

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, And today I'm joined by Kate Saccone, project manager and an editor for the Women Film Pioneers Project. So first, could you tell us about the project?

KS: Sure. So WFPP is an open-access digital publication and resource that advances research on the hundreds and hundreds of women who worked behind the scenes in film industries and cinema cultures worldwide during the silent film era. So this means our focus is basically the late 1890s to the late 1920s, 1930s. But we also make exceptions because we know that sound came later to some regions, but basically that's our chronology. And we publish original scholarship. We call these "career profiles" on women who worked, as I said, all around the world as directors, producers, screenwriters, editors, distributors, exhibitors, film critics, publicity agents, film colorists, studio managers, the list goes on and on. And our contributors, the authors are mainly feminist film historians and film scholars and archivists based all around the world, working specifically in early and silent film and media history. WFPP was founded by Jane M. Gaines, a feminist film historian and film and media studies professor at Columbia University. And we're actually hosted and published by Columbia University's Digital Scholarship Division, in the libraries. And being online, we're an expanding resource. So when we launched in 2013, we had about 184 profiles and today we have 310 or so. And they cover women who worked in the US, the UK, Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, and there's many, many more in the pipeline. But the project actually began in the 1990s, and it was first conceived as a multi-volume book set, but eventually it was reimagined as this online-only publication, which I think is a great thing. And just broadly speaking, our main goals since the beginning, really, this has not changed since the 1990s, is just to challenge the long-ingrained narrative that only great men invented and shaped cinema, and really to jumpstart archival research and exhibition and restoration activities around early women filmmakers.

AT: Now, I completely agree with you that this is better as a digital resource. And I say that from a purely selfish standpoint, because, apart from the fact that, once a book is out there, there's really not much you can do with it short of another expanded edition. So the fact that it is constantly growing is not something that would have been nearly as simple with a print version. But one of the things that I love about WFPP, again, from a purely selfish standpoint, as someone who researches women's history and writes books about it, resources like this are amazing and they are not as common as I wish they were. By which I mean you have trustworthy, in-depth information that is well-cited, it's coming from a reputable place, but it's not hidden behind a paywall like so much of academia is. And I just think this is so important in terms of making information accessible, because if I had paid for access to all of these different journals and databases, where this information is often, I don't want to say hidden, but gatekept, then I would be bankrupt by now. And so having something that is free, that is easily searchable, that is easily findable online, like if you're searching for any of these women's names, which is another benefit to having it digital versus print, is that if I was trying to find this information and it was only in a print book somewhere that I may not even be able to buy a copy, if I could even afford to. There's just so many benefits that I really appreciate. And I'm going to stop fangirling now and let you talk again.

KS: No, I mean the open access component was really important to the libraries and was there from the beginning for all the reasons that you've mentioned. The user experience is part of it. We want to have this place where all this information is compiled and readily accessible or as much as we can link to and include from archival resources. Being open access is also about going beyond the scholarly community too, and reaching just cinephiles and filmmakers and people who are interested in film history, but again, maybe don't have the institutional access to library databases or the means to purchase these expensive academic books. And I will say, I think the spirit of open access is infused in the project. And in our guidelines, for example, we really ask and encourage contributors to raise questions and highlight the challenges of the research process. It's not about hiding behind an authoritative tone, but really showing what this kind of research process is like

and what questions and issues and challenges you face while doing it. When I came to Columbia as a graduate student in 2011, I had not been taught about any of these women in any of my undergraduate film courses. I had learned, of course, about the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès and D.W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton and Hitchcock and Fritz Lang, but never any of these women. So for me, WFPP and all its contributors really reoriented my entire worldview, and I mean that as dramatically as it sounds, and I think that it and all the rich feminist film scholarship around it that's just continuing to grow and expand, I think that does the same for many others today. I think it's a really, really exciting time to study and get reacquainted with women in early cinema, and there's just so much more work to do.

AT: And so something that has come up before on the podcast, because one of the people that I've spoken with is Shelley Stamp, who came and talked about Lois Weber, and she's also written about Lois Weber for WFPP. I think that's actually how I found her, so thank you for that. And one of the things that we were talking about is this idea that women are treated as a new addition in a lot of different fields. And a lot of those are STEM fields, but you also see it in writing and directing films. But then when you actually look at the history, you find that women have been here the whole time. And that really raises this question of, okay, so how did these women who were incredibly successful in their day - or not, even people who were just like middle level still deserve shout-outs - but how did particularly the Lois Webers and the Alice Guy-Blachés, how did they get written out of that history in the first place?

