AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Mayukh Sen, author of *Love, Queenie: Merle Oberon, Hollywood's First South Asian Star*, to tell us about the life, career, and complex legacy of this too often overlooked icon. So first, because I feel like a lot of people don't know who we're talking about, and that's one of the reasons we're here today, could you introduce us to Merle and her place in history?

MS: So Merle Oberon was an old Hollywood actress who was born in India. She was the first performer of color and the first Asian actress ever nominated for an Academy Award when she got a Best Actress Oscar nod in 1936 for a film called *The Dark Angel*, which I can almost guarantee maybe three listeners tops have ever seen. It is a very underseen film. But she's probably most famous for starring in the 1939 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* as Cathy opposite Laurence Olivier's Heathcliff. But there's a wrinkle to her story, which is that throughout her lifetime, Merle had to conceal her South Asian heritage from the public eye and pass as white, and this was due to a variety of factors, namely the fact that immigration from what was then known as India was outlawed in America from 1917 until 1946. And in addition to that, Hollywood for much of the studio era was constricted by a number of censorious codes that limited the opportunities that were available to performers of color. And she kept this masquerade going until the end of her life in 1979, that she had been born to white European gentry in Tasmania, Australia. And this was a fictitious studio biography that was cooked up for her by her publicist all the way back in the early 1930s when she got her very first film contract in 1932. And it was only after her death that the truth of her origins came out, that she'd been born to a South Asian mother and a white father into poverty in what is today Mumbai, or Bombay, in India.

In terms of her career, she was one of the major stars of Hollywood in the 1930s. So before she got to Hollywood in 1934, she had gotten her start as a contract player in British cinema. The very first contract that she had gotten was with a fledgling film production company called London Films, and it was a publicist there who gave her this backstory that she had actually been born in Tasmania, Australia to these rich white European parents. Because the team at London Films felt as though British audiences would not be receptive to the reality of a mixed-race potential movie star who had grown up in poverty. And she carried that story with her as she eventually transitioned into Hollywood. She was one of Britain's rising stars in the early 1930s. One of her most famous early roles was Anne Boleyn in a film called *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. She had a very, very short role. I think she's gone right around or before the 15-minute mark because, of course, she's executed, as many people know and there's a fate that Anne Boleyn suffered. But she brought such intensity of feeling to that role that British audiences and critics immediately took note, as did executives across the pond over in America. And so by 1934, she's back into America because there's so many film executives there who want her to star in Hollywood films, but she does not have an easy time with it when she gets to Hollywood. First there is that agitating political factor that I mentioned earlier, which is that from 1917 onward, America had outlawed immigration from India, and six years after that law was passed, there's also a Supreme Court ruling that barred Indians from obtaining American citizenship on the basis of their race. And those federal gestures were the result of long-simmering animus towards South Asians that had infected the American mind since the early 20th century when there was so much anxiety about South Asian laborers taking the jobs of white men in the Pacific Northwest and just kind of spiraled from there.

And so that was what she was up against, so she had to lie and say that she was white rather than a mixed-race South Asian woman who was born in India when she came to America. But once she arrived in Hollywood, despite having the security of studio backing, she faced a lot of ostracization within Hollywood circles. There are many fellow female stars who looked at her and were sort of skeptical of her. They thought that she was the sort of brown vamp who was just barging into town without reason. They may very well have felt threatened by her. But she had very few friends and very few people who were looking out for her. But it was in 1935 that she finally found a lifeline in an executive named Samuel Goldwyn, who was the head of a studio called United Artists. He was the person who said, “I want to wipe the grease paint off of you. I want to move you away from these ‘exotic’ roles that London Films and other companies have stuffed you into, and I

want to essentially denude you and pasteurize your image, and make you the typical English rose." And of course, there are many people who just heard of these plans and immediately were like, "what? That's not going to happen". One of the things that I came across in my research for this book was a letter in a fan magazine, which was in all the rage. Fan magazines were all the rage in Hollywood during that period. And they took umbrage with the fact that Merle was this "asiatic adventuress," who was going to try and play these English rose characters. But nevertheless she kept going. And her star-making role in America was in this drama called *The Dark Angel* that I mentioned at the top of our conversation. And she played this very demure English woman who was embroiled in this love triangle during World War I. And the film itself didn't give her many notes to play, but it convinced a lot of critics that there was an actress beneath all that makeup. And so that was essentially the start of her Hollywood career. And so she would spend a few more years in the 1930s working under Goldwyn while still having a contract with London Films. And that resulted in her career peak in 1939 with *Wuthering Heights*, which, if anyone's familiar with the origin text, Cathy, Catherine Earnshaw, that is a canonically white character. And she is someone who is meant to stand in contrast to Heathcliff, who is a man of ambiguous racial provenance. There's some references to his potential South Asian heritage. He was played by Laurence Olivier, who, as far as we know, did not have South Asian ancestry, at least documented South Asian ancestry. But the fact that she even played that role showed just the extent to which Goldwyn was really trying his best to whiten her image as much as possible.
But, unfortunately, by the end of the 1930s, what Goldwyn realized is that she was not the box office draw that he was trying so strenuously to manufacture. So her contract with United Artists ended. And she would spend the next few decades sort of floundering, trying to replicate the success that she enjoyed in the 1930s. And there are a lot of hidden gems in her filmography. She eventually had a four-decade-long career. Her final screen credit was in 1973, just six years before her death. But she never again reached the, no pun intended, heights of *Wuthering Heights* in 1939. And it's a shame. But she really did have a very tumultuous personal life. She had four marriages to men of various social standings. Some of them were incredibly rich, others less so. Some treated her with great care, others did not. But she definitely achieved a life that she likely did not think was possible growing up, because she had come of age in abject poverty in India. And she spent the first 18 years of her life in that country just slogging through a lot of pain, encountering so much discrimination because of her mixed race origins, as well as her class status. And so she was able to achieve so much, but it came at a great cost. And I think that is what I wanted to show in *Love, Queenie*, in my book, is that all of these triumphs of her career, they were almost enveloped within this sort of tragic arc. And I wanted to create space to hold both truths in equal measure. The tragedies alongside the triumphs of her life.

