We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present.

— Sidone Smith and Julia Watson

The radical instability of the Caribbean as a cultural domain coincides with the radical instability of autobiography as a genre.

— Sandra Pouchet Paquet

Caribbean writing has a well-established association with autobiographical and life writing forms; indeed, as Pouchet Paquet argues, the instability of the genre resonates well with the ‘radical instability’ of the region as a whole. With its volatile and violent history of enslavement and indentureship, this ‘radical instability’ has profoundly determined the possibilities for selfhood, self-making, life-making, and life writing in the Caribbean. But life-stories by or about the enslaved are scant; in Saidiya Hartman’s words, they are ‘an asterisk in the grand narrative of history’.

Caribbean writing is haunted by this absent/presence. In *Zong!* Marlene NourbeSe Philip mines the transcript (*Gregson v Gilbert*, 1783) of a claim for compensation against the loss of the *Zong*’s ‘cargo’, over 130 enslaved people who were ordered to be thrown overboard by Captain Luke Collingwood in 1781. *Zong!* is a painstaking, poetic piecing together of the ‘impossible’ story of the *Zong* massacre in which the author bemoans the impossibility and necessity of its telling, ‘There is no telling this story; it must be told.’ The text that unfolds is epic in scale and scope and composed of fragmented syllables, sounds, and words—all from the legal ruling—that require an
immersive, open reading. The title page invokes an amenuensis, ‘As told to the author by
Setaey Adamu Boateng’, and the Notanda outlines the twists and turns of her research and
formal experiments, and the many affective and intellectual challenges encountered.
Attempting to tell this story, then, compels the writer to implicate herself explicitly in the text
while, in the radical fragmentation of language and form, make a similar demand of the
reader. My point here is not to suggest that Zong! is a ‘life narrative’ but to argue for the
complex ways that the history of enslavement has shaped this genre. To quote Saidiya
Hartman, ‘narrative may be the only available form of redress for the monumental crime that
was the transatlantic slave trade and the terror of enslavement and racism’.

Given this perilous history, the appeal of life writing in the Caribbean is obvious: with
its associations of ‘coming to voice’ to express marginalized identities and lives, the
autobiographical has been important in establishing a distinctly Caribbean presence in
writing, particularly for women. But life writing is also a slippery genre and one that can’t be
relied on for any simple, truthful expression of ‘self’ or ‘life’. In a special issue of
Biography, ‘Life Writing as Intimate Public’, assumptions about life-story as personal (and
therefore truthful) are reassessed in light of Lauren Berlant’s comprehensive critique of the
public/private binary. Berlant’s ‘intimate public’ refers to the ways that intimate attachments
and ‘private sentiments’ have been mobilized by public institutions (on behalf of the nation
state) to produce an ideal of the citizen and ‘the good life’ that coheres around the
heterosexual couple and family, for whom ‘having a (good) life’ includes material success
and the privilege of intimacy. Versions of this colonial narrative about the civilizing
potential of ‘good family life’ and ‘appropriate sexual behaviour’ continue to shape
postcolonial Caribbean states so that, as M. Jacqui Alexander argues, ‘Not just any(body) can
be a citizen’.
Thus we can identify a certain trajectory in the establishment of nationalism which is grounded in notions of respectability which like eighteenth-century European nationalism came to rely heavily upon sexual gestures that involved the symbolic triumph of the nuclear family over the extended family and other family forms.  

What can it mean to ‘have a life’ or to write a story of that life in a context where the ‘public’ and ‘private’ are imbricated in such an over-determined and instrumental way? In her introduction to Life Writing as Intimate Public, Margaretta Jolly, while accepting Berlant’s questioning of life-story as truth-telling, acknowledges that many readers (including herself) ‘remain impossibly attached to the magical promises of life story’. Berlant suggests that we redefine ‘intimate publics’ as ‘laboratories for imagining and cobbling together alternative construals about how life has appeared and how legitimately it could be better shaped’. This reimagining also requires rethinking familiar notions of emotions as private, personal property, anterior and interior to us, things women naturally have. Emotions, as Sara Ahmed argues, ‘do things, and they align individuals with communities […] we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, the individual and the collective’. Like NourbeSe Philip, for many Caribbean women writers, the after-effects of slavery pulse in the present as a pervasively affective, melancholic haunting force, however variously parsed.

