

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Alison Parker, history department chair and Richards Professor of American History at the University of Delaware. Dr. Parker is the author of *Unceasing Militant: The Life of Mary Church Terrell*. So first, could you give us a bit of an introduction to her and her work?

AP: Mary Church Terrell was born into slavery during the Civil War in America in 1863, and then ended up living until 1954, the same year as the *Brown v. Board of Education* case that ended segregation in American schools. So you have a woman who lived over 90 years and who was very active for at least 60 of them in various kinds of civil rights and suffrage and women's rights struggles. So she's pretty well known for being the first president of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896. She was the first Black woman on the District of Columbia in Washington DC's Board of Education, and she was one of the only two Black women who was a co-signer, along with Ida B. Wells-Barnett, of the founding documents to be a founding member of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, among other things.

AT: And one of the things that you see with both her story and you mentioned Ida B. Wells is that they're both working in intersectional spaces where they are Black women trying to fight for women's rights in a movement where a lot of white women wanted to ignore anyone who wasn't white. And they're also working in civil rights spaces where a lot of the Black men they were working alongside weren't overly concerned with, again, the experiences of Black women. So when you mention that she was the first president of the National Association for Colored Women, for example, it's interesting to see how not only are they navigating their place as marginalized people in these larger movements, but also how they were creating spaces for that subgroup specifically.

AP: Yes, right. In fact, the women of this era really articulated the concept of intersectionality all the time, even though we credit it to Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s and '90s as the person who developed the exact term. But Terrell would talk about what she considered to be the so-called "double handicap" of being Black and a woman. And she talked about how Black men only had to overcome racism, and white women only had to overcome sexism, but Black women had to overcome both sexism and racism, which she thought put them in a very unique intersectional position. And so from that perspective, they had to work extra hard to figure out, as you point out, how to fit into both the women's movement and the civil rights movement as defined by Black men. And so in both cases, they had to make claims for themselves and space for themselves. And in fact, one of the things that's remarkable about the National Association of Colored Women, this NACW group that they form in 1896, is it's actually the first national secular group of any African-Americans. And the idea that they had is that they needed to defend themselves and create a group for themselves, because they, specifically as Black women, were being targeted for extra abuse and really terrible comments by white journalists who made a point of targeting Black women and trying to disrupt alliances between women in Great Britain and America by writing lots of slurs about their supposed sexual immorality, etc. to women in England. And so this created a sense that they needed to stand together by themselves. And so Mary Church Terrell was someone who, because she managed to get a lot of higher education, which was unusual for any woman at the time, but especially for Black women in the decades after the end of slavery, she was able to insert herself into predominantly white spaces and be able to vocalize and tell white women about their priorities and concerns of Black women, which were often the disenfranchisement of Black men, not just "we Black women want the right to vote," but technically Black men do have the right to vote from the 14th and 15th amendments, but they're not actually able to, by the end of Reconstruction in the American South. And so she's trying to get them to realize that the fight for the struggle for voting rights shouldn't just be about white women "we want our rights to vote," or even white and Black women "we want our right to vote." It had to be a much broader struggle to make sure that everyone had their voting rights.

AT: Well, it's also important to remember that a lot of the white suffragists, not just were being discriminatory against Black suffragists, like, "no, you can't march in our parade" like they're middle school mean girls. But a lot of prominent feminists that like we hold up today as the leaders of the movement, a lot of them were using really overtly racist rhetoric in their fight for women's suffrage, because they were using tactics like telling Southerners in particular, I believe that, "well, now that Black men have the vote, you need us white women because otherwise the Black men will take over." And they framed it a lot more racistly.

