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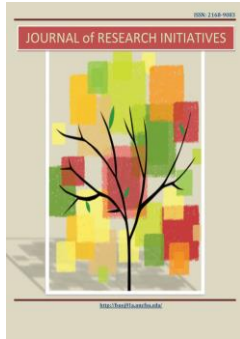
## The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism

### About the Author(s)

Rosemary Onyango is a core faculty in the Africana Studies Program at Eastern Illinois University. Her research interests include women activists in Africa and the African Diaspora, gender issues in education and development and issues that impact culturally diverse students in relation to their background, information needs, learning experiences and assessment and outcomes. Her publications have appeared in the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *The Journal of Pan African Studies* and *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies*.

### Keywords

Africana Studies, Transnational Identities, Black feminism



## **The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism**

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Title: *The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism*. Author: Bianca C. Williams

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### **Abstract**

Given the increase in transnational connections and mobility, this review offers insights from detailed research on black feminism and tourism and affective connections across diasporic locations that scholars, college students, and the general reader interested in transnational mobility will find intriguing.

### **Book Review**

*The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism* (2018) is a fascinating study of a group of middle-class Black American women determined to seek emotionally enriching connections through annual visits to Jamaica that enable them to escape racism, sexism and ageism in the United States (US). Bianca Williams, a professor of Anthropology, documents her research journey in Jamaican and American sites. From 2003 to 2007, Williams, a young Jamaican-American ethnographer, followed the women who were members of Girlfriend Tours International (GFT) and interacted with over fifty Jamaican men and women in Jamaican cities. She interviews, observes, and explores the participants' virtual connections "...to get a fuller view of their participation in emotional transnationalism" (p. 24). Members of GFT (also called Girlfriends) seek sisterhood with each other while exploring friendship and perceived diasporic kinship with Jamaicans. Since Girlfriends are in their forties and fifties, they relate to Williams as a daughter figure, young niece, mediator, and confidant. The study uncovers networks of relationships, some of which are intimate, interdependent, short-term, long-distance, and imagined. Carefully adapted

theoretical frameworks elucidate the complexities of Girlfriends' experiences and offer a multidimensional view of the politics of gender, construction of Black identities, fantasies of happiness, regional histories, and contemporary realities.

The book has a detailed introduction, five informative chapters, and concludes with a reflective epilogue. Each of these is preceded by a brief section titled "Interlude" consisting of six captivating vignettes that reflect on Williams' conversation with her grandmother in New York, prospects of meeting an uncle she has never met in Jamaica, experiences with a Customs officer, a taxi ride in Jamaica; and interviews with participants. The theme of the pursuit of happiness traverses all the chapters.

The introduction delineates Williams' goals, research sites, and devotion to positioning these multigenerational Girlfriends in the limelight. She states, "...one of my main goals in completing this research was to bring to the forefront the experiences and voices of Black American women, who are themselves often silenced, overlooked, and made invisible" (Williams, 2018, p. 25). Williams argues that centering Black women's voices beyond the borders of the US engenders the construction of effect across diasporic locations and helps to disrupt the sexist notions that women in their forties and older cannot travel solo or be sexual beings. She describes an emotional welcome ritual for newcomers against a backdrop of Jamaica's picturesque landscape. According to Williams, touring Jamaica enables Girlfriends to unplug from the demands that work, family, and politics of race and gender placed on the women domestically and to plug into their choice of Jamaican milieu that enables them to maintain emotional wellness, gain a new sense of personal freedom and self-worth, and to collectively rehumanize.

Williams' study suggests that physical and cultural mobility has an empowering effect. She underscores that Black American women sought happiness in a new geographical location outside the US, where apparently, American citizenship and American Blackness were more privileged. She states, "To travel to Jamaica, the Girlfriends need American economic, national and social capital... to remain hopeful and happy within the United States, they need spiritual connection to their imagined second home of Jamaica and their imagined community of Jamaicans" (Williams, 2018, p. 5). Girlfriends' assumptions were disrupted by the realization that similarities of skin color, history of the Transatlantic slave trade, and cultural unity did not

obscure differences in the ways race (blackness), gender, and class operate in both geographic locations.

