

Talks at GS
Anna Malaika Tubbs
Author, “The Three Mothers”
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Recorded: January 10, 2022

Anna Malaika Tubbs: It's almost uncanny how clear the connection is between the mother's strategy for fighting oppression and what her son goes on to make famous.

[MUSIC INTRO]

Stephanie Cohen: Hi everyone, and welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Stephanie Cohen, Global Co-Head of Consumer and Wealth Management. And we're very pleased to be joined by my friend Anna Malaika Tubbs, New York Times best-selling author of the new book *The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation*.

Today, we're going to talk to Anna about why Alberta King, Louise Little, and Berdis Baldwin were overlooked by history, and how their teachings led their sons to become leaders in the fight for racial equity. And the lessons that their life experiences offer to all of us today.

Anna, happy New Year.

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Happy New Year. Thank you so much for having me.

Stephanie Cohen: Thank you so much for being here. And I read the book, but I'm really excited about this

conversation. So, Anna, I know this was a really personal project for you. You wrote this book while you're becoming a mother yourself. How did the lives of these women give you a deeper understanding of the experience of Black mothers?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Oh my goodness. It was such a gift to give myself. So, when I started the project, when I started my PhD, I actually was not a mom yet. I just wanted to honor mothers. I had an incredible mother. I wanted to make sure to honor her. But then as I was doing the research, I found myself expecting my firstborn. And all these feelings went through my head. But the initial ones outside of excitement and being so happy that this was happening, I was also incredibly afraid. I was very well aware of the dangers of becoming a Black mother, of becoming a mother in the United States where we have a terrible maternity health crisis. And thinking through if I even survived this pregnancy and this labor, what life would be like for my child.

And so, in studying these three women who experienced this fear as well, and in many ways it was much more of a visceral fear and much more of this kind of explicit sense of danger that they experienced on a daily basis, I was able to see that I needed to have agency. And that I could reclaim my agency in this moment and celebrate and be joyous and be happy. And that that love that I was going to experience with my child was also very revolutionary against such hatred and such ugliness. And that I could use that as further impetus in my own fight against social injustice.

So, in learning their three different strategies, some ways that were the same and, in some ways, different, I was able

to apply that and feel even more excited and empowered as I was entering my own motherhood.

And today, my baby now is two years old. Which is crazy. I can't believe it. And I have a four-month-old as well. And I learn from these women each and every day. And if I pick up the book or if I'm reading a passage for an audience, I see new layers to what these three women are continuing to teach us.

Stephanie Cohen: Yeah. And I love that focus that you have on empowerment. You know, the one thing that really struck me was that these stories of Alberta, Louise, and Berdis have never been told. I mean, my mom's a history teacher. Like, I spent a lot of time focused on history. And I had never read about them at all. There's been no scholarly work done on their lives. They were just ignored. What do you think accounts for that? And in the absence of their stories, what is history really missing?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: And a lot of people say this to me, you know, "This was such a creative project, how did you come up with this idea to tell this story?" And I thought, I don't think this is creative at all. I am shocked I'm the first person to say, "What about their mothers? Who raised them? Who thought them these things?" You know? They didn't just pop out of nowhere, fully formed. And so, I was shocked as well.

And that is the biggest part of this book is that it's all original research. There was none of this available to the general public before I wrote this book. And I find that to be quite an accomplishment. But also, incredibly infuriating. The erasure of them was very intentional. I

don't think that it was the sons that erased the mothers. But I do think that whether it was journalists or scholars who studied the sons, it didn't fit our normal narrative of who the heroes of our stories are. And so, those moments just get taken out of the interview that they might have had with the son. Or they're just completely ignored. Or they're put in a footnote and left out of context.

So, I think it's a larger symptom of something that's happening on a systemic level in our country that we don't appreciate mothers. We overlook women's contributions. All of us know this very well. And that becomes even more apparent with Black women and Black mothers.

Stephanie Cohen: All three women raised their children during a time when institutional racism and violence were rampant. But also, at a time when Black Americans began to demand rights. And all three of them chose to fight. How did the ways in which they confronted racism and segregation prepare their sons to not only face a world that was violent against them, but go on to change it?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Something I should say first. I don't think it's the case of every mother/child relationship that there's such a direct connection between what the mother does and what the child does. Even if there is this kind of influence and inspiration. But in these three cases, it's almost uncanny how clear the connection is between the mother's strategy for fighting oppression and what her son goes on to make famous around the world or become known for. So, I'll just go through each of them. And I'm not even doing it on purpose to make the connection. This is just the truth.

