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'I Want to Wear It': Fashioning Black Feminism in *Mahogany* (1975)

Kimberly Lamm

Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

ABSTRACT
In this article I focus on the portrayal of fashionable clothing in the 1975 film *Mahogany* and connect it to the history of African American women engaging with sartorial self-representation as a means to assert their visibility in American culture. My aim is to analyse *Mahogany's* emphasis on brightly-coloured highly-ornamented clothing, which has a long history of signifying bad taste and became part of accusations of racial and sexual inferiority. I want to show how *Mahogany's* representation of fashion undermines the historically entrenched bias against colourful, highly adorned clothing while also revealing how this bias has played a subtle but significant role in the racism and sexism black women have encountered, further (but not finally) impeding them from the forms of recognition the category of femininity offers. *Mahogany* represents those impediments and repeats the sexual and racial commodification underlying them, but also resists them (albeit quite subtly) through the film's loving display of fashion and its attention to the work of designing and making clothes. *Mahogany* tells a story of bright sartorial resistance that can be understood as an articulation of black feminist desires for women of colour to be able to compose the images through which their bodies are perceived.

KEYWORDS
Black feminism; film; colour and adornment; fashion; Diana Ross; history of African American women

In the 1975 film *Mahogany,* the character Tracy Chambers – played by Diana Ross – aspires to be a fashion designer. Tracy lives on Chicago's South Side, works in the display department at Marshall Fields, and takes design classes at night. Animated by Tracy's talent and ambition, *Mahogany* makes fashionable clothing a prominent visual theme and scenes that focus on the creation and display of clothing highlight both the visual composition of the film and the creation of Ross as a celebrity image (Figure 1).

Ross designed all the costumes she wears in *Mahogany.* Her role as designer is stated prominently in the film credits – 'Costumes Designed by Diana Ross' – which gives the costume designer unprecedented prominence. In her biography *Secrets of a Sparrow*, Ross writes that *Mahogany* was her 'debut in the fashion business' and built upon what she learned in high school about 'fabrics, sewing, millinery, knitting, and crocheting' (Ross 1993, 175). She explains that she created the designs from a careful reading of the script and noting the places where she thought 'Tracy needed special clothes' and then writing down 'exactly what she needed to wear' (Ross 1993, 175). In his biography,

CONTACT Kimberly Lamm kkl9@duke.edu
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Figure 1. Diana Ross in a gown from *Mahogany*. Photo by Steve Schapiro/Corbis via Getty Images.

director Berry Gordy writes that Ross stayed up all night during the production of *Mahogany* to see her designs to completion and felt that Ross' devotion to the clothing compromised her on-screen performance (Gordy 1994, 341). Whether this assessment is true or not, the role of Ross as costume designer complicates the readily available story that Gordy, as head of Motown, transformed Ross into a harmonious image of black femininity that white audiences would be comfortable consuming, making her not only the star of the Supremes, but a perfect vehicle for what Mark Anthony Neal identifies as Gordy's corporate ambitions (Neal 1999, 89). The desire to become a fashion designer, which Ross and her character Tracy share, exceeds the demands to serve and please others and imprints the cinematic image with black women's agency.

The fact that Ross made her own costumes for *Mahogany* connects the film to the history of early cinema in which actresses had to provide their own on-screen attire. In 'Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story,' Jane Gaines charts the emergence of the costume designer in film history and analyses role that figure played in the

tension between the film's narrative and its costumes, which, according to Gaines, indexes women's work and tells the woman's story. Gaines explains that actresses working in silent film had to either purchase or design their own costumes until they became stars (Gaines 1990, 182). The actresses Gaines refers to are white, and one could say that by entering this history of women designing and sewing their own costumes to place themselves within the cinematic frame, Ross makes *Mahogany* a meditation on challenging the implicit whiteness of femininity on screen, which reflects upon the difference fashioning her own iconicity entails.

Nicole Fleetwood's analysis of Ross in *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* substantiates this reading. Fleetwood argues that, 'becoming a celebrity icon is a labor-intensive choice that involves sculpting one's features, developing public recognition, and turning oneself into a vehicle of desirability and adoration. In essence the celebrity icon is manufactured and groomed' (Fleetwood 2015, 55). Black female stars inherit pressures that make this labour particularly intensive. They have to contend with the fact that, as Fleetwood points out, their celebrity 'tends to be read within a representational space of negation' (Fleetwood 2015, 71). That is, the black icon is understood primarily in relationship to the restrictions US racism has placed on black life: not only 'the limited access blacks have had historically and presently to arenas of power, wealth, and possibility', but the subjection of black bodies to the commodification of slavery (Fleetwood 2015, 71). The images of Tracy designing clothing that appear early in the film – she is portrayed in her apartment studio shaping fabric draped on mannequins into dresses – can be read as meditations on the dense work of becoming a black female icon and claiming a place for black women within American culture's picture of femininity.

A 'fashion film', *Mahogany* contributes to a rich history in which fashion and film mirror each other and contribute to the visual ubiquity of consumer capitalism (Munich 2011, 260). In 'The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window', published just four years after *Mahogany* premiered, Charles Eckert argues that from the beginning of cinema, 'all of the elements of a new advertising form were implicit' (Eckert [1978] 1990, 103). With limitless potential for displaying products in idealising light, early films 'functioned as living display windows for all that they contained' (Eckert [1978] 1990, 103). As Eckert's research reveals, the beginnings of the Hollywood film industry inspired the development of the fashion and cosmetic industries, and together they produced the image of a young white woman as their star and primary consumer (Eckert [1978] 1990, 109–110). *Mahogany* intervenes in the racial premise of this history and addresses black women as consumers with dreams of making themselves into stars.

While *Mahogany* asks viewers to celebrate its intervention into the whiteness of American visual culture, scholars of the film have rightly pointed its political limitations. They argue that the film is not only a commercial for the star power of Diana Ross, but illustrates the capitalist appropriation of the anti-racist arguments that made an impact in the 1960s and 1970s and therefore offers restricted ideas how black men and women can appear. In her historically nuanced analysis, Miriam Thaggert reads *Mahogany* as an illustration of anxieties about 'career-oriented black women', which reflect the stubborn legacies of the Moynihan report on the post Civil Rights era (Thaggert 2012, 716). Thaggert highlights the anxious dismissals of what she calls Tracy's 'visual acumen' – her 'efficiency in *creating* images' – that run through *Mahogany* (Thaggert 2012, 720, 716). Highlighting how the film

'pathologiz[es]' Tracy's 'professional goals', Thaggert demonstrates how *Mahogany* reigns in a black woman's ambitions by reducing her to the work of submitting to and symbolising unthreatening iterations of black heterosexuality (Thaggert 2012, 716).