KS: I mean, there's several different reasons. And obviously, the reason for one woman's invisibility or marginalization today is very context and regionally dependent. But I really think it comes down to a question of value, both at the end of the silent era as the field was consolidating, especially in the American context into this big business, and many women in these higher positions were getting pushed out. But also, it's a question of value in the decades that have passed since then. Women filmmakers were not included in some of the first histories of early cinema. And they haven't been included in many film classes and mainstream film canons since then. And also, their surviving work hasn't been prioritized in archival restoration projects compared to their male counterparts. And then there's so much loss, there's so much material loss when it comes to the silent era. So I think this lack of value is really shaped in part by a lack of awareness and access to film materials and documentation. The film preservation movement didn't really start until the 1930s. So there are so many films that are sadly lost forever. But yeah, so you have all these women who were once present and known to other makers and the public to varying degrees, as you said. And then they all seem to have been forgotten with a vengeance, which is a phrase that film historian Richard Kaczmarek has used about Lois Weber. They're a blind spot for us all. So there's all these different reasons. But I think for Lois, what's so interesting to me, and I'm sure this came up with Shelley, is just that she's not remembered as this very big, high-profile, important, powerful director. But in the later years, as a star maker, as kind of nurturing and helping actresses, which is a fantastic thing, but hides so much of her contribution to film history. That is the case for I think, a lot of women who are remembered just solely as actresses too, like Florence Turner and Cleo Madison and Clara Kimball Young, Mary Pickford, even. Their behind-the-scenes roles are obscured by the on-screen, which we can see today still.

[Listen to Shelley Stamp on Lois Weber](#) or [read the transcript](#).

AT: Mary Pickford's a really interesting example. So I don't know if this was because she was largely an actress. And so she was probably more aware of her public image and her brand, like back in the days before they would have called it a brand. And part of that is her legacy. So when we're talking about these different factors, Alice Guy-Blaché, the first film studio that she worked with in France, basically, the head of that studio wrote her out of their history, like he just kind of pretended she had never existed. And so she wasn't in the documentation. And she had made so many short films, she couldn't even remember all the films she had

made. So when she was trying to even document for herself, "here's what I've done." There was just too much, but then not enough in terms of documentation and the physical films. And also, like you said, so many films were lost. The films we do have from the earlier days, credits just weren't a thing. So you didn't have credits rolling that actually told you who all was involved, which doesn't help. Lois Weber wrote a memoir that was never published and then was lost, which Shelley is still very salty about, understandably.

But going back to Mary Pickford, I don't know if it was because she was seeing what was happening with other women and she was seeing experiences like Alice Guy-Blaché's, but she was very fastidious about collecting her work and making sure that she had records of everything that she had done. So she was actively working on preserving her legacy in a time when a lot of people didn't realize that was even going to be an issue. And she's also, and when I say she's primarily remembered as an actress, she wasn't "just" an actor. She also co-founded United Artists, which I believe is still around in some form. And she was a businesswoman. She was a producer. She had her hand in distribution. So she was much more in control of both her career and her legacy than a lot of other women were in that time, and today.

KS: Yeah, yeah. Whenever Mary Pickford comes up today, I always think of the fact that Getty Images misidentified Alice Guy-Blaché with a picture of Mary Pickford behind the camera. It's like the stage publicity still. But because it's a woman behind the camera, everyone just assumes it's Alice Guy-Blaché. They've since taken it down. But for some algorithmic reason, I don't know how the internet works, but it gets to the New York Times, many high-profile publications have used it and have misidentified Mary Pickford. So I think you're totally right about all the work that Mary Pickford did to preserve her legacy. And then it's just really sad to think, we still don't know who she is. We still don't know who Alice Guy is. And I will also say women like Iris Barry, too, who was the first film curator at MoMA, but who began as a film critic in the silent era, she was also very instrumental in helping Mary Pickford and other stars at that time really consider, "we need to save your work." And that's really how the [Listen to Mindy Johnson on Bessie Mae Kelley](#) or [read the transcript](#). MoMA film department started, too.

