

Between the Pulpit and the Gallows: Forging Race and Identity in 18th Century New England

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When Cotton Mather stepped into the pulpit on the twenty-fifth of May in 1721, he looked out onto the “vast” congregation and saw not an array of unfamiliar faces, but rather an assembly of sinners who he was divinely instructed to lead back into God’s loving embrace.¹ He was to deliver an execution sermon entitled *Tremenda. The dreadful sound with which the wicked are to be thunderstruck*, ostensibly designed for the condemned Joseph Hanno, a freed slave who had murdered his wife with an axe and was sentenced to be hanged.² Those in attendance lined the Boston streets with great anticipation as they awaited the grand purge of evil from their town they hoped would prevent the wrath of an angered God.³ Yet, as Mather began to speak, the crowd must have realized that Hanno—the “miserable African”—did not represent the sole focus of the fifty-eight year old preacher. “*WHO is the Wicked Man?*” he asked the crowd.⁴ The answer, with the foreign African in chains sitting on the gallows for the murder of his spouse, should have been evident. But Mather was less concerned with affirming the prejudice of the masses, and he instead chose to extend the condemnation to those in the audience. “There is not a Just Man upon Earth,” he proclaimed, “who doeth good and

¹ Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, volume 2, (New York: Ungar, 1957), 620.

² Cotton Mather, *Tremenda. The dreadful sound with which the wicked are to be thunderstruck: In a sermon delivered unto a great assembly, in which was present, a miserable African, just going to be executed for a most inhumane and uncommon murder. At Boston, May 25th. 1721.: To which is added, a conference between a minister and the prisoner, on the day before his execution. : (One line from Deuteronomy)*, (Boston, B. Green, 1721), 34.

³ Scott D. Seay, *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth: Capital Crime, Execution Preaching, and Theology in Early New England* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 44.

⁴ For this analysis, I have chosen to reproduce the primary sources as they were written, emphasis and all, unless otherwise noted.

sinneth not.”⁵ In that moment, he aligned the lives of traditionally disparate groups: those who are white, and those who are black.

According to Mather, every individual irrespective of race, commits sinful acts. They are “The Servants of Sin,” “The Servants of Corruption,” and “The Captives of the Devil.” The sinner is completely bounded by the vices that “lay Chains upon him.”⁶ Throughout the eighteenth century, white, black, and Native inhabitants of Boston were all deemed sinners under the doctrine of original sin.⁷ That all individuals were descendants of Adam and at least nominally equal among the Puritans is only one way this analysis attempts to discern racial and identity formation in colonial Boston. When a crime was committed, no matter the secularity of the act, the impetus was often cited as being a product of sin. If the act was heinous enough to merit capital punishment, individuals of all races were led to the gallows to hang. This analysis will argue that to be publicly executed for violating the laws of the land legitimized one’s place within the body politic. It conveyed to all in attendance, and those who would later read of the execution in newspapers and printed sermons, that being sentenced to the gallows was the consequence for every person who chose not to abide by laws governing the citizenry. As a result, the diction used by Africans and Natives in their “dying speeches” reflected their understanding of and participation in Puritan society. While the legitimacy of African and Indian authorship in dying speeches and confessions has been highly contested, this study will show that the words of the condemned need not be represented verbatim. Rather, what is of consequence is that ministers represented the language of Africans and Native Americans as their own, thereby reflecting these racialized groups as active and equal participants in the greater Puritan assembly. The use of piety within an event governed by the law forced New England communities to consider both whites and racialized others

⁵ Mather, *Tremenda*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ Scott D. Seay. *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth*, 59.

as equal under two institutions: the church and the state. To hang in the gallows, as tragic as it was, constituted a kind of egalitarianism in an otherwise prejudiced and unfree society.⁸

Central to this analysis will be *Tremenda*, an execution sermon given by Cotton Mather before Joseph Hanno was to be hanged for the murder of his wife, Nanny. Using *Tremenda* will convey that Joseph Hanno and Cotton Mather are emblematic of the society at-large. As a result, the overarching objective of this investigation will be to contribute to the discussion of race and identity formation in early America. If race is to be considered a socio-historical construction, and not tethered to legitimate biological principles, then it is important to take note of how individuals and groups cultivated their sense of being as it relates to the society in which they exist.⁹ In doing so, it becomes possible to understand how opposing forces have attempted to demarcate these same individuals, contesting their integration into the community. As slaves, servants, and opponents in war, these groups were considered peripheral to the lived experiences of white New Englanders. As all races converged on the gallows, this racial hierarchy was consequently challenged. In the decades leading up to the execution of Joseph Hanno, Puritan society wrestled with this notion of belonging as they considered how to live with their Native and African counterparts.¹⁰

⁸ For a discussion of slavery and freedom represented on a continuum of “unfreedom,” see Jared Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston*. Additional literature that engages with the subject material of death in early America, see Erik Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800*. Furthermore, this study is indebted to the scholarship of Lorenzo Greene who first articulated the importance of the African in colonial New England, no matter the population statistics. The influence of Greene can be discerned from works like *Black Yankees* and *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* by William Pierson and Richard Bailey, respectively. Both scholars have shown the importance of illustrating the lived experiences of historical actors who are considered to be peripheral. While the entry point of this study is capital punishment in New England, the greater objective is to bring attention to the ways in which racialized Africans and Native Americans navigated their religious experiences.

