

# Tattooing: a rhizomatic map of a research theme

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## Introduction

**I**N October 2017, an article published in the Economy section of the Ig news portal, titled “Business: tattoo market goes beyond art and grows during the crisis”, stated:

Brazil still lacks a census on how many people have tattoos in the country. But a study by Sebrae identified that the number of regularized tattoo parlors in the sector grew by 24.1%, an index calculated between January 2016 and 2017. These new businesses would not have opened – or regularized – within this niche in times of crisis if not for a significant demand for this type of service, right?<sup>1</sup>

In August 2020, the website Hypheness ([www.hypeness.com.br](http://www.hypeness.com.br)) published the article “Coronavirus-themed tattoos gain popularity during quarantine”, in which it stated:

By now it has become clear that no one will be the same after the Coronavirus quarantine. But some will come out more different than others and these differences will be skin deep. Literally. The pandemic has inspired tattoo lovers to sketch more designs on their skin, with illustrations wearing masks or making subtle references to this very confusing period endured by humanity.<sup>2</sup>

The impact of tattooing on the contemporary social fabric is widely known, especially as an inscription to adorn one’s body between its internal and external borders. On the one hand, the excerpts from the news articles above are only two of the 72,200,000 results, after a Google search performed on 05/08/2021, with the keyword tattoo. The result is anything but negligible and reveals something about the subjectivation process regarding what we have become, i.e., bodies that increasingly seek adornment through tattoos. On the other hand, business models continue to proliferate within this practice, given that organizations in this field must continually forge innovative and attractive differentials to remain competitive, not to mention spearheading technological advances. These advances relate not only to production of materials, such as needles and inks, but are part of a very broad arc within the tattoo market. Therefore, competitiveness between manufacturers and the synchronous spread of this practice ultimately demands continuous research, innovation, and advances in the area, thus propelling the academic-scientific production about the impact

of tattooing on the social fabric, as well as the different ways for thinking and applying tattoos on people.

As such, the academic-scientific production about the practice of tattooing has attracted the interest of researchers from the most diverse areas of knowledge. Within this wide range of production, this text focuses on articles published in renowned and best reputed journals in the interdisciplinary area in the Qualis system of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES in the Portuguese acronym). Within the context of Brazilian graduate studies, the creation of the interdisciplinary area, in the late 1990s, stems from

[...] the problems that emerge in a contemporary world, with different natures and varying levels of complexity, often resulting from the progress of scientific and technological knowledge. The complex nature of such problems not only requires dialogues between closely related disciplines within the same area of knowledge, but also between disciplines from different areas of knowledge, as well as between disciplinary and non-disciplinary knowledge. (Brazil, 2019, p.8)

As tattooing encompasses both disciplinary and non-disciplinary knowledge, including the jurisdiction for this type of practice, we selected this area as our thematic arc in the editorial outlets. We covered articles published in journals rated A1, A2, and B1, according to the ranking during the four-year period between 2013-2016 when we began our work, to investigate what has been published about tattooing. We only included journals with digital archives. Another relevant observation concerns the reorganization of our work schedule, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020, within the sabbatical period.<sup>3</sup> We had initially reserved this period for an in-person research on journals in Brazilian libraries, but the ongoing public health emergency forced these institutions to suspend their in-person activities.

Our research procedure takes inspiration from Afrânio Mendes Catani, Denice Bárbara Catani, and Gilson Pereira (2001) as well as Júlio Groppa Aquino (2016, 2018), particularly regarding the selection method for journals and articles. Thus, our intention was by no means to exhaust the subject, but rather an attempt to map tattooing according to researchers who published in journals rated A1, A2, or B1 in the interdisciplinary area mentioned above.

### **A rhizomatic map of tattooing: researchers in the interdisciplinary area**

When selecting article that mentioned the term tattoo in their titles, abstracts, or keywords, we compiled a set of 34 articles, distributed across 25 journals. The journals are as follows: *Acta Paulista de Enfermagem*; *Ágora*; *Alea: Estudos Neolatinos* (online); *Anais Brasileiros de Dermatologia*; *Antropolítica: Revista Contemporânea de Antropologia*; *BAR - Brazilian Administration Review*; *Brazilian Journal of Microbiology*; *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva*; *Comunica-*

*ção, Mídia e Consumo; Estudos de Psicologia* (Puccamp<sup>4</sup>); *Estudos Semióticos, Galáxia* (São Paulo); *Horizontes Antropológicos; Linguagem em (Dis)curso; Mana* (Rio de Janeiro – online); *Physis; Projeto História* (Revista do Programa de Estudos Pós-Graduados de História); *Psicologia & Sociedade; Psicologia Clínica; Revista Brasileira de Epidemiologia; Revista Brasileira de Ginecologia e Obstetrícia; Revista de Saúde Pública; Revista Digital do LAV; Saúde e Sociedade; and Tempo Psicanalítico.*

We review these publications below, even if concisely, by considering characteristics such as: the five-year interval, their authors, as well as their institutional origin.

The first published article dates from 1990. Subsequently, three more articles were published between 2001 and 2005. In the following period, between 2006 and 2010, we find 11 articles. From 2011 to 2015, the most productive period, 14 articles were published. The last period, from 2016 to 2020, includes 5 articles.

The survey found 94 authors, of which 4 were recurring: Emerson Diógenes de Medeiros (with two articles), Valdeiney Veloso Gouveia (two), Vitor Sérgio Ferreira (two), and Gabriela DeLuca (two).