Thaggert's analysis of *Mahogany* builds on earlier readings by Robyn Wiegman, Jane Gaines, and Richard Dyer. These scholars draw attention to what Wiegman identifies as the film's 'reliance on narrative structures that foreground the bourgeois ideal as symbol of racial egalitarianism' (Wiegman 1991, 312). Wiegman also situates the film in relationship to American feminism, and reads *Mahogany* as an example of a feminism that gives 'equal access to corporate and commodity worlds' (Wiegman 1991, 308). By following how Tracy serves as a conduit for masculine rivalries, Wiegman argues that Tracy's self-commodification through fashionable display gives her access to a diluted form of feminist progress that replicates white and middle class ideals of femininity (Wiegman 1991, 308). In her well known analysis of *Mahogany,* which reads the film to demonstrate the limitations of feminist film theory's engagement with psychoanalysis, Gaines argues that in addition to making Ross a '"white"' model, the film 'hawks the philosophy of black enterprise and social aspiration' (Gaines 1988, 20). As though he was creating a template for *Mahogany*'s many negative reviews, Dyer focuses on the fact that Gordy made the film to appeal to both black and white audiences. He reads the film as a paean to consumption so full of clichés that any real political argument is diluted. 'As a vehicle for Diana Ross', Dyer writes, 'it chucks in something for everyone in her audience. The white audience is given a story of "success" and how "success doesn't bring happiness" that both celebrates the American way of life and keeps people (blacks) in their place' (Dyer 1986, 131).

These readings are convincing, but I approach *Mahogany* from a different angle. I read the film's focus on Tracy's fashionable clothing as more than a capitulation to white capitalist dominance, but a fashioning of black feminism that connects to the history of African American women's work with clothing. Focused on a black woman who takes pleasure designing brightly coloured, highly ornamented clothing, *Mahogany* alludes to the role clothing played in black women's resistance to slavery's punitive restrictions and defies a cultural history in which the construction of aesthetic taste and criticisms of fashion are intertwined with the production of racial and sexual difference, insidiously contributing to the limitations placed on black women. When read this way, *Mahogany* illustrates Gaines' argument that women's film costumes 'tell the woman's story' – the subjective landscape of the female character/star, which had to be seen and felt but could not stand out – but also highlights the impulse to make Tracy's ambition to be a fashion designer the primary narrative of the film (Gaines 1990, 180). I set this impulse against what is unquestionably considered *Mahogany*'s most prominent narrative – the contest between a black man and a white man for access to Tracy – and show how it *almost* erases the story of her ambitions to become a fashion designer, but not quite. By maintaining a consistent focus on Tracy's designs, *Mahogany* challenges this historically entrenched bias against colourful, highly adorned clothing while also revealing how this bias has played a subtle but significant role in the racism and sexism black women have encountered, further (but not finally) impeding them from the forms of recognition the category femininity offers. The film's loving display of Tracy's flamboyant designs resists these limitations and aligns with iterations of black feminist assertion that came alive in films and magazines addressed to African American audiences in the 1970s. Though quelled by a conclusion that reasserts the conservative assumption that the

black woman's purpose is to serve her husband in his fight for racial justice, by fashioning a black feminism that actively embraces and defies stereotypes about black women in loud flashy clothes, *Mahogany* tells a story of bright sartorial resistance that can be understood as an articulation of black feminist desires for the story of a black woman who can imaginatively arrange her own image and have a say about how she is seen.

Defying taste

The intertwined themes of race, gender, and visual display are announced quite explicitly in the two scenes that open *Mahogany*. The first depicts a fashion show that takes place in an opera house in Rome. The second scene takes place in a classroom in Chicago. Theatrical and elaborate, the fashion show announces Tracy's success as a fashion designer, and contrasts sharply with the second scene that goes back in time to portray an early articulation of her ambitions. Both scenes put Tracy's skill at creating images on display and ask viewers to take it seriously as her fashioning of black feminism.

Before the fashion show begins, white graphic pictographs appear against a black background. As these pictographs begin to move and turn, it becomes clear that they represent bodies moving in fashionable clothing. The calligraphic inscriptions dissolve into a full colour cinematic image and viewers see bodies in costumes arranged on a stair. A red curtain closes over this stylised arrangement and two giant gold dragons slowly drop over the dark red curtains. A male voice announces that this is Mahogany's 'Kabuki finale', and the camera focuses on a procession of women who wear heavy make up that has transformed their faces into masks, deliberately artificial wigs and flamboyant costumes, many of which allude to Asia. Extending far beyond the body's immediate outlines, the costumes are highly imaginative, even fantasmatic. The fabric colours – yellow, silver, orange, purple, red, fuschia, and pink – are bold, bright and eye-catching. Forms of shiny adornment embellish almost every surface, and decorative headpieces, parasols, faux feathers and furs add layers and dimensions to this display of Tracy's sartorial imagination. Exemplifying the key feature of the fashion film, this procession is, a 'ritual parade and twirling models robed in outfits that dreams and stories are made of' (Munich 2011, 260). The models walk on to the round stage with slow and grand gestures as though they are dancing, and they graciously hold out their arms to show the full expanse of the rich fabrics.

Tracy's flamboyant costumes evoke the ancient aesthetic practices of Kabuki theatre, but they also point to disco and glam rock and the influence of Japanese designers on fashion in the 1970s. The work of Kansai Yamamoto brought these elements together. In 1971, Yamamoto became the first Japanese designer to hold a runway show in London and then designed costumes for David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust tour. The geometric shapes and layered density of Tracy's designs also recall the work of Issey Miyake, a Japanese designer who made an impact on western fashion in the 1970s by realising the sculptural possibilities of cloth and expanding normalised ideas of the body's contours and surfaces.

Following from this outlandish procession, Tracy walks on to the stage wearing a modest brown sequined dress. She holds a small mask over her face. When Tracy takes off the mask, she opens her arms to ecstatically receive the applause and shouts of praise from the audience. Though more subdued than the spectacle she has orchestrated, Tracy's mask continues the themes of masquerade she has incorporated into her designs.