⁹ Barbara Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, Ed. Morgan J. Koussar and James McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, 143-177); “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review* 181 (May/June 1990): 95-118.

¹⁰ How Puritans considered the assimilation of people of color is thoroughly discussed by Richard

In this analysis, the contemplative process of Puritan race and identity formation, as it relates to Africans and African Americans, can be located in three thematic conceptions. The first category of identity formation is “Sin” within the Puritan community. That the fall of Adam is believed to have marred each human’s relationship with God, black and white Christians can be seen as brethren striving towards oneness with their divine creator. In the slow abandonment of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, Puritans placed the burden of responsibility of obtaining God’s grace onto the individual.

Secondly, “Crime” must be considered in Puritan society. This will include discussion on types of miscreant behavior, but most importantly, how the intertwining of crime and sin cultivated a unique Puritan moral identity. In sentencing individuals of all races to the gallows for the same crimes, judicial authorities were situating otherwise disparate groups, as equal under law. That capital punishment was performed publicly well into the nineteenth century, and that execution sermons often addressed the sins of those in the audience along with the condemned, leads us to reasonably conclude that the gallows helped equate persons of color with the rest of the body politic.

Lastly, “Death” contributed largely to identity formation, as the finality of one’s earthly life informed the quotidian rhythms of existence. In death, Puritan exceptionalism and angst becomes most discernible. This analysis largely emphasizes the chance for redemption for those whose faith had been marred by misdeeds. If a sinner made a conscious decision to mend sullied relations with the creator, then god would accommodate the condemned with the extension of his grace. The Puritans defined this restoration of faith as “regeneration,” or a new birth in Christ, and believed that this redemption could occur at any moment so long the faith is true, and the sinner was still alive.¹¹ When Cotton Mather implored

A. Bailey in *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England*.

¹¹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 9.

Joseph Hanno to repudiate his sins and to “Turn and Live to GOD” the day before his execution, he showed how God’s grace could be extended to any individual of faith, irrespective of race, at any time during their earthly lives. In Hanno’s response that he’d “fly to the *Mercy of God*,” he actualized his participation in Boston’s Puritan community by speaking in familiar terms of religiosity.

Sin

Speaking on the new English settlement across the Atlantic, John Winthrop stated that colonists should see themselves as setting an example for the world as a “Citty upon a Hill.” If the settlers of Massachusetts Bay failed to fulfill the covenant of God, He would make an example out of them as a “by-word through the world,” and their enemies would use the opportunity to speak “evill of the ways of god and all professours for Gods sake.”¹² To understand Puritan exceptionalism is to first comprehend the grand impetus behind their faith. If we accept that Puritans defined themselves in relation to their harmonious relationship with God, as predicated on being the exemplar of all Christians, then the consequential nature of individual sins and sinners becomes clear. When Cotton Mather imposed the responsibility on the congregation to “Let none remain any longer Among the Wicked,” he was not only speaking of the selflessness of Christian duty, but even more acutely, he was trying to save his flock from God’s wrath.¹³ Over four decades before Cotton warned the assembly during *Tremenda*, his father Increase had written in a sermon entitled *The Wicked Man’s Portion* that “If ever *New-England* be destroyed, this very sin of disobedience...will be the ruine of this Land.”¹⁴ The sins of an individual did not only represent the moral failing of one person, but also a fracture between God and the entire body politic.

¹² Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 11.

¹³ Cotton Mather, *Tremenda*, 19.

¹⁴ Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the origins of American Print Culture, 1674-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 48.

It becomes important to distinguish between the sins of the quotidian variety and the sins of the “Wicked.” As discussed in the introduction, Cotton Mather believed that all men were sinners as a result of innate depravity caused by the fall of Adam. Yet, the souls of God’s faithful children could be redeemed with an assiduous proclamation of faith. When one accepts God as the savior, God extends his grace which allows the anguished Puritan to live unhindered by their corrupt nature. In *Pillars of Salt*, Mather writes of a restraining grace that God provides the sinner. “A man would soon Murder his Father & Mother, Destroy his own Wife, and Debauch his Neighbors, Blaspheme God, and Fire the Town, & Run a muck among the people, if God should not Lay upon him Restraints of Conscience.”¹⁵ Original sin instilled a “hellish Disposition, to *Every Sinner*, and while Puritans separated themselves from their predecessors in their belief of free will, they still viewed God’s grace as a gentle hand that acted as a guide and a shield from the temptations of the world.¹⁶ Yet, Puritans remained sinners, and this would manifest itself in offenses not just of the wicked variety. The Puritan belief rested on their own imperfections, necessitating assistance from God, and to be free from all sin would contradict the foundation of their faith. Mather, for example, separates the wicked from the benign in the latter’s lack of consent to sin. The “Child of GOD” does not give a direct “Yea, of Consent; but when he Sins, he does not give his, No, so livelily as he ought to do.” Conversely, the “*Wicked Man Sins with a Full Consent: He is one who Chooses to Sin: Yea, He is one who prefers a way of sin*” and even “*Resolves to sin.*”¹⁷

¹⁵ Cotton Mather, *Pillars of Salt. An history of some criminals executed in this land, for capital crimes. With some of their dying speeches; collected and published, for the warning of such as live in destructive courses of ungodliness. Whereto is added, for the better improvement of this history, a brief discourse about the dreadful justice of God, in punishing of sin, with sin.* [Two lines from Deuteronomy] (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1699), 17.

