



## DISCUSSION GUIDE: BELIEVE IN YOUR VOICE | Stefanie Brown James

### Background

*Only the Black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole race enters with me.*

Anna Julia Cooper, Ph.D. – A Voice from the South, 1892

For over 400 years, Black girls and women have been a widely known secret, defined, assessed, and coveted by everyone, but us. And unfortunately, a consequence of over four centuries of negative stereotypes and tropes have followed Black girls and women and have had both negative and positive impacts our dreams, aspirations, expectations, and outcomes. Although we are forever grateful for the presence and the impact of venerated “race women” intellectuals such as Anna Julia Cooper, Zora Neale Hurston, Jeanne Noble, Joyce Ladner, Stephanie Y. Evans, Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Brittany Cooper, and others who have helped Black girls and women to center, define, and live our lives unapologetically and without the gaze and expectations of others. There are a consistent need to provide space for Black girls and women to reflect upon, define, and assess their own experiences.

According to Joyce Ladner (1978), “...the total misrepresentation of the Black community, and the various myths which surround it, can be seen in microcosm in the Black female adolescent.” Therefore, it is imperative that we consistently and intentionally *check the pulse* of our Black girls, making sure that they are able to successfully navigate personal experiences and encounters; social, historical, and cultural perceptions and expectations; and social media traps. Overall, creating opportunities for Black girls to become collectively and individually equipped and prepared to find their voice, determine their passion, navigate their path, and smash their opportunities.

Unfortunately, the gifts, talents, insights, and skills that Black girls bring to the world, are often overlooked, undervalued, or falsely attached to others. For example, when identifying students as “gifted” or “talented,” in the classroom Black girls are missing from an archaic process which only recognizes binary perceptions of math and reading achievement. However, when the contemporary gifted traits of: “motivation,” “interest,” “problem-solving ability,” “memory capacity,” “inquiry skills,” “insight abilities,” “reasoning skills,” “imagination/creativity,” and “sense of humor” are added to the equation, Black girls rise to the top. (Frasier, 1995) Notably, loving, affirming, respecting, centering, connecting, uplifting, and understanding Black girls is more than just a teaching approach, a “best practice,” or a tool in a tool kit. “When we love and affirm Black girls, we love and affirm *humanity*. This freedom is not just for Black girls, but for educators to be fully human in the classroom.” (Love, 2021, p. xiii)



### **Purpose**

**The purpose of this discussion guide is to help facilitate dialogs around topics and themes gleaned and collected from conversations with 12 phenomenal Black women who have not only excelled in their careers, but also in how they have personally navigated often treacherous or uncertain pathways in life, unapologetically.** This discussion guide is not designed to be a “how to guide” or prescriptive in nature, but rather as a document designed to help spark profound introspection and meaningful conversations among and between Black girls and women, and to develop what it means to fashion themselves as “dope,” “mela-nated,” “unapologetic,” “magical” Black girls.

Unfortunately, Black girls and women exist within the intersection of both racial and gender caste systems. Therefore, it is important that Black girls and women have the ability and agency to define themselves and their experiences using their own voice, without being compared to, or defined by, others. Patricia Hill Collins’ (1990), theory of Black feminist thought (BFT) focuses on the unique perspectives and experiences of Black women, and argues that oppressive factors such as history, culture, social, educational, economic status, age, sexual orientation, etc. contribute to who Black girls and women are, and how they see themselves. A second assumption is that Black girls and women have individual, collective, unique experiences and perspectives that are shared both within and between groups of Black girls and women. And finally, BFT centers the perspectives, analyses, and experiences of African American Black girls and women’s analyses from within, rather than by, or from, others.

Black feminist thought key concepts:

- Outsider-Within
- Balancing Intellectual Activism
- Matrix of Domination
- Power/Controlling Images on Black Girls and Women
- Self-Definition

Not surprisingly, some of the key concepts identified in Black feminist thought also were seen in the “themes” that emerged from the conversations with these empowered Black women.

### **How to Use this Discussion Guide**

The following is a brief biography, emergent themes, and discussion questions that can lead to reflective conversations with Black girls. Watch the video featuring Stefanie Brown James and think about her experiences or perspectives may relate to your own experiences.