AT: So the fact that they assumed that a woman behind the camera must be Alice Guy-Blaché, because there were no other women with any business being behind a camera this time, reminds me of the only woman syndrome, where it's "okay, we can admit that there is one, but just that one, this wasn't common or anything." And I also spoke with, for another episode, Mindy Johnson, who is specifically an animation history scholar. And she has a book about Bessie Mae Kelley. And it's called *The Only Woman Animator*, which I find to be kind of tongue-in-cheek. But that's how Bessie Mae Kelly described herself because she would go on vaudeville circuits and show and tell about the art of animation in its earliest days. And whether or not she genuinely thought she was the only woman animator, she probably wasn't. A lot of those records don't exist, as we've discussed. But that may have been just a marketing thing, or she may have genuinely believed that she was the only one because something that Mindy and I talked about was, I think it was like the '70s, there was a woman in animation who thought that she was the first. Which because you don't know the history, you might genuinely believe that. And you might tell people that. But it's not true. It's just that these histories are not as well known as they should be. And so yeah, that perception that there is only one. There is never only one.

KS: No. No, I think Jane always says, once you find one, you're always going to find more. Jane Gaines, the founder of WFPP. But that's why I think that projects like WFPP are so important. Because they show that any history of the silent era that doesn't include women, or any kind of account of the silent era that doesn't include women, or even, I would say, any kind of exhibition program or public-facing project that doesn't include women is really myopic and false. And so we are trying to offer an abundance of evidence to rewrite that history and just an abundance of evidence to put that out there. And then I think also this idea of self-representation comes to that, with this only woman problem in terms of just contemporary filmmakers, female

filmmakers, non-binary filmmakers, just seeing that there were all these women in the past working. I once interviewed Shelley Stamp for WFPP. And she made this point that I'm going to butcher now. But basically, she was saying, so many of the debates we're having, we actually already settled 100 years ago. Can women direct action pictures? Yes. Can female leads carry pictures of the box office? Yes. Can women's issues like reproductive politics and family life appeal to a wide audience? Yes. So if we keep ignoring that, and debating issues today, they've already been settled. And we need to move forward and look to the past for inspiration.

AT: Speaking of exhibitions, you are also a curator. And so you have been making the change you want to see in the world when it comes to curating programs that highlight women filmmakers, rather than, "oh, great, we're showing Charlie Chaplin films, again. We've never seen those before."

KS: One of my greatest joys is presenting these films by women directors, producers, but also editors, colorists, to contemporary audiences. We celebrated our 10 year anniversary in October 2023. And so for that, I was honored, I got to curate a two-week film series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. And we titled it *After Alice, Beyond Lois: Mining the Archive with the Women Film Pioneers Project*, because as much as we love Alice and Lois, we also wanted to look a little deeper and highlight that they were really just the tip of the iceberg. And there are so many, so many other women whose work is around and we need to show it. So that was a real joy. One of the sub-joys of doing it was that I really got to take a global approach or as global as I could within the 15 slots that I had. So we we had films from Tunisia and China and Japan and Germany and Czech Republic, the US obviously, Poland and all over. And it was just this really great celebration of the really diverse, diverse types of films that women made during the silent era.

AT: Something that that is a great point to illustrate is that WFPP is always growing, much like my own Infinite Women database, there are always more women to write about. And so you have an unhistoricized women film pioneers list that is just this very long series of names as sort of an invitation to scholars to take on individual women as their projects. And so for example, Bessie Mae Kelley is not yet on the site, I believe that's in progress. But because your scholars put so much time and energy into these profiles, it's not a quick turnaround and obviously it has to fit within their often very busy schedules. So even the ones that are in process may not be readily available soon.