AT: And I'd like to dig more into that because when I was reading the book, what really struck me about particularly her early career years is that she seems to have this fascinating combination of naivete but also a certain ruthlessness, like a willingness to use people, which on the one hand, that's practical. If you want to get ahead, a lot of times if you don't start off with all of these privileges, you have to be willing to do things that are often vilified in women, regardless of their motivation. And particularly with celebrities, that line between personal and professional is often very blurry. So can you tell us a bit more about her background and how that shaped her career and her relationships as an adult?

MS: Yes, absolutely. So something that I omitted because it is so convoluted in my initial answer is that she was born into what I can only describe as a broken home. So her mother was a woman named Constance Selby, who had been born in Sri Lanka, and she was only 14 years old when she gave birth to Merle in Bombay, or Mumbai, India. And Merle was the product of unimaginable sexual violence exacted upon Constance by her stepfather, a man named Arthur Thompson, at least according to her birth certificate, along with conversations I've had with various sources. And the reality of Merle's birth was concealed from her. Essentially, what happened was Constance, because she was so young and so vulnerable when she gave birth to Merle, it was Constance's mother and Merle's grandmother, Charlotte, who was also a Sinhalese

woman from Sri Lanka, who said, “I'm going to scoop Merle up and raise her as my own daughter. And Constance, you will have to masquerade as her half-sister, and that is the family that she will know.” Meanwhile her biological father was absent from the picture completely. So she grew up believing her biological grandmother to be her mother, while she did not know her father at all. All that she knew is that she was white. And one of the most fascinating tidbits I came across in my research was an account from one of her friends in Kolkata, or Calcutta, which is the city where she spent much of her adolescence after being born in Bombay. And this friend who was a white English woman, who was traveling to Kolkata on tour as a dancer and struck up this friendship with Queenie Thompson, as Merle was then known in her India days, she would talk about how Merle was very open with her about the fact that she regretted that she never knew who her father was, only that he was this English man, whom her “mother,” aka her grandmother would always talk about in very vague terms and always prevaricate about. And she had this desire to connect with that side of herself that she can never quite fulfill, at least as long as she was in India.
But the woman who raised her was this dark skinned, brown, Sinhalese woman named Charlotte. And that is one thing that I want people to understand is that when the only parental figure you have to identify with in your life is a woman like Charlotte, of course that will lead to a certain kind of perception of yourself, because, one sentiment that I've encountered prior to my book coming out, but also in the months since is that, “oh Merle, she identified as British, and she identified as white, why don't you just let her be white, like she wanted to.” And what my research and reporting uncovered is a far more complex truth than a superficial read of her career and life would suggest. But having grown up in such a difficult environment, where again, she had so little, just materially to her name. She was raised by her grandmother, who was quite poor, and she was as well, it led to a lot of discrimination. When she was a schoolgirl in Kolkata, she went to this boarding school called La Martiniere, and she was known as a “charity child,” she was admitted on sufferance, essentially. And she's very different from the other girls. And the other girls made fun of her because the fact that she was from this poor, mixed-race family. And she had this insecurity that no one would want to be her friend because of her class and racial background. And I think that having grown up in that sort of environment, and under that level of psychological torture, for Merle, it really fueled her desire to essentially prove people wrong. What I detected as I was researching, reporting my book was this “I'll show them” attitude, essentially, where if someone expressed a doubt about her ability to fulfill a certain ambition of hers, she would try to prove them wrong many times over. And sometimes the battles that she waged, they weren't quite successful, but she had that sort of fighting spirit that I think had its roots in that very painful childhood of hers. And I think that's just kind of a constant of her entire life. But it's interesting because she's a woman who, given the circumstances that she was born into, she was probably not supposed to have this sort of life that she ended up having. And I think that makes her quite extraordinary.

AT: I'd like to elaborate on the racism that she experienced growing up being mixed race, because you've touched on this a couple times, but I just want to clarify for anyone who may not be aware is that the fact of her being mixed race didn't just mean that she had the racism from white people later in her life. Her European heritage also made her a target as a child.

