

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Anna Malaika Tubbs

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by writer and scholar Anna Malaika Tubbs, where I ask her: How Can We Honor Black Motherhood? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to interview our guest this week. She is an author, she is also, you know, I've been saying for years on this podcast, I love, like, a PhD moment; I can't help it. You are a PhD candidate at Cambridge, which just sounds so fancy, honey. You're a Bill and Melinda Gates Cambridge scholar. She's also an educator on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and she spent the last four years as the First Partner of Stockton, California. Her new book 'The Three Mothers' tells the story of the women who raised Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin. Welcome to the show.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:00:57] Thank you. Thank you so much, thank you so much for having me.

JVN [00:01:01] So you have written *such* an incredible book. It's coming out this week. and everyone, I just have to tell you that we're on Zoom right now, and I did just give Anna a quote, end quotes, because it's actually coming out in a couple of weeks and this is really, like, a few weeks from the past. But, this book is so incredible. And actually, right before we jumped on, I learned something about this that I think I want you to share, but, so I'm just blown away to learn that this is the first time that these three prolific women have been profiled. How did this idea come to you? How did you start to approach it? Wow!

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:01:39] Yeah. It is a surprise that these three women have not been put together. It's, it's definitely a symbol of the fact that they have been erased through history, to my benefit sure, that I'm the first person to do this. But it definitely is also quite sad and disheartening that many haven't thought of these women before. So my idea came from starting my PhD, wanting to join other scholars who were correcting this erasure, this crime of erasing Black women from history and making sure that we tell their stories, whether that was, you know, Margot Lee Shetterly with *Hidden Figures* and several other Black feminist scholars who were saying, "Enough is enough, we're gonna tell these stories, we're gonna set the history record straight." And so with these three mothers, that's exactly what I wanted to do.

My idea of starting with three famous men was, one, because it's kind of like a hook and kind of a trick, because so many people love these men, and they definitely should, it's not to take away any credit from the men and their work, but to say there is a lot more happening around them. They aren't these unicorns that popped out of nowhere. They

aren't these men that we just celebrate, you know, the fact that they were born as if that's something they did on their own. But they're men who had communities around them. They're men who had families around them and who quite often gave credit to the women in their lives. And they spoke about their mothers *all* the time. But it was more a crime that scholars and historians have erased these narratives and kept us from knowing these three incredible women stories. So, as soon as I started looking into them, I was immediately enthralled. And the story just wrote itself from there.

JVN [00:03:15] So who *are* the three men? Just to be specific, I already know, but so everyone listening: who are the three men that we're talking about?

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:03:24] Yes. These are the mothers of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and James Baldwin. And their names are Alberta King, Louise Little and Berdis Baldwin.

JVN [00:03:33] The story behind these men is so intricate and so complex and it shows such a dynamic range in how these three men who literally changed the course of history came to *be*, and we really are the people who kind of-, like, we are a product of-, it's I know it's the nature versus nurture thing, but, like, our communities who bring us up, like, that's who we kind of become, and that's really such a beautiful thing to celebrate.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:04:02] Thank you.

JVN [00:04:03] So tell us about what the mother-son relationship between these moms and these sons looked like.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:04:09] Yeah, and can I first say something about your last point in terms of--

JVN [00:04:12] Yes!

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:04:13] This kind of generational knowledge and the importance of understanding that these men are part of the continuance of something much larger and how that helps us understand American history more generally. You know we so often give credit to this one star or these, like, few speakers of a movement instead of thinking of the ways in which they're continuing something that was passed down to them. That's a much more realistic understanding. Our history is complex, it's beautiful, it's rich with diversity. And until we understand all those different layers, we're not fully getting the full picture of how we've arrived where we are today. And so it's even before these mothers, you know what *their* mothers taught them, what *their* communities taught them.

Even going back to an example with Louise Little: she learned from the care of Indians and their history in Grenada. So, so much of it is just this long time coming. And then we put ourselves as a part of that and we connect to these histories that have been, been here for centuries versus thinking that we're standing here alone in this moment right here, right now, without an understanding of the foundation that we're standing upon.

JVN [00:05:18] I think part of why, especially in the United States, that continues to run into such an issue is because people do want a quick and easy answer, first of all. And *second* of all, there's this idea of, like, "Well, pull yourself up by your bootstraps," and--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:05:31] Right.

JVN [00:05:32] --"This is the land of opportunity. And if you just work hard enough, and if you just do the most enough, you're gonna get there." But--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:05:39] Yeah.

JVN [00:05:40] --That's actually not the case, because if you don't have the mom or the dad or someone to really invest in your potential, it may or may not happen. Like, there isn't enough resourcefulness in, in the world for certain, for certain things. If you don't have-, 'cause you know a parent's love and a parent's, like, belief in your potential, as we learn from this book, really can change the course of the *literal* world.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:06:06] Yeah, and it gives us a better understanding when we think about the differences, for instance, of MLK Jr. and Malcolm X and how often people paint them as, like, these direct opposites of each other when in fact they saw themselves as being part of the same mission to accomplish Black freedom, but in different ways. But we also better understand through their circumstances why they believed what they believed. You know, MLK Jr., his family worked incredibly hard, but they also were able to gain privileges throughout their time in this country versus we think about Malcolm X's family, which the book shows there's constant racist violence and attacks against them. Louise Little is constantly facing what it means to be a Black immigrant woman in the United States, and she bases her lessons to her children in this experience, versus Alberta King who was part of this church community that gave her the resources that she needed. And that's not to say that she didn't work hard for what she had, but she didn't have that same direct violent exposure to racism in America.