KS: Yes, the work is always in progress in many more ways than one. Yeah, as you were saying, we're always expanding, we have, I think, 123 profiles that are currently in progress. And these might have been assigned 10 years ago, two months ago, there's a range, but they're all in progress. And then we'll go through the editorial process before publication. And the unhistoricized list that you mentioned, it's also not a static list because it's always being changed as names are taken off if they're assigned or if they're verified. And we realize, because we don't know everything about all, I think it's 750 names on that list right now. So some of them are like, there's one source saying that maybe they directed a film and we don't want to take them off the list yet, but in the future, maybe research will show that they didn't direct the film or whatever. Unhistoricized simply means that the woman has not been historicized on WFPP, because there are some pretty big names on there, like Ruth Roland, for example. So it's not to say that no one has ever studied Ruth Roland before, but just that we don't have a career profile for her on WFPP. And the other way we expand that I think is not as well known maybe is that we can update existing content because we really do want to be a reliable and up-to-date resource. So if a film is discovered, we can update the filmography. We always do this in a very transparent way with research update boxes and editorial notes, as well as, contributors can rewrite their text to account for new information and we have a whole process with the DOIs and making sure that there's an updated record of the changes in Columbia's academic commons. But for example, Musadora, a fragment of one of the films that she directed was discovered in 2016, but we had published the profile in 2013. And so things like that, we

can go in and update. And I think that's really, really important part of this whole, always ongoing, never complete feminist film historiographical process.

AT: I think people have this idea that because history happened in the past, we don't have updates to make. And I don't think a lot of people realize the scholarship and the discoveries and the things that are happening in history scholarship, even though the events may have been a hundred years or more ago.

KS: Yeah, for the longest time, we knew that there was this one French film colorist who worked in France,. She colored the films for Georges Méliès and Pathé. And so we always just assumed there was the one. And her name was Élisabeth Thuillier. And then we discovered in 2020, that she actually was working with her daughter. So there were two women, and our contributors found, they traced the daughter's entire biography, and they added so much more knowledge to what we know about the mother. And so this became this robust, really rich, new information. And that all came from just rethinking and re-looking at the past from today.

AT: Something else that comes up in that particular instance as well is the limitations when you are an English-language scholar trying to do global history. And so again, this is something that I come up against as well, is trying to find sources of information about women who were not from English-speaking countries. And so finding resources about them in general is hard, but finding them in English and finding them online, each of these is a barrier that makes it harder and harder to find them. And so you might have someone where you need a person who is not only physically able to go to the archive or wherever else the materials might be, but also speaks the language well enough to understand what the things say.

KS: Yeah. And it's always from the beginning, WFPP really developed out of this larger network. It's called Women in Film History International, and they put on the conference since 1999 called Women in the Silent Screen every two years. And it's this very international network. And having scholars from the places that these women were in outside of the US, outside of Europe, is central to that organization, but then all just isn't so central, obviously, to WFPP and grew from the former into the latter. We try to encourage contributors to leave film titles and bibliographic references in the original language. If we can, we have English translations right next to it, but really trying to maintain the linguistic diversity as well. This also goes back to the MoMA exhibit because in 2021, two fragments of films by this Argentinian filmmaker, Renée Oro, were discovered in Buenos Aires. She was a documentary filmmaker, propaganda filmmaker, who worked in Argentina and Chile and Brazil. And I was so fortunate to be able to show her films at MoMA, but all the work, all the scholarship on her is done by Argentinian scholars. And that's fantastic. They're the ones that have their hands on the nitrate film, their gloved hands on the nitrate film. I couldn't present the film without their help.

AT: Now, I do feel like we have to discuss the fact that a lot of the things that we're talking about were not exclusive to the silent film era. So, for example, when we're getting into the '40s and you've got Alma Reville, who was Alfred Hitchcock's wife, but she was also a film writer, a director, an editor, and a lot of her contributions to his films went unacknowledged. So, she worked a lot on preparing and adapting scripts for films like *Rebecca*, *Foreign Correspondent*, *Suspicion*, *Saboteur*, but she was only credited for *Suspicion*. So she wasn't included when *Rebecca* and *Foreign Correspondent* were both nominated for Best Original Screenplay Oscars in their respective years. And so you see stuff like that where she didn't even get credit at the time. And a lot of people look at Oscars, like, I think we can agree the Oscars are problematic in terms of how representative they actually are of who is producing the highest quality of art. But a lot of people will look at, "okay, well, this person won an Oscar," or "let's look at the Oscar winners from that period" and use that as their criteria for who was making an impact. And obviously everyone knows, even people who aren't film history buffs, know Hitchcock, even people who've never seen any of his films. But almost none of those

people will know who Alma Reville is, even though one film critic said “the Hitchcock touch had four hands and two were Alma's.” And even Hitchcock himself, when he was accepting his AFI Lifetime Achievement Award in 1979, he said that if it weren't for her, he may have been at the event, not on stage, but “as one of the slower waiters.” So like, he's willing to admit it when *he's* accepting a Lifetime Achievement Award, but not putting her names on the films that she was largely responsible for.