**Writing for a life and writing life**

Published in 1831, Mary Prince is considered a foundational figure as the first black West Indian woman writer. Prince didn’t write her History but narrated it to Susana Strickland who, with Thomas Pringle as editor, then published it. Given the over-determining mediation of both her interlocutor and scribe, it is impossible to determine just how much of Prince’s phrasing, framing or feeling is hers, or the extent to which she may have self-censored her
story. But it is striking that even as her story catalogues her inhuman treatment as property and her exhausting labours, the narrative voice is persistently ladylike. Such narrative decorum was required for it to be readable for her target audience of English abolitionists. At the same time, the horrors that Prince recounts (including the ones related to sexual abuse that she only hints at) puts such pressure on that ‘ladylike’ narration that she was required to expose her naked back for inspection by Mary Pringle (Thomas’s wife) as ‘evidence’ that the beatings she described really were ‘true’. Acting as eye-witness, Mary Pringle verified Mary Prince’s spoken account to reassure the anti-slavery public in what is, in effect, a brutishly ‘intimate public’ moment. Despite this framing though, we still want to hear Prince’s own voice, especially when she appears to be speaking most directly:

I have been a slave—I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free.11

How can we quibble with this appeal? And what to make of such horrors as a life-story, and of the shifting registers and filters of its narration? Perhaps Prince’s text is intelligible only if we give up on it as a singular, expressive life-story and settle for ‘imagining and cobb[ling together’], to echo Berlant, fractured and fugitive glimpses of Prince’s agency. Reading this life-story requires a piecemeal piecing together that puts the reader on the line, demanding strenuous interpretation.

A composite woman’s life story: activist testimony

Published over 150 years later, Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women (1986) was propelled, like Prince’s account, by testimonial impulses and was also a collaborative production, though the terms of this collaboration were radically activist:
The stories chart the terms of resistance in women’s daily lives and illustrate the ways in which women can move from the apparent powerlessness of exploitation to the creative power of rebel consciousness.\textsuperscript{12}

The Sistren Theatre Collective, under Honor Ford-Smith’s Directorship from 1977-1989, was funded by Michael Manley’s social welfare programme and, through theatre workshops, aimed to raise awareness of the particular challenges facing working class Jamaican women. The publication of the fifteen stories in 1986 consolidated the impact that the collective had already established via their performances in Jamaica, the Caribbean and beyond and was welcomed widely as an important Caribbean-feminist contribution to subaltern women’s studies. The published stories were elicited by a series of questions focused on their perception of their gendered oppression, which were then recorded, transcribed, and edited for publication.

Unsurprisingly given the focus of the questions, similar themes and concerns are evident: the demands of motherhood; disruption to education caused by early or frequent pregnancies; embattled or violent relationships with itinerant men; the difficulty of finding paid work; and nostalgia for childhood, particularly those spent in rural areas. All the stories demonstrate awareness of the intersection of gender and race in limiting opportunities and ambitions in life. Most were narrated in Jamaican Patwah\textsuperscript{13} with equal verve, whether articulating fear—‘All my life me live in fear’ (3), a strong sense of autonomy—‘From me very young me decide seh me nah go do no farm wuk’ (61); ‘From me small, nobody no tell me notten’ (157), or a more reflective approach—‘From me born till now, me never really understand Mama’ (129). As indicated in these brief examples, many accounts were presented self-consciously as life-story: ‘All my life’, ‘From me small/born’; another, ‘Ava’s Diary’, was prompted by a contributor’s detailed statement for the police about domestic violence. Two ‘middle-strata’ contributors, including the editor, found the shift from the
formalities of Standard English ‘and the conventions of academic expression’ too jarring, so presented their accounts in a more formally scripted style (xxviii). To protect them and their families, none of the contributors were named, apart from the editor.