Tracy's mask and the Asian themes of her fashion show harken back to what Alys Eve Weinbaum identifies as the *racial masquerade* that was prevalent in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century. The racial masquerade identifies the ability of modern women to 'consume, put on, and take off racial "otherness"' (Weinbaum 2008, 121). The racial masquerade reflects a bourgeoning consumer culture, directed at women – exemplified by the proliferation of cosmetics and ready-to-wear clothing – as well as the interrelated forms of racism in this period, which includes Jim Crow segregation and anti-immigrant discourses of 'yellow peril' (Weinbaum 2008, 126). As Weinbaum points out, masking was a mechanism for white women to play with images of the primitive and thereby signal their participation in the progress of American modernity. Performing with the masks of racial difference reinforced the idea that women designated as racial others were forever embedded in the past. Weinbaum argues that 'those unable to participate in racial masquerade were perceived as "premodern," "primitive," and/or atavistic members of an outmoded social order that relegated them to traditional roles of wife and mother' (Weinbaum 2008, 121). To illustrate the dynamics of this relegation, Weinbaum analyses Nella Larsen's Harlem Renaissance novel *Quicksand* (1928), which features a biracial woman who attempts to pass and wants to take pleasure in the 'commodified surfaces' of the racial masquerade, but is denied the possibility of 'craft[ing] her modernity and her sense of belonging in the United States' (Weinbaum 2008, 143).

Images that signify Asia have a fraught place in the history of western fashion and it is not wrong to assume that when fashion designers draw upon Asian motifs, a form of what Edward Said identified in 1977 as orientalism is at play. Said's *Orientalism* targets the West's long history of creating images of the Orient to solidify its imperial reach and stabilise the assumption of its superiority (Said 1978). There is no doubt that Tracy's fashion show can serve as an example of this particular form of othering. The costumes indulge in what Anne Anlin Cheng identifies in her essay 'Ornamentalism' as an Orientalist fantasy in which 'opulence and sensuality are the signature components of the Asiatic character; that Asia is always ancient, excessive, feminine, available, and decadent' (Cheng 2018, 425). At the same time, the orientalist themes of Tracy's designs may point to desires for cross-racial identification and a feminist affinity between African American and Asian women (Cheng 2018, 416). Since *Mahogany* is about the impediments a black woman faces as she contests the culturally sanctioned impulse to relegate her ambitions to a domestic role and make her race the ground of her sexual commodification, we could say that Tracy's fashion show participates in fantasies of Asian 'opulence and sensuality' in order to imagine the black female body as an aesthetic surface that cannot be reduced to bare flesh (Cheng 2018, 425). The colourful, shiny, deliberately superficial costumes destabilise the skin as a referent for race and suggest that fashionable clothing can become a passage into a form of visibility that moves out of the denuded forms of commodification inflicted upon the black female body.

The scene that immediately follows Mahogany's fashion show suggests that though Tracy may now have the power to take off the mask of racial difference and can imagine forms of protofeminist identification, she cannot do so with ease. Upon hearing her friend Carolotta Gavina enthusiastically assert that she has become 'a real success', Tracy responds with an expression of deep ambivalence. Her eyes lower with shame and the freeze frame of her face indicates that she is immobilised by fear. Viewers will come to see that Tracy is wary of the sexual exchange she has promised

the Italian millionaire Christian for funding the production of this fashion line, but she also may be uncertain about the consequences of displacing her racial identifications with her 'success'. As Thaggert makes clear, Tracy's fears are not hers alone. She could be confronting her own internalised anxieties about black women's achievement in a post Civil Rights United States and enacting the limitations placed on black women's imaginative capacities for self-transformation (Thaggert 2012).

The freeze frame of Tracy's face halts the film's temporal flow and opens on to a flashback in which she is in training to become a fashion designer in Chicago. This scene takes place in a crowded urban classroom that seems a world away from Rome. It begins with a mid range horizontal tracking shot that moves across the backs of students who are seated at a table drawing images of modest, simple dresses. Before we see Tracy, we see, over her shoulder, her drawing of a golden yellow column dress with a pleated chiffon overlay that expands into a half-circle as the figure stretches out her arms and fills the space of the sketchpad.

Tracy's sketch is an expression of defiance. The instructor of the design class, a tastefully dressed white woman, addresses Tracy's resistance to her instruction with a rhetorical question: 'I thought I told you to sketch a simple cocktail dress?' Tracy answers this question with a defiant look. The bell rings and the teacher swiftly steps up to the podium to announce the next assignment: a 'basic swimsuit'. She returns to Tracy's place in the classroom and translates the assignment for her: 'and that means no sequins, no rhinestones, and no ostrich feathers … '. The teacher's list of flashy adornments is meant to connect to Tracy's yellow dress (and probably other designs as well). The teacher is pointing out the fact that Tracy's dress is neither 'simple' nor 'basic' but exemplifies what the teacher sees as the *bad taste* of colourful and ornamental display. And yet, the way Tracy lovingly holds her pens and looks at her sketch again expresses a passion that the pedagogies of white taste cannot erase.

The fact that Tracy's dress resists her teacher's emphasis on the simple and the basic indicates that *Mahogany* is staging a contestation between a streamlined modernist aesthetic and the supposed vulgarities of ornamental design and bright, eye-catching colours. This is to say that the film is alluding to the neoDarwinian ideas that colourful, ostentatious display is an expression of primitive impulses, while also contesting those ideas through Tracy's commitment to her own aesthetic criteria. European and American intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries bastardised Charles Darwin's treatises on natural and sexual selection and the ideas about sexual and racial inferiority that subtended it – cast in the language of 'sub species' – to stress that excessive colour and ornamentation confirms a person's or a group's low place on the evolutionary ladder. Manifesting residually as 'taste', such arguments have worked with an insidious efficiency to reinforce negative assessments of black women's bodies and make their clothing extensions of the narrow meanings punitively attributed to their skin colour.

Arguments that read ostentatious sartorial display as a sign of the primitive found their way into the 1970s and can be discerned in the many negative reviews of *Mahogany*. Writing about the film in *The New Yorker,* Pauline Kael dismisses the film as a 'garish garbled black version of outmoded white kitsch', which is basically a claim that the film was stuck in a tasteless past, slavish to white styles that had long since become obsolete (Kael [1975] 1982, 354). More recently, in the lead up to the fortieth anniversary of the film, which was celebrated in Chicago with an outdoor screening and a fashion show, film critic

Richard Roeper identifies *Mahogany* as a 'lurid fashion-world soap opera', a description that echoes Kael's accusation of bad taste (Roeper 2015). 'Lurid' is a word often used to describe distastefully bright colours, and the soap opera, which consistently signals the lowest and most feminised form of mass culture, helps to make accusations of bad taste incontrovertible. Roeper's description can be understood as a reactive assessment of the film's deliberate engagement with bright colours ('lurid') that relies upon the sexist assumption that genres and cultural practices associated with women (like the soap opera or fashion) are obviously bad. *Mahogany* is actually staging a black feminist argument against these aesthetic assessments and their link to white cultural dominance. The film reveals how intimately these standards of taste connect to the challenge of making a black woman the centre of a film's visual story.

