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## Carney Landis and the Psychosexual Landscape of Touch in Mid-20th-Century America

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In the last quarter of the 1930s, Carney Landis, an associate professor of psychology at Columbia University affiliated with the Psychiatric Institute of New York, headed a Committee for Research in Problems of Sex-funded research project in which he conducted interviews with 100 women between the ages of 18 and 35 who self-identified as physically disabled. Landis interviewed the women about their sex lives, their sexual identities, and their relationship to their bodies and published the results in 1942 under the title *The Personality and Sexuality of the Physically Handicapped Woman*. The book represents conventional psychosexual presumptions about disabled women's stunted personality and frustrated sexuality stemming from the absence of a Freudian "sexual moment." Yet, the original research notes, housed at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, reveal that many of these women engaged in acts of erotic touching that played a far more dynamic and complex role in the development of their sexual subjectivities than Landis or his researchers could recognize. This article examines how touch and tactility produced meanings for Landis' research subjects and thus illuminated forms of sexual subjectivity not regularly associated with either histories of disability or histories of sexuality.

AQ:1

*Keywords:* Carney Landis, disability, sexual subjectivity, tactile, 1930s

When one considers the influence that the Rockefeller-funded Committee for Research in Problems of Sex (CRPS) had on the history of sexuality research in the United States beginning in the 1920s, it becomes apparent that some areas of inquiry—such as marital relations, prostitution, reproduction among the eugenically "unfit," and the problem of homosexuality—commanded significant attention. During the interwar years of the early 20th century, the conflation of sex problems with other perceived social problems such as juvenile delinquency, criminal behavior, and even political dissent made some populations more likely to attract the attention of sex research (and the financial support of the CRPS) than others. The sexual behaviors and attitudes of people with

disabilities, for example, are not remembered as being especially robust areas of research funded by the CRPS. But during the second half of the 1930s, Carney Landis (1897–1962), an associate professor of psychology at Columbia University, received support from the CRPS to undertake a major research project with his colleague, Mary Marjorie Bolles (1913–), a researcher at the Psychiatric Institute of New York, to conduct interviews with and analyze the sex lives of 100 women who were identified as "physically handicapped," in the parlance of the day. These women, between the ages of 18 and 35, were classified under a range of conditions captured by the then-current rubrics "orthopedic," "spastic," "cardiac," and "epileptic" and were living in institutional care facilities in the metropolitan New York City area. Over the course of 4 years, Landis and Bolles interviewed the women about their sex lives, sexual identities, and relationships to their bodies, and eventually published the results of their study in 1942 under the title *The Personality and Sexuality of the Physically Handicapped Woman* (Landis & Bolles, 1942).

It is curious, then, that in mapping the contributions of the CRPS to histories of sex re-

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search, Landis and Bolles's innovative study of disabled women's sexuality has virtually disappeared. This was not always so. During the process of researching and writing *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Kinsey cited *The Personality and Sexuality of the Physically Handicapped Woman* as one of 19 significant sexological studies produced during the interwar years that positively impacted his investigative methods (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948/1975, p. 27). But among historians of sexology or psychology, almost nothing has been written. In its obituary for Landis, for instance, published in 1962, *The American Journal of Psychiatry* observed that "the influence of Landis's work probably is likely to have been more widely felt among his generation than will be noted for history" (Hunt, 1962, p. 509). Landis and Bolles's work has not fared much better under late-20th- and early 21st-century scholarship, either. According to one prominent historian of sexology, their work on disabled women's sexuality "should be noted more for its intent than for its results" (Bullough, 1995, p. 164). Yet, there is much to say about *The Personality and Sexuality of the Physically Handicapped Woman*—in particular, the ways that perceptions and prejudices about the putative capacity of disabled women to have sexual subjectivity shaped the analytical logic at the core of Landis and Bolles's conclusions.