While for many feminists, the collection provided a welcome challenge to complacent assumptions about ‘universal sisterhood’, Carolyn Cooper argued that Ford-Smith’s pristine editorial in Standard English, compromised its ‘impeccably subversive credentials’ and reinscribed divisions between white middle-class and black working-class women.\(^{14}\) Cooper’s argument was compelling and, thinking back to Pringle’s role in mediating Prince’s story, we might say there are historical continuities here. But there are crucial differences. Ford-Smith carefully catalogued her role as participant, editor, and curator, and her own story, ‘Grandma’s Estate’, offered a candid account of family-life shaped by toxic racist values.\(^ {15}\) When reissued in 2005, Ford-Smith included an afterword reflecting on the initial reception of *Lionheart Gal*, including Cooper’s critique; she conceded that they gave her pause for thought about her relative power, privilege, and editorial role but concluded, ‘social movements and the cultural work they produce are never pure spaces of resistance, and that they do not produce pure ruptures with domination’.\(^ {16}\) I share this sense of thinking about feminist solidarities as necessarily ongoing, daily skirmishes and would argue that Sistren remains a rare example of a collaborative life-writing project in which the gathering of individual stories amounts to something *more*, even if not quite ‘a composite woman’s story’ (xiii).\(^ {17}\)

**Writing as a way of being**

Writing well after Prince and before Sistren, in entirely different sociocultural circumstances, Jean Rhys’s life-story clearly does not echo the extreme perilousness of either. As a white Creole woman writing in the first half of the twentieth century, with direct familial
connections on the ‘other side’ of the plantation, introducing Rhys here may seem incongruous, or just plain wrong. My argument is not that they represent opposite poles of the Caribbean experience or that a reconciliatory comparative reading is possible, but to note continuities in the motivations, shape, and reception of life writing. Where Prince and Sistren bear witness to their perilous lives with some urgency, Rhys reluctantly and belatedly agreed to write an autobiography after her success as a novelist. Where Prince was literally writing for her life, Rhys was invited to write about her writing life. But Rhys, too, had to rely on a scribe as, by the time she got round to it, she was eighty-six and unable to write herself. *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, published posthumously, was written by David Plante, to whom Rhys dictated episodes of her life and which he then transcribed and read back to her for approval. That David Plante, a novelist himself, would go on to write, *Difficult Women: A Memoir of Three: Jean Rhys, Sonia Orwell and Germaine Greer*, somewhat compromises his involvement as ‘ghost writer’. Erica Johnson argues that although Plante is not a reliable amanuensis, Rhys escapes his control by narrating vignettes of her life that were memorized, sometimes verbatim, from her fiction and to ‘ghost’ her own life-story.18 Where readers can also evade Plante’s control by reading Rhys’s fiction alongside the autobiography to gauge truth-values on Rhys’s terms, the Pringles’s framing of Prince’s narrative leaves no room for such calibrations.

Rhys’s published writing haunts *Smile Please*; coming to it after the fiction, a feeling of déjà vu is pervasive, especially as it relates to the melancholic affective atmosphere that characterizes the fiction. One resonant example appears when Rhys describes her reading habits as a child and ends with a terrifying story (of cockroaches eating her eyes) that Meta, her nurse, tells her to scare her away from books. Another vignette elaborates on Meta’s terrifying power: her stories of zombies, soucriants, and loups-garoux; her merciless teasing and rough handling of Rhys. Forbidden by Rhys’s parents to slap her, Meta shakes her
violently by the shoulders instead; Rhys recalls ‘hair flying’: ‘While I still had any breath to
speak I would yell, “Black Devil, Black Devil, Black Devil!”’. Rhys concludes, ‘Meta had
shown me a world of fear and distrust, and I am still in that world.’¹⁹

Pouchet Paquet reads this as Rhys blaming Meta for ‘generating an enduring fear and
distrust of black people’ which finds its way into the fiction as ‘ambivalence about race’.²⁰
Johnson also reads this experience through parallels in the fiction, pointing to the original
ending of *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), when the dying Anna Morgan recalls being dragged
roughly from her hiding place by her nurse and shaken so hard her teeth, hair, and flesh
‘shook’, prompting her to shout ‘black devil black devil’.²¹ Johnson argues that where the
novel demonstrates how experience shapes Anna’s worldview, the autobiography suggests
that ‘Rhys’s fear is based on an irrational and immature adult response to Meta’s childhood
stories’ (577). While there is ample evidence of anxiety and ‘ambivalence about race’ across
Rhys’s oeuvre, I don’t share Pouchet Paquet’s view that Rhys *blames* Meta for this, or
Johnson’s suggestion that fears absorbed in childhood are presented in *Smile Please* as
‘irrational and immature’ (577).

