

Bad Bastards?: Tattooing, Health, and Regulation in Twentieth-Century Vancouver

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Article abstract

Using local newspapers and archival documents from the City of Vancouver Archives, this article investigates how state actors—namely the city of Vancouver's Health Department—attempted to regulate professional tattooing in Vancouver. Simultaneously, I consider how tattooists understood health and sanitation relative to tattooing and, in the process, responded to and challenged regulation. In doing so, I investigate the complex relationship between Vancouver's professional tattooists and state actors, focusing on the methods used to regulate tattooing. I argue that although unfounded or inadequately established health concerns typically concealed efforts to control tattooing, tattooists worked within and against regulation to maintain a presence in Vancouver.

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Using local newspapers and archival documents from the City of Vancouver Archives, this article investigates how state actors—namely the city of Vancouver’s Health Department—attempted to regulate professional tattooing in Vancouver. Simultaneously, I consider how tattooists understood health and sanitation relative to tattooing and, in the process, responded to and challenged regulation. In doing so, I investigate the complex relationship between Vancouver’s professional tattooists and state actors, focusing on the methods used to regulate tattooing. I argue that although unfounded or inadequately established health concerns typically concealed efforts to control tattooing, tattooists worked within and against regulation to maintain a presence in Vancouver.

À partir des journaux locaux et de documents d’archives des Archives de la Ville de Vancouver, cet article examine comment les intervenants du Département de la santé publique de la Ville de Vancouver ont tenté de réglementer le tatouage professionnel dans leur ville. Nous considérons également comment les tatoueurs ont compris les implications hygiéniques et de santé de leur pratique, et comment ils ont réagi à la nouvelle réglementation. Ainsi, en se concentrant sur les méthodes employées pour réglementer le tatouage, nous examinons la relation complexe des tatoueurs professionnels de la ville de Vancouver avec ses instances municipales. Nous avançons que même si les préoccupations sanitaires, qu’elles soient sans fondement ou insuffisamment démontrées, ont servi à masquer les intentions de contrôler le tatouage, les tatoueurs ont travaillé simultanément avec et contre cette réglementation afin de maintenir leur présence dans la ville.

Introduction

In the introduction to her canonical text *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Jane Jacobs claimed that modernist approaches to urban planning did not have their intended effect. Jacobs contended that efforts to rejuvenate city centres often led to erosion of the areas immediately beyond them. These zones “acquired an incongruous rim of ratty tattoo

parlours and second-hand-clothing stores, or else just nondescript, dispirited decay”—an ironic result of a process aimed at avoiding urban deterioration.¹ Jacobs’s perception of tattoo shops is my primary concern, since her statement is characteristic of how tattooing has often been understood, written about, and discussed by scholars, media, and general public. By positioning tattoo parlours as signifiers of an urban space’s degradation and decline, Jacobs simplified how tattoo shops, their proprietors, customers, and the profession itself contributed to and were affected by a city’s informal social and cultural milieus and formal municipal regulation. Accordingly, this article examines tattooing in Vancouver through the relationship between professional tattooists and state actors that sought to control tattooing through their positions at the city of Vancouver.

Efforts to curtail tattooing came principally from the Vancouver Health Department, an agency that emerged alongside Vancouver’s growth as a city in the late nineteenth century.² From the turn of the twentieth century onward, British Columbia became, according to John McClaren, Robert Menzies, and Dorothy Chunn, “a social laboratory where authorities ... strove to bring its citizenry under political, legal, moral, and self-control” through new forms of state regulation.³ Much of this intervention took place in Vancouver, the province’s pre-eminent urban centre. Regulation encompassed a spectrum of controls on businesses and activities; most important, for this study, is that the state frequently dictated how citizens could (or could not) engage with their own bodies and, often, the bodies of others. By regulating what people consumed, their sexual habits, and even restroom use, authorities impeded personal pleasure and recreation, professional opportunity and income, self-expression, and, quite simply, normal bodily function and desire.⁴ My analysis of tattooing’s regulation contributes to the literature on regulation in British Columbia, and Vancouver more specifically, by revealing how public health concerns were utilized against tattooists who, for a fee, permanently altered the bodies of interested citizens. For tattooers, tattooing was work. The regulation of tattooing was therefore the regulation of business.

Yet, as a result of the practice's corporal dimensions, regulation fell predominantly under the purview of the Vancouver Health Department.

