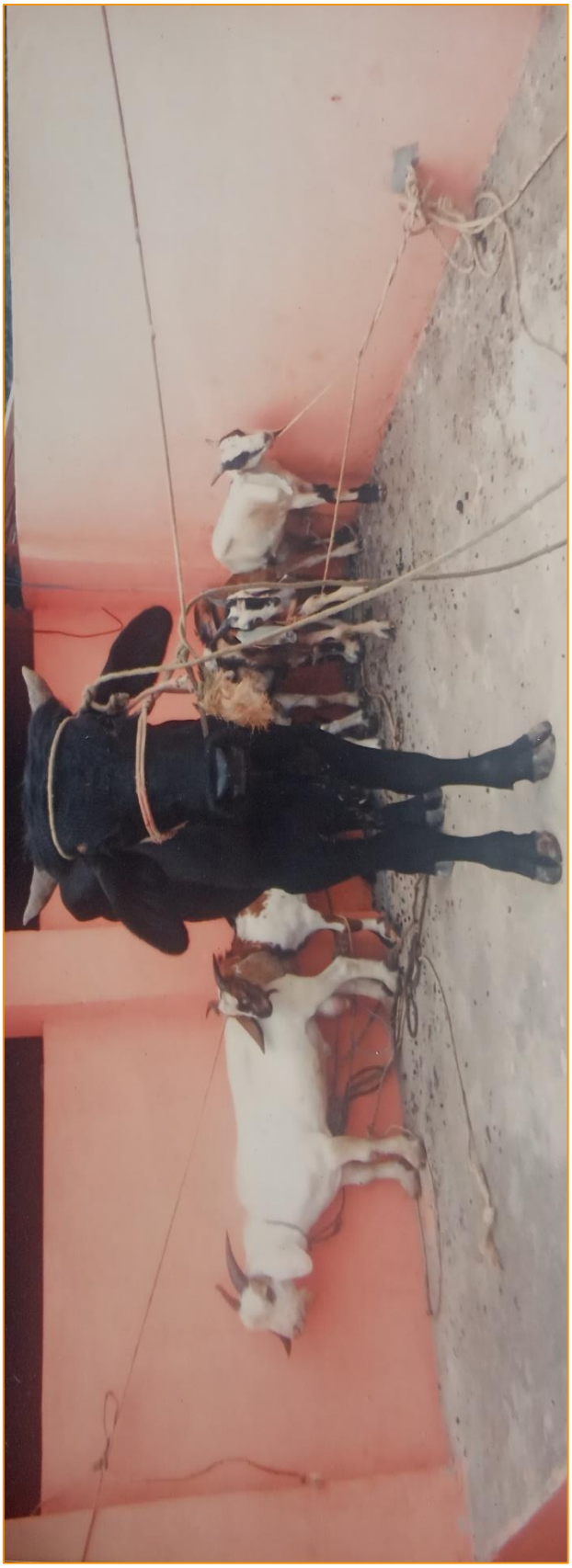

# Diffracting Ruth Landes on candomblé: Agency and complicity

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written by

Matheus Malty Rubin

Student number: 6827802

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submitted to the evaluation of

Dr. Kathrin Thiele

Dr. Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken

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# agency and complicity

# Abstract

Ruth Landes is historically a most impacting and controversial scholar on studies about the Afro-Brazilian religion candomblé. A feminist methodology that attends to her own position as a scholar in knowledge production, besides much a biased discussion bolstering her claim that candomblé is matriarchically structured and Landes' complex positionality, and her awareness of it, as an outsider-within; all these are capable of impacting not only the academia for decades after her publications, but even candomblé as an institution, bearing consequences up to nowadays. This thesis aims at a double move: it sets to examine whether diffraction as a western academic methodology can contribute to the decolonial project, how do they interfere and resonate as bodies of thought, while concomitantly pursuing a feminist reading of Landes in twenty-first century. After a brief introduction to Karen Barad's agential realism and the decolonial project in my first methodological chapter, I center, in chapter two, on demonstrating Landes' ambiguity regarding her feminist political commitment implicit in her research project and her complex complicitous positionality as a relatively powerful, external authoritative academic who grapples with this very complicity. The value of this research is, thus, the nested problematic of the critical and uncritical accountability in Landes' research conducts. Chapter three envisions a reworking of agency in order to ponder whether Landes' research was not also responding the otherwise unnoticed inputs of Afro-Brazilian religions gathered under the umbrella-term candomblé de caboclo – religions syncretized with the cult of native-indigenous beliefs and entities. I conclude with a vast interference between diffraction and decoloniality in terms of (i) multivocal knowledge production, (ii) a commitment to be committed and especially (iii) through the complex relations dealt with in diffraction, and pervasive in the current colonial matrix of power. In short, this thesis performs an attempt to move from individualist to collective responsibility.



Keywords: Ruth Landes, candomblé, decoloniality, diffraction.

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# Introduction

This thesis weaves in some textures of four different sources: anthropologist Ruth Schlossberg Landes, feminist accountability, decoloniality and diffraction as an object-methodology. In this thesis I will focus solely on Ruth Landes' most controversial and influential works: her ethnographic novel *The City of Women* (Landes 1994 [1947]) and her infamous article *Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality* (Landes 1940). The "cult" Landes writes about is an Afro-Brazilian religion known as *candomblé*. The aim of this thesis is thus twofold. First, the guiding research question reads: can diffraction be a decolonizing tool within academic knowledge production? Here Landes figures but as framework of this experiment. Second, I want to examine whether Landes can still be read as a feminist, and how. In both dimensions, Landes is a constant presence: in the background in the first, foregrounded in the second.

In 1938, Ruth Landes was sent to Salvador, Brazil, by Columbia University under the auspices of Ruth Benedict and Franz Boas to study supposedly peaceful race relations in contrast to turbulent and violent racial issues in the United States (Landes 1994, 1). Landes' contribution to her contemporaneous anthropology was very controversial, and Landes herself was the target of speculative journalistic reports, conspiracy theory, idle talk and sheer lies, including in her own field of research.[1] Her studies did not keep to Brazilian race relations but zoomed into tabooed topics like gender and sexuality within Afro-diasporic candomblé. Moreover, her pioneering participatory methodology dissented from the establishing paradigm in anthropology as a science of culture with positivist and objective aspirations. Yet, her methodological disobedience in her time caused Landes harsh condemnations by professional peers. Landes' supervisor during her research period in Brazil, Artur Ramos, endeavored to disqualify her work among his fellow professionals and found support in Melville Herskovits to defame and jeopardize Landes' career with long-lasting professional consequences. As a student of Boasian anthropology, Landes was aware of the political implications of her work. More than joining Boas' efforts to undermine scientific racism, she endeavored to pursue critical and accountable research. Landes' biographer Sally Cole interprets her work as a forerunner of later-to-come feminist critique (Cole 2003, 248). And this is one of the goals of this thesis, how to read Landes in a feminist way today.

[1] For more information on this, see (Cole 1994; Landes 1986; Carneiro 2010; Matory 2005, 196).

Second on my list of introductions comes candomblé. As a religious conglomerate transported in the enslaved bodies trafficked from West and Central Africa (today's Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, in the West, and Angola and Congo in Central Africa) to Brazil, candomblé is the product of colonial uprooting of geographically relevant deities with legally sanctioned repression prohibiting its practice to varying degrees up to the second half of the twentieth century. Strong syncretism with latin roman catholicism ensued as a means to disguise its practice. Similar genealogies led to the development of sister religions throughout the African diaspora in the Americas, such as santería/lucumí in Cuba and vodou in Haiti. Common to them is the evocation of spiritual deities, called *Orixás* in candomblé, through music and drumming accompaniment. As worship, special dishes are prepared for each Orixá in their personal celebration, songs and dances are enacted and when incorporated in a material (human) body, they revel in dancing. The *terreiros*, where the celebrations are held, are hierarchically structured with one leading priestess or priest responsible for initiating the devotees – a ceremony popularly referred to as "making the saint" – which inserts the devotee in an economy of obligations and services to their personal guiding Orixá. The relations among the devotees are, thus, given in a familial vocabulary. Initiators are referred to as mother-in-sainthood or father-in-sainthood, and devotees who share the same guiding Orixá address each other as brother or sister, in sainthood.

But why study candomblé? According to Roberto Strongman, there is a "need to investigate Afro-diasporic religions as a repository of philosophical information that can overcome the imposition of Western philosophical discourses on colonized peoples" (Strongman 2019, 10). This repository is not, in effect, to be colonially exploited for the sake of continuing western knowledge and promoting the (re)production of the current globalized conditions of living. Counter hegemonic philosophical discourses, that constantly germinate and decay all over the world, are sensitive to their appropriation. Instead of a resource, I suggest candomblé as a realm of joy and care, out of which not only a different philosophical discourse, but also different living practices can originate.

But why through the works of Ruth Landes? Because of Landes' ambiguity, her controversial status, methodological dissidence, and pioneering address of race, gender and sexuality. These combined with the critical development of feminist and race studies yield a differential gap in accountability between the one produced by Landes and nowadays. How did she account for her positionality, and how constructed was her agency, among which determinants,

and how constricted her actions; these are some of the ensuing questions when foregrounding Landes. Chapter two centers on Landes' *The City of Women* and makes explicit her complicity with contextual variables in her positionality by diffracting Landes first with feminist anthropological methodological interventions from the 1980s and then with more recent feminist race studies. Chapter three, then, discusses Landes' article *Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality* and explores a subtle ambiguous disruption of settled power relations embedded in a strongly homophobic rhetoric. By placing Landes' work in relation to other active participants within her research context, I complexify the notion of agency to include non-academic partakers in the formation of Landes' research outcomes.

