AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by historian Dr. Tamara J. Walker, author of *Beyond the Shores, A History of African Americans Abroad*, to talk about journalist, civil rights activist, and adoption advocate, Mabel Grammer.

TW: So the book blends elements of memoir and history to chronicle a century of people on the move, and I talk about my own family history, my grandfather, my grandmother, and older members of my family, as well as my own experience of travel, and I weave that into narrative chapters that start in the 1920s and continue to the present day. And so for each decade of the 20th and 21st century, I spotlight a person or a pair of people and a place or a pair of places that best reflect what was at stake for African-Americans when they were going abroad in each of those decades, and what made these various parts of the world that they traveled to appealing or what was going on in those parts of the world that made them beckon to and make themselves appealing to African-Americans. And so I have a chapter that opens in the 1920s, which is a period that people, when they think about African-Americans going abroad, are largely familiar with. And in particular they're familiar with Paris and figures like Josephine Baker. And so I kind of set the story in Paris, but I look at another figure, a woman named Florence Mills, who was often compared to Josephine Baker. They were both performers, they had arrived as part of these review performances in Paris, and they went on to have different experiences of success. Florence Mills was short-lived compared to Josephine Baker. She got sick and died at a relatively young age, and I chose her both because she kind of reminds us that Josephine Baker was one of many African-Americans that made their way to Europe in the 1920s. Florence Mills also went to London during this time period, so it was an opportunity to talk not just about Paris, but Europe in the 1920s more generally, and what was happening that made Europe an inviting place to African-Americans. London kind of takes away from some of the romance of the story because in many ways London was a lot like the United States in the 1920s, where African-American performers experience their share of racism and exclusion. The other reason I focus on Florence Mills is because she has this tragic story, and it allows me to set up the story I tell in *Beyond the Shores* as a tragic story that's not just about the romance and adventure of travel, although certainly that's part of the book, but it's also about the tragedy that led to African-Americans needing to leave their own country in the first place. And so that sets the kind of tone for the rest of the story, that kind of blend of romance, adventure, and also tragedy. And I talk about people who go to Uzbekistan in the 1930s. I follow Richard Wright to Argentina in the 1940s, and then in the 1950s, I follow a woman named Mabel Grammer, and she goes to Germany with her husband. And Mabel Grammer is a really interesting person, in part for all the things that she gave up to accompany her husband Oscar to Germany. She had spent many years as a socialite of sorts and a society reporter, and she had a regular column with the Afro-American newspaper where she chronicled the comings and goings of the city's Black elite, and had just made a name for herself as a chronicler. At the same time that she was having all this career success, she was also experiencing a bit of personal turmoil. She had a marriage that was kind of falling apart at the same time that she's experiencing, all of the success to a man named John Alston, and so at the time she went by Mabel Alston, she ends up divorcing for reasons that are not entirely clear. But she eventually remarries a man named Oscar Grammer, who ends up being stationed in Germany in the 1950s in the post-war era

when US soldiers were deployed to various parts of Europe as part of their kind of peacekeeping mission in the post-war era, and to help advocate for democracy abroad.
So that's the context that brings Mabel Grammer to Germany, and how she becomes involved with this kind of project of placing brown babies into adoptive a family is that she arrives in Germany, she doesn't have any children with Oscar, and hadn't had any children with her ex-husband. And so she arrives in this community that is really defined by mothers and fathers and their children, and so while the men go off to work serving the US army and military, the women are usually focused on the business of raising children, and that wasn't something that Mabel was doing, nor was she still doing any sort of journalism. And so she experienced a bit of a crisis when she was there, and tells this story about going to a hospital because she had been sick and experiencing migraines and unable to get out of bed and nothing she could do would help her feel any better, and so she ends up going to see this doctor who diagnoses her basically as feeling sorry for herself. So she ends up talking to the doctor who shares her own experience, the doctor was a Jewish woman who had experienced horrible treatment by the Nazis and survived a concentration camp, survived being medically experimented on, and uses that kind of story of not being able to have children because one of the things that comes up in her conversation with the doctor is that she's unable to have children of her own. And so both she and the doctor kind of commiserate over that, and the doctor tells her about these orphanages in Germany that are filled with children who were born to US soldiers, and a large proportion of those children are children born to African-American soldiers and German women, who have been placed up for adoption, despite the fact that they had mothers who were alive and in many cases wanted to raise them but lived in a culture that was hostile to them raising children of mixed racial ancestry, and so what Mabel ends up doing is first adopting several so-called “brown babies” herself, and eventually facilitating the adoption of several other brown babies, hundreds of other brown babies. So that's kind of the story of how Mabel Grammer comes to be involved in the project of helping these children be adopted, mostly to families in the US, almost entirely, and to Black families in the US. And so she plays a really active and an instrumental role in finding homes for those children.