AP: This was a huge problem. And the issue for people like Alice Paul, who was a major suffragist in America, who took her cues from the British suffragettes, and who had spent time over there with Lucy Stone and participated in more militant suffrage activism in both Scotland and England. She came back to the US in the early 1900s, determined to bring some of that militancy to the US. And her first efforts, or at least major significant efforts were in 1913 with this national march, which was supposed to be a women's suffrage march, the day before President Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. And he had already expressed his disinterest in the subject of women's suffrage. And so the point was to put pressure on him. But she did explicitly say to Black women who wanted to march, that she hoped that they would march in the back of the parade to keep white southern women happy. And the woman who's most known for raising this issue and for insisting that she marched with her Illinois delegation is the anti-lynching activist and civil rights activist, Ida B. Wells-Barnett. And that is a true fact. But what gets lost, and that I talk about in my book, is that actually there were dozens of Black women who marched in the parade all throughout the parade that day. And they all refused to march in a segregated way. And Terrell played a big role with another famous suffragist, Inez Milholland, who was the woman who is a lawyer and a suffragist who ends up riding in a white outfit with a cape and a crown and on a white horse leading the parade. So she's a very famous figure in the parade. But they ended up working together because they had known each other from having met in London in 1904. And they argued with Alice Paul, saying that it wasn't viable to keep people segregated and that they specifically advocated that the Howard University, which is a historically Black university, the first one in DC, that the young women who created a sorority called the Delta Sigma Theta sorority should be allowed to march together as a delegation with the other delegations of college women, like from Vassar College or the other universities and colleges that women went to. So there was a lot of work to try to force white women to take them seriously and to let them in. And also to not take no for an answer. But they repeatedly received these kinds of racist and negative responses. But since they knew that they couldn't get suffrage without white women, they continued to collaborate even as they also fought for suffrage independently.

AT: One of the things that strikes me as you're talking about Black college women and the fact that one of Terrell's great strengths was that she could go into a room full of white women and communicate with them in a way that they would respect. People who have listened to episodes before may recall that one of my pet peeves is the Sojourner Truth "Ain't I a Woman" speech where they took a very eloquent woman who didn't even speak English until she was nine, took her speech and gave it this like Southern patois so that it sounded like the stereotypical uneducated former southern slave. It's like, she grew up in New York. Her first language is Dutch. This doesn't make any sense. But what I'm getting at here is the fact that she was part of this African-American elite class that I think a lot of people didn't necessarily want to acknowledge existed at the time, but also has largely not been featured in our media, in our nonfiction history retellings, we sort of ignore that there was this whole group of middle- and upper-class African-Americans who were forming their own segment of society. And like her father was one of the first African-American millionaires in the south.

AP: Yeah, no, it's an interesting story. Her parents were both enslaved. And as I said, she was born enslaved, although she was freed within a year because of the Civil War. However, they were both of mixed race and their mothers were enslaved, but both of their fathers were white enslavers. So this created an interesting situation for them because once they achieved their freedom, they had some training, some literacy, although

her father less than her mother actually. And some of that literacy came through sitting through lessons as the enslaved person for the white daughter of the enslaver. So just by being in proximity, you can obviously learn to read if you're sitting with the young mistress in a sense, who happens to also be your half-sister. So these are the kinds of situations that they were in. But Louisa Ayers Church ends up owning a hair business where she makes really big, fancy hair wigs for white women. And that's because that's a job she had already been doing. But she was really good at it. And she was able to get, we think a loan, possibly from her father enslaver or one of his friends. The same thing seems to have happened for Robert Church, her husband. And in his case, he managed to get a loan to create a saloon. But what he ended up doing is, he became a savvy real estate investor. During the yellow fever epidemics in Memphis, Tennessee, he basically bought up land as whites were fleeing, because there were two yellow fever epidemics in a row. And so some people were wanting to sell cheap and run. And in the end, he did have quite a bit of real estate. But the other thing that he's quite famous for is that he developed Beale Street, which we now know as the home of the blues. So that neighborhood was developed by him.

And with that money, they were in the early, from, here she is as a young girl in Memphis, Tennessee, and they are looking around, and they're making enough money to see that they can't put her in any school in Tennessee. There's no place good enough for her. She was very smart, and they had resources. So they sent her to Ohio, and she was able to start getting an education at a very young age of 8, although she had to leave her family to do so. And that enabled her to go to the Model Antioch School. It was a model school connected with Antioch College. And then she went to Oberlin College, which had a history of being progressive and letting in both women and Black people before most other colleges did. So she was able to live and basically grow up in Ohio. So she also didn't have a strong southern accent at all, and was able to present herself and was, in fact, more educated than many of the white women she met, or at the very least as educated. In the end, she even had a master's degree and spoke at least five languages. And when she went to Washington, D.C., after teaching for just a couple of years at Wilberforce College in Oberlin, she ended up teaching Latin and Greek at the best public high school for African-Americans in the nation, which was called M Street Preparatory School. But this is a public high school that was devoted to teaching African-Americans the kind of education that was previously described as being acceptable only for whites. And so she always believed that African-Americans should be able to get classical educations.