And so when we think about their sons, and what they witnessed, and what they grew up in, that's gonna change the way that they think about their politics and what they tell others about how we accomplish change. So, it just gives us a better understanding. It's

not just, like, "this one man was so radical"--and I'm a huge fan of Malcolm X, I absolutely love him--but so many people misunderstood what he stood for. And I think this book gives us that context to better understand where they all came from. In James Baldwin's case, he had an incredibly humble upbringing, it wasn't always peaceful in his household. His mom did the very best she could to provide for her nine children. And we're gonna have to think about what that means in terms of his commentary on the United States. He grew up poor and Black in Harlem. If you don't think about that, if you don't think about him helping his mom with the eight children that came after him, then you don't really fully understand his writing.

JVN [00:07:57] So basically, just to kind of recap and also people need to read this book, but second of all, um, so I don't, but, but so basically I think what I hear you saying is that some of the background of these men is we have, we have Martin Luther King's family, who, they were based in, he like grew up in--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:08:14] Atlanta.

JVN [00:08:15] --Atlanta, right. And so, as soon as I was, like, about to say it, I was like, "Ahh I'm going to get it wrong, oh my god, ah." But yeah, so he's brought up in Atlanta, but then Malcolm X and his family, he comes up in?

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:08:28] Well Lansing, Michigan, is where he's born, but they move around so many times as a part of their activist roots as these Marcus Garvey followers. They were these Pan-African activists. Both Earl Little and Louise Little were very heavily involved in the movement and they moved to different places where they could help spread this Marcus Garvey Black independence message. And so they would always go to communities where Black communities were responding to white supremacist violence, where they were not just sitting idly, which most Black communities were not doing that, but were responding, whether with guns and with their own force and saying, "We're not going to be treated this way."

And those are the communities that the Littles wanted to be a part of, because that is exactly what they were looking for in terms of Garvey-ist recruits. And so that's what they, they kind of raised their children in. But they had to be more nomadic because they were constantly being followed and blamed by white supremacist groups for corrupting kind of the "good Black people" in the community. And they were threatened and their houses were burned, like, it's a constant kind of persecution of the Little family that just continues going forward.

JVN [00:09:40] And then James Baldwin, he and his family, they're in Harlem?

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:09:45] Harlem, yeah, in Harlem. Until of course he goes to Paris later on in his career.

JVN [00:09:50] And, so then what happens with, well, however much you want to share without-, 'cause, like, if you think you're going to listen to this podcast and get out of this gorgeous book, honey, you've got another thing coming! So I think, you know, for my, from my research and my reading of the book, I found there's this idea of, and you kind of briefly mentioned it before, but it's, like, the Martin Luther King's family kind of did it in a more peaceful approach. Then you had Malcolm, Malcolm X's family do it in the more Garvey approach, and then, and then you have James Baldwin, who, where does, are they kind of, like, or is, like, is that just weird to me for, like, wanting to compartmentalize, like, who felt what, like, what, what's wrong with-, I don't know why I want to do that.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:10:35] No, I don't think that's weird at all! I, I think it's kind of our normal reaction to think about, "Okay, what categories can we put these men in." But surely it's, it's more complex than that. All three of them have these trajectories in their lives where they change their, their minds, their opinions. They grow upon what they're thinking about, they start to understand each other better as their careers go on. You know, even right before Malcolm X was assassinated, they were actually set to all three be interviewed because they were starting to see each other more on the same page than ever before, was this quote that I read somewhere. But he was assassinated two or three days before the interview was supposed to take place.

So, this is a constant and evolving thing, and I think it really rests in the fact that they were taking from what their moms taught them. And again, their moms also have these complexities based off of what they grew up with and how they are morphing their own ideas and kind of thinking through the world as it's evolving. We have to think about the context in which they are born and the context in which they die. These women lived through almost a century of American history. So Louise Little is born in 1897, circa 1897 because her birth date is a little contested in the record and then she passes away in 1991. And then we think about Alberta King who is born in 1902 or 1903 and then passes in in the 1970s when she was assassinated.

JVN [00:12:01] But wait ah, ah, so Martin Luther King's *mom* was--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:12:07] Yes, Alberta--

JVN [00:12:07] She was assassinated?!

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:12:10] She was assassinated in their church at Ebenezer Baptist. She was assassinated while playing the organ. Her and her husband were the leaders of the church. This was after MLK was assassinated and after their second son was also found dead in his pool after a drowning incident that is still not fully explained as to what happened. But this family experiences extreme tragedy throughout their lives, including the fact that Alberta King herself was also assassinated.

JVN [00:12:39] I mean, fuck me! How did I not know about *that* part of the story?!

