AT: Welcome to the infinite women podcast. I'm your host Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Robyn Spencer-Antoine, a historian and author of *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender and the Black Panther Party*, to discuss Patricia Murphy Robinson.

RSA: So Patricia Murphy Robinson, who was colloquially known as Pat by her friends and family and comrades, she was a left Black feminist. She played a lot of important roles in several social movements. So she was part of the Black Power era. She worked with local teenagers and young adults in her community to help support them in their political activism. She was a mentor. Oftentimes, we don't think about mentorship, but she was a mentor to them. She used her library to help educate them. She was a sounding board. She was the mother of three teenagers at that time too. So she was in the thick of it as a community member, as a mentor, as a family member. And at the time, the location where she was, which was in New Rochelle, New York, which is in Westchester County, New York. That community was going through very deep battles around school desegregation. There was a real struggle for Black Power that was going on in New Rochelle and Pat Robinson had her finger on the pulse of it.

She was also part of the women's movement. She was a leading feminist thinker. So she wrote a lot of articles, essays that were anthologized widely during the women's movement. In particular, she wrote about Black women and birth control. She wrote about urban poverty and the role of gender. She wrote about the importance of having a criticism of US foreign policy at the time, which was the Vietnam War. So she wrote collaboratively with some of the people in her community. So she is known for also reducing the hierarchies and challenging the hierarchies between different types of people. She herself was highly educated. As a therapist and a social worker, she really played a key role in helping people to understand that as they were trying to change the world, as she was in the movement that she was involved in, it also required changing yourself. And when you did that, oftentimes you were in conflict with your family members, with your father, with your partner around patriarchy when you took up feminist ideas. If you were coming out of the closet and you were coming into an identity that was different than the heteronormative identities at the time, if you were coming out as queer, as gay, as lesbian, as transgender, you oftentimes found yourself confronting all sorts of restrictions that society had, and not just society, but the people closest to you. So she really helped people to navigate what it meant to transform society while they were transforming themselves.

So yes, she was in the Black Power movement, she was in the women's movement, she was also part of the New Left. She was very much influenced by Marxist philosophy. She had a library of over a thousand books, many of which were by leading Marxists from Fidel Castro to Marx and Engels and European philosophers, to different thinkers from different parts of the world like Africa and the Caribbean, who were also trying to actualize socialist ideas and criticize the capitalist system. So she kind of brought all of those concepts together in the body of someone who was your neighbor, your friend, your friend's mother, the person at the PTA meeting, the woman sitting on her porch down the street. She was never someone who was interested in the spotlight. As a result, her name outside of her very widely anthologized essays tends not to be well known, but including her in the story of Black radicalism and Black radical women also plays an important role in how we can rethink these moments.

Now, she also started several organizations, one of which I want to point out was called the Mount Vernon Women's Group, and it was an organization of Black women who were active locally. She started it as an outgrowth of her work with Planned Parenthood, and she literally went into the housing projects near where she lived, knocked on people's doors to talk to them about birth control. That was her way in. As she became known as the birth control lady, she also would talk to them about the inevitable ways that their concerns about family planning also revealed their analysis of power, of racism, of sexism, whether it be in a big way like the welfare system or the state or dealing with police brutality or whether it was very intimate, like their conflicts with their partner over their ability to control their bodies. Pat dispensed not just birth control, but also advice. She allowed them to take what felt like an individual and personal problem and tie it to a broad network of institutions to help people to understand and unpack where people's behaviors and ideals were coming from.

So in that way, she played a very, very key role. The women that were part of the group that she started grew out of this Planned Parenthood network, but also went on to include other women. They became an outspoken advocacy group for birth control and the idea of women taking control of their bodies. And this was important in the context where there was a lot of discourse about racism causing genocide, that the goal of racism was to exterminate the Black community and Black women's bodies were a way to ward against that because they were reproducing more and more Black people. So their reproductive capacity was, in fact, something that was revolutionary. Well, Black women felt like their bodies were their own. And they wanted to have a say in when and under what conditions they choose to become parents. And that caused conflict. And Pat's group was in the thick of things, writing very well received and widely circulated letters around the topic of poor Black women and birth control.