¹⁶ Cotton Mather, *The curbed sinner. A discourse upon the gracious and wondrous restraints laid by the providence of the glorious God, on the sinful children of men, to withhold them from sinning against him. Occasioned by a sentence of death, passed on a poor young man, for the murder of his companion. With some historical passages referring to that unhappy spectacle.* [Two lines from Job] (Boston: J. Allen, 1713).

¹⁷ Mather, *Tremenda*, 6.

Adam's fall made all his descendants inclined to sin, but with faith, God extends a restraining grace that prevents his children from committing acts that could fracture their union with the Lord. When a person pledges themselves to a dishonorable transgression, it is not a result of God passively allowing one of his children to sin, nor is it indicative of an individual being inherently worse than his neighbor.¹⁸ Puritans believed that the repeated act of sinning, coupled with the desire and willingness to sin, angered God and eventually caused him to remove the restraining grace. This left the sinner, innately depraved and given to sin, to his own natural impulses. If a sinner showed God that he did not want his grace, then God would allow the wicked man to live as an example of what a withered faith looked like. Ministers often used execution sermons to reaffirm the absence of a restraining grace and the consequences that would follow. Perhaps the Northport minister Nathaniel Clap summarized the effect of choosing wickedness over grace most succinctly when he wrote that "If you leave God, God may leave you."¹⁹ In no event that transpired is this isolation most evident then when one was made to stand on the gallows, facing the assembly of onlookers who had traveled to see "the condemned man arrive and face his eternal fate."²⁰

One prominent example of God's abandonment of the wicked occurred nearly three decades before Joseph Hanno was led to the Boston gallows to be punished for his own immorality. Two women, one white and one black, were sentenced to hang next to one another for the murder of their children. Presiding over the service was Cotton Mather, and most of what we know about these two women is from his reflection on the execution in *Pillars of Salt*, as well as Massachusetts court records and one diary entry

¹⁸ Seay, *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth*, 53.

¹⁹ Nathaniel Clap, *The Lord's voice, crying to his people: in some extraordinary dispensations considered in a sermon, upon Micah VI. 9. Preached 27 d. 1 m. 1715. Occasioned by the terrible tragedies of a man barbarously murdering his wife and her sister, and then burning his house, March 22, 1715. Together with some account about the poor man written for the benefit of the living.* By Nathaniel Clap, M.A. Preacher of the Gospel at N. Port, R. Island (Boston: B. Green, 1715), 48.

²⁰ Seay, *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth*, 11.

from Samuel Sewall, a prominent judicial official in Boston.²¹ The white woman was named Elizabeth Emerson, an unmarried twenty-seven-year-old of Essex County who had an affair with a married man named Samuel Ladd. Eventually, she became pregnant and gave birth to twin girls, only to put the infants into a pillow case that she sewed up and buried in her backyard. Failing to fully conceal her pregnancy, Elizabeth was not able to explain why she was without progeny. This necessitated a search of the Emerson property, and officials recovered the pillowcase and the corpses of her twin girls. After a series of court proceedings, a verdict was reached that Elizabeth had willfully murdered her two children and was sentenced to death by hanging on June 8th, 1693. On that same day, a black slave named Negress Grace was sentenced to the gallows for the same crime of infanticide. She belonged to a merchant named James Taylor, and while it is unclear whether or not the child was his, it is known that she gave birth in isolation before throwing her progeny down the latrine. Hanging side by side, the “Two Young Women were Executed at Boston, for murdering their Bastard Children,” and at least during their trial and punishment, Elizabeth and Grace were equal.²²

While the law of the land determined which crime necessitated the gallows, it was the minister who articulated the meanings of execution day to the rest of the populace. When delivering his sermon for the two condemned women, Mather read Elizabeth’s written confession aloud for the assembly to hear. As a pattern of execution sermons, this had the effect of making her sins applicable to the entirety of the congregation as she used the shared language of a waning faith, regret, and hope for redemption. She was driven to crime after she “provoked the Holy God to leave me unto that Folly of my own Heart,” a perversion that—according to the doctrine of Original Sin—lay dormant in each person’s soul. Elizabeth was raised a Christian and baptized in the faith, but as she aged, she “forgot the *Bonds* that were laid upon me to be the

²¹ Daniel Allen Hearn, *Legal Executions in New England: A Comprehensive Reference, 1623-1960* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company), 402-403.

²² Mather, *Pillars of Salt*, 99.

Lords.” This alone did not result in God’s abandonment, but with continued wickedness and her “Delay to Repent,” it “provoked God to leave me unto the Crimes, for which I am now to Dy.” She wistfully reflected that had she “feriously Repented” the first time she fell to sin, “I do suppose, I had not been left unto what followed.”²³ While capital punishment was used to purge the land of evil, it was concurrently implemented by ministers to cultivate and reaffirm the moral identity of the community. If weekly sermons and the Bible proved insufficient, the gallows represented one additional impetus to remain faithful to the Lord and to repudiate one’s inherent depravity.

