

## Ruth Landes (1908-1991) and Her Understanding of Brazil in *The City of Women*\*

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### ABSTRACT

Ruth Landes was an American anthropologist whose academic background was forged at Columbia University, who developed her research on Brazil in the 1930s. Her research was mainly related to black populations and Afro-Brazilian religions. Ruth Landes's trip to Brazil was influenced by a web of relations involving American and Brazilian anthropologists, such as Franz Boas (1858-1942), Melville Herskovits (1895-1963), Rüdiger Bilden (1893-1980), Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) and Arthur Ramos (1903-1949), in addition to her intense contact with the researcher Edison Carneiro (1912-1972). She also went through an "internship" at Fisk University, also the starting point for other American researchers who conducted research in Brazil, which points to an intense intellectual circulation in the United States and Brazil during the process of production and dissemination of her research on Afro-Brazilian populations. In this paper I analyze the trajectory of Ruth Landes as an American anthropologist who carried out research in Brazil. I seek to analyze the elaboration and reception of "The City of Women", highlighting the role of gender relations in this process.

**Key Words:** Ruth Landes, Afro-Brazilian studies, women anthropologists

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## INTRODUCTION

In January 1938, the anthropologist Ruth Landes (1908-1991), a Ph.D. from Columbia University, came to Brazil, she was a Ruth Benedict's (1887-1948) advisee, and a student of Franz Boas (1858-1942). Although she had a brief stay in South America (he left Brazil in July 1939), the young female researcher from a Jewish family produced a remarkable work for the field of research of the Afro-Brazilian religions, and pioneered in the investigations on the relations of gender, race and religion. Ruth Landes "[...] was an exception because she was a self-employed researcher since until then the female researchers who came here were doublés of researchers' wives – such as Dina Lévi-Strauss, Frances Herskovits, Yolanda Murphy" (Corrêa 2003, 167).

Due to the originality of her work in the field of Afro-Brazilian studies, revisiting *The City of Women* is an important exercise to understand the formation of Latin American and Brazilian studies in the 1930s, since Ruth Landes was part of an important network of relationships between Brazilian and American researchers who shaped the field of race relations studies in Brazil. Another question that makes her work relevant nowadays is that: "Ruth Landes is seen today as a transitional figure (Cole 2003), since her ethnographic writing presaged our concerns about power, agency and our own positionality" (Oliveira Filho 2018, 4).

In addition, Landes's research was carried out at the time of intense intellectual circulation of American and Brazilian researchers (Sansone 2012), in which Afro-Brazilian studies became institutionalized. The emergence of anthropology as an autonomous academic field also occurred during this period, so Landes' work must be perceived as central to both processes.

Although her fieldwork was produced in the late 1930s, a period marked by the institutionalization process of the Social Sciences in Brazil, and also by Vargas dictatorship, it was only in 1947 that she published her book *The City of Women* in the United States, and 20 years later its version in Portuguese, generating controversies in the American and Brazilian academic field. The delay in publishing her book points us to the possible barriers she has encountered, and to the controversial reception of her ideas in the field of Afro-Brazilian studies.

After 70 years since the publication of the first edition of this work, it continues to be a landmark in gender and religion studies, especially Afro-Brazilian religions. However, rather than reviewing *The City of Women*,

I seek in this brief essay to apprehend the controversies involved in the reception of this book in the academic field, arguing that one of the central points of this discussion lies not only in the ideas elaborated and presented in the work, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that it is a woman affirming such ideas, and being a researcher disseminating her hypotheses in other intellectual cycles.

## THE COMING OF RUTH LANDES TO BRAZIL

Although her biography has already been the object of careful consideration of previous research, especially Cole (2003), I think that to situate the reader better; I would like to write a few brief notes about Landes.

She was born and raised in New York in a Jewish family, marked by her father's union activities, experiencing an intense set of cultural, ethnic and social transformations through which this city passed in the early twentieth century. She graduated in sociology from New York University and studied in her master's degree a group popularly known as "black Jews", having migrated to anthropology in her doctorate under the influence of Ruth Benedict and Franz Boas. Between 1932 and 1934 she undertook intensive fieldwork among the Ojibwa in Canada, resulting in her doctoral thesis defended in 1935, advised by Ruth Benedict, from this work are the publications *Ojibwa Sociology* (1937) and *Ojibwa Women* (1938). Also in 1937 Landes receives an invitation from Robert E. Park (1864-1944) to take up an instructor position at Fisk University, a well-known "black university" in Nashville, which for Benedict and Boas could serve as a "laboratory" for future research in Brazil (Cole 2003; Cunha 2004; Oliveira 2017).