But why through a diffractive methodology? Fading Landes to the background, this question relates to the overarching question whether the methodology can work toward a decolonial horizon. Here, the methodology is also a research topic. While applying it, considerations will be woven into the text body regarding its decolonizing potentials. A short discussion follows in the conclusion. Moreover, diffraction's quantum turn subverts time linearity and allows me to read Landes through other feminist scholarship. Karen Barad's theoretical apparatus does not only trouble the common understanding of time, but it has profound consequences for notions like entity, unity, causality, agency, accountability and relationality. A brief exposition of these reworkings is provided in chapter one, where I also lay the ground for opening considerations regarding its decolonizing overtures. And it is with these reworkings that I am able to perform the ensuing analyses of Landes' agency and complicity.

Strongman's remark, however, highlights the religious aspect and its important role in shaping habits, values, prospects, but also providing security, managing sociability, and certainly also taking part in the enactment and dictation of sexuality. It is thus an altogether pivotal axis for provoking politically engaged scholarship. This brings me to my personal reasons for this analysis.

I spent five months in Recife, Brazil, living with and becoming part of a large family, during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, who were partially practitioners of a type of candomblé popular in Recife and surrounding area called xangô. In a short time, I was confronted with the connection often made between male homosexuality and candomblé and especially another syncretized and reappropriated version of it called jurema (a pair of Afro-diasporic religions present in the country often put together, distinct but connected). Intrigued as I was about it, I decided to study the production of this discourse within the academy. Fortunately, I had the initial

guidance of Dr. Luis Felipe Rios (UFPE), who introduced me to the debate on candomblé and sexuality, especially male homosexuality, starting with Ruth Landes' *The City of Women*.

It is still worth mentioning that this thesis is consciously situated within the global north. Furthermore, I endorse a commitment to complexity and complicity in an effort not to take for granted or to set in stone any knowledge bit which is in a complex field of tension, where forces constantly bargain and check in with each other to handle the processual turning of knowledge. I undertake this analysis to contribute to singular-plural feminism that does not keep to only highlighting condemnable practices. I understand that a critical review of what has happened in the past in the light of the present, in an entangled temporality, can be very instructing to how feminists today can engage in political organizing, with a critical awareness of their own positionality and constructed agency that was not so bluntly available to Landes. In short, this thesis performs an attempt to move from individualist to collective responsibility.

# Chapter 1 - Diffraction, Decoloniality and how does Landes enter the picture

This thesis explores possible usages of a diffractive methodology as a decolonizing tool within academic knowledge production. Given its diffractive character, an application of diffraction further produces new and participates in the very interferences being produced. It is a double move. In this thesis, by applying the methodology to Ruth Landes' religious ethnography on candomblé I seek the interferences with the decolonial movement that emerge from this application. In this methodological chapter, I will first quickly reconstruct the historical formation of the applied methodology and present its robust theoretical support. In the second section, I turn to the decolonial project, which has been taken up in academic institutions in the last few decades, enabled by an overt political commitment to make a difference with knowledge production. There, I suggest how diffraction can be used, framed by a commitment to decoloniality, to decolonize western knowledge (production) from within this very matrix of genesis in an effort to enter into dialogues with non-western knowledge traditions. At last, I outline the usefulness of diffraction as a decolonial methodology to the purpose of this thesis and I expose how I am proceeding in the following chapters.

## Genealogy of politics of situatedness and diffraction

By the mid-1980s, the assumption of objectivity in scientific knowledge production was being put under strong criticism from different scholarly sides, especially in relation to feminist/critical science studies.[2] It was starting to be contended how the modern scientific method, with its esteemed objective neutrality, in fact erases the investigative position off from the investigation itself. To keep scientific knowledge reliable, this practice brushed aside and even ridiculed the intrinsic connection between knower and known. Feminist biologist and philosopher Donna Haraway set out to debunk the myth of scientific objectivity and provided valuable material support with her situated criticism (Haraway 1988), arguing that there is no position from nowhere. In a nutshell it maintains that researchers always occupy a given space and time. These dimensions, along with many other contextual assumptions, run into the findings we abstract from data analyses

[2] See (Smith 1996 [1974]; Harding 1986; Longino 1990; Barnes and Bloor 1982; Knorr-Cetina 1981; Shapin and Schaffer 1985; Woolgar and Latour 1986).

and scientific practices. A detached scientific knowledge production has issued even deleterious and blatantly offensive knowledge, for example scientific racism. This postulate of hierarchical human races aimed to explain and justify the global subjugation of different peoples, cultures, value and knowledge systems to the white male European ones, which served as models throughout the centuries to attain power and prestige. The resulting knowledge, in turn, is woven into a larger, allegedly neutral, politically disengaged net, which has historically been masqueraded as oblivious to power inequalities, even though its products were pivotal in the maintenance of the hierarchized world system.

Situated knowledge, on the other hand, is characterized by "limited location" and responsibility (Haraway 1988, 538). To locate oneself means to mark one's position, by attesting to one's involvement and interests in producing certain knowledges. For Haraway, not universal but partial knowledge is more responsible in relation to holding oneself accountable. Instead of using the visual metaphor of distance in order to attain objectivity, Haraway highlights the complex systems of codification and interpretation of vision: "It is a lesson available from photographs of how the world looks to the compound eyes of an insect or even from the camera eye of a spy satellite […] The "eyes" made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building on translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life" (Haraway 1988, 583). The visual and orienting organs and possibilities of dogs, bats, flies, humans, cameras, satellites, microscopes are all different and necessarily result in different perspectives, which are not anyhow lacking but partial. To acknowledge and not to dismiss and cover this partiality is a way to produce more accountable knowledges. As Peta Hinton argues, Haraway does not relinquish objectivity, but reformulates it as embodied objectivity in order to ensure accountability of the researcher's positionality (Hinton 2014, 103–5). Complementary to her situated knowledges, Haraway also suggests diffraction as a thinking technology different from the monopoly that reflection held in western knowledge tradition. In her own words: "diffraction can be a metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness […] one committed to making a *difference* and not to repeating the Sacred Image of *Same*" (Haraway 2018 [1997], 273). In short, this thinking technology is attuned to its political implications, because it is locatable, related, and able to affect its relations. It thus calls for responsibility.

The three central concepts I want to highlight in order to introduce diffraction as a methodology are difference, interference and pattern. While sameness accounts for similarity, difference, as a foundational premise, allows for multiplicity of entities, which can interfere with one another. This interference, in turn, forms patterns. In Haraway's words: "Diffraction does not produce 'the same' displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of difference appear" (Haraway 1992, 300). In other words, there is no correct map representing these interferences, rather connections produce and reproduce patterns. To bring very rudimentary examples, I think of fashions, traditions, habits as patterns resulting from the complex interference of many correlated entities, which in turn further sediment material reality with the intrinsic opportunity to change. Here we see a refocusing from representation to production, from truthfulness to effectuality.

Diffraction as a thinking technology engendering difference and change is taken further by feminist quantum physicist Karen Barad drawing from Niels Bohr's Copenhagen interpretation of quantum entanglement, in order to provide a truly interdisciplinary philosophical intervention of far-reaching consequences for the academy at large (Barad 2003; 2007). It can be succinctly encapsulated in the motto "*matter matters*" (Barad 2003, 803). In other words, matter plays a significant role in the complex enactment of reality and cannot be reduced to passive resources as the anthropocentric, modern, greedy, colonial, blown ego would have it. The quantum physics necessary to this chapter is only the inceptive gist that *no assessment can be done without interfering in the phenomenon being assessed*.[3] This stems from what Bohr has called an "inherent indeterminacy" of quantum phenomena (Bohr apud. Barad 2007, 127), which assumes that both knowable and existent properties measured in an experiment only come about *through the performative assessment* of them (Barad 2007, 113–14). Changing this material configuration of assessment also changes the material configuration of phenomena, and so does our possibility to know them, i.e. this reality's knowable or indeterminate status.

The interpretation of inherent indeterminacy by Bohr accounts for the foundational problem on the double nature of light, which entails the core of the quantum turn. Light can behave

[3] Like in a mangrove, there are many ways to enter and leave this topic, and this only attests to its complexity. Thus, Bohr's postulate of inherent indeterminacy of quantum properties already contains the seed for Barad's intervention, three quarters of a century later. Therefore, we should proceed in circles, always with the ability to review at a later stage what has been said and complement where necessary.

as particle and also as wave, depending on the instrument used to perform the assessment. In case light's wave behavior is being assessed, it shows a diffraction pattern, but no such pattern, when it's being assessed as a particle. The assessment instrument determines the very phenomenon being assessed. Inspired by and building on Bohr's inherent indeterminacy,[4] Karen Barad produces a relational ontology where phenomena are *intra*-actions, that is happenings, which involve a multiplicity of entities in co-constitutive, intermingled relation to each other. Entities are not pre-existent to their inter-relating, they presuppose each other for the enactment of the very situation they find themselves in. As in Bohr's interpretation of the quantum turn, the decisive question here is the apparatus for "measurement", which, taken to be the enactment of intra-activity (i.e. the complex triggering of a phenomenon) defies the separability of intra-acting *relata* and puts forward their relationality. Or as Barad puts it: "There is no absolute inside or absolute outside. There is only exteriority within, that is, agential separability" (Barad 2007, 377) – a constant (re)negotiation and reenactment of the boundaries between not-preexistent, mutually presupposing and co-constitutive entities.