Chapter 1, "More Than a Groove: Pursuing Happiness as a Political Project," presents theoretical tools for analyzing the racialized, social, and political lives of Black people in the US in ways that illuminate the pervasiveness of varied forms of oppression. For instance, Williams draws a parallel between the history of violence, marginalization, and perception of "Blackness" as a problem that William Du Bois highlighted in *Souls of Black Folk*, published over a century ago, and the current need to declare that Black Lives Matter. Her review of Black feminists' scholarship grounded in real-life experiences of Black women underscores their contribution to making them visible. She espouses Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) writing on intersectionality as a conceptual lens to examine the enduring oppression that Black women experience based on gender, race, and class, despite gains in political power, education, employment opportunities, and class mobility. In a section titled "The politics of (Mis) Recognition," Williams draws from cultural scholars like Hall (1997) and Harris-Perry (2011) to elucidate the Black women's burden of striving for recognition amidst influential negative images. These reviews affirm that because Black American women have been oppressed, stigmatized, stereotyped, and shamed, their pursuit of happiness becomes a valid political project.

Diasporic connections between Girlfriends and Jamaicans are the focus of Chapter 2. Titled "Giving Back" to Jamaica: Experiencing Community and Conflict While Traveling with Diasporic Heart," it underlines social and physical spaces where cultures, issues of class, power, subordination, and identity formation converge. Williams adopts Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zones" akin to social spaces such as airports, hotels, restaurants, and the beach where "Girlfriends and their Jamaican interlocutors were able to test the elasticity of shared notions of Blackness, while also interrogating power differentials within African diasporic relationships" (Williams, 2018, p. 65). Discussions of varied topics, including guidelines to new tourists on tipping for services, religion, race, and politics, influence Girlfriends and Jamaicans to recognize differences in constructing Black identities, nationality, and socioeconomic status. While Girlfriends had no family ties with Jamaicans, Williams (2018) observes that their discussions suggested that "...they felt a deep sense of diasporic connection and kinship to Jamaicans and expected that because most of them were Black, Jamaicans felt the same" (p. 66). The

transformative nature of their transnational experience heightens their awareness of perceptions of identity. Whereas Jamaican identity is not necessarily defined in opposition to white people, in Jamaica, Black women tourists are perceived vis-a-vis their American identity. Williams stresses that because Jamaica is perceived as a getaway, seeking a liberating space of possibility, leisure, pleasure, and happiness is *Girlfriends'* precedence.

Williams juxtaposes *Girlfriends'* experiences with Terry MacMillan's novel and film, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back (Stella)*, in chapter 3. It focuses on Black American women's perception of Jamaica, their imagined homeland, as a black paradise close to the US, and experiences that enable them to criticize their illusions against realities. Despite some parallels with *Stella*, she reminds readers that *Girlfriends'* annual trips to Jamaica and experiences in the US are not merely reenactments. Williams asserts that because tourist spaces like Jamaica are contentious, they must be analyzed in the context of broader frameworks of transnationalism and theories of globalization to illuminate how fields that traverse social, geographic, cultural, and political boundaries operate. She states, "...tourism is another significant site wherein racialized, classed, nationalized, and gendered identities are formed and reconfigured" (Williams, 2018, p. 101). For *Girlfriends*, seeking happiness in Jamaica is an emotional process that involves planning trips and activities, building networks of friendship and sisterhood, and contemplating issues.

Furthermore, this chapter contrasts the transnational mobility of *Girlfriends* with migrants from other locations in modern times and the forced migration *Girlfriends'* enslaved ancestors experienced. Unlike their enslaved ancestors, *Girlfriends'* mobility is voluntary, liberatory, and tied to personal and economic empowerment. Additionally, they can pursue pleasure and happiness as tourists, not refugees or migrants. Williams (2018) states, "However, their everyday experiences with racism, sexism, and even ageism in the United States make them feel as though they must leave home to travel to another (virtual or national) space in search of happiness" (p. 103). *Girlfriends'* voices echo the lure of exploring authentic African culture in Jamaica via popular music, scenery, and good food to take a hiatus from an oppressive atmosphere. Williams reveals that *Girlfriends* want to bond with Jamaicans as diasporic kin through a shared history of slavery and participate in their imaginations of an idealized Jamaican paradise that offers a place for relaxation, self-care, and self-renewal. Accordingly, *Girlfriends* are committed to giving back

through gifts, donations, paying for services, and offering generous tips. Conversations between Williams and some Girlfriends emphasize their belief that spending American dollars could positively impact Jamaican lives if adequately invested.