KS: This contemporary example, or more contemporary than the silent era, really shines a light on two ongoing issues: credits and crediting, and then husband and wife collaborations or collaborations maybe in general. And I think one of the benefits of WFPP, even though it is a historical resource, is really that it can help frame some of these other issues, more contemporary issues and situations. One of the things that I see our contributors often working through is how to suss out a woman's contribution in terms of credits, if they're not on the film print, or they're not in the official documentation. And, for example, we have a pre-revolutionary Russian pioneer, Elizaveta Thiemann, and she was actually, I think, the first known women director in pre-revolutionary Russia. But she also produced, her husband was a producer and had a production house, and she was on set, involved in negotiating what the next film was going to be. But she's not credited as a producer on any of the films. And so to look back 100 years from now, our contributors really had to look at memoirs, they had to look at all sorts of receipts and photos and everything, all sorts of extratextual information to just see that she really was involved, like Alma with Hitchcock. Hitchcock also brings in this question of legacy, and I don't think this is the same maybe with Alma because I don't know in her case, but many of the women on WFPP, after their husbands died and their husband being a famous filmmaker, they really spent a lot of time, they dedicated the rest of their life to really preserving and holding up his legacy. So Frances Flaherty with Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov's wife, who was an incredible editor and director in her own right, Elizaveta Svilova, she spent the end of her career really just making sure that Dziga Vertov's career was remembered.

AT: But it's not just women who were collaborating with their husbands or other men. So like also in the 1940s you had film writer Catherine Turney, who was specifically known for writing like great women characters who were strong and independent and funny. And even though Warner Brothers and film historians and the Screenwriters Guild all agree Turney was the primary script writer for *Mildred Pierce*, which was 1945, she didn't get on-screen credit. So again, when it was nominated for Best Screenplay Writing at the Oscars, she wasn't named, only Ranald MacDougall was. So somebody was getting credited, it just wasn't the woman who was doing the bulk of the work. And she later told the media that at Warner Brothers, “women writers were not particularly highly thought of. We were seen as a necessary evil and were seldom paid as much as the men. I think the only reason that they put up with women writers, certainly at Warners, was that they had big women stars. At one time they had Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, Rosalind Russell, Ann Sheridan, and Ida Lupino. All of them were under contract and demanded stories slanted toward women.” And so that perspective on sort of the studio-level sexism, I think is really important because one of the issues that the early pioneers like Lois Weber and Alice Guy-Blaché faced was not just the Great Depression, but also around that time, studios were consolidating power. So it was a lot harder for independent filmmakers of any gender to keep operating. And also under the studio system, for many decades, you would have actors who were contracted to the studio. So it's not just “I signed on for this picture,” it's “you own me for the next five years,” or however long their contract was for. So it was a very different environment, both from where we started and where we're at now.

KS: As the American studios consolidated and film really was recognized as a big business, the women directors were pushed out. Some of the women screenwriters, but a lot of women stayed in below-the-line jobs, which are seen as traditionally female. Like “editing is so much like sewing. So of course, it's the vocation of a

woman.” And Erin Hill has written a fantastic book called *Never Done*, that shows in the ‘40s and the ‘30s and ‘50s, women in the studios working in these, as secretaries and as cutters and coded women jobs.

AT: And one of the funny things about that is, I believe Mindy mentioned this in relation to Bessie Mae Kelley, is that self-reinforcing bias that something is a female-coded job. And so women are often restricted to that job. And what she found was, even when she would find a picture of Bessie Mae Kelley, the men around her often assumed that, “oh, that was a secretary or a cleaning lady,” because those were the only roles that they could imagine a woman would be doing in that environment.

KS: Right. Yeah, I even feel bad saying, like, saying, “woman director,” and I think it’s important to say woman director in the context of WFPP, because we are kind of making fun of this, the kind of pioneer myth of “the great male pioneers.” But external to WFPP, I always feel weird saying, “female director,” I wouldn’t say he’s a male director, Alfred Hitchcock is a male director. I think it’s connected to what you’re saying about seeing one woman, and just assuming that they’re the secretary when they’re actually the director. Again, maybe it goes back to this value thing about how we read images, but also how we read careers, or how we understand or interpret and present them in the present, and what kind of stories and narratives we’re perpetuating.