Because tattooing is an occupation centred on the body, its regulation has similarities with efforts to regulate sex work in Vancouver. Becki Ross's research on Vancouver's sex industry has revealed techniques to stymie striptease dancing by police, politicians, and moral reform groups during the 1960s and 1970s. While police ticketed and even arrested dancers for their conduct, authorities also regulated the locations where dancers worked. Strip clubs were closed down, subjected to police harassment and raids, and had their liquor licences denied.⁵ Local government and police also regulated prostitution. According to Greg Marquis, during the first three decades of the twentieth century Vancouver tolerated prostitution. "Many police chiefs and detectives saw brothels, if properly regulated, as necessary and desirable, particularly when faced with the alternatives of public solicitation and prostitutes working out of rooming-houses, hotels, and apartments."⁶ Michaela Freund has demonstrated that during the late 1930s to mid-1940s the lax attitude toward the practice had subsided, and "prostitution was considered to be both an individual sin and a social problem."⁷ The prostitute's body, like a tattooed body, became a point of comparison for notions of respectability and decency. As such, "the body of the prostitute raised questions of control and opportunity."⁸

Acknowledging the marked difference between stripping and prostitution, realms of sex work nevertheless provide a comparative example by which to consider the regulation of tattooing in Vancouver. In his book on the history of prostitution in Vancouver, Daniel Francis pointed out that although sex workers never lacked customers, they needed places to conduct business. While authorities concentrated on street prostitutes, off-street prostitution increased. In the process, the government adjusted laws to criminalize and disrupt their work.⁹ The sex worker on the street corner was a highly visible symbol whose interpretation was dependent upon one's own—often negative—preconceptions. Yet, physically speaking, prostitution and tattooing affect only the service provider and customer. What this suggests is that it was not striptease dancing, prostitution, or tattooing per se that were the problem, but their visibility to the public eye.

Similar to sex workers tattooists needed a clientele. As Jane Jacobs's abovementioned statement acknowledges, tattoo businesses were often situated in transitional neighbourhoods. Regularly locating themselves in such areas, tattoo shops and their proprietors physically connected dissimilar neighbourhoods and facilitated contact between equally disparate customers. In Vancouver this included tattoo shops on major traffic arteries, including Robson Street, Hastings Street East, and Davie Street. During the second half of the twentieth century, Robson Street functioned as a commercial business district. Hastings Street East was a skid row long known for decrepit rooming houses and drug use, and Davie Street was a known

sex worker stroll.¹⁰ To earn a steady income, professional tattooists located themselves on such streets where they benefitted from population density, social contact, affordable rent, and a wide array of potential customers. This interaction between tattooing and Vancouver's citizens was a source of tension, contributing to perceptions that tattooing was dangerous and, by extension, so were tattooists. Civic officials were concerned about the spread of illness and infection to customers, which in turn motivated efforts to regulate tattooing in the city. To address tattooing through their professional expertise, health authorities in Vancouver utilized limited, localized, but nevertheless powerful measures, including inspection, testing, and licensing, to regulate tattooing businesses in the city.

To investigate the relationship between tattooing, public health, and regulation in Vancouver, I draw on archival material at the City of Vancouver Archives, including medical health officer's subject files, Health Department Legislated Program Area files, Health Department annual reports, health inspection records, and city council minutes. Additionally, I utilize local newspaper articles, primarily from the *Vancouver Daily World*, *Vancouver Daily Province*, and *Vancouver Sun*. Chronologically I contextualize my analysis within a longer trajectory of apprehensions about tattooing in Vancouver during the first half of the twentieth century. Then I consider local state regulatory processes that began in the early 1970s. I explore how business inspection, concerns about hepatitis transmission, and licensing were used as regulatory mechanisms by the Health Department, which culminated in an attempt to prevent new tattoo shops from opening altogether. This article is therefore concerned with the methods that officials used to regulate tattooing and the impact those measures had on Vancouver's tattooists and their businesses. Although efforts to regulate tattooing were typically hidden under the guise of unfounded or inadequately established public health concerns, tattooists worked within and against such regulatory practices to maintain the presence of their profession in Vancouver.

Tattooing and Public Health

On 4 February 1921 the *Vancouver Daily World* quipped that despite being "under the impression that tattooing had gone out of fashion," there was a sign on Cordova Street announcing, "Tattooing Done Privately INSIDE."¹¹ Although no further information was provided about this sign's location or the business it advertised, the *Daily World's* remark provides an entry point into the analysis of regulation of professional tattooing in Vancouver. The sign referenced by the *Daily World* emphasizes the connection between tattooing and attitudes toward the practice. This follows David Henkin's claim that urban texts, such as signage, reflect "changing patterns of residence, work, commerce, education, social control, and visual representation."¹² The sign's *public* placement in a storefront window on Cordova Street in central Vancouver and its advertising of *private* tattooing highlights a tension in Western tattooing: the perceived social stigma and frequent reality of the normalization of tattooing. That this unnamed tattooist advertised private tattooing in the otherwise

public domain of urban Vancouver suggests that he or she believed—or that potential customers believed—there was something that needed for it to be hidden from passersby.