In this article, I am interested not so much in examining the conclusions drawn by Landis and Bolles about disabled women's sexuality per se. Rather, I am interested in examining the relationship between Landis and Bolles's published conclusions about disabled women's sexuality and the evidence of sexual subjectivity preserved in the Landis Collection held at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction.<sup>1</sup> These files contain the original notes of the oral histories Landis and Bolles conducted during the late 1930s, a good deal of which are organized around evidence of sexual touching among the young women—the fear (and desire) of which provoked confusion and, in some cases, outright censorship by the authors of the study. The tensions and discrepancies that emerged between these unpublished data and Landis and Bolles's published work are not only historically illuminating about the concept of touch, but they also tell us much about the professional inability to comprehend

the production of sexual subjectivity among disabled women. By comparing unpublished data with Landis and Bolles's published work, I hope to draw a more complex picture of the study and how it exemplifies the ways in which clinical psychologists of the interwar period, many sponsored by the CRPS, often mishandled psychological and social profiles of complex people with whom they did not know quite how to contend.

Furthermore, I also hope to show how Landis and Bolles's study confounds the historical interpretations of the CRPS's ambitions and predilections during the first half the 20th century, especially in the period just before the Kinsey Institute became the primary beneficiary of its financial largesse. In particular, Landis and Bolles's work departs significantly from conventional understandings of CRPS-funded work in its engagement, however limited or undeveloped, with the concept of sexual subjectivity among disabled women. By and large, the topic of disabled sexuality has not been treated in any comprehensive or sustained way by historians of psychology or other fields, certainly not before the civil rights and sexual revolutions of the 1960s and early 1970s made disability's inclusion in sponsored research a legitimate goal (Serlin, 2010). Some queer theorists and disability studies scholars argue that the absence of research on disabled sexuality is due in large part to the archival intangibility of the subject matter; what has been left behind, if anything at all, are mere scraps, most of which require extrapolation rather than straightforward interpretation (McRuer & Mollow, 2012; Shildrick, 2009). Women with disabilities, and people with disabilities more generally, have been characteristically excluded from those populations studied explicitly as sexual subjects in their own right and denied—out of fear or ignorance—the opportunity to be seen as agents of their own sexual subjectivities. Add to this the exclusion of women of various identity markers from any kind of sustained archival presence that might account for their sexual subjectivities—poor women, women of color,

<sup>1</sup> All references to case histories taken from files, dated 1934–1937, located in the Carney Landis Collection, deposited at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, Indiana University–Bloomington.

women in institutions, and so forth—and the silence becomes profound.

Katherine Butler Hathaway's autobiography *The Little Locksmith: A Memoir* (1943/2001), published at exactly the same moment as Landis and Bolles's study, provides a superb account of one disabled woman's exploration of eroticism and sexual fulfillment (Hathaway, 1943/2001). Hathaway's narrative is striking for its forthrightness and elegance about the inner life of disabled desire and its manifestation in married life. In the end, however, it is a highly mediated work of literary memoir that has only gained a reputation through its rediscovery by scholars eager to find narrations of disabled women's sexuality outside of the parameters of pathology and pity. Thus, the challenge for historians of psychology is to seek sources that would allow us to speculate on or demonstrate the significance of erotic subjectivities among disabled women as forms of active silence given that very little archival evidence exists that would permit one to excavate and interpret the subjective contours of disabled women's sexuality using conventional methodologies. Using Landis and Bolles's study as an evidentiary anchor to rely on as well as a problematic to be worked through, this article attempts to reconcile the possibilities and limitations of theorizing disabled women's sexuality while also honoring the possibilities and limitations provided by existing archival documents.