MS: Exactly, yes. So Merle, despite her ancestral roots on her maternal side being in Sri Lanka, because she was born and raised on Indian soil, she was subsumed within this broader category of what was known as the Anglo-Indian. And that was back in the vocabulary of the empire, let's say, that really referred to anyone who was maternally South Asian and paternally white like she was. And that is a distinction that I am as careful as possible to make within my book, which is that yes, it is accurate to say that her mother was Sri Lankan, but it is also accurate to say that she was Anglo-Indian because as my conversations with her surviving family members from India made clear, that is how she identified early in life, she identified as Anglo-Indian and she was certainly subject to all the penalties that came with identifying as a member of the Anglo-Indian community. So like you say, Anglo-Indians did not just face discrimination from white Brits who were in India.

They also faced great discrimination from South Asians who were living in what was then known as India. And they were called by quite derogatory names, ones that I don't want to repeat but are printed in my book. And that was certainly something that Merle had to deal with whenever she set foot outside her home. And so she was marginalized from pretty much each of the communities that she belonged to both amongst white folks, but also amongst South Asian folks. And I feel as though there is a version of this prejudice that has played out in the afterlife, since Merle's death. I do find just anecdotally that, I say this as someone who is South Asian myself, what I've noticed just from my vantage point is that there are a lot of South Asian people and just members of the Asian diaspora, the Asian-American community, what have you, who reject her soundly and completely because they say, “oh, she wasn't proud to be one of us, why would you try to claim her?” Sometimes they come after me for even writing this book. They're like, “why are you trying to glorify someone who was no hero?” And you can compare her to someone like Anna May Wong, or Bruce Lee, or Sessue Hayakawa, people who are working around that era or directly after who have been held up as icons of Asian American representation. Merle occupies this sort of nether region in the popular mind. So she is not really celebrated amongst a lot of South Asians or Asian Americans, nor is she really respected by a lot of cinephiles. It's really fascinating because one of the reviews actually of my book pointing this out, it was in the Wall Street Journal by this veteran film critic named Ty Burr, whom I respect immensely, he basically pointed out that Merle Oberon has never had the respect of film scholars in the same way someone like Betty Davis or Joan Crawford or Katherine Hepburn has. Because she's seen as this oddity within the broader narrative of old Hollywood and the female stars that studios were pushing in the 1930s. Like, oh it's funny, this mixed race woman who studios wanted to be white very badly, and she was almost a failed experiment in manufacturing a star. And as a result, I think those factors have certainly led to her marginalization just in the public mind. She is neither here nor there. And that, as I said earlier, it's just a manifestation, I think, of the prejudice that she faced very early on growing up in India over a century ago.

AT: I was holding myself back from saying, when you said Katherine Hepburn, I'm like, “who did yellowface!”

MS: Yes, she did. (AT: Never forget!)I will say this: Merle also did yellowface. And I think that one of the challenges of this book was to make sure that I was not absolving Merle of any wrongdoing or making her into some sort of passive figure. I think that my intention with this book was not to make an idol of her, or not to encourage people to start making Merle Oberon Barbie dolls. She was a complicated figure. And that is what makes her fascinating. That is what makes her compelling from a narrative standpoint. That is what makes her human. I was able to relate to her because I could see my flaws in her. And what I strove to do was to bring that to the page. But there is something so boring about just having this monochromatically heroic figure whom you're writing about. And I sense that there are probably some readers today in our post-Tumblr age who want that. But I was not going to offer that with my book.
In 1934, Merle was in a film called *The Battle* in which she played a Japanese woman and she did perform in yellowface. And she was certainly, as I say in the book, she was beholden to just the pressures of the time in which she was working, of course. And she was not really in a position to protest if she did have any issues with that sort of portrayal. But I think that what I wanted to make sure I was doing in rendering her life was to be honest about the fact that sometimes she could, as you said earlier, she could be somewhat ruthless. She had a propensity for throwing onset tantrums. She was not a perfect person. Her politics took a hard right turn in the 1970s. And I don't want to make assumptions about where our listeners stand politically. But she said some pretty hideous things. And what I really wanted to do was understand how she became that way and the conditioning under which she was living that would make her say those truly odious things and have those sorts of beliefs that she was willing to air out in the public eye. So, I'm sorry, not to keep on referencing like the reviews of my book, but there's another amazing review of my book that I love so much, which mentioned that, and this is the highest compliment that I feel like anyone can give me, this reviewer said something like “Sen pays his subject and his reader as the ultimate compliment in not making Merle Oberon into a saint.” And that

was my precise intention with this endeavor, was to show her humanity. No one is served well if there's a sort of overcorrection in which this woman who's been vilified and misunderstood for so long is suddenly just elevated to sainthood. Gotta cut her down to human size while still portraying her with love.