AT: Fun fact on the women director, female director thing: reputedly, the word scientist was created to describe a woman named Mary Somerville, who was a scientist across a bunch of different fields, and they couldn’t call her a man of science. So they had to come up with a whole new word to describe her. So I would just like everyone to start using the term “male scientist,” because that is correct.

KS: That’s amazing. I didn’t know that.

AT: Fun facts. I am so full of them. Even today, I am still very salty, because *Barbie* was robbed at the Oscars. And more broadly, so we know *Barbie* was not only the highest grossing film of the year, it was certainly the most talked about. And I would argue that it certainly met the criteria for a quality film, not just a popular film, and we’re not going to get into the high art/low art argument, it’s not worth it. But I think it was definitely an important film. And so even though it was nominated for Best Picture and seven other categories at the Oscars, director and writer Greta Gerwig was ignored for Best Director again. And so when I say again, she’d been nominated for 2017’s *Lady Bird* and didn’t win, but she wasn’t nominated for Best Director for 2019’s *Little Women*. And so *Little Women* had six nominations, including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay. And when you look at the fact that Gerwig, as of the time we’re talking about this, has only directed written and directed three films. In total, they had 19 Oscar nominations, among so many other awards. And yet the famously male-dominated Best Director, she still hasn’t won yet. And it actually makes me wonder because another woman, Justine Triet, was nominated that year for *Anatomy of a Fall*. So I’m kind of like, “oh, did you just see a woman has already been included so we can’t have two and it’s the only woman again?” It just seems statistically improbable that a writer-director who has only done three films, which collectively have had 19 Oscar nominations, but yet she has only been nominated for Best Director once and hasn’t won. That just seems really statistically improbable.

KS: Yeah, the Oscars are frustrating, aren’t they? And, again, this is using WFPP to frame this, but a lot of the issues that scholars and programmers or film curators face with women filmmakers is that some of them have a much shorter filmography than their male peers because they had less opportunities to create, to direct films. And we see that today, obviously, it’s notoriously hard for a woman or a person of color to get a second feature sometimes greenlit and funded and made. And so I think it’s so interesting, here Greta Gerwig has a short filmography. It’s only three films and yet they are all so critically well received, popular box office successes.

The Oscars, they are frustrating.

AT: Well, and I don't think it's a coincidence that all three of her films have also been female-centric. So when you look at the women who have been nominated, the women who have won for best director, they mostly don't pass the Bechdel test. The first woman who won Kathleen Bigelow for *Zero Dark Thirty*, that is a very male-centric film that does not pass the Bechdel test. And that's pretty indicative of even when women are nominated, it's not for films about women for the most part. And when we're talking about writing credits, one thing that a lot of people were raising an eyebrow at was the *Barbie* script was nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay rather than Original. And everybody's like, what is she supposedly adapting it from? That doesn't make any sense. But going back to the issue that we were talking about in the 1940s, where women just go completely uncredited for writing, I have to bring up *Selma*.

So, again, we have another Oscar-winning film, but director Ava DuVernay, who anyone who doesn't know, she is an African-American woman. She was handed a white savior tale about how Lyndon B. Johnson made civil rights happen, that was written by a white British man. And so she rewrote almost the entire script, including all of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches that are used in the film. She changed the perspective of the story, added almost a dozen new characters, wrote a new third act. And she was also largely drawing on her own father's lived experiences. And I would assume the lived experiences of other actual African-American civil rights activists that she had spoken with. But contractually, the white British man would have had to give permission to share the writing credit, and he refused. He also publicly criticized her changes, which to me is really weird, because if you don't like the final project, why are you insisting on taking sole credit for the writing? And DuVernay herself said a couple years later, "it's the only time in the industry I feel I really betrayed myself, because I wrote that script and my name was not on it. The credit was taken from me." And she was actively discouraged from raising this issue at the time, because it was nominated for Oscars and the producer, studio, whoever, didn't want any controversy. And she also later said that "I was the seventh director they'd asked. All of the men before me said no." And added that the producer seemed ready to give up on the film entirely until David Oyelowo, who starred in the film, suggested they ask DuVernay. And so you really can't overstate how important she was to this film. And yet you once again, in 20-frickin'-14, have a woman not being given credit for writing an Oscar-winning film that she also directed, and it is infuriating.