So, Alberta King, who is MLK Jr.'s mother, she was raised by the leaders of Ebenezer Baptist Church. So, she's raised believing that if you are a religious leader, you must also stand against injustice. You must stand for the oppressed. Stand for the poor. If you have the privilege of an education, you use that to advance freedom causes forward. It's not just for yourself, it's for something that you can do for your larger community, for your world.

She participates in marches and in boycotts. So, even though she's not calling it nonviolence, these are the excitement same strategies that she teaches her children, teaches MLK, and that he then tells the whole world about and kind of adds his own experiences to.

Then we can move to Louise Little, Malcolm X's mother. She is this radical activist. She believes in Black independence and Black pride. Her grandparents were at one point enslaved and were able to gain their freedom. And so, they carried this lesson on into teaching their children and their grandchildren the need to not rely on your oppressor, but to find your own independence, your own voice. To not assimilate.

So, she believed this by any means necessary. She's going to stand for Black pride and Black freedom. She's a Marcus Garvey follower, for anybody who follows the Garveyite movement. But there's direct connections between Marcus Garvey and the Nation of Islam later. So, this is why Malcolm X says it's a homecoming for him when he's approached and thinks about joining Elijah Muhammad's movement.

Then thirdly, we have Berdis Baldwin, James Baldwin's mother. She is someone who I actually think maybe wouldn't have called herself an activist. But I certainly would say that she was. She believed that through her writing and through her love and her sharing of her view on the world, she could help other people through their own pain.

Berdis focuses on healing and how you can confront your pain so that you can move forward. And she becomes a writer. She loves using her words to help people around her through their own healing journeys. And that's what with does. She gives people her letters. She travels to New York during the Harlem Renaissance. And of course, then we have her son becoming the famous writer James Baldwin saying that he's a witness to the power of light [PH]. It's not just a beautiful thing he's saying. He was directly quoting his mother.

Stephanie Cohen: You start to allude to this, but you talk about it in the book, and you certainly have talked about it here, these mothers may not have really viewed their approach to parenting as radical. But the revolutionary power of their motherhood cannot be denied. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Yeah. I don't think that any of the three of them necessarily thought I'm doing this so that my child will be this radical change agent in the world. But more so because there was no other choice. This is the way they were going to mother their children because of the world that they lived in. They knew how ugly the world could be. They were aware that racism would be a huge part of their children's upbringing.

As Black mothers, we don't have a choice of whether or not we're going to tell our children about racism, about white supremacy. We have to tell them. And it's just going to maybe differ depending on our backgrounds, our experiences. So, you see these clear differences between the three mothers, maybe because of their socioeconomic status. You know, Alberta King has a little more privilege than Louise Little does. And maybe that's why Malcolm X is going to be raised in a much more radical environment than MLK Jr. But when it comes down to those similarities from the source, it's that there's no choice. They have to educate their children on how to live in the United States as Black people. But also, to find a balance between saying, "You need to be aware, but don't let this control you. Don't let this define you. You can have agency," going back to that word. "You can change this. And beyond that, you should also experience joy. You should experience love. Because that is a part of this fight as well."

Stephanie Cohen: Earlier you alluded to the fact that the sons didn't just become adults. That they're a product, at least partly, of their own childhood. And that's true of these women as well. And so, one of the common threads [PH] in all three narratives, actually, as you go through the mothers is education. Just so happens that my mom happens to be a teacher. And I believe deeply in the power of education, particularly early in life. And all three families sacrificed so that these girls could receive an education. And all three girls learned to read and write above average grade level. They formed a passion for the arts. They wanted to pursue their own dreams.

Can you speak to how these three young Black girls defied

the limiting representations of their time? And how that empowered and informed their ability to raise their own children?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Yeah. It's something that we really can't take for granted. At the time they were born, all of them around, let's say between 1897 and 1903, these are the years that they're born, it was not common for Black girls to be able to pursue their education beyond really any level, but let's say even an eighth-grade level. So, for all three of these women to become these scholars who can write, who know how to use their words, who are achieving degrees, this is very, very rare.

So, we have Alberta King who has a bachelor's degree, as well as a teaching certificate. Louise Little who is a writer for the UNIA, which is Marcus Garvey's organization. She's a branch secretary. She's writing in their newspaper. We know that Berdis Baldwin was incredibly well educated. I don't know her degrees, but when I talked with her children, all of them said, "I don't know where she was educated, but she was one of the most brilliant women. And her writing was beautiful." And all of James Baldwin's principals comment on the fact that even the notes that she writes to excuse his absences are so beautifully composed that it's clear that that's where he inherited his talent from.

