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“A Grave Social Question Has Arisen” : Interracial Encounters and Racial Identity in Reconstruction-Era Washington, D.C.

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One of the most stunning changes to the American political landscape was the election of black men to state and federal office throughout the South during Reconstruction. Although histories of Reconstruction take note of the tenures of black elected officials, few accounts have paid attention to the ways that the entrance of black men into politics produced new social anxieties by creating opportunities for new forms of interracial encounters. The bugbear of “social equality” became even more frightening when racially ambiguous politicians and their wives could boast of similar if not more impressive social and educational credentials than those of their white counterparts. Coupled with the usual paranoia about black men getting too close to white women were new concerns about how the social landscape in Washington would be reconfigured and just what place wealthy, well-educated and nearly white wives would occupy.

Would it be possible to maintain the tenuous boundaries between public and private worlds while calling for black suffrage and cross-racial political collaboration? The work of historian Jane Dailey underscores the “analytical impossibility of isolating ‘politics’ from these other ‘social’ realms.”¹ But unlike the black men in Dailey’s study who joined the Readjuster Party and “made the equation of black political power and sexual power seem both obvious and natural,” the light-skinned wives of black politicians posed a different kind of problem. This problem was less about sexual power and more about a worrisome blurring of racial and class boundaries.

My talk will examine the arrival of Blanche Bruce, the second black man to be seated in the United States Senate, and his elegant, well-educated and light-skinned wife, Josephine, in Washington in the 1870s. As Josephine prepared to move to Washington, her husband wrote to her to describe the commotion that she had already created: “A great deal of curiosity is manifested here, for what reason I know not, to know where you will stop. . . . It is very amusing. Washington is all ablaze to see you.”² Despite Blanche Bruce’s history-making political success, reporters focused on what seemed to be much more urgent questions: would white senators’ wives be willing to cross the color line and return Josephine Bruce’s invitations? Given her beauty and sociability, would Mrs. Bruce be welcomed in Washington society?

Josephine Bruce, comfortably perched at the top of colored society yet only grudgingly accepted by white Washingtonians, exemplified the new questions about social arrangements and racial customs that racially ambiguous people raised in the aftermath of the Civil War. At the

¹ Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): 7.

² Blanche Bruce to Josephine Bruce, December 5, 1877. Box 9-1: Family Correspondence, General Correspondence, A to Heywood; Folder 5: Josephine Bruce—Family Correspondence—1897. Blanche Bruce Papers, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D. C.

same time, her life reveals the dense community networks that sustained black elites. As Josephine and Blanche Bruce navigated new interracial terrains, they also operated within the constraints imposed by their notions of kinship, racial leadership and respectability. Blanche and Josephine Bruce's arrival in Washington offers a lens on the ways that racial ambiguity was experienced and on the intersecting themes of race, class and culture in the Reconstruction era.