In her academic career, Landes was able to meet other researchers who had already carried out investigations in Brazil, such as Donald Pierson (1900-1995) and Rüdiger Bilden (1893-1980), which allowed her to have access not only to previous knowledge about the Brazilian reality, as well as to be presented to Brazilian researchers.

Pierson was advised by Robert Park in his doctoral dissertation in sociology, entitled *Negros in Brazil: a study of race contact at Bahia* (1942), later published in Portuguese as *Branços e Pretos in Bahia: study of racial contact* (1945). He was a professor at the Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política de São Paulo (Free School of Sociology and Politics of São Paulo),

having been responsible for the institutionalization of sociological research in Brazil. On the other hand, Bilden was a US-based German researcher who devoted himself to research on race relations in Brazil, known for the influence of his ideas on the work of Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987), with whom he had studied at Columbia University in the 1920s.

Both Pierson and Bilden had important intellectual contacts in Brazil and the United States, in the Brazilian case they were close to Gilberto Freyre, author of *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (The Masters and the Slaves), and to Arthur Ramos (1903-1949), full professor of anthropology of the Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia (National Faculty of Philosophy) and founder of the Sociedade Brasileira de Antropologia e Etnologia (Brazilian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology). So, we can realize that Pierson and Bilden gravitated around the intellectuals considered protagonists in Afro-Brazilian studies. Therefore, these contacts were extremely important for Landes to access the Brazilian academic field.

In a letter dated 1937 addressed to Arthur Ramos (1903-1949) Rüdiger Bilden made her presentation to the renowned Brazilian anthropologist.

You will be interested to learn that Dr. Ruth Landis, a young anthropologist who has done already much worthwhile work on the North American Negro as well as field work among Indians of North America, is being sent toward the end of this year to Brazil by the Department of Anthropology of Columbia University, to do concrete field work on the Brazilian Negro. Ever since my return from Brazil have suggested to Professor Boas and Prof. Ruth Benedict, present head of the Department, that trained investigators be sent to Brazil to study specific aspects of the vast and interesting Brazilian Negro situation. This has borne fruit. On my advice, Dr. Landis has chosen the Negro in and around the city of Bahia as the subject of her investigations. She will come first to Rio, remain there for some weeks, and then proceed to Bahia, where she intends to remain about a year.

Dr. Landis is a competent and capable anthropologist as well as a fine and charming young woman. While thus far she is not yet familiar with the specific Brazilian situation, she no doubt will work into it and do very worthwhile work. I am anxious to smooth her way as far as possible and see that she gets the requisite assistance from all interested circles in Brazil. Toward this end I appeal particularly to you, knowing that you will be greatly interested in her scientific endeavor and will help her with advice and introductions. I would be very grateful, as will be the Department of Anthropology, if during Dr. Landis' sojourn in Rio you would give her all possible aid in arranging her requirements for successful work in Bahia, in particular introduce her to people in that city who can be help to her. I know that this is asking much, but I also know that you will have the greatest understanding for her work and objectives.

Ramos's reply comes in a letter dated August 17, 1937, and he arranged to assist Landes in her research, and already in another letter from Bilden sent on October 10, 1937, he appreciates the readiness of the Brazilian anthropologist to support Landes. Bilden, as it is known, had a similar formation to that of Landes, having been a colleague of Gilberto Freyre in the 1920s at Columbia University where she also studied (Pallares-Burke 2012), and already had an intense contact with Brazilian researchers, especially those dedicated to the study of black and racial relations. In another letter dated March 10, 1938, when Landes was already in Brazil, in which Bilden rectified his opinion about the young anthropologist, stating that she had no seriousness in her work.

Some time ago I wrote you about the forthcoming visit of Dr. Ruth Landes to Brazil for purpose of making studies about the Negro in Bahia. I believe that she will depart soon. However, I am forced to retract my recommendation of her to you, as I am not impressed with her personality, seriousness of purpose, and preparation for the task. At the time I wrote you she had been referred to me by my friends in the Department of Anthropology of Columbia University with the request that I direct her preparation, as she was wholly ignorant of any subject pertaining to Brazil. In the year that has elapsed she has not prepared herself adequately and is in my opinion unfitted for a sound study of the Bahia Negro, in spite of a misleading superficial ability. I wrote you at the time as I did in spite of the warnings of your and my friend Melville Herskovits, who, as well as other anthropologists, expressed an unfavorable opinion of her. I realize now that Herskovits was right. You are, of course, free to treat her as you deem best. And I do not wish to place obstacles in her way. But I cannot endorse her or recommend her.

