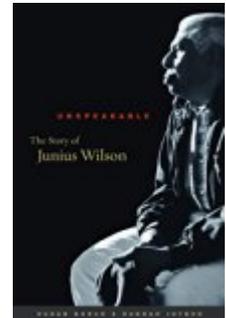




Susan Burch, Hannah Joyner. *Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 304 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3155-7.



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In its long, torturous history, Jim Crow claimed many casualties, perhaps none more tragic than Junius Wilson. For seventy-six years, Wilson was confined to a North Carolina State Hospital for the Colored Insane, although he was neither a criminal nor insane. Wilson's gripping story--described as a "Southern Gothic horror tale"--tells of a man isolated from the world by the near impenetrable barriers of poverty, race, and disability (p. 195). It reveals a deaf man whose humanity was denied to him at almost every turn by the vicissitudes of place and time. Yet Wilson's survival is both a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and a window into the intersections of some of the most insidious inequalities in American life.

Unspeakable provides a unique biography of Jim Crow through the biography of a single man. Wilson was born into a poor black farming family in 1908, a time that Rayford Logan (1897-1982) famously described as the nadir of American race relations. Wilson's family struggled to eke out a living from the land while living under the con-

stant threat of white violence. Young Junius's deafness and general inability for work was a constant source of anxiety for his family, stretching their already meager resources. In response, the family shipped the young boy to the North Carolina State Hospital for the Colored Blind and Deaf. There, Wilson was able to develop a rudimentary vocabulary in Raleigh signs, an indigenous form of black sign language, and forge a deaf community with fellow African Americans. However, after the sixteen-year-old Wilson took an unexplained and unsupervised sojourn during the annual school trip to the local Negro Fair he was quickly expelled.

Wilson returned to a broken family who neither understood him nor wanted him. Financial considerations, fear, and ignorance of deaf culture led to one of Wilson's extended family members bringing a false rape accusation against him on behalf of a female relative. Wilson was arrested and committed to the criminal ward of the North Carolina State Hospital for the Colored Insane, later renamed Cherry Hospital. Although

Wilson was eventually transferred out of the criminal ward, he spent the rest of his life at Cherry Hospital. However, with the demise of Jim Crow, and the respective rise of the civil rights and disability rights movements in the 1960s and 1980s, Wilson's situation gradually improved and he was eventually able to live out his final days with a measure of dignity in a small cottage on the hospital grounds.

Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner document Wilson's life in incisive, yet compassionate, terms. Through exhaustive archival research, oral histories, and extensive interviews, they adroitly untangle the twisted web of race, class, gender, and disability that ensnared Wilson for much of his life. Most important, they preserve Wilson's humanity by conceding that differences of race, class, gender, geography, and time prevent them from ever truly knowing their subject. Wilson is spared the patronizing indignity of being reduced to a definitively "known" object, or a well of racial pathologies. Instead, the authors acknowledge him as someone "who more closely resembles a silhouette than a portrait" and remains "frustratingly elusive" (p. 6).

Born black and poor in the Jim Crow South, Wilson began life with limited opportunities. However, as a deaf man he constantly ran the risk of unwittingly transgressing the social and sexual customs of Jim Crow in his furtive attempts to communicate, i.e., inappropriate touching or yelling, or his simple failure to heed the admonishments of whites. Burch and Joyner argue that although the fact that Wilson's alleged rape victim was black and not white undoubtedly saved his life, it did reinforce the characterization of the black man as sexual predator. Soon after his arrival at Cherry Hill, Wilson became one of the first North Carolinians to be forcibly castrated under the state's new sterilization law.

Wilson's castration speaks to one of the book's major themes: disability and institutionalization. Along with the pernicious influences of race and

class, Wilson was also victimized by medical hubris and bureaucratic inertia. Wilson came of age in an era when medical and political elites tried to frame social policy along biological lines. Such theories as eugenics linked form to function when delineating an individual's suspected degeneracy. Wilson's blackness and deafness therefore rendered him incurably defective and "feeble-minded." The disabled black body became the repository of a constellation of various social ills--disability, poverty, sexual deviance--from which the general (read "white") public had to be protected.

Accordingly, institutions like Cherry Hill saw their role as custodial rather than curative in nature. The institutional logic of Jim Crow eugenics justified Wilson's personal isolation, and segregation as a whole, as both a social and biological imperative. Ultimately hospital officials lacked the mandate and the means to effectively integrate Wilson into a supportive deaf community. Even Wilson's most well-meaning advocates, trapped within the rhetoric of segregation and institutionalization, at times slipped into enfeebling paternalism.

Indeed, one of *Unspeakable's* most lasting contributions is the way in which it foregrounds language as a metaphor and medium of historical change. Through Wilson's story we come to better understand how "insane" and "inmate" were replaced by "psychotic survivor" and "patient" in a specific place and time. Moreover, language, or Wilson's lack of it, had a profound impact on his own life and the perceptions others held of him. Burch and Joyner posit a language that is not merely performative, but constitutive of the "mosaic" of social factors and identities that governed Wilson's experience (p. 5).

Unspeakable is a significant contribution to African American history and the burgeoning fields of deaf and disability histories. Burch and Joyner build on Catherine J. Kudlick's argument for "another 'other'" by using an analysis of dis-

ability to integrate concurrent networks of social difference such as race and class.[1] Much like Susan Schweik's recent analysis of anti-begging ordinances, or "Ugly Laws" (*The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* [2009]), *Unspeakable* links race and disability through the uniquely American rhetoric of dependence. Wilson was viewed as a threat or menace by his family, state, and hospital officials, in large part because he was an economic liability. His arrest, castration, and confinement all raise troubling but urgent questions about the ways disability informs the process of social marginalization. Though at times the minutiae of Wilson's life obscure the broader analysis, *Unspeakable* is a remarkable and humane study of the political economy of race and disability in twentieth-century America.

Note

[1]. Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003): 763-793.

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