## **Stefanie Brown James**

A passionate leader, Stefanie Brown James is a master of making the political, personal. She has dedicated her life to empowering people to organize and advocate for justice and equality in their communities. Stefanie is the CEO and Founding Partner of Vestige Strategies, LLC, a Washington, DC-based public affairs firm that specializes in grassroots community and civic engagement strategies. Through her role at Vestige, Stefanie leads a team of four to connect clients like the Black Civic Engagement Initiative, MomsRising.org, the Climate Action Campaign and others around the world with their targeted constituencies – especially people of color, women, and youth. Personable and engaging, Stefanie’s outsized personality draws people to her, making her a magnet for the whispered secrets, concerns and dreams of those around her. Though this knack for connections is innate for this Cleveland, Ohio-native, Stefanie honed her skills while working as the National Field Director and National Director of the Youth & College Division for the NAACP. In the process of overseeing the organization’s 2,200 adult branches and representing the 23,000 “under 25” youth, she helped communities identify their pressing issues and crafted creative solutions that turned citizens into stakeholders, and unlikely allies into partners.

Stefanie Brown James’ reputation precedes her, which is why it only made sense that President Barack Obama would bring her onboard to work as his campaign’s *National African American Vote Director* for the 2012 election cycle. She didn’t just convince a record breaking 66.2% of eligible Black voters to cast ballots, she also empowered a massive volunteer force to engage their friends, family and neighbors, by bypassing the tired tactics of the folks who like to talk over the heads of their audiences and getting to know who they are and what they need to be their most successful selves.

It’s a strategy that the 2003 Howard University grad also employs as the founder and Executive Director of *Brown Girls Lead, Inc.*, a leadership development organization focused on helping collegiate and professional women cultivate the skills they need to effect positive social change on their campuses and in their communities. Whether it’s helping college students in the *Brown Girls Lead Academy* pick the right clothes to wear to an interview or motivating professional women to take charge of their lives, Stefanie and her six-member planning team are helping to break the glass ceiling of leadership for brown girls across the country.

### **Emerging Themes**

- Knowing Who You Are – Issues of Self (e.g., self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-definition, self-concept, fitting in, self-criticism, etc.)
- Confidence/Fearlessness- Being Authentic Self
- Young, Gifted, and Black (curiosity, problem-solving, challenging stereotypes, etc.)
- Being Seen/Heard and Perceptions of Others



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- Good Trouble: Activism, Social Justice, Advocacy
- Identity Development and Intersectionality (Black, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic, class, colorism, body image, etc.)
- Finding your passion, purpose, and vocation
- Opening Doors/Continuing the Legacy
- Creating Your Own Space(s)
- Pioneering Your Path, Inspiring Others, and Giving Back

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- Stefanie mentioned that while she was growing up, she sometimes felt like her family didn't pay attention to her. What are examples of how Black girls may be overlooked by their families, teachers, coaches, mentors, boys, girls, friends, media, etc.?
- How can we silence or distract the "little voice" in our heads that make us feel inadequate, unimportant, or unseen?
- Do you have to have a big or loud voice to be heard? Do others have to give you permission to be heard or listened to?
- Stefanie talks a lot about community or public service. How did/does her work in the community help her to find her voice and her purpose?
- Black women are limited in number within this country, does your voice really matter, or can it make a significant impact? Why or why not?

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

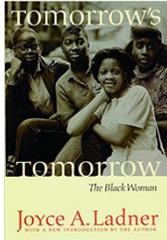
**Olivia V.G. Clarke.** (2020) Navigating predominantly white institutions (PWI) as a young Black girl provides amazing opportunities as well as challenging experiences. The poems, anecdotes, and entries found in this book seek to provide support and guidance for Black girls in PWI's and are written by Black girls and women who are current or past attendees of PWI's. Hair, friendship, dating, motivation, information, racism, self-esteem - nothing is off limits. (Ages 13-18)





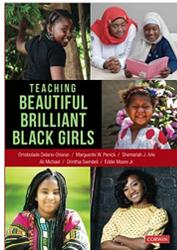
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**Joyce A. Ladner.** (1971). *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* is a pioneering sociological study of black girls growing up in the city. The new introduction considers what has changed and what has remained constant for them since the book was first published in 1971.



