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Panel: Classical Antiquity and Mass Culture

Title: “Luxury Discourses in Roman Imperial Literature and Contemporary American Hip-Hop Culture”

Luxury is a controversial cultural force in both Roman literature and contemporary hip-hop: its consumption and display is negatively linked with moral corruption by critics, positively with power and social mobility by others.

In Rome, luxury was made an issue of cultural and national identity: Propertius casts luxury as violating the honest, traditional values of Rome which had made her great and set her apart from the barbarians (1.2, 2.18c, 3.13). The association of luxury with the foreign East also linked it with the effeminasation of the Roman male, further divorcing Rome from its moral values (cf. Juvenal 10). But luxury also displayed Roman power and imperial status: one reason given for the repeal of the Oppian law suppressing female adornment was that Roman women should not be less splendid than those subject to Roman control (Livy 34.7). Ovid echoed this sentiment, saying that the Roman woman must reflect the cultivated, urban Rome (and Roman man) that was master of the world (*Am.* 3.107-28). On a smaller scale, luxury marked social status and legitimacy; women and men adorned themselves to display their status or announce their [upward] social mobility, as with Petronius’ Trimalchio and his wife (*Sat.* 67).

Hip-hop culture also displays this conflicted response. With greater commercial success, the conspicuous consumption of luxury has become a crucial part of any hip-hop artist’s image. By appropriating traditionally recognized symbols of (white) wealth and power, such as Louis Vuitton and Cristal champagne, hip-hop artists demonstrate both their social mobility and their new status as powerful socio-economic and cultural forces. This display of consumerism and advocacy of luxury is not merely limited to musical

lyrics or videos, but is also seen through the participation of hip-hop stars in advertising campaigns (e.g. Missy Elliott for MAC Cosmetics or Snoop Dogg for Chrysler).

However, some critics and artists criticize this consumption of luxury, arguing that the focus on wealth is a violation of hip-hop's 'original' values as both the voice and consciousness of urban America; its origins in low-income communities forged these initial values, expressed by groups such as Public Enemy through efforts to simultaneously change social conditions and celebrate urban culture. The adoption of upper-class symbols, areas, and audiences is thus a betrayal of those communities and values.

In both cases, however, it is an ideal past that is being defined, and not necessarily an accurate one. Luxury was not restricted to a corrupted present – after all, the Oppian law was repealed 195 B.C., before the final defeat of Carthage to which many Roman authors (e.g. Sallust) date the decline of Roman morality, and hip-hop groups as early as the Sugarhill Gang in 1979 were name-dropping luxury brands in their lyrics, such as Cadillac.