The Femme Fatale in Brazilian Cinema

Challenging Hollywood Norms

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The Black Femme Fatale in *Xica da Silva*

The sexual danger the femme fatale represents in American film noir (which did not occur, however, only in this film genre) is "constructed through foreign, racialized, and exoticized others" (Fay and Nieland 171). Nevertheless, although foreignness in film noir relates to racial issues, this seems to be masked by the fact that the femme fatale is played by light-skinned actresses, such as Rita Hayworth and Greta Garbo. Indeed, the relationship of film noir with blackness, for instance, is mostly figurative and is implied by the symbols the films use such as "jazz music, the black-and-white cinematography, and even the darkness of the femme fatale herself" (Fay and Nieland 274)—the black *body* is absent from characters in leading roles, particularly those playing the femme fatale. The "visual blackness" suggested through symbols such as the ones above is, therefore, what stands out in the analysis of racial issues in the films (e.g., Oliver and Trigo's study). For Oliver and Trigo, the femme fatale's "darkness" and her "repressed racial blackness" are indications of her questionable maternal origin as this is likely to be the source of her evilness.

Thus, blackness in film noir is suggested through the cinematography and the visual style, but the femme fatale herself remains a light-skinned woman. Although this could be because of the context specificities, the 1940s, it seems to be related to the imaginary surrounding the femme fatale as Caucasian. This is strongly indicated by the lack of black femmes fatales in neo-noir films and in studies that fail to identify the femme fatale beyond noir and neo-noir films. As Caputi argues (by referring to Hannsberry), "Many theorists, through differing strategies, neglect to critique representations of dangerous, monstrous, and violent women of color and focus only on sexy white femmes fatales" (51). Moreover, as Caputi points out, all the negative features that make a woman "bad" or

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"noir" are those related to women of color and are rooted in colonialist and racist views: "primitive emotions and lusts, violence, sexual aggression, masculinity, lesbian tendencies, promiscuity, duplicity, treachery, contaminating corruption, sovereignty, and so on" (52). Yet, these are "transmitted" onto the Caucasian femme fatale and the black one is consequently ignored in cinema. As Fay and Nieland point out, "Film noir's misogyny is perhaps a more culturally acceptable alibi for its racism" (164–65). But as Caputi further observes (by referring to Lalvani), although the femme fatale is essentially characterized as a white woman, her background is a colonialist one.

Wager emphasizes noir's minimum focus on racial issues. Even more significant, as the author rightly points out by quoting Orr, is that remakes of film noir have done the same thing. Wager argues that the most these films show is somebody "passing" as white and that the "racial threat" for these "white" characters concerns their true racial origin being discovered, as happens in *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) where "the femme is trapped by her ambiguous racial status" (125). The author, nevertheless, contends that because this film concentrates on race it loses its impact on gender; indeed, race motivates most evil in the film.

The issues these authors raise regarding race is evident in Brazilian cinema where black people have mostly played minimal roles, such as servants and criminals, in films (see Stam, *Cross-Cultural*). Only on very few occasions have they been the main characters of a Brazilian film, let alone a femme fatale. Xica da Silva is an exception to this. Hence, by engaging with this filmic representation of the black Brazilian femme fatale, this chapter aims to subvert the existing conception of such a figure as a Caucasian woman and to show that such a character is performatively constituted. This is crucial for an up-to-date understanding of the figure and to "decolonize" the Euro-American imaginary surrounding it.

Carlos Diegues's *Xica da Silva* is based on the life of the eponymous protagonist—a slave who lived in the hamlet of Tijuco (now Diamantina) in the province of Minas Gerais, which is a region where the Portuguese mined diamonds and other precious stones, during the eighteenth century.[1] In the film, Xica da Silva (Zezé Motta) becomes renowned for possessing a phenomenal sexual drive and much cunning. She performs different sexual tricks—"some things that only she knows how to do"—that cause men to howl not only with pleasure but also with pain. She captures the attention of the newly arrived Portuguese contractor João Fernandes (Walmor Chagas), sent by the Portuguese Crown to Tijuco to mine for diamonds. But once there, he falls in love with Xica and, as a result, provides her with whatever extravagance she demands; he even presents the slave with her enfranchisement letter. Consequently, Portugal

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sends a revenue agent—the Count of Valadares (José Wilker)—to check João Fernandes's excessive expenditure and this ends the lavish lifestyle he provided for Xica. Furthermore, because of his relationship with the black slave, João Fernandes loses his position as a contractor and is sent back to Portugal.

Since its release, the film has been reviewed by film critics and scholars from different subject areas, and they show much disagreement about its "quality" and the approach the filmmaker chose to portray the historical character. For instance, one reviewer says that the film "recreates the past without creating a postcard"[2] (F. Ferreira n. pag.), while another criticizes the relationship of the filmmaker to the plot by saying that "there is hardly any identification of the author with the slaves but with the masters" (Nascimento n. pag.). Some critics even call it a "disguised *pornochanchada*,"[3] whereas others see *Xica da Silva* as a film that "stands out in the mediocre context of Brazilian cinema production, as it is one of the few to attract the public without the bad taste of *pornochanchadas*" (J. Ferreira n. pag.). Regardless of the various critics' views, the film achieved box-office success. On its release in Rio de Janeiro on September 4, 1976, it made a profit of about Cr$ 1.200.000.00 (*Nas telas*). Over eight million viewers watched it in the first two and a half months it was shown (Johnson, *Carnivalesque*). Its reception at film festivals also demonstrated its success. For example, during the *Brasília Film Festival*, it was described as an "exuberant film, lively, contagious—in sum, a film with enormous public sympathy" (Vartuck n. pag.).

Despite the film addressing various important issues for understanding the Brazilian society of its time—mostly in a metaphorical way—as *cinema-novo* films (the film critics' "thermometer" of Brazilian film quality) did in the previous decade, it clearly was not understood at the time. For example, the difference between *Xica da Silva* and the *cinema-novo* films mostly concerns aesthetics. *Xica da Silva* brought different aesthetics to the screen than the Brazilian audience of *cinema novo* of that time—composed mainly of members from the country's intellectual elite—was used to seeing. As Soares observes, what differentiates "the *avacalhação* [sloppiness] in *Xica da Silva* from that in the films of Glauber Rocha and Rogério Sganzerla is that *Xica* is popular not because it talks about the 'people' or on behalf of the 'people,' as preach the *cinema-novo* filmmakers, but because it speaks the language of the 'people'" (60). *Xica da Silva* tackles different issues such as race, gender, and sexuality that are as important as the ones the *cinema-novo* films focus on, such as hunger[4] and drought in the *sertão* ("backlands"). The "misunderstandings" of the film are seemingly a result of the allegorical way it addresses these issues.