Set to her popular (but often ridiculed) theme song, 'Do You Know Where You Are Going To?' Tracy leaves class in a crowd of classmates, passes by a long row of dingy school lockers that line a narrow hall, and rides Chicago's 'L' train home. Sitting on the train, she continues to work on her dress design and defy her teacher's aesthetic criteria. Making a connection between the sketch of her dress and black working class street culture of the 1970s is part of this defiance. Tracy sees and becomes inspired by the rainbow graffiti created by two African American boys wearing red knit hats and spray painting the walls of the train platform. After seeing the image they have created through the train window, Tracy waves to them playfully and begins to accent the yellow dress with swathes of rainbow colours.

Since graffiti became a sign of inner city dangers in the 1970s, a shorthand for systemic neglect and racist fears, this scene of Tracy on the 'L' is dense with suggestions about Ross' celebrity image and its connection to the material conditions of racism. The scene may reflect upon Ross' role in the history of Motown, indirectly substantiating Neal's argument that Gordy made Ross a symbol of his 'quest for corporate/social mobility' (Neal 1999, 89). If Ross was a vehicle for Motown's success, this scene with the boys on the 'L' platform serves as an image that helps to cover over the fact that Gordy had, as Neal argues, 'consciously abandoned his working class constituency in Detroit' (Neal 1999, 89). The affective connection that Gordy makes between Tracy's aspirations to be a fashion designer and black working class street culture of the 1970s relies on a gendered separation in which black boys are granted a freedom of movement, an ease of rebellious expression and a public visibility that black women and girls can only participate in from behind glass. Tracy's boyfriend Brian will also embody a visibly intimate connection to urban spaces and the film demonstrates that he needs her confinement within a domestic and heterosexual arrangement to translate that connection into a public life in politics.

Tracy will work on her rainbow dress across the first half of *Mahogany*, and it is compelling to watch it transform from a sketch to a three dimensional form that Ross wears on screen. By following the production of the dress, *Mahogany* asks viewers to reflect on the ways in which colourful and ornamented display figures into this film's attempt to open a space to see the black feminist value of Tracy's aspiration to become a fashion designer. In subtle ways, the film also links Tracy's fashion design to African American women's histories and the multi-faceted role clothing and fashion have played within them.

This connection becomes clear in a scene that begins with Tracy walking swiftly under the 'L' platform and entering a concrete building. Carrying her black drawing portfolio, she wears a tan trench coat, a knit hat, and long red boots. The next shot shows Tracy at

the far end of a garment factory, but the image of her body is hard to discern through the rows of women sewing and the piles of fabric and clothing around them. Tracy surprises her Aunt Florence (played by Beah Richards) working at her sewing machine. Seeing the drawing of the dress Tracy has just placed in front of her, Aunt Beah responds with pride and pleasure: 'Hon-ey. You're getting too good for my vocabulary'. Aunt Florence agrees to help her complete the dress but 'at her regular rate,' though Tracy playfully negotiates and asks her for a '25% discount—just for relatives'. Florence goes on praising her niece's designs: 'They're good, child, more than good.' This is a loving collaboration between an aunt and a niece centred on the intergenerational transmission of sewing and design skills.

Aunt Florence and her work as a skilled seamstress index the long history of African American women working with fabric and making clothing: the unremunerated labour they gave to the cotton industry; the work of maintaining clothing (for slaveholders' families as well as their own) on the plantation; their poorly paid work as laundresses and seamstresses during Reconstruction; and the skilled economy of dressmaking, which expanded upon the work women performed during enslavement and allowed women such as Elisabeth Keckley, the writer and dressmaker for Mary Todd Lincoln, a place in the legitimate economy (Camp 2004, 78–89; Jones 2010, 28–29, 38–39). Along with tailoring and millinery, dressmaking was a significant form of work for African American women during and beyond Reconstruction, though whites barred women from the cultural visibility and prestige associated with the occupation. In *Picturing Freedom,* her study of black visual expression in early nineteenth-century American culture, Jasmine Cobb explains that after seeing free black women working with clothing in the urban spaces of Philadelphia, 'whites began to deny "respectable women of color" dressmaker work, even when there was an advertised need, to instead usher Black women into domestic work as cooks and cleaners' (Cobb 2015, 118). Set against this punitive history, black women's pleasures making and wearing clothing can be considered claims to the surplus value of sartorial commodities black women made possible, giving clothing a political significance that has not been fully recognised. The cinematic portrayal of Tracy's passion for dress design continues those pleasures and claims. Reading *Mahogany* this way, it is hard to agree with Neal's assertion that Ross' onscreen performances in the 1970s reflect Gordy's 'proclivity to divorce African American expressive culture from its political and social roots,' and thereby betray the black feminism of that era (Neal 1999, 90). On the contrary, the connection *Mahogany* makes between Tracy's aspirations and her aunt's work as a seamstress aligns with black feminism's emphasis on tracing the material conditions of black women's lives to the histories of colonialism and slavery.

The colour of black feminist resistance

Since African American women have had to contend at every turn with the racism and sexism upon which American culture is built, black feminism has a long and rich history in the United States. It was in the late 1960s and 1970s, when black women confronted the racism within the women's liberation movement and the sexism at work in the civil rights and Black Power movements that black women's resistance became a discernible political and intellectual force that was identified with the name black feminism. One of many texts that announced the emergence of black feminism in the 1970s was Angela Davis' 'The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,' an essay she published in

1971, the year before she was acquitted of conspiracy charges. 'The Black Woman's Role' exemplifies black feminism's attention to the multiple ways in which in which slavery laid the foundation for imprisoning black women in the fears and fantasies of white American culture. In her preface, Davis points to the discursive visibility and power of the Moynihan report and articulates her commitment to 'shattering' what she calls the 'reified images' and 'grossly distorted categories through which the black woman continues to be perceived' (Davis [1971] 1998, 111). Davis traces the distortions of the Moynihan report back to the particular oppressions black women experienced during enslavement. Pertinent to *Mahogany* and its claim to black femininity is the fact that slave masters inflicted what Davis identifies as the 'deformed equality of equal oppression' (Davis [1971] 1998, 117). That is, black women were subject to the same brutal working conditions as their male counterparts, which gave them an 'equality' that they transformed into a resistant, life- and community-sustaining strength. At the same time, Davis explains they were 'stripped of a palliative feminine veneer which might have encouraged a passive performance of domestic tasks', but this denial of femininity allowed them to become 'capable of weaving into the warp and woof of domestic life a profound consciousness of resistance' (Davis [1971] 1998, 117). *Mahogany* suggests how this 'consciousness of resistance' might have been woven into fashion and clothing.