Two deep radical moves set in from Karen Barad's ontological shift. Given the intra-active character of reality, according to Barad, any knowledge about an intra-acting phenomenon becomes bounded to participating in it. As is the case with the assessment instruments in quantum physics, the means of intra-acting are decisive to the formation of the situation and directly inflect on the knowability status of any phenomenon. Building on Haraway's emphasis on situated knowledge production, Barad therefore challenges the simplified spacetime metaphor of position, opting instead for a much more intimate relationship between space, time, and matter (Barad 2007, 376). The focus on embodied participation is, thus, further ingrained in her relational onto-epistemology.

There is, however, another twist inherent to this radical intervention by Karen Barad that relates to ethics. Such an intricate onto-epistemology based on intra-active relationality implies a radical change in ethics. From a model framed by singular individuals and their actions, Barad proposes "a relation of responsibility to the other. Crucially, then, the ethical subject is not the

[4] Karen Barad, on page 248 and 249 of *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, expresses her disapproval of such unbridled repercussions of quantum physics in other instances, that are not directly dealing with the matter at hands, and gives an interpretation of quantum physics with feminist poststructuralist insights. Given the obvious constraints of my educational background – not in physics – I will indulge in re-enacting Barad's thoughts, with the aid of her works and with reference to them for an appropriate correlation to the tangible quantum problems met in subatomic physics and their philosophical implications.

disembodied rational subject of traditional ethics but rather an embodied sensibility, which responds to its proximal relationship to the other through a mode of wonderment that is antecedent to consciousness" (Barad 2007, 391). The subject is a sensibility; an embodied sensibility, which is antecedent to consciousness. Its embodied wonderment recognizes closeness and relation. Participation is here key. This antecedence to consciousness confirms and conforms to the fact that, according to Barad, matter matters, matter is meaningful, it has agency in the enactment of the world and should be recognized, accounted for, and consequentially be held accountable for its presence. Given the constant re-enactment of the boundaries between intra-acting entities, the possibilities to change inscribed therein "entail an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Barad 2007, 178). Similar to Haraway, Barad also pushes for responsibility.

Karen Barad's feminist philosophical intervention – labelled agential realism – thus suggests a far more complex way to conceive the ethic-onto-epistemologically interlaced structure of existence/reality. It complexifies our understanding of phenomena – an appreciated feature for the up-coming analysis of Ruth Landes' religious ethnography. Nonetheless, in order to explore the methodology's possibilities as also a decolonizing tool, I first need to briefly explain the decolonial turn.

## Diffraction as a decolonizing tool

Decoloniality opposes coloniality. Different from colonialism, coloniality is a conceptual tool to refer shortly to what colonialism has caused and left in the world (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007, 19). To oppose the effects of colonialism is a bold, broad, and brittle commitment. As any other movement, the push for decoloniality stems from a long tradition, never fully new, but with concrete interventions, building on written contributions from antiracist, anticolonial and independence struggles, and dating from centuries old living and lived processes of extermination and survival. Given this fragmented history, Aníbal Quijano's 1990 formulation of the concept of 'coloniality/modernity'[5] is quite randomly pointed to mark the inception of the decolonial project. This conceptual pair, however, is the gist to understand the decolonial move.

[5] According to Quijano and fellow thinkers, modernity and coloniality mutually presuppose each other as if intra-acting – there is no modernity without coloniality – to build racial, gender, geopolitical, economic, cultural hierarchies, expandable to educational, religious, age-related and other types of power relations and human subjugation.

According to Rolando Vázquez, "modernity designates the affirmation of 'the real' […] whereas coloniality designates the denial and disavowal of all that belongs to the outside of that 'reality'" (Vázquez 2012, 242). Enacting these two axes, the current colonial matrix of power is able to uphold universality. The decolonial project, in contrast, endeavors to revalue, reestablish and revive precisely this outside of monoreality as the/a valid real.

Instead of criticizing capitalism and geopolitical imperialism from internally grounded *critical* methodologies of sociology, economics, and politics – say, poststructural, Marxist, postmarxist, feminist and so on – the decolonial project clearly breaks with the western epistemological undergirding of its criticism. It draws from indigenous cosmologies and ways of living in order to create just different worlds[6]. Discussing Ecuador's 2008 constitution as a model of radical decolonial efforts, Catherine Walsh speaks of "sociocultural-ontological-cosmo-existence-based modes of life and living" (Walsh 2018, 63) as one of its transformations. Prominent indigenous leader Ailton Krenak, writing about lived experiences divergent from the homogenized, monetized, flattened life of modernity/coloniality, ponders:

> To sing, to dance and to live the magical experience of suspending the sky is common to many traditions. To suspend the sky is to expand our horizon; not a prospective horizon, but an existential one. It means to enrich our subjectivities, which is the material the times we live in want to consume. If there is a yearning to consume nature, there is another to consume subjectivities – our subjectivities. Let us, then, live them with the liberty we were able to invent, and not put them for sale in the market. […] Definitely, we are not equal, and it is amazing to know that each one of us here is different from any other, like constellations. The fact that we are able to share this space, to be travelling together [through space], does not mean we are equal; it means precisely that we are capable of attracting each other by means of our differences (Krenak 2019, 15–16). [7]

This is an example of the unbridled, broad, bold and fragmentary opposition to which the strive for decoloniality gives itself. As a consequence of its critique of modernity/coloniality's claim to universality, decoloniality endorses pluralism or pluriversality,[8] which is not to completely reject and do away with western euronorcentric thinking traditions, but to resize and localize them (Walsh and Mignolo 2018, 3). As Walter Mignolo puts it: "Multiple ontologies are only possible if multiple epistemologies are possible. There cannot be multiple ontologies

[6] See (Marcos 2010). Audio and transcript of the address in "Primer Coloquio Internacional *In Memoriam* Andrés Aubry" available under http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2007/12/13/conferencia-del-dia-13-de-diciembre-a-las-900-am/. Last accessed, 14.01.2021.
[7] This and all other translations are mine.
[8] See (Restrepo and Rojas Martinez 2010, 23) and (Walsh and Mignolo 2018, see especially "Closing Remarks").

"recognized" by the benevolence of one universal epistemology" (Walsh and Mignolo 2018, 227–28). Pluriversality is this very ambition to multiply the possibilities of reality, to grant, respect and fund the efforts toward livability of divergent life forms, habits, values and knowledges. Intrinsic to pluriversality is the resizing of western *episteme* to but one epistemic tradition, along many others, and the reseizing of non-western epistemic traditions to authentic and important sources of knowledge and life.

And I believe that the diffractive methodology used in this thesis can work toward decoloniality precisely in this way. Clearly situated *within* the western knowledge tradition, diffraction is undergirded by a broad and interdisciplinary approach based on and open to difference. Moreover, it is informed by thoroughgoing knowledge and critique of areas funding western epistemology, and, as it is with languages, the best one can speak it, the more serious will one's intervention be in it, i.e. the more power one has – a very needed trait in abstract violent disputes.

However, interventions from outside modern coloniality are also urged to work out the more epistemic aspect of decoloniality. Luis Macas, indigenous leader and founding rector of *Amawtay Wasi*, the Intercultural University of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador, remarks that *Amawtay Wasi*'s fundamental task is to respond from epistemology, ethics, and politics, to the decolonization of knowledge […] as an indispensable prerequisite to work not from the answers to the colonial epistemological, philosophical, ethical, political, and economic order, but rather from [our] proposal constructed in a base of [Andean] philosophical principles" (García 2004, 280–81 apud. Walsh 2018, 69–70). This quotation by Luis Macas points to the ethic-epistemological and philosophical response from a non-westernized perspective and it points to a productive interference with Barad's agential realism.

Therefore, I want to stress *decolonizing tool*, as fundamentally framed by the commitment to decoloniality from within coloniality/modernity. I discern between 'decolonizing' and 'decolonial' as commitments to decoloniality from different positions within the globalized geopolitical economy of knowledge production. Decolonial would, in this reading, apply to interventions stemming from outside the Euronorcentric western epistemology. Here, I am certainly departing from the understanding that 'decolonization' refers (only) to a historical period of colonized regions proclaiming independence from colonial states. Although the acknowledgement that there is no fundamental separation altogether is intrinsic to diffraction, the

division between central and peripheric, respected and ridiculed knowledge traditions are products of centuries of exploitation and expropriation bearing large consequences that distinguish these positions. In Barad's terminology, the agential entangling cut that constantly reenacts the boundaries between mutually presupposing relata/entities cannot be relocated so easily. The colonial "cut" is a *wound* (Kilomba 2010, 19–20).

Inspired by Andrea Gill and Thula Pires' proposal of "pathways to dialogue with, rather than import" Euronorcentric epistemological frameworks (Gill and Pires 2019, 277), I envision the decolonizing purpose of this methodology to provide pathways to dialogue with, rather than export theories and concepts marked by an unmarked sense of self-centrality. This attends to Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel's call "to enter dialogues with non-western forms of knowledge that see the world as a totality in which everything is related to everything else, but also with the new theories of complexity" (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007, 17). Dialogs among western and non-western epistemic traditions require equity and the deconstruction of the hierarchy structuring them. And this is a constant effort to decolonize internalized power differences throughout the historical formation of the (academic) world.