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The film's allegorical approach also leaves room for different interpretations and helps to question if there is a true and definite historical version of this character. *Xica da Silva* develops in a way that deconstructs the notion of historical truth, which earns the film an accusation of showing "disrespect to Brazilian History" (Nascimento n. pag.). Diegues's portrayal of the historical character challenges the conventional way of understanding history and the traditional way the character is conceived in sociohistorical imaginaries. That is, the film does not reduce history to "the 'what really happened' of past events" (Hill 3); instead, it works with a notion of history that includes the totality of processes whereby individuals experience, interpret, and create changes within social orders, and both individuals and groups change over time as they actively participate in changing objective conditions (Hill).

Thus, Xica could be a "historical truth," a "myth," or even neither of these if the conventional binary way of seeing history is deconstructed and the structuralist way of understanding both myth and historical truth is challenged, as Hill proposes. Hill deconstructs this dichotomy within history by arguing that such an approach is based on an uncritical distinction that sees myth as atemporal, whereas history is based on a sequence of chronological events. In his view, the structuralist disentanglement of mythic "structure" from historical "event" has resulted in a view of myth as fiction "as opposed to history as fact, a dichotomy that disappears as soon as it is recognized that neither myth nor history is reducible to a text, thing, fact, or event" (5).

Concerning myth and the femme fatale, Place sees this as a mechanism used to apply an ideological operation—to control the strong, sexual woman. According to Place, besides expressing dominant ideologies, myth is "responsive to the repressed needs of the culture" (36). It gives voice to the unacceptable archetypes as well: "The myth of the sexually aggressive woman (or criminal man) first allows sensuous expression of that idea and then destroys it" (36). Indeed, with its representation of a black femme fatale from the colonial period, *Xica da Silva* arguably responds to and criticizes the country's political situation at the time it was made, and the "unacceptable archetype" of the femme fatale works as a smokescreen to slip through censorship while it addresses these issues. The criticism is done in a carnivalesque and allegorical way, and the way it brings "history" to the screen works as an escape valve for the weak to occupy the position of power and change places with the dominant class. Thus, Xica causes social inversion in the colonial setting. As a consequence, the black femme fatale simultaneously represents the glamour and the horror of "otherness" once she becomes both a source of pleasure and a threat to the colonial society

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via the control she exercises over the European male colonizer through her "fatal" sexuality.

The Slave Femme Fatale and the Colonial Setting

Xica first appears in the film in the courtyard of her master's house. The clothes she wears identify her as a slave; therefore, unlike many traditional Caucasian femmes fatales who have power from the beginning of the films and control nearly everyone and everything around them, the black femme fatale needs empowerment to exercise such control over the colonial society, especially its men. Such empowerment moreover supports the view that the femme fatale is not born as such but is an identity that is performatively constructed through the character's acts. This is indicated through Xica's acts from her first appearance in the film, which shows that she depends on no one but herself to achieve liberation. That is, like the femme fatale in neo-noir, she does this by playing with the very fantasy that patriarchal males have about female sexuality: she freely talks about her sexual acts and uses these to dominate males. Although she is not an example of the conventional model of beauty that is disseminated through depictions of traditional femmes fatales, she is as sensual and seductive as they are. She knows the power her body has and she uses it to cause social inversion.

Xica immediately puts every new idea she has into action, and she achieves her goal of occupying a prestigious place in colonial society. But her acts disrupt the colonial society's social and sexual order. In contrast to other slave women in colonial contexts whose bodies were "readily available" to the colonial white males, Xica "is portrayed in the film as mostly in control of hers" (Dennison and Shaw 172). Unlike what some film critics have stated (e.g., Stam, *Tropical*), men do not possess Xica. As Araújo rightly observes, "Contrary to the traditional interpretation of the film, Xica is not used sexually. She enjoys the pleasure sex provides" (42). The black femme fatale possesses the men and they have to do exactly what *she* wants. Xica's power over men is not only a subversion of hegemonic gender and sexual roles, as is mostly the case with the new femme fatale, but also an inversion of the master/slave dichotomy within the colonial context, and it shows the ways in which she exploits these for her own benefit. The colonial males are unable to resist Xica's sadistic treatment and this indicates the masochistic pleasure they find in it, which additionally confirms the black femme fatale's control over them. Through her performance as a femme fatale, Xica becomes a threat to the colonial society once it loses control over her, and she manages to

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occupy a position of power (as João Fernandes's quasi-wife) from which she controls everyone around her.

Besides dominating the males through her sexual power, Xica causes anxiety for the colonial elite by getting involved with men who are against colonial rule, such as her owner's son José (Stepan Nercessian) and Teodoro (Marcus Vinícius). José is involved with the anticolonial movement known as *Inconfidência Mineira*,[5] while Teodoro explores the diamond mines without permission from the ruling authorities and refuses to pay the high taxes he owes the Portuguese Crown. However, despite the black femme fatale representing numerous threats, the white European "hero," João Fernandes, cannot avoid getting involved with her, and he provides her with whatever she demands.

João Fernandes's relationship with Xica paradoxically becomes necessary for him as it reaffirms his colonizer position in relation to the "other," that is, the colonized black femme fatale—similar to other colonial contexts. For example, Yee points out that according to imperialist exoticism, the successful protagonist (the European hero) "should emerge sufficiently cleansed and strengthened from his encounter with the revalorised colonial subject to be able to assert his own status as hero faced with the more pernicious exoticism of the femme fatale" (478). In *Xica da Silva*, João Fernandes gets involved with a femme fatale who possesses an unrestrained sexual drive that is a test for his status as a hero and a patriarchal male. However, he fails the test and his involvement with the "devalued," exotic, and colonized black femme fatale costs him his position of power as he loses his post as a contractor because of this. Hence, unlike what Yee states about European heroes in her study, João Fernandes does not leave the colony as a strengthened hero.

The sense of "otherness" in *Xica da Silva* additionally recalls the perception of other colonized countries that different European colonizers' discourses have portrayed over centuries. The image of inhabitants of such countries has been propagated as essentially sexual, which provides possibilities for the colonizer to not only fulfill his prohibited sexual desires but also reassure his masculinity. McClintock argues that during the Renaissance European travelers had "an eager and lascivious audience for their spicy tales" (22). The author further contends that Africa and the Americas became the "porno-tropics for the European imagination" and "a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (22). However, their sexual contact with nonwhite women in the colonial setting brought risks because "through sexual contact with women of colour European men 'contracted' not only disease but debased sentiments, immoral proclivities and extreme susceptibility to decivilised states" (Stoler, qtd. in

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McClintock 48). This projection of prohibited desires McClintock points out is presented in *Xica da Silva* through the construction of the black femme fatale as the sexually insatiable "other" with whom the European male colonizer releases his sexual desires. She reduces him to her passive and masochistic sexual plaything.

Xica's sexual behavior mirrors Doane's claim that unrestrained female sexuality presents a danger to the male and to the system of signification itself. An example of this is how Xica, similar to other neo-noir femmes fatales, makes her male counterparts, including João Fernandes, violate society's customs and laws by tempting them to have sex with her in public spaces. Xica has sex with her counterparts in different public places—for example, with João Fernandes on the veranda of their house, with José in the tower of the Convent of the Blacks, and with the Portuguese count in her palace—being watched by other people in most cases. Her sexual behavior is a stark contrast to that of the "good" white woman who represents patriarchy's female role model and opposes the "shameless" black femme fatale.[6] Hence, Xica's hypersexuality is "a *racialised sexuality* linked in this perversity to other women of colour in representations such as the African American mammy/Jezebel, the Native American squaw/princess, and the Chicana/Latina virgin/whore" (Shimizu 65).