AT: I think we have to mention that they didn't just adopt a few children, they adopted 12 kids, and not surprisingly given their father's profession, 10 of them ended up serving in the military, and their youngest daughter Nadja graduated from West Point, became a physician, and she was the army's first female three-star general, and in 2016 she became the army surgeon general.

TW: It's a testament to the way that Mabel and Oscar raised these children, who went back and forth with them between Germany and the United States. They had adopted I think just three or four children during their first stint in Germany, then they returned to the United States, and then go back to Germany in the 1960s where they adopt more children. And through it all they instill in these children a sense of responsibility, a sense of patriotism to serve the United States, which in itself is really interesting and complicated, just the ways in which African-Americans managed to be patriotic in the context of being denied certain civil rights, even in the military. Oscar Grammer told stories about how when he would enter the military base where he was

stationed in Germany, the sentry wouldn't salute him despite his high-ranking position in the military, so there were a lot of things that were kind of putting challenges in the way of their patriotism or kind of making it difficult for them to be so patriotic. So it is remarkable that they raised children who ended up going into military service, and I think it's testament just to the example that Mabel and Oscar set for their children.

AT: One of the interesting things throughout the book, because as you mentioned earlier there's Paris, there's London, she's in Germany, there's also Russia during sort of the Soviet Revolution, post-Revolution era, as well as South America, and you're really contrasting the different experiences that African-Americans had in these different countries based on the context that they found themselves in, and post-World War II Germany was not one of the friendlier zones, shall we say.

TW: Even that's complicated because the post-war context was fraught for lots of reasons. Germany, like Austria and other parts of Europe, was an occupied state. The US was an occupying force, and so there was kind of that degree of complexity when it came to having these US soldiers kind of walking around their community, but the US had also been instrumental in winning the war, and that was something that was also meaningful to Germans who had lived under the shadow of Nazism, and so there was a sense of gratitude also towards the US, and gratitude towards US soldiers. And so they occupied this complicated position in the post-war German context, and then you add to that the fact that we're talking about African-American soldiers, not just Oscar Grammer, but the other soldiers who had gone to serve in places like Germany. The other thing I talk about in the book is my own grandfather's experience in Austria. He had been stationed in Austria during the same time, and the reason I ended up writing about Mabel Grammer was because my grandmother, accompanied my grandfather, and their two oldest children went to Austria as well, and so my attempt at kind of better understanding their story and also signaling the kind of way in which their story connects to a larger story of African Americans going abroad in the post-war era is what was interesting to me. And so you have the fact that not only are these American soldiers, but they're also African-American soldiers in the context of a country that has had and continues to have a really complicated racial history, and deeply entrenched anti-Blackness and anti-Semitism obviously. And so they're arriving in the shadow of Nazi rule and having to confront some of these deeply entrenched prejudices, and so they're walking a fine line. And not just kind of in Germany, but in the context of the US Army, and as I mentioned, Oscar Grammer was someone who didn't have the full respect of his peers when he was entering the military base to serve this country. So on all fronts, these African-American soldiers and their families are walking really difficult lines. And so that was the other reason it was interesting to talk about someone like Mabel who didn't have the same sort of institutional kind of relationship to Germany and to the US Army presence in Germany that her own husband had. So she was there. I mean, not quite as a civilian, but had access to civilian life and the kind of day-to-day rhythms of civilian life that her husband didn't have. She was able to go do the shopping, and especially once she involved herself in the work of placing these brown babies up for adoption, she was just traveling more around her community in Germany and different parts of Germany, and she was part of this wider network