By now I have explained the genealogy of diffraction as a methodology since the end of the 1980s, its uprooting development in the early 2000s. In this section, I then presented the push toward decoloniality recently endorsed by academic workers and I suggested how the methodology and its radical theoretical apparatus can contribute to the decolonial project of building just, different worlds that first grapples with and, secondly, tackles the vast, violent colonial traces left throughout the historical development of the current colonial matrix of power. The question stays however, how will this be useful as a methodology for this thesis?

## Reading Landes diffractively

The reader of this thesis might ask themselves how I can use this methodology that literally shifts the boundaries of epistemology, ontology, ethics, politics, grounded in western feminist thinking, to read Landes' work on candomblé. How are they related, to begin with? This is a pertinent question. What my thesis project wants to suggest is that a diffractive reading of Landes on candomblé is a feasible way to explore how agential realism can be aptly used with decolonial purposes, especially from within coloniality/modernity, as outlined in the above.

By establishing a dialog between Landes' disruptive ethnography, on the one hand, and feminist anthropology texts and feminist race studies, on the other, I want to argue that diffraction as a methodology is able to show a complexity of affairs and can, thereby, work in order to fight simplistic and self-assured thinking. With multiple origins throughout the historical development of western knowledge tradition, this principle of simplicity has regulated the valuation and validation of knowledge. It has also contributed to the ostracization of other knowledge systems through dismissive claims. Krenak recounts the spurning tone: "When we say that our river is sacred, people interject: 'it's some folklore of theirs'; when we say that the mount is showing that it will rain and that this will be a prosperous and good day, they go: 'No. A mountain doesn't say anything'" (Krenak 2019, 24). Such blatant denials of an other ethic-onto-epistemology is what the upholding of complexity endeavors to stop in order to unsettle the overt hierarchical power relations among different thinking traditions.

In what follows, the diffraction of Landes' texts with more contemporaneous Black feminist authors such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Grada Kilomba allows me to outline how both disruptive and complicitous Landes' interventions have been in her attempt to produce a more accountable religious ethnography. My argument for diffraction as a decolonizing tool able to outline complexity relies on showing how (her) positionality figures as a structural axis of complicity. The rationale here is that we – and I read most of my readers in here – as inhabitants of a globalized, (post)colonial world are complicitous with the horrendous state of affairs that gambles lives and even livability, of humans and non-humans, in exchange for pandering to and satisfying the whims of privileged people. As Bunz, Kaiser and Thiele express in the opening pages of *Symptoms of the Planetary condition*, "there is no outside from which to gauge things […] there is no untouched corner of the planet that could entice us to believe in better versions of ourselves, to be achieved in a New World" (Bunz, Kaiser, and Thiele 2017, 10–11). A belief on better versions of ourselves in a New World is endemic to the modern/colonial project. It builds on the binary, simplistic valuation of right and wrong, and it completely misses the complex complicity inherent in much of the current globalized world.

However, the authors also remind that the tools of "negativity and judgment, the modes in which critique and critical analyses were practiced and thought since Kant, have run their course. […] they are unable to bring forth real transformation and newness" (Bunz, Kaiser, and Thiele 2017, 8). This discourse of "a 'better' political project, an 'elsewhere' in linear spacetime, is thus

no longer plausible" (Bunz, Kaiser, and Thiele 2017, 11). Yet, the authors do not discard 'critique' as a whole. Instead, we are urged to grapple with our complicity in a critical manner. The aim of this thesis is to show Landes' complicitous entanglement without simply reducing her attitude to an error that could have been avoided. I do not mean to justify general offenses given a person's context. I believe there is an intermediate space between condemning and justifying practices, definitively permeated and localized by its own contextual references. And I believe that the methodology chosen in this thesis can help me move closer to this complex matter.

# Chapter 2 – Ruth Landes' *The City of Women* or feminist accountability in the making

Written out of field notes, memories, and personal correspondence with her accompaniment in Salvador, Édison Carneiro, *The City of Women* was published in 1947 as a novel and recounts, in literary prose, Landes' experiences in researching with mainly two candomblé temples, Ilé Iyá Nassô (aka Casa Branca do Engenho Velho) and Ilé Iyá Asé Omin Iyamassê (aka Terreiro do Gantois). The novel does not mirror traditional ethnographical monographs, which presuppose an absent, neutral researcher who describes and analyzes the culture, people, place studied. Landes' methodology defied this monolithic and atemporal account. Instead, she favored to write a novel, in which she presents, describes, and analyzes life as she encountered in Salvador. In a more or less chronological style, it reads also as a literary personal memoir, populated with personages she met, stories she heard, thoughts she had, conversations she undertook, strolls, visits, rituals, formal and informal gatherings, other people's reactions.

This chapter aims to apply a diffractive methodology to Ruth Landes' *The City of Women*, in order to test the decolonizing possibilities of the said methodology. I mark the formulation "*a* diffractive methodology" implying that Barad's incredibly insightful theoretical support can be fruitful in many ways. Diffraction and interference patterns go way beyond mere texts, dealing directly with ideas and commitments. These, in turn, require a material tangibility in quotable and retrievable records. I will diffract Ruth Landes' ethnographic novel first with feminist anthropological methodology in order to expose her feminist commitment and, following this, with a few Black feminist authors.

In practical terms, Landes' language is not always politically correct, sometimes her words and formulations are quite repulsive, bearing an offence. To a reader accustomed to twenty-first century's academic writing, such thoughtlessness around language is utterly striking. As a foreign academic, Landes also carried a power-bubble around her which constrained her in many ways during her research, while functioning elsewhere as a supportive structure to enter certain closed circles. Although white and relatively stable financially, Landes was born to working class Jewish immigrants in the USA. Her upbringing in labor unions and among political debates about minorities' and women's rights (Cole 2003, 24–29) would later become pivotal for her critical

awareness of given state of affairs and inherent power relations. Her imbrication, thus, within different positions in power matrices and respective discourses is a constant.

The value of Landes' insights lies in the active recognition of her complex positionality and her strive to account for it in her academic production. Her dissident, in fact, pioneering feminist methodology bolsters Landes' critical awareness of her own positionality. Conversely, her complicity as an academic scholar undermines her criticality. This research therefore assesses this difference sprung out of an honorable political commitment driven forward in a context which challenged Landes' critical awareness of her own positionality. To top, Landes' aspiring accountability was conducted in time when such criticality was definitely not in vogue. The value of this research is, thus, the nested problematic of the critical and uncritical accountability in Landes' work on candomblé, framed by the differently valued axes of her studies' focus, locale, her feminist agenda, her political interpretation of her own work. This ambiguous character is the focus of this chapter's diffractive analysis. The overarching guiding purpose remains however the test of diffraction as a decolonizing tool.

As a way to exemplify the above I diffract some text passages in order to establish that Landes did employed a feminist methodology and strived for an accountable research conduct. The arguably most efficient diffractive interference in relation to Landes' feminist commitment regards her methodology. Four decades after the publication of *The City of Women*, feminist ethnographer Kamala Visweswaran affirms that:

> *In traditional ethnographic practices, if the first person narrative is allowed to creep into the ethnographic text, it is confined to the introduction […] or postscript* (Visweswaran 1988).[9]

Landes in turn advances,

> *I should have to persuade the Bahians to take me into their life. I should have to force my way into the flow and become a part of it. To study the people I should have to live with them, to like them, and I should have to try assiduously to make them like me* (Landes 1994, 16).

As if further challenging Visweswaran's consideration, Landes does not only mention herself in the novel as a way to label her positionality, but she is one of the central protagonists in

[9] Available online under https://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-34/kamala-visweswaran/. Last accessed 09.01.2021.

the book. By including her reactions, thoughts, personal observations, conversations and those of the people with whom she was surrounded, Landes diverges very strongly from the hegemonic scientific prescriptions for an ethnographic work. More than placing herself in the center and writing in plain personal narrative, Landes expresses how crucial her connections are to the conduction of her work, and she demonstrates how her positionality is thoroughly interwoven with her ethnographical study as the starting point from which she could cast her interpretative and partial lenses. To interlace and to exchange was the only possibility for her to continue her anthropological practice.

Feminist anthropologist Marilyn Strathern complements in terms of a more accountable methodology:

> *Experimentation with ways of presenting ethnography itself also includes recent self-conscious attempts to let the anthropologist's subjects speak in their own voice* (Strathern 1985, 17).

Landes recounts,

> *"For Oxum, Senhor Doctor," she answered matter-of-factly, in a bass voice.*
>
> *The doctor turned to me. […]*
>
> *I was dissatisfied with this excursion. Possibly I was mistaken, but I felt that these Negro Bahians should be approached in a more personal manner, in a manner that conveyed clear evidence of my regard. Actually, I wanted to see them live their own lives instead of merely hearing them answer my questions. Indeed, I myself could not ask questions before I knew about their lives* (Landes 1994, 18).