Additionally, the black femme fatale is constructed as the colonized sexual degenerate and the "cannibalistic other"—the latter implied by the fact that she bites people. For example, during a banquet João Fernandes and she host for some members of the colonial elite, Xica bites the fingers of the superintendent (played by Altair Lima) when she asks him if he was still interested in her "teeth" as he had previously said. The scene is significantly phallic and can be associated with the shouts the audience hears from her counterparts during sexual intercourse with her. At certain moments, they are heard howling "Not that, Xica!" about an act they fear yet are unable to resist. Xica subordinates men and exercises her sexual control over them, and this threatens their hegemonic masculinity and power as colonial males. Moreover, from a psychoanalytic point of view, the males' screams reveal much: the female genitalia, the *vagina dentata*, can "castrate" men, so the black femme fatale represents a threat to patriarchal colonial power because of her dangerous sexuality.

Xica's relationship with the males she has sex with recalls what Madureira argues about the Brazilian film *Como era gostoso o meu francês* (*How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, 1971), which, for the author, evokes the myth of the *vagina dentata*. Madureira goes on to say that it "remits us to the original colonial encounter, to the voracious native woman whose exuberant, overpowering sexuality Vespucci finds at once menacing and fascinating" (124). Hence, Xica's sexual behavior can be linked to the idea

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of cannibalism that was related to the black colonial women and their sexual danger to the European colonizers. But Xica's threat of castration is more symbolic and indicates her male counterparts' masochism rather than her being "a terrifying symbol of woman as the 'devil's gateway'" (Creed 106).

Creed argues that the male fantasy of women as castrators is linked to fetish and that fetish in this case relates to the *vagina dentata*, the very organ males want to disavow. But women are also constructed as castrated according to the author. Because of this, they are represented as tamed, domesticated, and passive, whereas the castrator is constructed as savage, destructive, and aggressive. But Creed contends that there is another type of woman that denies the existence of this pair: the phallic woman. For her, the phallic woman is the "fetishized woman." She claims that there is confusion about what the phallic woman and the castrating woman are. The author argues that the two concepts are "collapsed together" (106). Referring to Laplanche and Pontalis, Creed states that the term "phallic woman" refers to a woman who has masculine character traits. An example of this, Creed claims, is the film-noir femme fatale who carries a gun in her handbag.

Considering the types of women Creed discusses, Xica is therefore a castrator, which is particularly indicated through her aggressive sexuality. But the black femme fatale's castration is more related to male sexual fantasies and her domination over them, which she uses to make men give her pleasure rather than to ensnare her victims (as Creed puts it regarding the castrator). The castration threat she represents concerns the males' loss of their power and their own identity as a consequence of their sexual contact with her. Hence, her *vagina dentata* constitutes a symbolic representation of her domination of the colonial males.

Indeed, it is through the castrating power Xica has over men that she changes positions from a slave to the contractor's controlling quasi-wife. In subverting the social order, she becomes a "blend" of the well-known saying in Brazil: "A white woman to marry, a mulatto woman to fornicate, a black woman to cook" (Freyre 10). She metaphorically performs each role in different parts of the film; thus, she deconstructs the idealized racial type prescribed for each role in the Brazilian saying. Her (metaphorical) performance of the white, mulatto, and black women's different roles in the saying also shows the ease with which she moves into different social, gender, and sexual arenas, pushing the boundaries dictated by the patriarchal colonial society. Although she performs the "white-married-woman role," she refuses to accept the subordinate role assigned to colonial wives. She will not allow a man to control her even as a married woman; she uses her quasi-married-woman position for social ascension

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and to subvert colonial power. In addition, this black femme fatale shows no interest in raising a family or maintaining the family values patriarchy dictates: besides avoiding becoming the passive dutiful wife, she does not become a mother.[7] Because of this, she is a thoroughly modern femme fatale with certain similarities to other femmes fatales, especially those in neo-noir films. In other words, Xica shows that she is interested not only in money or power as the traditional femme fatale was but also in fulfilling her hypersexual appetite as the neo-noir femme fatale is. She gets as much money as she wants and satisfies her sexual desires whenever and with whomever she chooses. As DaMatta (*A hierarquia*) points out, Xica is "the only instrument that truly knows and effectively controls and possesses her own body" (n. pag.). By exploiting the power that "emanates from her body: sensual, firm, healthy" (n. pag.), as DaMatta describes it, Xica manages to insert herself into the social sphere of the dominant and powerful members of the colonial society.

This black femme fatale remains in power (as the contractor's quasi-wife) long enough to be subject to society's punishment. Like many other traditional femmes fatales, she holds a temporary position of power over patriarchal society (indicated by her control over men), which confirms that her power and performance of it are carnivalesque. In other words, her transgressions are allowed by the males who control colonial society and this recalls the carnivalesque power inversion proposed by Bakhtin: her acts disrupt colonial social order but patriarchal rule is reestablished by the end of the film, as it was in film noir, and the black femme fatale is punished for her transgression.

Bakhtin (*Rabelais*) develops his theory about the carnivalesque in his study of carnival festivities in the work of the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais. In it, he proposes that there is a power inversion in carnival. That is, according to the author, in carnival time there was a sense of freedom and equality. It was an "escape from the usual official way of life" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, in Morries 198). Moreover, the author adds that everybody was considered equal during carnival.

In his approach to Bakhtin's discussion of the carnivalesque, Stam (*Subversive*) argues that to avoid confusing the carnivalesque with other categories considered less subversive such as comedy and play, it is imperative that the carnivalesque is seen within a larger translinguistic context. Stam enumerates 13 different concepts that the carnivalesque evokes. Among these, three are worth mentioning as they relate to the representation of the femme fatale discussed in this book, including Xica da Silva: (1) the notion that there is a "liberation" from hegemonic sexual roles through bisexuality and transvestism; (2) a valorization of the obscene through language; and (3) "a rejection of social decorum entailing a release

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from oppressive etiquette, politeness, and good manners" (93–94). Stam contends that Bakhtin is more interested in "the symbolic overturning of social hierarchies within a kind of orgiastic egalitarianism" (89–90). According to him, this is reflected in the two main Middle Ages institutions that Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque mocked: the Church and the Monarchy. This is well illustrated in *Xica da Silva*, particularly when the black femme fatale tells her Portuguese lover João Fernandes to tell the Portuguese king to "fuck off" and when she threatens to paint the church black because she is refused entry to it for being black.