Regarding the institutional origin of the authors, we found a set of 36 institutions, across eleven states in the country, mostly concentrated in the South and Southeast regions, especially in the states of São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul. The institutions are as follows: University Center of the National Service for Commercial Education (Senac-SP); Hospital for Tropical Diseases of Goiânia – Unified and Decentralized Health System (SUDS); Irmandade da Santa Casa de Misericórdia of São Paulo; Ministry of Health and Medical Education of Tehran (Iran); Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas (PUC–Campinas); Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP); Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná (PUC-PR); Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUC-RS); Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio); Education Secretariat of the State of São Paulo; Municipal Health Department of São José dos Pinhais (SP); Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB); Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS); University of Strasbourg (France); Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences; University of Lisbon; University of Santa Cruz do Sul (UNISC-RS); University of São Paulo (USP); State University of Santa Catarina (UDESC); State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ); University of South Santa Catarina (Unisul); State University of Campinas (Unicamp); State University of Maringá (UEM); Federal University of Pará (UFPA); Federal University of Health Sciences of Porto Alegre (UFCSPA); Federal University of Goiás (UFG); Federal University of Pelotas (UFPel); Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC); Federal University of Uberlândia (UFU); Federal University of Ceará (UFC); Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UniRio); Federal University of Piauí (UFPI); Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ);

Fluminense Federal University (UFF); Municipal University of São Caetano do Sul (USCS); and Health Surveillance Agency of Jacareí (SP).

Our bibliographic sources comprise two groups of cited authors. The first refers to the fields of medicine and healthcare; the second concerns the arts, anthropology, and sociology. We begin with the first group.

The work of American Myrna L. Armstrong (retired full professor in the School of Nursing at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, located in the city of Marble Falls), was cited 14 times (10 co-authored works and 4 individually authored works). Among the co-authored works, the following stand out: *Motivation for tattoo removal; Motivation for contemporary tattoo removal: a shift in identity; Tattooing in adolescents, more common than you think: The phenomenon and risks; Tattooing: another adolescent risk behavior warranting health education; College students and tattoos: influence of image, identity, family, and friends; Tattooing and body piercing: Body art practices among college students; and Correlations of religious belief and practice with college student's tattoo-related behavior. The articles Career-oriented women with tattoos and Tattooing, body piercing, and permanent cosmetics: a historical and current view of state regulations*, with continuing concerns, were individually authored.

The next production is by Brazilian scholar Sérgio de Andrade Nishioka (retired professor at the Faculty of Medicine, Federal University of Uberlândia) in co-authorship with Canadian scholar Theresa W. Gyorkos (senior scientist at McGill University Health Center – MUHC, Montreal), especially the article *Tattoos as risk factors for transfusion-transmitted diseases, cited 3 times. In turn, Tattooing and risk for transfusion-transmitted diseases: the role of the type, number and design of the tattoos, and the conditions in which they were performed*, published in co-authorship with also Canadian scholars Joseph Lawrence (Clinical Epidemiology, Jewish General Hospital/McGill University), Jean-Paul Collet (University of British Columbia), and John Dick Fleming MacLean, was cited once. Lastly, *Tattoos and transfusion-transmitted disease risk: implications for the screening of blood donors in Brazil*, co-authored with John Dick Fleming MacLean, was cited 1 time.

The second group of authors, mentioned 5 times, includes: journalist and writer Toni Marques, author of the book *Tattooed Brazil and other worlds*; and Célia Maria Antonacci Ramos, professor-researcher at UDESC, particularly the book *Tattoo theories: the tattooed body: an analysis of the tattoo parlor Stoppa Tattoo da Pedra*, and the article *From graffiti to tattoos/from the city to the body: the political imaginary of young people based on visual expressions since the 1970s*. This group also includes the Portuguese sociologist Vitor Sérgio Ferreira with the articles *Marks that demarcate. Tattooing, body piercing, and youth cultures; The trades of marking the body: the professional realization of an identity project; Tattoo, body piercing, and the experience of pain: emotion, ritualization and medicalization; and From the fine arts to the art of tattooing: recent dynamics in the*

*Portuguese tattoo world*; and the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, with the books *Sociology and Anthropology* and *Techniques of the body: manual of ethnography*.

With 4 citations, we find an expanded abstract and three articles by anthropologist Débora Krischke Leitão, one of which co-authored with anthropologist Cornelia Eckert. With the same number of citations, we find the thesis by Andrea Barbosa Osório, titled *The genre of tattooing: continuities and new uses regarding this practice in the city of Rio de Janeiro*, and the article by Andrea Lisset Pérez called *Identity under the skin. Ethnography of the practice of tattooing in contemporary times*.

Finally, cited three times each, we find French anthropologist David Le Breton, especially the book *Signs of identity: tattoos, piercings and other body markings*; Canadian sociologist Michael M. Atkinson, with two citations for the book *Tattooed and Sociogenesis of a Body Art* and one for the article *Pretty in ink: conformity, resistance, and negotiation in women's tattooing*; American anthropologist Margo DeMello and her book *Bodies of inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*; Brazilian dermatologists Tatiana Sacks and Carlos Barcaui with the article *High-energy laser and pulsating light – Induction and treatment of tattoo-related allergic reactions*; and American sociologists Clinton R. Sanders and D. Angus Vail with the book *Customizing the body: the art and culture of tattooing*.

Following this brief overview, we will now address the discursive approaches to the practice of tattooing in contemporaneity and outline the interdisciplinary production published in the aforementioned journals. Our intent is not to adhere to any given argument, but merely to present the discursive surface of these studies. This matters because discourses, whether visual or textual, have concrete effects on people's decisions to submit themselves to this type of practice, ultimately unfolding in a tattooed subjectivation process. Hence the tattooed subjectivities.

### **What have researchers investigated on the practice of tattooing?**

Given the extensive number of articles in the interdisciplinary area, we defined 4 thematic axes based on an analysis of this discursive mass. The first axis concerns the different ways for comprehending the practice of tattooing, whether through the discourses of tattooed individuals and tattoo artists, or documents such as TV series, online social networks for sharing photographs and videos among users, and sometimes through photographic archives of public institutions.