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:12:51] Yeah. It's shocking and this is, this is really the point of the book: why don't we know *these* stories? These are crucial to our history. It's important to understand this, it's important in terms of what we're talking about and situating where we are right now and thinking about Black women and the importance and everything that they've held on their shoulders for so many years. But I will say we're at a time right now-- it's almost perfect timing for the book to come out--because more and more people are realizing, "Oh, Black women have been telling us all along what our country needs. Black women have been voting in the way that would lead to progress for our country." And so these are three examples of Black women who, without knowing their stories, you are missing a huge piece of the American history puzzle. But as soon as you do, you'll better understand where we are today as a nation. And that's where the subtitle comes from; they shaped our nation through their lives, through their lessons, through raising their children.

JVN [00:13:46] I also think one thing that just *really* strikes me and something that I didn't fully understand until the last two years of my life, which is, I'm really ashamed to say that at 33 that I didn't understand this in my life until, like, 31 years old, but Black women didn't have the right to vote in this country until the Voting Rights Act was passed. So--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:14:07] Yeah.

JVN [00:14:08] --As these women were birthing these **children and** raising these young men in, many times, like, a hardcore segregationist area that, you know, I think about the amount of racial police brutality that happens now; there wasn't cell phones. If you think it's bad now, we probably had, like, times, I don't even know how much more to times it by to, to reflect, so it's like, you know, when people say, "This isn't who we are," for instance, like, after the Capitol Hill riots, and they said, "Well, this isn't who we are." This *is* actually in so many ways who we have always been. And this sort of--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:14:42] Exactly.

JVN [00:14:43] --Racist violence has been, has been around for hundreds of years and it has yet to be confronted.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:14:48] Yeah, absolutely, I mean so many people are asking me my opinion of the Capitol riots on the day of, you know, everyone was, like, "What, what do you make of this? What's happening?" You know, "This is so shocking." And all of these news titles saying, "This is unprecedented or that, you know, we were all su-." It's not surprising! And if you think it's surprising, you need more Black people in your life. You need more people of color in your life. You need to read more books on, the history of this country that are authentic representations of what we have faced as people of color. The only thing that was unprecedented was the *building* that they attacked. But white supremacists love to riot. They love to destroy things when things don't go their way. That is American history. And that doesn't mean that we are, you know-, not to say that it's not disheartening. You can still say that's sad that that happened. But what it is not is surprising; this is not surprising.

JVN [00:15:40] Yeah.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:15:41] And I hope that at least this book contributes to that conversation again, um, even thinking about how historic that day was for Georgia. And, even with my book, speaking about Alberta King, Ebenezer Baptist Church, this is the church that our new senator is the reverend of, and is now, you know, fulfilling this legacy that Alberta's parents started when they created this church and built it to be this vehicle of social change. That was their vision for it from the beginning. They, when they joined, there was, I think--maybe 13 people were a part of the congregation. And Alberta's mother and father wanted to make it all about social justice and faith and combining the importance of meeting the basic needs of their congregants, making sure that they understood the importance of boycotting places that didn't respect Black people and our rights. So there's this really beautiful history of Ebenezer Baptist.

But we also see when Alberta was only three years old, this destruction of the street and the community, that it was at one point one of the richest Black communities because white rioters could not *stand* to see Black people with their own independence and with their own businesses thriving. And it's this, this riot that happens, these Atlanta race riots that destroy the Sweet Auburn community. So, just on that day alone, we see, you know, these riots coinciding with both history of white rioters, but also this beautiful response from Black community members to continue to persist and continue to know their worth and their value. So just one example, in one city, we already have a precedent for Black Georgians doing what they wanted to do, to voice their opinions, to say, "Our rights are here, we are humans." And then a white supremacist response that continues the day after.

JVN [00:17:34] One thing we learned recently with Mehrsa Baradaran about the history of finances in this country is that the economy has consistently punched down onto folks. It doesn't, a lot of times, punish the people who had the power in the first place. And so with that, when you see what ends up happening with the massacre in Oklahoma in 1921--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:17:54] Yeah, mmmm.

JVN [00:17:55] --Redlining was invented, like, 15 years later. So when, when these people were going out on behalf of the government to say, like, "Well, what houses are we going to insure and what houses are we not going to insure," a lot of those places were insured based on these race riots, which were done by white people.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:18:08] Yeah, yep.

JVN [00:18:09] So then Black people and people of color are paying the price in that they *can't* get mortgages and they can't pass down generational wealth. And, I just can't help but think in those Atlanta riots and then also the Oklahoma, I'm sure the government didn't come and say, "Oh, here's your homes back," like, "We'll help you rebuild."

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:18:28] No.

JVN [00:18:32] So one thing that you were saying is that, you know, we don't live on an island. And actually this history is a lot of, like, communities passing things down and it's so amazing. So, Alberta King is assassinated in this, in this church. And, so what happens after that to go from there to now in 2021, Reverend Warnock is *literally* senator from the state of Georgia. Can you share a little bit more about that without giving away the book for us?

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:18:57] Yeah! I think, I mean I would say that it even starts with her parents in the early 1900s with establishing this church, wanting everybody to think about social justice, that faith without social justice was not faith, basically, is how they, they both, I would say, would maybe put it. And, teaching Alberta this from the very beginning, that, you know, as a young girl she was gonna be a part of this societal change where we were going to start to see more Black rights represented, more Black representation in politics, etc. So they were very bold, they never let their privileges separate them from the cause for Black freedom or the fight for Black freedom.