Writing in his diary, Mather began his year with an entry that expressed his own acute awareness of his sinfulness. “Tis amazing, tis amazing,” he reflected, “that such a feeble, and such a fruitless, and such a sinful Thing as I am, should be still continued in the World!” Two years later, he ended his year with a similar sentiment, noting that he has “come to the End of another Year, overwhelmed with Confusion, when I look back on the Sin and Sloth constantly attending me in it.”²⁴ Conversely, his addled rumination of his place in this world is juxtaposed with his lucid understanding of his responsibility to “be used as a servant and a witness of my incomparable *Jesus*.” In doing so, he would “fly unto the great Sacrifice for the Congregation” and “touch the Consciences of the guilty Sinners...to recover the Wicked out of their Miscarriages, or to remove the accursed Things.”²⁵ What can be discerned, then, from Mather’s personal reflections is this: his sense of being was predicated on glorifying his God, and that was done in leading the flock away from their wicked ways and into the Lord’s loving embrace.

One can even begin to at least conjecture that Mather’s proselytization was reflective of a reckoning with the tormented souls of himself and those who he desired to lead to Christ. When

²³ Ibid., 99, 101.

²⁴ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather vol 2.*, 1, 162.

²⁵ Ibid., 61, 67, 70.

he stood in front of the assembly who gathered to see Joseph Hanno executed for the most “uncommon murder,” Mather spoke in a way to turn an “inhumane” sin into an event that would be relatable to all. “But, is the *Black Thing* that you have in Irons here before you, the only One that may be charged with Murdering his *Wife* among us?” “No;” he proclaimed. “Husbands that follow Courses which Grieve, and even Kill their *Wives*; *Husbands* who like the Beast we read of, *Speak like Dragons*, and whose *Words* are *drawn Swords* upon their *Wives*.” According to Mather, then, discourse could be as deadly as Hanno’s axe. “...the poor *Wives* dy before their Time, and if their *Broken Hearts* might have the cause of their *Death* Legible upon them, there would be found some such words as these; *A Cruel Husband has hastened it!*”²⁶ Mather, whose first two wives had succumbed to disease and the third, while alive, was said to have suffered from mania, was all too familiar with the dangers of words as swords.²⁷ While the sins of denigration may not constitute grounds for capital punishment, Mather’s sermon situates himself, the congregation, and Joseph Hanno as congruent beings defined by sin.

Crime

During a wintry afternoon in Boston in 1685, a man named James Morgan drank himself to excess in a tipping house. His beverage must have incited his latent fervor as, before long, he found himself in a dispute with Joseph Johnson, another patron. The quarrel escalated into a physical altercation, resulting in Morgan impaling Johnson with a metal spit. A jury convicted him of “willful” murder, and he was sentenced to hang in the gallows where Increase and a young Cotton Mather delivered the execution sermon.²⁸ In the elder Mather’s oration, he writes that “if (a man) smite his Neighbour so that he die, then he is a Murderer.” Increase Mather did not substantiate this claim with legislation—though that association with the law is implicit since it was the jury who

²⁶ Mather, *Tremenda*, 26.

²⁷ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather* vol 2., 583-586.

²⁸ Hearn, *Legal Executions in New England*, 56.

sentenced Morgan to death—rather, he used the Bible. “Here is the punishment to be inflicted on such a Criminal,” he continued. “Only God’s Order was to be observed. The Murderer was to be put to death...for a Sin so great...by the hand of Publick Justice.”²⁹ One does not need to speculate to discern the union of church and state in public executions. It was the jury who wielded the heavy hand of the law (an edict claimed to be from the word of the Lord), but it was the minister who was to provide the final meaning of the event. In this context, both Mather and the court were representative of this “Publick Justice.”

In the effort to uphold the veil of separate institutions, there were both ostensible secular and religious motivations for capital punishment. Irrespective of the church, justifications for the gallows included the need for deterring other criminals, as well as the desire of the victim or their family to rectify the misfortune.³⁰ Ministers offered other reasons that were of the abstract variety, including the necessitated act of mending the breach of both the criminal and his or her with God.³¹ While the diction created an imagined division between church and state, the effects were the same. The Judiciary wished to deter crime with the prospect of death, and ministers wanted to intimidate the inherently depraved so as not to risk eternal damnation, or impending doom from an angry God.³² After the convicted had perished, justice and God had been served.

The first criminal codes in Massachusetts imposed the death penalty for offenses explicitly stated in the Bible such as murder and bestiality, but eventually the law extended the gallows

²⁹ Increase Mather, A sermon occasioned by the execution of a man found guilty of murder: preached at Boston in New-England, March 11th 1686. (Together with the confession, last expressions, and solemn warning of that murderer, to all persons; especially to young men, to beware of those sins which brought him to his miserable end). (Boston: Joseph Browning, 1686).

³⁰ Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, 105.

³¹ Seay, *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth*, 44.

³² See David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgement: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

to secular crimes of committed burglary, arson and piracy.³³ Even if an offense was not biblically condemned, ministers and judiciaries alike saw crime as an assault on the hegemonic relations of a community that needed to be rectified. It not only represented a moral failing on the part of the individual, but it also revealed the shortcomings of religious and civil instruction by the patriarchal figures in colonial society.³⁴ Man is inherently sinful, but he is supposed to be nurtured with instruction—first by his father, then by his minister (an extension of God) and, finally, the magistrate. Puritan ministerial identity was predicated on their ability to impart knowledge to the depraved, and those teachings helped to situate ministers as the shepherd of their “flock.” When this collective belief was contested, ministers were quick to attach labels of filial disobedience to the criminal, deeming them an “ungrateful child” whose misdeeds had affected all of society.³⁵

This designation of disobedient progeny becomes important, as ministers attempted to assert that lawbreakers—particularly those who had received Christian instruction—had committed a crime in spite of their religious rearing. Ministers were obligated to describe transgressions in this way, or else religious education as moral instruction would fail to carry influence. After all, it was Mather who appealed to masters to educate their slaves in *The Negro Christianized*. “With what Face can you call your selves *Christians*,” Mather began, “if you do nothing that your *Servants* also may become *Christians*?” Speaking in paternalistic terms, he continued, proclaiming that those allowing “a part of their *Families* (to) remain Heathen” are themselves “worse than an Infidel.”³⁶ Over a decade after he published his treatise, Mather used his own finances to open a school for the “Instruction of poor Negro’s, and Indians” in their

³³ See Hearn, *Legal Executions in New England*.