Pat Robinson was unique in that, although she had herself an elite background, she chose to align herself with working class Black people, Black women in particular, and use her skills to amplify, to elevate, to become a co-learner with them, a co-teacher, a co-writer. She wrote many things with co-authors. So in a lot of ways, she really tried to get people to think about systems and hierarchies and how they can challenge them, and also to think about how they can move towards greater mental health, a greater sense of wholeness, a sense of hope that would come out of their political involvement. So I see her as a key person in helping movements to sustain themselves, helping activists to sustain themselves. Because when we think about movements today, we just think about the society that we're living in in 2024, the word trauma comes up a lot. And someone like Pat Robinson allowed people to work through their traumas. And to understand that it wasn't just their individual failing or their particular unique personal history, but it was something bigger than them that had an impact on how they were feeling and what they were doing. So her work with poor Black women was really pioneering in this way.

She was also an educator. She was part of a wave of Black people who turned to self-education, alternative education, to really begin to challenge the status quo. I think that we don't think about these movements enough, like movements of people who felt it was important to read books. People read so much during this uprising. And for Black radicals, reading was essential. There was a playlist of authors that you had to be familiar with, from Frantz Fanon, to C.L.R. James, to Fidel Castro, to Mao Zedong. You had to be rooted in this kind of collective knowledge-making. And so one of the things that Pat Robinson did was that she started a freedom school. And the freedom school, the goal was to learn more, right? To bring people together. The school, with its feminist sensibility, was sure to provide childcare. It deviated from these student-teacher, normal power dynamics of schooling. And instead, the attendees of the school were empowered to imagine themselves as intellectuals, as thinkers. They were allowed to imagine themselves as writing their own story, literally becoming Pat's co-authors. So one of the great texts that came out of this effort is called *Lessons from the Damned*. And it's really a remarkable book. It's really seen as one of the few pieces of literature that really bring together and center the voices of poor Black people, unfiltered. So in *Lessons from the Damned*, you have essays from children as young as 13 and 14, as well as elders. It just brings together a real community feel around some of the questions of power, self-actualization, the way the family and family dynamics can mirror the inequalities of larger society. So it was really a remarkable effort. So Robinson really played this key role in so many ways.

And I really want more people to learn about her because it allows us to think about our movements just a little bit differently, right? It's one thing to imagine people out there in the public doing things, rallying, marching, advocating for voting, voting themselves, that kind of political activism is hypervisible. That's what we expect to see. But the ideal of people simultaneously working on themselves, not just challenging their boss at work, but challenging their father in the household. It really gives you a sense of how transformative these radical movements were. And to think about Pat Robinson as somebody who was at the hub of the wheel of all of these social forces is really, really exciting to me. And I hope that more people learn about her and that the insights they gain from where and how and when she did the political work that she does can allow people to kind of reimagine what was possible at the time. So that's why I get excited about her.