KS: No, I know. That's a really interesting example, because my immediate thought because of WFPP is like, what are film historians 100 years from now, like, how are they going to know about her contribution? They're going to have to look in the press where she talks about how she regrets this or in the male screenwriter's public criticism, if that's been documented. But yeah, they're not going to see it on the on the film print or the digital file or whatever we have in 100 years. And that is an interesting question to me, because then you see that it's the exact same from the silent era. So yeah, we have, obviously, very visible women filmmakers in powerful positions today. We've definitely gotten better between the silent era and today. But there are still practices and situations that hurt them. And so in 100 years, a film historian might be in the exact same situation that we are today in terms of the silent era, and really trying to understand a woman's true contributions to a film.

AT: Well, and I think it's also very telling that, first of all, Ava DuVernay is influential enough, she is important and powerful enough that when she said this, people listened, it was newsworthy, there is documentation of that. But because of these external pressures, she did not fight for it at the time, she did not feel she was in a position to do this for three years. And that also speaks to the fact that so much of the hidden aspects of women's history that are deliberately hidden, where credit is deliberately taken from them, a lot of those do not come out until so many years after. So the fact that Catherine Turney was saying those things about how Warner Brothers didn't like women writers and they kind of had to because they had women stars who were demanding good scripts. She told that to the media in 1984. So that's almost 40 years after she was writing



those scripts in the first place. So the fact that we even know about these things that have happened in the last 10 years is unusual from a historical standpoint. Like a lot of this stuff does not get exposed until so long after it happened that it can be very difficult to recognize when it is happening in real time.

KS: No, that's a very good point.

AT: I think it's also a question of it is harder for people to band together when they don't realize that what is happening to them is happening to other people. And so I think that's another big danger of it. And so when we talk about, maybe Mary Pickford saw what was happening to Alice Guy-Blaché and said, "that's not going to happen to me." We can't protect ourselves against things that we don't know are happening. And we can't band together if we don't know that the same thing that's happening to me is happening to her as well.

KS: Yeah, for me, and I know for all the people who work on it, the scholars and the graduate research assistants over the years, it really does help us frame what's going on. So the fact that I can look at this *Selma* incident and see the historical traces in the past and how it's playing out in the present, you can see the patterns emerging. And then hopefully I would like to think that, and I'm not a filmmaker, obviously, but I would like to think that I, as a critical observer, I can be aware.

AT: I do find it interesting in the context of women banding together, like we saw with #metoo was obviously the most high profile recent example. But you also see partnerships like Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman, I believe have collaborated on getting movies and television shows that they want made. One of the things that is kind of fascinating is that when I look at these early, particularly the high-profile women, they were working with men. So Lois Weber and Alice Guy Blaché worked with their husbands. And when Mary Pickford founded United Artists, it was with two other men. So when we're talking about the only woman in the room, it does seem like there is some merit to that stereotype.

KS: I will say, though, that Mary Pickford and Frances Marion's collaboration is central to film history. So I would not ignore that. There are situations like Reese and Nicole Kidman in the silent era that, like Frances Marion and Mary Pickford, that we shouldn't ignore. But I do think your point about women having to start a company with the man is an important one. And there were basically two waves, what film scholar Karen Ward-Mahar calls "her own company." And a lot of actresses started their own production companies, often with their husbands because, sexism, because of patriarchal society. But also that was who they were working with because of their marriage or because of industry partnerships. And even in some cases, like Germaine Dulac, she needed her husband's financial backing to start a company because of French law, like a wife can't do something without her husband. So I think it is a really good point that often these women were starting businesses with a man for various reasons, whether or not they had control, they had say, that's a whole other conversation.