It is well known that slave masters used coarse and plain clothing as a tool to punitively maintain the boundaries of slavery. As historians Shane White and Graham White explain, 'garments doled out to slaves throughout the American colonies tended to be drab, uniform and limited to relatively few items' (White and White 1998, 9). Crude garments kept slaves identifiable and visually confirmed their subjugation. The use of coarse and bare clothing established the ground for making dressing up in vivid and elaborate clothing not only an act of pleasure and a claim to freedom but an expression of defiance. Discussing the Sunday promenades that took place in urban spaces of the colonial South, White and White speculate that the 'vivid, visual presence [African Americans] established was an emphatic repudiation of their allotted social role' (White and White 1998, 35). Historian Stephanie M. H. Camp highlights the meanings women brought to the act of making and wearing clothing, which reflected the specifically gendered expectations and exploitations imposed upon their bodies. Camp charts how enslaved women 'procured fancy apparel' for themselves and highlights the different ways they created style: 'enslaved women went to great effort to make themselves something more than the cheap, straight-cut dresses they were allowanced. When possible, women cut their dresses generously so they could sweep their skirts dramatically and elegantly' (Camp 2004, 80, 82). These sartorial expressions recalibrated the value to which slavery assigned them. As Camp explains, '[w]omen's style allowed them to take pleasure in their bodies, to deny that they were only (or mainly) worth the prices their owners placed on them' (Camp 2004, 83).

Aesthetic arguments that gained prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century substantiated the impetus to see such expressions of resistance as threatening and distasteful. During this period, the writings of cultural critic Thorstein Veblen, architect Adolf Loos, and feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman created the intellectual foundation for the argument that vivid and densely ornamented clothing is morally and aesthetically depraved. Drawing heavily from theories of natural and sexual selection, these intellectuals made clothing the focus of their cultural criticism and crafted sustained arguments against bright colours and lavish ornamentation. It is no coincidence that these are the

stylistic features that African American women deployed to resist slavery's definitions. Indeed, for these thinkers, vibrant eye-catching display was an irrefutable symbol of the debilitating, feminising barbarism that halted progress toward the beautifully streamlined civilisation many thought members of the white race were obligated to create for themselves. Veblen, Loos, and Gilman articulate many of fashion's familiar criticisms – that it is useless, superficial, and degrading. They bolster this criticism by dismissing femininity and the idea of woman who is instinctually captivated by the showy lures of consumer culture. Moreover, threats of racial degeneracy and images of racial others deepen this dismissal of fashion and highlight the moral stakes of doing so. These writers shared the argument that women's propensity to adorn themselves was a symptom of their debased positions in the process of sexual selection and put them in dangerous proximity to racial degeneracy.

David Batchelor's examination of 'chromophobia' highlights a particular dimension of the arguments against adornment: the suspicion of colour. Batchelor demonstrates that colour has been considered the 'property of some foreign body,' linked to the 'feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological' (Batchelor 2000, 22–23). Signalling civilisation's fall into savagery, colour has been considered dangerous and trivial. We could say that perceptions of black women wearing bright colours synthesise both associations, bolstering the racism and sexism black women confront (Batchelor 2000, 23). Batchelor turns to the work of Charles Blanc, a nineteenth-century cultural critic who perceived colour to be a danger that had to be 'contained and subordinated—like a woman' (Batchelor 2000, 23). Drawing upon formulations such as Blanc's, Batchelor argues that 'colour has been the object of extreme prejudice in Western culture' (Batchelor 2000, 22). Not only has this prejudice remained 'unchecked' and 'passed unnoticed', it is, according to Batchelor, 'so all-embracing and generalised that, at one time or another, it has enrolled in just about every other prejudice in its service' (Batchelor 2000, 22). The prejudice against colour has a particularly strong connection to 'sexual and racial phobias' (Batchelor 2000, 29).

The prejudice against colour has certainly been 'enrolled' to support biases against black women. In her reflections on the infamous red dress, African American studies scholar Karla F.C. Holloway offers a salient example of brightly coloured clothing reinforcing damaging myths about black women's sexuality and its lower value. Holloway writes about her grandmother 'warn[ing] [her] away from red' (Holloway 1995, 16, 15). Her grandmother believed red makes black girls look 'common', and signalled their willingness to be 'passed around' (Holloway 1995, 16). Holloway's memory of these admonitions was provoked by the testimony of Anita Hill and the professional, tasteful attire she wore when she appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1991. 'A nice girl,' Hill did not wear a red dress for her testimony. She wore instead, as Holloway explains, 'a teal blue suit with a modest row of military-like double buttons down the front,' which mirrored by her 'polite demeanor' (Holloway 1995, 15). Ultimately, however, Hill's clothing did not protect her from sexual harassment or its public re-inscription by either the US senators or the American media (Holloway 1995, 15). Holloway explains that '[f]or all the frank talk about sexual harassment, pubic hair, and pornography, Professor Hill may as well have worn red' (Holloway 1995, 15). In other words, tasteful clothing ultimately cannot defend black women against intrusive forms of sexualisation. In the eye of white American dominance, black women are always wearing brightly coloured dresses and forced to embody the sexual availability the red dress signifies.

Mahogany's consistent focus on the vivid colours of Tracy's dresses is a direct challenge to the deployment of chromophobia against black women. The film stages this challenge by revealing its consequences, but also by highlighting the pleasures Tracy takes in making and wearing clothing of her own design. Indeed, the negative assessments of *Mahogany* should not occlude the fact that the film reflects the new visibility of black fashion in the 1970s and contributed to a vibrant visual culture in which African American women were defying the aesthetic legacies associated with their subordination and asserting their capacity to determine how they were perceived.