The key element of the carnivalesque theory for this book concerns the temporality of power it allows. This is mostly evident in *Xica da Silva* which "abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions" (Stam, *Subversive* 86). Moreover, some of the concepts related to the carnivalesque that Stam discusses are evident in the femmes fatales' acts that transgress social norms. These include Xica spitting on the food before it is served to guests she does not like; Solange spitting at her father-in-law's face in *A dama do lotação* (discussed in chapter 4)—an indication of her power in their sexual relationship; and copulation, which occurs with all the femmes fatales in the films discussed herein and is a key act that is related to the physical body. Sex is indeed a very strong element in femme-fatale films and occupies the center of their narratives, particularly in neo-noir films.

As with the carnivalesque, Stam argues that everything that is marginalized and excluded "takes over the center in a liberating explosion of otherness" (*Subversive* 86). However, such an inversion of power is temporary, and its suspension has an effect for a while but all is reestablished, or at least there is an attempt to do so, at some stage. This is particularly the case with the film-noir femme fatale: she is given power, challenges patriarchal norms and morality, but she is then controlled and patriarchal society's power is reestablished, especially by destroying her—often through her killing. Nevertheless, as will be seen in this book, this does not happen frequently to the new femme fatale as she often manages to stay in power despite challenging patriarchal power and performing acts that the society in which she lives considers lewd. In the films with the new femme fatale, bodies and sexualities are central, but these, in most cases, challenge moral codes. This happens particularly in films considered noncanonical, such as B films and sexploitation films. However, resorting to such film genres seems to be a way to "allow" transgression to take place, as happens with the carnivalesque.

Nevertheless, in *Xica da Silva*, the femme fatale is chastised for her acts. The white colonial society, from children to the elderly, wants her punished severely for transgressing gender roles but in particular for

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breaking class and racial boundaries. Because she rebels against social order, she has to be castigated so that society reestablishes the norms it dictates. The reactions of the colonial society toward her near the end of the film confirm that her power through her sensuality and body was a temporary construction that indeed depended on the male, João Fernandes, to have its effect, and once this male matrix of power was annulled she was destroyed. The black femme fatale loses the power she needs to continue occupying the same social sphere as the colonial elite, even if she is no longer a slave. But the film shows that the colonial society has failed to control her "degenerate" sexuality, as illustrated in its last sequence wherein she satisfies her sexual desires by having sex with José in the tower of the Convent of the Blacks—confirmed by his masochistic howls and the lines he cries out offscreen. Thus, Xica's subjectivity and sexual agency escape patriarchal colonial society's control. The fatale power that derives from her body is something the white ruling elite cannot take away from her; even if she were killed as the traditional femmes fatales were, the whites would destroy her material body, but they would not destroy her subversive identity as a black femme fatale: this will always be out of their reach.

The Slave Body: From Striptease to Colonial Power Subversion

Foucault argues that power asserts itself "in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting" (*An Introduction* 45). The way Xica achieves her position of power resonates with Foucault's assertion. That is, this black femme fatale asserts power through her resistance to being domesticated or turned into a passive dutiful wife by patriarchy. Her performance of power challenges the status quo, resists the colonial order, and causes social inversion through her "scandalous" sexual behavior, which echoes Shimizu's point that because the femme fatale "cannot be imagined outside of sex…, her resistance is also found in sex" (99). As Soares argues, Diegues's Xica "exchanges the power of diamonds for the power of sensuality" (61). Still according to Soares, sex and slavery in *Xica da Silva* are "pretexts to talk about power relations: submission and subversion of the order" (64).

The black femme fatale's "showing off" is illustrated in a "striptease" she performs for João Fernandes (watched by the most important people of Tijuco Hamlet), during which power relations are evident and her subversion of these takes place. Xica's striptease functions as the starting point of her inversion of the social and sexual order, which again shows that her role as a femme fatale is performatively constituted. It demonstrates how

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she is able to move in different social spheres and is comfortable in all of them. In addition, the striptease shows how Xica, who is still a slave at this point, is capable of stopping a business meeting among the most powerful men in the locale: the newly arrived contractor João Fernandes, the master sergeant (played by Rodolfo Arena)—who is Xica's owner—and the superintendent.

The striptease sequence opens with a long shot showing the superintendent's wife Hortência (Elke Maravilha) entering the house where the men are having the meeting. The first shots of the sequence imply that the fight for João Fernandes's attention has already begun, not only between Xica and Hortência (who despite being married to the superintendent shows much interest in the Portuguese contractor) but also between the two local men present in the meeting. At a crucial point of the meeting, a commotion interrupts the three men's conversation as Xica enters the room. Straight away she catches their attention and the curious local elite use the opportunity to follow her into the room. In this sequence, the rivalry between the slave and the white woman, Hortência, is amplified and the dichotomous pair—the black femme fatale as the sexually degenerate sinner and the white married woman as the "prudish" conformer—is established.

Xica goes to the house using the excuse that she has to tell her owner that his son José had repeatedly beaten her and would not "leave her alone." She also reminds her master (and informs colonial society) of "all the things" she usually does to him, including massages and things only *she* "knows how to do." But while she is talking to her master her eyes are fixed on the contractor. Her gaze is assertive and conveys domination, whereas João Fernandes's is rather passive and he seems uncomfortable with the way Xica stares at him: he becomes the object of her gaze—a "male gaze" (Mulvey, *Visual*) in reverse. As an attempt to defend the white colonial society's morality, Cabeça (Adalberto Silva)—João Fernandes's bodyguard slave—attempts to remove Xica from the room against her will, but João Fernandes stops him. Staying in the space occupied by the colonial elite is all the black femme fatale needs to engage in her "planned" striptease for the Portuguese contractor.

Xica keeps using the excuse of having suffered violence at the hands of José to remain in the room while staring continually at João Fernandes. She exposes her body as if she were doing an aggressive striptease, during which she tears off her clothes while a shot/reverse shot sequence of her and the contractor is shown until she is completely naked (see figures 1.1 and 1.2). Xica's naked body stays on screen long enough for the male characters and the audience to "explore" her whole body. This recalls the point Place makes about the visual presentation of the femme fatale,

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Figure 1.1

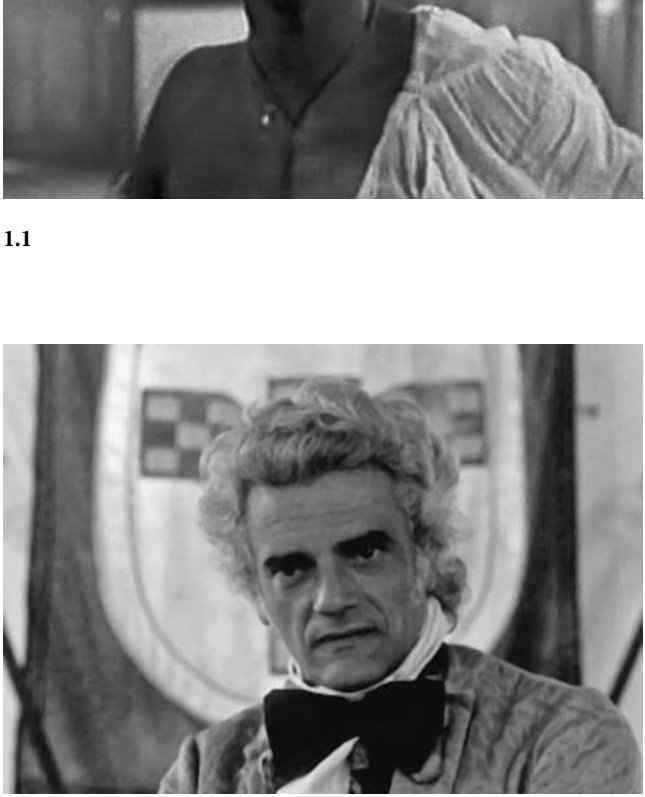

Figure 1.2

which, according to the author, is for the pleasure of not only the hero but also the audience. As Doane puts it, "In the structures of seeing which the cinema develops in order to position its spectator, to ensure its own readability, an image of woman is fixed and held—held for the pleasure and reassurance of the male spectator" (101). The femme fatale's body on