So, this is big. This really makes a huge difference. And this is really the reason I say that they're the ones who shaped our nation because even in meeting their husbands, all three of them were much better educated than their husbands. All of the husbands might have even been considered illiterate. We know that that is definitely

the fact with Reverend Martin Luther King Sr. Before he meets Alberta, he was considered illiterate. After he meets her, she educates him. She tutors him through his degree. She helps him get into Morehouse. And he graduates from college and becomes this incredible orator. But without her, there is no way he can pass that talent onto his son, to his family members. So, it's really crucial in our understanding of these three men to know that their mothers were well educated.

Stephanie Cohen: Clearly history has not done a good job of giving credit to these women. But the sons have. And so, they have not gotten credit in history for it, but they have gotten it from their sons. Can you talk about what their sons say about them and how their sons feel they had real influence on their lives?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: It's my pleasure to do that. And I think this is part of one of the things that makes me happiest in the book is reading the moments where the sons talk about their moms. And usually, it's through letters that they write to their mothers or to their family members where they're giving this credit. And it's also through the siblings of these famous sons that we know how important the mothers were in all of their children's lives.

So, I'll start with Louise Little. The biggest moment for me in my research was when I found this letter that Malcolm X had written to his older brother Wilfred when he is in prison. He says, "All of our accomplishments are our mom's. All of our accomplishments. These are hers. We owe these to her. She taught us this all along. She knew what she was doing from the very beginning."

Then we have James Baldwin, who there's so much I could say about his relationship with Berdis. That was really his best friend. He loved her so much. He even talks about her being his first love in life. When he passes away, however, he says that his dying wish is that when it's his mom's time to join him, that she be buried next to him. So, to this day if you go and try to find James Baldwin's gravesite, you're going to see that he's buried next to Berdis. And they have a shared plaque that says, "Berdis" on one corner, "James" in the other, and "Baldwin" right in the middle. If that not a testament to how much a son loves his mother, I really don't know what is. She also had eight other children. So, that's important to note as well.

And then with Alberta King, there are moments in the book where you'll see letters that he has written to her saying, "Mother dear, you're the best mother in the world. I tell everybody I owe everything to you and to dad." And he talks about asking her to send him little things like chicken. And he wants his shoes.

You see each of the sons as the human being that they are, rather than as these deities that we have made them out to be. They are children who really loved their moms. And also had their moments where they're sort of, like, oh no, mom's getting too worried, and she's too concerned about me. So, you just really see the humanity behind them. And that's why those are my favorite parts of the book.

Stephanie Cohen: Yeah, those touches of humanity really make the book quite a pleasure to read.

You know, one of the things that I know all of us can relate

to this, in all three cases these mothers' worst fears became a reality when they had to bury their sons. And I don't think a lot of people know this, but Alberta, in particular, was terrified of her son getting killed. She had seen him threatened and jailed and stabbed and assaulted. And she was constantly praying for his safety. But it happened to be the bombing of his house that was a real turning point for her. Can you talk about how Martin's service to the country on the front lines of the movement really did almost cripple her?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Absolutely. So, as much as these mothers taught their children how to navigate the ugliness of our country and how to be change agents and transform it, they were still their mothers. They still, first and foremost, wanted their children to be happy, to be safe, and to be okay. But this is the struggle of how are you going to be an active agent in a place where it's quite dangerous to be that, while also being safe? And you sometimes have to make this choice.

Say today she is getting phone calls even at her own home threatening her son, her baby boy, her child. And this really consumes Alberta. She's always worried. She always thinks something's going to happen to him.

And so, he and his brother and his sister are always calling home just to update her. So, her husband talks in his autobiography about how when she would receive those phone calls from her children, she has a moment where she gets to feel peaceful. And there's a bit of weight that's taken off of her heart. And maybe an hour later it all comes back, and she gets concerned again. So, even at certain points she has to go on bedrest because she's so worried

and it's causing so much of a reaction for her physically what might happen, as she's imagining what could happen to her kid.

Stephanie Cohen: Yeah. And Martin really understood what that was doing to his mother. He talks about how my mother, too, had suffered like all parents. She was afraid for the son and the family. And yet, she was worried, and she was fearful, and she was on bedrest. It never caused her to doubt the necessity of her son's activism.

Anna Malaika Tubbs: No.