of US soldiers families that would travel around Europe. These African-American families would travel around Europe and visit each other on different army bases around Europe in this time period, and just go on tourist excursions. They would go to Paris, they would go to London,they would check in on friends in these kind of army bases around Europe. Mabel was also a devout Catholic, and so she would go on pilgrimages of sorts. So she was able to just do a lot of travel and exploration in ways that her husband, just because of the nature of his work and the demands of his work, wasn't necessarily able to do. So she occupied this really interesting position and had an exposure to the kind of layered dimensions of life in Europe in the post-war era for African-Americans, it made her story so interesting.

AT: Like you said, a majority of the children were placed with Black families in the US, but some of them were able to be placed with families in Germany. But I'm curious because the feeling that I got while reading the book was that any biracial child was automatically assumed to be the child of an African-American soldier, and therefore representing the US, but there were Afro-Germans at that time, so not every person of African descent in Germany would have been African-American.

TW: Yeah, yeah, and that's one of the things that I found interesting in the process of researching the book and address in the book, the fact that African Americans were not the first Black people to arrive in Germany. In fact there had been centuries of Africans being present in Germany and there was a deeply entrenched Afro-German history dating back to Germany's colonial activities in Africa and the arrival of Africans into Germany, and I talk about their experiences of anti-blackness and racist exclusion going back to the 18th and 19th centuries and the ways in which they had been kind of enlisted. Many Afro-Germans had been enlisted, for lack of other opportunities, in traveling circuses, right, that really kind of undermined the humanity of these Afro-Germans and treated them as circus freaks and as spectacles rather than multidimensional human beings. And so the African-Americans who are arriving in Germany in the post-war context are arriving in a context that is really racially complex. There's also the fact that the brown babies born to African-American soldiers aren't the only kind of children of interracial unions in Germany. There had been a history of Afro-French soldiers who had served in wars in Germany that also resulted in relationships between themselves and German women, and so there is a German word, mischlingskinder, that refers to these kind of racially mixed offspring and brown babies is just one example of that kind of category of racially mixed Germans born to non-white, non-German fathers for the most part, and German mothers. But there had been a long history of Africans in Germany and racially mixed Germans as a result, so that's the other kind of backdrop that I tell the story of the brown babies up against.

AT: I feel like this definitely ties into much bigger issues and patterns and histories around race and adoption, so whether it's a systematic removal of Indigenous kids from their homes and communities to be placed in mission schools, and even today there's a lot of social concern and questions around interracial adoptions. So I'm just curious, the experience of the white German mothers, because as you said many of them would have gladly kept their children if they'd had adequate support, so was it just intense social pressure or was there an active effort being

made to separate these women from their children?

TW: I would say it varied. One example that I talk about in the book involves a woman who had reunited after having been adopted by a Black family in the US, reunited with her German mother. And she worked for ABC News in New York, and so she goes back to Germany with a television camera and a camera crew in tow, and she wrote an article for Ebony magazine about this experience, and she is able to reconnect with her mother who in that case had felt a lot of social pressure to give this child up for adoption within her own community and family. And there's another story I tell in the book about the children of Black GIs in Japan and Japanese women that kind of plays out in a similar way, where there was a belief in Germany and in Japan that these children didn't belong because they were not fully German, and accompanying that belief was the sense that they would be better off where they did belong, in the US among their people. And so that is a racist belief that somehow by virtue of not being 100% German that they didn't belong in Germany, and we know exactly what those beliefs attribute to, right? And so it was also a bit of a patronizing belief that what would be better for the children, and Germany worked really actively alongsideMabel Grammer to help facilitate these adoptions, they thought that they would be better suited to living in the United States. So there was this kind of sense that they were doing right by these children who didn't belong in Germany to get them where they did belong, which was in the United States.