Rather than ‘irrational and immature’, the text conveys the affective force of the
abrasive intimacy between nurse and child, registering indelibly it seems, on the child’s body.
Rhys notes that Meta ‘always seemed to be brooding over some terrible, unforgettable
wrong’, and then recalls ‘the feel of her hard hand as she hauled me along to the Botanical
Gardens’.²² Through her frightening stories and ‘hard hand[s]’ hauling her along or shaking
her by the shoulders, the child is imaginatively and affectively marked by, and inducted into
Meta’s life-world. This encounter, then, is suggestive of precisely those intensities of
emotion that Sara Ahmed argues have a binding force.²³ The sticky affects of a shared, but
differently experienced, history lock Meta and Rhys together in ways that resist familiar
taxonomies of intimacy. In *Smile Please*, rage flares and ricochets between the nurse and child as an unsettlingly embodied after-effect of history.

Like Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid persistently mines her own life across a range of genres, (memoir, serial autobiography, essay, short story) generating a similar a sense of déjà vu. Her life-stories are forged in the violent history following Columbus’s arrival in 1492 that culminated in the horrors of plantation slavery that Prince evokes so powerfully, and continues in the servitude Kincaid associates with the contemporary tourist industry. Her work poses hard questions about the conditions of possibility for life itself, and for writing about that life:

What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me?

Should I call it history?

If so, what should history mean to someone like me?

Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over, or is it a moment that began in 1492 and has come to no end yet? […] What should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself?24

This graphic image recalls Prince’s wounded back, but where the shared depredation of enslavement allows her to speak with certainty—‘I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows’—Kincaid speaks as one outraged and non-plussed by the everyday, ongoing legacy of violence. By referring to ‘people who look like me’, she identifies, but does not identify with the presumptions of the prevailing optic of race. Where Prince claims to know, Kincaid articulates ontological uncertainty: ‘How should I feel, where should I place myself?’ For both Rhys and Kincaid, writing and living are closely entangled modes of being; as Kincaid states: ‘Writing isn’t a way of being public or private; it’s just a way of being’.25
The broad trajectories of Kincaid’s life-story (migration to America, becoming a
writer, her relationship with her mother, the death of her brother, the end of her marriage) are
easily verifiable in many published interviews; indeed, the interview as life-story is itself a
fascinating form in relation to Kincaid. These all confirm that for ‘people who look like her’,
life writing is not a simple matter of ‘expression’ but involves strenuous questions about the
conditions in which it might be possible to author a self who writes in the first place.
Alongside details of her own life, she frequently engages with canonical English texts,
particularly novels such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) that are integral to ideas of ‘character’ and self-
making. Kincaid has spoken as often about her love of *Jane Eyre* as she has of her fury at
being forced to imbibe the cultural values and ‘civil’ sensibility associated with novels by
Brontë and others.26

Kincaid’s, *See Now Then* (2013) is instructive. It catalogues the end of a marriage
between a West Indian writer named ‘Jamaica’ and an American composer (‘Mr and Mrs
Sweet’) who live in Vermont with their two children; Kincaid’s marriage to the American
composer Allen Shawn, with whom she had two children, had recently ended. Although
clearly drawn from life and offering searing insights into the extremities of emotion prompted
by the demise of a marriage,27 its most compelling arguments relate to her writing life, in the
room ‘just off the kitchen’ where she ‘kept her true self’.28 The narrator presents her family
as deeply resentful of the writing and remembering that keep her in the room, from where she
catalogues people, events, places, and histories familiar from her publications. As the details
accumulate, the room becomes both family burial plot and archive of Mrs Sweet’s writing
life, a place of intense emotional labour and struggle. By contrast, Mr Sweet’s studio is a
space of composed civility, buttressed by the full weight of a western classical music
tradition, which is unequivocally *his*. Mrs Sweet does not have such cultural ease or
entitlement; her study is configured as a room that can barely contain the rage and affective turbulence its occupant generates in engaging with her past.