From the perspective of the *Vancouver Daily World*, tattooing was passé. This line of thought is comparable to the famous remarks of Austrian cultural critic and architect Adolf Loos from over a decade prior, which maintained that tattooing was socially, culturally, and aesthetically backward in the face of developing Western modernity.¹³ Loos's argument built upon previous research by competing late nineteenth-century criminologists Cesare Lombroso and Alexandre Lacassagne. Lombroso, an Italian, maintained that tattoos were atavistic signifiers of an inherent, born criminality; Lacassagne, a Frenchman, believed that tattoos represented criminal tendencies acquired through a person's social environment.¹⁴ Both criminologists erred, however, by studying tattooing *exclusively* amongst criminal populations—an acute example of confirmation bias. Nevertheless, as Loos's assertions exemplify and as Jane Caplan has shown, Lombroso and Lacassagne had formalized a connection between tattooing and criminality, which quickly spread across the Western world.¹⁵ Moreover, Gemma Angel has revealed that although public health concerns about tattooing predated such criminological studies, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and remaining well into the twentieth, the two fields developed a "congruence in conceptual formulations" for understanding tattooing via its connection to criminality and disease.¹⁶ When tattooing came onto the radar of Vancouver's state officials several decades later, comparable moral connotations often supported their claim that tattooing was a threat to public health. This constitutes what Mariana Valverde has referred to as "slippages," in which a discourse on a certain category of analysis slips into another, thus making it "impossible to determine what a particular statement or genre of statements ... was *really* about."¹⁷

Tattooing became a long-term focus for Vancouver's health officials in the early 1970s. However, the practice started gathering attention from authorities roughly thirty years prior. In February 1942 Vancouver police contacted the city's medical health officer, Dr. Stewart Murray, to investigate the premises of an East Hastings tattoo shop. According to the *Vancouver Sun*, two soldiers were tattooed at the business under "alleged insanitary conditions" and developed an infection.¹⁸ Nearly two decades later, Vancouver police were again involved with tattooing. In the summer of 1963, a fourteen-year-old boy obtained a tattoo—two intertwined birds with the word Mom—from an unidentified downtown tattooist. His father discovered the tattoo and contacted police, who said there was nothing they could do about the situation. Constrained by lack of regulation, the father used the media to draw awareness to this happening. "Heck, there are laws against a juvenile drinking liquor but the worst he can get from that is a hangover that goes away the next day.... This is forever," he proclaimed.¹⁹ Like the allegedly infected soldiers almost twenty years earlier, this event garnered only passing interest from local media and Vancouver's state officials. Moreover, I have not located any information that suggests

citizens undertook any grassroots efforts to prevent tattooing. Aside from brief newspaper coverage, a lack of sources on the two incidents or any resultant formal regulation suggests that these occurrences had limited impact on professional tattooing in Vancouver. Numerous tattooists worked unencumbered in the city between the two decades that separated the events and for the near decade that followed the 1963 case. This would soon change.

At the forefront of an effort to regulate tattooing was Dr. Gerald Hugh Bonham, Vancouver's medical health officer. Bonham was appointed to the position in May 1967, at which time he declared, "I believe public health is the purest form of preventive medicine."²⁰ By late spring of 1971, Vancouver's Health Department began to investigate how other North American municipalities regulated tattooing. Bonham and the assistant medical health officer, Dr. Marshall Goldberg, contacted their counterparts in Toronto, Montreal, Baltimore, and Victoria. Toronto's Department of Public Health reported "no adverse reactions" to tattooing but emphasized that the "Department keeps tattoo businesses under surveillance."²¹ Montreal's Department of Health lamented that the city had no bylaw or regulation for tattooing.²² Baltimore had a \$100 licensing fee intended to discourage tattooing.²³ Bringing health anxieties into conversation with personal aesthetic choice, the University of Maryland Hospital's head of dermatology declared that he was aware of possible allergic reactions, keloids, and granulomas, but "The most undesirable feature of tattooing is the cosmetic defect it imposes on the subject."²⁴

Several months earlier, similar discussions had taken place in Victoria after John Drennan applied for a licence to work as a tattooist there. In response to a letter from Bonham, Dr. Anthony Larsen of the Department of Health Services and Hospital Insurance in Victoria forwarded Bonham correspondence between officials at the Greater Victoria Metropolitan Board of Health and the city of Victoria, which stated,

We do not recommend the licensing of a tattooing establishment in this area. We have known of serious local infections resulting from the use of contaminated equipment. Tattooists are not trained in the proper sterilization of such equipment. The danger of infectious hepatitis is ever-present when injections are given—as you know, we use disposable syringes and needles, which are thrown away after each immunization. Keloids and sarcomatous (cancer) growths have been reported as resulting from tattoos.

Allergic reactions are not uncommon.... In conclusion, we would strongly recommend that you do not issue a trade license to Mr. John Drennan to carry on the occupation of tattoo artist and cosmetologist.²⁵

Larsen concluded that there were two ways to regulate tattooing in Victoria. The first was banning tattooing unless done by physicians, a tactic utilized by the city of Winnipeg less than a decade prior.²⁶ The second was a permit, complete with regulatory standards that medical health officers would allocate.²⁷ With an awareness of how licensing procedures and medical concerns could supplement one another, officials in

Vancouver soon developed their own strategies to regulate tattooing. According to its 1971 annual report, the Vancouver Health Department's top priority was to prevent illness "primarily through educational methods."²⁸ But the department, assisted by other branches of Vancouver's municipal government, did not approach tattooing using an educational model. Instead, they adopted a regulatory regime that consisted of business inspections, laboratorial testing, and licensing.

