

Tuesday 22 October 2019

Arima mission a ‘slave colony’ Author explores records of First Peoples



First Peoples visits San Fernando last week. – Marvin Hamilton

TRACY ASSING

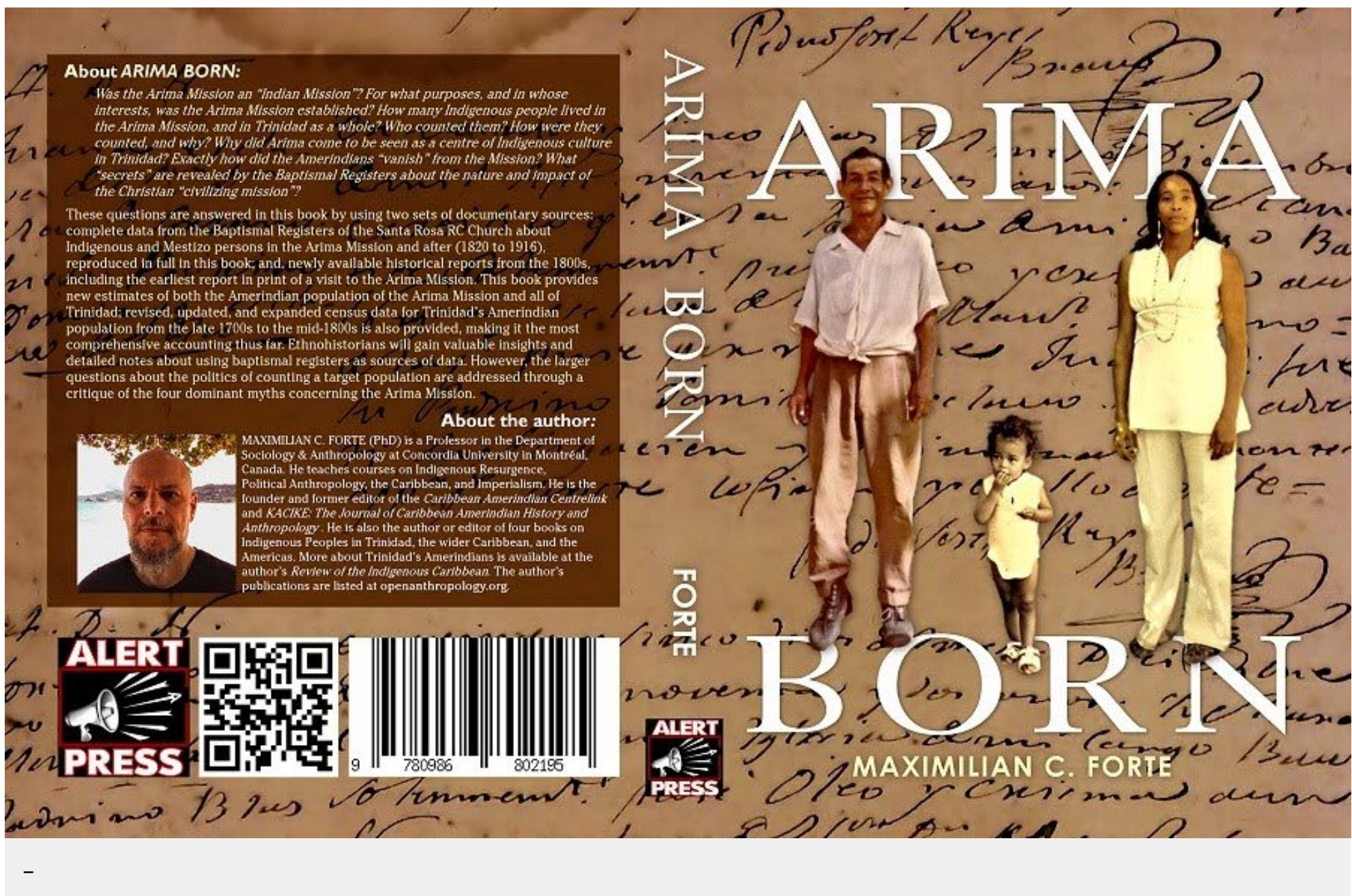
In December, Maximilian C Forte returns with an exciting new text which deals specifically with the history of Trinidad’s indigenous population, titled Arima Born.