And she became a teacher, married a man who worked in the government in the Treasury office and then became a lawyer. And then eventually, Robert H. Terrell became the first Black District Court federal judge in Washington, D.C. So they were kind of a power couple of their time. And there were other African-Americans who made similar achievements and were part of this Black elite. But the difference is that the Black elite, whether it's middle-class or upper-middle-class, the thing is they had no inherited wealth because they came from people who were enslaved. So we're not talking about the kind of wealth of the Rockefellers or people who could live on family trust funds. If you were a middle class person with a job at the post office and you got a paycheck every single week or month, you were part of the Black elite. So the term is much broader and more fungible than what we would think of when we're thinking of elites in other contexts.

AT: It is interesting how it becomes more stratified, because as you're saying, this isn't inherited wealth, but she would have been arguably that first generation who was inheriting, I assume, a degree of wealth from their parents. And I actually have an episode on Mabel Grammer, who was part of the Black social elite a few decades later. And one of the things we talked about was she was writing a society column. At the time, her name was Mabel Alston. So it was Mabel Alston's Charm School, something like that. And she was basically a beauty influencer before social media and everything. But she would get complaints about "you never highlight working class women, you never highlight darker-skinned women." So it is interesting this transition that we see over maybe a 100-year period, probably less actually, where you're going from someone who had a job and had a regular paycheck was part of this group. But then as time goes on, the hierarchy gets

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more incremental.

AP: I do think that the women of Mary Church Terrell's era starting from the 1880s and '90s, when they were adults all the way through the 1920s and beyond, were actually more interested and willing to have cross-class alliances than we realize. And they were open to and wanting to do things that go beyond the National Association of Colored Women's motto, which Terrell created, which was "lifting as we climb." And that does sound kind of condescending, right? Because it implies we're up higher and we're pulling you along. But she, as a formerly enslaved woman herself, whose parents and grandparents had been enslaved, was certainly not an elitist. I would say she was a member of the elite, but she wasn't an elitist. And so when they were doing the kinds of advocacy work that they did in the National Association of Colored Women, one of the things that they focused on was day nurseries and daycare facilities and kindergartens. And that was all because they knew that Black women worked for a living, had to work for wages more than any other group of women in America, and that they were also suffering from the highest rates of miscarriage and infant mortality than any other group, which is unfortunately still the case today in the US, which is just shocking and terrible. But one of the things that they did for that is that they really encouraged women who went to college to think about becoming nurses really more than doctors, but they weren't opposed to doctors. It was just that that was a barrier that white women couldn't even do very much of. So they focused a lot on nursing. But the point is they wanted Black women to become nurses, and they wanted to open, and they did open, a lot of day cares and kindergartens. So this notion that they're not paying attention to, or that there's this huge class divide, either in terms of their experiences of things like infant mortality, Mary Church Terrell herself suffered multiple miscarriages, infant stillbirths, deaths of babies after just one day in a improvised incubator in segregated hospitals in DC. I mean, she experienced it all, just like even now, a very famous, well-off woman like Serena Williams couldn't get the kind of health care that she needed and had to fight so incredibly hard to have the doctors pay attention to what she was saying about her health emergency when she was giving birth. So this is not, unfortunately, like I said, a changing situation, but it just shows the persistence of the racism.

So the other thing I would mention in the context of this cross-class alliances is that they were also willing to stand up for very poor, uneducated, dark skinned young Black women from the south who were finding themselves caught up in the criminal justice system in ways that they thought were unfair and wrong. And one case of that is a young girl who was a teenager named Virginia Christian who in about 1911 was charged with murdering her white employer when she was being a domestic servant when there was an altercation and she was charged incorrectly with having stolen this woman's jewelry. And she was sentenced to death in the electric chair at the age of, she was 13 when she committed this so-called crime. And she said it was an accident, she was trying to defend herself. But the point is that these women and Terrell, they physically went to her, a delegation led by Terrell went to see the Virginia governor, talked to the Virginia governor to try to get clemency for her, and then they went and visited her in prison. And this is the same pattern of behavior that happened when there was another woman who was accused of a similar kind of crime. And then later during 1919, and then also even in the 1940s, Rosalie Ingram was a black sharecropper who was accused of, she and her sons, of murdering a white man who was trying to sexually assault her when she was on her own land. And Mary Church Terrell led the fight on that, went to see the Georgia governor and visited her in prison as well. So this idea that there's this hyper-elitism isn't as straightforward as we might think.