"Doc" and the "Bastards"

Concurrent with the Health Department's developing concerns, tattooing as a practice and questions about its safety started to garner more attention in the media. For example, in March 1971 the *Vancouver Sun* published a feature-length article on tattooing by journalist Peter Wilson. The piece profiled Vancouver's "now legendary" tattooist Forbes Hendry, better known as "Doc" Forbes. Among the photographs taken by Ray Allen included in the article was one of Hendry dressed in a doctor's white smock. This image was bolstered by Wilson's assertion that Hendry "seem[ed] constantly to be sterilizing things" and Hendry's own claim that "50 per cent of my business comes from patching up the work of other tattooists."²⁹

By his own account, Hendry earned his "Doc" pseudonym before he started tattooing, after touring an exhibit of preserved medical specimens for two years.³⁰ Yet his "doctor" persona was not entirely superficial. Hendry was actively concerned about hygienic tattooing. In one instance, Hendry even advertised that he was available to do "medical tattooing" for doctors and hospitals.³¹ When asked by a CBC journalist during the mid-1960s about the health hazards involved with tattooing, Hendry remarked,

There is a great deal of risk if it isn't done properly. Any virus, infection, or any disease can be contracted. Any infectious disease can be contracted through a dirty tattoo needle. And we question them pretty closely, the older men, to see if they've ever had, well, hepatitis, serum hepatitis, or liver ailments and things that could be carried on. Because some of these infectious viruses [and] diseases, even boiling the needles wouldn't kill the infection. He went on to state that if he suspected someone had a communicable illness, he did not retain the used needles to be boiled for reuse, but discarded them altogether.³²

Hendry's meticulous attention to hygiene was not just part of his public discourse. In private correspondence with Nels Johnson, a tattooist and barber in Fort William, Ontario, Hendry painstakingly described the sanitation methods he used. These measures included the development of "very sanitary and convenient" rubber ink wells that could be boiled and a business location on Davie Street that "was picked for cleanliness."³³ However, Hendry was of the belief that his competitors did not exercise a similar degree of caution. In another letter to Johnson, Hendry stated, "We got 3 bad bastards trying to tattoo here and it keeps us going fixing up their bad jobs and infections."³⁴

Among the "bad bastards" that worked as tattooists in Vancouver when Hendry wrote Johnson was Guy Edward

Leopold. Leopold tattooed in the rear of a Robson Street barbershop under the name "Circus Leo" and had worked intermittently in the province for several decades.³⁵ Despite Hendry's defamation of other tattoo artists in the city, Leopold reportedly maintained a hygienic practice. A 1965 circular from the Tattoo Club of America indicated that he "does very good work and has built up his reputation on the strict basis of cleanliness."³⁶ Several years later, a publication by San Francisco-based tattooist Lyle Tuttle affirmed that Leopold's "studio gleams with modern hospital sterilizing equipment, [and he] often fills special requests for cosmetic and medical tattooing."³⁷ Another account, however, contradicts these statements. Reflecting on a visit to Vancouver, American tattooist Ed Hardy detailed that Leopold's "setup looked antique even to me. He insisted on putting a free tattoo on me, although I didn't particularly like the idea."³⁸

In late 1970 art critic Richard Simmins visited Leopold's business. Simmins provided a similar description of Leopold's workplace and stated that the business had "modern equipment," but its walls of vintage tattoo designs were a "visual reality that is 30 to 50 years in the past."³⁹ However, an art critic visiting Leopold's shop highlights the difference in perspective toward tattooing between government workers, competing tattooists, and those in the cultural field. Throughout municipal efforts to inhibit tattooing, the practice simultaneously experienced a growing interest from Vancouver's fine art world. Leopold was included in an exhibition entitled *Better Body Works* at the Burnaby Art Gallery in early 1972. In that instance, Simmins referred to him as "Vancouver's famous tattooist."⁴⁰ Art critic Joan Lowndes also visited the show and, in response to the number of tattoos on his body, christened Leopold a "one-man gallery."⁴¹

Roughly one year after initial conversations about controlling tattooing in Vancouver, Dr. D.J. Brant and Peter Jacobs from the Metropolitan Health Service of Greater Vancouver visited the businesses of Leopold and Hendry on 25 April 1972. The Metropolitan Health Service of Greater Vancouver was a separate agency from the city of Vancouver's own health department, but the two were in contact regarding inspection of tattoo shops. Brant and Jacobs had a mandate to determine:

- a. Status of the premises conducive to good health, for both individuals and the community at large.
- b. Tattooing practices of the operator, equipment, attention to details of sanitation with regard to prevention of infectious disease transfer, as well as prevention of diseases attending tattooing (pigment idiosyncrasy, photosensitivity, activation of dermatologic disease already present in the tattoo site, etc.)
- c. General knowledge of the tattooist.⁴²

The combination of these criteria demonstrates how officials conceived of tattooing relative to municipal concerns about public health. Brant's interest in tattoo shops comparative to the "community at large" reveals that their focus was not solely on health from a medical perspective. They were also concerned with social health or, in other words, a perception of public well-being. Moreover, by evaluating the "general knowledge" of

tattooists, Brant and Jacobs could assess aspects of Hendry's and Leopold's work that was outside the parameters of their health expertise.