And so they, even her parents, were some of the first to advocate for the first Black high school, first Black public high school in Atlanta. They led successful boycotts of these, like, newspapers that were degrading to Black people. And then, so from there, when Alberta

falls in love with, at the time, Michael King, who later changes his and his son's name to Martin Luther King, she brings him in to her family, basically, and then he becomes the reverend and pastor of the church. Later on we see that MLK also will become pastor with his father. His younger brother will also become pastor after MLK is assassinated. And all throughout this, Alberta is leading, whether she was the daughter of her parents as you know the leaders of the church, the wife of the head pastor, the lead organist, the choir director, you know, president of the Women's Auxiliary. She's doing all of these incredible things um to promote this message that she was raised within. And so it's really like you know this direct continuation of reverends who see the importance of activism and social justice with their faith.

JVN [00:20:45] Yes! Ok, so now transitioning into really the academic research that drives your book, and it's-, 'cause it's about really motherhood, Black motherhood in the early 1900s and how it influenced the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, which, if you don't win, like, some gorgeous Pulitzer or like, like, give me a Grammy for the, for the audio book, *something!* I mean, you know, I'm just saying, I'm just putting out there--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:21:14] Thank you! Let's just keep that, put that out there, manifest that.

JVN [00:21:17] I'm doing it, I'm doing it! So, like, so you get the idea and then, what has it been like to conduct the research during such a continued push for social justice? And also, I mean, well, I wouldn't have this written down as a question if folks didn't know, but also, like, you are a new mom and you were writing this because that's also in there, so what would, what was combining the approach to researching this book in the time like?

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:21:46] Yeah, there's several layers to that answer because, yes, on one hand, there was my very personal connection with the book. I started writing the book before I was pregnant with my son. I already knew I wanted to honor Black motherhood, Black womanhood, the diversity and nuance of who we are as Black women today in our history and kind of provide *another* text to join several other scholars that are doing this. So there, that was already going to happen. But then when I found myself expecting my son, it took on this incredibly personal and just beautiful journey for me of becoming a mother while learning about these three examples of *incredibly* fierce women who just, in so many ways, really dictated where our country was going to end up in the future, even if people weren't going to give them credit for that.

But at the same time, of course, becoming a Black mother in the United States is really scary. Our Black maternal health crisis is real. A lot of people do not speak about this but, regardless of your education level, regardless of your socio-economic status, of your access

to resources, you are more likely to die in childbirth if you're a Black woman, you're more likely to lose your, your child. There's so much that can happen that is *incredibly* dangerous, mainly because our healthcare system is rooted within a lack of understanding of Black women's humanity. If we even think about the history of gynecology in the United States, all of that was founded on experimenting on the bodies of Black women who were enslaved. Not giving them any kind of pain relief when they were in labor, you know, cutting their bodies open when they're laboring to try to perfect the C-section. So we're seeing remnants of this really gross history today when Black women say, "I'm in pain, something's wrong and nobody listens to them."

The Black maternal mortality rate is incredibly high. We also see this when a lot of Black women want to work with doulas because they want to maybe have a more traditional approach so that they can *avoid* going into hospitals. But even with the COVID-19 pandemic, doulas are being turned away when they show up with their clients at hospitals, even though we have research that shows that that reduces the mortality rate of Black mothers. So there's a lot I can say about that. It was extremely kind of terrifying because I've studied these things. And then to, you know, we planned our pregnancy, we were very excited, but at the same time, I was terrified.

And having these three women who did this, you know, in the 1920s, having their children in the 1920s, and, and with everything that was happening in our country, that was even more violent for them. I also talk about examples in the book of women who were around their ages who were lynched, or, you know, raped, what could-, the possibilities of what could happen to Black women in their time period. It gave me a lot of hope and a lot of strength where I needed it the most. But it also gave me resolve to speak about this *even* more and to bring even more attention to the stories of Black motherhood in the U.S.

So that's, that's one side of the research, a very personal journey that I was on. And the other side, of course, is the more technical you know finding all of these details about their lives. It was a really difficult challenge because they are not the ones who are deemed important in history. And if you're not deemed important by this kind of, you know, white, cisgender male hegemony, then you're not going to be given, you know, the kind of you're not going to have documents written about you. You're not going to have books written about you. No one cared to ask *you* what you thought about, you know, your, your son's accomplishments or your own hopes and dreams or your own educational journey. And so it was really like finding a needle in a haystack, going first through the sons' works as my entry point and bringing their moms from the margins to the center, working with historians all over the country who helped me find birth certificates and doctors' notes and so many other things, you know, letters to principals that they wrote on their son's behalves, letters between the sons and the moms.

So, I found a really incredible range of things through a lot of dedicated searching and the help of several incredible scholars and researchers. But it was also really frustrating for me, because I know there's so much out there we will never know about them. You know, I wish that this book was like the, triple the size of what it is. I think each of these women deserve their own book, each of these women deserve their own, I mean, dozens of books just like their sons have. But I, I do see this book as a *beginning* so that more people start to look for evidence of their lives and start to pay attention not only to these three mothers, but when we're talking about anyone, but *especially* men, to think about the women around them. And what I like to say: the woman before the man.