There are many reasons to situate *Mahogany* in relationship to the slowly emerging visibility of black women in mainstream American fashion in the 1960s and 1970s. The story of the model and actress Donyale Luna, known as the first black supermodel, has remarkable parallels to both *Mahogany* and Ross' biography. Luna was discovered in Detroit in 1964 and left the United States for Europe in 1965 after 'collid[ing]' with the 'American fashion industry's glass ceiling' (Powell 2011, 82–83). The same year *Mahogany* premiered, Beverly Johnson appeared on the cover of *Vogue*, the first African American model to do so. These resonances are strong, but it is the portrayal of women's fashions in a magazine such as *Ebony* that connect to *Mahogany* in the most interesting ways, as *Ebony* tells a collective story of black striving and success and reveals the role fashion played within it.

Known as the *Life* magazine for African Americans, *Ebony* made fashion part of its work 'visually showcase[ing] and celebrat[ing] the best in black life' (Bivins 2013, 10). Eunice W. Johnson is the reason the magazine highlighted fashion's role in the story of black success. Her role as the magazine's fashion editor was connected to her work producing the *Ebony* fashion fair, an annual tour that showcased both couture and ready-to-wear fashions for African American audiences across the United States. Johnson worked with some of the biggest names in fashion and nurtured the careers of black models and designers. Racism pitted these priorities against each other, but Johnson demanded just representation of African Americans in the fashion industry.

Both *Mahogany* and the *Ebony* Fashion Fair allowed black women to see themselves in fashion's idealising spotlight and on a more subtle level, rewrote the standards of taste that had been used against black women. In his biography, John H. Johnson (Eunice's husband and head of Johnson publishing corporation) explains that '[b]efore the Ebony Fashion Fair, people said Black women couldn't wear red or yellow or purple. The fashion show proved that black women could wear any color they wanted to wear' (quoted in Heaven 2013, 39). *Color Explosion,* the theme Johnson picked for the 1979–1980 season, announced the freedom to wear bright colours quite explicitly and reflects Johnson's penchant, not only for 'selecting garments in brilliant colors' but also her attraction to the 'glamorous, the luxurious, and the dramatic' (Heaven 2013, 40). The *Ebony* Fashion Fair expanded and solidified in the 1970s and perhaps can be considered an extension of the magazine's increased attention to what Toni C. King identifies as *Ebony*'s 'stories about black women's work experience' and the implicitly white standards of taste they were likely to encounter in the workplace (King 2003, 88). Defying chromophobia's link to racism and sexism, Johnson's assertion of a bold aesthetic was not only a protest against the assumption that bright, eye-catching clothes on black bodies are manifestations of bad taste but was also an effort to bring black femininity and its histories into the recognisable definitions of beauty (Bivins 2013, 21).

Since *Ebony* accentuated the black feminist potential of fashion, it makes sense that when promoting *Mahogany,* the magazine emphasised Ross' role as costume designer, almost at the film's expense. The black and white photograph that opens the article suggests a struggle with Gordy. It depicts Ross sitting on the dolly and under the camera looking frustrated and feigning patience. Her portrayal contrasts sharply with the portrayal of the Motown chairman; his stance and profile align with the camera lens as if to highlight the authority and skill he brought to the job of directing. However, the opening sentence of the article undercuts this attention to Gordy: it describes the film 'hit[ting] the screen in a blaze of color—much of it in the *haute couture* gowns Miss Ross designed' and there are large high-quality colour photographs that feature Ross' costumes (*Ebony* 1975, 145). The caption accompanying the photographs details the extent of her work as a designer, stating that she 'personally supervised all operations, from the purchase of special fabrics to coordination of colours to beading and all other finishing techniques' (*Ebony* 1975, 148). This work becomes an expression of Ross' long standing interest in fashion and the article points out that she studied fashion design and illustration in high school and brought this 'passion for creating spectacular clothes' to work when the image of 'The Supremes' was crafted. It quotes Ross explaining that she 'used to talk to the guys who designed our clothes and I'd tell them exactly what I thought we should wear' (*Ebony* 1975, 149).

Like the Supremes, *Mahogany* was made to address both black and white audiences. With its broad, assimilationist appeal, the film could be considered part of the rejection of Blaxploitation films, which attempted to speak directly to African American audiences about racial exploitation and deliberately refused the policing of black people through standards of propriety and taste. Such a distinction does not take *Mahogany*'s immense popularity with African American audiences into account and misses the celebratory attention to clothing and style it shares with Blaxploitation films. While notorious for their raunchy, overtly sexualised depictions of black women's bodies, there is a cluster of blaxploitation films that make feminist arguments about black women's grit, resilience, and self-possession. Bright, flashy, and revealing, the costumes in films such as *Foxy Brown* (1974) hinged sexual liberation to the films' visual assertions of black women's power while also reassuring audiences that black women were not going to upend gender hierarchies completely. To tell Foxy Brown's story of fighting for justice against a drug and prostitution syndicate, Pam Grier wore halter and wrap dresses with deep necklines; her gowns were made of thick, shiny silks and bright, solid colours – lemon yellow, sky blue, orange red. These lavish fabrics and bold colours were not just sexy, they were defying the chromophobia lurking behind white standards of taste.

Mahogany has striking affinities with *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975). In these Blaxploitation films, Pamela Dobson plays 'Cleo', a CIA operative on a crusade to stop the criminal drug trade and its exploitation of African American communities. Dobson creates a striking image for Cleo with a flamboyant, high fashion wardrobe: flowing fur robes; spiked boots and platform heels; large and elaborate gold earrings; large-brimmed hats; bright silk turbans and head wraps that always match the trims and accents of her pantsuits. The article in *Ebony* covering the film begins by addressing women who were tired of the blatant masculinism of Blaxploitation films and argues that *Cleopatra Jones* is made for 'black women's libbers who have sat through the growing procession of *Shaft, Super Fly, Nigger Charley,* and other assorted celluloid sensations of

male derring-do with growing impatience for an idol of their own' (*Ebony* 1975, 49). The article goes on to introduce Dobson, her modelling career, her degree in fashion illustration, and her own identification with the character she played: 'The idea that this lady can make a decision and follow up on her point of view is something that compliments my own life pattern' (*Ebony* 1975, 49).

Given this connection between actress and role, it makes sense that Dobson wanted to embody Cleo's strength and performed all the martial arts sequences herself. The less successful sequel, *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*, takes place in Hong Kong, which makes the film's debts to martial arts cinema more explicit, and allowed the costume designers to draw upon the imagery and decorative motifs associated with Asia to dress Dobson in even more flamboyant attire. Like *Mahogany, Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* was described as 'lurid,' and similar to Tracy's Asian inspired designs, *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* might express the desire for cross-racial identification among women (Ebert 1975).