*See Now Then* closes with the narrator imagining her family’s fury at her withdrawal, yet again, into the ‘room in which she would commune with the vast world that began in 1492’, finally erupting: ‘that room, that room: burn it down, cried her children, burn it with her in it, cried Mr Sweet, but Mrs Sweet knew of no other way to be’.29 The scene with its obvious echoes of Brontë’s Bertha in the burning attic, connects the ‘mad woman’ in one text to another. In this echo, Kincaid invites us to gauge these distinct registers of rage/madness against each other. If Bertha, with her ‘pigmy intellect’ and ‘giant propensities’30 poses a threat to Jane’s achievement of ‘ladyhood’, then Kincaid excoriates the terms on which this hierarchy of self-hood continues to determine the possibilities for self-making, putting herself on the line in the process. As a result, Kincaid’s fictions are *necessarily* autobiographical; and novel writing becomes *necessarily* life writing.

**Writing, family, community**

Rhys and Kincaid share an idea of ‘self’ as precariously positioned in history and self-consciously tethered to the highly individuated subjectivity associated with literature; family provides little sustenance for either and ‘community’ is absent. Writers such as Lorna Goodison and Edwidge Danticat by comparison, focus their life-narratives on family to expand out into the Jamaican and Haitian communities respectively. In both, extended familial connections are vital lifelines. Goodison’s *Harvey River: A Memoir of My Mother and Her Island* (2007) documents the shifting fortunes of her parents, forced from their middle-class country life to a tenement yard in Kingston, when her father’s garage business collapses following WWII. The family is large, stays together, and keeps in touch over the years and across parishes and countries via a shared ancestral connection to Harvey River.
Readers of Goodison’s poetry and short fiction will be familiar with the loving exuberance with which she records the everyday labours and loves of ordinary Jamaicans. While the history of slavery is referenced, Goodison’s approach in *Harvey River* is to generously celebrate the cultural practices, loving relationships, and sheer *style* that enable ordinary people, like her family, to survive and thrive despite that history.

In Goodison’s account, despite hardships, illnesses, and infidelities, family is a vitally sustaining structure, not the chaotically dysfunctional one that dominates Caribbean writing; indeed, Donnette Francis quibbles ‘this memoir feels almost too wholesome’. But Goodison’s emphasis on the extended family as a powerfully sustaining force in post-plantation Jamaica, implicitly refuses the norm of the nuclear unit. She also persistently recognizes the resourceful labour of family and community (sewing, gardening, cooking, keeping house), to which we might add Goodison’s labour, across the two decades it took to complete *Harvey River*, a maneuver that neatly affiliates life-writing with her community’s resources for ‘making life’.

Edwidge Danticat similarly engages life-narrative as a form of witnessing to the resilience of her family and community, arguing in *Brother, I’m Dying* (2008) that she is ‘writing this only because they can’t’. Like Goodison, she was a well-established writer before publishing a memoir, so readers of her fiction will recognize the Haitian and diasporic contexts with which she engages. *Brother, I’m Dying*, is structured around her ‘two papas’, her biological father and the uncle with whom she lived in Haiti for several years. It charts their close attachments to each other, to the narrator, to the family and to Haiti and it recounts their deaths. The text navigates across several registers of prose, from the literary-novelistic, to factual recounting, to personal reflection and testimonial as it embeds the personal narratives of beloved family members in the wider geopolitical circumstances that shape their lives and deaths.
In several chapters, Danticat imaginatively conveys her uncle’s dramatic flight from Haiti in a first-person narrative of experiences that are not her own but which she compellingly conveys, using her skills as novelist. In ‘Alien 27041999’, she uses her uncle’s medical records and immigration interviews at KROME detention centre in Miami to piece together the dire circumstances in which the eighty-one-year-old died. Here, the facts are presented with little embellishment and only seldom is outrage expressed directly, as when she asks: ‘Was my uncle going to jail because he was Haitian? […] because he was black?’

In shifting boldly between factual and imaginative registers of prose, and between literary memoir and testimonial, Danticat exploits the hybrid possibilities of the form offering, as Gillian Whitlock argues, ‘a critical reshaping of what life writing is, and what it can do’. Danticat’s text also notably inscribes male figures as loving and enabling, rather than troublingly controlling as in Prince and Rhys’s texts. She opens the text with the twinned news of her father’s terminal illness and her pregnancy and closes it with his death, shortly after meeting her newborn daughter. In so doing, the memoirist entangles her life structurally with those she writes about.