That's also because these women were young and unmarried that they were subject to certain kinds of social pressure and scrutiny, so it's a combined punch of racism and nativism within Germany, right? And sexism that resulted in many of these young women who very much wanted to raise their children not being given the resources to and being exposed to a tremendous amount of social pressure and isolation that resulted in them giving their children up for adoption. And what was interesting about the case that I was mentioning of the ABC News New York reporter was that her birth mother never married and never had any additional children, so that seemed to be a common experience as well among these women, that they were somehow tainted by having had these children out of the bounds of marriage and with these African-American soldiers, so there was a lot that was going on on that side of things that resulted in conditions for raising these children being untenable. That's not to say that there were no brown babies that remained in Germany and remained with their families, but a big part of the story is that they were put in these orphanages separate from other German orphans, so even at the level of the orphanages, they were isolated and treated as different and in need of being removed from Germany, right? The problem needed to be removed from Germany, so that's the kind of situation that's happening on the ground in Germany.

And then on the US side, and here's where Mabel Grammer becomes a really instrumental figure because she was relying on her journalism chops to help spread the news about the brown babies, and so she still had contacts at the Afro-American, and so she reached out and updated them on what she had been up to ever since she left the DC area and moved to Germany and used the space of the Afro-American column that she started to write while there, to, one, help people understand how to go about the process of adopting these brown babies and kind of gave them guidance in terms of the nuts and bolts of the paperwork side of things, but also helped them prepare themselves for adopting these children since they weren't going to

be able to kind of have their pick of a baby and decide which sex they wanted, like it was really about making a home for children who needed it most. And so they couldn't treat it like a shopping list, right, and so she had this tone and a lot of her columns where she was very clearly getting a lot of letters and correspondence that showed that, people needed to be educated about what it meant to adopt from a foreign country and to adopt children who had been born into these conditions. So she used the space of a new column that she started to write to educate people about what it would mean to adopt a brown baby and how to go about doing it.
She also started and I thought this was a really interesting kind of indicator of her savvy and also her passion for writing and having a career outside of motherhood, and she ended up using the space of that column eventually to write a society column for people living in Germany, a society column that focused on the the habits and customs of these military families, such as her own, and the ones that she had traveled with and befriended and made community with in Germany. And so she got back to her roots as a society columnist, but this time from the other side of the Atlantic, but chronicling a similar group of people that she had been writing about for many years prior to her arriving in Germany, so the work of getting brown babies placed in families was obviously very important to her, and it was her life's work in many ways, but so too was her career as a journalist that she managed to find her way back to as a result of working on this brown baby adoption plan.

AT: Getting into her background a bit, so Mabel Alston's Charm School ran from 1938 to 1943 in the Baltimore-based Afro-American. And it's an interesting juxtaposition to me because we have someone who is very prominent in DC African-American society, like she's in a lot of rooms with a lot of rich, fancy, important people. She was a beauty influencer, essentially, decades before social media existed.

TW: Totally.

AT: And it's really, I love seeing these examples of prominent, elite African-Americans, because I feel like that's a story that doesn't get told as much as it should, including like when you see historical dramas, and there is just, it looks like an episode of Friends. There is no Black people somehow in New York City, so that was one of the things that I really found interesting about Mabel's story as well, was that reflection of a type of African-American history that often gets left out.