JVN [00:26:46] Yes, woman before the man! It's, I mean, and I think that because this has been such a paternalistic-driven society and such a male-driven society, even in the Constitution, when this country was founded, like, women weren't seen as, women weren't seen as equal, this country was really founded on a principle and in ways that women weren't seen as equal in terms of education, jobs, job opportunities, home life. I mean, all of it. There's been so much to consistently unlearn. And one thing that I wrote down just as you were talking is, you know, when we-, I, I think a lot of my healing in my personal life has, is about understanding generational trauma and, like, generational burden.

But, when I think about generational trauma and generational burden of Black Americans, I think of when everyone was talking about family separation at the border--and we actually had an interview on Getting Curious where, basically was saying, "Well, you know, this isn't a new concept either, I mean, with the mass incarceration system, we have a huge family separation problem with you know Black and brown families in the United States as it is." And then I think about when, in reading some passages from the book family separation and, really fundamentally, like, draconian institutionalization really steered these families in a particular path that I think that most people wouldn't believe would be possible. And I'm interested and curious for our listeners to hear more about what that means.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:28:13] Absolutely. It's definitely something again that goes back to slavery in the United States and the separation of African families as soon as they were captured, putting them in groups with others who spoke different languages than they did so that they couldn't come together and revolt. And so there is a very strategic part of separating Black people from their loved ones, of keeping us away from each other, of using our love for each other as means of control. So even if slaves were to find a way to find unions and find love in these you know treacherous circumstances, that was used against them as you know a threat of well, "If you do this, I'll take this person away from or I'll sell this person off." I include a quote in the book from Fannie Lou Hamer where she

speaks about Black women in America are the only ones who have had babies sold from our breast and the moms sold from their babies.

When you think about the evil of that, it's really *why* I wrote about Black motherhood. You see the dehumanization of Black people so clearly in the treatment of Black women and their children in America, where we are the only ones who by law were deemed the givers of non-life, the givers of property, that it didn't matter. You know I think about the day that I held my son in my arms when he was born and the fact that he could have been just taken away from me and I would be sent back, right back to work um and would be, you know, doing this backbreaking labor up until he was born and right after; it's sickening. And that's the kind of sickening nature that we need to *face*. This is what our country was built on. Again, not surprising. This is *how* white supremacists view people of color, as non-human, as animals, even, and even, you know, maybe lower than that, because animals also have feelings and they also hold on to their kin and they also don't want to be separated.

So anyways, I could go on and on with that tangent. But to think about *today*, you know, changing the way we see people of color, but in a way where we see them, in the way that they see themselves, this is the reason that I believe Black mothers have been able to influence the fabric of this nation, because no matter what we were told, we weren't going to accept that about ourselves. If other people told us that we were the givers of property, we said, "No, we are the givers of *life*." We are creative thinkers; whether or not we had children, it was in the works and then the ways that we were giving life to our community and humanizing ourselves for ourselves. And so with our understanding that all human beings truly are human beings, this is why we've continued to push the country in a direction where that humanity is recognized in all of us.

JVN [00:31:10] And, you know, one piece of the book and of the history is that, which is the mom who, like, had the nine kids and then was, like, "Well, when I go shopping and when I go grocery shopping, people look at me." And then she was, like, and then *she* was institutionalized for 25 years--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:31:31] Louise Little. Yeah.

JVN [00:31:33] So when I think about, like, you know, you think about how much you love your mom and then your mom says something to a doctor and then you don't see your mom for 25 years. Like, that's the sort of trauma that a family could potentially never heal from. And so when I, when I was reading some of those stories, it's, like, you know, white privilege isn't only that there were opportunities that white people had that other people-, you know, educationally, voting, mortgages, you know, *all* of that like, you know, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, all that. That's not only what it is. It's also that as white

folks, you *never* had your baby taken away. A white woman, if she went in and said, "People look at me funny." I mean, I mean, Abraham Lincoln's wife did end up getting institutionalized 10 years later because her son said that she spent too much money, so there is, like, some misogyny, like fucked up-ness with, like, all the ladies.

However, the intersectionality of what happened to Black women for both being Black and a woman, it's that, is, there is no other situation. And in, in the history of this country, of people who had been so dehumanized and abused and, the perseverance and the beauty and the ingenuity and the creativity and the life giving, is I mean, I, I just people who aren't Black women and Black people will *never* understand, I mean, I, I will *always* be learning, I will *always* be, like-, my mind will always be blown, because that is, it's just things that you could not understand if you didn't have the-, just, like, there are things that LGBTQ people will, if you're not that, like, you're never going to understand.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:33:16] I agree, I agree 100 percent, I mean, I think to add more context to Louise Little's story, this was something that definitely influenced Malcolm X's path when he was separated from his mother, when he was, I want to say in middle school. And she was put in an institution against her will, the Kalamazoo Mental Hospital, after a white male doctor diagnosed her with what he called dementia praecox. This was right after her husband was assassinated. She was providing for her children and she basically told him that people were coming after her to you know collect money from her, white supremacist groups were still trying to attack her, that she was being discriminated against at the store, that welfare workers were questioning her as a parent.

