Bianca C. Williams, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2018. xii + 226 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

Bianca Williams's *The Pursuit of Happiness* is an ethnographic study of the experiences of a group of African American women who travel to Jamaica, most of them quite regularly, through tours organized by Girlfriend Tours International. For these Girlfriends, as tour participants call themselves, Jamaica is more than a vacation spot. Girlfriends see the time they spend in Jamaica as a respite from the emotional burdens of family and work and from the daily stress of living in a racist and sexist society. At the same time, Jamaica represents happiness through friendship, affirmation, diasporic connection, and sexual intimacy. In their online exchanges about upcoming and past trips, and in their occasional stateside retreats, Girlfriends expand beyond Jamaica the spaces where they might find happiness. The book details their experiences in these worlds as well.

Williams traveled with Girlfriends to Jamaica and to their stateside retreats, monitored their web posts, and conducted extensive interviews with them and Jamaicans with whom they had relationships. The result is an ethnography that illuminates the importance of following travelers through the virtual spaces of their imaginings and their communications with each other, and showing how these figure in the construction of place and affect. *The Pursuit of Happiness* details how online posts by veteran Girlfriends and narratives such as Terry McMillan's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996) animate fantasies about Jamaica as a space of intimacy, recuperation, and connection. Once Girlfriends are in Jamaica, carefully choreographed welcome dinners, club nights, and van tours with hand-picked drivers bring Girlfriends' fantasies to life, and organized get-togethers back in the United States sustain otherwise transitory moments of happiness. As Williams notes, "whether in physical Jamaica, in virtual Jamaica, or at Jamaica-centered US-retreats, Girlfriends were always encouraged to indulge in self-care, take time for restoration, and participate in solo and group reflection about their lives ... to escape and go to a place where they could have affective experiences without feeling shame" (p. 77).

One of the affects that Williams treats is Girlfriends' experiences of Jamaica as a space of sexual intimacy. Her chapter on the intimate relations some Girlfriends have with Jamaican men illuminates how race, class, and culture intersect to create a different sort of difference than that documented by studies of the intimate relations between white western women and Afro-Caribbean men. The book also contributes to our understanding of the emotional complexity of diasporic identities. It characterizes Girlfriends' travel to Jamaica as

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© COLLEEN BALLERINO COHEN, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09303043

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC 4.0 License.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 11:10:45AM
via free access

a form of emotional transnationalism, a search for a deep connection to themselves and to others in the African diaspora, through virtual and real transnational mobility. While this search for “new forms of connectivity and belonging” (p. 104) is made possible by Girlfriends’ economic standing as members of America’s middle class, their aspirations for diasporic communion with their Jamaican brothers and sisters are often dashed by perceived and actual differences in class and privilege. Among the most wrenching of the many interviews in *The Pursuit of Happiness* are Girlfriends’ accounts of their confusion, disappointment, and anger upon confronting these differences. With its illumination of Jamaica as a site for African American women’s search for diasporic belonging, the book makes an original contribution to studies of transnational Blackness in the Caribbean and opens new directions for it.

Williams’s interpretations of the motivations for and consequences of the Girlfriends’ pursuit of happiness are informed by critical race theory, intersectional feminism, and tourism, diaspora, and transnational studies. This renders the ethnographic specificity of her study more generally applicable to scholars working in these areas. It also makes it a relevant text for courses in Caribbean studies, tourism, and gender studies, as well as in Africana studies and ethnography. In addition to ethnographic and interview material from Jamaica, the United States, and the internet, Williams includes reflections on her relationship with the Girlfriends; in brief interlude chapters, she reflects as well on her relation as a Jamaican-American to the Jamaica, imagined and real, to which the Girlfriends travel. *The Pursuit of Happiness* is thus an exemplar of multisited ethnography, even as it serves as a model for scholars working in the emerging of fields of the ethnography of affect and cultures of care. In all respects, this is an original, accessible, and important book.

Colleen Ballerino Cohen

Anthropology and Women’s Studies, Vassar College

cocohen@vassar.edu