Although Landis and Bolles's work on the topic of disabled women's sexuality was unique among studies conducted by U.S. psychologists and sex researchers in the 1930s, in many ways *The Personality and Sexuality of the Physically Handicapped Woman* is a rather conventional quantitative study that reflects the predominant models used to conduct sex research during the era. Kinsey approved of its originality in terms of interview methods; but one could argue that Landis and Bolles were contributing to a cottage industry that had been in full production mode for nearly two decades. In the furtive period following World War I, many CRPS-funded psychiatric and sexological researchers collected and analyzed voluminous quantities of sexual data on both "normal" and "abnormal" American women, including studies such as "Sexual Behavior and Secondary Sexual Hair in Female Patients With Manic Depressive Psychoses" (Gibbs, 1924) and *Factors in the Sex*

*Life of Seven Hundred Psychopathic Women* (Strakosch, 1934).

Among the many books that belong to this genre, Katherine Bement Davis' (1929/1972) study *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women* stands out as methodologically distinct in that Davis asked women to talk about not only their sexual practices but also about their erotic relationships to their own bodies. Davis deliberately broke from conventional forms of data gathering and collected her information through oral histories, which permitted her research subjects to identify their sexual subjectivities without necessarily defining themselves according to clinical or conventional categories of sexual identity. This was a radical break from the seemingly rational strategies used by contemporary researchers to define desire and deviance. Putatively "objective" methods of quantifying gender or sexual deviance (such as measuring, comparing, and cataloging varieties of breasts, clitorises, labia, nipples, and pubic hair) were regularly deployed to generate evidence that seemed to corroborate supposed "truths" about questionable or non-normative bodies (Hegarty, 2007; Rembis, 2004). These truths were supposed to have emerged as part of a general cultural anxiety about women and increasingly linked to their public presence, both illicit and socially sanctioned, outside the home: "As women's sexual desire and behavior became a site of anxiety for society at large and as women served to participate in such gender transgressive behaviors as feminism, professional work, prostitution, and same-sex behavior, [sexologists] . . . began to 'read' female bodies for 'anatomical evidence' of sexual desire and behavior" (Miller, 2000, p. 79).

Sexologists, psychiatrists, and medical professionals during the early 20th century were committed to quantifying the social behaviors and sexual characteristics of women, such as prostitutes and lesbians, who fit into recognizable categories of sexual and gendered deviance. Taxonomies were created through the use of physical examinations to prove that body parts were morphologically correlated with deviance: "A woman's genitalia revealed her confession to the sexologist, her confessor," thus revealing the tensions surrounding tactility in a professional setting where touch exists as both

as an extension of the clinical gaze and a facilitator of social discipline (Miller, 2000, p. 80).

Katherine Bement Davis' decision to foreground self-narration among her informants marked a significant break from the aforementioned investigative and analytical techniques, so common during the era, and established a model far more resonant with the postwar work of Kinsey. One could argue that Davis' foregrounding of interviews provided an important methodological inspiration for Landis and Bolles in much the same way that Landis and Bolles inspired Kinsey. And in its use of oral histories with a wide variety of research subjects, *The Personality and Sexuality of the Physically Handicapped Woman* seems to gesture toward something new. As such, it is tempting to consider it as a missing link that completes a genealogical arc that emerges in Davis' work on female sexuality published in the late 1920s and is fulfilled in Kinsey's work on male and female sexuality published in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Such optimism, however, is largely untenable when one distinguishes Landis and Bolles' methodological innovations from their professional convictions, which were governed by psychosexual presumptions about the effect of disability on female sexual subjectivity. In this sense, Landis and Bolles' study does not provide the kind of innovation that Davis' did in that, rather than enabling subjects to speak about their sexual subjectivities, it is driven by psychologists' prescriptive belief in the constitutional limitations that inhibit and retard the disabled subject's capacity to possess sexual subjectivity in the first place.

In the introduction to their published study, Landis and Bolles make it clear that they did not undertake their study to contribute to an understanding of disabled women's sexuality per se. "These physically handicapped women provide an 'experiment in nature' for the study of psychosexual development. . . . The general hypothesis to be tested is whether or not the psychosexual component in personality development is modified and changed by the presence of the physical handicap; and if so, whether such changes influence the form and nature of personality adjustment in adult life" (Landis & Bolles, 1942, pp. 5–6). In other words, they positioned themselves neither as explicit advocates for disabled people nor as

harsh critics of the individuals or institutions that cared for them. Their work stemmed from the conviction that disabled women constituted the ideal "experiment in nature" in that they were examples of women who could not narrate their own sexual subjectivities and were excluded from the group of self-possessed, non-disabled young women interviewed by researchers like Davis.