TW: Yeah, and you know, she had her finger on the pulse of Black life in Washington, DC, and for sure the kind of elite slice of Black life in Washington, DC. That was both because of the publication that she worked for, and its particular orientation, but also because of her own husband at the time, John Alston, who was a professor at Howard University. And so she, by virtue of who she was married to, and the newspaper she worked for, was connected to these important institutions in Black life in Washington, DC, these institutions that in Howard's case churned out the elite of Washington, DC, and in the Afro-Americans case, chronicle the lives of the elite in Washington, DC. And she found herself often kind of on the receiving end of criticism

as a result of her charm school column, because it was a beauty column. She had a background as a hairstylist, and so she would advise women on how to style their hair. That evolved into advising women on how to stay fit, and healthy, and what kinds of creams and ointments to use on their skin to stay beautiful and youthful, and trim. And she also would spotlight each week in the column, or I think more often than that, a local woman who kind of best embodied the spirit of Charm School, who seemed to take all the suggestions in the column to heart. But what you notice from looking at the people who were featured, one is that they are by and large women with lighter skin tones, and straighter hair, and that is unsurprising if you know anything about the kind of upper-crust of Black DC, which is that many of those people were light-skinned, and had more European features. And their beauty, especially among the women, was highly prized, and kind of held up as a standard that other women were expected to conform to, and if they didn't, then woe be unto them. And so she was kind of reproducing these beauty ideals in her column in terms of holding up her Charm School devotees, and in turn holding up a particular kind of beauty. And one of the things that people who would write into the column would mention is that they also seemed to embody a particular class status, where they were all government workers or teachers. There were no housekeepers, or, you know, lower wage workers, who were obviously reading the column as well, because those people would write in and complain about not being featured in the column, but they were not being represented by the column. And so that just kind of is a window onto some of the class and intra-racial dynamics that DC represented, and that Mabel Grammer was part of by virtue of where she worked, and the kind of writing that she did, and over the course of working for the Afro-American. So it was an interesting time and place to be in DC for sure, and she really captured the spirit and the energy at that time and place.

AT: Now going back to the ABC reporter that you were talking about earlier, I believe she also reconnected with her father as well. And so I'm just wondering with, you know, a fair amount of influence and connections and everything, particularly in DC, did Mabel try to reconnect these kids with their biological fathers, because I would assume a lot of those fathers didn't have any idea they had a kid.

TW: Yeah, yeah, I mean, I didn't see that aspect of her work. I think more than anything, she was trying to place children with families that would take them, because she saw this really urgent situation and saw herself as being in a position to lend a hand. I think in a perfect world, that would have been her approach or an approach that she took to try to reunite these children with their biological fathers. I think that was made complicated by the fact of how some of these relationships came to pass, which is that they weren't necessarily enduring relationships. The women didn't always know very much about the men that they had relationships with, not all the time, but in many cases. And there was also the fact that many of them didn't know that the women they had been with had been pregnant and had children. And so, there was a lot of complexity that Grammer was navigating, or at least sidestepping in order to place these children in homes that would not only welcome them, but care for them and help them thrive and flourish in the way that the children that she had adopted and her husband had adopted had been able to thrive and flourish. And so, there were certainly a lot of moving parts, but also,

as was true in Germany and in Japan, it was often the case that these men had no idea that they had children who had been not only placed up for adoption, but adopted by families in their own country.

AT: I wonder how much of it is also, again, as we're talking about different biases, the bias against a single unwed mother. I do wonder how much of it may have just been influenced by the idea that a single father just couldn't possibly raise a kid on his own, especially if he's in the military.

TW: Yeah.

AT: She was criticized, and I would say rightly so, because there was no system in place to conduct welfare checks on these kids after they were placed. So, I don't know if that was... She didn't really know what she was doing in the sense that she had no background in this. She was trying to do the best she could with what she had. She didn't have a lot of resources, obviously. And there may have also been a naive desire that she wanted to believe in the goodness of people, even as she's writing that some Americans do more harm than good. So, I'm not sure if anything bad actually happened to any of these kids. I don't know that. But given that orphans who don't have anyone looking out for them, do often end up in places they shouldn't be, shall we say.