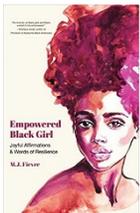
Ladner spent four years interviewing, observing, and socializing with more than a hundred girls living in the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis. Ladner asked what life was like in the urban black community for the “average” girl, how she defined her roles and behaviors, and where she found her role models. She was interested in any significant disparity between aspirations and the resources to achieve them. To what extent did the black teenager share the world of her white peers? If the questions were searching, the conclusions were provocative. According to Ladner, “The total misrepresentation of the Black community and the various myths which surround it can be seen in microcosm in the Black female adolescent.”

**Bola Delano-Oriaran, Marguerite W. Penick-Parks, Shemariah J. Arki, Ali Michael, Orinthia Swindell, and Eddie**



**Moore.** (2021). This book is a collective call to action for educational justice and fairness for all Black Girls – Beautiful, Brilliant. This book engages willing and knowledgeable educators to disrupt and transform their learning spaces by presenting: a) Detailed chapters rooted in scholarship, lived experiences, and practice; b) Activities, recommendations, shorter personal narratives, and poetry honoring Black Girls; c) Resources centering Black female protagonists; d) Companion videos illustrating first-hand experiences of Black Girls and women; e) Tools in authentically connecting with Black Girls so they can do more than survive – they can thrive.

**M.J. Fievre.** (2021). *Inspirational Affirmations from Fabulous Black Female Trailblazers*. Even strong, fearless, and badass Black girls and Black women need affirmations. Now more than ever, we need to practice the art of self-care and give our minds and bodies the TLC they deserve. Author of *Badass Black Girl* and *Happy, Okay?* M.J Fievre brings you inspirational words of wisdom through fabulous Black female trailblazers who have changed the world, including Audre Lorde, Lupita Nyong'o and Angela Davis. **Take a deep breath.** We don't always have to be strong. Sometimes, taking a break to focus on our mental health is bravery in itself. We find ourselves needing reminders that we are incredible and more than enough.



**Eunique Jones Gibson.** *Because of Them, We Can.* Because of Them We Can® was started by *Eunique Jones Gibson*



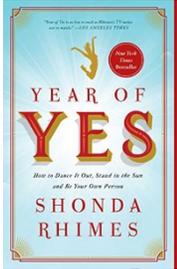
in February 2013 as a 28-day photo campaign where children appeared as iconic Black history figures of the past and present. Inspired by her sons, Chase and Amari, it was a way to teach and refresh Black history while connecting the dots between the past, present and future. Today, Because of Them We Can® has evolved into a movement via an online platform that reaches millions of people monthly across our digital footprint. We are committed to responsibly engaging our audience (especially our children) with content and tools that help them embrace, amplify, and exude Black excellence on a daily basis.

[www.becauseofthemwecan.com](http://www.becauseofthemwecan.com)



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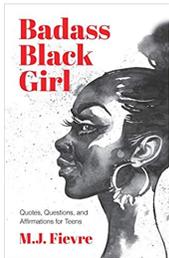
**Shonda Rhimes. (2015).** The instant *New York Times* bestseller from the creator of *Grey's*



*Anatomy and Scandal* and executive producer of *How to Get Away With Murder* shares how saying YES changed her life. “As fun to read as Rhimes’s TV series are to watch” (*Los Angeles Times*). She’s the creator and producer of some of the most groundbreaking and audacious shows on television today. Her iconic characters live boldly and speak their minds. So, who would suspect that Shonda Rhimes is an introvert? That she hired a publicist so she could *avoid* public appearances? That she suffered panic attacks before media interviews? With three children at home and three hit television shows, it was easy for Shonda to say she was simply too busy. But in truth, she was also afraid. And then, over Thanksgiving dinner, her sister muttered something that was both a wake up and a call to arms: *You never say yes to anything.* Shonda knew she had to embrace the challenge: for one year, she would say YES to everything that

scared her.