The second thematic axis concerns the perceptions about tattooed people, i.e., prejudices and judgements, the “B-side”, towards this type of bodily inscription. The third axis encompasses studies within the interface between public health, dermatology, and tattooing, which stem from a critical outlook towards this practice. Finally, the last axis concerns studies focused on the new genera-

tion of tattoo artists in the last two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in their differences from previous tattooists.

It is worth noting that, within each thematic axis, we outlined other subsets of articles, especially in the first axis, to emphasize exceptional developments in each analyzed theme.

### **First axis: tattooing as an inscription of the self, as creative and emancipatory power**

In this axis we explore the first set of articles by authors who approach tattooing as an important practice in the construction of one's identity, as well as in the forging of a new subjectivity: that of tattooed people.

Striving to understand the proliferation of tattooed bodies, Rodriguez and Carreteiro (2014), anchored in psycho-sociology, interviewed ten people aged between 20 and 30 years residing in the city of Rio de Janeiro, who volunteered to talk about the meaning of their tattoos. For the authors, while tattoos are a permanent mark on the skin, the reasons that trigger getting one or more tattoos often change and do not remain stationary throughout life.

In our analysis of the research material, we observed that tattoo designs, to a certain extent, conveyed one's biographical characteristics, important meanings, and spoke of one's singular history. Choices were not unfounded, but rather closely related to the moment experienced by the subject when deciding to get the tattoo [...]. The meanings attributed to tattoos vary widely, and not all people are clear about the motivation and what they wish to represent. Nonetheless, we observed rationales espousing the tactile and sensory experience. A search for the corporeal reality of events. One must literally feel it on the skin. (Rodriguez; Carreteiro, 2014, p. 753)

Tattooing as a practice of etching/inscribing lived events on the skin, in which the skin itself becomes a canvas and a collective mnemonic support, is the subject of a study carried out by Cardoso (2018) which explores, based on Peircean semiotics, comics tattoos – a tattoo style with designs that appropriate images of comic book and cartoon characters. Using seven interviews, obtained from tattoo artists specialized in comics tattoos and people who had this type of tattoo, the author explored the potential connections between the meanings attributed to these tattoos and the consumption experiences of the tattooed individuals. According to the author:

When these signs take the form of tattoos, they operate as communication objects that serve not only to preserve individual memory, but also collective memory. The discourses and narratives stemming from these images result not only from memories of lived experiences, but also from memories of the collective consumption of media products: watching cartoons in groups, playing swap cards with collectible cards, exchanging used magazines, etc. (Cardoso, 2018, p.159)

In turn, DeLuca and other authors (2018) explored the potential relationship between tattoo designs and choice of profession. The authors relied on a Deleuzian/Guattarian mapping and interviewed four subjects: a nutritionist, a graphic designer, a stylist, and a food critic. There were two selection criteria for the interviewees: having work-related tattoos and on visible parts of the body. In the authors' conclusions:

[...] among the mapped stories, work-related tattoos enable the body to contemplate what the individual reflects, (d)enounces, expresses, resists, communicates, interacts, connects, conjugates, and continues, within the individual's relationship with work, themselves, and others. [...] Resistance, above all through changes in narrated lives, sculps a character who transits and transforms oneself, communicating concepts and interacting in a given territory. (DeLuca, 2018, p.9-10)

Still on the subject of apprehending tattooing as an inscription of the self, yet now under the baton of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, we find the works of Manso and Caldas (2013) and Macedo and Paravidini (2015). The former departed "from the assumption that the contemporary individual has adopted different forms of writing to find, in the growing plurality of signifiers, the specificity of their desire and a meaning for their *jouissance*" (Manso; Caldas, 2013, p. 110). In addition to rendering tattoos as a form of rewriting, they also inscribe them "as possible and unique ways of entangling the subject to the Other, marking a possible form of establishing a social bond" (p. 110). Among the authors' conclusions, the following excerpt stands out:

We thus find tattoos that cover almost the entire skin surface, as if the entire extension of the skin must be redone. At first glance, this may seem excessive. Certainly, our current times favor consumption towards infinity. In a more detailed analysis, however, these may be thought of as forms of social insertion, a construction of the psychic reality in which the body may insert itself and transit without the risk of becoming lost in the Other *jouissance*. Such was the case of a young man who tattooed his own name on each arm and leg so he would know that was his body. In other words, to possess his own body, recognize it amid a diffuse field in which he does not separate himself from the Other. (Manso; Caldas, 2013, p.123-124)

Macedo and Paravidini (2015) used excerpts from the third season of a TV reality show, *NY Ink*,<sup>5</sup> broadcasted between 2013 and 2014, and first released in the United States in June 2011. The series takes place in a New York tattoo parlor, where people seek to materialize experienced events through tattoos. The conclusion of this study follows a similar trend from the previous work:

[...] tattoos can indeed bring forth indescribable anxieties, yet they can also refer to a form of subjective language when operating in service of a search for identity [...] More interesting, however, was realizing that circumscribing the tattoo solely within the Symbolic and Imaginary realm proved

insufficient to understand the relationship between the act of tattooing oneself and the self. There is an overflow in the act of tattooing oneself, which cannot be translated, as it exists within the logic of unconscious formations and therefore refers us to indescribable jouissance and to the Real. To disregard this dimension of the tattoo would be to ignore its richer dimension. Getting a tattoo is to transcribe on the skin something that escapes interpretation. The tattoo is a marking insofar as it conveys elements inscribed from the field of the Other, but it is also letter insofar as it carries the jouissance of the letter. (Macedo; Paravidini, 2015, p.151)

As we conclude this subset of articles, the works of Braga (2009) and Pérez (2006) were the only to use, respectively, Bakhtinian and Pecheuxian discourse analysis (DA) alongside ethnographic description. By conceiving the practice of tattooing as a discursive genre and a form of writing “rooted in utterances”, Braga (2009, p. 136) argues that the location of each drawing/image on the body reveals different utterances and textualizations, sometimes referring to the circulation of meanings and how they are negotiated within myriad linguistic practices, sometimes referring to the local historical contexts where people live:

The meaning of a tattoo at a given time may not be the same at another moment, even if it belongs to the same person. In this case, it is interesting to consider the effect of meaning as a byproduct of textuality, which will have a direct relationship with the social. From this perspective, the tattoo – language – as a definitive marking (a priori) becomes evident. A tattoo made in adolescence will produce a certain text, and its textuality an utterance, to which certain effects of meaning will be attributed. Consequently, this textuality will have a relationship with a specific audience, enabling an equally specific reading [...] The same will happen with this same tattoo when the subject (the tattooed individual) reaches adulthood. The same text will acquire another textuality, formed from another utterance, and its relations with the social will probably be different. (Braga, 2009, p.152-153)

Pérez (2006), when striving to elaborate “a ‘total’ view of tattooing” (p. 205), attended the *Experience Art Tattoo* parlor between 1992 and 1993, located in the city of Florianópolis. When participating in the parlor’s activities, which included customer service, tattoo sessions, and meetings, the author also conducted nine interviews: one with the employee responsible for sterilizing the materials; five with tattooed people who attend the studio; and, finally, three interviews with studio owners, including the owner of the *Experience Art Tattoo*. According to Pérez,

[...] although impulses operate as motivation in the act of getting a tattoo, there are also significant moments of reflection, such as those triggered by the interaction between tattoo artist and tattooed person, which includes the explanation of “tattoo ideas” and, through these, the preferences and tastes of the inner world of the tattooed individual. This also occurs imme-

diately after the conclusion of the tattoo, when the person recreates their corporeality and verbalizes it through revelations and discoveries about themselves. In this regard, emotional events transform into reflexive acts, or their opposite, when reflexive attitudes precede the act of being tattooed, for example, among those within the category I have labeled “tattooed persons”. These persons have projects of body construction, thought out and planned as part of an experiential, autonomous, and subjective process. Lastly [...] I propose to think about the subjectivity structured through the practice of tattooing as an open, fluid, dynamic process, built between the interface of individual pursuits and interaction processes introduced in the act of being tattooed, between aesthetic enjoyment and the construction of intimate meaning, between the reflective inner being and emotional impulses, as a dialectical and innovative movement. (Perez, 2006, p.202-203)

Unlike the studies reviewed thus far, which conceive tattoos as either an autobiographical inscription or a way of engraving experiences and remarkable life events on the skin, the next set of four articles turned their attention to the connection between youth culture, visual culture, and corporalities in structuring the contemporary urban social fabric.

Stemming from the idea that body inscriptions, particularly piercings and tattoos, are ways to embellish the body, Le Breton (2010), supported by anthropological studies, advocates the thesis that these same inscriptions “represent the individual’s signature on the skin” (p. 25), which, according to him, “serves as a screen on which one projects a dreamed identity, as in the case of tattoos, piercings, or the countless ways of staging appearance that rule our societies” (p. 26). The author concludes his study by stating that if the “skin intensely participates in the separation-individuation process that characterizes the adolescent’s transition” (p. 26), such a moment:

[...] is riddled with doubts, discomfort, as the young person is haunted with the fear of never finding themselves, never finding meaning within the abyss which has abruptly emerged between they and themselves. This body – detached from the teenager is where all evils crystallize. Attacks on the body are above all an attack against the inherent meanings therein [...] The body, especially the skin as its visible dimension, is the most immediate resource for altering the body’s relationship with the world. By redrawing its borders, the individual manipulates the relationships between the self and the other, the inside and the outside, the body and the world, etc. The individual seeks to inscribe themselves in another dimension of the real. (Le Breton, 2010, p.26-27).

When analyzing the Western youth political imaginary from the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ramos (2002) states that if in literate societies “the most important entrepreneur of memory is writing” (p. 116), the skin assumes this role in oral societies through tattooing. The author asserts that manifestations such as graffiti and body modifications, particularly tattoos, are languages “that

reappear in our daily lives, translated and re-signified for our own supports and beliefs” (p.122), in such a way that

[...] the body and hybrid spaces, built upon multicultural diversification, tell the plot of the labyrinth of beliefs, myths, and desires that intersect daily in the urban meshes. They are communication vehicles and binders that belong to a society that believes in the simulacrum, in the fetish, and which seeks to express freedom through the redemocratization of the city and the body, a homogeneous language of interaction. (Ramos, 2002, p.122)

In the wake of contemporary youth culture, Oliveira (2007) explores the subject of tattoos, which make up a large part of São Paulo’s urban corporeality, to reflect upon youth cultures and their connection with deriving cultural products inserted “within the complex network of belongings, sensibilities, symbolic productions and appropriations, disputes, and struggles for hegemony” (p. 64), in which the author concludes that:

The colors and shapes of tattoos, scarifications, and implants, as well as graffiti and stickers, provide insight into important elements of contemporary culture. These comprise metropolitan images that accompany us every day, contaminating advertising, cinematographic, and artistic languages. Through them it becomes possible to understand youth life, its values, and its disputes. (Oliveira, 2007, p.85)

Baliscei, Stein, and Chiang (2015), when associating the proliferation of tattoos to the juxtaposition and coexistence of multiple identities, argue that the tattooed subjectivity “partially owes to excessive contact with information and images. These images, more than ever, are exercising their pedagogical potential” (Baliscei; Stein; Chiang, 2015, p.43). Thus, by emphasizing the pedagogical role of images, the authors consider tattoos as a visual artifact that aims to achieve an ideal of beauty through the betterment of these same images when inscribed on the skin.