The change of tone between the two letters is dramatic, and the activation of the figure of Melville Herskovits (1895-1963), with whom Ramos had been developing an intense intellectual exchange since at least 1935 (Guimarães 2004), seems to seek to reinforce an opinion contrary to the Landes and the development of her work. It is interesting to note that Herskovits was also a graduate of the University of Columbia, having been advised by Franz Boas, so we are referring to intellectuals who gravitate around the same academic cycle, which can produce relations of proximity and friendship, as well as tensions and disputes.

Herskovits represented in the American context the central figure in this network of academic relations between Brazilian and American researchers, having been founder of the anthropology department at Northwestern University in 1938, and the first program of African studies

in the United States in 1948.

The fact is that Ramos wrote letters of introduction from Ruth Landes to people like Aydano do Couto Ferraz (1914-1985), Edgard dos Santos (1894-1962) and Edison Carneiro (1912-1972), all dated August 1, 1938. The letter to Edison Carneiro is especially relevant considering the proximity that he had with the American anthropologist, which includes a loving involvement (Rossi 2015), in addition to having become one of the main characters of the book *The City of Women*, having revised its translation to the Portuguese, inserting numerous explanatory notes.

Although Carneiro had a relatively peripheral position in the academic field of Brazilian anthropology, never becoming a full professor, he was widely recognized as an important researcher of Afro-Brazilian religions. He had close relationships with Arthur Ramos and other researchers, including providing ethnographic material for other researchers. Also noteworthy was the fact that Carneiro was not a white man, among a universe of white researchers, and affiliated to the Communist Party in the dictatorship in Brazil. Thus Landes' proximity to Carneiro was crossed by complex social, racial and political issues. But as Landes affirmed, Carneiro was the only person that she truly trusted in her fieldwork (Landes 1986).

In a postcard (written in Portuguese) dated September 1928, sent from Bahia, whose photo was from the Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia (Faculty of Medicine of Bahia) –institution in which Arthur Ramos had graduated– Landes sends the thanks for the letters of recommendation that Ramos had given her. “I am very grateful for your letters of introduction. I took great advantage, especially from the knowledge of Dr. Edison Carneiro. He is a good cicerone and very intelligent”.<sup>1</sup>

According to Corrêa (2003), arriving in Brazil, Landes first presented herself to Heloisa Alberto Torres (1895-1977), also known as “Dona Heloisa”, and “Without knowing, Landes was transposing the threshold of a field already undermined by theoretical, methodological dissensions and policies” (Corrêa 2003, 168), since she was not promptly presented to that considered the “patron” of the studies on the black: Arthur Ramos. Heloisa Alberto Torres was director of the Museu Nacional (National Museum), the most important anthropological research institution in Brazil, and had a close relationship with Arthur Ramos, but there were also academic disputes between them (Barros 2008).

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1 In Portuguese: “Estou muito agradecida pelas suas cartas de apresentação. Eu aproveitei muito, especialmente do conhecimento do Dr. Edison Carneiro. Ele é um bom cicerone e muito inteligente”.

Thus, the arrival of Landes in Brazil, although mediated by American and Brazilian researchers, soon found resistance and objections, even before producing its first results.

## **THE CITY OF WOMEN: RECEPTION AND CONTROVERSY**

Although the publication of *The City of Women* took place only in 1947, there was a process of dissemination of the results of Landes's previous research. In a letter dated August 1, 1938, after Landes returned to the United States, Bilden wrote to Ramos indicating that Landes since her return to New York done "absurd interviews" on the situation of the Negro in Bahia without expressing more detail about the content of these interviews. The most emphatic disclosure of Landes' ideas occurred through the publication of the articles "A Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality" in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* (1940) and "Fetish Worship in Brazil" in the *Journal of American Folklore* (1940), that was part of the report "The Ethos of the Black in the New World" (1940) made for the Carnegie Corporation.