³⁴ Richard Slotkin. "Narratives of Negro Crime in New England, 1675-1800." *American Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1973): 3-31

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Cotton Mather, *An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, The Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), 7.

“Catechisms” and “Scriptures.”³⁷ While his spiritual egalitarianism should not be mistaken as a censure on slavery, Mather’s views on religious inclusion of racialized others demarcated him from his antecedents.

Cotton Mather was presented with a challenge, then, with the crime and execution of Joseph Hanno. The “miserable African” had received an upbringing of “very Distinguishing Privileges,” and still bludgeoned his wife with an ax before slitting her throat and leaving her to die on their shared bed.³⁸ Mather’s own despair for his spiritual progeny is palpable, telling the congregation that Hanno’s actions are made worse knowing he had been “so distinguished from the most of his Complexion.”³⁹ He continued, almost as though he was trying to make sense of the crime himself:

“He was favoured with a Religious Education, which Enabled him to Read the *Oracles* of GOD, and learn the Principles of Christianity; and then had an Emancipation into a *Liberty*, which he has been too unthankful for. He made a Profession of Religion, and was *Baptised*, and stood a Candidate for *Communion* in the Church; which indeed the Faithful *Pastors*, fearing *Hypocrisy* in him, which is now discovered, wisely delay’d unto him. Now, for One who so *Knew the Will of our Glorious Master*, to do as he has done; for One under such Obligations, to be a Pattern of all Goodness unto other *Ethiopians*, to prove of so Doubly and so Deeply *Black* a Character; Oh! how *Many* & how severe *Stripes*, in the Infernal Prison must such an One be worthy of! *Ungrateful Wretch!* What art thou worthy of!”

Using Mather’s own words, we can conclude that Hanno had received a prodigious amount of instruction, including learning how to read. He was baptized in the faith, and was nearly made a member of the Church. Most importantly, Hanno was supposed to

³⁷ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather* vol. 2, 500, 442.

³⁸ Mather, *Tremenda*, 23, 34.

³⁹ Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England*, 39.

have been an example to other Africans, freed and enslaved, and perhaps even confirmation to Mather's assembly that the word of God could change the deepest "Black Character" to one that is "White as the Snow and the Wooll."⁴⁰ Yet, even with the graveness of Hanno's crime, there remained hope for redemption after one's earthly life. No matter the offense, God still had the choice to extend his Grace if the transgressor desired it. "Tho' if you seek to Him for it," Mather expressed to Hanno, "there is *Hope*, and it is a *Sign*, that He will grant it."⁴¹ The law of the land necessitated the gallows, and after the jury made their decision, the execution would take place. But, the purging of evil from the community is only a partial justification for capital punishment. For ministers, the gallows were ideally a transitory locale that represented a swift departure from the community from which their crime could not be erased. But, with an assiduous faith, the hope was that one may be able to obtain forgiveness in death.

Death

Presented with the cart that would carry her to the place of execution, Esther Rogers, a white woman, expressed her desire to walk instead. The sheriff acquiesced, and she and her minister John Rogers, of which there was no relation, made their way toward the gallows.⁴² She had been condemned and sentenced to hang by the Essex County Assizes for two infanticides; one occurring in 1697, and the other in 1700. At only twenty-one years old, Esther's earthly life would cease not because of disease, or natural causes, but because she had turned away from God.⁴³ Yet, Esther "retained an invisible Courage" in the face of death. Mystified, John Rogers

⁴⁰ Mather, *Tremenda*, 24.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴² John Rogers, *Death the certain wages of sin to the impenitent: life the sure reward of grace to the penitent: together with the only way for youth to avoid the former, and attain the latter. Deliver'd in three lecture sermons; occasioned by the imprisonment, condemnation and execution, of a young woman, who was guilty of murdering her infant begotten in whoredom. To which is added, an account of her manner of life & death, in which the glory of free grace is displayed. By Mr. John Rogers, Pastor of the Church of Ipswich. [One line from Timothy]* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1701), 143.

