

# The Skin as a Space of Memory Inscription: Reflections on Skin Tags and their Role as Elements of Signification in the Constitution of the Subject

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to discuss the contribution and role that skin tags play as elements of signification (objects?) for the constitution of the subject. For this purpose, we make use of the ideas of Foucault, Fonseca-Silva, and Sant'Anna, in order to analyze the participation of skin tags (scars and dermatoses of chronic and long-term course, congenital diseases) in the constitution of the subject.*

**Keywords:** Memory. Self-care. Beauty

## 1. Introduction

This study is linked to a research developed in the Doctoral Program in Memory: Language and Society of the State University of Southwestern Bahia whose approach is dedicated to the study of how tags on the human skin contribute to the constitution of the subject. The study was carried out through the analysis of the discourses obtained from interviews conducted with patients with chronic and long-term dermatoses, which stand out for presenting extensive skin tags located in areas of the body difficult to camouflage. Thus, we seek to verify which discourses about the impressions and relationships with such tags are materialized in the interviewees' statements. Herein, based on the aforementioned authors, we discuss some aspects related to this theme: the skin as a surface for the inscription of memories.

The skin - organ present in the first line of defense of the human body - imposes itself as the first obstacle to be overcome in the fight against pathogenic organisms, while acting in the conduction and perception of the senses. It permeates the first human contact with the world at birth. A multifunctional biological tissue, whose physiology in full operation leads and directs, in the richness of its complexity, the beauty of the subtle texture of existence, of experiences, of perception, promoting and enabling multifaceted experiences that incorporate meanings for the constitution of the subjects.

We investigate, in this study on skin tags and their role in the constitution of the subject, how the writings from the outside inscribe senses on the inside, and how these senses, by their turn - although carefully housed in the recesses of the soul, in the personal and secret intimate world, protected and hidden in the basement - loudly shout, show themselves and determine who we are and where we are going. Tags that recall and announce a pain, a wound, and exhibit the memory of the unpleasantness that accompanies us.

## 2. The Normal Skin

The skin or cutis is the outer covering of the human organism. Essential for life, it isolates the organic components from the outside. It consists essentially of three layers: an outermost layer - the epidermis; an intermediate layer - the dermis or corium; and a deeper subcutaneous cellular tissue - the hypodermis. The skin surface also presents, according to the body segments, variations, and articular and muscular folds; pilosebaceous units and sweat glands; the latter two also responsible for odor changes, according to the regional distribution. Skin color is determined by the combination of several factors, some of genetic-ethnic nature, such as the amount of pigment - melanin; others, individual, regional and even sexual, such as the thickness of its various components and the blood content of its vessels. The skin corresponds to more than 15% of the weight of a human body and presents great variations along its length, sometimes being more flexible and elastic, sometimes being more rigid. (Sampaio, 2007, p.1).

As a continuous and flexible garment, it envelops us completely. From an embryological perspective, the skin is the oldest of our organs, our first means of communication and contact with the world, our most efficient protector (Montagu, 1988, p.21). In the evolution of the senses, touch was undoubtedly the first to emerge. Touch is the origin of our eyes, ears, nose and mouth. Perhaps, after the brain, skin is the most important of all our systems and organs.

In its condition of primordality and great extent, the skin - along with its appendages - allows the body to grasp what its environment is. It is through the skin and its adnexa that we perceive the external world and nourish our internal world. The face and hand as sense organs not only convey information about the environment to the brain but also transmit information about the internal nervous system to the environment. In addition, it exerts a strong sexual appeal,

thus participating, albeit indirectly, in the processes of perpetuation of the species.

Throughout life, this prodigious tissue, the skin, is in a state of constant renewal through the physiological activity of the cells of its basal layer. Skin cells fall off at a rate of over one million per hour. Every twenty-eight days, on average, we renew our entire epithelial lining.

The barrier function inherent to healthy skin delimits what one lets in or out of one's body, as well as what one wants to get out of oneself. Changes in the skin may reveal fear and anxiety, impatience and intolerance; low self-esteem, feelings of rejection and neediness.

Like a double-sided mirror, the skin responds to what it sees - the outside - and what it feels - the inside. Considering the richness of meanings expressed and apprehended by the skin, we can also theorize about the existence of "echoes" that reverberate on the "inscriptions", on the signs found there, making an allusion to the sound that we can "hear", which the skin give us, at the simple touch, at the subtlety of the smells, at the attentive look.

### 3. The Tagged Skin

Considering disease as a state of imbalance of organic functions, we are facing a diseased skin when, for reasons of various orders and nature, it is unable to fulfill its essential functions in maintaining the balance and health of the human body, and therefore its integrity. From this perspective, skin diseases reflect aspects beyond the probable risks and threats to life itself. Aspects related to medical care, especially to psycho-social problems, since the manifestation of these diseases is often explicit. Due to the extension of this organ, much of the skin is exposed, cruelly accessible to the eyes of others, such as the regions of the face, scalp, forearms, and hands.

There are several conditions that can compromise the full integrity of skin functions, such as infectious processes, whether viral, fungal or bacterial. In addition, inflammatory disorders resulting from allergic processes or chemical, physical and neoplastic aggression may also play a major role in skin diseases.