What Landes was outlining in these materials would refer not only to a predominance of women in charge of *candomblé* –conclusions that she formulated mainly from the *terreiros* in which she developed a more intense field work such as *Gantois* and *Engenho Velho* (Landes 1967)– but rather the predominance of a feminine principle.

An even more severe criticism was made by Ramos in a *Aculturação Negra no Brasil* (The Black Acculturation in Brazil) (1942), in which he criticized both points that are affirmed by Landes, besides others questions that were not present in her work, such as the existence of a ritual initiation to homosexuality. But the main thread of her argument centered on the fact that –according to his research in Bahia, as well as in Herskovits in Africa– there was no predominance of women in command of Afro cults.

The conclusions of Landes are produced from what is indicated by her interlocutors. In that sense what Edison Carneiro indicated for her during the field work was highlighted. In a particular passage, he says to Landes that: "It is a pity that men are not qualified for this experience, except when abnormal; it is imagined that they are of earthly matter, and the only thing they can do is to dance in the streets" (Landes 1967, 261).

As Healey (1996) points out, Landes has not escaped the canons of her time, and ends up by creatively using the idea of primitivism, especially by thinking about the power of women and the feminine principle from the idea of tradition and stability, the which, according to Healey, made it difficult for Landes to perceive the dynamicity and flexibility of the relations observed. These criticisms do not invalidate Landes's work, but place it in the broader context of the anthropological interpretations that were in force at that time.

In this context the primitive would serve as a criticism of the modern, as is evident in the closing words of the book: "I will tell you about women too. I think they help to make Brazil bigger. Will Americans believe that there is a country where women like men, feel safe and comfortable with them and do not fear them?" (Landes 1967, 316).

In raising such ideas, the work of Landes was subject to harsh criticism. Herskovits published a review of her book in the renowned journal *American Anthropologist*, in which he criticized the training received to carry out her fieldwork, as well as questions her main conclusions. According to Herskovits (1948, 124):

[...] the cause of the false perspective on the role of men and women in the culture that gives the book its misleading title. What Miss Landes does not realize is that the men has places that area quite as important as those of the women; that the African counterparts of the Bahian cults have priestesses as well as priests; that the term for cult-head she uses, "mother", is literal Portuguese translation of Yoruban *iyalorisha*, which means priestess; that there area fathers (priest) as well, called *babalorisha*. The basic thesis is wrong, also, because of the misreading of an economic cause - that is, few men are initiates, in Bahia no less than in Africa, because they cannot afford the time it takes, because in Africa it is easier to support a woman in a culthouse then to withdraw a man from productive labor for months on end. Miss Landes overstresses the homosexuality of male priests - there are many "orthodox" as well as *caboclo* priest in Bahia who have tendency toward inversion.

And as already indicated, Ramos criticizes even more severely in Brazil, which also implied a response by Edison Carneiro in 1964 in a text entitled "Uma falseta de Arthur Ramos" (A falsetto by Arthur Ramos), in which he clarified certain points of the criticism that do not correspond to what Landes actually said and published. As Carneiro pointed out, Ramos claimed that Landes gave him no information about what she done with the presentation letters. However, we find records of at least three correspondences from Landes to Ramos, that deny this accusation.

In addition to Edison Carneiro's professional and personal proximity to Ruth Landes –as himself states: “I was a friend of Arthur Ramos, I am a friend of Ruth Landes” (Carneiro 1964, 227)– I think that when he was responding to Ramos he was also coming out in defense of his ideas. There are two questions here: the first and most evident is that Edison Carneiro is one of the main characters of *The City of Women*, being one of the informants of Landes, so that a significant part of the statements about female predominance in *candomblés* comes from Edison himself; the second, perhaps a little more subtle, is that it also diffused interpretations similar to those of Landes in the same period.

In the same volume of the *Journal of American Folklore* in which Landes published the article “Fetish Worship in Brazil” Edison Carneiro's article entitled “The Structure of African Cults in Bahia” was also published, in which he presents theses similar to those defended by Landes.

Of course, the tone of Landes is more emphatic than that presented by Carneiro (Motta 2016). But the question remains, therefore, what enabled Edison Carneiro not to suffer the same shreds as Ruth Landes? Why was Landes the main target of the attacks in the Brazilian and American academic field? I will raise some hypotheses here to try to think a little about this question.