Clothes between men

My analysis of *Mahogany* has made it clear that fashion is both crucial to Tracy's character and story and points to the film's engagement with and response to the black feminism that emerged in visual culture in the 1970s. Through fashion, *Mahogany* contributes to actively contesting the long-standing arguments against bright and ornamented clothing and refutes the subtle and not-so-subtle ways they have been deployed to police how black women have been allowed to make themselves visible in American cultural life. However, the real plot of *Mahogany* – and by that, I mean the story with which the film is predominantly identified – is put into motion when Tracy meets two men who compete to make her a vehicle of their ambitions: the white, arrogant, slightly queer fashion photographer Sean Mackovy, played by Anthony Perkins with his shrewd, twitchy insight; and Brian Walker, the black grass-roots community organiser and aspiring Chicago politician, warmly embodied by Billy Dee Williams with his all American – and unquestionably heterosexual – good looks. While Sean offers Tracy an entrance into the world of fashion and the promise of success unencumbered by provincial American racisms, Brian represents the pull to racial authenticity and the belief that conservative gender arrangements are a foundation for fighting racial justice. In defiance of Brian's assumption that her career should disappear into his, Tracy takes up Sean's proposal to leave Chicago and move to Rome, only to return to Brian at the film's conclusion.

Brian represents the masculine authority to decide what racial politics are and how they should appear. This authority is on display in a scene in which Brian and Tracy walk through an abandoned Chicago neighbourhood. Thick with clichés, this scene is staged to illustrate the characters' perspectives on collectivity, individualism, and poverty. Through the language of lost feeling, Brian laments that Civil Rights struggles have been undermined by capitalist accumulation (though he does not use those terms). He identifies Tracy's desire to 'get out' and pursue the 'much better life that she wants', aspirations that she is not ashamed of, and asserts himself as the person who will stay and attend to the job of making Chicago's inner city 'a better place to live'. There is a moral heroism in this self-identification that relies upon a judgment of Tracy's individualistic aspirations that Brian never questions as they delve into the plot of their stormy romance.

In the scene that follows, Sean entices Tracy with the prospect of pursuing a modelling career in Rome. He offers her this possibility while photographing her in the rainbow dress she just completed. This scene takes place in the backroom of Marshall Fields, which is littered with the accoutrements of department story display (mannequins, baskets, and ostrich feathers). Transformed from a drawing to a dress Tracy is actually wearing, viewers can now see its details: the gold collar of the chiffon overlay, the form fitted yellow column dress underneath with its high slit up the leg and the row of small yellow buttons placed along the side seam. Aunt Beah accompanies Tracy on this photo shoot and Tracy lovingly identifies her as the 'tailoring department' that helped her make the creation she proudly wears on her own. As Tracy walks among the mannequins and talks about her intentions to sell her designs, Sean expresses skepticism about whether she can do this in Chicago. Aunt Beah asks, 'What's wrong with Chicago?' Beah's rhetorical question gives Sean the opportunity to introduce the possibilities of Rome, where 'pretty things' (like Tracy) are not 'sent out for coffee' that is, where she will not be confined to subservience because she is a black woman. Though Sean has been intermittently photographing Tracy throughout this conversation, the modelling session really begins when Sean turns on music and dares Tracy to 'shine,' 'dance,' and 'move'. Tracy responds by dancing around the mannequins and stretching out her arms in circles so her chiffon overlay swirls around her in a dizzying blurs of ecstatic colour. The department store supervisor, Mrs. Evans – another white middle aged lady, who, like her design teacher, polices Tracy's ambitions – interrupts the photography session to tell Sean that Tracy cannot be the model for this layout: it is against the agency's rules to hire black women as models. Her interruption exemplifies the provincial racisms Sean claims Tracy will not have to encounter in Europe (Figure 2).

This photography session is the last time Aunt Beah appears in *Mahogany*. Her erasure from the narrative can be understood as evidence of Tracy's alienation from African American culture and her steadfast insistence on her own individual success. But it is probably more accurate to say that it is women's work fashioning their places in African American culture from which Tracy becomes alienated. For when Tracy returns to Chicago, it is Brian's political aspirations – not sewing skills – that become her connection to home.

It makes sense that the issues Brian fights for – racial justice and fair housing for the urban poor – take precedence over fashion but what *Mahogany* draws out is the unquestioned assumption that designing and making fashion is a trivial hobby and not a valuable form of work. It also displays the more pernicious idea that woman's identification with fashion is silly, not worth taking seriously. And yet, the film also shows that Tracy's 'visual acumen' can be of value if it is a vital part of the affective labour a woman gives to her partner. In a scene that takes place in his apartment, Brian announces that they will be going out to dinner with a congressman and his wife. This plan conflicts with Tracy's design class and to mark the fact that Brian's career takes precedence over hers, she despondently pins the candidate poster she has been drawing over the sketch of her rainbow dress. Her talents should be put in the service of crafting Brian's image.

This is only a momentary expression of acquiescence, however. In the next scene, which takes place in his campaign office, Brian articulates his assumption that her career does not matter – and Tracy fights back. The scene begins with Tracy answering a number of phones, illustrating the fact that she performs secretarial work for the campaign. With exasperation, she passes the phone to another woman and rushes to leave the office as

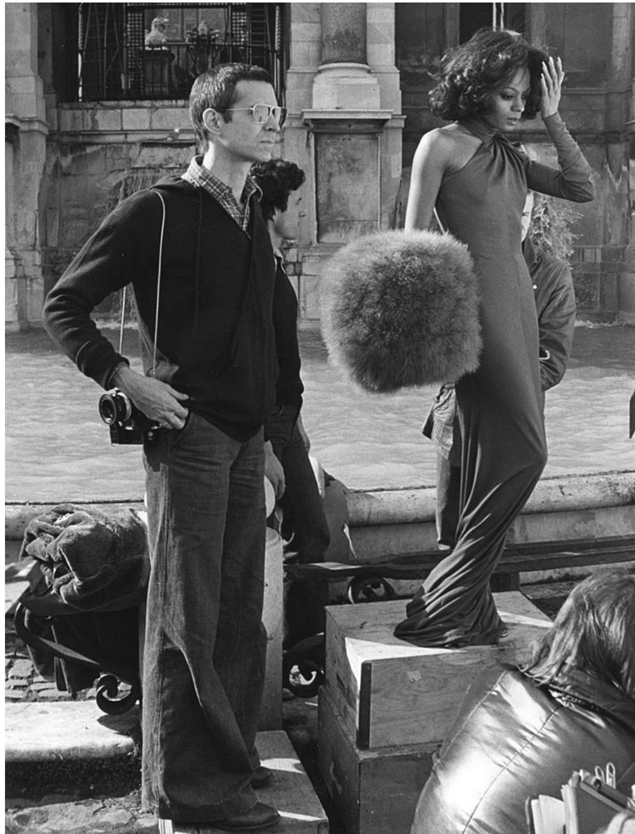

Figure 2. Diana Ross and actor Anthony Perkins on the set of the film *Mahogany* in Rome, 1975. Photo by Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