AT: And I do think that is fundamentally how you do justice to someone's story, is telling it as accurately as you can. I find it interesting when we're talking about her legacy because something that has come up in previous episodes, like you mentioned, Anna May Wong is someone that people do hold up as oh, she is someone who was proud of and tried to promote in positive ways her Chinese heritage. But at the time, particularly earlier in her career, the same people in Asian and Asian-American communities who would praise yellowface actors who were doing “yeah, but it's a positive portrayal of us.” They're criticizing **her** for playing to stereotypes, which I got into in the conversation that I had about Anna May Wong with Katie Gee Salisbury, if anyone wants to go listen to that after this one. Similarly, Hattie McDaniel, who was the first woman of color to win an Oscar and it was for best supporting actress. She was criticized for playing maids and stereotypes. So the Oscar she won was for her mammy role in *Gone with the Wind*. And she didn't even attend the premiere because of segregation. And even at that Oscar ceremony, she was set at a separate table away from the white folks because the hotel itself was segregated. And so I feel like there is a common issue that we see where marginalized communities can often be much harder on their own members than they are on those with more privilege because they have this sense of ownership. They hold these folks to a higher standard while also overlooking the barriers that they face. And this also came up not just in a racial sense, but in a conversation that I had with June Thomas about her book about lesbian spaces. And we talk about how the women who would frequent lesbian bars, for example, when they were owned by lesbians, they would hold those women to much higher standards that ignored all the barriers that they were facing as small business owners who were catering to a very small group that also happens to be very diverse because obviously not all lesbians are alike, but also you have less spending power because you're women and you're more likely to be unemployed because you're lesbians and also women. So they're not really focusing on the realities. They're not having empathy for what these people are experiencing while trying to do whatever they're doing.

Listen to Katie Gee Salisbury on Anna May Wong or read the transcript.
Listen to June Thomas on queer women’s spaces or read the transcript.

MS: Yes, that was exactly the conclusion that I arrived at after I wrote my book. I was just so infuriated by the fact that so many people pinned the blame on someone like Merle Oberon, this individual rather than looking at the system that pushed her into this performance of concealment. And I'm saying this as someone who is a cis man, so just that's the caveat here, but I do think this speaks to just how deeply misogyny is wired into the American mind. The level of vitriol that you see Merle facing, Merle's ghost facing, let's say, because she died many decades ago, but she's still haunted by this specter of misinformation and prejudice from her own people even. You don't see people level those same critiques against someone like Boris Karloff. So Boris Karloff, for listeners who do not know who he is, he was a very, very talented actor and he was the horror icon who starred in *Frankenstein* and *The Mummy*. And something that I feel that a lot of people still don't know a lot about is the fact that, like Merle Oberon, he was Anglo-Indian. Both of his parents were Anglo-Indian and he had naturally very dark skin. And when he began his acting career abroad in the late 1910s, he decided to undergo his own self-reinvention and change his name to Boris Karloff while pretending that his mother was of Russian extraction. So this was something that he orchestrated himself.
Contrast that with Merle Oberon essentially being this powerless figure in 1932 who is being handed this new life by film executives in London Films and they're saying, “to have this contract you need to acquiesce to this demand that you will pretend to be a white woman who was born in Tasmania.” You have one woman who is not the architect of her deception versus a man who was very much the architect of his deception. And I have empathy for both parties. Of course I have empathy for what Boris Karloff had to do in that era of extreme prejudice just to have an acting career. But he does not get nearly as much smoke as Merle Oberon does. And

I think it's because it is far easier for people to blame women on systemic issues in the same way that Anna May Wong and Hattie McDaniel have been blamed for systemic issues that they were facing during their lifetimes. And I wanted to be very clear about that as I was writing my book. And it's so funny because I've been writing this book in my head for many years, but I began working on it in earnest in 2022, just a few months before a little film called *Everything Everywhere All At Once* came out in movie theaters. And of course a few months later, it would run the table at the Academy Awards. But my girl Merle Oberon, she was pushed back into the news cycle in January 2023, after Michelle Yeoh became the second Best Actress nominee and eventually the first Asian Best Actress winner at the Oscars. And of course, people then started to say, “oh, well, who was the first?” “Oh, it was Merle Oberon.” “Oh, does Merle Oberon even count?” I still vividly remember an article from one of the trades. I have too much politesse to name it, but there was an article that came out the day of Oscar nods that year that named Michelle Yeoh as the first Asian Best Actress nominee. And if you scroll within that article, you see one paragraph saying, “oh some recordkeepers believe Merle Oberon might be the first, but she doesn't really count because she passed as white and concealed her Asian heritage.” And I am just like, “do you people hear yourselves?” And there was so much of that, that of course was for me, really disorienting just to be in the throes of writing this research-heavy book on her life, trying to understand her, trying to empathize with her in ways that I'd seen so few people attempt to do in prior years. And then to just see how much people were willing to disrespect her and just forgo the much harder work of trying to understand what she was up against. And so I wanted to paint that contextual picture as vividly as possible in my book. And I do hope that it continues to reach readers and gets them to rethink some of the assumptions that they've had about Merle Oberon and her life and her career choices. I think that we should indeed celebrate the fact that she was able to have such an extraordinary career, despite the fact that we can also lament that it came at great psychological cost to her.

AT: Also shout out to Michelle Yeoh because she was definitely telling everybody about Merle Oberon during that Oscar run.