⁴³ Hearn, *Legal Executions in New England*, 107.

asked “How can your heart abide! Dont you here behold terrible displays of Justice: you are surrounded with Armed men, which signifies that God and man has determined to rid the World of you.” He continued, bringing attention to the finality of what “in a few Minutes” she would face, even directing her attention to the coffin where her “perishing Body” would be placed. “How can you bear the sight of all these things?” Esther answered with a “smiling countenance”: “I know I am going to the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁴ After John Rogers delivered his sermon, Esther used her last few earthly breaths to warn the young members of the crowd, and to offer her prayers up to heaven. “O Lord Jesus Look down upon me, and Save my Soul; I trust thou wilt Receive my Soul.” Upon Esther’s last words, the minister assured her that “We have Recommended you to God, and done all we can for you. If your Hopes can lay hold upon the irresistible Grace and Mercy of God in Christ, and you can cast your self in His Armes, you are Happy for ever.” With a handkerchief now over her face, Esther received the minister’s words and lifted her “Eyes and Hands” up to heaven. In a final affirmation, Esther cried “Now Lord Jesus, I am a Coming.”⁴⁵

As Esther had done, expressing piety on the gallows was the final demonstration that validated capital punishment. When the condemned experienced a “good death,” which the Puritans believed to be a willingness to die and a hopeful belief that heaven awaited them, the entire community was offered redemption.⁴⁶ The criminal whose act constituted the breach with God had returned to His loving embrace, while the minister and magistrate could both take solace in a final submission of guilt.⁴⁷ As a result, the overarching message to the assembly and those who read the highly decimated execution sermons was that, as long as one

⁴⁴ Rogers, *Death the certain wages of sin to the impenitent*, 143-144.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 147-152.

⁴⁶ On “good deaths” in colonial New England, see Erik R. Seaman, “Reading Indians’ Deathbed Scenes: Ethnohistorical and Representational Approaches.” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 17-47.

⁴⁷ Seay, *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth*, 36.

remained on earth, there remained an opportunity for full repentance. In *Tremenda*, Cotton Mather implores the crowd to seek God's forgiveness. "There is not one of you all, whose *Day of Grace* is yet over with them." "If it were," he declared, "you would not feel such Motions in your Souls as you do. The worst of you all, may yet *Return to GOD*, and in doing so, He will be Reconciled unto you...He does *Beseech you to be Reconciled unto Him*."⁴⁸ In effect, the criminal's conversion and death represented an opportunity for communal rebirth. Even if the newfound devotions of the offender were not an accurate portrayal of their true beliefs, the intended message remained true: redemption was offered to both the miscreant and the community in which they lived. Still, one difference remained between the executed and the assembly. Those sent to the gallows had the privilege of knowing when their earthly lives would end, and most times had mere weeks—from sentencing to hanging—to restore relations with God.⁴⁹ Those in attendance on execution day were not aware of the specific day they would perish, but only that no person evaded the finality of life.

Early inhabitants of New England had become well acquainted with the uncertainty of their lives, and with the ubiquity of early deaths. Scholars have estimated that crude death rates in Boston averaged 37.2 per 1,000 people between 1701 and 1774, and were as high as 103 deaths per 1,000 people during the smallpox epidemic of 1721.⁵⁰ An even more significant loss of population occurred between 1675 and 1676 when nearly thirty percent of the English population, and thousands of Native Americans, died during King Phillip's War.⁵¹ Only one year later, Boston experienced a smallpox epidemic where 150 colonists perished in the first four weeks, and approximately 800 in a

⁴⁸ Mather, *Tremenda*, 21.

⁴⁹ Seay, *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth*, 23.

⁵⁰ Daniel Scott Smith and J. David Hacker. "Cultural Demography: New England Deaths and the Puritan Perception of Risk." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 26, no. 3 (1996): 385.

⁵¹ Robert E. Cray, Jr. "Weltering in Their Own Blood": Puritan Casualties in King Phillip's War." *The Historical Journal of Massachusetts* (2009): 107/

population of 6,000 had died by 1678.⁵² On the eve of the American Revolution, three hundred and seventeen individuals had been sentenced to death in New England, with the first documented case occurring in 1623. One-hundred and ninety-eight of those were white, eighty-seven were Native American, and thirty-two were of African descent.⁵³ While dying is a secular act insofar that one need not be religious to perish, it was expressed by colonists as an event inextricable from divine will. Even as death for the pious individual was presented as a positive transitory experience from this earthly world to eternal life, the finality of dying for sinners represented a perpetual sentence in hell. The end of one's life was a communal reaffirmation of the precariousness of existence, whether pious or not, and the need to remain tethered to principles of asceticism and repentance.⁵⁴

Due to the propensity of deaths caused by external forces such as disease and warfare, Puritans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries believed that communal demise was the result of an angered God. One almanac from 1649, for example, contained a poetic prognostication that read: "Great Earth-quakes frequently (as one relates) / Forerun strange plagues, dearths, wars & change of states / Earths shaking fits by venomous vapors here, How is it that they hurt not, as elsewhere."⁵⁵ In a world controlled by divine instrument, colonists were only ever assured of the day at hand, and whether or not they themselves were recipients of God's grace. "No Wise Man has a, To *Morrow*, for *this World*," Cotton Mather wrote in his *Brief Essay To Awaken in a Dying Man*. Emphasizing the volatility of life and death, he continued, "There is not the Youngest of us, but what, for ought they can say, may be gone into another World, before One Week more be Expired. The

⁵² Bailey, *Race and Redemption*, 20.

⁵³ See Daniel Allen Hearn, *Legal Executions in New England: A Comprehensive Reference, 1623-1960* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1999).

