IN MEMORIAM. DR. FITZROY ANDRÉ BAPTISTE
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Fitzroy André Baptiste was born in Grenada on 26 February 1940; he was 67 at the time of his passing (7 July 2007). Fitz Baptiste, as he was better known, had a long and distinguished career as teacher and administrator at the University of the West Indies (UWI). He retired as Senior Lecturer in the Department of History at St. Augustine Campus in 2001 after 33 years, but was recalled to the Mona Campus in 2004.

According to Dr. Eric St. Cyr, the Baptiste Brothers attended the prestigious Grenada Boy’s Secondary School and all “attained scholarship standard”. Fitz’s childhood environment fostered a penchant for meticulous details. St. Cyr succinctly summed up this “distinguishing quality” of Baptiste’s character in the following words: “I have not come close to a West Indian scholar as meticulous, painstaking and careful for detail and factual accuracy as our colleague
Fitz Baptiste.” It was in recognition of this quality that his major work, *War, Cooperation and Conflict: The European Possesion in the Caribbean 1939-1945*, was awarded the prestigious “Outstanding Academic Book” prize in 1988.

Fitz Baptiste completed his rites of passage from secondary schoolboy to career historian during the 1960s, a truly exciting decade for young, ambitious Caribbean nationals. The old colonial order was rapidly crumbling before them and they wished to be part of the construction of a new, post-colonial architecture. Armed with his Masters’ Degree from Manchester University, Baptiste took up the challenge of forging a new national identity and consciousness via a decolonised praxis in the study of Africa and the African Diaspora. As with other nation-building blueprints this goal was beset by many obstacles from forces of reaction as intense within the enclaves of the University as from the neo-colonialist public.

The launch of African Studies at the St. Augustine Campus occurred against the backdrop of widespread protests against the Jamaican government’s ban on Walter Rodney after just one year at the Mona Campus as the UWI’s first lecturer in African Studies. Unlike Rodney, Fitz was destined to spend his entire life at the UWI. As the UWI’s First Vice-Chancellor and Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Eric Williams conceptualised an African and Asian Studies Unit or Institute at the St. Augustine Campus. In 1968 he personally invited Fitz Baptiste to Trinidad to set up the African component of this Unit, which was then located within the Department of Sociology and Politics. Thus Baptiste began his teaching career as Assistant Lecturer in African Studies, lecturing in anthropology and culture history. Williams himself was a seminal scholar who understood the value of history to the decolonisation process. But the late 1960s were turbulent times and Williams would have second thoughts about the Unit he spawned, causing him to withdraw his support even before it became fully established.

Detractors did not only challenge the validity of African history as a discipline but were equally concerned over its potential as a medium of radical politics. As Baptiste recounted, he and Rodney “pioneered a tradition of outreach into the community … in the field of African History and African Studies.” Yet, there was a marked ideological difference between them. Whereas Rodney was a political activist-cum-scholar and a major player in the Black Power movement, Fitz Baptiste became a scholar-activist, consciously taking the “middle
ground” in national politics. Notwithstanding, revisionist African history was too revolutionary and inviting to remain outside the pail of political intrigues of the Black Power generation, since many of Baptiste’s students were leaders of the local arm of the movement and the ensuing Black Power Uprising of 1970. Fitz recalled his uneasiness in “the crazy political atmosphere of Trinidad and Tobago in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.” Not long after his arrival in the country, he became the target of government intelligence agencies. Two of his “best friends”, Patrick Emmanuel and William “Bill” Riviere were picked up in the government’s Counter-revolutionary State of Emergency and imprisoned on Nelson Island; many of his students and associates were also imprisoned, including Geddes Granger and Kaffra Kambon, key personalities in the Black Power Uprising. A military officer allegedly involved in the Trinidad and Tobago Regiment’s mutiny—which paralleled the Black Power Uprising—was also a member of his African Studies class.

Having survived the heady days of Black Power, Fitz became a missionary of African Studies in Trinidad and Tobago. He delivered lectures on Africa and the African Diaspora to many African-led civil and political organisations including TAPIA House headed by Lloyd Best; The Democratic Action Committee (DAC) led by A.N.R. Robinson; Club L’Ouverture; the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC); the Caribbean Historical Society; the Traditional African National Association (TANA); the Emancipation Support Committee; the Extra-Mural Department of the UWI (now The School of Continuation Studies); and various Orisha and Shouter Baptist groups. He was also a foundation member of the Confederation of African Associations of Trinidad and Tobago (COATT), and a Fellow of The Trinidad and Tobago Institute of West Indies.

The name Fitz Baptiste still resonates in every sphere of activity at the St. Augustine Campus. He was an Acting Head of the Department of History in 1987-88 and Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Arts and General Studies, 1982-83; he served as Chairman of the Afro-Asian Studies Unit during the 1970s and 1980s. He also served on numerous University Committees including Chairman of the crucial Non-Academic Staff Appointments Committee; he was President of the Senior Common Room Club and senior member of the Campus Security Committee. He served as President of the West Indies Group of University Teachers (WIGUT) on two occasions in the 1980s and 1990s; he led WIGUT when it achieved one of its most salutary agree-
ments, “The Cross Award”, which made the St. Augustine Campus one of the most remuneratively attractive Campuses in the English-speaking Commonwealth.

Paradoxically, Baptiste’s teaching of the African Diaspora was nurtured outside of his home Campus at St. Augustine. His first lecture was delivered in Barbados in 1969 entitled “The Historical/Geographical background to the African Diaspora.” His first Diaspora course was introduced at the UWI only in 1991; the second in 1993. In the interim, he skilfully configured his own brand of Diaspora epistemology and pedagogy through several public lectures, workshops and the teaching of African Diaspora courses in foreign universities. He was Visiting Professor of African Diaspora at Howard University, U.S.A. 1989-90; Visiting Professor at Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria in 1990; and Visiting Professor in African and Latin American Studies at Colgate University, U.S.A. (1992-93) He earned a second Fulbright Visiting Professor in African, African-American and Caribbean Studies at Oberlin College, U.S.A. in 1998-99. Baptiste was also instrumental in the development of “model” African Diaspora courses for the campuses at Mona and Cave Hill and many other institutions including Michigan State University and Spelman College (Georgia).

It is a mark of his considerable contribution to “outreach” into the non-African communities that he was awarded the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Prize of Trinidad and Tobago. He was also proud of the seminal contributions to the study of the African Diaspora from the students that he supervised at undergraduate and graduate levels. Fitz leaves to mourn his son André, daughter, Desiree and wife, Kathryn – the trinity to whom he dedicated his monograph, War, Cooperation, and Conflict.

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