Another group that she started was called Black Women Enraged. It began as a way of trying to provide support for Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's widow, a political activist in her own right. Pat Robinson and her partner and husband, Lloyd Robinson, they were in the audience of the Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm X was shot. She knew Malcolm X's family. She knew Malcolm X himself, who used to visit her at her house. And so she started Black Women Enraged in order to help Betty Shabazz. But the very real stuff of life, when you become a widow and you are also a mother of small children, the organization grew to take on a criticism of the US war in Vietnam. It became an anti-draft organization. So Black Women Enraged would go down into Harlem at the recruitment stations, and they would engage in the type of political activism that I mentioned earlier, the marches, the handing out flyers and leaflets, the handing out flyers and leaflets, those kinds of things. So she also had a very strong kind of internationalist sensibility, and she truly believed that the people of Vietnam should be left alone to exercise their own self determination rather than being pawns in what she saw was this Cold War game. And she really believed that racism was at the heart of how the US was even conceptualizing their foreign policy in that moment. And so Black Women Enraged took on that role. She would eventually leave the group due to ideological differences.
She was someone who was very direct. I do think it's important to think about people's personalities as activists and historical figures. We accept personalities from flesh and blood people, but somehow we sanitize our historical figures and make them into kind of robots. So Pat Robinson was somebody who was very direct. One might say she dispensed tough love. She was not afraid of confrontation, although she did not seek confrontation. But she spoke her mind. She had a lot of strong convictions. And because of that, it meant that she could hold an audience. She was captivating and charismatic. At the same time, being a therapist, she was an amazing listener too. And the ideal of listening as a political act is another one of her legacies, I would say. Of course, as a therapist, she's doing a particular type of listening, right? But the ideal that we need to understand more, we need to understand not just how capitalism is working out there in the world, but how capitalism is working in our lives. And we need to really self-examine, not because we want to focus on just us as an individual, but we want to self-examine in order to better ourselves in this larger political struggle. And I think that concept is one of her legacies, one of many.

AT: So previously, I did an interview with a biographer of Mary Church Terrell, who she described as an “unceasing militant.” And what I find interesting here is when we talk about radical, when we talk about militant, I think there's this perception of it as very angry. And certainly there is anger there, but using anger in productive ways. But we think of it as this sort of like violent, like the person who's just yelling, right? Rather than having a conversation. And so what's interesting is what I heard in that conversation, what I'm hearing again here is that you can be militant, you can be radical, but you can also be nurturing. And I don't know if that's a gendered thing, because when we think of militants and radicals, the images that we have are not these women who were often doing the work in the background, behind the scenes, not being put forward. But the ones that we are seeing as the archetypes of these kinds of words are the men yelling, rather than like you were saying, she's going into people's homes and having conversations and helping guide them in a counseling kind of way. So, it's obviously an important aspect of the activism, but do you think it's more important? Do you think it's often left out when we're considering what needs to be done?

RSA: I think so. I think that's a great observation. But I want to point out that the behind the scenes, those were very fractious places too. In her archives, you see that her clients were calling her in the middle of the night. She was intervening in domestic violence situations. She was going down when people had their babies and speaking to them, in those vulnerable moments. So she definitely was a nurturer. But somehow when we see nurturing, it can feel soft, or warm in a way. It can come across as gendered female.
But I feel like the way that she nurtured people, she would oftentimes be kicking them in the butt. She was the person that would be, just like if anyone's ever been to therapy, you know that sometimes you get delivered some very tough truths in those

Listen to Alison Parker on Mary Church Terrell or read the transcript.

moments of vulnerability. And she had the ability to be loving, I would say, but also very direct. I think that was her skill set. And I think that she was able to get to people where they lived. Because it's one thing to say fight the power, but then when someone is pointing out that the power wants you to iron their shirts, the power wants dinner on the table, and how are you fighting that power? It's a whole different conversation. And that was the kind of nurturing that Pat would do. That's what she would see as a nurturing of the self. And she used humor, I would say, was one of her skill sets, is that she used humor to diffuse situations. Later on, she would be writing letters and counseling through letters and phone calls, not just face-to-face. And she used storytelling. She would tell people stories of her life so that you would understand that she's not coming to you as someone who knows it all.
And I think that flies in the face of, again, if you've been to counseling, you're usually not hearing too much about your counselor's life. But she really pulled back the veil on her own life in order to have people understand that it was larger than them. It's not just this particular individual expects a certain domestic life. It's that society is organized in ways that have us understand what manhood is in a particular way, and that person is acting those tropes out, right? And that allowed people to, whatever decision they made, however they continued to move through the world, but they got a greater political understanding about the dynamics of power. And I definitely feel like this is something that more people need to know about, that people were doing this kind of work in these times where one imagines that a lot of the work is kind of the external work. People were also connecting the external work to the internal work. And that was deeply radical. If radicalism is getting to the root of something, there is no deeper root than the self.