⁵⁴ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgement*, 205.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

Assaults which our Death makes upon us, are very Surprising ones. We are Well one day; Dead the next.”⁵⁶

When Mather penned those words of certainty, it was because he had become all too familiar with the unpredictability of mortality. In 1713, the year his essay on death is published, both Mather’s second wife Elizabeth, and their three children Eleazer, Martha, and Jerusha, all perished from various maladies. Additionally, he was predeceased by his first wife, Abigail, and five of their children.⁵⁷ To make sense of the near unconscionable tragedies of his life, Mather produced essays entitled *The Best Way of Living; Which is to Die Daily* and *The Will of a Father Submitted To*, both written in 1713. In the former, he writes that every individual should become familiar with the pervasiveness of death. “All Ages are Liable to the Stroke of Death! They that are under Six. are as Likely to Dy, as they that are beyond Sixty.” Mather asserts that one can only assuage the anxiety over an unpredictable death by “Dying Daily,” which is to “keep Alive a prudent, perpetual, reasonable suspicion, That this may prove our *Dying Day*.”⁵⁸ In time, when death presented itself for you or your loved one, it was supposed to be willingly embraced, for it meant that God’s earthly intentions for the individual had been fulfilled. In *The Will of a Father Submitted to*, Mather encapsulates this, writing that he was now “Reconciled unto whatever Cup I shall find appointed by my Father for me!”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Cotton Mather, *A Brief Essay to Awaken in a Dying Man, (That is to say, In Every Man,) A proper and a Lively Concern for. A good State After Death. With some Directions, How that Good State is to be Obtained and Ensured* (Boston: T. Green, for D. Henchman, in King-Street, 1713), 20-21.

⁵⁷ See Mather’s Diary Entries both volume I and II, each by Ungar Publishing.

⁵⁸ Cotton Mather, *The Best Way of Living; Which is to Die Daily: Very briefly described and commended in a plain Discourse, Made at a Time, when the Author had newly seen Repeated Strokes of Death, on his own Family. And the Publisher had his salso Struck with a Sudden Death upon a Vital Part of it* (Boston: Printed by J. Allen, 1713).

⁵⁹ Cotton Mather, *The Will of a Father Submitted to. The Duty of Patient Submission to Every Condition which the Providence of God Orders for the Children of Men* (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1713), 19.

For all that Mather had lost, he remained confident that his life had been accordingly designed by the Lord. His suffering, instead of providing doubt, reassured him that he was in the foremost position to serve his congregation as Christ's exemplar. "I behold myself in the Condition of one that is nailed unto a Cross," he says, aligning his plight with that of Jesus. The condition where "all possible *Indignities* heaped upon him, and finds himself stript of everything he had in the World...I *dy daily*, in a continual expectation all these Things."⁶⁰ Perhaps, then, the smallpox epidemic of 1721 created an unusual moment for Mather to serve his flock on the grandest of scales. In April, a British naval vessel carrying members who had caught smallpox arrived in Boston and by May, Mather had become aware that the infected men had come ashore and into town.⁶¹ Using the knowledge of his slave Onesimus, he would eventually become one of the leading figures in the inoculation of Boston.⁶² Even so, he knew well enough that smallpox would infect individuals more swiftly than in the time physicians could possibly vaccinate, and as a result he worked assiduously to prepare the souls for their eternal lives to come. On the twenty-fifth of May, Cotton Mather stepped onto the pulpit to deliver a sermon on Joseph Hanno and other "froward Husbands" and "*Ethiopian Slaves*," but his urgent oration suggests his aim was much greater.

Tremenda. The dreadful sound with which the wicked are to be thunderstruck probed the depths of one's fears, articulating the unpredictably of death and the fragility of existence. Those who made their way to the gallows were probably spurred by their own fascinations and wonders concerning the act of dying and were in turn made privy to the redemptive process of receiving God's grace. Before one is to die, Mather explains to the assembly how they will hear the "*Dreadful Sound*" if they are to remain sinners, but if they are "*Saved with Fear*" and "*Perswaded* into the

⁶⁰ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 475-476.

⁶¹ Amalie M. Kass. "Boston's Historic Smallpox Epidemic." *Massachusetts Historical Review* 14 (2012), 5.

⁶² Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 631.

Methods of Our Salvation, then that dreadful sound with be “drowned with the *Joyful Sound*.”⁶³ As he continues, it becomes increasingly apparent that he is appealing to the perturbation of the audience concerning the speculation over the smallpox that had reached the town’s shores the month prior.⁶⁴ “The Lord will Make thy Plagues wonderful. There are many *Woes* which the word of GOD threatens unto the wicked, in the concerns of this *Life*; and at length an *Early Death*, and a *Grievous Death*.”⁶⁵ What Mather is articulating then, is one must look inward to explain the events of the world. While the community can begin to make reparations to the angered God, as evidenced by the punishment of Joseph Hanno, it is the individual soul that must be reckoned with. Whether one is to hear the dreadful or the joyful sound is determined only by a saving grace and an unwavering faith, and it is Mather who hoped—as the shepherd of his flock—to lead them to God’s loving embrace before the maladies of their town became uncontrollable by any human intervention. “*Death, O Man, is unavoidable,*” he reaffirmed. “*The Day of thy Death, it is Near.*”⁶⁶

Speaking to Joseph Hanno the day before his execution, Mather tells the condemned ex-slave that “You are now to Dy; The Land where you now Live, would be polluted, if you should be spared from *Death*.”⁶⁷ He goes on to say that Hanno must “Turn & Live unto God” and in doing so, his *Sin* may be all pardoned; and that GOD may be Reconciled unto you.”⁶⁸ Yet, Mather is not fully convinced that Hanno will be able to receive God’s grace, and refuses to ever make a definitive proclamation one way or the other, as that would negate the mystery of God that which their faith depended on.⁶⁹ “The *Sacrifice* and *Righteousness* of your

⁶³ Mather, *Tremenda*, 1.