All of these things that there's plenty of evidence to suggest that, that in history, not only in her own life, with several Black women in history, that these are things that did happen to them, especially if they were single women who were trying to provide for themselves and own their own property. This was really looked down upon. And we only really have his letters in this diagnosis from this white doctor to the state saying that she needed to be put away and her children needed to be taken away from her. And her family definitely read this as a continued white supremacist attack on their family. That kind of continued with the things that I, I mentioned earlier. And after, yes, 25 years of being away from them, she was released finally after multiple attempts for her children to have her released from the institution. But they weren't old enough for several years because they were all kiddos when she was taken from them to kind of advocate on her behalf. But once they were able to, she was released. The attacks continued after that, but I'll leave that for, for those that will read the book to see how it continued.

And then I will say, yes, it is, it is about honoring Black women and so many people are now talking more about our strength and our resilience and all of that yes is beautiful, but

at the same time, this book is about acknowledging our humanity. We are not, like, these people that have these supernatural powers. Again, it goes back to thinking about, like, people don't think that women, Black women experience pain. We do. This is heart wrenching for us, you know, with-, these three mothers when they lost their children, it was *heartbreaking*. When we think about Black mothers today who are losing their children constantly to police violence, gun violence, so much more, we are not, like, these beings that can just continue to persist through this and be resilient. We don't want to be applauded for that anymore; we want our lot to be easier to carry. We wanna be seen as the human beings that we are, with the human feelings that we have. Yes, 100 percent we have been strong, we have been resilient. It's not to take away from that.

But I also want to add a layer of "Ok, and how can we make things easier?" How could Louise, Alberta, and Berdis' lives have been easier if the state had listened to what they needed, if the country had cared about policy that would have made their lives easier. That's really what this book is about in terms of the conclusion and how we apply lessons from their lives to what we're seeing in the United States today. The question becomes *how do we make life easier for the most marginalized in our country?* And, I, I do hope that this kind of contributes to that conversation when we think about the humanity of each of these stories that we're speaking about. These aren't just you know numbers. It's not just, you know, talking about what percentage of people lost their jobs in COVID. These are people with human stories, human feelings, who deserve to be represented and seen as citizens and human beings in the country that they live.

JVN [00:37:14] I love that added layer of context, and that makes so much sense, it's, like, there's no fucking gold medal for how much you suffered and no one wants that gold medal anyway. Like, that's not a competition anybody's trying to fucking be in. So, now that you've written the book, it's coming out, you have a gorgeous family, you are, like-, I mean, an incredibly brilliant mind. You also are the First Partner of Stockton, which is, like, major, and I feel like that-, writing this book at the same time as that is also, like, just such insight that people will not ever have of, of a platform and pressure. And I'm just curious to know, with everything that you've done and accomplished, what does the future hold for Anna?

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:38:04] I love that question. You know, it's been my dream for so long to be a public intellectual. I have loved, you know, school, I'm definitely a nerd, I'm all about you know the research and continuing to do as much as I can to learn what I can and kind of gain these tools of educational study. But I've always been much more inspired by speaking to those outside of the academy, outside of the ivory tower, bringing more people in conversation together on things that they *think* are complicated. You know, they think race theory is complicated. They think gender theory is complicated. But, these are

lived experiences. It's something you were saying earlier: we're all bringing our identity to the table, we're speaking from our perspectives with different experiences, and I want more people to be able to connect and speak and learn.

I think one of the things that's really hurting our country right now is a lack of media literacy, a lack of *wanting* to be in dialogue with each other, a lack of kind of having discernment about what sources are and are not true and what sources are and are not representing fact. And it can be incredibly confusing out there. And I want to be one of those voices that helps people find clarity and guides more people to also understanding things for themselves rather than feeling like, "Ok, this, whatever news network is causing extreme fear and worry for me and I need to like protect my family, protect my loved ones against all of these horrible people that they're telling me--." You know, like, there's so much brainwashing, and I want to be one of those people who kind of helps lift the veil with honest conversation. And I hope this book is an example of that. And I'm really just excited to join, like I said, other colleagues who honor Black women and who kind of see us in the light that we deserve to be seen. And, it's a special time in the United States. I understand that a lot of us feel afraid and a lot of us are like, "Oh, no, this, this unprecedented violence."

That's not true; actually, we have much more progress right now than we have had. I want us to focus more on Georgia winning, then on white rioters who have always been here. Yes, we want to critique them, but let's not make that, you know, the story of what the United States is today. Let's focus more on the future and these accomplishments that are being led primarily by women of color, which I think is so incredibly inspiring. And that's been the case throughout American history, but we're paying attention to them in ways that we haven't before with all these incredible congresswomen and so many more that I could speak about, with a vice president who's a Black and Indian woman. It's just so incredibly inspiring and really cool for me to have a book out where I can join all of these voices and hopefully be a part of this kind of group of women of color who are at the forefront of these conversations.