Consequently, individuals are ready to maintain and transform their bodies. We consider that in post-modernity, trendiness and the idealization of a perfect, exhibitionist, spectacularized body have added other meanings to the practice of tattooing, which have found in the school an environment-stage to expose the ensuing vanity and need for attention. (Baliscei; Stein; Chiang, 2015, p.44)

### **Second axis: the “b side” of tattooing**

Regarding the second thematic axis, we considered six articles. The first is by Lise et al. (2010) who interviewed 42 people, 31 women, and 11 men, aged between 18 and 65 years. Regarding the discursivity of the tattooed individuals, “the analyzed sample believes that, in general, tattoos serve as way of beautifying and expressing themselves” (p. 636) and, furthermore, “tattoos are a way of disguising some sign that the individual does not appreciate in themselves,

such as the signs of aging” (p. 636). In their conclusions, however, the authors argued

[...] that there is still stigma against tattooing as they also demonstrated a seeming lack of perception or even denial of this reality among themselves. This contradiction was expressed by the tattooed individuals, regarding both objective issues relating to discrimination as well as general issues within the practice of tattoo production – such as location on the body. What we find, therefore, is a difference between the tattooed person’s discourse and their actions within the social context. Our research also found an important change in the meaning of the practice for the tattooed person. (Lise et al., 2010, p.637)

Another two studies also addressed the stigmatization of tattooed bodies, focusing on the behavior/reaction of people who interact with tattooed men and women, despite the reasoning that nowadays there would be no more prejudice against tattoos. Through questionnaires, both studies focused on the attitudes of students at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), in João Pessoa, towards tattooed bodies. The focus of the authors of the first article (Medeiros et al., 2010) consisted in drafting and validating an instrument called “Scale of Attitudes Towards Tattooing (SATT)”, tested in two stages. The first stage included 273 students, evenly distributed in terms of gender and age (average of 25 years); while the second stage encompassed 245 students, most of them male and with an average age of 21 years. Upon ratifying the SATT, Medeiros and collaborators argued that “that this instrument gathers evidence with factorial validity and reliability, which may be used to measure attitudes towards tattoos among university students.” (Medeiros et al., 2010, p.177).

In the second study, the authors stem from the same database as the previous publication (Medeiros et al., 2010), and argue that “humanities students are less averse to the use of tattoos than those from the exact sciences or technological areas. As demonstrated in the theoretical framework, attitudes towards tattoos have often been associated with various deviant behaviors.” (Gouveia et al., 2010, p.482).

The work of Caroni and Grossman (2012), in turn, addressed the perceptions of nursing assistants about the use of tattoos and piercings by hospitalized teenagers. The authors interviewed seven professionals in the city of Rio de Janeiro, aged between 28 and 49 years and with length of service between five months and 25 years, in which they linked

[...] the use of markings, especially by teenagers, to generalized negative preconceived ideas. Furthermore, the number of marking, location on the body, type of design (with different patterns according to gender), and the definitive/transitory nature (differentiating tattoos and piercings) play an important role in the construction of value judgments. (Caroni; Grossman, 2012, p.1068)

Bicca et al. (2013) focused on the use of tattoos by enlistees in the Army Battalion of the city of Pelotas, in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. The researchers interviewed 1,968 enlistees examined by dermatologists, who inspected for the presence or absence of tattoos, as well as size, colors, patterns, and if they had permission from those responsible to get tattoos.

The young age group hereby analyzed, with a high incidence of tattoos and complex drawing patterns (size, color, and number of tattoos) and association with risk behaviors, revealed worrying trends and a behavior change in society, which may involve future complications for removal. From a legal standpoint, many teenagers have their bodies tattooed without the permission of those responsible, which is also worrying. (Bicca et al., 2013, p. 927)

By way of 10 interviews with bodybuilders and regular clients at bodybuilding gyms in the north and south areas of the city of Rio de Janeiro, Sabino and Luz (2006) sought to understand the identitarian logic/rationality that interviewees attribute to their tattoos, comparing it with the logic/rationality of Amerindian perspectivism – an Indigenous concept which, by radicalizing the idea of otherness, establishes a symmetrical encounter between human and inhuman trajectories. Thus, if having a tattoo in bodybuilding gyms means adhering to an identitarian logic, these subjects are above all referred to “hierarchical relations of gender and status” (p. 266), insofar as “difference and asymmetry emerge as evils that need to be fought in the name of a supreme and immutable identity, a pure manifestation of perfection and positivity” (p. 266). Within the logic of Amerindian perspectivism, on the contrary, “respect for difference and asymmetry underpins the entire thought process and the practical organization of life” (p. 266).

Toffoli (2005) concludes our second subset of articles with a study on the meaning of criminal tattoos,<sup>6</sup> also known as prison tattoos, using the photographic collection of tattoos from the São Paulo Prison Museum – affiliated with the State Department of Penitentiary Affairs (SAP in the Portuguese acronym) – which gathers 1800 photographs of prison tattoos between 1920 and 1940, compiled in 28 volumes, and cataloged by psychiatrist José de Moraes Mello. Based on plastic semiotics,<sup>7</sup> the author systematized the meaning of these tattoos to better understand the São Paulo prison context, concluding that

[...] as found in recent examples, contemporary prison and criminal tattoos strive as close as possible to resemble artistic tattoos, in terms of lines, design, and improved composition, as well as the represented motifs. [...] These changes in the signifier reflect an attempt to bring the prison and/or criminal signifier closer to the style of artistic composition. We observed that even classic criminal tattoo designs, such as the five points represented on the arm, no longer had the classic articulation design on the back of the hands. This may indicate a relaxation of formal tattoo codes within the criminal world. [...] As we see it, this interlacing serves two purposes: to confuse the viewer and to expand the prison code beyond its confines. (Toffoli, 2005, p.9-10)

### **Third axis: the interface between public health, dermatology, and tattooing**

With the spread of beautification practices, the quality of biosafety procedures caught attention of the Ministry of Health in the interface between public health, dermatology, and tattooing. This is the subject of our third thematic axis.

