

QC Professor A 'Body Mod' Expert

by Lee Landor, Assistant Editor
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Queens College can add another name to its list of famous and successful alumni and faculty: that of Victoria Pitts-Taylor.

The sociology professor, who was recently promoted and awarded tenure, has published two books, edited an encyclopedia and become a regular guest on a television series.

She has written dozens of articles and published books on the subject of body art and modification, sometimes referred to as "body mod," and has appeared numerous times on National Geographic Channel's "Taboo," a TV series that explores the contemporary body practices of cultures around the world.

An expert in her field, garnering attention from newspapers and magazines around the country, Pitts-Taylor is a celebrity of sorts and it appears to be due, in part, to Queens and Queens College. "It's always a transformative experience for me to teach in Queens," she said, crediting the diversity of the student body.

After finishing up her Ph.D at Brandeis University in Boston, the Ohio native came to New York, looking for an exciting place to live and work. She found that and more — "wonderfully diverse and interesting" students — at Queens College, where she has worked for nearly a decade.

Pitts-Taylor estimates that she has appeared on about 11 episodes of "Taboo," where she provides sociological explanations for the body modification, tattooing, scarification and other practices that are often misunderstood by society.

More of these explanations, as well as questions regarding the boundaries of which body practices are acceptable in society, are found in her book "In The Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification," published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2003.

Pitts-Taylor's explorations of a different, but related, subject — cosmetic surgery — are described in her newest book, "Surgery Junkies: Wellness and Pathology in Cosmetic Culture," published last year by Rutgers University Press. Before writing this book, the 36-year-old Hudson Valley resident "became really fascinated with how (society) decide(s) what counts as acceptable cosmetic surgery and what is beyond the pale."

Her studies found that excessive and artistic plastic surgery or that which defies beauty ideals is considered deviant. A prime example, she noted, is the extreme cosmetic surgery of former pop idol Michael Jackson.

"Even though we're modifying the body constantly, and we're obsessed as a society with modifying the body, it's certainly still regulated by social norms," she said.

Both body art, which began as a rebellious subculture that intentionally distinguished those who practiced it from those who didn't, and plastic surgery, which Pitts-Taylor calls a "normalizing

body practice,” are symptoms of a “body-obsessed” culture.

As a result of this preoccupation with the physical form, pressing social concerns — such as cosmetic surgery addiction and body dysmorphic disorder, a mental illness in which a person is preoccupied with an imagined or minor physical defect — have developed, according to Pitts-Taylor.

In addition to teaching, researching, writing and speaking about the aesthetics of the human body, Pitts-Taylor has edited an encyclopedia dedicated to the subject.

“Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body,” published by Greenwood Press, is a two-volume collection of essays that chronicles body practices of various cultures, societies and time periods. The essays explore the human body by part, “detailing practices and beliefs ... that are sometimes mind-blowing and eye popping,” according to www.greenwood.com.

In the encyclopedia, which will be available for purchase in December, body parts are examined through a multifaceted cultural lens: Pitts-Taylor hired 45 authors from around the world and from a range of specialities — from doctors to anthropologists to art critics — to do the research and write from their own perspectives.

While Pitts-Taylor, who is the co-editor of the Women’s Studies Quarterly journal, continues to educate her students, those who read her work and “Taboo” viewers, she is also learning herself.

“My students bring with them diverse perspectives that come from their religious, or ethnic or cultural backgrounds,” she said. “They transform our conversation by bringing their own experiences and perspectives and ways of thinking about the world to the conversation.”