AT: Well, and I know the big reason that Lois Weber was framed as a star-maker is because she was really good about mentoring young actresses and writers who were women. And so she did mentor and help promote their careers. And so that led to this reputation that sort of overshadowed her writing, directing, and producing in her own right. But I think it is also important, as you point out, to note that, you know, this was an era where women's property rights and right to manage their own finances and whether they could even open a bank account. The simple fact is that the degree to which two women could even start a company together, if they did want to, there were all of those barriers that you're talking about that just meant that it wasn't feasible. But it did create this perception that, "oh, it's two guys and Mary Pickford" or, "oh, she did it with her husband." And this probably also reinforced undermining of those women. So when Lois Weber divorced her husband, a

lot of people thought that like, “oh, well, he must have really been like the brains behind the operation” because she experienced this perfect storm of, there was the Great Depression, there was the studios consolidating power, there was a lot of other stuff going on. But her divorce coincided with shutting down production. And she never really restarted her career after having to take that time away. There's no indication that her husband was like the primary creative force in their partnership. And I don't think he did anything after that, that was noteworthy either. But people use this as an excuse to take the credit away from her.

KS: Yeah, and I think that Shelley Stamp has made such a convincing case that Lois Weber was the driving creative force throughout their marriage and throughout their partnership. So that's just ridiculous. Going back to what you were just saying about property rights and the female situation, I always go back to the fact that these women were working, like, especially at least in the American context, before they had a right to vote. Like, they weren't even equal citizens, and they were inventing and shaping this new medium that would become, a global, global phenomenon.

AT: Now, I feel like I have pushed us into this trap that you see, where I am so focused on the writers and the directors who were also often producers, that I have missed one of the points of WFPP, which is that it is not just the women in the top positions who deserve to be recognized. And so there are a lot of women in other areas who made their contributions that you are a big fan of. So would you like to share those? Or is it like me asking a parent to choose their favorite child?

KS: No, I love all of them, because each woman has a different career and different challenges, and a kind of different biographical arc. And that's always really fantastic to learn about. I'm, again, really interested in curating and film exhibition. So I am really interested in the women who worked in those domains in early cinema and really shaped the moviegoing experience. For example, there's Flossie Jones, and she was this exhibitor in a really small town in Wisconsin. And she did everything from taking tickets and managing the bookings to organizing and staging, directing these little live theatrical shows before a feature film. And they often had to do with the film thematically. And so just in terms of the realm of creativity and theater management, she's a really important woman to remember. I'm also really interested in musicians. So we have someone like Hazel Burnett on the site, and she played the piano and the organ during film screenings in Ohio and Texas. And the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, the University of Austin, I believe, has scores, her music sheets. And so we can trace some of the scores and what she played for certain films and really see the relationship that she was creating between sound and image.

I also am really fond of, we'll say, women with no surviving films, because I think I see that as a harder obstacle to overcome. If there's no films to preserve and restore and show, it's harder to become a familiar name today. And for the longest time, I was really interested in Renée Oro. All of her films were presumed lost. And then in 2021, two fragments were discovered. And we showed them at MoMA at our 10-year anniversary show. And it was just this joy to see this work that we thought we would never see again.

That's not to say that that always happens. There are women like Maria P. Williams, who was an African-American organizer, I believe, in Kansas City, Missouri. And she uncredited, directed, and produced and, I believe, wrote *The Flames of Wrath*, which is this all-Black cast. It involves, if I remember correctly, a jewelry heist and an escape from prison and mistaken identity and evil bosses. And that's, unfortunately, considered lost. And I don't know if, there's always hope. That's what Renée Oro shows, there's always hope. Adriana and Dolores Ehlers, who are Mexican filmmakers, these sisters that work together, and they studied in the US for a short time and then went back to Mexico. And unfortunately, all their films are lost today. So I am particularly fond of the women who, there's nothing to show, but we still want to know them.

AT: And something that strikes me about what you've just been saying is, I would imagine, particularly as a

curator, you mentioned that you are intrigued by the experience of a cinematic event. And particularly in the context of silent films, even the audio was something that could vary from location to location. But even today, an empty theater and a full theater are very different audience experiences. And that's not even getting into, I'm sitting on my couch at home watching it. So it's kind of funny that we think of film as this, I don't want to say static medium, but this idea that everyone is having the same experience because the film itself is the same, but the experience is so much more than that.

KS: Yeah, I think if the sound era can tell us anything today, it's that it's such an ephemeral and a performative experience. Each screening is so different from the next, like the silent era with its all its variations on exhibition context from the fairgrounds to the movie palaces to the storefront nickelodeons to the traveling outdoor or church screenings. It really just hammers home that that cinema has never been one thing and the cinematic experiences is never one thing.

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