**M. J. Fievre (2020).** Affirmations for strong, fearless Black girls. Wisdom from Badass Black female trailblazers who accomplished remarkable things in literature, entertainment, STEM, politics and law, sports and more. Explore the many facets of your identity through hundreds of big and small questions. In this book and affirmations journal created for Black girls, M.J. Fievre tackles topics such as family and friends, school and careers, body image, and stereotypes. By reflecting on these themes, you confront the issues that can hold you back from discovering your inner Black joy. Embrace authenticity and celebrate who you are.



**M. J. Fievre (2020).** A Girl Power Coloring Book for Teens, Tweens, and Black Young Ladies

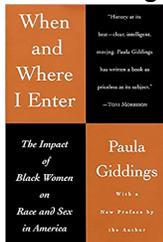


The cool companion to MJ Fievre’s life guide *Badass Black Girl* is finally here. *Black Brave Beautiful* is a coloring book for girls jam-packed with intricate designs and empowering quotes from notable Black figures.

We all know Black girls rock—but they also relax. Coloring books for teens are a great way to get inspired, relieve stress, and now—unleash your inner badass. With this coloring book, black girls can finally color and shade in a palette of their own choosing. A twist on traditional teen coloring books, *Black* and visionary Black women while colorfully guiding them in the direction of their dreams. Inside, young girls will find excerpts from inspirational books and

quotes by badass Black women like: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Gabby Douglas; Oprah Winfrey; Maya Angelou; And more!

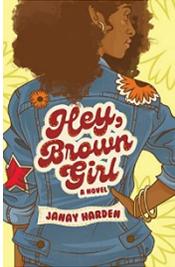
**Paula Giddings. (1984).** “History at its best—clear, intelligent, moving. Paula Giddings has written a book as priceless as its subject” — Toni Morrison. Acclaimed by writers Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, Paula Giddings’s *When and Where I Enter* is not only an eloquent testament to the unsung contributions of individual women to our nation, but to the collective activism which elevated the race and women’s movements that define our times. From Ida B. Wells to the first black Presidential candidate, Shirley Chisholm; from the anti-lynching movement to the struggle for suffrage and equal protection under the law; Giddings tells the stories of black women who transcended the dual discrimination of race and gender—and whose legacy inspires our own generation. Forty years after the passing of the Voting Rights Act, when phrases like “affirmative action” and “wrongful imprisonment” are rallying cries, Giddings words resonate now more than ever.



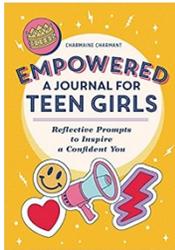


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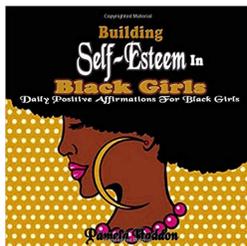
**Janay Harden. (2021).** 17-year-old Raven Jamison, and her three best friends, Nia, Jasmine, and Trinity, make up The Brown Girls Club. The girls spend long and carefree days in their bayou town of Lake Lacroix, nestled behind the big city of New Orleans. A dinner time knock at the door abruptly changes everything. When child protective services descend on their doorstep dropping off her younger cousin Carter, Raven is suddenly thrust into a brand new reality. Generational ties that affected the entire family for decades soon resurface. Carter's presence rips at the Jamison household, and his aggressive and shocking behaviors may prove too much to handle for this seemingly picture-perfect family. Raven, her family and friends must work together to overcome their shared pain and help Carter find his voice before it's too late. Hey, Brown Girl is a compelling and thought-provoking young adult novel about struggle, forgiveness and hope. When this Melanin rich family finds strength in their shared bonds, it's undeniable proof... love conquers all.