AT: I'm always fascinated by these intersections of privilege and marginalization. And as we've been talking about within marginalized groups, there are always people with more privilege. And whether those people are using their privilege to, as you said, uplift the members of their group who have less privileges as opposed to those who, whether or not it's their own opinion, so whether or not the white suffragists were actually just being racist versus were they just trying to appease because they knew that they had to have this support from people who were racist. I don't know that from a practical standpoint, it really makes that much difference in the outcomes. But when we're talking about sort of a respectability politics approach, because this also seems to

be a conflict that you see in a lot of rights movements of the folks who say, if we just behave “properly,” then they’ll give us our rights versus the side that’s more militant, say the suffragists who were breaking windows. And there seems to be in any movement that debate between these two. But there’s also folks in the middle. And as we’re talking about the differences between a woman like Terrell and these women that you were talking about that she went and tried to help, it made me think of Claudette Colvin. So again, this is several decades later, but essentially for anyone who doesn’t know, Rosa Parks was not the first Black woman to refuse to give up her seat for a white man. It was actually Claudette Colvin, but she was, I believe, 15, pregnant, unmarried, hot-tempered. And so other women, older women, more respectable women were put forth as the face of the Montgomery bus boycott, because even Rosa Parks later said that, “if we had put her front and center, they would have torn her apart.” Because she knew exactly how the media, how the white public would have responded to someone like Claudette Colvin, as opposed to Rosa Parks and Aurelia Browder, who were older, educated, presumably not as hot-tempered. But they were more respectable. And so it is always fascinating how much of that is strategy that acknowledges the facts of prejudice versus people’s own internal prejudices.

AP: Yeah, I think for Black women, they were highly aware of all of the incredibly negative, vicious stereotypes against them, this concept of Black women as Jezebels, who were super-sexualized. And then alternatively, this stereotype of them as Black mammies, who were kind of ignorant and willing helpers of white women. But either way, these stereotypes were really harmful and never gave them due for their full humanity. And so they developed this politics of respectability as a way to counter all of this prejudice. So it was very self-conscious, and it was a decision that many middle-class Black women especially, who had the means and the education to do so, decided to adopt. So it’s absolutely true that Mary Church Terrell chose the path of respectability in the sense that she knew that she would get farther with her Black freedom struggle goals if she did it while dressed to the nines with these crazy, amazing hats and the look of the day that she would wear. But this doesn’t mean that she was less militant. And so it gets a little complicated. My book is titled *Unceasing Militant* because Paul Robeson, who was a communist and an actor and somebody who she worked closely with in the last decades of her life in the 1940s and ‘50s, called her “an unceasing militant in the struggle for the rights of her people” as his tribute to her as a eulogy when she passed away in 1954. And I think that’s an accurate way to describe her. So she was pragmatic about using this respectability, but not to be fearful or to make compromises because in fact she was one of the more militant Black women around in the sense that she did march in the suffrage parade, but she and her daughter, Phyllis, were some of the only people who we’ve so far been able to document, participated in the National Women’s Party’s picketing before the White House during World War I. So I believe that other Black women participated, but we just haven’t yet found evidence of that we know for sure that she did. And then she participated in all kinds of strikes and boycotts, including in the 1930s, these campaigns where people were asking folks not to buy things where they weren’t allowed to work. So it’s an early version of a boycott or a sit-in. And then later she leads major sit-ins and boycotts. It’s not exactly the Woolworth sit-ins, but what she would do is she and other white and Black people would go together into restaurants where they were not “allowed” to be and demand service, which is kind of a sit-in. And then when they didn’t get service, she ended up suing. And this lawsuit, together with the boycotts and the picketing, which so that’s really the way I would describe it, the boycotts, the picketing and the lawsuits together were the way that in the late 1940s and early 1950s, she managed with a whole cohort of people who worked with her, but she was the chair of the committee that led the effort to desegregate Washington, DC restaurants and department stores. And it was a successful one, both in the courts and in terms of businesses feeling pressured to desegregate just because they were going to be losing so much business. So this question of militancy is a tough one because she was standing, in the photographs that we have of her, which are quite endearing from when she’s 91 years old, in a fur coat with white gloves and her little handbag and her picket signs, right? So what is militancy and what is respectability? But the rules written into the laws from the 1860s and ‘70s actually had said back then that you couldn’t segregate or discriminate against “respectable”