Diniz and Matté (2013) turned their attention to professionals such as manicurists, pedicures, tattoo artists, and body piercers<sup>8</sup> in city of Jacareí, state of São Paulo. The authors conducted 40 interviews with these professionals and applied a survey to verify their knowledge and attitudes as well as a questionnaire to assess the establishments' adopted procedures and physical infrastructure. The authors considered that

[...] tattoo and piercing services operate under specific legislation, namely CVS Ordinance 12 (São Paulo, 1999). This legislation, however, has shortcomings as it lacks guidelines on decontamination, cleaning, sterilization, and process control. Furthermore, regulations for beautification services fail to consider a very important dimension: professional training. (Diniz; Matté, 2013, p.757)

Bittencourt et. al. (2013) performed a case study in which they reported skin reactions to certain tattoo inks. Pigments introduced into the dermis may trigger skin reactions with varied histological patterns, including inflammatory and granulomatous reactions, transmission of infections or even neoplasms. The reported case of dermatofibroma (DF) concerns a 24-year-old man who had a black colored tattoo. The rash began two months after the application of black ink on top of an existing tattoo; clinical examination revealed an erythematous nodule, freely movable over a black pigment zone on the right leg, mildly sensitive to pressure.

The link between DF and tattoos is supported by the chronology between tattooing and the development of DF in all cases, as the skin was free of any lesion before tattooing and DF has been reported to occur after trauma. [...] DF should be considered in the clinical differential diagnosis of lesions occurring in tattoos. Further investigations are needed to clarify the nature of this association. (Bittencourt et al., 2013, p.616)

Additionally, other studies have investigated the effect of pigments used in tattoos and the association with different dermatoses. Cruz et. al. (2010) analyzed the reactions to these inks/pigments in two case studies: pruritic lesions observed on the red pigments of a 3-year-old tattoo on the right ankle of a 24-year-old woman; and the presence of nodules in the lilac and red pigments of a one-year-old tattoo on the right leg of a 30-year-old man. The authors observed that

Other dermatoses have been described in tattoos, such as pyogenic infection, verruca vulgaris, and mucormycosis. Many skin diseases show a predi-

lection for tattooed skins and may emerge as primary manifestation, further aggravate, or even represent the Koebner phenomenon, as in lichen planus and psoriasis. None of the described treatments were effective. Improvement has been reported with the use of CO<sub>2</sub>, Nd:YAG, and Q-switched lasers. (Cruz et al., 2010, p.708)

Molina and Romiti (2011) also conducted a case study to address the emergence of numerous umbilicated papules in a black-pigment tattoo on the back of a 22-year-old man, who noticed their appearance four weeks after completion. The authors concluded after an extensive literature review that

[...] while in theory tattoos may accidentally inoculate any type of infection, in practice the most observed are syphilis, tuberculosis, hepatitis, and viral warts. In the case of molluscum contagiosum, a few cases in the literature have reported the spread of these lesions in tattoos. [...] At least two hypotheses have sought explain the pathogenesis of molluscum contagiosum lesions on tattoos: virus transmission through instruments used in the tattooing process or inks contaminated with the virus. Furthermore, some authors have suggested that black pigment may locally decrease humoral and cellular immunity. We reported a case of molluscum contagiosum accidentally inoculated in the tattoo skin area. This relatively frequent viral skin disease should be included in the differential diagnosis of infections in tattoo skin areas. (Molina; Romiti, 2011, p.354)

In the wake of the previous study, Veasey et al. (2020) analyzed the case of two individuals who, after getting a tattoo, saw the emergence of warts in the tattoo pigmentation area. The first case concerns a 39-year-old patient who reported the appearance of warts twelve months after getting a tattoo on the left calf, while the second case concerns a 33-year-old patient with<sup>9</sup> a 12-year-old tattoo on the left upper limb, who reported that he found warts six years ago. The authors, when reviewing the appearance of warts in tattoos, observed

[...] that the risk of warts on black pigment is seven times greater than on colored pigment or on skin without tattoos. Regarding the cases in our study, the first patient without comorbidities had verrucous lesions mostly restricted to such coloring, while the second presented lesions that did not respect the linearity of the pigment and even affected healthy skin. (Veasey et al., 2020, p.80)

Another set of texts focused on the potential association between the occurrence of some viruses and the presence of tattoos on the body.

Martelli et al. (1990) tracked 1,033 first-time blood<sup>10</sup> donors selected from five blood banks, from a total of eight at the time of the study, in the state capital of Goiás; and 201 prisoners among the 299 listed in July 1988, in the only prison in the state. In order to verify the occurrence of hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection, from June 1988 to February 1989, a questionnaire was applied to two groups of individuals to assess the existence of tattoos, prior

blood transfusions, number of sexual partners, homosexual/bisexual experiences, history of other sexually transmitted diseases, use of injectable drugs, use of injectable medicines, acupuncture, and VDRL seropositivity (Venereal Disease Research Laboratory).<sup>11</sup> In their conclusion, the authors stated that “16% of the prisoner population was tattooed, a statistically more frequent characteristic among HIV-positive individuals, in tandem with other studies.” (Martelli et al., 1990, p. 274). That is, “age group, incarceration, and the presence of tattoos were the statistically significant risk factors associated with seropositivity, even after a multivariate analysis controlled for age and incarceration.” (Martelli et al., 1990, p.270).

On the other hand, Bezerra et. al. (2007) focused on the prevalence of hepatitis C virus (HCV) and its genotypes in patients at a reference hospital in the state of Ceará. A total of 119 anti-HCV seropositive patients answered questionnaires about risk factors related to HCV infection, before being subsequently tested for HCV using polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and RFLP (Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism) genotyping. “Of the 119 patients, 95 showed positive results in the qualitative HCV test. History of surgery was the most reported risk factor, followed by use of drugs, having tattoos, undergoing hemodialysis and occupational exposure.” (Bezerra et al., 2007, p.660).