JVN [00:41:05] I want to see *more* of that from you queen, I feel like I could just, I see it! I think that the media literacy issue is such a huge issue and wanting to be in dialogue with each other. I have been learning and thinking a lot about, lately about how in the 50s and 60s and 70s, I guess, there was a rule, where, like, news reporters, like, weren't supposed to be as animated or something, but, like, Reagan did away with these things where, like, it's what started the, these sorts of, like, news cycles that we're seeing now, like, it was, I need to know more about that because I don't really know that much about it so that's like, food for thought for, like, another day.

But I do want to talk or just ask you a little bit, like, about, you had, you did so much in the last four years as the First Partner of Stockton, and you got the 'Status of Women' report in Stockton that you spearheaded. Just for any of our listeners that are young, fierce women, preferably, like, young fierce Black women that wanna get into politics, they wanna get into research. Is there any misconceptions or advice or anything that you could say to those folks that are inspired by you and look up to you and, like, want to get all up in that arena too?

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:42:09] Oh, thank you so much for those incredibly kind words. I-, it has been a journey to be a political partner, generally; I will just say that. To give a little context, since I was 19, I have been helping my partner with his political career. And that meant, you know, a campaign run for city council, a campaign run for mayor and another campaign for mayor again, the most recent one that we unexpectedly did not win. But the work that I've been able to do by his side and with him has also been really inspiring. From a young age I was shown that people were going to be watching me and that I was going to have some decisions to make, but that they were going to be watching me more as sort of like an accessory to him and not necessarily in the light that I *wanted* to be seen. I had my own journey, always have had my own journey.

It's one of the reasons we work really well together is we both have these big dreams for what we can kind of, like I said, join in terms of generational battles for our people and social justice movements; that's always really what's brought us together. But when I moved to Stockton, a lot of people only saw me as his partner. In a lot of interviews or even at times I was just, like, kind of standing next to him, people quite often don't want to hear from the woman and they see it-, saw me as this sort of trophy wife. And I was called that actually directly to my face. I received so many comments about how pretty I was and my outfits and my looks, and that's just never been the thing that for me, I cared most deeply about. And so in my time in Stockton, I made a decision that I was not just gonna be an accessory, I was not just gonna go to events and shake hands. I was going to do my part to make a difference with the knowledge that I have, which, my specific degrees are in anthropology, gender studies and sociology. And with that--

JVN: [00:44:01] Mmm!

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:44:02] Thank you. I said to Mike, "You need to do more for your women in this community. You yourself were raised by three Black women, and if you're not going to propose policy that's specifically tailored to making their lives easier, then you're gonna really miss the mark." To his credit, he was like, "You know better about this than I do, so where do we start?" And that's what engendered the report on the status of women in Stockton, and having data to back up what so many women were already

saying they needed in their community. I'm a huge believer in if women are doing well in a community, that community is going to do well.

If you ask women what they need, what they need for their kids, what they need for their students, what they need for their families, they *have* the pulse on what they need. If we listen to them, we can solve these issues. And so we started with the data. So many people though, when they listen to what women need, they say, "Oh, it's not that big a deal. You're being emotional, I think you're exaggerating." So we back those feelings and those real feelings with numbers and research so that more people can apply for grants, so that more people can say, "Look, these domestic violence numbers are way too high.

Our rates of domestic violence calls need to be addressed. We need to think about the fact that in this community many of us are single mothers of color who were born in another country." So if we're not tailoring policies to them, then nothing is going to really be resolved. And it's been really exciting to see that play out even in the SEED demonstration, which is the basic income demonstration that took place in Stockton and thinking about how many single mothers received those 500 dollars a month and how that then ripples and has this beautiful ripple and wave effect for the rest of our community.

So I also spent time teaching young girls in Stockton. It was important to me, crucial to me, that they see me as a mentor for them and then somebody that, of course, if they wanted to become me cool, but also just have somebody who they could talk to um and have someone to answer questions that were addressed. They often ask me about, "When are you two going to get married," because when I first moved here, we were just dating, and I was like, "That's really not the most important thing in my life." And to even shift this narrative for them of, "Oh, ok, as young girls that we don't have to just aspire to getting married. We can think about our careers, we can think about how much our voices matter." And my time here has been incredibly rewarding. I've loved being here. I absolutely love Stockton. It's been an honor to represent in all of these areas. And I'm also super excited for what our next steps are. But there'll be an announcement soon for what Mike is doing next.

JVN [00:46:46] Yeah, ok, so the, which actually does bring me to, like, a little bit of a minor question, which I didn't, we can just, you can, like, blink three times if you don't want to answer it. So does that mean that there could ever be like a, like rep or senator, rep, like, like, something Anna Tubbs? I just feel like, you know, who knows, maybe?!

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:47:09] Maybe! Who knows, I'm never going to say never. I won't say, like, for sure not. But I will say that politics is so messy and it can be very-, especially today in politics where lies are accepted as facts. And I think about, you know,

my child's life and, like, what we dealt with even when I was pregnant. You know there's a group of people in Stockton who unfortunately are led by disinformation and we're seeing this in so many communities around the states where local newspapers are unfortunately failing because they don't have the money that they need to keep going. And then you see these kind of, like, Facebook media sites taking over that are not based in fact.