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screen, thus, provides pleasure for the heterosexual male viewer and reassures his belief that he holds the gaze. This is indicated in the way Xica tears off her clothes to enact the sadomasochistic fantasies of both male characters—especially those of the European "hero"—and the heterosexual male spectators' gazes. Her striptease performance combines sensuality and violence as she strips to illustrate the supposedly violent way José treated her and to imply that he raped her.[8] But later on in the film, the audience learns that José did not beat or rape her. Xica invented the story to gain initial proximity to João Fernandes as her master had previously refused her demand for him to take her to meet the European man.

The iconography of the image in this striptease sequence is extremely important for the construction of Xica's sexual power on screen and to show how the features in *Xica da Silva* contrast with those of other films portraying the femme fatale. For example, whereas the Caucasian femme fatale's hair is often exploited as part of her sexual performance and seduction, in Diegues's film this is replaced by a femme who has a short "haircut and make-up with a 'black is beautiful' visual that predates the 'black beauty' of the 1980s" (Soares 62). Xica's look is explored during the striptease and shows that "beauty is performative" (Tate, *Black Beauty Meets*).[9] As such, her black beauty "can be performed differently and disrupt the beauty normalizations, the taken for granted ideas of our beauty ideals" (Tate, *Black Beauty* 7). The femme fatale's "performance of black beauty" mirrors the point Tate makes; that black beauty like any other beauty "is a matter of *doing* and its effects are not therefore an inherent attribute which awaits apprehension and judgement through a neutral process of reflection" (*Black Beauty* 7). Xica's facial expression exhibits pride in her black body and the colonial social disruption her black-power look can cause. Her acts and facial expressions in this sequence show a total lack of submission to the white colonial society's domination. Thus, instead of putting on clothes and accessories to enhance her power as other femmes fatales do, Xica shows that her power relies on the beauty and sensuality of her black body. Her striptease suggests that beauty is "not something that simply is but it is rather done and translated for its cultural intelligibility. As culturally intelligible beauty is an effect of discourses" (Tate, *Black Beauty* 9). By exploring the power of her body, the black femme fatale subverts the colonial discourse and traditional conceptions of beauty. She puts all her sensuality "at the service of seduction of the men she desires: she does not have children, nor resist men, and she is—for both the men with whom she lives and the audience that watches her—frighteningly attractive and beautiful" (Soares 62).

The ways Xica's body is displayed in the sequence, in terms of the visual style, also contribute to the construction of this black femme fatale's

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power through her sexuality. She "dominates" the camera and the gaze: she is "looked-at" but she also returns and controls the gaze and the pace of the scenes during the sequence. Most of her striptease performance is presented through shot/reverse shot—a common editing pattern used in many films depicting femmes fatales, especially when they seduce their counterparts. The shots show that Xica has already caught João Fernandes's attention. She dominates the entire sequence from the background to the foreground while other people, including Hortência, are squashed into the left side of the frame. The space allocated to the characters in this sequence mirrors the point Stam (*Brazilian Cinema*) makes. According to him, space in the visual arts "has traditionally been deployed to express the dynamics of authority and prestige. The cinema translates such correlations of social power into registers of foreground and background, on-screen and off-screen, silence and speech" (206). Although Xica is in a disadvantaged social position, this is subverted in the sequence by her moving freely around the frame, while a small percentage of it is left to the static dominant class. This foreshadows the sexual and social subversions she is to cause from her initial subaltern position within the colonial society to a quasi-queen. Similar to the visual elements, the language Xica uses in the striptease sequence is equally important. It also hints at S/M—a feature that became prominent in depictions of the femme fatale in neo-noir films—and recalls the valorization of the obscene through language in Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. The best example of this is when she reports the supposedly violent way José often treats her: "He beats me, steps on me, bites me; my whole body burns!" The words she uses and her aggressive facial expressions (see figure 1.1 for an example) imply that she planned what she intends to achieve with this account of violence: to arouse sadistic and masochistic sexual pleasure in the males. The black femme fatale's use of language is indeed an important device she deploys in this sequence and indeed throughout the film. This is evident when she (and the colonial society) repeatedly refers to the things that "*only* Xica knows how to do." She exploits language to seduce her sexual counterparts and promote herself as someone capable of doing unique things. She is conscious of the effect the language she uses will have on her male "victims"—it arouses excitement and curiosity in them, as it does in the audience,[10] because they want to discover what this thing that only she knows how to do is.[11]

Stam (*Tropical*) argues that Xica's role assumes two levels. One is directed toward society's hypocrisy, which enslaved black people and exploited black women. Regarding the other, he claims that Xica embodies the fantasy of the sexually available slave because she is *used* by a variety of white men for sex—"all of whom at one point 'own' her" (293–94).

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Stam goes on to say that the *zoeira* ("dizziness") she often feels when she is sexually excited is "symptomatic of her political incapacity" (294). But if the femme fatale's use of language is considered, each time Xica says she feels "dizzy" the word *zoeira* is a "signpost" to men that she is actually on the verge of "devouring" them rather than it showing weakness on her part. The males know, as the audience does, what she is up to when she feels "dizzy." As soon as Xica says she feels dizzy, the men she approaches react in a defensive way and try to stop her sexual advances. José's response to her advances at the Convent of the Blacks in the final sequence of the film illustrates this. When Xica starts feeling "dizzy," he tries to protect himself by saying that they are in a sacred place and if they had sex there they would be committing a sin. Despite this, he fails to control his masochistic desire, so he surrenders to the black femme fatale who once again manages to satiate her "dizziness."