Written as a memoiristic ethnographic novel, Landes was able to experiment with feminist interventions that were yet to be collectively delineated decades later. A novel gives space for less objectifying, less essentializing moves. It certainly does not bar them, in case such is the will of the writer, but for instance the multivocality present in dialogs is a way to disrupt the hegemonic norm. Out of the four words Landes recalls from the saleswoman's answer, half of them is common to Landes' American public; the others, 'Oxum' and 'senhor', are respectively from Yoruba and Portuguese. In a way, Landes both exoticizes but also translates to the reader the woman's unwillingness to attend the physician. This is just one example of several carefully constructed instances where the reader is left adrift as to their interpretation. One possible interpretation is that Landes was able to condense the woman's response to such a disrespectful address by Landes'

accompaniment and weaves instances of linguistic disruption into the saleswoman's refusal to be patronized and demeaned.

According to feminist ethnographer Lila Abu-Lughod, Landes' intervention as a woman producing knowledge with other women about women harbors a potential. Abu-Lughod argues:

> *...one point can be made about a feminist ethnography. If it were an ethnography with women at the center written for women by women (even if the women at the center were mostly women from other cultures and the women it was written for were mostly Western women who wanted to understand what gender means, how it works, and how it produces women's situations—that still being the unequal structure of the world and the structure of anthropology), something important would have shifted. By working with the assumption of difference in sameness, of a self that participates in multiple identifications, and an other that is also partially the self, we might be moving beyond the impasse of the fixed self/other or subject/object divide* (Abu-Lughod 1990, 25).

Landes recounts,

> *I discovered that I had become African in my prejudices, as African as Martiniano, as Menininha, as Luzía*[10] (Landes 1994, 200).

As part engaging in and engaged by the daily life of the Black Bahian women and men she was studying, Landes acknowledges her fragmentary subjectivity and personal identity in a constant becoming with those people and forces that surrounded her. This passage exemplifies the ambivalence in Landes' writings because her emphasis on 'becoming' indicates the porosity with which she lived, engaged and studied in Salvador. The notions of self and other, so entrenched in the anthropological endeavor of early twentieth-century and also implicated in Landes' working premises by several of the involved actors, was also concomitantly being put into question. At the same time, however, she unproblematically presupposes a unitary category of "African prejudices", without any critique about the strongly invested and imagined aspect of such term. In a way, Landes is plainly disruptive from the hegemonic anthropological guidelines[11] for a "science of culture" and opts rather for a feminist methodology, but at the very same instant, she makes use of uncritical, essentialist notions, exposing thereby her contextual, that is, temporal, geographical, familial, educational, cultural biases.

These first three diffractive exercises already issue some disposability of diffraction for the decolonial project. One very tangible and appreciable characteristic is the demonstration of the

[10] These are influential personages within the Bahian candomblé world Landes came into contact, the Nagô nation.
[11] These were to attempt neutral objectivity and disregarded the position of the researcher. See Cole, 2003, conclusion.

non-linearity of ideas, which figures almost as a condition for diffraction. The ability to demonstrate this non-linearity – and to render it more tangible – is a valuable tool to withstand 'linear causality suggesting a 'natural' or 'proper' way for ideas and reality to develop. The non-linearity enabled and engaged by diffraction allows for complex causality – a very useful feature for countering complex effects (coloniality) of a complex phenomenon (colonialism). Moreover, the fact that Landes' words lend themselves to the patterns of interference by means of a commitment to expose the inequality she perceived points to yet another important issue, the bearing of commitments in knowledge production.

This section illustrates how aware Landes was about gender codification of reality and how bold she was to diverge from the perceived faults in the hegemonic research practices of her time. However, this state of affairs does not replicate the ambiguous character initially announced. These interferences have mainly casted her as a feminist researcher, self-critical of her own positionality, endeavoring to produce accountable knowledge on an embodied objectivity enmeshed in the lifestyle and with the people she was studying with rather than about them. It is not my objective to only portray Landes' positive side about her linguistic, behavioral and academic interventions. In what follows I diffract Landes with race-critical feminist thought and I try to expose the complexity of the issues she started discussing, by evoking disruptive as well as corruptive, that is, critical and acritical passages of her research.

## Landes' interference with anti-racism and Black feminist thought

By now I have exemplified Landes' firm feminist commitment by diffracting it with some more recent texts on feminist ethnographical methodology. In the above diffractions, I passingly pointed to some of Landes' ambivalence in relation to contemporary reading practices. Disruption but also complicity with the power relations at place are present in her text. When these traits go hand-in-hand, it becomes hard to evaluate the contribution the author is able to give. By assessing this complex situation by means of diffraction, I wish to give an example of how this methodology is able to contribute to a decolonial horizon by untangling the controverted assertions and commitments to be found in scholarship literature. In this section I concentrate on exposing Landes' controversial stances by diffracting certain passages with some Black feminist authors.

The first diffractive exercise I do with abolitionist Sojourner Truth's famous speech in Akron, USA, during a women's rights' convention. Truth declares,

> *I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ain't I a woman?* (Truth and Perry 2005 apud. hooks 2015, 160)

Landes describes,

> *The women were Black-skinned, strong and big, and had none of the mincing ways that the upper class consider feminine and alluring. In fact, they seemed to me like men dressed in the skirts of the Bahian women* (Landes 1994, 48).

The pattern of interference here is the common reference to strength implicit in Truth's words and explicit in Landes' description. As counterexamples to patriarchal normativity, both passages invoke how gender inequality is a social and changeable oppression, and defy the sturdiness of biological, natural justifications. However, both passages also remain entrapped in the same gender power relations they are trying to uproot. Truth maintains reference to male accomplishments and Landes reproduces notions of upper-class femininity, consciously naming it. This forms the contradictory core of the fight for social justice: in order to oppose social injustice, one has to acknowledge it and becomes thereby, to some extent, complicit with it.

A second pattern of interference comes about in Landes' second sentence. The comparison Truth makes between herself and other men is also re-enacted with the gender blurriness Landes suggests of women resembling men in Bahian skirts. However, some years following her famous speech in Akron, Truth was challenged by a certain doctor, "the mouthpiece of the slave Democracy", at an anti-slavery meeting in Northern Indiana.

> *A rumor was immediately circulated that Sojourner was an imposter; that she was, indeed, a man disguised in women's clothing. […] it was his impression that a majority of them [those present in the congregation] believed the speaker to be a man* (Truth and Perry 2005).[12]

Suddenly, the same passage by Landes that lends itself to a gender-fucking reading (women resembling men dressed in skirts) is revamped as an offence of the highest order, when diffracted with the confrontation set up against Truth by a staunch supporter of slavery. It is meaningful that both opposite interpretations start off from diffracting passages bearing opposite political commitments. The transgression present in her cross-dressing description is aligned with the

[12] The wording is from William Heyward, recounted in a letter in Truth and Perry, 2005, online version without page number. The passage is to be found in the second part, under "Pro-Slavery Indiana".

defense of non-binary, queer struggle toward gender freedom of being truthful to one's own identity without facing nefarious types of violent discrimination for it. On the other hand, the challenge toward Truth's gender belonging "unwittingly voiced America's contempt and disrespect for black womanhood" (hooks 2015, 159). No wonder that it came from a pro-slavery, white supremacist, powerful man. As such, it remains indeterminate, to share in Bohr's terminology, which if any of these interpretations were intended by Landes. Different diffractive material yields different interference patterns. This diffractive exercise reallocates our attention back to the preexistence of a commitment in order to utter, to interpret and to diffract words, texts and ideas.

Another point of obtuse diffraction regards Landes' description of the size and form of Black women she met in Salvador. Upon meeting Mãe Menininha, the head-priestess at Terreiro do Gantois, describes Landes:

> *She lowered herself heavily into a flimsy chair, placing her palms on her thighs. Suddenly she was remote and obscure as a Stone Age Venus* (Landes 1994, 80).

Recasting the story of Sara Baartman, Sadiah Qureshi writes,

> *Shortly after Baartman's arrival in London in 1810, at no. 225 Piccadilly, members of the public were invited to view the "Hottentot Venus" for two shillings* (Qureshi 2004, 236).

The analysis revolves around Landes' usage of 'Venus' to refer to Mãe Menininha and the adnoun 'Stone Age'. Sara Baartman lived an epitome of colonial oppression, with just enough attention to stand out from trampled anonymity, combining historical forces with a lack of Baartman's recorded agency. The result was the creation of an icon of scientific racism used for legitimizing both human superiority over animals and superiority of white over others, especially over Black people. Baartman was exoticized in public freak shows in Britain and, years later, dragooned into nudity by insistent educated men for further voyeuristic purposes disguised in their talk as the progress of science. This icon, built on top of Baartman's body, was then declared repulsively as the "most pronounced antithesis" of human (perverse) perfection, embodied in the white European (Buikema 2009, 77). Landes' (sub)conscious sexualization, by reference to the European myth of Venus, and hierarchization through uncritical repetition of a linear history of humanity, in the words "Stone Age", is a reminder that such gruesome scientific history Baartman's is not all too forgotten, even in works with the best intentions by pioneering feminist knowledge producers.

Landes' words also lend themselves to another ambivalent interference concerning the strength and toughness ascribed to mãe Menininha and other Black-skinned women in this section's diffractions. James L. Matory argues that Ruth Landes, together with Édison Carneiro and Gilberto Freyre, who had and were to publish tremendously influential works about the Brazilian history, especially on the country's racial formation, coalesced to form another icon, the Black Mother.

> *Brazilian journalists describe even the toughest Candomblé priestesses in the clichés characteristic of the Black Mother image—self-sacrificial, self-effacing, long-suffering, generous, constantly available, and so forth […] but journalists offer the further assurance that she is also "firm" (firme) with her masses of black children [in sainthood] and has always "commanded [them] with an iron hand* (Matory 2005, 203).