TW: Yeah, and one thing we do know is that they were taken from the country of their birth, right? So, even under the best of circumstances, and the ABC reporter talked about what a lovely childhood she had, and that she couldn't have asked for better parents than the parents who she was raised by. At the same time, she also felt a sense of loss in terms of not having been able to live in Germany and speak German. She didn't speak German. She couldn't communicate all that deeply with her birth mother and her extended birth family. And so, at the heart of all these stories is a story of loss and dislocation, right? And that's probably always the case when the parents are from different places that someone is going to be dislocated and someone is going to feel a sense of loss. But because so many of them were sent to the US, at the core of that story is a sense of dislocation from the country of their birth and the country where their birth mother is lived, right? As for the conditions into which the children were adopted, it varied, and I think that that's always the case, right? And to your point, Mabel Grammer did not run an adoption agency. She happened to be in this particular position, both as someone who had adopted children herself and who understood the need for these children to find homes and loving families acted on their behalf. But it was a very kind of ad hoc sort of enterprise and she still was not the kind of final say. She was more kind of an intermediary between these children and the families, but they still had to go through the German and US governments to get the paperwork in order for the children to actually be able to go to the US and stay in the US and get citizenship in the US. So she was one of many people kind of on the way between these children and living and growing up in the US.

AT: And you touched on this a little bit before, but could you give us a little more insight into why

you chose Mabel for this decade of the book?

TW: Yeah, I mean, I think she just represented a different side of the coin when it comes to the post-war era in Europe, because to the extent that we talk about Americans and African-Americans, we're talking about soldiers. And obviously in that chapter, I talk about soldiers and my grandfather was one of them when he went to Austria. But those soldiers often had families, right? They had wives, they had children. And for me, I was so interested in the question of what life was like for the wives and children. I grew up hearing stories in my own family about some aspect of that. But I was so young when I would hear those stories that I didn't have the presence of mind and the ability to kind of step outside of myself to really ask more about that experience. And so Mabel Grammer was my way into understanding that experience. She was one person and a truly remarkable person, so she can't stand in for the entirety of that experience. But I do think that what was so interesting about her was that she kind of arrives in Germany with one set of expectations, to kind of be there as her husband's partner and to make a home for them while he went about the work that took him there and earning a living for the family. But that over the course of being there and kind of running up against her own sense of limitations that she wasn't content to just stay at home and make a home. She was also thinking about other things and certainly some of that was adopting children and raising a family. But the other part of it was writing and storytelling and bringing people together, which had been so central to who she was even before she met Oscar and before she left Washington, DC. So I thought that was an interesting kind of full-circle of moment and experience to explore as well.

AT: Yeah, one of the things I really enjoyed about the book was not just, I believe you described it as tremendously personal, so not just that sort of memoir, family history feeling that you bring to it, but also the fact that in most of these cases we're talking about people who were living immersed, but also separate from the cultures that they were in and also juxtaposing, you know, this person is Black, but they're also an American and how do those things intersect from these outside perspectives of the communities that they are existing in? It’s a really a combination of perspectives.

TW: Yeah, yeah, thanks for saying that. And I think that also helps to explain some of my choices of subjects. I mean, I was drawn to Mabel Grammer for the reasons I already said and that there was something that allowed me to better understand my grandmother, but there was also something that I felt connected to as well because I am a working woman who does not have children and I really identified with what I sensed was her sense of alienation from the world of mothers and children when she first arrived in Germany. I found myself in similar kinds of situations, obviously not that exact situation. And so I saw her as a really complicated figure that I felt a lot of affinity for and compassion towards. And in telling her story, I wanted to just tease out some of that complexity. I think often the way she has been written about, and I read a profile of her in Good Housekeeping that came out in the 1960s and it seemed to very much kind of want the bow on the story to be that like, after all these years of not having had children and not having biological children that she was finally able to have a family by adopting these

brown babies. And I think that is true that she found happiness in raising her children. But I also think because she got back to writing again, and I'm someone who loves to write and tell stories and connect with people through the written word. I love that part about her story too that even though she was becoming connected to this world of parenting in a really profound way, not just in her own life but in the lives of the parents that she made through adoption, she was also connecting again to the world of work and the world of words. And so I just found her to be this tremendously compelling person and that's true of so many of the people that I write about in the book but I think her especially.

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