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Wilderson, Frank B., III. *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*. Boston: South End Press, 2008.

In his classic study of colonialism *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961], Frantz Fanon wrote, “The violence of the colonial regime and counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity” (88). In *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*, Frank B. Wilderson III, powerfully explores this axiom, at times in sharp, unforgettable detail, at times with deliberate obfuscation in the name of covert operations and the secret work of the armed wing of the African National Congress, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK). Both African-American and South African writers have access to a full and deep tradition of autobiographical narrative as truth-telling political witness, including such classics as: Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* [1945], Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* [1965], Assata Shakur’s *Assata* [1987], and Mark Mathabane’s *Kaffir Boy* [1986]. Specifically in relation to the armed struggle and political violence in South Africa, a number of memoirs have come out post-1994, the year of South Africa’s first democratic elections including: Gillian Slovo’s *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country* [1997], Letlapa Mphahlele’s *Child of This Soil: My Life as a Freedom Fighter* [2002], and Pumla Gobodo-Madizikela’s *A Human Being Died That Night* [2003].

What distinguishes *Incognegro* from this vast tradition of autobiography and expanding field of post-apartheid commentary is Wilderson’s thoughtful weaving of past and present, shifting dramatically between an unfolding relationship with a white woman poet/professor in California, difficult memories of South Africa (his marriage and participation in ANC work), and recollections of his family and youth in the Civil Rights/Vietnam War era. These three separate seasons of Wilderson’s life frequently intersect and reflect each other in complex and interesting ways. For example, he recounts a tumultuous and conflicted relationship with his demanding, upwardly mobile parents, the tension of adolescent years heightened by Northern racism in an integrated neighborhood and the volatile political context of the 1960s. The philosophy of Black Power gave him access to revolutionary principles and rhetoric swirling in American popular culture and shaped his nascent political identity but also put him in constant conflict with his family. Wilderson’s memories of the murderous attacks on the Black Panthers, especially the killing of Fred Hampton in Chicago, and the violent retaliation against students at Berkeley, Kent State, and Jackson State eerily parallel the violence in South Africa when political assassinations and student uprisings occurred almost daily in the last years of apartheid. Additionally, as an academic, Wilderson relentlessly challenged institutional racism in transitional South Africa and more recently in post-9/11 America. However, this commitment to political work continued to complicate his relationship with his parents throughout the narrative.

Wilderson taught classes at two universities in South Africa, the University of the Witwatersrand and Vista University, both in Johannesburg, and he helped organize protests by student groups while simultaneously working with an underground cell in MK. From his first trip to South Africa in 1989, as an outsider, Wilderson painfully predicted (using Fanon) the cooption of the ANC’s radicalism by liberal establishment forces and Nelson Mandela’s probable role in allowing that cooption. South Africans rarely received Wilderson’s Marxist critiques of Mandela willingly, which is understandable, but in the end Wilderson’s analysis proved prophetic. Wilderson recalls one memorable incident

which even put his life at risk, when, during a secret meeting with an MK cadre, the comrade slammed his head against the steering wheel of his car and held him at gunpoint in response to Wilderson's commentary on Mandela. Wilderson recalls his thoughts in that moment, "*Breathe, Frank, breathe*. I knew that he had a black belt in karate and I could feel it in his firm, expert grip pinching my neck. *Guess you don't do Jesus jokes in Jerusalem*" (287). Despite this frequent backlash, Mandela's reputation being unassailable, Wilderson also documents how his own immediate circle of ANC comrades attempted to resist the coming "Hydra" of "English liberalism and African conciliation" (144).