Black feminist poet and psychologist Grada Kilomba ascertains,

> *The images are richly endowed with the idea of strength, self-sacrifice, dedication and unconditional love – attributes that are associated with the archetype of motherhood, but which inadvertently refuse to acknowledge the real Black female experience* (Kilomba 2010, 119).

And warns Kilomba,

> *After one is de-idealized, one becomes idealized, and behind this idealization lies the danger of a second alienation* (Kilomba 2010, 120).

As if entering a less visible and less perceptible layer of the racist wound, such an interpellation of an undistinguished Black woman as a superpowered human continues to idealize this iconic figure, to dehumanize her; not anymore as a sub-human but as a super-human. Kilomba explores with her interviewee one of this stigmatization's most pernicious affairs: suicide. The iconic figure of the Black Mother forecloses the availability and attainability of professional psychological support to Black women. The concerned interviewee, Kathleen, recounts: "I remember another woman (…) once used the example of a woman in Mozambique who managed to give birth to her child in a tree during the flood last year as proof of how tough we are: 'No *white* woman could ever do that. *White* women run to therapists and psychologists when they have problems. Not us. We don't need all that'" (Kilomba 2010, 119). As Kilomba analyses, the violence hidden in such a rhetoric is explicit by noticing this discursive construction of Black

womanhood as defying the possibility of professional psychological support through referencing of white women.

Recurrent is the effacing of the psychological damage caused by everyday racism, argues Kilomba. Granted, these stereotypical images were promoted to fight an even stronger and more truculent vilification of Black people as lazy, careless, unskilled, disjoint from the *white standard*. But this derivative kind of dehumanization by means of a super-glorification must also be acknowledged and the strongly flattened human complexity, thereby enacted, needs to be unpacked, outspoken and deconstructed. Landes fits tightly this type of secondary dehumanization, because she is depicting "the" Black woman she sees, from her lenses fitting the adjectives 'strong and big' or 'great, powerful and firm' which is at once empowering and objectifying. In terms of interference patterns, there is an ambiguity in Landes' words, concomitant and contradicting (de)humanized, (un)just treatment. Just like the particle and wave nature of light, which depends on the instrument utilized for assessing it, in this case it is the framework chosen by the reader that foregrounds the one or the other aspect.

Landes' ambivalence continues also in relation to another important milestone in Black feminist thought, which is intersectionality. Condensing the extensive and robust critiques of Black feminist women to the established white feminist movement, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality as an attempt to uproot common ways of thinking oppression. Intersectionality challenges the single-axis analysis of oppression that focuses on the disadvantage that "otherwise-privileged members of the group" suffer and opts for a multiple-axes analysis foregrounding how different types of discrimination can occur concomitantly. Crenshaw announces,

> *I will center on Black women in this analysis in order to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences*
>
> (Crenshaw 1989, 139).

Landes concludes *The City of Women* with:

> *I was sent to Bahia to learn how people behave when the Negroes among them are not oppressed. I found that they were oppressed by political and economic tyrannies, although not by racial ones. In that sense, the Negroes were free, and at liberty to cultivate their African heritage. But they were sick, undernourished, illiterate, and uninformed, just like other poor people among them of different racial origins. It was their complete poverty that cut them off from modern thought and obliged them to make up their own secure universe*
>
> (Landes 1994, 248).

This passage deserves a more lingered attention. Many are the uncritical instances here, that ought to be pointed out. Who does she refer to with such general 'people'? Would they be the Black population in Salvador or the privileged population of the capital? How come does she affirm to be no oppression against Black people in Salvador? Landes herself writes that "the municipal police (whose own relatives supported candomblé) were ordered to make sudden raids" to candomblé houses (Landes 1994, 61). Nonetheless, the interference with intersectionality I want to bring about is the focus Landes poses on the lack of access to health, food, education and monetary provisions she observed. Class intersects with education, with alimentation, with health to form a self-propagating cycle of oppression. It is striking, however, to read about the lack of racial oppression. Perhaps this could be seen as an instance of confusion around the concept of race.

Linda Alcoff explains with Foucault that during the centuries following the European Renaissance, "emerging sciences understood knowledge primarily as a practice of ordering and classifying on the basis of essential differences. […] However, in the early modern period, the juxtaposition of these classification practices with an emerging liberal ideology espousing universalism produced a confused and contradictory account of race" (Alcoff 1999, 15). Landes' words might be a result of this account, an attempt to counter the racial hierarchy and outright hatred in place.[13] She does not deny the existence of race when she compares with "other poor people […] of different racial origins" (Landes 1994, 248), but she tries to argue that race is not a biological determinant factor; and instead shifts the focus to the material and tangible access to basic human rights.

This argument does not touch, though, on why she ascertains that Blacks were free to cultivate their heritage. She even contradictorily mentions the jeopardization of Black lives, who were left "to make up their own secure universe" (Landes 1994, 248). Poverty is given as the cause of such life-threatening situation, but without attaining to the profound overlap of historical racial exploitation and economic difficulties. One way of understanding Landes' judgmental parsimony when affirming the absence of racial discrimination might indeed come from her contextual references. Perhaps, the reality she knew in highly segregated USA from the 1930s was of a sort that made certain aspects of congruous conviviality among whites, Blacks, and mestizxs in Brazil

[13] In the opening pages of the book Landes describes a conversation she had with a "distinguished minister of the government" who uses such racial hierarchization to justify "political backwardness" and Getúlio Vargas' dictatorship.

jump to her eyes much more intensely than, for instance, cultural persecution, which today reveals intense sites of discrimination. Another way is to localize Landes' broad claims about the regional racial power relations. What would easily be read in the USA as standing for an amiable sociability in the whole country, might have been meant and might find corroboration only in a limited social realm involving thorough acceptation of candomblé, for example. In any case, she refrains totally from criticizing the racial democracy proclaimed by another of Boas' pupils, Gilberto Freyre, which was internationally exalted with the publication of *The Masters and the Slaves* on Brazilian history and racial configuration. This myth of a racial democracy produced by the extremely violent Portuguese colonialism still hovers today latent in white popular nationalist accounts, currently urging a strong black (feminist) movement to push against such interpretation in popular social media. Again, we have a conflictive situation where Landes does produce instigating thoughts but not from the common vantage of intersectionality today, since she disregards the racial tyranny in favor of health, education and class.

This section envisioned to diffract Landes with Black feminist contributions in order to bring about some of her not so much contradictory as conflictive and conformist and complicit formulations. As mentioned in the last chapter, my material bottom line are the words I choose to read, their position, their context, their tone, which disclose a large field of forces and the resources to further analyses, for instance, about the political consciousness and commitment adopted by Landes in her work. I have persevered with the opening observations about the possibilities of usage of a diffractive methodology and was able to bring about more emphatically the complicity implicit in Landes' words.

## Conclusion

This chapter aimed at testing diffraction as a methodology in its decolonizing overtures. My diffractions of Landes' novel with other feminist scholars envisioned first to expose her ambiguous character as a researcher in order then to demonstrate the relatively unstable interpretation of her passages, yielding differently depending on the material it is being diffracted with. This points to the first of my conclusions: diffraction drives home the necessity of a commitment in research. By hook or by crook, producing academic research implicates choices on several levels. And diffraction, far from overlooking it, embraces this fact in a methodological way. Which passages/works to diffract with what/whom? There is no illusion around the factuality of the choice being made. The research and the researcher need be (held) accountable for these.

As elucidated in the last chapter, the overemphasis on neutrality and lack of critical self-accountability are part of the colonialist decimation of different knowledge traditions. Thus, the explicit choices and the resulting awareness of one's responsibility inscribed in a diffractive methodology work for decolonizing traditional scientific practices.

Secondly, reading texts alongside each other encloses another feature that counters colonial Western scientific knowledge: multivocality. By means of literally including different texts inside of one's own, there are a plurality of voices being engaged and the (correct, neutral, uncritical) monoauthorial voice is thus dislodged. Certainly, a voice can be compounded out of many and remake for its fractures by elaborate rhetoric. This is a central move to colonial knowledge production. Whether the multiple voices are crafted to hide or sustain the faults is a matter of commitment. Yet, multivocality as a methodological feature already points toward the decolonial horizon.

As a third and last decolonizing feature to be resumed here I single out diffraction's ability to show complexity. This is intricately related with the quantum disavowal of the linearity of time, which in diffraction shows up in the non-linear causality of ideas, that is, in the fact that one intervention is always open for reconsideration depending on what it is being diffracted with or thought through. By demonstrating how Landes interventions were both disruptive and complicitous, and how their interpretation was open to re-formulation, through different diffractive readings (as when discussing Truth's speech and challenge, for example, or Landes' proto-intersectional ponderings), I aimed to bring forward the methodology's capacity to uphold and sustain complexity – a very useful feature within the complex decolonial project.