AT: Well, I want to come back to the question of the birth control contention within the Black community at this time, because that actually also came up in a conversation where we were talking about the fight for abortion rights at this time and how that was one of the things that feminists were having to push back against in Black communities. And what I find fascinating here is this obsession with controlling not just women's bodies in a reproductive sense, but also specifically Black women. Because from the days of slavery, there was this obsession with Black women's reproduction for financial gain when they were enslaved. And then moving forward, that has shifted to rather than white people wanting to control Black women's reproduction, to Black men feeling like they have the right to control it. And I highly doubt that any of them were making that particular connection. But then you've got forced sterilizations, like women who didn't even know that they were being sterilized at first. Fannie Lou Hamer is a famous example of this, but it was very widespread and was happening into like the 1970s. And what I think gets missed when women are not often being involved in decision-making conversations about what are we fighting for, what are our policy stances, all of these things, is all of those men who were saying like, “oh, this is genocide” and everything. But we're overlooking that it has to be about the woman's choice to control her own body.

Listen to Barbara Winslow on abortion activism or read the transcript.

RSA: Yes, yes. And it speaks to a long-standing and very problematic counterposition of race and gender, right? Because the people who were pushing birth control as genocide would say things like, “procreation is beautiful. When we produce children, we're aiding the revolution in the form of nation-building. Our children have to have pride in their history. This idea that alleviating poverty by increasing access to birth control is a dupe in order to trick Black folks out of having the kind of family life that enslavement denied them.” That is a powerful argument. And those are some direct quotes from some of that literature, this ideal that to take the pill means we're contributing to our own genocide is a direct quote from some of that literature. In contrast, I think that Pat Robinson and the women really saw the world in a way that saw themselves and their needs at the center, right? And they also understand that the very people who are asking them to make these sacrifices are also misogynistic and sexist as well. So here's a quote. “For us, birth control is freedom to fight genocide of Black women and children. Poor Black women in the U.S. have to fight back out of our own experience of oppression. Having too many babies stops us from supporting our children. Teaching them the truth or

stopping the brainwashing." So they are talking, I think, speaking in their own voices.
And they're speaking against not just the activist men who are promoting this idea or this discourse of genocide. They're speaking back to social science at the time. They're speaking back to policymakers at the time who have identified at the time who have identified Black women as the focal point of what is wrong with the Black family. It's Black women. They're too dominant. Black family is matriarchal. And Black women just need to submit. And then the Black family will do better economically, politically, in all ways. Those were the dominant ideas. So you have someone like Pat Robinson knocking on doors, speaking to poor women, and allowing them to understand that their own intelligence, their own analysis, their own self-understanding is actually powerful enough to be a voice that speaks back to this discourse. And that particular piece that she helped to co-write in September of 1968. And she signed that piece, Patricia Robinson, Housewife and Psychotherapist. She didn't shy away from the fact that of the domestic, in all of her public political world, she was a housewife as well in this time, and a mother, those were things that governed and shaped how she showed up in the world. And you see that be a powerful rejoinder, a different way of thinking through an intellectual response when you're talking from your own experiences and you're speaking collectively. And I think that was one of the things that she did, and the connections that people made.
The people were talking about genocide and pointing out about the Vietnam War. Right now, 2024, we understand that the term genocide is in high circulation in this time period as well around US foreign policy and the Vietnam War. And so under Pat Robinson's tutelage, I would say that these women understood their conversation about what they were going to do with their bodies to be part of a larger conversation about power, about dominance. So they say things like, "like the Vietnamese have decided to fight genocide, like the South American poor are beginning to fight back. The African poor will fight back too. Poor Black women in the US have to fight back out of our own experience of oppression." That's a direct quote from the document that Pat Robinson helped put together. And I just find that adding her to the literature of how we think about Black social protests in this period opens up so many new doors and windows for us to peer through to really see what was happening on the ground.