Rodrigues Neto et al. (2012) also investigated the prevalence of Viral Hepatitis C in individuals who use public health services in the city of São José dos Pinhais, state of Paraná, through an epidemiological survey with a stratified and probabilistic sample of 5,017 volunteers, submitted to a questionnaire and rapid anti-HCV test. In their conclusions, the authors emphasized that “the study found a low prevalence of hepatitis C in the analyzed sample, with a predominance of males; single, separated, or widowed men; with a history of previous symptoms; with a history of blood transfusion; presence of tattoos; and drug use. (Rodrigues Neto et al., 2012, p. 363).

Jafari et al. (2020), based on the assumption that tattooing is a risk factor for contracting bloodborne diseases, analyzed the prevalence of tattoos throughout life, during incarceration, and associated factors among Iranian prisoners. The authors selected the data from hepatitis B and C screening exams, conducted in prisons from 2015 to 2016, from a random sample among 12,800 prisoners, distributed across 55 prisons in 19 provinces in Iran.

The prevalence of tattoos among prisoners throughout life and during incarceration was significantly high, particularly in high-risk groups such as prisoners who make use of injectable narcotics and sexually active individuals. Given the role of tattooing, drug use, and extramarital sex in bloodborne diseases, we recommend harm reduction programs to decrease these high-risk behaviors in prisons. (Jafari, 2020, p.296)

Finally, in an analysis of genital hygiene practices, Giraldo et al. described the habits of 346 female students from a public university in Campinas, (from

the biological, exact, and human sciences) who volunteered to answer a questionnaire with 42 questions concerning the use of tattoos, body piercings, underwear, waxing, and sexual practices. The authors concluded that:

Interestingly, even though our study focuses on a young population at a time when tattooing and piercings have become common practices in Western countries, we found a number close to zero for both adornments. The low incidence of these adornments in female university students may be related to their higher level of education and consequently greater awareness of the risks associated with the use of these adornments. It is possible that women with a lower educational have a higher incidence of these adornments. [...] We also concluded that young women enrolled in a Brazilian public university have some inadequate genital healthcare habits. Although they do not have genital piercings or tattoos, they reported pain during intercourse and vaginal discharge after sex in a large number of cases. (Giraldó, 2013, p.405-406)

#### **Fourth axis: a new generation of tattoo artists**

The fourth and last thematic axis concerns studies about the new generation of tattoo artists in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially regarding their differences from the tattooists who preceded them.

From the opposition between the old figure of the tattooist, seen as a skin craftsman, and the new figure regarded as a tattoo artist, Ferreira (2014) explored the participation of a new generation within the contemporary tattoo job market, which the author argues has led to considerable social changes for this practice. To this end, the author interviewed twenty male and female tattooists, whose age ranged from 22 to 41 years, with different educational levels, in different studios across Lisbon and surrounding areas.

With the participation of an increasing larger number of agents originating from other artistic environments, we observe an intense process of emerging creativities in tattooing through the integration of new processes, techniques, methodologies, values, and work demands stemming from other visual arts worlds. [...] The value of their activity and the subsequent graphic results no longer emerge from the mechanical replication of habitual production processes, technical skills, styles, gestures, and materials generationally transmitted in the master-apprentice relationship through conventions in the world of tattooing. Where we once found the passive and mechanical reproduction of tradition, we now often find an attitude towards active regeneration and refoundation. Without denying the importance of the founding knowledge and know-how, which established the tradition of this social world, the new generation of tattoo artists intertwine this knowledge with learnings from their own artistic backgrounds, renegotiating conventions of the tattoo world (historical, stylistic, technical, and even material), combining them with knowledge and conventions imported from other art worlds. (Ferreira, 2014, p.103-104)

Interested in the historical development of the tattoo artist career in Brazil, in which conceptual historicization has been a nodal point, DeLuca and Oliveira (2016) adopted ethnographic strategies with a 34-year-old tattoo artist living and working in his own tattoo parlor, in the city of Porto Alegre (state of Rio Grande do Sul). Throughout a 22-month period starting in 2013, the authors conducted interviews and informal conversations. Ten further interviews were conducted with other people somehow related to him and/or the local tattoo industry. As the authors concluded,

[...] deviant fields may serve as a methodological strategy to contribute, theoretically, to career studies and, in practice, to disseminate their peculiarities and organizations, even providing info for public policies [...]. Even though we considered tattooists as deviant, we understand that this field is complex enough to contemplate other analytical perspectives, such as body-related careers [...] and creative work. (DeLuca; Oliveira, 2016, p.14)

### **Final considerations**

Without losing sight of the general objective of this study, namely, to devise a map of the specialized production within the interdisciplinary field of tattooing, we strove not to take sides in favor of any authors. After all, our purpose was not to interpret the articles in our analytical corpus, but to present the discursive surface congregating the pieces of this mosaic. Hence, our description was more akin to kaleidoscope than a puzzle. With that in mind, we make three observations in our conclusions.

The studies within the first thematic axis, when advocating for the importance of studying/researching the practice of tattooing – whose spread in the contemporary urban social fabric would justify the pressing need to understand the reasons why individuals increasingly desire to submit themselves to this practice, regardless of age, gender, race and/or social class – tend to celebrate the positive attitude behind the practice of tattooing as an assertion of an autobiographical epidermal record. One could ask, however, if such praise does not stem from a “psychologization of society” as argued by Almeida (2001) in his study “Nothing beyond the epidermis: the romantic performance of tattooing”. One must also remember that demand is at an all-time high for Psychology to evaluate, and often praise, vital contemporary problems, among which the practice of tattooing.