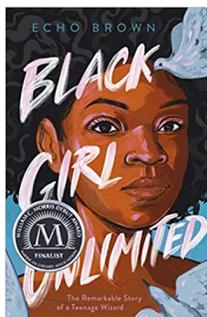
**Charmaine Charmant. (2021).** Help teen girls step into their strength with this inspiring journal. Feeling empowered means loving yourself unconditionally. It also means building the confidence to forge your own path instead of comparing yourself to others. This teen journal shows girls what empowerment looks like, with writing prompts and affirmations to encourage self-reflection and build self-esteem. It's a safe space for them to explore hopes and dreams, claim their place in the world, and learn how to live as their most authentic selves. Inspire confidence and ambition in young girls with this empowering teen journal.



**Pamela Haddon. (2020).** How do you feel about yourself? And, why do you feel such way about yourself? Do you know that you are what you think? Your thoughts control your feelings, your feelings control your actions and your actions control your outcomes in life. This implies that; if you take charge of your thoughts, you can easily take charge of your feelings and actions and hence, your outcomes in life. The pressing question now is, how can you take charge of your thoughts? I am going to show you one very effective way of taking control of your thoughts and life in this self esteem workbook for black teens and young women.



**Echo Brown. (2020).** Heavily autobiographical and infused with magical realism, *Black Girl Unlimited* fearlessly explores the intersections of poverty, sexual violence, depression, racism, and sexism—all through the arc of a transcendent coming-of-age story for fans of Renee Watson's *Piecing Me Together* and Ibi Zoboi's *American Street*. Echo Brown is a wizard from the East Side, where apartments are small and parents suffer addictions to the white rocks. Yet there is magic . . . everywhere. New portals begin to open when Echo transfers to the rich school on the West Side, and an insightful teacher becomes a pivotal mentor.

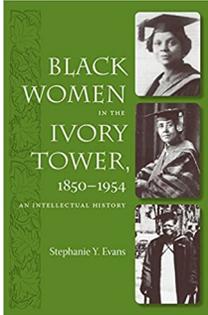


Each day, Echo travels between two worlds, leaving her brothers, her friends, and a piece of herself behind on the East Side. There are dangers to leaving behind the place that made you. Echo soon realizes there is pain flowing through everyone around her, and a black veil of depression threatens to undo everything she's worked for. (ages 14-18)

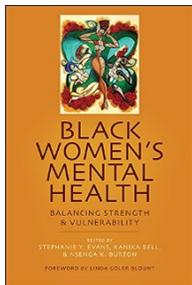


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**Stephanie Y. Evans. (2008).** "Provides scholars with a historical lens from which to view the higher education of black women . . . [and] how one generation of black women benefited from the work and sacrifices of the prior generation." Evans chronicles the stories of African American women who struggled for and won access to formal education, beginning in 1850, when Lucy Stanton, a student at Oberlin College, earned the first college diploma conferred on an African American woman. In the century between the Civil War and the civil rights movement, a critical increase in black women's educational attainment mirrored unprecedented national growth in American education. Evans reveals how black women demanded space as students and asserted their voices as educators--despite such barriers as violence, discrimination, and oppressive campus policies--contributing in significant ways to higher education in the United States. She argues that their experiences, ideas, and practices can inspire contemporary educators to create an intellectual democracy in which all people have a voice.

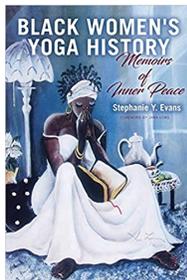


**Stephanie Y. Evans. (2017).** *Creates a new framework for approaching Black women's wellness, by merging theory and practice with both personal narratives and public policy.* This book offers a unique, interdisciplinary, and thoughtful look at the challenges and potency of Black women's struggle for inner peace and mental stability. It brings together contributors from psychology, sociology, law, and medicine, as well as the humanities, to discuss issues ranging from stress, sexual assault, healing, self-care, and contemplative practice to health-policy considerations and parenting. Merging theory and practice with personal narratives and public policy, the book develops a new framework for approaching Black women's wellness in order to provide tangible solutions.