MS: No, I was so happy, she did the late night talk show circuit and one of the hosts whom I mention in my book he was like, “Oh, so you're the first Asian best actor nominee.” And she was like, “no, no, Merle Oberon was.” I'm like, “thank God someone acknowledged,” I could cry just listening to this.

AT: I feel like we're also getting back to what we were discussing earlier about her childhood. So the absent white father, meaning that she didn't really have any direct connection to that side of her heritage because she is half white. And that's a huge chunk of her heritage that she was missing when she was growing up. And it seems like she did want to seek that out, not just moving to the UK for career purposes, but also probably wanting to connect with that side of who she was. But also when you have people criticizing her for appearing to reject, and she did reject it for various reasons, but criticizing her for rejecting a society, a culture, a heritage where she grew up with that community rejecting her. I feel like there's both not just the practical side of things, but I feel like there are emotional components that people either don't care enough to dig into, or they don't want to, because that would complicate this very simple narrative that they have in their heads. And that gives them their righteous anger that makes them feel good.

MS: Exactly. Yes. There's this smug posture that I've detected amongst members of my generation. I mentioned Tumblr earlier, and something that I admitted in that seemingly snide remark is that I was a Tumblr user myself back in high school. And so I saw how certain harmful discourses would blossom and flower on platforms like that, that encourage that sort of simplistic thinking that you mentioned. And I think that Merle has certainly, in the years since her death, she's fallen victim to that mode of thought that I find so troubling. But yes, she left India for a reason. I think it was a very painful place for her to grow up, but that didn't mean that she didn't miss it. And what was so fascinating to me is that it actually made me feel like I was and actually one

of the great pleasures of writing this book was seeing the ways in which she really tried to reconnect with aspects of the culture of her birth country as she grew older, and also as America became more open to embracing India and Indian culture. She arrived in this country in a time when, as I said earlier, federal law banned immigration from India and also looked down on Indians in general. And yet, as the years went on, certain aspects of her birth country's culture came into fashion. People started wearing turbans, they started wearing saris. By the 1970s, this is one of the most fun revelations that I came across while I was researching and reporting my book. She would celebrate the fact that she loved curry so much, and curry gets a bum rap today. But back in 1973, it was the food that was associated with Indian cooking and the American mind, which I wrote about on my first book, *Tastemakers*. But it was funny to see that intersection between my past and present writing selves.

But in addition to that, in the 1970s, she signed on to play Kasturba Gandhi, Gandhi's wife, in a planned biopic of Gandhi. And I could, unfortunately, find very few documented sources in which she spoke about what that role meant to her. But one of the most meaningful that I could find indicated that she saw that role as a new start and a new beginning for her. And it just moved me immensely to know that she seemed to be going towards a place of self-acceptance later in life. But ultimately, she was trapped in a lie that she did not create, as one of her best friends, Luis Estevez, said in an interview after her death. This biography that was created for her back in 1932, she had built trust with the public on the heels of that. And so, if she were to come out later in life saying, “this was all a lie, I'm actually a mixed-race woman who was born in poverty in India,” she would have considered that a breach of the trust and the contract that she had with the public. And so she kept quiet. And I want my readers to feel what that was like for her. That was not easy for her to survive.

AT: I'd like to dig a little more into the aspect that you bring up in the book of, as you were saying, there's this weird juxtaposition in her later life of, you've still got the racism, but there's also this cultural appropriation where Americans are elevating things like clothing, other aesthetics, food. They're taking the things that they like, the colorful and the flavorful aspects, while also still continuing to degrade the people whose culture, or cultures, I should say, that these things come from. And I feel like even if she had come out, so to speak, she still would have gotten criticism for, “oh, well, now that it's trendy, you're South Asian.” I feel like there are some people who, even if she had done that, she still couldn't win with a lot of people.

MS: That's exactly it. She was in a lose-lose situation completely. And it actually does make me think of my first book, *Tastemakers*, in the sense that what I detected as I was researching that book and the stories contained within it is that there was this recurring theme of Americans or the dominant culture, let's say, loving a people's food without loving the people. Or making sure that certain harmful policies that restricted their mobility remained in place, even if their food was a part of this shared culinary vocabulary within America. And I think that does extend to some extent to Merle's story as well. Because as I said earlier, she lived long enough to see America's posture towards Indians and Indian culture change significantly. Something that I neglected to mention earlier is that you really see those changes take shape in the 1960s. That's when the counterculture fully embraces all things India. And Ravi Shankar's association with the Beatles, of course, makes so many people just love India and its music and its food and whatnot. And those changes also happened right after the passage of 1965's Hart-Celler Act, which essentially walked back most of, if not all, of the restrictive immigration policies that have been in place in prior decades. And so you saw a wave of Indian immigrants come in in the post-1965 years. And what I saw and noticed as I was researching my book is that Merle would sometimes try to partake in that culture. And what I read that as is a woman trying to connect to this home she had left behind so long ago, but still lived inside her, and part of her probably really missed, without being able to own that side of herself completely. And so it was pretty heartbreaking that she had to live like this. But I want my readers to make sure they're targeting their criticism in the right place. And that's towards America and the system that pushed her into this, not to her. She was just a woman trying to survive.