In chapter 4, "Breaking (It) Down," Williams delves into Girlfriends' reflections on varied social locations that were gendered, racialized, nationalized, sexualized, and classed. She states, "I explore the gendered dimensions of diasporic subjectivity and girlfriendship by examining the relationships these tourist women seek and engage in while in Jamaica" (Williams, 2018, p. 127). Because of divergent views regarding a shared diasporic history and what Blackness meant, Girlfriends and Jamaicans experienced tensions, disconnections, and misunderstanding. The chapter details an organized Thanksgiving dinner in Jamaica that fits into Girlfriends' pursuit of happiness and exposes nuanced and complex experiences. While the middle-class Jamaican men and less affluent fishermen attending managed to navigate interclass spaces well, Williams notes that class and gender tensions bothered American and Jamaican women. Jamaican women felt that sharing a multi-class space with the fishermen's perceived low socioeconomic status was incompatible with the expectations of masculinity. A member of GFT echoed a sentiment that Williams notes was typical among the group, "We are all Black people, and we should be able to share a meal together, especially a holiday dinner. I just did not get it" (Williams, 2018, p. 125). Williams observes that while Black American women and Jamaicans seemed to have a shared understanding of how gender operated in their countries, Jamaicans are not preoccupied with racial differences.

This chapter includes a conversation with Jennifer, a participant and friend of Girlfriends, explaining factors influencing how Black women view sex and love. Since some members of GFT were seeking Jamaican males as partners, lovers, or acquaintances, Williams (2018) summarizes her perspectives on romance tourism in the following statement:

Jennifer connects the dots between how Black women are socialized to think about their sexual agency and respectable interaction with potential male partners and how tourist women interpret and label their relationships with Jamaican men. ...almost all Girlfriends hoped and desired to be the subject of a Jamaican' man's appreciative gaze and seductive lyrics, even if they did not take them up on the proposition. (p. 129)

Throughout the book, Girlfriends echo that being desired was crucial to their fantasy of Jamaica. Moreover, they explicitly or implicitly requested emotional labor that they often rewarded via economic transactions.

Further, conversations about heterosexist relations between Black Americans and Jamaicans reveal varied understandings of Jamaican and African American masculinity. One interviewee discusses male-female relations, stating that "Jamaican men have perfected the art of finding out what it is you want to hear and giving it to you. American men feel like they do not need to because they are the prize" (Williams, 2018, p. 129). The gist of the rest of the conversation is the Girlfriends' need for a committed relationship. While Girlfriends respected Jamaican women's ability to strive for economic independence, they became aware of a few Jamaican women's concern that their male Jamaican companions ignored them when they dated tourists. Although men's perspectives are excluded from these excerpts, Williams asserts that in complex ways, these transactional relations and intimate relationships were rewarding, exploitative, confusing, upsetting, and infused with hierarchies of power.

A significant segment of Williams' study covered in Chapter 5 involves examining connections of Girlfriends via Jamaica.com. "Navigating Virtual Jamaica" delves into how cyber interaction creates a shareable community for seasoned and prospective travelers to Jamaica and extends the happiness and connections for Girlfriends through reunions. Williams theorizes about how power, agency, and pleasure steer racialized ideologies that permeate the circulation of media technologies in ways that expose intersections of cyberspace, gender, race, and nationality. Over fifteen thousand people from European countries, the US, and Jamaica accessed its twenty-nine discussion forums on varied subjects. Members of GFT shared posts, trip reports, cordial exchanges, concerns, arguments, comments, plans for reunions, and questions about cultural events in Jamaica. Williams (2018) notes the following:

The website's trip reports were the most exciting part because the interactions between tourists and Jamaicans within the forum provided numerous opportunities to examine how complicated the relationship between producer and consumer becomes when Internet technologies are utilized. (p. 183)

Williams details how virtual interactions preceded face-to-face meetings, provided recommendations about sites to visit in Jamaica, and arranged tours that contributed to marketing



Jamaican culture to potential tourists and investors. The cyber connections aided in building and maintaining ongoing connections and emotional bonds that allowed the Black American women tourists to introspect about their adventures, offer constructive feedback, and maintain accountability through critique and interrogation. Generally, Girlfriends were able to construct complex notions of diasporic subjects and transnational tourism influenced by intersecting boundaries of power relations and shifting expectations.

The epilogue explicates Williams' understanding of why pursuing happiness was essential to Black American women and divulges that the life and activities of a researcher partially reflected the participants' agenda. She discloses some lessons and pleasant aspects of her research experience, stating, "I realize that while seeing and observing are essential to participant observation, what is truly the meat of the ethnographic method is relationship building" (Williams, 2018, p. 189). In her view, the research experience is a learning process that requires unraveling how to fill the void between exiting the field and before data analysis. She states, "Few people teach you how to leave the field...less is taught about how to explain your exiting the field to your research participants so they can understand what is happening as the ethnographer shifts to analysis" (Williams, 2018, p. 191). She contemplates how severing a bond the researcher and participants have built over time can elicit mixed reactions. Besides increasing Girlfriends' visibility, autonomy, and well-being, the study also suggests that the pursuit of happiness is modulated with spells of unhappiness that push Williams to reflect on her anxieties and evaluate her happiness.

Overall, *The Pursuit of Happiness* examines how diasporic affinities, differences, allegiances, solidarity, and unexpected contradictions are constructed, bolstered, and challenged. This book contributes to affirming and normalizing the existence of Black women tourists, which is often obscured in personal journals and stories. Also, the book's strength lies in its centeredness on Black women's lived experiences in ways that amplify their voices and visibility. As an American with Jamaican roots, Williams invites readers to consider her empathetic and informed interpretation of Black American women and Jamaicans' interviews, observations, and virtual responses. She uncovers candor in how the participants frame their experiences regarding visibility, proclivity for romance, perceived infidelity, sentiments of GFT loyalty, and feelings of happiness, loss, loneliness, and disappointment. Her representations of

perspectives regarding complex affective issues offer several ways of contemplating black feminism in the contexts of various themes such as race, class, sexuality, age, tourism, virtual interactions, national histories, diasporic connections, and current realities. Several interviews involving Black American women and male participants illuminate perceived diasporic experiences. Another significant contribution involves weaving the GFT community's cyber interaction into the research, which extends their communication beyond the tourist sites.

An apparent weakness of the book is that it gives fewer opportunities for Jamaican women to express themselves. Jamaican women are spoken about in various contexts compared to the documented interviews with Black women tourists and males participating in the tourism industry. Examples include those the author observes participating in formal sex tourism; some are reported as exhibiting class and gender tensions during the Thanksgiving dinner, covered in the fourth chapter, and others that interviewees like Sasha and Jacqueline perceived as strong and determined to make a living. The few memorable voices of Jamaican women include the author's Jamaican-born grandmother documented in the first interlude, Sasha, a Jamaican-American woman who articulates that Black American women do not strive to befriend Jamaican women and an unnamed woman seeking her baby that Sam, the father who is doubling as a tourist's boyfriend, took with him some days ago.

*The Pursuit of Happiness* documents a captivating research journey that is worth reading. Because it cuts across disciplines, it offers insights into different topics and subject areas. I like how it delves into the complexities of transnational migrations and reflects relatable experiences, such as women's need for self-care and the ambivalent feelings of strangeness that migrants experience at and away from home. This book contributes significantly to research on Black women's transnational migrations, Black feminism, happiness and well-being, narratives of identity, and diasporic connections.

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