The discomfort caused by the appearance of skin lesions - such as scars and dermatological lesions resulting from chronic and long-term inflammatory processes - prevent patients from exercising outdoors, doing activities such as swimming and sports, and also leisure practices typical of social life, because of the shame of exposing their disease-affected bodies to the eyes of the social observer. This exposure brings unpleasant feelings comparable to those provided by other intensely painful conditions, as reported by some patients when seeing the dermatologist. Such patients report that similar situations also occur at work and at school. People's reaction is clearly perceived in the face of the spontaneous, and often automatic, withdrawal attitudes that come from their colleagues because of the imagined possibilities of physical contact between them.

Thus, the bearers of skin tags seek, at all times and in all circumstances, diverse ways to conceal their real condition, in an attempt to preserve themselves from prying eyes, inappropriate questions, joking comments, and unpleasant nicknames - often derogatory - coming from individuals belonging to their social groups. We are talking about situations where, in most cases, there is no manifestation of intense painful or itchy symptoms, but which, by their very characteristics, have a strong appeal to the pragmatic criteria evoked in the social collective memory.

### 4. Conditions of Possibility

In Foucault we find:

*"The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (FOUCAULT, 1977, p. 148).*

Foucault introduces us to the body as symbolic materiality of meaning, inserted in a system of disciplinary power that takes hold of the body of individuals, making them docile and useful. "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (FOUCAULT, 1995, 136).

Such power is founded on the principle of discipline. This principle is understood by Foucault as a domain of objects; a set of methods and propositions; rules considered valid for the construction of new utterances, which exert control over the production of discourses, imposing on them boundaries delimited by the possibilities of permanent re-updating of the rules in force during the course of the experience of human becoming in several societies.

*"The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour" (FOUCAULT, 1995, p. 137/138).*

The paradox of opposites: the tag that hurts is the same that drives and invigorates a subject who carries it, in their existence, all their arsenal of doubts and uncertainties, of courage and strength, of fear and pain, in a composition of gestures and discourses that weave an existence. The body as a hermeneutic instrument in the search for an understanding of life, of existing, of being in the world. "Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience) (FOUCAULT, 1995, p. 138)

The care of the body stands out as an important practice, among the practices of the self, through which the subjects

constitute themselves as moral subjects (FONSECA-SILVA, 2007, p.204). Throughout history, Foucault (1986) shows us how self-care practices were imposed at different times. Galeno considers that it is up to medicine, in addition to the care of the body, to pay attention to the care of the soul, since for him "the ills of the body and those of the soul can communicate with one another and exchange their distresses" (FOUCAULT, 1986, p. 56).

*"The practice of the self implies that one should form the image of oneself not simply as an imperfect, ignorant individual who requires correction, training, and instruction, but as one who suffers from certain ills and who needs to have them treated, either by oneself or by someone who has the necessary competence" (FOUCAULT, 1986, p. 57).*

"The insidious thing about the diseases of the soul is that they pass unnoticed, or even that one can mistake them for virtues (anger for courage, amorous passion for friendship, envy for emulation, cowardice for prudence)" (FOUCAULT, 1986, p. 58). This same author shows us that since the Renaissance, the cult of beauty has become an obligation of upper-class women.

*"In the second half of the twentieth century, a new order of power-knowledge over the body was established, a space for the inscription of events in which beauty and health are associated. In that order, beauty ceases to be a gift and becomes a construction" (FONSECA-SILVA, 2007, p.204).*

The primacy of the development of science and technology resources emerges, traversing the discourses of society in its practices of body worship, seeking ideals of beauty and health, so valued by the widely disseminated discourses in the media.

*"Progress in the surgical and cosmetic fields has reinforced the idea that with them anyone can adapt to the contemporary world, improve the relationships with themselves and others, and escape failure, abandonment and loneliness" (SANT'ANNA, 2014, p. 175).*

From this perspective, it is now open to the "tagged" subject the radiant possibility of removing the tags, those that "hurt so much"!

The great beauty of the bodies (always models?) is now within reach. In this century where knowledge and technological progress brought the possibility of transforming appearances, SANT'ANNA (2014, p.189) points out that the physical aspect became the main proof of human subjectivity - "that is, the body has become something as important, complex and sensitive as the soul had once been."

The possibility of achieving constructed beauty is the solution to the dissatisfaction problem with one's own body. It's a happy dream come true. The pursuit of an ideal of beauty that once found insurmountable barriers and can now be overcome, despite the possibilities of failure (due to the inherent risks in the application of the techniques) and the

high costs to reach them, which make it impossible for all of those who want to do it. Therefore, paradoxically, they also present themselves as agents of frustration.

Beautifying resources become limitless as they impose themselves in the pursuit of happiness, as an investment in the care of the self.

*"Mingled with the millennial dream of rejuvenation, body beautification has become a proof of life and self-love — not just a duty but a well-deserved pleasure; not simply a trick in order to be loved, but a technique to feel adequate, clean and decent" (SANT'ANNA, 2014, P.16).*

The body carries within itself the density of memories, of experiences lived throughout a lifetime. However, in contemporary times, the exaggerated valuation of physical appearance reveals dreams and fears, denies the interior, the intimate. Only the exterior prevails. The exterior to which the other has access. The exterior that shows the other, only part of what I am, which, by its turn - since it is the only thing the other sees - represents the self as a whole...

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