WHO KILLED IT: TOWARD A HIP HOP THEORY


Adviser: Alys Eve Weinbaum

This dissertation examines how the set of creative impulses and artistic methods initially ascribed to nineteenth-century American literary Realism continues to inform and shape present-day expectations and interpretations of hip hop narrative production. Realism emerges in the U.S. during a time of tremendous social transformation, including rapidly changing technological and scientific advancement, the rise of national industry, mass immigration, and shifting ideas about what exactly constitutes "American" civil society. In the midst of this social revolution, purveyors of Realism, and champions of the novel form in particular, turned their artistic efforts toward representing the lives and concerns of everyday people.

Although many of the artistic strategies developed by Realists have continued well into the present, most critics mark the end of Realism as a discernable literary movement at the turn of the twentieth century, and more specifically, around the time novelists began embracing the experimental techniques that would later become associated with modernism. However, this dissertation argues that the original debates about the Realist novel as an egalitarian art form and vehicle for democratic representation remain stubbornly intact, finding their most salient present-day manifestation in discourses around hip hop narrative and cultural production. This project examines the work of three popular hip hop artists, Tupac Shakur, Kanye West and Janelle Monáe, each of whom deploy various literary strategies that challenge Realism’s hegemonic hold on popular culture, exposing how its legacy continues to haunt debates about race, gender, and representation in American popular culture. I argue that by engaging Realism, this trio of artists contributes to the longer and more radical project of *disarticulating* the genre's ideological claims on mimetic representation as a practice of democracy.