Returning to the striptease sequence, it ends with a long shot showing Xica completely naked, from the back, and occupying the center of the frame, which is followed by a shot from the front. The camera then pans out, showing the people in the room staring at the femme fatale in dismay and shock. Hortência plays her role of the "good woman" who opposes the femme fatale's "shameless" behavior to try to restore colonial society's morality. She screams and pretends to faint, and later on she demands that Xica be flogged for her "immoral acts." However, Hortência's reactions are rather hypocritical as she is also interested in João Fernandes, as the audience already knows. But the white woman and the colonial elite fail to have the black femme fatale punished as Xica's performance has the effect she intended on João Fernandes. The Portuguese contractor buys Xica from her owner despite the latter's protests and unwillingness to sell his slave. Hence, from this striptease sequence on, the audience sees that the black femme fatale "discovers her place in the social order of Tijuco, actualizing a corporeal practice…A practice made up of scandal…, the power to bless and curse, the power to laugh and have pleasure" (DaMatta, *A hierarquia* n. pag.).

Xica soon becomes the talk of the colony and so does Fernandes for his passivity toward her, "bewitched" as he is by her fatal sexuality and power. For example, later on in the film, a sequence showing two men talking in an open market reveals the local people's opinion about Xica. When one of two characters asks a question—"And his *wife* [Xica] who was a slave?"—he is reprimanded by the other who states: "Don't say that! *He* is the slave now! Xica can do *some things* that *only she* knows how to do. But there are many people who do not like her; they really don't." These lines denote the femme fatale's domination over her European male counterpart and show that she has actualized her desired change in social

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class. However, as DaMatta observes, in a hierarchized and paternalistic society, "the point does not really concern the strong or the weak, but the inversion of the position of the strong by the weak. This is the dangerous moment, which indicates that it is time to moralize" (*A hierarquia* n. pag.). So the paternalistic colonial society finds a way to reinstate social order by destroying the femme fatale. Xica is removed from the position of power she occupies not only because of her (dirty) sexual behavior but also, if not mainly, because of her skin color as blackness is mostly associated with degeneration in colonial discourse.

Blackness and the Femme Fatale

As already pointed out, imaginaries concerning the traditional femme fatale are associated with whiteness. As a result, most depictions of this figure in cinema and other arts have assumed that she is Caucasian and therefore focused mainly on one aspect: gender. The focus on gender over race indicates that such an approach is because she is mainly a male creation as most of these films are made by men. The femme fatale becomes a vehicle to express male concerns about female domination rather than other conflicts.

Similar to what happens in cinematic representations of this figure, the femme fatale's racial identity has also been neglected in many scholarly studies of her[12]—they hardly mention non-Caucasian women as femmes fatales.[13] Such neglect resonates with the concerns of American feminists of color, who argue that "a primary focus on gender erases other aspects of women's identities and experiences, including race, sexuality, and class" (Caldwell 19). These concerns are extremely important for reading Xica's performance as a femme fatale. The ways the black femme fatale challenges colonial society's hegemonic gender roles are essential for her subjectivity as a woman, but this aspect of her identity cannot and should not be separated from her race, sexuality, and social class because all these are integrated in the constitution of her subjectivity.

Indeed, as McClintock argues, race, gender, and social class "are not distinct realms of experience that exist in complete isolation from each other" (5). But she also contends that they cannot be "simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego" (5). For McClintock, they exist in and through their relation to each other; hence, she suggests that gender, race, and class should be considered "articulated categories" (5). The author explores these three realms by triangulating them into the intimate relations between imperial power and resistance, money and sexuality, and race and gender. In *Xica da Silva*, the way the

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femme fatale behaves challenges these three aspects. The femme fatale destabilizes hegemonic racial, gender, sexual, and class relations as she simultaneously subverts various conventional dichotomous pairs such as black/white, male/female, passive/active, and slave/dominant colonial elite. Her "deviances" from patriarchy's norms are, therefore, too much for the colonial society to accept since dominant culture "can only tolerate the destabilisation of one binary [i.e., gender or black/white relations] at a time" (Kaplan, *Women in Film* x). Consequently, the dominant class seeks to control the deviant black femme fatale and it exploits her "deviances" as its justification for annihilating her power. The whites' response to Xica's behavior also reveals "the white culture's fears of what might happen if gender and racial boundaries were not managed and kept in place" (Kaplan, *Women in Film* x).

Such fears of the black femme fatale stem from the colonial imaginary that she embodies "the glamour and the horror of otherness" (Kaplan, *Women in Film* x). Glamour evokes her sexuality—her "exotic" appearance, and her strength and domination over the male colonizer. The black femme fatale also embodies the characteristics that the colonial society rejects: she is a colonized black subject who possesses a threatening sexuality. The very blackness of this Brazilian femme fatale is a feature of her identity that shows her ambivalence: she is a slave and as such she should be available for the white colonizer, but she is strong enough to subvert her subaltern condition and dominate the European "hero." She, therefore, contradicts the roles imposed on her because she is a black slave woman. Her acts show that her blackness does not prevent her from being a femme fatale and it indeed challenges the established construction of the femme fatale being exclusively a Caucasian woman. The black femme fatale arguably becomes more problematic than the Caucasian Euro-American ones because she is marked not only by her gender and sexuality (which are the main features of the others) but also by her race and social class.

The black femme fatale represents "the white male's projection and displacement of desire upon the black body" (McCabe 640). Xica's blackness attracts João Fernandes as it clearly contrasts his Portuguese wife's[14] (unattractive) skin color, which he says is "as white as curdled milk." Despite the risk of "contamination" by Xica's "otherness" and "exoticism," the European male colonizer cannot avoid getting involved with the black femme fatale. This means that Xica can use the Portuguese contractor to achieve what she wants: power. However, this becomes a problem for the colonial sexual order as Xica acts as a "dominatrix" who controls the colonial males and turns them into her sexual playthings. As she has sexual contact with the most powerful white men in the colony, including the

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European contractor, her domineering and sensual black body functions as "a vehicle for mediating the sexual transgression of the white characters" (McCabe 647).

The way the film addresses race works as an expression of colonial racial anxiety and as a way of forging links with sexuality and gender. The connection between these is illustrated in the ambivalence Xica's black body represents within the colonial context. That is, on the one hand, her body provides pleasure, but, on the other, it generates colonial anxieties as she is presented as a threat that is not easy to control. The black femme fatale's body, therefore, arouses phobia among the colonial white people who see her color as the cause of her "degenerate" sexual behavior. For example, in a sequence in which members of the colonial elite are having dinner at João Fernandes's house, Xica says that a newly arrived slave who is serving Fernandes is too beautiful to do the job and that she wants the girl as her slave so that she can keep an eye on her. Hortência uses the opportunity to attack her rival by saying that Xica "knows her race," by which she means that blacks are all sexual degenerates.