According to the era's conventions of psychosexual thinking, disabled women were believed to compose a subset of women whose frustrated sexual subjectivity, if they could even own such a thing, was evidence of the absence of what Freud (1910) called the "sexual moment," an originary or primary insight into one's sexual self that allows one to narrate ostensibly normative heterosexual desires. For Landis and Bolles, disabled women were useful to the fields of psychology and sexology because they were perceived to be voiceless, sexual *tabulae rasa* whose social alienation confirmed psychological and sexological "truths." Which population, after all, would be better suited to demonstrate the effects of social ills on psychosexual development than the disabled, and disabled women in particular?

Furthermore, Landis and Bolles, like other researchers in this era, believed that there was a fundamental relationship between physical disability and neurotic behavior. Following on the work of contemporary psychologists who investigated the neurotic dimensions of disabled women's personalities, Landis and Bolles argued emphatically for a correlation between hyposexuality (that is, a subnormal diminished sex drive or the absence of one altogether) and psychosexual immaturity, attributing some of it to the young women's lack of social engagement but much of it to the perception that disabled women were socially maladjusted and neurotically inclined (Pintner, Eisenson, & Stanton, 1941; Rosenbaum, 1937). Landis and Bolles made explicit links between their research subjects' personalities and their respective sexual histories (or lack thereof), the inner mechanisms of which they believed were fundamental to understanding disabled women's sexuality in relation to existing categories of psychopathology. Such insights were also applied, with equal vigor, to nondisabled women who were regarded for all intents and purposes as physically normal while also identified as

psychologically neurotic. The category of the “neurotic,” charged with late 19th-century conceptions of the assault on the body by the pace of modern life, was typically gendered female because it played directly into the period’s understanding of women’s hysteria as rooted in their essentially vulnerable constitutions (Pfister, 1997). This is a legacy that continued well into the 1990s with the feminization of depression and mood disorders in both clinical and popular discourses (Metzl, 2003).

Some historians of sexuality contend that during the 1920s and early 1930s the lauded goal of making socially and sexually autonomous adults depended on teaching a generation of young men and women how to be extroverted, how to avoid isolation, and connect how to interact with others for the purposes of social solidarity—and one might cynically imagine, for the purposes of consumer identification (Haag, 1993). Normative understandings of personality were mediated through advice literature and popular self-help-oriented texts that were instrumental in developing one’s capacity to tell one’s own story (presuming that one had a story to tell about one’s self) that included a physical history, an account of social obstacles one had overcome, a projection of self-esteem, and a sense of social belonging. Landis and Bolles’s interviews, by contrast, were not designed to promote disabled women’s personality profiles or to champion the centrality of their social or sexual histories to psychological growth. Their interviews were anchored in the objective pursuit of pure research, implying that there was something valuable to be gained from studying women whose social experiences were perceived to be thoroughly excluded from the typical currents of social life. Within the often state-sponsored physical rehabilitation schemes that these women inhabited, the prospect of social rehabilitation, clarified through the techniques of self-possession and self-narration, was simply part of the missionary zeal with which sexologists and psychiatrists plied their trade in the 1930s.

Sometime after World War II, Landis deposited the complete data sets for *The Personality and Sexuality of the Physically Handicapped Woman* in the archives of what was then called the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University. These raw data, when compared with the published versions of Landis and Bolles’s

study, make it evident that the researchers omitted a large number of individual narratives from their final conclusions. Much of their study, on the surface, seems rather unflinching in its portrait of disabled women who are far less intimately familiar with their bodies than one might have imagined young women to be at mid-century point. For example, in one of the tables appending their text presenting data on autoeroticism, Landis and Bolles give the impression that the vast majority of their informants either rejected masturbation outright or practiced it so infrequently that it was, generally speaking, a negligible component of their sexual subjectivities (Landis & Bolles, 1942, p. 134). From such a table, one might be tempted to extrapolate that disabled women in the New York metropolitan area constituted a mostly masturbation-free population.