AT: I'd also like to explore the various barriers that you encountered when you were trying to uncover the actual truth of her story, because something that comes up often is, the more marginalized someone is, the less documentation that we have about them, particularly in their own words. But you, I feel like, had a more difficult journey than most in the sense that there is a lot of documentation and we have a lot of accuracy issues, shall we say. So not just that you have a lot to dig through, but then how much of that is actually correct between the previous versions of her stories that were told, because this is not actually the first biography of her, but certainly these were not great representations. All of the issues with the lack of documentation, not just her own lies as well that she told and studios told on her behalf, but things that she didn't or may not have known, like you mentioned her sister being her birth mother, her being the product of rape. You also mention that her grandmother had her sterilized without her knowledge when she was quite young. So are these are these factors why we haven't had an in-depth, well-researched biography of her prior to this?

MS: Yeah, certainly has a lot to do with that reality. In my acknowledgments, I do call Merle Oberon a biographer's nightmare, and I stand by every word of that because as I was writing this book, let me take a step back. When I was trying to sell this book to my publisher, I was like, “how has there not been a book about Merle Oberon in almost four decades?” And now it's been over four decades, because my book was sold officially in 2022. And the first and only biography of her prior to mine came out in 1983. And then as I started writing, I was like, “okay, I get why,” because who would sign up for this willingly? Because as you mentioned, you are dealing with the subject who had to lie about her own life for her own survival. And when I was writing my first book, *Tastemakers*, I had a certain naivete about the process. I was this like boy reporter who was like, “oh, I'm gonna like rely on these women's words to form the foundations of each of my biographical sketches.” And implicit in that is trusting that each of these figures is a reliable narrator of their own lives. And that methodology was really challenged as I was writing Merle’s story, because pretty much every single one of the interviews that she gave about her life essentially talks about Tasmania and what it was like for her growing up down in Australia. And it's just complete and utter fiction. And so you had to learn how to read between the lines and ask yourself, “okay, is there any kernel of truth here? How can I go about verifying if there is? What are sources I can check this against?” Everything like that.

So you have that factor. And in addition to that, you do have a prior biography from 1983. So that book, it merits a long discussion, but I will try and keep it brief (three hours later). And so this book was called *Princess Merle*. And it was co-written by Charles Higham and Roy Moseley. So anyone who knows about old Hollywood and old Hollywood biographies, let's say, probably knows the name Charles Higham. He is someone who was known for playing fast and loose with facts in a lot of his biographies. He got a lot of heat for claims he made in his biographies of Howard Hughes and Errol Flynn in particular. These are contained within his New York Times obituary. And so he was the co-writer of this 1983 biography of Merle Oberon. And I want to preface whatever I'm about to utter with the fact that I don't want to be too hard on Charles Higham. I think that what we do as writers is really difficult. And I do feel that his heart was in the right place. And there's a lot of good that he did with that book in the sense that his book was really one of the first to document that Merle Oberon was not born in Tasmania, but rather that she was born in India, and that she had grown up in incredibly challenging material circumstances. And I will have a lot of respect for him as a result of that.

But unfortunately, I do think that the sloppiness that you see in some of his other work does extend to his work on Merle Oberon. There are many questionable claims, also erroneous claims. For example, the identity of Merle Oberon's mother. That book from 1983, it runs on the assumption that Charlotte, whom we now know to be Merle Oberon's grandmother, was in fact her mother, and it paints Constance as this shrew of a half-sister. And what I wanted to do with my book was, knowing the truth of Merle's maternal lineage, to paint Constance with as compassionate a brush as possible. And correct the record, so to speak, and honor her life alongside her daughter’s. So there was that. And then there's so much else that has burrowed its way into the public consciousness surrounding Merle as a result of that prior book that I really needed to set the record straight on. So for example, there is a claim that she was part Maori in addition to being part Sinhalese, and that is

something that her family, in my conversation with them, disputed. They were very forthright about this. There were also claims that she voluntarily sought out skin-whitening regimens, and I couldn't really find persuasive evidence suggesting that she did. What my research uncovered is that studios certainly subjected her to skin-whitening procedures, but I didn't really find much indicating that she herself sought this out. Which doesn't preclude the possibility that she may have, but again, as someone whose work is really grounded in documentation and verifiable fact, there's so much in that prior book that I have to be like, “are we sure about this? Where else can I find this information aside from this book of yours,” given just the source and the questionable claims that reside in Charles Higham's body of work. There's so much else that has been weaponized against Merle in service of this narrative that she was a self-hating traitor to her race. There was this 1949 painting that she commissioned of the woman she believed to be her mother, Charlotte, that was among the files that her family sent me, but I found no evidence to back up the claim that has its roots in Charles Higham and Roy Moseley's book that she asked the painter to lighten the skin of her mother in that painting to deflect any sort of scrutiny about her origins. But that is something else that so many people say as a sort of demerit against Merle Oberon.