I believe that a first point worth noting is the fact that, despite Landes's difficulty in obtaining a stable university post, she was recognized as an academic, recurrently presented as an anthropologist at Columbia University, Edison Carneiro was often presented as a journalist and writer. Even his attempt more incisive in the academic life, when he tried to become a professor at the National Faculty of Philosophy, his inscription was rejected for failing to comply with the academics requirements (Barros 2008).

Landes represented at this time the diffusion of ideas that ranged from academic interpretations consolidated in the field. Is not a coincidence that in the lecture “Ethnological Research in Bahia” (1943), Herskovits choosed to silence about the work of Landes.

However, even if the academic position is relevant, this point does not close the question, especially considering the considerations of another researcher: René Ribeiro (1914-1990). The eminent anthropologist from Pernambuco was advised in his master by Herskovits, and in the article “Personality and Psychosexual Adjustment of the Faithful of Afro-Brazilian Cults”, he did similar conclusions to those pointed out by Landes (Fry 2015). For Ribeiro, there was a relationship between male homosexuality and Xango, possession was interpreted in some cases as an opportunity

for homosexuals to exhibit “[...] their mannerisms or to identify with the female deities in meetings led by homosexuals”, and that “[...] they can also be betrayed by other complex motivational needs of compensation for the frustrations imposed on them by their positions and intersections within the larger society” (Ribeiro 1969, 119).

Thus, the fact that Landes would have violated certain “taboos” placed in the academic field, which perhaps was not clear at that time (Sansone 2012), should be considered. Landes was aware of her position, as is clear from her later work (Landes 1986), she knew that her status as a woman who was taking on a role that was not what was expected of her weighed heavily on the judgments she made about her job. As she points out, many gossips were made even years after her fieldwork, some referred to her status as a woman, as she would have run a brothel in Brazil (Landes 1986, 129).

As Cole (1994) rightly points out in the introduction to the second American edition of the book, one of the issues that certainly made the work of the day enter the onslaught of its time was Landes’s insistence on situating herself as a woman and a Jew in the writing of her text, something that may seem current today, but that was in agreement with what was at that time convened in terms of ethnographic authority.

What I want to emphasize here is that the reception of *The City of Women* was conditioned not only by the fact that it presented a different interpretation of those crystallized by the canons of the field, both American and Brazilian, but also, or even mainly, by the fact that it was produced by a woman who did not fit into the roles that would “fit her”, which is more evident with the fact that we observe that Edison Carneiro presented the same hypotheses without the same consequences.

As I announced in the introduction to this essay, I understand that although this is a particular case, the considerations we have may to some extent be generalized to think broader questions about the relationship between gender and the hierarchies of the academic field, which is reflected in this case as part of the various critiques that focused on Landes are directly linked to the fact that she was an anthropologist, a woman in the field.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this brief essay, I pointed out that the attacks received by *The City of Women*, within an interpretative process on Brazil, were not exclusively due to the ideas presented here, which evaded the most common interpretations of the social and religious structure of candomblé. Before even divulging her first results of the research done in Bahia, and well before the publication of the book resulting from her stay in Brazil, her work began to be questioned, as we can observe in the exchange of correspondences between Bilden and Ramos.

Landes was not the only researcher who realized the centrality of women and homosexuals in candomblé, Landes presented ideas shared by Carneiro and later by Ribeiro, but that did not suffer the same type of retaliation in the Brazilian and American academic field. I argue, therefore, that the same part of this retaliation can be explained by her place as an anthropologist, occupying a role that would not be expected for her, and reaching conclusions that also based on the gender perspective called into question the interpretations of some of the leading experts in the subject, especially Ramos in Brazil and Herskovits in the United States.

A number of other researches carried out in the later period pointed to confluent issues for those indicated by Landes (Fry 1977; 1982; Rios 2011), and as Birman (2005, 412) states: “[...] possession cults pose in relief, how can we infer from these works, sexual and gender identities that pass between the adherence to the sexual and dominant gender norm and their transgression, affirming, despite all conflicts, the hesitations and difficulties that ‘other worlds’ are possible”.

In this sense, I reaffirm here the seminal place that the work of Landes occupies to think about the relations between gender, race and religion, as well as the need to revisit *The City of Women*, not only for its ethnographic value, but also for the possibility that this work opens us to think the disputes in the academic field, and how the gender issue comes in the computation of this discussion. More than that, I believe this is an important work in the field of Latin American and Brazilian studies, which enables us to understand the formation of collaboration networks between Brazilian and American researchers, and the disputes between them in the interpretation of race relations in Brazil.

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