As this chapter focused on Landes' *The City of Women*, I move now to consider her other groundbreaking, controversial, defamed article *Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality.*

# Chapter 3 – Ruth Landes' *Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality* or the relocation of agency

*The City of Women* is usually described as the milestone of the claim that candomblé is undergirded by a politico-religious matriarchal structure. In a sort of climax achieved after gradually introducing this idea throughout the book, writes Landes: "'I know by now that women are the chosen sex,' I said to Edison. 'I take it for granted just as I know in our world that men are the chosen sex.'" (Landes 1994, 202) Landes' works on candomblé are equally reputable as the catalyst for a long-unfolding academic debate regarding sexual deviance within candomblé. In her 1940 article titled *Cult Matriarchate and Male Homosexuality*, another claim is concomitantly put forward: male priests in candomblé are generally non-orthodox and – in acceptance of her contemporaneous psychiatric diagnosis – "passive homosexuals" (Landes 1940, 387). The tone in which she does so is offensive and homophobic. James L. Matory argues that Landes' hostility against male gender and sexual dissident individuals works to bolster her fancied claim of a matriarchal ruling structure in candomblé (Matory 2005, 188ff), which invites an interesting reading of interested complicity. In this chapter, however, I diffract Landes' article with Mika Lior's *dark horse kinetics* and Rose Réjouis' *dark horse poetics* as a way to twist the subjugated status of candomblé in the order of knowledge production sequence. In a more abstract way, I aim here at reviewing Landes' agency by placing her in a broader network of active disputing members in the formation of discourses.

## Landes' constr*i/u*cted agency

In the aforementioned article, Landes historicizes the, at the time, relatively recent mushrooming of a religious branch under the candomblé religious conglomerate, called candomblé de caboclo. The striking difference between candomblé de caboclo and all other African-derived nations of candomblé is the worship of and the possession by indigenous entities (*caboclos*), regarded as the owners of the land. Other ceremonial features for the invocation of the caboclo entities do not variate much from the African-derived candomblé. Yet, Landes' focus lies on male homosexuality within this religious formation, in an untrue dichotomously flat frame "scandalously conjoining male priests, homosexuality, mixed race, *caboclo* worship, the Angola nation, newness or lack of tradition, and 'black magic'—all in a fictive antitype to Nagô and

'purely African' religion" (Matory 2005, 265). In what follows I focus on Landes' homophobic take of male sexual deviance and diffract it with research on the agential character of the caboclo cult.

It is hard to bring about Landes' ambiguous status – both disruptive and complicit with the heteronormative colonial matrix of power – in her discussion of queer gender and sexuality of male bodies. Her homophobic rhetoric is abundant and counter instances scarce. There is not barely any critical disruption in her article besides the very fact that she was broaching sexual deviance within a repressed religion in a context thoroughly permeated by colonial forces at a time marked by a positivist paradigm in anthropology. Landes expresses high disapproval of the personality popularly known as adé, or in her words male "passive homosexual" (Landes 1940, 386). According to the strict gendered division of much of Brazilian society and its replication within popularized candomblé, Luis Felipe Rios connotes adés as men who present themselves "as feminine, especially in gesturality, modes of speech and of dress. These traces allow them to express their sexual desires for men while suggesting a preference for sexual passivity" (Rios 2011, 223). In Landes' hostile wording:

> The passive homosexuals solicit on the street in obscene whispers, and make themselves conspicuous by mincing with sickening exaggeration, overdoing the falsetto tones, and using women's turns of phrase. All their energies are focused upon arranging the sexual act in which they take the female role (Landes 1940, 387).

Depreciating deviant male bodies, Landes is subtle but inflexible in her negative judgment of their presence and behaviors. Characteristic of her dichotomic model, she equals male religious priests, fathers-in-sainthood – who by her definition of the cult matriarchate cannot belong to Nagô, and as such to authentic candomblé – with caboclo worshipers and with homosexuals.

> In contrast with the "mothers," the "fathers" seem combative and frustrated. They desire simple personal satisfactions usually, and rarely glimpse the social ends that are the stated goals of Nagô fetishism (Landes 1940, 393).

Evident is Landes' wholehearted vindication of the Nagô nation to the detriment of the emerging religious institution candomblé de caboclo. Yet, despite Landes' implicit hierarchized presentation of candomblé, Landes' ambiguous status can still be brough forward through diffraction. Different from the last chapter, her ambivalence does not regard the type of a scholar she is and what commitments she has, but here it is her very status *as* a scholar that is up to

reassessment. I do this by reading Landes diffractively through dance scholar Mika Lillit Lior's *Embodied Narratives of Candomblé's Afro-Bahian Caboclos*.

The two central references for Mika Lior are, first, literature scholar and object-oriented ontologist Timothy Morton's ecological turn, as in *The Ecological Thought* and *Dark Ecologies*, and second, literary scholar Rose Réjouis' concept of *dark horse poetics*.[14] The methodological undergirding Lior draws from Morton can be assembled into three ontological pillars: i) interconnectedness (entanglement of entities constituting reality), intrinsic unknowability (one only knows upon encountering what is to be known) and multiple spatial-temporalities (disputing the colonialist linearity of time). Dark horse poetics, in turn, functions "as a subversive literary politics […] 'committed to revealing the unexpected resources within the culture of the "weak"'" (Réjouis 2014, 106; apud Lior 2020, 119). These unexpected resources in a narrative infused with dark horse poetics are what renders triumphant and rehabilitate the historically and structurally disadvantaged culture. Lior finds them within candomblé de caboclo's abilities to challenge imageries and narratives "for their self-determining purposes" (Lior 2020, 119), and to bring "contested histories into the present" and "rehistoricize" it (Lior 2020, 122, 121). In short, Lior revamps the agency of candomblé de caboclo through its ceremonies, conjoining esthetics with causality.

Following Brazeal's interpretation of caboclo's ceremonies as contexts capable of challenging and rearranging hierarchies (Brazeal 2003, 642), and defying static and timeless conceptions of the religious functionings, Lior pursues a more complicated account of the ceremonies' agency of this cult formation. By "focusing on their ontological and kinesthetic operations" (Lior 2020, 116), she argues that through kinesthetic performances, with the respective garment, (sacred) objects, polyrhythmic music and dance, caboclos "make things happen" (Lior 2020, 120). As an institution, it is capable of challenging and intervening in discursive formations – her examples are the racialized and gendered imagery of the Bahian hero of independence, and of binary gender notions pervading broader society. This gender unsettling, for instance, happens through the ceremonial incorporations of a specific type of caboclo – called Exua, the female counterpart of the masculine, trickster, sexual Lord of the Crossroads, Exú – who, in plural numbers, superpose polyrhythmic dance patterns. In the ceremony attended and recounted by Lior, the Exuas dance seductively to the celebrated male caboclo – Sete Flechas – incorporated in the

[14] Lior engages *dark horse poetics* as presented in (Réjouis 2014).

female body of the leading priestess. Thus, both the spiritual Exuas' as well as their humane mediums' sexuality is favored instead of their "confinement to the power constellations of patriarcho-heterosexuality" (Lior 2020, 124). Although Lior homes in on the tangible ceremonial materiality involved in the rehistoricizing of discourses, in my case study, Landes' portrayal of candomblé de caboclo, I turn solely to the institution as an active, agential dialoger within the ongoing knowledge production.

A complementary unfixing of categories around body and agency is also provided by dance scholar Yvonne Daniel. According to Daniel, "[d]ance in Diaspora cultures is kinesthetic, but also visual, aural, oral, physical, and cognitive. Knowledge of African-derived dance and music has been stored in the ancient archives of the dancing body" (Daniel 2005, 14). Neither body nor dance in the African diaspora are deemed passive and less important like in the colonial matrix of power. Rather, the kinesthetics of dance interlace body moves, cognition, social, political and, in case of candomblé de caboclo, also religious implications. Reiterating Lior's attention to the polyrhythm of caboclo's dance, Daniel affirms that in the diaspora "dance structure is contingent on rhythm or an order of repeated rhythms with supra-rhythmic display—in other words, established patterns with superimposed improvisation" (Daniel 2005, 15). This superposition is conducted by "body-part isolation" (Daniel 2005, 15) and the "ability to perform or consolidate a series of interlocking meanings within one discursive body" (Lior 2020, 124). This feature of a meaning body, meaningful, mattering body, is what I utilize in my revision of Landes' homophobic depiction – not Landes' but the adés' bodies and behaviors. Moreover, improvisation is key to Rose Réjouis' dark horse poetics in its emphasis on "the unexpected resources" (Réjouis 2014, 106) of the subjugated culture.

To close the circle in my diffraction of Landes I need to come back to her writing. Before, however, I want to recapitulate one stance, with which I started this research and motivated my crisscross journey. Roberto Strongman refers to the "Afro-diasporic religion[s] as a repository of philosophical discourses" (Strongman 2019, 10). This section presupposes candomblé and specifically candomblé de caboclo as equal partners in the knowledge production involving/evolved with and through Ruth Landes. Where bodies are "living libraries", to paraphrase Yvonne Daniel (2005, 14), why not take the religious institution as a living body?

What I propose is to see candomblé de caboclo as an agent as much as Landes is. The rupture of the subject/object, self/other distinction is already present in Barad and, through my

reading of Abu-Lughod, in Landes. Similar here, candomblé possesses some diffractive features, like the troubling of self/other separation latent in incorporation of deities in human bodies, forming a mingled being, deeply interdependent and involved in an economy of services and protection. While Landes was studying candomblé, candomblé de caboclo was also studying Landes; prospecting for an available medium with both capabilities: to talk and to listen. Landes' complicit positionality, as a white academic woman, as a socially stable immigrant, as a respected Jew in early twentieth century, as a feminist anthropologist rendered Landes suitable for addressing this marginalized societal facet. She held the power to install caboclo worship by adés into the academic discourses, but because of this very power, she also took part in other social circles and was susceptible to their prejudice against innovation in candomblé. It is a gamble.