If one examines Landis and Bolles’s original notes, however, the provocative character of the qualitative data that produced these quantitative conclusions tells a different, more richly nuanced story about sexual subjectivity that Landis and Bolles presented to their readers. For example, when one informant was asked whether she experienced physical pleasure, she stated that of her earliest sexual memories “the only thing I remember is sliding down the banister. I still like it, and started again about five years ago.” She also reported, “I have had experiences where I had my legs crossed, someone plumped themselves into my lap and I had a very nice sensation. [I was] about 15 or 16.” Landis and Bolles rated this informant, a young adult when she was interviewed in the late 1930s, as someone who “never” masturbated, and the details she herself provided were omitted from the final version of their book. Another interview subject, diagnosed with cardiac arrhythmia and living in an institutional setting, described sex play with a female neighbor who “often stayed with me because she loved my home. We were very intimate and she purposely missed trains to be with me. [She] [d]isplayed quite a bit of physical affection . . . I remember we were so free, I’d take a shower and then I bathed her.” Landis and Bolles rated this subject also as someone who did not masturbate, proving that quantitative analysis makes little or no room for cohabitations of the bathtub or shower.

In a slightly more guarded and hesitant interview by a different research subject, another

young woman recalled that, as a young girl, “I enjoyed remaining in the bathroom for long periods of time, feeling the warmth comfort me. I found great pleasure in being nude,” she remembered, “but then I never looked at myself in the mirror.” The hesitation coming from this particular research subject is painful to contemplate, as it suggests a measure of emotional repression and psychic control enforced not by visual or tactile pleasure but by external standards of visual and tactile disidentification generated by others and applied against one’s self. As yet another informant told Landis and Bolles, “There was a time when I did not like anyone to touch me. I could not stand it. The nurses used to do it a great deal when I first came here. I shrank from it. Now this [has] completely changed . . . since coming to the hospital here.”

In noting that Landis and Bolles excluded these insights from their subjects’ self-narrations, I am not suggesting that the researchers acted maliciously, even though what they actually *did* do was to strip their informants of complex sexual subjectivities by removing their messy or rough edges to fit conventional ontologies of sexuality. These young disabled women had sexual narratives, or forms of what might be called sexual *habitus*, that did not correspond to known or recognized psychosexual categories (Bourdieu, 1977).<sup>2</sup> That is, the narratives of sexual subjectivity collected from their interview subjects were far more confounding than anything Landis and Bolles understood how to grapple with, especially given Freudian narratives of social and sexual maturation that so structured psychological and sexological research for the first half of the 20th century, and were therefore discounted and erased (Jones, 2004; Reumann, 2005). Such narratives gathered by Landis and Bolles conveyed subjectivities consummated not through quantifiable acts of conventional (and/or heterosexual) penetrative sex or through recognizable patterns of oral–genital or digital–genital contact. Instead, they seem to be subjectivities consummated through something far less quantifiable. Rather, the sexual *habitus* described here seems to involve various acts of touch: self-touch, being touched through one’s clothes, or touching one’s erogenous zones by rubbing against an object. In the 1930s, such practices of touch may well have been viewed as provoca-

tive Freudian peccadilloes of polymorphous perversity. But they also may have been regarded as *terra incognita* for researchers such as Landis and Bolles.