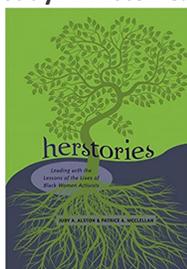


For access to an online resource created by the editors, visit: Black Women's Mental Health @ <http://www.bwmentalhealth.net/>

**Stephanie Y. Evans. (2017).** How have Black women elders managed stress? In *Black Women's Yoga History*, Stephanie Y. Evans uses primary sources to answer that question and to segregation, and migration to the Civil Rights, Black Power, and New Age movements have been in existence all along. Life writings by Harriet Jacobs, Sadie and Bessie Delany, Eartha Kitt, Rosa Parks, Jan Willis, and Tina Turner are only a few examples of personal case studies that are included here, illustrating how these women managed traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression. In more than fifty yoga memoirs, Black women discuss practices of reflection, exercise, movement, stretching, visualization, and chanting for self-care. By unveiling the depth of a struggle for wellness, memoirs offer lessons for those who also struggle to heal from personal, cultural, and structural violence. This intellectual history expands conceptions of yoga and defines inner peace as mental health, healing, and wellness that is both compassionate and political.



**Judy A. Alston & Patrice McClellan. (2011).** The field of leadership has often been criticized for excluding voices that are not White and male. Not only are women – specifically Black women – poorly represented in leadership positions and the field's knowledge base, they are vastly underrepresented in the actual content of leadership courses and texts. This book analyzes the transformational leadership, servant leadership, and social justice leadership found in the lives of Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, Mary McLeod Bethune, Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, and Audre Lorde. The book not only chronicles the careers and professional contributions of these women, but also uses these leadership models as units of analysis to highlight their

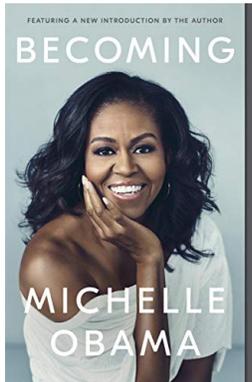




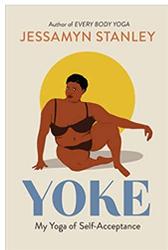
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effective leadership «herstories» to inform current practice. *p. Herstories* provides an important (re)visioning of leadership theory by documenting the leadership lives of six strong black women.

**Michelle Obama. (2018).** In a life filled with meaning and accomplishment, Michelle Obama has emerged as one of the most iconic and compelling women of our era. As First Lady of the United States of America—the first African American to serve in that role—she helped create the most welcoming and inclusive White House in history, while also establishing herself as a powerful advocate for women and girls in the U.S. and around the world, dramatically changing the ways that families pursue healthier and more active lives, and standing with her husband as he led America through some of its most harrowing moments. With unerring honesty and lively wit, she describes her triumphs and her disappointments, both public and private, telling her full story as she has lived it—in her own words and on her own terms. Warm, wise, and revelatory, *Becoming* is the deeply personal reckoning of a woman of soul and substance who has steadily defied expectations—and whose story inspires us to do the same.



**Jessamyn Stanley. (2021). Finding self-acceptance both on and off the mat.** In Sanskrit, yoga means to “yoke.” To yoke mind and body, movement and breath, light and dark, the good and the bad. This larger idea of “yoke” is what Jessamyn Stanley calls the yoga of the everyday—a yoga that is not just about perfecting your downward dog but about applying the hard lessons learned on the mat to the even harder daily project of living.



In a series of deeply honest, funny autobiographical essays, Jessamyn explores everything from imposter syndrome to cannabis to why it’s a full-time job loving yourself, all through the lens of yoke. And in the end, Jessamyn invites every reader to find the authentic spirit of yoke—linking that good and that bad, that light and that dark.

**Beverly Bond – Black Girls Rock.** BGR is a global women’s empowerment movement and multifaceted media, entertainment, philanthropic and lifestyle brand, dedicated to inspiring and celebrating women of color. The annual BLACK GIRLS ROCK AWARDS is the biggest celebration of the nexus of achievements of exemplary women of color who break boundaries, blaze trails and set trends across sectors. **BLACK GIRLS ROCK! Inc.**, the 501(c) (3) nonprofit entity of the brand, is devoted to healthy positive identity development of young women and girls by providing programs that support critical thinking, leadership development, sisterhood, innovation, civic engagement, and career exposure. <https://blackgirlsrock.com>