people. And so part of the reason why they always dressed well when they went to these protests is that they were saying, look at these anti-discrimination laws from just after the Civil War, we think they still could be enforced even though they hadn't been. And when they finally got to the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court agreed. And so the first desegregation case that comes to the Supreme Court has actually heard Thompson's Restaurant case. The reason why we don't know about it and we know about *Brown v. Board* is that the restaurant case or the desegregation case only applied to the District of Columbia because it's not a United **State**, right? And so in the United States of America, the District of Columbia isn't a state and so what happens there, even if it's a Supreme Court ruling, doesn't actually apply to all the other states. So her 1953 Supreme Court win isn't as famous as the one that comes the year later, *Brown v. Board*.

AT: So you don't have to throw a brick through a window to be a militant. Fair.

AP: Right. And then the suffragists in America didn't do that stuff. They didn't throw things, they didn't set things on fire. The biggest thing they did was the picketing and then hunger strikes in prison and they were force-fed. So they got all that from the British suffragettes, but they did not decide to blow up mailboxes, etc. So we don't have anybody over there who does that.

AT: They didn't pull a Carrie Nation, who was temperance activist who would go into bars with an axe and just start smashing everything up, which I'm still amazed that she got away with that, but (AP: Yeah.) that's not that's neither here nor there. (AP: No, that's not these people, different people.) And so I know a lot of my guests would be very jealous of you because a very common issue that we have with telling women stories, with telling people of color's stories, especially women of color, is that we don't have documentation. But fortunately for you and your book, Terrell was a prolific writer.

AP: That's really true. And what's so funny about it is that as I started writing this, the reason I wrote it was because I was shocked to find out that in fact, we didn't have a biography of Mary Church Terrell written for adults. There were several for children, but none for adults. And I was just perplexed, especially since she does actually have very large numbers of papers that exist in the Library of Congress, Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Collection, the University of Memphis, and other places around the US. And so as I continue to work on all of this, I actually decided that perhaps it was the volume of papers that was the issue, because there's so much. And so it's so funny because, of course, it's a worse problem, absolutely, to have no papers. But it can be almost overwhelming to have so many. But it's really a gift and something that I'm extremely grateful for. And now all of Mary Church Terrell's papers at the Library of Congress have been fully digitized and transcribed, which I would have absolutely adored because I was using microfilm and transcribing it myself and losing my eyesight even more through this process. But I'm absolutely delighted that now it's so incredibly accessible. So it was the ability to find her voice, not only in terms of the public speeches, her many, many articles, because she was a journalist, but also she kept many diaries, which still exist. And then she also wrote many letters, some of which were to her husband and were more personal. And some, of course, most of them actually were to all of the people who she was collaborating with on the many, many civil rights and women's rights campaigns that she participated in over the course of her long life.

AT: And I'm always curious because obviously she was an amazing woman. And as you said, there had been no biography for adults, even though she did have an autobiography in 1940, *A Colored Woman in a White World*. So these are both obviously very good reasons for you to say, "yes, I'm going to write a book about this person." But we could also say that about a lot of brilliant and incredible women in history. So what was it about Terrell that specifically made you say, "yes, I am going to write an entire book about this person" and go through all of the, you maybe didn't know exactly what you were signing up for with all of the archives on the microfilm. But was there something that made you really want to focus on her specifically?