But I will say that it's been four and a half months since the book has come out, and I still see myself fighting these battles of misinformation. This is just the age that we live in. Don't talk to me about her Wikipedia page. It is filled with so much misinformation. My heart sinks just seeing people making claims on there without any sort of sourcing to back it up. Last I checked a few months ago, and please don't tell me if you check it because I don't want to even hear what they're saying about her there. But someone changed one of the lines to say, “oh, she was British and identified as such,” and their justification was that identifying her as someone who was partially South Asian and had grown up in India was motivated by some sort of political agenda. My only agenda is to tell the truth. And it breaks my heart thinking about just the lengths to which so many people who've been told a certain story about Merle Oberon will go to deny just the reality and the truth of her life. As someone who has been in contact with her family from India and still is on WhatsApp and everything like that, I want readers the world over to know that, her family in India, they're real people. They're people who care about her. They always wondered what happened to this relative of theirs who had such a hard time in India that she had no choice essentially but to leave. And no one can take Merle Oberon away from her family, and her family is in and from India, and that's what I want my readers to understand.

A few months ago for Mother's Day, I did post a photo of her mother, Constance, and I had to turn the comments off on that post because I got a few people who would just barge in and say, “is that really her mother? Aside from the dark complexion, they don't look anything alike.” And I'm like, “would you like me to hand you a genetics textbook? What are we doing here?” And there's another person who said something so beyond the pale, essentially something like, “oh clearly she did not get her slanted eyes from her mother.” And that's like, “my goodness, do you hear yourself?” And so it really breaks my heart to have to encounter that sentiment. And I do think that there is a contingent of old Hollywood fans in particular who have been told one story about Merle Oberon that they believe, and it is a story by Charles Higham and Roy Moseley. And they might refuse to accept a counter-narrative like mine that is rooted in journalistic fact. But I will just continue to shout about it until my dying day. (laughter)

AT: So one of the things that I really enjoyed about the book, because I love context. I love people who give me all of this information about what the world was like for this person at this time. And so in a Hollywood books context, like Mallory O'Meara I think does this really well to lay out, “here's what Hollywood was like at this time,” for example. And in your book, you really illustrate how Hollywood was a place of reinvention for a lot of people. So it seems like Merle was the norm rather than the exception, and not just when we're talking about rewriting your past, like you were telling us about Boris Karloff, but other things that people had to hide on an ongoing basis from the media and the public. So like you particularly mention Norma Shearer's sister had a mental illness that Shearer had to actively work to conceal. And so making it very clear that this wasn't just someone's heritage that they were having to constantly be concealing, but it might have been queerness, for

example, any condition that would have harmed your public reputation, any state of your being. All of these people had to fit a norm that was fake.

MS: Exactly. One of the closest comps that always comes to mind whenever I talk about Merle is Rock Hudson, who of course was just so violently outed in the mid 1980s, following his diagnosis and his appearance on *Dynasty*. But prior to that point, he had been living in the closet. And of course, there were murmurs that surrounded him. But he had handlers and many powerful parties working to make sure that he remained in the closet. And that came at a real price for him. And by that same token, so many female stars of the era were subjected to the censorious whims of the Hays office, and also the ways in which studios would, in response to those codes, make sure that their women fit a homogenous mold. I think often of Rita Hayworth, for example, whom I omitted mention of this in my book, but she is someone else who did undergo a pretty drastic reinvention regarding her appearance. And then of course, you've got Norma Jean becoming Marilyn Monroe – that is the old Hollywood story. And I think that you're totally correct, and that Merle was the norm rather than the exception. But I do think that her story represents the extremes of the old Hollywood system, and frankly, its violence. And into the fact that she was really forced into this position where she had to suppress the truth of who she was. And then she had to live with it, even after the dissolution of the studio system. And what was kind of painful for me was to see the ways in which she had this sort of Stockholm Syndrome mindset around the studio system. When her final film, *Interval*, which is available on YouTube as of this recording, let's see if it's yanked off there. It is this old-fashioned love story. And it's frequently ridiculous, but Merle gives a really wonderful, to my mind, performance, a very accomplished one that shows you why she was a movie star in her era. And it also, to me, really stands as a testament to her genuine acting ability even in her later years. But as she was promoting that film and gearing up for its release, she gave some interviews in which she would lament that, female stars in the 1970s, they don't have the security and comfort of the studio system in which they were told what to do, how to behave, and whatnot. It provided a sense of comfort for her that she was now missing in the 1970s, feeling so unmoored. And I think it just speaks to the fact that her outlook on life, her perception of herself was really distorted and warped in some ways by this industry that she had built a life for herself inside. And I don't know that she really had the clarity of mindset to see the ways in which she fell victim to that sort of conditioning but it definitely did seem like the case where she was just pining for this past through rose-tinted glasses.

AT: Now you talk in the introduction about what drew you personally to Merle's story, and as we've been talking I'm wondering if that picture that I'm seeing over your shoulder on your wall is of Merle. So clearly you do have this very personal connection to her story, if anybody couldn't tell from this whole conversation that we've been having and the way that you talk about her. So what was it that drew you to her?

