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“Their Negro Nanny was with Child By a white man”: Gossip, Sex, and Slavery in an Eighteenth-Century New England Town

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In 1746, an enslaved woman named Nanny gave birth in Barnstable, Massachusetts. In the months prior, she had become the subject of gossip throughout town. Rumor had it that the father of her unborn child was one of two young white men—either a poor relative of her enslavers or a son of an elite lawyer. After the birth, the disputed paternity resulted in a defamation suit, the records of which illuminate the social and legal cultures of misogyny and racism at play in eighteenth-century New England and provide a rare account of the intimate experiences of a Black woman in the colonial North. Local gossip about Nanny attests to the complex nature of white men’s sexual access to enslaved women’s bodies, as well as of white women’s efforts to surveil and control those same bodies to maintain familial reputations. In these expansive gossip networks, enslaved people actively engaged in discussions of race and sex with white neighbors. When Nanny testified that both men “Lay with” her, she asserted her own story and personhood while participating in a broader cultural conflict over the privileges and boundaries of manhood and whiteness in the Atlantic world.