Forte has continued his research in the Carib/First Peoples’ Community, which began in 1995, and has already contributed to the documentation of TT history with Ruins of Absence, Presence of Caribs, which was published in 2005. Forte’s other work on the Amerindians of Trinidad is titled Indigenous Resurgence in the Contemporary Caribbean: Amerindian Survival and Revival.

The new, self-published text (Forte’s Alert Press) is invaluable to any Caribbean history collection. Forte has based this new work on his study of the baptismal registers of the RC church in Arima for 1820-1916.

He is the first to admit that his work is incomplete, as huge chunks of the records were missing, illegible, and systems of record-keeping were flawed. He has included re-productions of the records he studied, bringing the page count to just over 300.

In the preface of the book he reveals that the registers he had the opportunity to examine were sent to the archives of the Archbishop’s residence and are now difficult to access.



Forte is a professor of anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. He first learned of the Carib Community in the early 90s through a newspaper article. He committed to sharing the results of his research with members of the Santa Rosa Carib/First Peoples Community, some of whom believe the very proof of their indignity lies in these records, but Forte says: “Identity is ultimately an idea.”

At Concordia University he teaches courses on indigenous resurgence, media and visual anthropology, political anthropology, Caribbean history and political economy, among other subjects.

He makes the point that the registers are “not only material evidence concerning the history of the Amerindians in the Arima Mission, they are also a detailed repository of data on African slaves in Arima and environs.”

This is so, he notes, “in a period when reparations are being studied and proposed at the highest political levels across the Caribbean.”

In Arima Born, readers learn that Arima was never actually a mission just for Amerindians. In fact, Forte describes it as a “slave colony.” Even though missions were initially conceived to “pacify” the Amerindian population, toward the end of the 1700s the Amerindians were, as ever, “caught between shifts of value.” The mission to “pacify” and Christianise failed. Then Don Miguel Sorzano, a Spanish slave owner who was the first corregidor, established the mission in 1784. There were other slave owners in Arima and at that time, the mission’s indigenous inhabitants included tribes forcibly displaced from their lands in Tacarigua, Caura and Arouca.

According to Forte: “Between field work, public works and armed security one cannot interpret the founding of the Mission as anything less than a form of state patronage in the service of landed capital and the existing oligarchy.” Amerindians even built homes for the disbanded 3rd West India Regiment.

Even when the British came, the Amerindians were only valued as long as their labour was valued. British authorities “imported” Amerindian/mestizo labourers from Venezuela, and they got to work shoulder to shoulder with the Amerindians of Trinidad: “Amerindian labour was utilised to create value in land, by clearing it for cultivation. Once that land was cleared, its value would have increased while the labour that produced that value would then become disposable.”

When the priests in the mission kept careful accounting through racial/ethnic registry, it was because real legal obligations and rights were attached to members of different groups. Forte concludes: “The Amerindians of Arima went extinct but in a political-economic sense only, rather in than either ethnic/cultural or biological terms.”

Arima Born shares more information about the socio-political structures which orchestrated this “paper genocide.” Two priests of interest who appear in Forte’s text are Fr Pedro Josef Reyes Bravo (1786-1818), who gave testimony in the trial of Luisa Calderon, and Msgr Charles de Martini (1895-1916), whose family came to own substantial cocoa estates during his tenure.

Forte also reveals that the position of Carib Queen did not exist before the 1800s and the first queen may even have come from Venezuela. In exploring the roots of the Santa Rosa Festival, which is essentially why a queen was appointed, he examines the similarities between the Santa Rosa Festival and the Cross Wake (Veloria de la Cruz). He also offers more information about the existence of Amerindians outside the missions, those who choose to live in the forests of the Northern Range. Add this to the fact that we have no way of knowing how many baptised children were not included in the register and how many were not baptised, or the numbers contained in the records which have been lost.

What becomes clear is that the assertion that Amerindians “died out” or “lost their heritage through miscegenation” is a myth. And, Forte wrote: “Far from offering the Amerindians ‘protection,’ the mission was an engine of their socio-economic demise.”

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