Hepatitis: A Growing Concern

In a report forwarded to Bonham, Brant concluded that Leopold was unaware of the "medical aspects of tattooing" because he did not change needles between clients, sterilized equipment only weekly, and used cold sterilization with 1.5 per cent zephiran chloride. Leopold told the inspectors that "no disease ever resulted from tattooing." They countered that tattooing could transmit hepatitis,⁴³ a connection that doctors elsewhere had begun to explore approximately twenty years earlier.⁴⁴ Trepidations about hepatitis during the early 1970s were consistent. Vancouver's health department reported that over four hundred cases of hepatitis were recorded in 1971. The department connected hepatitis rates to Vancouver's rapidly expanding drug culture, which made the disease difficult to control.⁴⁵ Furthermore, there was a point of comparison between tattooing and drug usage—needles. No conclusive evidence suggested that anyone in Vancouver had actually acquired the illness via a local tattoo shop. The health department believed that both tattooists and drug users reused needles without sterilization, predating Vancouver's HIV/AIDS epidemic that began just over a decade later. Yet, similar to the magnified charge that tattoo needles transmitted hepatitis, by late 1988 there were only two instances of people contracting AIDS through intravenous drug use.⁴⁶

Apprehensions about tattooing spreading hepatitis were not new. In October 1961, concurrent with a tattoo ban in New York City, Vancouver's senior medical health officer, Dr. J.L. Gayton, indicated that he did not know of any instances of hepatitis transmitted through tattooing in Vancouver. He said, "We would get reports on such cases and, so far, there has been no suspicion of such a thing." Hendry, who then worked on Hastings Street, asserted, "I boil my equipment then soak it in alcohol.... I use needles and ink capsules only once. I even put antibiotic ointment on the skin before I work." For him, only "careless artist[s]" spread hepatitis.⁴⁷ Hendry's mindfulness of hepatitis was once again demonstrated when Brant and Jacobs visited his business. The duo indicated that Hendry "seemed to be aware" that the disease could be transmitted via tattooing. Despite Hendry's insistence on proper hygienic practice, which included sterilizing needles by boiling and using new needles between clients, Brant and Jacobs remained skeptical. They noted, "Whether his on-going practices coincide with what he says is not possible to determine."⁴⁸

Brant admitted that the amount of disease and infection caused by tattooing "is not known; it is probably low," but emphasized that hepatitis transmission could be eliminated if tattooists practised "very basic principles." He concluded that tattooists should undergo an examination to mitigate disease causation and transmission. Brant also suggested that the city of Vancouver pass regulations through the Health Department.⁴⁹

Health officials did not have conclusive information to evaluate tattooing's risk to public health, but they moved proactively to limit the practice. The risk of hepatitis due to tattooing continued to be a source of unease, although there was little evidence that tattooing had caused hepatitis in Vancouver. Similar conclusions were drawn elsewhere. After moving to Wisconsin, Bonham's former colleague, Goldberg, conceded in 1972 that "locally, there has been no reported association of tattooing with serum hepatitis."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, hepatitis fears continued to fuel attempts to regulate tattooing.

According to a tally forwarded to Bonham, Vancouver-based hospitals discharged twenty patients in 1972 after treating them for tattoo-related skin diseases.⁵¹ These records, however, did not consider the circumstances in which the patients acquired their tattoos. There was no differentiation between tattoos acquired at local businesses and those produced in non-professional contexts. Instances of tattoos recorded by Vancouver's St. Paul's Hospital between 1972 and 1974 were predominantly of tattoos done unprofessionally and by youths. This included a fifteen-year-old who tattooed himself with his brother's help at age twelve, a thirteen-year-old with a self-made tattoo, a twenty-one-year-old who had self-tattooed at age nine, and a fifteen-year-old drug user with multiple tattoos "done by friends" alongside a single professional tattoo.⁵²

There were no confirmed instances that Vancouver's professional tattooers had transmitted hepatitis. One instance from September 1974 exemplifies how hepatitis anxieties were typically grounded in suspicion. Bonham received a memo from a doctor who suspected that a patient's hepatitis diagnosis was a result of a tattoo he received at Dragon Tattoo, a tattoo shop operated by Dave Shore. The doctor thought Bonham "should be aware of his suspicions."⁵³ Though the patient had acquired a tattoo within a month of the diagnosis, the doctor provided no conclusive proof that linked the tattoo to the disease. Such an instance exemplifies how officials used poorly investigated or presumed instances of hepatitis against the city's tattooists.