The whites see Xica's skin color as something that makes her intrinsically inferior so they exploit this to diminish her in an attempt to destabilize her newly acquired colonial identity as a powerful woman. For example, Hortência and the Portuguese count repeatedly refer to the black femme fatale in racist ways. But Hortência's racism is not a surprise because it is a clear reaction to the threat Xica's sensual black body is to her: unlike her whiteness, it attracts João Fernandes. She repeatedly tries to get the Portuguese contractor's attention but does not succeed. As Johnson observes, Hortência is perhaps "the most petty incarnation of racism in the film…; she feels threatened by Xica's ascent and by her attractiveness to men" (*Xica da Silva* n. pag.). But racism was not confined to the film's characters. The racist reactions toward Xica are prominent in different reviews of the film at the time of its release. For example, one says:

> At the end of the day, who is Xica da Silva? A *black* with a soul as white and perverted as any Du Barry of the best ballrooms. A *black* who liked laying down the law…; a *black* who, above all, liked loads of luxury and wealth, and, on top of that, she had a secret sensual "trick" that made men howl strange screams of pain. A brazen prostitute who took maximum advantage of her condition of object—this is the "greatness" of Xica. (Frederico n. pag., emphases added)

The way *Xica da Silva* deals with race challenges and criticizes notions of racial identity that have developed in Brazil. Some film reviewers have,

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however, accused the film of creating a stereotype of black people. But the film's depiction of racial relations actually mocks the dominant racist whites who are "caricatured even more than the blacks" (Stam, *Tropical* 294). In comparing Hortência and Xica, for example, the white woman is much more caricatured than Xica—the slave functions as a "screen" onto which the criticism of her rival is projected. The film, in the same fashion of satirical or parodic films, as proposed by Spence and Stam, seems "less concerned with constructing positive images than with challenging the stereotypical expectations an audience may bring to a film" (12).

For instance, the racial conflict in the film indicates not only that Gilberto Freyre's conceptualization of Brazil as a "racial democracy" does not hold, but also that the whitening of the Brazilian population, manifested for instance through "mulatto essentialism" (Caldwell), is also a failure. As Nunes observes, the mulatto woman, not the black one, was considered to play an important role in Brazil's racial project and "in the linking of race and nation" because it was through her body that *embranqueamento* (whitening) took place. This confirms that black women have always been on the margins of Brazilian society, both during the colonial period and after independence. Moreover, the film criticizes rather than conforms to the belief that blacks want to be white. This is evident in the black femme fatale's "mimicry" of the whites' culture, which works as a mockery of the colonial elite and as a "cannibalistic" way of appropriating their culture and criticizing the racist imaginary they create of black people.

Mimicry

Bhabha contends that "mimicry" is ambivalent—or in his words, involves something that is "almost the same, but not quite" (123)—and has a profound and disturbing effect on the authority of colonial discourse because it "repeats rather than re-presents" (125). For example, in *Xica da Silva*, the black femme fatale uses mimicry to consolidate and maintain her power. But her mimicry of the colonial whites is rather disturbing for them as it is not intended to represent the colonial elite's values but to criticize them. It does not simply consist of repeating the colonial authority, as Bhabha puts it, but is instead a tool she appropriates in a conscious way to trouble colonial authority.

Xica's "repetition" of the whites' culture implies a cannibalistic criticism of it as she appropriates the things and beliefs white people consider to be of value, such as clothes and consumerism, and she usurps power from them to advance her cause. But, despite seemingly accepting the colonial cultural matrix, she actually transforms it to a more

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genuine model that matches her identity and makes her stronger than the ruling class. For instance, although Xica receives various goods and expensive clothes from all over the world, she modifies them in her own way—transforming them into "carnivalesque costumes"—before wearing them. She ignores her limitations and demonstrates that she is "shifty, irreverent, willful, expansive and fully in charge of herself; she is capable of transforming the white elite's fashion into fancy dress and their customs into a mockery" (F. Ferreira n. pag.). The black femme fatale's cannibalistic mimicry of the whites' culture helps her to become stronger than the colonial elite: it is through her mimicry that Xica finds a way to insert herself into the dominant class's arena.

The way Xica behaves echoes Bhabha's statement that the unintended effect of colonial discourse is "the production of a subject whose mimicry mocks and defamiliarises the model, casting doubt on its integrity and solidity" (x). In most of the film, the black femme fatale's mimicry is used to mock the colonial elite members' behavior, particularly Hortência's and the Portuguese count's racism. It also challenges their "integrity" and their "solidity." For example, besides destabilizing her main rival Hortência throughout the film, Xica's acts expose the white woman because it shows that Hortência is not as good a role model of the colonial patriarchal wife as she tries to advertise to society. From the moment Xica manages to get the Portuguese contractor's attention through her striptease, Hortência can no longer hide her interest in the Portuguese man as from this point onward she perceives the black femme fatale to be an impediment to her goal of seducing João Fernandes. She is so disturbed by Xica's power over the European "hero" that by the end of the film she behaves hysterically in public, shouting and calling Xica names and blaming the latter for João Fernandes's enforced return to Portugal.

Hence, Xica's cannibalistic mimicry—enacted through her wearing clothes and accessories usually worn by the ruling class and her mocking "copy" of their behavior—works to equalize her power to the white elite. For example, early on in the film when José asks her what she would like him to give her as a present, she says she wants "clothes for human beings: white shoes and a white dress." Her yearning for white clothes and shoes implies that she sees white as synonymous with social ascension and a possible means for her to "disguise" what the whites see as her sign of inferiority: her skin color. Indeed, after actualizing her social inversion through her striptease, she wears white and light-colored clothes repeatedly and uses these to show society the change in her social status. By making use of her new clothes and accessories, the black femme fatale seems to "operate a performance of femininity, a masquerade, by means of an accumulation of accessories—jewelry, hats, feathers, etc.—all

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designed to mask [her] lack" (Doane 172). In other words, Xica deploys all these accessories and clothes to "mask" her lack of racial equality to the colonial white elite and even her lack of a phallus—taking into account the psychoanalytical understanding of "lack" (Mulvey, *Visual*)—as she is not just black but above all a female black slave, which represents at least three subaltern positions in the colonial context.

Although she acquires all the accessories and expensive clothes to which no other woman in the colony has access and gets everything she demands from João Fernandes, her blackness is a trait she cannot expel from her identity. She "performs whiteness" through her money and class ascension, but her blackness continues to serve the white elite's goal of pushing her into a subaltern position within the colonial society. For example, even after receiving her enfranchisement letter and becoming "*dona* Francisca da Silva"[15]—as she proudly boasts to the priest—she is not accepted into the local church because of her skin color. In other moments of the film, she is accused of having a pact with the devil, which is also because of her black skin. But despite her "lack(s)," the black femme fatale destroys the boundaries between her and the colonial society through mimicry. Her cannibalistic appropriation of the whites' culture makes her stronger than the colonial ruling class, even if this is in a carnivalesque way only.

Cannibalism

The black femme fatale's cannibalism[16] concerns how she appropriates what belongs to the dominant class to "usurp" the power it signifies and empower herself. Besides this, her cannibalism can be linked to the concept of mimicry proposed by Bhabha to show that this black femme fatale's acts are not just a mimicry of the white people—a criticism the film has received (i.e., that Xica is "a black woman with a white soul")—but that her mimicry is a cannibalistic act that she deploys for her own benefit to acquire the position of power she desires. Her cannibalism is suggested not only in the goods she appropriates but also, and mainly, through her sexual acts—just like many of the other femmes fatales, especially the ones in neo-noirs.