MS: First of all, your suspicions are correct. That is actually a pair of photos of her. It's tough because as a biographer, of course, you strive to, you should ideally, ostensibly strive to portray your subject in objective terms. And that is certainly what I tried to do with this book. I really was. But I think that I couldn't help but admit that, my outlook on her was grounded in love. And that bloomed very early on in my life and in my cinephilia. So I was a rising senior in high school in the summer of 2009. I had grown up as a kid who was totally obsessed with the Oscars. I was the product of a cinephile household. So watching the Academy Awards every year was a pastime for us. I would hoard old Entertainment Weekly issues. So it was that summer, I was like, “I'm a loser. I'm going to just dedicate my free time to studying the history of the best actress in a leading role category.” And so it was in that very fun process that I came across Merle Oberon's name. And by that point, 2009, most of the truth of her origins was out there, it was indeed common knowledge that she had been born in India, that she was mixed race, that her mother was South Asian, that her father was white, that she had to pass as white throughout her lifetime. And I noticed that she had grown up in Kolkata, or Calcutta, which is a city where my dad was from, of course, I felt such a deep connection to. And my heart immediately went out to

her. And I should add that I was pretty deep in the closet myself at that point. I had a suspicion that I liked men, but I wasn't really willing to vocalize it. And so something about her plight really reached out to me. This idea that she lived inside a proverbial closet throughout her lifetime, and she was able to achieve all of her dreams despite that. It inspired me as a young person.

And then I sought out her work. I couldn't really find *The Dark Angel* back then because, again, it's like a film that three people have seen. But I did find *Wuthering Heights*, and I was just blown away by the grace and composure of her performance. And I just thought to myself, “wow, I cannot comprehend that someone who lived with such pain in her off-screen life could gather herself to give a performance of such beauty.” And so that made me a fan ever since. But when I looked around, I just saw so much disrespect thrown her way. As I said earlier, cinephiles had a very low opinion of her. And my fellow South Asians and Asian-Americans, they just like to pretend that she did not exist. But I really vowed to one day, if I became a professional writer, to write a biography of her, a proper biography of her. And I even remember when I began my journalism career a few years later, and I signed with my literary agent, who's still my literary agent, William Callahan at InkWell Management. I told him, I said “I really want to write this biography of this old Hollywood actress named Merle Oberon.” And I'm so grateful that he was like, “we'll get there. Not yet, but let's give it a few years.”

And I have such compassion for everything that she lived through and everything that she did in her life. She was not perfect. And I like to think that identifying with her in some way actually helps me see her imperfections a bit more because I'm someone who is hard on himself. And so if I relate to my subject, I can see their flaws more clearly as well. And I never wanted to erase the complications and the texture of her life in my rendering of this extraordinary career that she had. And so I am in a position right now where there's some days I wake up and I just can't believe that this book is actually an object that exists in the world. I really can't. And I would love to be in a position where I get to live with her story a little bit longer for a few more years. Yes, this book is out, but I hope it's just the beginning and that I am able to tell her story in different formats and help get the truth out there. Because as I said, I'm fighting against this tide of misinformation peddled by people who think they know everything. And I want to be compassionate towards them too. But I really feel a sense of responsibility to do right by Merle Oberon and her memory. And I've committed myself to that project. So let's see what happens the next few years.

AT: So you want everyone to love Queenie the way you do?

MS: I do. But it's okay. It's tough though, because I feel like for the past few years, she's like been, I don't want to say my dirty little secret, but there is a very small clan of us who love Merle Oberon. She does not have the same number of fan accounts on Instagram, but someone like Vivien Lee or Joan Crawford, what have you, Bette Davis has. I think she's a sort of acquired taste and there's something very scary about unleashing her. And realizing too that there are maybe going to be some parties who want to sensationalize her story further in the same way that past narrative renderings of her have. And there's so much that won't be in my control. And I never want to sound territorial about someone's life and work. But I think that when you feel what your subject feels in the same way, I'd like to think I feel what Merle Oberon felt and experienced in her life. You want to make sure that people take that responsibility seriously. And they don't smear her memory further in service of erasure. And so that is what I was trying to write against with this book.

AT: Ironically, I feel like it's that same sense of ownership that we were talking about earlier, when people hold other members of their marginalized community to higher standards and sort of ignore the barriers. I feel like that comes from a place of ownership of, “this is something that is mine. And because of that, I feel very protective of the thing that I see as mine.” And the thing that you are protecting is Merle. And the thing that other people who attack people like Merle see as “we are protecting the community and our truth” and however else they justify it. So it's fascinating because it feels like that comes from the same place.

MS: It does. Yeah. I never even thought of it that way, but I think they are kind of twinned to some extent. (AT: I like your version better.) I appreciate that. And again, I think it's kind of icky to be territorial over someone else's life, work, and legacy. But I think that I've just seen the mishandling of her memory just play out. And I really got to witness it firsthand as I was researching and reporting my book out. And so I just, I see her as a human being, warts and all. And I want people to, yes, see the warts, but also see the beauty in her life and the way that I tried to put to the page.

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