⁶⁴ See Mark S. Weiner, “This ‘Miserable African’: Race, crime, and disease in colonial Boston.” *Common-Place* 4, no. 3 (2004)

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁶⁹ Seay, *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth*, 84.

SAVIOUR; you will hope for the Benefit of it,” Mather said, convinced that most all sentenced to the gallows would desire regeneration before judgement. But, “how dare such a *Sinner* as you are, One so horribly Criminal, hope for such a Thing? What have you to Embolden your *Hope?*”⁷⁰ For Mather believed, as he wrote nearly a decade before *Tremenda*, it is only the “*Righteous* who has *Hope in his Death.*”⁷¹ Concluding with a conditional reprieve, Mather tells Hanno that if he is filled not with the “*Hope of the Hypocrite,*” but instead with the *Faith* in the *Sacrifice* and the *Righteousness* of your SAVIOUR,” then God may just liberate his soul.

After the Gallows

Following Mather’s sermon and perhaps a few parting words to the prisoner, Hanno was executed for the willful murder of his wife.⁷² Following the dispersal of the crowd, and after Mather ambled away from the pulpit, it is possible that his lifeless body remained hanging for some time before the sheriffs took it down, providing an image of sin and death to all who passed by the Boston gallows.⁷³ On that same day, a white woman did a public penance for giving birth to a child of a mixed race. She sat on the same gallows as Hanno with a noose around her neck—a cautionary action to forewarn of what would be if she continued to sin—and was whipped on her back until the civic official believed she and those who watched had learned of the inextricable relation between crime and punishment. The *Boston News-Letter* reported that Hanno had “hoped that all Mankind would take warning by him to keep themselves from committing such Sin and Wickedness,” which included “Sabbath-breaking and willful

⁷⁰ Mather, *Tremenda*, 38.

⁷¹ Mather, *The Best Way of Living*, 12.

⁷² Hearn, *Legal Executions in New England*, 116.

⁷³ Cotton Mather describes a condemned “Negro burnt at the stake” being left for all to see in *Pillars of Salt*, 70.

Murder,” which had he “not been guilty of the first, he might probably have never committed the second.” The next paragraph described the penance of the white women, and of her punishment the unnamed author of the section wrote that “we hope (it) will be a sufficient warning to all White Women to keep clear of Negro’s for the future.”⁷⁴ Even with smallpox beginning to ravage their town, there remained a desire to reconcile wrongs done within a community, by the community.

Joseph Hanno did not receive capital punishment solely due to his pigmentation, but because he lived in Boston among a community and, as being part of a collective whole, implicitly agreed to uphold a civil standard. He was sentenced to the gallows because that was the law of the land, and not necessarily due to a racially powered motivation on the part of the judiciary or the minister. We can reasonably conclude that race was not a determinative factor in the trial and execution of Hanno because of the litany of similar cases within the canon of New England capital punishment. In the decade before Hanno’s execution, for example, there were six whites, three Natives, and two blacks sentenced to the gallows for willful murder.⁷⁵ While New England society had been disproportionately white, these statistics allow us to at least conceptualize equity under law and religion. Within each execution sermon, there was a similar pattern of using the condemned as an example of an individual who had disobeyed the dictums of the land, and who willingly turned away from God. Therefore, Joseph Hanno was only racialized insofar that Mather used his elevated privileges to instruct slaves in the audience to cease their desires for freedom, as they could very well end up destitute and without the favor of God. In most every other way, Hanno was a common participant in a reoccurring pattern of Puritan execution sermons.

⁷⁴ *The Boston News-Letter*, no. 855-899, 10, May 22-29, 1721.

⁷⁵ Hearn, *Legal Executions in New England*, 111-117. On the eve of the American Revolution, 317 individuals had been executed since 1623. 198 were white, 87 were Native American, and 32 were of African descent.

The sources do not reveal where Joseph Hanno was born, but we do know that he was an African forcibly transported away from his native land, and toiled as a slave for thirty years before being freed. He took part in the civil institution of marriage and had remained engaged with, in some capacity, the faith that he was “brought up in” by his masters.⁷⁶ In many ways, we can surmise that Hanno had integrated himself within Boston’s greater society. When Hanno transgressed, he had committed a sin as a member of the community, against a member of the community. His actions were deemed a result of his innate depravity, defined by original sin and not by his race. Adam’s fall necessitated that each Christian commiserate and bond over their immorality, and a shared desire to be in God’s favor on Judgement Day. As Hanno hanged from the gallows for his offense, there remained the possibility that his heart was contrite and his faith was true, and that he would be welcomed back into the grace of God as he had been before. Furthermore, Joseph Hanno’s religiosity forced onlookers to internalize what they had witnessed. If a member of their community was unable to repudiate their wickedness in full, then one of them would soon be forced to reckon with their own moral corruption.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ *The Boston News-Letter*, no. 855-899, 10, May 22-29, 1721.

⁷⁷ On Joseph Hanno’s background, see *The Boston News-Letter*, no. 855-899, 10, May 22-29, 1721 and Daniel Hearn’s *Legal Executions in New England*, 117.