Touch, as consummated through sensual acts, is a fundamental component of the communicative landscape of sexuality. It is a modality that travels in multiple directions simultaneously, and as such can become in moments of physical interaction a double-edged sword. Yet, our historical understanding of this complex sense medium has been deeply skewed and to a large degree overdetermined by how we understand touch: as an a permeable boundary of sexual danger or inappropriate public conduct; as an epidemiological vector of contagion; as a deliberate marker of economic status or the privileges that accrue to racial or ethnic distinction. The significance of touch as a medium of erotic communication is only ever grasped, if it is grasped at all, within normative modes of human sexuality, which characteristically exclude those with mobility or visual impairments, let alone those who desire touch outside the culturally relativistic models of interaction normalized in modern Western cultures. In the words of one queer theorist who understands the concept of bodily habitus as a form of social discipline, “The work of repetition is not neutral work; it *orients the body in some ways rather than others*” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 57).

It does not seem especially remarkable, then, to conclude that sexological studies conducted during the interwar period were hopelessly complicit with normative expectations of social or sexual behavior. This might explain why the forms of sexual subjectivity exhibited in the self-narrations collected by Landis and Bolles remain largely irretrievable. They contain evidence of sexual behaviors and social practices, such as touch, that cannot be easily analyzed or understood within conventional frameworks of sexual or social *habitus*. Perhaps this is because, at this particular historical juncture, sex researchers such as Landis and Bolles perceived

<sup>2</sup> Here I am adapting sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) famous term for those “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” in which bodies occupy physical and social spaces through particular bodily actions, behaviors, gestures, and habits that come to be expressed through the cultural frameworks in which bodies move and through which bodies are identified.

tactility as inherently dangerous for both the person who touches and the recipient of that person's touch. Even if one acknowledged the dual nature of touch, as a message simultaneously sent and received, the power relationships involved were nonetheless unclear and messy. In such a context, touch was emblematic of the range of questionable sexual subjectivities that must be foreclosed in deference to others.

Some recent scholars have argued, following the groundbreaking work of Silvan Tompkins in the 1960s, that touch is infused with complexities of affect and eroticism that confound simplistic categories of sexual orientation, let alone categories of gender orientation or gender or sexual difference (Sedgwick, 2003). One could even argue that characteristic and intersubjective forms of touch—stroking, petting, rubbing, holding, massaging, fingering, tracing, fisting, inserting, encircling, slapping, grasping, poking, and exploring with the fingertips—are performed more within the complex interactive dimensions of tactility than within established conventions of sexual orientation. Clearly, in the context of disabled women's sexuality, touch must be either avoided at all costs, or it must be institutionalized to reflect and sustain the psychosexual mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality in ways that make the seeming benignity of touch (and that of heterosexuality) appear to be enduring and natural. Among early sexologists such as Landis and Bolles, touch was regarded not as something that the research subject *does* but as something to which the research subject *reacts*. This has remained a constant theme well beyond the 1940s: According to one scholar, sex education manuals produced during the 1980s and 1990s directed at visually impaired adolescents were modeled on heterosexual romantic rhetoric that policed the boundaries of promiscuous tactility (White, 2003).

The critical examination of the evidence of touch, and its inadvertent disavowal, in Landis and Bolles's 1942 study helps to reconstruct the power relations that inhere in histories of disability and sexuality as well as the sensuous and experiential dimensions of human touch within history of psychology more broadly. Touch provides multiple conceptual bases for thinking about how to historicize certain subjective dimensions of experience—such as tasting, smelling, feeling, and affect—that do not entirely

depend on able-bodied status. Touch also poses a challenge to conventional methodological approaches to the sensorium that privilege forms of human communication that subordinate the so-called “lower” senses to the rigors of the rational mind (Corbin, 1994/2005; Levin, 1993; Pallasmaa, 2007). For the young women who served as research subjects for *The Personality and Sexuality of the Physically Handicapped Woman*, the erasure of the complexities of touch from their personal narratives reveals the institutional and social pressures exerted on researchers to uphold the conventions of heterosexual normativity. Their self-narrations of subjective experience and individual history, buried in the archive, highlight the need for scholars of sexuality and disability to think about touch not merely within reactive histories of social domination or sexual discipline but to think about touch as a proactive analytical category and generative historical phenomenon.

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