Stephanie Cohen: Talk about how she was able to counter such deep fears for his life. And where did she get the fortitude to share him with the rest of the world?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: I would say with her, 100 percent it's her Christian faith. This is so important to the whole entire King family, but especially to Alberta whose parents established Ebenezer Baptist Church. So, she's raised in the church. So, she really believes that MLK is doing what God has called him to do. And who is she to stand in the way of that? That in many ways, yes, this is her son. But first and foremost, this is God's child. And he's meant to be doing this.

And so, this is from her perspective, even though she knows the pain that she will feel if anything happens to him, she knows the worry she is feeling, she also sees it as something much larger than herself.

Stephanie Cohen: Yeah. And well, unfortunately for all three, the worst thing did happen. After burying their sons,

they chose to live really full lives. They were surrounded by their children and grandchildren. You talked about how many kids everyone had. Talk about how each mother summoned the strength to move forward, how that speaks to their resilience.

Anna Malaika Tubbs: I can give you some more context on the rest of their lives without giving everything away. But Alberta King, unfortunately, she not only buries MLK Jr., but within a year after that, her other son also passes away. So, Alberta loses two of her children. But she focuses, again, on this faith and thinking about what is she meant to do with this tragedy. And she translates that into her love for her community, continuing to teach her students her music, as well as thinking about her grandchildren, especially those who now have lost their fathers. But it's only a few years later, actually, that also that Alberta also loses her life when she's shot in the back. There's a lot of context around that as well. But the King family experiences tragedy after tragedy after tragedy. And their resilience to this day, when you think about Christine, who is MLK Jr.'s sister, she's still alive today. And to be able to survive all of this family pain is incredible. I mean, someone needs to write more books about her because I would love to know more about how she was able to endure this.

Then when you think about Louise Little, and I said that she was put away against her will for 25 years of her life in an institution, she actually is eventually released from this institution. Her children continue to fight for her freedom. And she goes on to live another 25 years, which is so, so beautiful. It's only a year after she's released, however, that she loses Malcolm X and he is assassinated. And so, her

grandchildren, especially in Betty and Malcolm's case, they end up knowing her better than Malcolm was able to. And it was an honor for me to be able to interview one of her grandchildren who calls herself her grandmother's keeper. And really kept her dad's stories alive, which was really amazing for them and for me too, to hear in my interviews.

And then with Berdis Baldwin, she doesn't pass away until 1999. So, I find this really incredible, this is a tangent, but on one end of Berdis' life, she overlaps with Harriet Tubman. Harriet Tubman doesn't pass away until 1914. And Berdis Baldwin was born in 1902. And then on the other end of her life she overlaps with me. She doesn't pass away until 1999. And I was born in 1992. So, it's just this incredible, when you think about what Berdis witnessed in this country, in this world throughout her life. And to see, also, that her son had such an impact on that history, what an incredible honor. Of course, I'm sure she would have much rather passed before her son did. But to be able to see his work live on was a gift to her. And so, she passes that onto her other eight children and all of the many grandchildren that she's able to meet before she passes.

Stephanie Cohen: You wrote that each mother persisted on her journey to leave this world a better place than when she entered it. Do you think America would be where it is today without these women?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: I do not. And not only these three women, but of course I wanted to celebrate their individual journeys. I really wanted to make sure I wasn't reducing the category of Black womanhood and making it seem like we were some kind of monolith. So, it's really important to me to celebrate their many, many differences and this

incredibly rich diversity that exists in their stories. But also, I am celebrating what they symbolize in terms of this class of Black women, this generation of Black women that were right before the civil rights movement. And how they were able to engender the civil rights movement, not only through birthing children, but in the many other ways in which they're giving life through their activism, through their writing, through their teaching. We see it in examples with Louise being the activist who she was and the writer that she was, with Berdis and the writing that she is able to produce, and with Alberta being this teacher beyond her family. They impacted so many lives.

And there are all of these stories that we have yet to hear about, that I would say are probably just as inspiring as these three.

Stephanie Cohen: What from these women's experience can we learn about the fight for racial equity today and what is necessary for progress?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Well, first and foremost that it is a continued movement, a legacy that has been passed on from generation to generation. That it wasn't just these figures in the civil rights movement and this one moment, a ten-year period in history. But instead that it's connected to generations long before these sons. And that we're continuing to be connected to them.