Instances of vindication of caboclo are rare in Landes' hostile article. Yet, some passages do sound less prejudicial and even beneficial to the adés within the caboclo cult. First, she partially historicizes the cult, naming and registering one pioneering mother, Sylvina, in caboclo worship, albeit from her particular perspective of Nagô matriarchal superiority. Second, this historicization can well be said also of gender-blurring personalities, registering for instance *pãe* João[15], who was "quite unashamed, half mincing in the streets, writing love letters to the men of his heart, wearing fancy blouses whose color and cut set off his fine shoulders and skin" (Landes 1940, 396). To present-day anti-patriarchal readers, the following sentence resounds indeed very positive: "Least of all do they [adés in candomblé de caboclo] reflect the masculinity of the patriarchal culture in whose heart they live" (Landes 1940, 394). On the other hand, its textual surrounding is filled with disparaging predicates such as "sexual anomaly" (395) and "masters of slander" (394). Third, some passages are explicitly in favor of this emerging religious branch of candomblé:

> these candomblé priests are all drawn from the *outcast* homosexual solicitors of Bahia[n] underworld. […] Having made their entry into the influential candomblé, as priests they have now a voice in all vital activities. […] *But as the voice of a hitherto voiceless group, they may be path-breakers to new institutions*." (Landes 1940, 393, my emphasis)

As if looping itself into the academic discourse, the granting of a voice to this "hitherto voiceless group" has indeed sparked a decades-long (academic) debate over gender and sexual deviance in candomblé, first following Landes' hostile complicity to outsiders' prejudices, but gradually giving in to less judgmental academic attention to queer candomblé worship (Strongman

[15] Landes registers this personalized respectful designation, "*pãe* João" (396), as an effect of João's insistent linguistic queering performance to mix 'pai' (father) with 'mãe' (mother) in their religious respectful title of address.

2019, 182–94). As critical and non-critical, Landes' intervention here carries the same ambiguous contours as encountered in the last chapter, only that in this section I layered stronger accent on Landes' constr*u/i*cted agency alongside candomblé de caboclo's meaningful agential scaffolding. In other words, it wasn't candomblé that allowed Landes to practice her feminist research, but it was Landes' feminist commitment that allowed candomblé de caboclo to interact with and unfix traditional discourses about this new religious formation in a more direct way. Tempering with Landes' complicity to broader societal views about caboclo worship, it engages her powerful voice, given her academic position, as well as her listening abilities embodied in Landes' complex positionality.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I aimed to further present how Landes can still be read as a feminist author, through a critical reconstruction of her constr*u/i*cted agency by a diffractive reading that places her alongside other agential actors in the net of knowledge production. This reading exposes how Landes' research outcome, although completely sprung from Landes' hands and responsibility, also carries in it parts of an unaccounted agency of the sedimented/sedimenting power relations structuring discourses internal as well as external to candomblé about candomblé de caboclo, especially its adé practitioners. I read Landes' homophobic article informed through the revision of candomblé de caboclo's agency performed by Mika Lior's dark horse kinetics in accordance with Rose Réjouis' dark horse poetics. These two modes of esthetical discursive interventions are corroborated by Yvonne Daniel through her twisting of the notions of body and polyrhythmic superposition as meaningful discursive practices. As an outcome, agency is rearranged so as to encompass also the active participation of candomblé de caboclo in the (re)construction of discourses around itself, in an attempt to challenge the expressively violent, fearful and homophobic portrayals.

The main takeaway is that placing Landes within larger circles in her research allows one to read her works in a feminist way, by means of producing new previously unconnected knots and reevaluating her work on the basis of a larger field of actors, not only herself. I call Landes' a constricted agency because it takes shape as not the only decisive one for the outcome of the research, but in connection and formed through other agents' agencies. I do not justify Landes' pathologizing rhetoric nor do I endorse her findings. She is definitely hostile against male sexual

and gender dissidence and reproduces much of societal vilification of the adé persona in favor of her “cult matriarchate”. Yet, what I intended to show is that some situations are more complex and defy a simplistic either-or frame to evaluate a final consequence. Relating to the overarching quest toward the decolonizing possibilities of diffraction, this chapter’s diffractive reworking of agency – feasible through complexity – hints at a move toward collective responsibility, one that is relational and dynamic, depending on the actors involved. With this I reiterate last chapter’s conclusion that diffraction can uphold complexity.

# Concluding remarks

This thesis proposed a two-fold goal: to test the decolonizing possibilities of diffraction, while reassessing Landes' complex complicity and agency. Equipped with a preliminary introduction to the diffractive methodology and to the decolonial project in chapter one, chapter two embarks on the journey of bringing about Landes' ambiguous positionality, critical feminist methodology, and complicit research outcome. In views of still reading Landes in a feminist way, chapter three contributed by revising Landes' agency as a knowledge knot that occupies not only the studying but also the studied slot. The passive/active dichotomy presumed in this last sentence (studying/studied) is granted, given that (my own) limitations still hold off more thorough, understandable and acceptable non-dichotomic ways to express this thought. And this last consideration pertains to one layout (a linguistic-representationalist one) of the overarching theme pervading the chapters: a decolonizing diffraction.

Regarding the quest for a decolonizing diffraction, I want to recap the findings of chapter two's conclusion. Productive interferences between decoloniality and diffraction lie in (i) multivocality, (ii) commitment, and (iii) complexity. Firstly, diffraction's open structure allows for multivocality, which undermines the value of authoritative voice unable to be questioned. The inability to be questioned is endemic of coloniality (Kilomba 2010, 16–23), while pluralism, pluriversality and, I add, plurivocality is endemic of decoloniality (Walsh and Mignolo 2018, 228). Secondly, diffraction is explicit about its commitment and urgence to produce responsible research. Just like any other tool, its usability is not a given, and its effects depend on the purpose of its application. Thus, a decolonizing outcome can spring from a diffractive application if this be the intention. Indeed, how else would a clear political engagement and outcome be achieved without such an incipient and insidious commitment?

But the main interference between diffraction and decoloniality bears on the third theme: complexity. Recalling Rolando Vázquez, modernity creates the 'real' and coloniality ensures its monopoly over reality, rendering everything irreal that does not belong in modernity's reality. As an effect of coloniality, there lies a tightly woven elastic fabric of thick knots of justification for current state of affairs over real and irreal reality. Diffraction, together with its robust theoretical support – agential realism – is capable of puncturing this thick-layered web of rationale-ty, a rationality of justification, a "hyper-consistent" (Gordon 2011, 2) and, I add, hypo-critical thinking

technology. This fabric resists confrontation by giving in to criticism but, while it gives in, its knots conjoin efforts to cover for each other when challenged; hence elastic. By opening the thickness of a knot and holding onto the complex reworkings of traditional ontological, epistemological and ethical understandings performed in agential realism, the diffractive pattern impedes other knots to compensate for any other's paralyzed rationalizing. Instead, diffraction relationalizes the very stretching defense mechanism of the colonialist fabric of justification and locates it within its own hyper-consistent and hypo-critical coordinates. There emerges then a potential for mutual collaboration between diffraction and decoloniality. The reworking of agency performed in chapter three is but one consequence out of the given material for diffraction. Coincidentally, or perhaps not so much so, it also joins efforts in decolonizing by amplifying notions of responsibility to include shared or collective responsibility.

The second quest of this thesis was the revolving question: how to read Landes in a feminist way? Both analytical chapters yielded similar insights to answer the question: through diffraction. The chosen methodology allowed me to show her complicity with given contextual marks and to bring forward a more nuanced assessment of her accountability as demanded from her research project as a whole. I did not use the methodology though in the same way in chapter two and three. In the latter, one issue, the reworking of agency, was afforded much more depth, while in the former diffractions were more flickering and ephemerous, without much long-lasting effect. Interestingly, however, is to note that, for me at least, chapter two offered much better ways to test the interferences between decoloniality and diffraction than chapter three. On the other hand, chapter two regularly resurfaces topics as open interpretation of passages and "non-linear causality of ideas". This focus on linguistic representationalism disappoints Karen Barad's turn to material effectuality. Another lingering presence is the materiality of ideas, here understood as the phenomenological perception of thinking, which is always already present in the abstractions relative to diffraction as a decolonizing tool, but which similarly owes immensely to (my lenses for) the linguistic-representational thought tradition.

Thus, how does diffraction interfere with the decolonial project from a more materialist perspective? How to broach diffraction as a methodology outside (natural) language interventions, such as texts? Drawing from Lior's and Rejouis' politics of esthetics, how do art and culture fit into the agential realist reworkings of ethic-onto-epistemological relationality? More methodologically, would this research yield significantly different results if using assemblage as

methodology? Iris van der Tuin, in fact, inserts "'assemblage', to speak with Deleuze" in the theoretical companies of new-materialist and object-oriented ontology (2014, 235). Historically, Landes was, alongside Katherine Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston, among the few women researching Afro-diasporic cultures. How come? Would a different parsing of agency along the lines attempted in chapter 3 yield any difference to current research on these pioneers? A most intriguing research focus that permeates my thesis but does not feature centrally or solely: what is collective responsibility? How to unsettle common individual understanding of achievements and faults without suspending a mature ethical compromise? How to account for complex phenomena like a pandemic, ecological crisis, mass migration? These are some lines of thought trotting through the ambits of this thesis.

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