AT: Well, and one of the things that strikes me about like birth control and abortion conversations is that so many of the people who are saying, "oh no, you need to produce more babies," then do nothing to support women when they do have babies. And so going back to that idea of like nurturing radicalism, it's a very stark contrast when you look at how the Black Panther Party was portrayed in white-focused mainstream media versus what they were actually doing. So things like providing free breakfasts and having these other more social support-focused programs to actually help the community. But that's the sort of thing that the white mainstream media did not want, they didn't want to present them as sympathetic and doing good. And so that, I think, helped shape this narrative of what is a radical group.

RSA: Right. For sure, for sure. I think you see those reverberations in organizations like the Black Panther Party, who, again, if we look at them closely and we relinquish the limited glasses that were given to understand Black radicalism, we see an organization that had strong debates about childcare, an organization where the people within it had children, had to figure out what to do with these children, had to figure out how to educate these children, and who can speak to larger questions of birth control, of what did it mean to be a radical and a parent at the same time. Their solution to that was collective parenting, right? They created what might be considered on some levels like a boarding school, where you dropped your child off on Monday, you picked them back up on Friday, and all of their needs were met and this freed you in order to continue to contribute politically at the level that was required in that period of the Panthers' history. So the struggles about that, the struggles about how to raise children, the role of young people in revolution, that nurturing is a key part of organizations like the Black Panther Party. It's not just a pragmatic matter, but also became a political imperative as they had to figure out how to make it possible for young people to become revolutionaries. What would it mean in the U.S. context? This wasn't an organization where you went down and volunteered three

hours a day, two days a week. It was your life. And so how could that life, that political life, be sustained in the context of a world where on the one hand there were so many beautiful political experiments and radical ideas and global 68s, all of those challenges to the status quo were very, very real. On the other hand, you're also facing political repression, arrests, and all sorts of other things that are going to hinder your activism. So it's ironic that some of the more nurturing things that the Panthers did, their community programs, feeding breakfast to school children before school, giving away bags of groceries, escorting senior citizens to the bank, those were things that people in the Black Panther Party did. But we don't know about those things as much as we know about their armed self-defense. But that was a type of self-defense. It was defense against fear, defense against impoverishment in so many ways. It didn't involve picking up a weapon, but it might involve picking up a book or picking up something else.

AT: Now, I'm curious whether there's a through line from Black clubwomen to organizing in more controversial spaces, because what we're talking about in both the clubwomen's role was that sort of charitable philanthropic making people's lives better in the community. And it feels like that's very similar to what people like Pat Robinson were doing, but it doesn't have that same respectability aspect that you saw with the clubwomen.

RSA: Definitely. And I think that that helps us. I think, the political context helps us to understand that. I think Pat was, again, personality. She was an irrepressible kind of person. She was pint-sized, like 5'2", maybe. She was a light-skinned Black woman with curly hair. She could have had a whole other life where she was the belle of the ball and was an elite woman who was a housewife and didn't think twice about social change. But she saw herself coming from a long line of race men and race women, people who could not stand down from the fight against racism, even though their class status somewhat shielded them from racism's hardest exclusions, they were still on the other side of the veil. And because of that, because of Pat Robinson's elite background, she was part of the Murphy family. The Murphy family published the Baltimore Afro, which by the 1960s had been in publication for quite the while and was one of the leading Black newspapers in the country. That is what she came from. That is who she came from. And the Baltimore Afro, if you look at it, was all about Black survival, Black resistance in the face of white supremacy. And she would write articles, like we know she was in the audience when Malcolm X was assassinated because she wrote about it in an article for the Baltimore Afro that she submitted. So she used her writing in that way as well. So when you think about all of the different mechanisms that were available to her and that she utilized, you can really understand just the power and uniqueness of her contributions.

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