New Methods

A combination of bureaucratic obstacles and laboratorial testing soon assisted the city of Vancouver's interest in controlling tattooing. Under Bonham's direction, the Health Department used similar techniques to deter other practices they deemed unsanitary. Between 1972 and 1978, the Health Department pursued Chinatown merchants to regulate the sale of barbecued meat because there were trepidations about food poisoning. However, like hepatitis and tattooing, there had not been any proven instances of food poisoning due to the barbecued meat. Kay Anderson has pointed out that the regulation of Vancouver's Chinese community "demonstrated the speed with which dormant ideas of Chinatown as a public nuisance could be resurrected at the whim of those more powerful."⁵⁴ This is similar to the lingering presumptions about tattooing's unsanitary nature that guided efforts to regulate the practice. Journalist James Barber used tattooing as a comparative example to

discuss the protracted “Barbequed Pork War.” However, like the Health Department he lambasted, Barber also believed that tattooists ran unsanitary businesses. Seemingly unaware that tattooers had been similarly subjected to scrutiny from the Health Department throughout the 1970s, the journalist implied that at least one local tattooist did not practise proper sanitation but was able to operate regardless:

One of the more popular tattoo artists in town runs an indescribably filthy store, and people line up to have him squirt his inks under their skin, not just because he does a good workmanlike job ... but because he wears rubber gloves to do his work. ‘Just like the doctors.’ And it makes no difference that the gloves are black with age, crusted with dried ink, and spend their time between customers lying about on his desk next to the overflowing ashtray.⁵⁵

Meats marinating in Chinatown’s storefront windows and tattoos on Vancouver’s citizens became powerful visual signifiers of urban malady to Vancouver’s municipal officials. But similar to the Chinese merchants that contested such attempts, Vancouver’s tattooists challenged regulations.

In 1966, the Sanitation Section of Vancouver’s Health Department developed a “priority list” to guide inspection of businesses and buildings. The Health Department revised this list in 1973, and those granted “first priority” required at least one inspection per year. Alongside tattoo parlours, “first priority” locations encompassed barber shops, beauty parlours, beaches and parks, electrolysis providers, federal government buildings, gymnasiums, laundromats and dry cleaners, massage parlours, steam baths and saunas, and theatres.⁵⁶ Inspections served a non-medical role by allowing inspectors (and thus the Health Department) to keep a watchful eye on tattoo shops, or at least to demonstrate that they were under potential scrutiny. However, the inspection of tattoo shops soon changed and grew to encompass more than the physical space of a tattooist’s business.

Inspectors from Vancouver’s Health Department attended three tattoo shops in early July 1974 with an interest in the pigments used to render tattoos. This tactic arose from the belief that certain tattoo pigments—namely red—could cause disease. Inspectors gathered pigment samples from several businesses in both powder form (before being mixed with liquid into a tattoo-ready solution) and slurry (after being mixed). They collected these samples in vials, paper cups, and bottles, which they submitted to the Health Department’s City Analyst’s Laboratory.⁵⁷ Among the samples was a powder from Artistic Tattooing, a business owned by John Wilfrid Weatherhead, better known as “Curly Allen.” Weatherhead’s tattoo shop was located on Hastings Street East, a commercial and traffic corridor that, as Diane Purvey and John Belshaw have described, had been long populated by “gaudy neon lights, cheap eats and cheaper hotels, burly longshoremen, ‘fallen’ women, and human derelicts.” Many Vancouverites perceived it as an area of “social and moral decay.”⁵⁸ The City Analyst’s Laboratory evaluated a pigment sample from Weatherhead’s business for mercury levels. They concluded that the pigment was “a relatively insoluble aluminum

alizarine [sic] dye. This does not contain mercury. It is an organic dye combined with aluminum.” Pigment samples collected from other businesses, however, were determined to have mercury. For instance, a red slurry sample from Dave Shore’s Dragon Tattoo was “apparently glycerin [sic] with mercuric sulphide powder suspended in it.”⁵⁹

The inspectors obtained two samples—powder and slurry—from Bryan Zuk’s Ace Tattoo. While Zuk’s slurry was the same composition as that from Dragon Tattoo, his powder had a “high concentration of mercury (over 60%); this powder is mercuric sulphide commonly known as vermilion or cinnabar.”⁶⁰ It is noteworthy that the inspectors took two samples from Zuk, as they acquired only one from competing businesses. Unlike other tattoo shop proprietors, Zuk was concurrently embroiled in a disagreement with the city’s Department of Permits and Licenses. This clash had begun in early May 1974, after Zuk intended to open a tattoo shop in Gastown’s Blood Alley. That Zuk’s operating licence to work in Gastown—or “Grasstown”—was denied is certainly curious, as only a few years earlier the city had tried to improve the area, specifically by eliminating drugs (mostly marijuana and other “soft drugs”) and drug users (principally young, non-criminal hippies).⁶¹ In consultation with the Department of Health, the Department of Permits and Licenses used its abilities to prevent Zuk from opening a new business. This represented an operational shift in regulating tattooing, as this was the first instance of a tattoo shop being denied a business licence. The methods used against Zuk represented a more bureaucratic approach to not merely regulating, but effectively preventing the growth of professional tattooing in Vancouver.

