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Ruth Landes. *The City of Women.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. xxxvi + 251 pp. $17.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1555-7; $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-1556-4.

Reviewed by Joan Meznar (Department of History, Eastern Connecticut State University)
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Bahian Seduction

In 1938, having recently completed a Ph.D. in anthropology at Columbia University, Ruth Landes arrived in Brazil. In the same decade that Gilberto Freyre published *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933), promoting Brazil's "racial democracy," Landes set out for Bahia "to learn how people behave when the Negroes among them are not oppressed" (p. 248). In Rio de Janeiro, her port of entry, she experienced both the political repression of Getulio Vargas's dictatorship and the social constraints of a patriarchal system where she found "women were as handicapped in their movements as political opponents" (p. 9). It was, in almost every way, an inauspicious beginning: "the climate and the people, the sounds and the smells, were strange, alien, difficult" (p. 6). Landes's life in Brazil changed radically for the better when she arrived in Bahia and teamed up with Edison Carneiro, a young mulatto journalist who was well acquainted with the black communities of Salvador. They became collaborators and lovers as he opened the way for her to discover a world unlike any she had experienced before. Landes found that although black Bahians were shockingly poor and politically oppressed, they possessed a phenomenal "joy of life" (p. 15). She attributed this to a religion that gave to women (the *maes de santo* or "mothers of saints") the highest priestly offices and provided direct communication with the gods through vibrant song and dance. These women, she was delighted to find, "like men, feel secure and at ease with them, and do not fear them" (p. 248). Poor black women in Bahia, she believed, had transcended the constraints of dictatorship and patriarchy.

The City of Women, first published in 1947, eight years after Landes returned to the United States, chronicles her experiences conducting ethnographic research in Brazil. Engagingly written, it provides a fascinating entry into the community she studied; it also illuminates the process of research undertaken by a remarkable woman. In both cases, she portrays competent women, professionally active in a world usually dominated by men. While the book is invaluable as an introduction to *candomble* (West African religion as practiced in Brazil), it is equally important for providing a look at how one ethnographer went about her work. Her delight in the people of Bahia, who opened their world to her, is contagious; few will put down this book without feeling a special attraction to the Bahia that, under the leadership of strong women, joined African and Catholic traditions in a unique celebration of life.

Sally Cole's excellent introduction situates Landes and her work in the academic culture of the 1930s, making the case that Landes was well ahead of her time in her research methods. While in the late 1940s some dismissed *The City of Women* as little more than a travel account, Landes's technique will be quite familiar to anthropologists of the late twentieth century: she focused on race and gender, was committed to living among the subjects of her study and not simply interviewing informants, and willingly inserted herself into her text as she pondered how her own cultural background (in particular the fact that she was an American Jew working in Brazil on the eve of World War II) affected her work. According to Cole, the challenge to scientific ethnography in the 1980s, particularly "in the context of postcolonial and feminist critiques of anthropology" (p. vii), warranted renewed attention to Landes's work. The publication of this new edition also provided more ready access to an important contribution to the burgeoning fields of women's studies, Atlantic history, and history of the African diaspora.

The City of Women provides a fine introduction to *candomble*: the gods, the ceremonies, the connections to Catholicism, the competition among *terreiros* (the temples where *candomble* rites were practiced), and the role of women (and men) in the affairs of the temples. Landes was an acute and sympathetic observer, and she tells her fascinating story well. At times, however, she glosses over fundamental problems in Bahian society. Landes's

experiences during a year of teaching at Fisk University, a black college in Tennessee, had shown her first-hand the overt racism in the U.S. South (on the part of both whites and blacks). What she found in Bahia was so different from what she witnessed in the United States that she concluded there was no racism in Brazil. Her foreword alerts readers that her book "does not discuss race problems [in Brazil] because there were none" (p. xxxvi). There is, then, an odd dissonance in her writing: she describes racism in Bahia while also denying it. She quotes blacks proudly asserting the "quality" of their mixed blood (p. 154), describing the beauty of lighter-skinned mulattos and the desire of many black women to straighten their hair (p. 196). Martiniano, a key contact who was the son of slaves and had spent time in West Africa as a teenager learning the art of sorcery, told Landes that, following his death, "'if I am born again in Brazil, I want to be white and rich, and I want a white woman instead of the black one I've got"' (p. 210).

Landes focused her attention on three specific *terreiros* of *candomble*: Engenho Velho, purported to be the oldest in Bahia, whose leadership was shared by four women since the one who inherited the top position was not suited for the job; Gantois, led by Mae Menininha, a Yoruba temple in the old style, struggling to keep modernity from creeping in; and Bom Jesus da Lapa, a temple in the newer *caboclo* tradition (incorporating indigenous Brazilian traditions alongside the African) led by Sabina, a distinctly modern woman. Landes vividly describes the ceremonies in each temple, along with the special feasts they sponsored: the *festa* of Iemanja/Janaina, the water goddess; the ritual washing of the church of Bonfim; the rites to cleanse Gantois after the death of a priest. Throughout, women figure prominently in the affairs of the temples; only in the *caboclo terreiro* did men regularly dance for and become possessed by the gods. This was also the temple whose priests and priestesses may have faked spirit possession, and whose high priestess was depicted as exploiting "clients" for financial gain.

Concerns with the future of *candomble* surface repeatedly. Landes had much respect for Mae Menininha, who was devoted to preserving Yoruba traditions in the Gantois terreiro. But Menininha worried about burdening her daughters with "our hard discipline and responsibilities" (p. 155). After all, Menininha told Landes, "'I have no time for myself! I am the slave of my people, two hundred of them who depend upon me absolutely"' (p. 82)! Her daughters' father wanted them to take advantage of the opportunities open to educated Bahian women in the twentieth century: one should train to become a dentist and the other a teacher. As the blood daughters of the *maes de santo* became more modern, would they keep the commitment to uphold the traditions of *candomble*? Martiniano lamented that so many of the "pure" African traditions were being lost. Landes tells us he died shortly after she left Brazil, and readers will feel that a new era must be dawning on Bahian *candomble*.

Recent scholarship has called into question the "timeless" African roots of the Yoruba *candombles* studied by Ruth Landes. In particular, the work of J. Lorand Matory demonstrates that the Yoruba culture so prized in Bahia had emerged from a combination of historical circumstances in the late nineteenth century that brought significant interaction between Brazil (and the Caribbean) and West Africa. Rather than embracing the customs of their ancestors, Bahians were in fact (through the transatlantic connections of their merchants) helping to reshape the African culture from which they drew their religious practices.[1] As we become more aware of the complexity of the African diaspora, the vitality and resilience of the Bahian *candombles* will also become more apparent.

Long after Martiniano's death, the women have kept the traditions strong. Mae Menininha did much in the years following Landes's visits to her *terreiro* to make *candomble* more acceptable to the broader population. Police persecution ended by the 1970s; more and more politicians and celebrities (including musicians of note such as Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso and Maria Bethania) frequented her *candomble*. At her death in 1986, she was one of the most influential religious leaders in all of Brazil. Ruth Landes, reaching the end of her own life, must have been pleased that Menininha's oldest daughter, following the traditions of the earlier part of the century, succeeded her mother in the leadership of the temple. When she died, her younger sister accepted the mantle. Landes had recognized in 1939 that "even at Gantois modern times were knocking" (p. 192). Modernity, however, did not destroy the *terreiros*; *candomble* has continued to adapt to new generations.

Note

[1]. J. Lorand Matory, "The English Professors of Brazil: On the Diasporic Roots of the Yoruba Nation," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 1 (January 1999): 72-103.

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