Brian enters it. Tracy is on her way to prepare for a design show class, but Brian expects her to be at a dinner for Independent Democrats. He doesn't believe she needs to prepare so thoroughly to present her clothes to designers – 'What's the big deal. They've all said no to you anyway'. This is just one expression of his demand that she relinquish her efforts to create a career for herself. Brian says to her that she 'has gotten herself involved in something really meaningful'. With quick anger she responds: 'Right, your career. You seem to be forgetting mine'. To this, he replies: 'You can't forget about something that doesn't exist'. These statements, and a phone call from Sean inviting her to Rome again, propel Tracy to leave Chicago.

Upon Tracy's departure for Rome, *Mahogany* becomes a story of a struggle over whether Brian or Sean can claim Tracy. As Wiegman argues, by 'moving from black man to white and back again, Mahogany mediates between them, and her image provides the means for a negotiation of power among black and white men' (Wiegman 1991, 316). Indeed, once the film assigns Tracy the role of mediating between Brian and Sean, both of whom want to make her embody their success, the film's attention to her passion for clothing begins to exist on a secondary narrative register, though it does not disappear.

When Tracy defies Sean's authority as the star fashion photographer, Tracy's passion for design reasserts itself. She arrives on set one day wearing one of her own designs, not the

ensemble assigned to her. (As a model in Rome, Tracy has only been modelling the designs of other people, not making or displaying any of her own.) Her long dress is bright white and the long sleeves extend out from the wrists into sculpted forms of flowing white fabric. Over the white dress Tracy wears an elaborate neckpiece made of yellow, orange, and turquoise beads that cover her chest and hang over the bodice. She also wears an elaborate headpiece – braids sculpted into wide circular shapes wrapped in red and green ribbons – that extend outward from her neatly coiffed bun. The colours of this ensemble are slightly more muted than Tracy's rainbow dress, but her beaded accessories and headdress are nothing if not ornaments. The ensemble announces Tracy's stylistic affinity with Egypt and the African diaspora.

The timing of this assertion is telling. Tracy decides to wear her design the day after Sean attempted to seduce her. This seduction fails and exposes his impotence, which Perkins skilfully renders with raw humiliation. When Tracy arrives on set, Sean (sitting on top of the dolly) drily takes note of her choice to wear her own clothes and his cool denial of her choice tells viewers that, in his eyes, she is not just breaking the protocol of the photo shoot, but capitalising upon his sexual humiliation. The setting comes to his defense: the vista that looks out onto the Roman architecture, with all its suggestions of Europe and civilisation, becomes Sean's alibi, buttressing his claims to white masculine power and justifying his denigration of Tracy and her designs. Sean tells Tracy she cannot wear the costume she has on, as it is not the 'proper attire'. Sean notes that it is 'wrong for the sequence' and looks out over the vista as if his assessment is obvious. The subtext of Sean's statements is that the Africanist themes of her dress clash with the aesthetic grandeur all around them. Stubbornly, Tracy insists, 'I want to wear it'. In response, he wields the power that this scene has established and rips off the beaded front of Tracy's costume. Sean's punitive restriction extends from this particular shoot to *Mahogany* itself, and I would argue, to African American women's historical relationship to clothing and fashion. And yet, reasserting *Mahogany*'s attention to black feminist defiance, Tracy replies to Sean's exposure by slapping him across the face.

Sean does not allow Tracy's slap to have the last word. He is in the audience of a fashion show for a charity auction in which Tracy surreptitiously wears one of her own designs. Interrupting a sequence of gowns made of sheer and flowing chiffon fabrics and soft, muted colours, Tracy wears a long kimono dress made of a thick tangerine silk. A dragon composed of blue sequins adorns the bodice. This dress has large bell sleeves, and a sharp slit goes up the right side. This is another contestation between a streamlined modernist aesthetic and the supposed vulgarities of colour and ornament. Indeed, before Tracy makes her entrance, the master of ceremonies describes the piece she was supposed to wear: a design of 'classic simplicity, a white silk jersey dress'. When set against the soft, diffuse lines of the other more obviously feminine dresses worn by white models, the hard and sharp contours of Tracy's shiny dress make it look like armour, a defense against becoming an image through which men struggle with each other. Modelling her design with her highly stylised choreography, Tracy receives no bids – only gasps of shock and boos of disapproval – until Sean makes an embarrassingly low bid to highlight her humiliation. This inspires Christian, a wealthy Italian man, to buy Mahogany's design for an enormously high price. This act of rescue transforms into enough support for Tracy to produce a fashion line but she has to pay with sexual subservience, which makes the charity auction echo a slave auction.

Mahogany ends with Tracy fleeing her deal with Christian, which epitomises the sexual and racial objectification she experienced in Europe. She returns home to Brian and Chicago and commits herself to their romance and his career in politics. In the scene of her return, Tracy calls to Brian from within a crowd at the rally announcing his congressional campaign and they come together through a call and response that reaffirms her fluency in black vernacular expression. As David Bogle explains in his sympathetic reading of the film, *Mahogany* 'refuses to let [Tracy] be both successful *and* black' and it is a given that she has relinquished her hope for a career in fashion (Bogle 1994, 255). And yet, the clothing Tracy wears in this scene – a fluffy white fur coat with a wide lapel – indicates that the desires she has attached to fashion have not been completely repressed. Writing about Tracy's final ensemble, Adrienne Munich observes that '[t]he film—and its star costume designer—cannot quite relinquish fashion's allure' (Munich 2011, 277). *Mahogany*'s attachment to fashion is an attachment to the black feminist desire to tell a story about black women fashioning their own relationships to the images their bodies project, without relinquishing an aesthetic claim to black femininity or the historical contestations that claim has entailed.

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Notes on contributor

Kimberly Lamm is Associate Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University. She recently published her first book, *Addressing the Other Woman: Textual Correspondences in Feminist Art and Writing* (Manchester University Press).

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