Bryan Zuk at City Council

Previous regulatory methods, namely anxieties about disease transmission and the physical composition of tattooing pigments, were used to justify denying Zuk’s licence request. After receiving Zuk’s application, the city of Vancouver’s chief licence inspector requested Bonham’s opinion. Bonham contended that the Health Department had “evidence” that tattooing had transmitted syphilis and hepatitis. Additionally, their files indicated “that there has been [sic] cases of cancer caused by the use of certain dyes in the tattooing process” and “because of these facts” the Health Department recommended against licensing tattoo shops.⁶² Such arguments were not new. As I have shown above, the Health Department deployed hepatitis alarms several years earlier in their regulatory efforts. In Vancouver, health officials had not yet raised concerns about syphilis, but American health officials had linked the disease to tattooing roughly a century prior.⁶³ The chief licence inspector deferred to Bonham’s expertise and denied Zuk’s application.⁶⁴

Zuk requested an appeal on the grounds that he had already purchased his equipment and, more importantly, emphasized that “in answer to the medical question which appears to be based on the fact tattooing under unsanitary conditions causes infectious hepatitis, I can assure you that this is well-known to tattoo artists and at the present time we now have sterilizing

equipment which absolutely ensures that all the needles will be used under the most sterile conditions.”⁶⁵

After a unanimous motion, city council made arrangements at their 7 May meeting to allow Zuk to make his case the following week.⁶⁶ One week later, Zuk and Bonham appeared before council. The former explained that Vancouver already had two other tattoo shops that had been in business for several years, while the latter presented arguments that tattoos could cause disease and allergic reaction. Council sided with Zuk and granted him a licence to operate until the end of the year, at which time Bonham would write a report on the matter.⁶⁷ Only one councillor voted in favour of Bonham’s proposal—Alderman Bill Gibson, a medical doctor—who was displeased with Zuk’s inability to identify the composition of the ink he used. On the contrary, and likely indicative of the rest of council that voted similarly, Alderman Michael Harcourt maintained that Bonham had not given a sufficient reason to refuse Zuk’s licence in light of other tattooists who were already operating in the city.⁶⁸ Progressive Alderman Harry Rankin also supported Zuk, resulting in whispers that Rankin was tattooed himself.⁶⁹ While a personal success, Zuk’s victory had wider ranging implications for both Vancouver’s tattooists and Bonham’s Health Department.

By successfully challenging the refusal of his licence, Zuk demonstrated that tattooists were also aware of health concerns in their work. In fact, some tattooists openly welcomed regulation. After Zuk’s successful appeal, D.A. Morgan, director of environmental health for the city of Vancouver, wrote to Bonham. Morgan stated that he had been approached by tattooists regarding standardization of their premises, equipment, and operating methods, who said that “they would gladly comply with any possible conditions which we would lay down for their methods of operation.”⁷⁰ Constrained by city council’s ruling, Bonham pursued regulation supported by legislation. By the end of May, he was in discussion with John Mulberry from the city’s Law Department to draft a bylaw for “the control of this activity.”⁷¹ The proposed bylaw included a provision for the sterilization of needles using an autoclave; that no tattoo pigments be reused; that no pigments contain mercury; that children under legal age not be tattooed;⁷² that persons under the influence of alcohol and drugs not be tattooed; and finally, that a registry of customers, including their name and age, be kept by tattooists.⁷³

Bonham drafted a report that city council gave first consideration on 19 July and revisited on 23 July. The report specified that Zuk had completed renovations to meet Health Department requirements and was requested to obtain mercury-free pigments. Furthermore, Bonham cited his consultation with the Law Department. Bonham’s report, which worked “on the assumption that Council has decided not to prevent the practice of tattooing in the City of Vancouver,” asked for guidance on two regulatory options. His first proposition was that the city not grant any further business licences to tattoo shops, under the logic that it would be easier to monitor existing tattooists “consistent with the foregoing concerns so as to minimize the

danger of infection or allergy.” The second was that the city adopt a policy to permit tattooists to obtain business licences, which would operate in tandem with the features outlined in the proposed bylaw. Council approved the second proposition. Aldermen voted to license tattooists in Vancouver without limit but suggested regulations similar to those in Bonham and Mulberry’s proposed bylaw, including prohibiting certain pigments, strict needle sterilization procedures, and the registration of customers to trace infection should it occur.⁷⁴ The implementation of these measures, however, was far from expedient.