Our second observation concerns the opposition between the first and second axis: the different ways of approaching tattooing. Even though both perspectives engage in different discursive regularities, they encompass discourses that either celebrate or condemn the practice of tattooing. Thus, our option to avoid adherence to any given regularity stems from our analytical intent to map the discourses in the aforementioned journals. To put it another way, “when leaving a bottle, each person finds themselves trapped in another bottle. Freedom is not found outside the bottles, but in the attempts to free ourselves from them”

(Veiga-Neto, 1996, p. 308). By mapping this discursive surface, our main goal was to provide a general overview of the practice of tattooing in contemporary times, enabling a reflection on our ways of life in present times, articulating these different axes and the subsequent unfoldings within this practice.

Our third and final observation refers to the fourth axis, in which a new generation of tattoo artists have sought to supplement their background training by enrolling themselves in more general art courses. That is, the mere knowledge of tattoo techniques is no longer sufficient. The tattoo professional must now have a multidisciplinary approach, contemplating other kinds of knowledge, whether from a legal standpoint concerning the regulation of tattoos, from a public health standpoint, or from the point of view of knowledge of human anatomy as well as different artistic techniques, which enables the professional to design different and unique ways of marking the skin. Furthermore, insofar as a wide variety of people undergo the practice of tattooing the demands and requirements have also diversified.

Thus, if the tattoo aesthetics has now been incorporated by clothing brands, advertising panels from the Brazilian Ministry of Health (MS), sunscreens, hand moisturizers, short and feature films, Playboy magazine covers, among many other possible examples, that is because it is saying something about our time. It attests to what we are becoming. It presents the psycho-sphere of spatiality, temporality, and corporeality of an era. Therefore, discourses are synchronous to the production of spatialities, temporalities, and corporalities, connected by the production of desires in a planetary environment traversed by the flow of texts and images (above all in movement). Migrant images. There is no longer a monopoly on the force and velocity in the flow of images, now anchored in the bodies themselves. That is not to say we live in a better or worse time than our ancestors, but rather that we are forging other ways of life, other possibilities for this multifaceted, kaleidoscopic period.

## Notes

- 1 Available at: <<https://diariomsnews.com.br/geral/negocios-mercado-de-tatuagem-vai-alem-da-arte-e-cresce-durante-a-crise/>>. Accessed on May 10, 2021.
- 2 Available at: <<https://www.hypeness.com.br/2020/08/tatuagens-com-tematica-coronavirus-ganham-popularidade-na-quarentena/>>. Accessed on May 10, 2021.
- 3 Project approved for the Sabbatical Year Program of the Institute for Advanced Studies (IEA) at the University of São Paulo, year 2020, titled “Tattooing in Brazil: trajectories and trends”.
- 4 Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas.
- 5 Broadcasted by the American channel Travel and Living Channel (TLC), owned by the media conglomerate Discovery Inc.
- 6 Toffoli (2005) distinguishes between criminal tattooing and prison tattooing.

The first refers to a style which “has the primary function of including or excluding a particular individual from a group, through a mark tattooed on the body [...]. The representation of criminal symbols follows a rigid order, modified according to the group’s internal conventions, which envisions a hierarchical ascription and reveals a rigid code guided not by written law, but by honor” (p. 3). The second, on the other hand, “constitutes a closed code, i.e., made to be interpreted by insiders within the criminal universe. The more exposed where the tattoo is on the body, the more economical its graphic elements as well as more enigmatic” (p. 4).

- 7 Refers to the “desire to praise the creative power of photographers and designers – even of editors and poets – always free, ultimately, to enrich or subvert the figurative or, often, the rhetorical material proposed or imposed upon them” (Floch, 1987, p. 50).
- 8 Professional responsible for applying body piercings. For more information see: <<https://pt.wikihow.com/Se-Tornar-um-Body-Piercer>>. Accessed on: April 12, 2021.
- 9 “Warts are common skin disorders caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), a universally distributed DNA virus” (Veasey et al., 2020, p. 80).
- 10 “All donations were voluntary and without financial compensation. We considered to be first-time blood donors those individuals who presented themselves as blood donation candidates for the first time. Regular donors were excluded from the study in order to avoid distortions in the prevalence estimate, since these individuals had previously been submitted to serological exams, constituting, therefore, a pre-selected sample. Military personnel or individuals referred by companies were also excluded from the study, due to the difficulty of assessing the spontaneity of these donations” (Martelli et al., 1990, p. 271).
- 11 Test used to identify patients with syphilis.

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**ABSTRACT** – To understand the dispersed interdisciplinary production on the topic of tattoos, we conducted a survey of the language of 35 articles published in Brazilian

interdisciplinary journals from 1990 to 2020. From these articles, we developed four axes of analysis: tattoo as an inscription of the self, a creative and emancipatory power; the “B” side of tattoo; the interface between public health, dermatology and tattoo; and, lastly, the new generation of tattoo artists. We then present some considerations that apprehending tattoo as a discursive practice opens the doors of a labyrinth, whose exits do not exist and do not assure us a more liberated and emancipated contemporary subjectivity.

**KEYWORDS:** Tattooing, State of the art, Journals, Interdisciplinary.

**RESUMO** – A fim de compreender a dispersa produção da área interdisciplinar sobre a temática da tatuagem, realizamos um levantamento dos discursos de 35 artigos publicados em periódicos brasileiros da área interdisciplinar, no período compreendido entre 1990 e 2020. A partir desses artigos, elaboramos quatro eixos de análise: a tatuagem como inscrição do eu, potência criativa e emancipatória; o lado “b” da tatuagem; a interface entre saúde pública, dermatologia e tatuagem; e, por fim, a nova geração de tatuadores. Por fim, apresentamos algumas considerações no sentido de que, apreender a tatuagem como prática discursiva, abre as portas de um labirinto, cujas saídas inexistem e tampouco nos asseguram uma subjetividade contemporânea mais liberta e emancipada.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Tatuagem, Estado da arte, Periódicos, Interdisciplinar.

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