Going back to the brainwashing that I was speaking about before, it's really unfortunate with this lack of media literacy, but so many lies are just spewed. You see it with *any* woman who is in politics, women of color especially, what is said about her, the attacks that she has to face. And you also, you can't always fully speak what you want to speak because you're representing other people. There is, like, a liberty that comes with doing public intellectual work where you can speak for yourself, which I think is quite liberating. But I won't say never, maybe someday in the future. I do feel really complimented that I've been asked that. And of course I have ideas for policy in a lot of ways that I would change things.

JVN [00:48:35] Can I just say it's, like, I've never heard someone articulate it like that 'cause sometimes-, like, some people who I really, really, really look up to and I'm, like, obsessed with it that are in politics, they've been like, "So when are you going to run?" And I'm, like, yeah, I think that I don't, like, I'm not mature enough, or I would, like, freak out, like, there's something, but, but it's--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:48:54] Oh you'd be incredible.

JVN [00:48:54] --But it's, like, when you, but it's, like, that's the way you said, it's, like, I don't want to have to speak for other people that I don't really-, that really pissed me off, and I don't understand that like. No, 'cause seriously, 'cause a lot of times people come into my DMs, like, saying really fucking offensive shit. And I just, like, I don't have the patience, like, I *want* to have the patience, but I don't.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:49:13] Yeah I just block people!

JVN [00:49:14] Me too.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:49:15] But when you're a representative, and you're elected, you can't.

JVN [00:49:17] Right!

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:49:18] That's against the law. You have to sit there and just take it. Like I sat for so many years and watched Michael at city council meetings, you know

on the dais, and people saying insane things to him, referring to him as "boy," very, like, you know, racist and antiquated ways of speaking to someone who had been elected to represent them. But he had to just sit there. And I will say, I mean, obviously, Michael's not somebody who just kind of sits around, we all know he does speak his mind and he is very progressive and doesn't necessarily let fear keep him from speaking. But he had to in many ways hold back--

JVN [00:49:52] I'm sure!

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:49:52] --What I think he would have said and could have blocked people. And I had to deal with that on a personal level of, like, you know, he's scrolling, and all of a sudden I see something has changed in his demeanor because some crazy person behind the screen has decided they just wanna, I don't know, ruin your day.

JVN [00:50:08] Fuck with him. Yeah, totally. I do want to kind of go back to this one idea that we were talking about a little bit before. And it's something I've been thinking about, too, especially now, and then we can end on anything that you want, because this is not the most upper of a question. But I agree with that frustration of, like, we *should* be celebrating the-, what happened in Georgia on January 6th. That was major and who it's led by and the fact that we do have more progress than ever--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:50:37] Yeah.

JVN [00:50:38] --Comma, I also feel, you know, from the 100-and however many legislators in the house of Republicans that voted to overturn a democratic election, the seven senators that did so and the fact that they *were* incited by President Trump on TV and in broad daylight. And my fear is, is that if we, if we do a censure, if we do something that-, I feel like we can't, I just I don't know in my lifetime if, if this if we let this go, the next thing that happens is so much worse. And, I fear that if we don't really stand up and say-, I guess it just comes back to the, literally that first thing, which is, like, complexity versus simple.

I feel like this has to be an abundant moment where, yes, we get the first 100 days. Yes, let's get these people confirmed. Yes, let's focus on who our senators are and the fact that, yes, Stacey Abrams did help make that happen and so did *you* queen and so did Kamala Harris! I mean, and those are all things that we should celebrate. But at the same time, I feel like we-, but I don't think I've done a very good job balancing that, like, on my Insta stories, on my Twitter. I'm like, "impeach and convict," "impeach and convict," "impeach and convict." And I, maybe I need to take my own advice and like, and do some of the celebrating that needs to be celebrated on. But I just feel like, I just sense these people

already trying to move past it and already trying to excuse it away. And I just, like, I don't know, I don't even know what my question is, I just, I guess I'm interested in--

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:52:08] No, I'm glad you came back to it. I think that, that you know when we do erase those moments, it's also part of historical amnesia. When we say, like, "Oh, ok, it wasn't that big a deal, wasn't that bad." Or, if we don't continue to talk about it, then we have a year from now something happens and we're, like, "This is unprecedented. This is-, I can't believe this is happening."

JVN [00:52:27] That accent you just did was brilliant! Yes!

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:52:32] I don't know who I was going for, but you know, it's out there now.

JVN [00:52:35] Yeah, I can't stand it. Oh, ah, ah, it makes me so mad. Ending on, like, a happier, well, whatever, I guess we can be complex and things don't have to end happy or whatever.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:52:45] Yeah!

JVN [00:52:45] Well, usually my last question is, like, Yogi or Yogini recess or, like, Yogi person recess, which is like, you know, at the end of a yoga class, like, you really wanted to, like, open up your hips, but they were just doing, like, all the chaturangas on that day and your hips are still really tight. Is there anything that we would just be remiss if we didn't talk about, whether it be about book stuff or you stuff or anything that's on your heart to share?

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:53:07] I feel like we covered so much, it's so hard for me. This happens at the end of every interview where I'm like I should have been maybe keeping better track of anything I wanted to say, but I feel like we really covered everything.

JVN [00:53:18] I feel positive about it.

ANNA MALAIKA TUBBS [00:53:18] I love that.

JVN [00:53:18] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was the writer and scholar Anna Malaika Tubbs.

You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

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