Key to this resistance was the leadership of Chris Hani, a leader in the South African Communist Party and a senior officer in *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. Tragically, Hani was assassinated a year before the elections, on Easter Sunday, April 10, 1993. Most valuably, *Incognegro* introduces an American audience to Chris Hani through memories of ANC work, his popularity among the rank and file, and the shock of his sudden loss. In many ways Wilderson's personal narrative pivots on Hani's death. Would a revolution be possible without his leadership? It is perhaps impossible to know at what point the ANC's goal of a people's revolution was surrendered for a compromised negotiation with the apartheid regime to achieve the goal of democratic elections. Did it happen during the secret negotiations to release Nelson Mandela and his fellow leaders on Robben Island? Did it happen when prominent South African businessmen met with exiled ANC leaders to talk about a negotiated solution? Or did it happen behind closed doors in talks between various political and military leaders of the National Party and the African National Congress after Mandela was released, during the 1990 to 1994 period? Wilderson's *Incognegro* points toward this last time period as the most likely answer.

In a meeting with his MK cadres immediately after Hani's assassination, one comrade suggested a broader conspiracy coming from conservative forces outside South Africa, "Fifty-thousand dollars from the Heritage Foundation. Thirty-thousand dollars from a West German minister of parliament. And someone from the ANC, someone high up enough to sell a vital piece of information—the timetable of Hani's bodyguards" (381). In this speculation, *Incognegro* perhaps resembles Zoë Wicomb's brilliant novel *David's Story* [2000] which explores the experience of two MK comrades during the transitional period, David Dirkse, who is confessing the story to an anonymous narrator, and Dulcie, one of his comrades, who is being tortured by unknown assailants throughout the novel. One troubling commonality between *Incognegro* and *David's Story* lies in their description of the active execution of ANC activists during the years of transition. Both David and Dulcie's names exist on such a hit list, and at the end of the novel David takes his own life by driving his car off a cliff into the sea near Cape Town. Similarly, Wilderson writes that in 1992 comrades close to him were receiving death threats, "*Eleven ANC comrades that I am close to get death threats as a matter of course. . . . Ten to twelve people close to them have been murdered execution style. They were educators, intellectuals, labor union organizers, peace commission workers, and university students*" (190-191). What is most unsettling about these assassinations (which also struck down Chris Hani) is the chilling possibility that the ANC leadership itself, through their deep compromises with white South Africa, sacrificed their own in order to achieve the transition and come into power.

Within *Incognegro* Wilderson provides much more detail about the transitional years and ANC secret work at that time than the ANC leadership itself who attempted to apply

for blanket amnesty from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and were denied.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in this memoir, Wilderson has offered an important and groundbreaking story of the last days of apartheid. It is not the official history of the ANC, then or today, and it is not the “rainbow nation” narrative of reconciliation most often sought in the new South Africa, but it does lay out a Marxist, black-consciousness path, which ANC comrades laid claim to, forging their own Fanonian revolution on the ground level, even as the possibilities for a people’s revolution evaporated before their very eyes.

In response to Chris Hani’s assassination, Wilderson explains that his MK unit struck back with armed action, although he does not reveal the exact target, and he himself did not participate in the bombing. Some of his comrades were forced then to flee the country, and one was caught and tortured. In another action of armed struggle, one month before the 1994 elections, in the Battle of Bop, right-wing vigilantes invaded the “homeland” Bophuthatswana, whose government had collapsed, with a rag-tag army of civilian vehicles killing African people randomly. However, a Bop policeman, ostensibly trained by apartheid forces, in turn struck back at the white right-wingers, killing three of them stranded by a flat tire. The footage of an African policeman militarily executing three white men played dramatically on South Africa’s national news, and this image, like the covert actions of Wilderson’s MK unit, signaled a definite end to the rule of white violence over Black South Africans.<sup>2</sup> The reciprocal violence announced an end game. More than anything *Incognegro* teaches us that the fall of apartheid was not bloodless or peaceful, that the corruption of neo-colonialism inhabits South Africa still, and it invites us, wherever we are, inside or outside South Africa, to tear down ourselves to the very foundations. Again to quote Fanon, “The struggle, they say, goes on. The people realize that life is an unending contest” (93-94).

—Meta L. Schettler

#### NOTES

1. See SAPA’s (South African Press Association) news release, “ANC Applications Did Not Comply with the Law” for more information about the “ANC 37” decision. <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media/1999/9903/s990304k.htm>
2. See Allister Sparks’ *Tomorrow Is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa’s Road to Change* for a longer account of the Battle of Bop.

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