

2009

Book Review of Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson

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Repository Citation

Stein, Michael Ashley and Soifer, Aviam, "Book Review of Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson" (2009). *Faculty Publications*. 669.
<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/669>

Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner, *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. Pp. 304. \$27.50 (ISBN 978-0-8078-3155-7).

Although neither a criminal nor mentally ill, Junius Wilson spent seventy-six years of his life in a North Carolina state institution for the criminally insane. He was castrated and forced to do manual labor on behalf of the public institution. From the 1920s to the early 21st century, Wilson endured countless hardships, overt and subtle, in cultural isolation as an African-American who happened also to be deaf.

Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner's *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson*, recounts Wilson's life in compelling detail. Through their prodigious research in documentary and archival sources and in-depth interviews, their lively book provides vivid details about Wilson's life, including a clear sense of his gentle yet mischievous personality. Burch and Joyner adroitly link his particular tragic story with the broader daily depredations of segregation as experienced by African-Americans, as well as by deaf persons, in the Jim Crow South.

Wilson's moving personal story thus exemplifies the lives of thousands of other institutionalized individuals with disabilities, many of whom were also persons of color. In a sense, we are empirically aware of their bleak existence even as most of their individual circumstances have vanished. *Unspeakable* makes a major contribution in this regard, and it is also an important cautionary tale against the continuing impact of intersectional forms of discrimination, undervaluing human potential, paternalism, and gross administrative failure.

The chronology of Junius Wilson's life is simple and cruel. Born deaf to subsistence farmers in Castle Hayne, outside Wilmington, North Carolina, Wilson was expected to contribute to his family's income by working the land, but he did not do so much at least in part because of his inability to understand instructions. At age seven, his family sent him without notice to the North Carolina School for the Colored Blind and Deaf, which he attended for nearly a decade. For reasons not discovered by Burch and Joyner, however, sixteen-year-old Wilson remained behind after the school's annual visit to the state fair. This dalliance resulted in his expulsion and quick return home.

Perceived as burdensome by his extended family, again at least partially due to his and their inability to communicate, a false rape accusation was made against Wilson by one member of his extended family, apparently on behalf of another. After a strikingly perfunctory hearing, Wilson was assigned to the State Hospital for the Colored Insane (later renamed Cherry Hospital). There, due largely to bureaucratic incompetence, malaise, and inertia, he spent the remainder of his days.

Unspeakable does an extraordinary job in telling Junius Wilson's life story in nonjudgmental but highly illustrative and effective context. The authors note, for instance, that the false rape accusation was craftily constructed using an alleged African-American victim. Had the purported victim been white, even an unidentified white, Wilson might not have lived to see a judicial proceeding. *Unspeakable* likewise points out that the initial confinement proceeding against Wilson was held just when the blatantly racist film, *Birth of a Nation*, was shown in his hometown. One of that movie's incendiary themes was the insatiable sexual appetite of African-American males, and Wilson's involuntary incarceration in the absence of plausible evidence seems horrible yet unsurprising with the film as backdrop, within the context of rural North Carolina in the years after World War I.

Burch and Joyner also demonstrate how general ignorance regarding Wilson's deafness—specifically his inability to communicate with nondeaf individuals on aural-centric terms—led to erroneous assumptions about his lack of mental competence. It likewise resulted in other misconceptions, such as misinterpretation of Wilson's intentions when he touched other people. Although this type of behavior is a standard tactic among deaf individuals when endeavoring to get another person's attention, it was deemed inappropriate or even violent behavior and bolstered labeling Wilson as criminally insane and mentally deficient. That he had been taught Raleigh signs, a specific kind of sign language within the black community, was not recognized by anyone for over 60 years.

Perhaps most significantly, *Unspeakable* underscores the recursive effect of multiple forms of discrimination—in this book, race and disability. Because Raleigh signs deviate from the more standard American Sign Language used by

whites, Wilson's inability to be understood when incarcerated on criminal charges was considered "feeble-mindedness," a false characterization that then channeled most of his long life. It was not until the 1960s that administrators at then-Cherry Hospital finally ascertained that Wilson was deaf. Even then, that information was kept hidden away in a medical file and only discovered years later, by a racially integrated treatment team.

Burch and Joyner vividly portray the power of inertia as well as some of the jagged edges of paternalism. They offer a nuanced portrait of the frustrations and vulnerabilities experienced by even impressive advocates for Wilson, such as social worker John Wasson and attorney Paul Pooley. The authors convincingly describe how, when people outside the hospital finally began to scrutinize Wilson's case, there was "a radical disconnect . . . between [the hospital's] long-standing vision of Wilson and a new, more complicated picture of the man" (118). They explore admirably some of the complex strengths and limitations of various "helping" professions. And they convey well how even some of Wilson's most effective champions could only see him through "'hearing' eyes" (118), or otherwise remained largely blinkered by race and additional key factors. (One quibble, which detracts only slightly from the book's many great virtues, involves several instances of inaccurate word choices. An inadvertently amusing example is the reference to "pigeon" rather than "pidgin" (132, 204)—an important distinction in discussing language, such as Raleigh signs.)

Unspeakable is a tragic and eloquent depiction of the confluence of problems that beset both disabled persons and African-Americans. As the civil rights movement gained traction in the 1960s, Wilson's situation changed for the better. Cherry Hospital's integration introduced him to black doctors, social workers, and other deaf African-Americans. Advances in disability rights facilitated recognition of Wilson's deafness, and precipitated advocacy on his behalf. Ultimately, Wilson's last years at Cherry Hospital were more happily spent, but his desire to live at home and with family, remained sadly unfulfilled.

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