So, it's really a strategy of oppression to make it seem that one person holds the movement. Because if that person is taken from us, then it's this assumption that we somehow have lost. And that is the strategy, the hope that if we put everything into this one leader and then we say, okay, now

they've been murdered, that means the rest of us will lose hope. But instead, by feeling rooted in the many, many generations of fighters that came before these men, and that continue to this day, we actually find so much, I would say, hope and sustenance for our current movement. We are continuing the fight in many different ways and strategies. Like I said with these three women, they had different approaches to freedom. And I'm someone who believes that we all have to play a role. That there's not one better way of fighting this. But instead, that if we see how history has worked and whenever we have achieved progress, it's that people from all of these different walks of life and from different backgrounds and thoughts and kind of strategies came together and really made that happen, even when they disagreed with each other. And so, I think that's really current and important for us to remember with our current struggle. We are rooted. We are connected. It's not just these random spurts but a continued fight, that I'm really honored to hopefully be playing a part in.

Stephanie Cohen: In addition to your work as an activist and an author, you're also really focused on increasing diversity in the workplace, which is something, as you know, we're both quite passionate about. And we know that companies that are inclusive and diverse outperform their peers in profitability and a whole host of other ways. And you know, and I've talked to you about this fact, that diversity and inclusion need to be discussed in the same rooms that we discuss things like market share and margins and growth rates.

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Yeah.

Stephanie Cohen: In the book, you wrote that Black

women have proven that we hold the key to the future. And you know, some of the ways that we've gotten introduced is because you know we recognize this stuff at Goldman Sachs. And recently, we launched our One Million Black Women initiative to invest in this future. What do more companies need to do to fully integrate diversity and inclusion as not just, you know, the nice thing to do, but a necessary thing to do in order to really be outperforming in great businesses?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Yeah. I think so much of it starts with that mind shift. Like you said, it's not just a nice thing to do. It's not some kind of charity to say, "Oh, okay, well, you know, we'll have some diversity hires. We'll give some people an opportunity." It is beyond that. It is the better thing to do, not only for your morale, or your morality, but also because of the money behind it and the change that will come for our entire world if we are able to make sure we're more representative of our nation, if we're making sure we're listening to voices that have previously be unheard, if we're making sure we're opening the doors, even in terms of thinking about what we're putting out there. If we don't have the members of our team who can tell us what everybody needs, then we're clearly going to miss important parts of our market. And we're also going to see that policy really does follow these kinds of shifts in our mind where we say, again, this is not for charity. It's for the better of all of us. And how can we get behind that so we can actually see systemic change? It's crucial.

And we can all do that in every aspect of our work. It's not just that one expert comes in and tells me, "Oh, okay, this is what the hire that you're going to need." Or "This is what we're going to do to shift the numbers." It's can we all get

behind the idea that diverse teams do better? And therefore, we'll be able to create better change for the world. And even make more money as a result for our companies.

So, whatever kind of end of the spectrum we fall on, whatever our goal is that we care more about, either way, diversity will make that better.

Stephanie Cohen: You didn't get the chance to meet them. But you did mention that you did get to meet some of the grandchildren. So, can you talk about the reactions that the families have had to the book? And maybe some of the conversations you've had with them?

Anna Malaika Tubbs: I had the disadvantage of the fact that the women I was studying, I could not interview, as you mentioned. And so, being able to approach family members, these living relatives, I was honored to, but I also wanted to be very respectful of the fact that these are three families who are inundated by requests, and who have been quite hurt, honestly, quite often by scholars who, I'd say, would dissect these stories and kind of objectify their loved ones. You know, these are their children. These are their grandchildren. They're real people. And so, I wanted to be as respectful as is possible. So, I just kind of approached everybody and met them where they were and what they were comfortable with.

So, with the King family, I actually wasn't able to interview anybody. But they did connect me with their archival team. And they gave me everything I needed in addition to the other research I was doing. With the Baldwin family, I was able to speak, sometimes only for ten minutes, to a family

member. Or I was able to sit down at a meal with one of Berdis' grandchildren. Which was, again, epic and so incredible.

And then with Louise Little, I was able to have two phone conversations, with one of her granddaughters. But I never knew when she was going to call me. I didn't have her number. So, I would get these unknown calls when I'd maybe be driving and I'd say, "Oh my goodness. Okay. I've got to stop." I would answer and start pulling out my note cards.

So, it was a really kind of cool investigative journalist kind of couple of years. But since the book's been out, I'm really, really proud that all of the families have supported it, have shared news about it, which I'm happy that I made them proud and that I've honored their family member in the way that I wanted to. So, even if they didn't want to speak at the beginning, I am so, so respectful of that. And I'm really grateful that to this day they're happy with the product.

Stephanie Cohen: Thank you, Anna, so much for being here. Thank you for doing all the work to write the book, for writing the book, and for letting us share it with you. And we're so thrilled to have you here. Thank you.

Anna Malaika Tubbs: Thank you. Thank you.

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