Regarding sex and cannibalism, this is even more strongly indicated by the verb "*comer*" (eat) in Portuguese to refer to the male active role in copulation. Xica, for instance, "eats" the men with whom she has sex. She subverts the logic of *comer* as a male act. Her sexual power is so strong that it causes anxieties at the same time it makes her, and the other femmes fatales, a feared representation of women. This is evident, for example, in the term used for the femme fatale in Mexican cinema: *la devoradora*

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("the devouring one"). Such a term indicates a strong connection with cannibalism and with the question of agency. That is, the femme fatale's "cannibalism" indicates power rather than objectification: she is feared by patriarchal society.

Stam (*Subversive*) argues that cannibalism represents "otherness" within Western traditions and is "the ultimate marker of difference in a coded opposition of light and dark, rational and irrational, civilized and savage" (Stam, *Tropical* 238). Because of her race, Xica's behavior is perceived by the colonial elite as a sign of her savagery, shamelessness, and irrationality. However, she retaliates by mocking the racist behavior of the white elite. The black femme fatale challenges white people's assumptions that only they are clever and allowed to give orders, have luxuries, and live a lavish lifestyle. She shows that she is ready to subvert the racial and social organization that dictates these boundaries, but this does not please the ruling class.

An illustration of Xica's stark criticism of the whites occurs in the sequence in which João Fernandes and she host a dinner for the Portuguese count. During the dinner, she appears with her face painted in white and wearing a blond wig (see figures 1.3 and 1.4),[17] bringing to mind Frantz Fanon's well-known book title *Black Skin, White Masks*.[18] During the dinner, she repeatedly mocks the racist count, who previously addressed her only as the *preta* ("black woman"). When the man decides to try some chicken, she tells him not to do so as it was prepared with *molho pardo*[19]

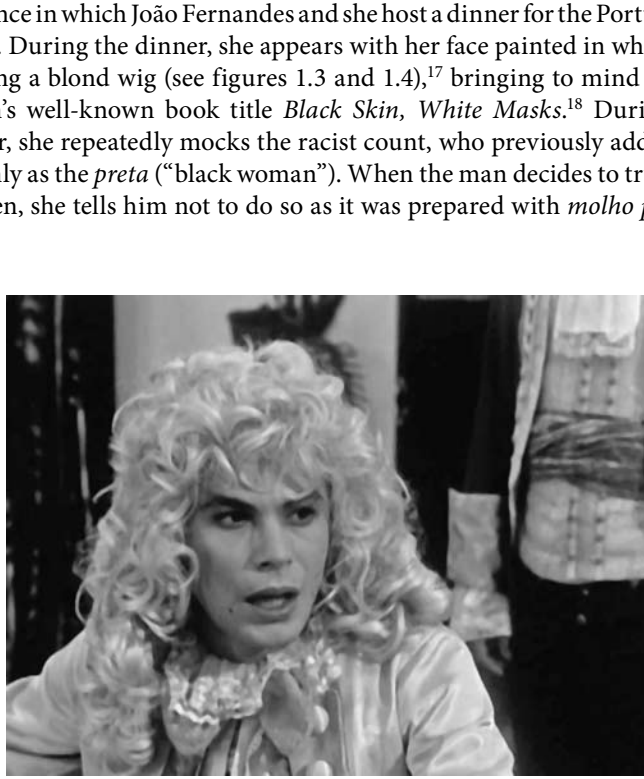

Figure 1.3

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Figure 1.4

("brown gravy"), which is clearly a criticism of his rampant racism as the word *pardo* designates mixed-race people—the mixture of black and white (i.e., mulatto). Thus, the femme fatale's behavior criticizes "white superiority" and recalls the white elite's "ideology of whitening" (Stam, *Cross-cultural* 244) that pervaded Brazil's social imaginary during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Hence, the black femme fatale performs "cannibalism" in two ways: by consuming goods and by sexually "devouring" her counterparts. Her behavior recalls Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's view of cannibalism. For Andrade, those who can, "eat" others "through their consumption of products, or even more directly in their sexual relationships. Cannibalism has merely institutionalized itself, cleverly disguising itself. The new heroes…try to devour those who devour us" (83). Xica voraciously devours the European "hero" sexually and this serves as a metaphor for the nation devouring its own people—that is, the ruling class exploiting the lower classes. The black femme fatale's "cannibalistic" sexual behavior, signaled by her sexual counterparts' screams during their intercourse (as if they were being eaten alive), turns her into a symbol of otherness in the colonial society's eyes.

Xica's "cannibalistic" consumerism implies a criticism of the colonial society's behavior. Many goods João Fernandes buys for her or that she purchases are entirely superfluous to her needs. She says that she needs to organize processions and parties to wear all the "beautiful things" she has received—clearly to exhibit her new status to the colonial society. She

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consumes for the sake of it, as the ruling class does. This behavior of hers denotes that she has assimilated and is exploiting the colonizer's values and those of the white colonial elite. Her exaggerated consumerism, however, turns the ruling class not only against her but also against João Fernandes.

As a representative of the European colonizer, João Fernandes should be "civilizing" the "other," but he becomes more and more influenced by the black femme fatale's behavior and power. He seemingly comes close to becoming the colonized "other" himself. The way he deals with his identity and virility contradicts what the patriarchal society of the European colonial metropolis would normally expect from a European male colonizer. That is, his identity and virility are "not autonomous or secure." On the contrary, they are "constructed in relation to that of the gendered ethnicised other" (Woodhull 120). But both are destabilized because of his relationship with the colonized black femme fatale. So instead of ensuring his virility and fulfilling the white male colonizer's hegemonic roles, he succumbs to Xica's performance as a femme fatale, which overpowers him and turns him into an object she manipulates to achieve her goal of occupying a distinctive position of power within the colonial society.

Therefore, the black femme fatale challenges male domination in a colonial context and subverts the behavior that white patriarchal society dictates as the norm to a black slave woman within this environment. Through her power as a femme fatale, this black slave overturns the colonial positions of power and inserts herself into the elite territory while mocking the same elite through mimicry and the "cannibalization" of the whites' cultural values. Xica's control over João Fernandes shows that "the slave (the colonized, the black, the woman) knows the mind of the master better than the master knows the mind of the slave" (Spence and Stam 15–16). He becomes an example of patriarchy's "fallen-masculinity" as he fails to resist the black femme fatale and allows her to "rule the colony" so the white colonial elite revolts and finds a way to annihilate Xica's power and "destroy" her. However, Xica does not allow herself to be converted and changed into patriarchy's "good woman," even if her obstinacy results in her downfall. She remains faithful to her sexual and gender identities, and even after she is "destroyed" she manages to satiate her sexual appetite. Thus, this black femme fatale's sexuality is a very important aspect of her identity and is related not only to her race but also to her very condition as a woman, which is also the case for other femmes fatales. Moreover, the ways she uses her body and her sexuality, besides challenging hegemonic sexual and gender roles, show how important gender identity is for the femme fatale's subjectivity and how such an identity is performatively constituted.

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