Conclusion

Two years after Zuk’s successful challenge, the proposed bylaw had yet to be realized. In fact, tattoo-specific legislation was not implemented in Vancouver until the early 1990s.⁷⁵ Health anxieties about tattooing remained in the minds of tattooists and municipal officials alike. In 1976 Belgian tattooist Joseph “Pancho” Vertommen wrote a letter to the city of Vancouver about the current state of professional tattooing and its relationship to social, cultural, and physical afflictions. Vertommen, who had previously worked in Canadian cities such as Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver, stated

there is plenty of trouble about Tattooing all over the world, mainly in the USA and Europe, the Health Department claims from the tattooing needles and colors you get first of all Hepatitis (Jaundice), Brain damage, cancer, all kinds of boils and swellings, even siphilis [sic]—is this true in Canada also, well I myself I had some diseases and the doctor claims this comes from tattooing, Would you please let me know what you think about Tattooing if it is really dangerous for your health.⁷⁶

Vertommen’s inquiry found its way to Bonham, who replied that the Health Department recommended against tattooing but that city council had permitted it in lieu of a still forthcoming bylaw.⁷⁷ Vertommen and Bonham’s brief correspondence highlights the tensions that surrounded professional tattooing in Vancouver and reveals how two diverse groups—tattooists and city officials—navigated this regulatory terrain. Tattooists and municipal authorities attempted to traverse these dilemmas through their own personal and professional perspectives, training, economic interests, and public perception to address health concerns about this work.

As a result of efforts throughout the 1970s to control tattooing in Vancouver, Bonham assembled a mass of information on the topic, which I have used here to examine the Health Department’s regulatory regime. Awareness of this material spread beyond Vancouver to influence other municipal governments. In November 1977 the regional health officer for the Capital Region District on Vancouver Island contacted Bonham for a “succinct summary” of the material because professional tattooing was growing in Victoria.⁷⁸ The fact that Bonham’s opinion was sought elsewhere, understood together with his earlier attempts to attain information from colleagues across Canada and the United States, accentuates how networks among health officials circulated and created knowledge about

tattooing. As a result, authorities often used subjective information as evidence to regulate the practice.

Vancouver's tattooists were resourceful and resilient. Through ingenious methods and robust determination they contested regulation, allowing them to continue to offer their services to city residents. Following the artistic curiosity about Vancouver tattooist "Circus Leo" Leopold in the early 1970s, apprehensions about tattooing throughout much of the early 1970s soon transitioned into further artistic interest in the practice. For example, during spring 1976, Vancouver's artist-run centre and gallery Western Front hosted a show by photographer Kazumi Tanaka entitled *Tattooed People*.⁷⁹ The following year, Tanaka's tattoo photographs were included in an exhibition of contemporary British Columbian art at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Discussing his interest in tattooing, the photographer recognized that stereotypical understandings about tattooed people failed to account for the wide range of citizens who had tattoos. Tanaka stated, "We have images or ideas of what kind of people have tattoos [sic]—like sailors, motorcycle-riders, non-intellectual people, etc... . But through doing this project, I saw many kinds of different people, young and old."⁸⁰ The relationship between tattooing and fine art at a local level co-existed with similar national and international developments.⁸¹ Consequently, tattooing experienced increased normalization and acceptance by the end of the twentieth century. By continuing to tattoo in spite of state efforts to hinder their work, tattooists played a vital role in contributing to the continuity and current popularity of tattooing.

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Notes

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- 22 Ant. B. Valois to M.C. Goldberg, 7 July 1971, 146-B-02, folder 10, CVA.
- 23 George W. Shucker to Marshall C. Goldberg, 2 July 1971, 146-B-02, folder 10, CVA.
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- 31 *Vancouver Sun* “Tattooing,” 31 January 1959, 30.
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- 33 “Doc” Forbes Hendry to Nels Johnson, letter 1, n.d., private collection of Jamie Jelinski.
- 34 “Doc” Forbes Hendry to Nels Johnson, letter 2, n.d., private collection of Jamie Jelinski.
- 35 While residing in Vancouver during 1948, Leopold purchased his first tattoo machines from the California-based tattooist and tattoo supplier Owen Jenson. Approximately two years later he briefly operated a tattooing business in Nanaimo. Between 1950 and 1962 Leopold worked on the carnival circuit as a ride operator and superintendent, concession stockist, and circus clown, in the process earning his “Circus” moniker. Leopold’s contributions to the circus community were recognized in the late 1950s when his name was added to the Showmen’s League of America’s clubhouse plaque in Chicago. See *Tattoo Club of America Newsletter*, October–November–December 1965, 2; *Victoria City and Vancouver Island Directory* (Vancouver: BC Directories, 1950–1), 130 and 246; *Billboard*, 5 October 1959, 59; *Billboard*, 19 October 1959, 60; *Billboard*, 2 November 1959, 69; *Billboard*, 16 November 1959, 55; *Billboard*, 15 July 1957, 106; *Billboard*, 4 August 1951, 60; *Billboard*, 8 April 1950, 153; *Billboard*, 4 August 1951, 6; *Billboard*, 2 June 1958, 57. After private correspondence on 1 March 2018, I was able to determine that the plaque with Leopold’s name, “LEOPOLD, GUY E. ‘LEO,’” still hangs at the Showmen’s League of America’s headquarters in Chicago.
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