AP: Yeah, when I was writing a different book, a book before the Terrell biography. And it was a book on Black and white women's political thought in the 19th century. And really what I had been trying to think about, and each chapter was a different woman, was how and why did women articulate their right to be full citizens at a time before most of them had any right to participate in national elections in the US. And so that was something that I was pretty interested in. And when I got to Terrell, what I found so fascinating about her, because she was my last chapter in that book, was that she was very brilliant. She had a really interesting writing style. She articulated her political ideas so clearly. She was a Black feminist who was talking about intersectionality before that term existed, but it was super clear in all her writing. And she had a sense of humor and talked about loving to dance. And her passion for life was really there as well. And so I think those things had already come into place. And then when I realized, because I was looking at every chapter, I would read all the biographies of the women that I could find, so that I could try to place their political thought in the context of their personal lives. And when I realized that I couldn't really do that in the same way, because there was no biography of hers, that's really when I thought, I just have to do this. And I did read her autobiography, which is good, but not great. And it does leave out a lot and is not super organized. So she tells things about herself. But I think one of the things that Black women's historians have talked about for a while is that Black women who wrote their own autobiographies were pretty guarded about what they told and what they didn't tell, because there was such prejudice that they wanted to talk more. And she even gave talks about the "progress of colored women," as she called it at the time. So if you're trying to present that, the story she tells hints at and does describe briefly some of the more disturbing things that she experienced in her life. But it doesn't really go into a lot of the detail, nor does it talk about her love affair that turns into her marriage with her husband Robert Terrell. So I was lucky enough to be able, once I did decide to start writing the biography, I was able to meet with Terrell's family. And that came somewhat late in the process of writing the book. So by the time that I met them, I had read all of the papers really that were out there in all of those main archives, and was able to gain their trust. And they were willing to share with me the love letters that she and her husband had written before she married. And so that was really lovely, because it gave me an entree into her private life in a way that even all those papers that were in the archives couldn't quite do. And in the end, after talking with them, we decided collaboratively that I would be their emissary and approach Oberlin College and offered to give the rest of her papers that were still being held privately by the family to Oberlin College. And so that was a very gratifying experience for them, and for me, and they ended up creating a big event. And we came to give the papers and give talks and various other things, and the library at Oberlin College is now named the Mary Church Terrell Library. So that's a very exciting development and a nice way to kind of end the project in terms of making sure that all of the papers are publicly accessible.

AT: 'Cuz there weren't enough papers already? (laughter) (AP: Exactly.) I'm curious because you mentioned that she also wrote diaries. And one of the conversations that I've previously had was about who tells the stories of Black women, and particularly we were looking at white women abolitionists who were telling stories of women like Mary Prince, who were enslaved, and how did the white abolitionist woman's lens change that woman's story? Because for many of these women, the person whose story it is may not even have been literate. And what are the biases that come into play, knowing that they, the white abolitionists, have their own reasons for writing this? They have a specific audience in mind, all of this. And it's interesting that you point out that even when Black women were telling their own stories, they were also conscious of all of these different factors. And so there is essentially a bias when we're telling our own stories, not just that everybody wants to present themselves in a certain light, but that a lot of these women, even in telling their own stories, were likely editing themselves to make it more palatable to a certain kind of audience.

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AP: Yes, that's definitely the case. And I think one of the challenges of any biographer is to balance out the way that we try to look into stories that they maybe didn't tell in full, but do it in a way that's both respectful and careful and empathetic, and that's not exploitative or gossipy. And my biggest challenge in that case was not actually on the love letters between her and her husband, because I felt like those were lovely and really gave another three-dimensional portrait of who she was. But in her diaries from the 1930s, when she's in her 70s and she's a widow, she ends up inadvertently describing, because she's trying to hide it for a while, a love affair that she has with a married man. And he, it turns out, is Representative Oscar De Priest, who's the first Black man to be in the House of Representatives since the era of Reconstruction. And so in some ways, it's not surprising that she would be attracted to a man like him, because finding someone of kind of equal stature and important in DC at the same time that she was, they had this romance, but it goes against all the respectability politics. She's not married anymore, because she's a widow, but he's married.

