THELOWLY REMAINS: WASTE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
AMERICAN FICTION


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At what point does a thing become waste, and why? What happens to waste when it is discarded? How can an aesthetics of waste retrieve its modes of production and circulation, revealing submerged histories of the commodities, bodies, and spaces of a nation? These research questions unify my line of inquiry, which enables “The Lowly Remains” to scrutinize literary representations of waste in postwar America, a period paradoxically known both for its unprecedented mass production and streamlined technological concealment of garbage. Examining four distinct yet interrelated categories of waste—corporate, bodily, spatial, and social—this dissertation elucidates the material, economic and psychological systems of waste-aversion which assign and rescind the value of the waste object, emphasizing literary excavation as an effective means of accessing a fuller range of the material world and uncovering historiographical elisions in master narratives of the development of the United States over the last century.

The dissertation examines the symbolic substitutions, cross-pollinations, and ideological relays between different categories of waste—how one economy of value will utilize the rhetoric and associations from another to form a multi-discursive culture of waste aversion. Through this dissertation, I aim to contribute to a growing body of interdisciplinary work on waste in recent years, the broadest goal of which is to grant serious academic attention and value to valuelessness.

Most contemporary studies of literary waste speak of trash as ahistorical abstract category and do not detail the development of various disposable and synthetic materials responsible for its current volumes. To avoid this pitfall, I employ a diverse array of theoretical positions integrated with historical precision and attention to specific materials—each chapter scrutinizes a specific moment in twentieth-century American history, the role of waste in that moment, the formal techniques through which it is aestheticized, and what it discloses about shifting values in the cultural imaginary.