

# Poor, Poor Julian: Narrative, Performance and An Enslaved Carolina Indian in Colonial Massachusetts

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On March 22, 1732/3, at Boston, there occurred "Severity of the Weather, occasioned by a hard Wind at Northeast and Snow," noted in several diaries as well as town newspapers, when the "Carolina" Indian Julian was executed for murder. He had been taken to the Brattle Square Church, place of worship for many of Boston's people of color, where Reverend Benjamin Colman delivered a Thursday Lecture about his crime. From published accounts, we know Colman adapted passages from the Gospel of Luke about the penitent thief at Golgotha who recognized the innocence of Jesus, acknowledged his own guilt, and was promised a place in paradise. After Colman's sermon, Julian was visited at the Boston jail by Reverend Mather Byles. Byles prayed with him and accompanied the Indian to the place of execution. At the gallows Julian supposedly behaved with great decorum and "behav'd very penitently till he was turned off into an awful Eternity." In this March blizzard, thus, ended both the life of "Poor Julian" and a veritable whirlwind of narratives produced by Julian, newspaper reportage, diary entries and public discussion of Julian and his crime.

In an eleven year period from 1727 to 1738, for example, the lives of three other executed Indians became familiar to New Englanders, memorable through newspaper accounts, dying speeches or broadsides, well known through published texts about their lives; however, Julian's narratives are the only known documents produced in colonial New England by an Indian slave.

While some scholars consider these Natives manipulated by ministers producing narratives of their lives, Julian manipulates the printed word, in multiple versions of his life referring to himself as "Poor Julian." So many narratives in verse or prose come from his hand that a week before his execution he repudiates prior versions he's released and, on the day of his death, revokes all earlier writings in favor of a final, definitive story of his life. Two of the extant narratives are within the Early American Imprint series. A third is not attributed to him by Evans. His other narratives may not have survived given the ephemeral nature of broadsides from the colonial period. In these writings, however, Julian incites a discourse around his life and crime. He excites and inflames a fear of people of color at a time when Euro Americans of region began associating color with servitude.

As Julian selects which ministers are to preach on his case and even opens his Bible suggesting to some of Boston's more venerable pastors specific lines of scripture appropriate to his situation, Julian orchestrates spoken and printed texts about him. For example, we learn from Reverend Samuel Checkley that "when with him in Goal, the other Day, he took his Bible and turned" to a text, Julian affirming "he had been thinking of it as one suitable for me to preach at this time."

On the Sunday after his sentencing and “according to his Desire, he went Yesterday in the Afternoon to hear Rev. Mr. Byles Preach.” At the time Mather Byles was a young minister beginning his career, in search of a pulpit since 1729 and only ordained on December 25, 1732; still, Byles “entertain’d the numerous Audience with an excellent Discourse, prepared and adapted to the miserable Circumstances of the Criminal from Psal. LI.14 Deliver me from Blood-guiltiness, etc.”

A week later Julian attended services at the church of Reverend Samuel Checkley where on the morning of March 4, 1732/3, he heard a sermon entitled Murder a great and crying sin. Julian returned for afternoon services during which Checkley preached Mercy with God for the Chief of Sinners. As he listened to these sermons Julian appeared “very penitent” during their delivery, according to published reports.

On March 18, the Sunday before his scheduled execution, Julian was again in Checkley’s church where he heard another sermon, Sinners minded of a future Judgement. During this period between condemnation and his execution, one Boston newspaper reported that “the Rev. Ministers of the Town,” expended “a great deal of Pains with the unhappy Criminal, to prepare him for his approaching Change and ‘tis hoped their Labours have not been in Vain.” Additionally, on the day of his execution, Julian was present at yet another sermon, a final teaching on his crime preached by Reverend Benjamin Colman.

With each of his successful narratives—all of them perhaps dubious—Julian utilizes revelation as means of obscuring and concealing himself within text. His production of discourse is subversion. The proposed paper would review Julian’s crime and the print material surrounding his trial and execution, demonstrating that where it is often tempting to imagine Indians of the eighteenth century “victimized” by the printed word, Julian offers a compelling example of Native American resistance within the colonial discourse, an instance of hegemonic discourse turned upside down.