And so I looked into that a lot, trying to understand, finding out that there was, in fact, inside the Black community, people were having affairs, were sharing that with their small intimate groups of friends. There was some awareness of this, but there was also a willingness to not talk about it, and certainly to hide it from any larger public and any white public as well. So what I found out is that many of these people, like W.E.B. Du Bois, all kinds of people were having affairs all the time. You hear more about them than you do about the women, but this is just part of what you see. And then how do you do it in a way that really focuses on what would she have been seeing and getting out of this at that time? What are the collaborations that they're doing on anti-lynching, because he's able to bring bills into Congress, but they're talking about it? So finding out that kind of information, but then talking to both his family and hers about the fact that I had discovered this and that I was planning on writing about it, and kind of getting their permission. I mean, it's one of those things where in some ways that's a risky endeavor. You don't want family members to then say, "no, you can't do it," but I was hopeful. And it turned out to be true, that they would support my telling the story, but it was something where you have to think about the ethics of it and what would she have liked. And I think she would have been okay with the story in the end too, but she certainly didn't plan on telling it at the time.

AT: I feel like something we're touching on here is that frequently in our views of history, we flatten people into one-dimensional characters. You are either a hero who can do no wrong, or you're a villain with no irredeemable qualities. And something that comes up a lot in these conversations is that that's not true of anyone. Everyone is gray. We're all a mix of the good and the bad. And if we say she had an affair with a married man, that is quote unquote bad. Like you said, what is the context? What is the nuance? Do we know what was going on in his marriage? Do we know if his wife was aware of this and how she felt about that? And maybe she and Terrell knew each other. I'm sure they met. But these are all elements of who this person was and what their life experience was. And the idea that we should censor and conform to what people are expecting us to say only reinforces that flatness of historical figures.

AP: I think that's an excellent point. And it's definitely something that was important to me is, I do think that Mary Church Terrell has been mischaracterized and flattened in popular culture and even in some historical accounts as an elitist representative of respectability politics who really would never have done any of these things, whether it was the boycotting, the picketing, the marching, the going into prisons or having an affair. None of these things would have necessarily been on people's radars. And so the point was not to embarrass her or to make her look bad, but to make her look fully human and to really show the complexity in one person's life. And when you have someone who's lived for over 90 years, you're going to see a lot of different kinds of living and really getting a sense of how complicated and interesting she was. To me, that was really important.

And it's been interesting because over here, recently on Broadway, there's a show called *Suffs*, and it stands for suffragists. And it actually includes as the secondary characters to the characters Alice Paul and Carrie Chapman Catt who are supposed to be opposing figures in the white woman suffrage movement, with Carrie



Chapman Catt representing an older National American Woman Suffrage Association, which is tired with stale ideas and timid behavior. And then the radical militant Alice Paul, who's much younger and vibrant and has new ideas for the 20th century. And then they do a kind of parallel for the next level down in the play. And those two people below are Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells Barnett. And what happens in this play is that in fact, they take the character of Mary Church Terrell, and they make her fully one-dimensional to fit with this contrast between the two main white women. So she's once again elitist, conservative, reactionary, uninterested in protesting, afraid of protesting. They even have her begging Ida B. Wells not to publish an anti-lynching article before some big vote on suffrage, which is exactly the opposite of what she did and would have done. So to me, it was highly offensive, but it just won two Tonys. And The New York Times interviewed the woman who plays Alice Paul and who created the story, Shaina Taub, and said, how did you turn it into a Tony-winning show because it had been off-Broadway first and was majorly revised to go on Broadway. And she said, "less history and more invention." And I get it, right? Invention is great. But it's a little disingenuous and replicates the racism and the problems of the blindness of Alice Paul and that generation of white suffragists and white feminists to not be able to have the two Black characters have more depth and not to be able to acknowledge that Mary Church Terrell didn't go to the back of the parade. They have Alice Paul say to Ida B. Wells, "oh, Mary Church Terrell *might* go to the back of the parade." And then later they admit she didn't go. But it's just those kinds of things. Like you don't need to insert that in there if it's not true. So I feel like I'm still interested in participating in discussions and debates about how we can better introduce these characters and these real people into historical performances like this.

AT: So then I guess the question is, what do you hope that readers will take away from your biography of her that they wouldn't necessarily get from other sources?

AP: I think that one of the lessons that Terrell provides for our current generation is the notion of persistence. She really continued the fight over the course of many, many decades and never gave up but also understood that the Black freedom struggle was not something that was going to be won in a day. So she did not think that the loss of one fight meant that the fight was over. And I think if younger generations today were aware of those kinds of examples that it might give them hope if they have a protest that doesn't realize the results that they were hoping for, not to give up and to just continue. And so that's what I think her legacy can help teach us.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.