**Going public with the private: the lives of writers**

Like Rhys, Kincaid, Goodison, and Danticat, Paule Marshall was well established as a prose writer before publishing *Triangular Road: A Memoir* (2009) but, unlike them, her memoir intersects less intimately with her fiction. Organized around a series of lectures, ‘Bodies of Water’, delivered at Harvard in 2005, Marshall frames her experiences around three personally pivotal positions on the Atlantic: the USA, Barbados, and Africa. The text reveals little of her everyday, lived life, and offers sparse detail of her relationships with her mother, father, siblings, husband, or son. Instead, it charts her development as a writer and activist in the American civil rights movement; rather than biological family, she adds to her ‘gene
pool’ by adopting alternative ‘kinfolk’: fellow writers, historical figures, such as Equiano and Sam Burke and all of those thrown overboard of the Zong.\textsuperscript{36} Her affiliations are articulated in the language of political and intellectual, rather than emotional, solidarity and her memoir consolidates her role as writer, reader, activist, and public intellectual.

By comparison, Julia Alvarez’s \textit{Something to Declare} (1998), although bearing the subtitle, ‘Essays’ offers a wide range of intimate details and personal reflections about a writer’s life.\textsuperscript{37} Siblings, parents, husbands, students, and friends all make appearances as she offers insights into her own writing practices, routines, and inspirations. The writing life Alvarez describes includes the readings, book signings, interviews, and other activities that writers, particularly ‘bestselling’ ones, are increasingly expected to participate in to publicize their work. Of the texts considered here, \textit{Something to Declare} engages most directly with the peculiar interface of public-private as it manifests in the figure of ‘the contemporary writer’.

\textbf{Itinerancy, diaspora, and self-making}

The life writing discussed thus far clearly indicates the significance of diaspora to the Caribbean. Dionne Brand’s \textit{A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging} (2001) also thematizes diaspora but in ways that implicate form and structure as profoundly hybridized by experiences of diaspora. \textit{A Map} bears a discrete label ‘Autobiography’ on its inner jacket but its subtitle, \textit{Notes to Belonging}, perhaps describes it more accurately.\textsuperscript{38} The book is composed of a series of fragmented reflections on diverse topics, many of them composed while Brand is travelling to and from places, literally or imaginatively or momentarily in a strange place. All journeys pivot in relation to the wider narrative of the middle passage and the infamous door on Goree Island, which Brand spools back to again and again. The door is an, ‘absent presence’ (21) that ‘makes the word \textit{door} impossible’ (19), haunting the text and
gathering a sense of collective melancholy that passing through the door signalled for countless numbers of enslaved subjects.

*A Map* is eclectic in range and register and includes fragments of poetry, aphorisms, anecdotes, critical reflections, and quotations from a wide range of texts, many of Caribbean provenance. Eschewing chronology or geography, the text maps the shifting affective landscapes of her reflections: rage, sorrow, unbelonging, melancholy, incredulity. Erica Johnson describes it as ‘a lush work of memories, fragments, and poetry’, but notes, as ‘autobiography’, it provides few details about family or formative years. The text opens with an ‘explanation’ of sorts for this: ‘My grandfather said he knew what people we came from’; but when he can’t recall the name and refuses to provide a guessed substitute, Brand recognizes the shared significance of this forgetting:

Forgotten. But the rupture this exchange with my grandfather revealed was greater than the need for familial bonds. It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography. (5)

In the absence of a reliable archive, she suggests that ‘any act of recollection is important, even looks of dismay or discomfort. Any wisp of a dream is evidence’ (19). We might read the frequent dispersal of quotations from Caribbean-authored texts in *A Map* as ‘wisps of evidence’ that accumulate to form, what Johnson calls a ‘neo-archive […] fiction that creates history in the face of its absence’.

The ethereal quality of the archival traces (‘real’ and invented) that punctuate Brand’s work speaks to both Brown and Berlant’s arguments for a more mutable, mobile understanding of agentive selves. It suggests the embodied, affective as well as intellectual solidarities and ‘counter-intimacies’ that are possible, if a relational sense of ‘selves’, plural, is embraced.
The complicated, faltering narrations of self that characterize *A Map* speak to an idea of self-making through life/self-writing that is fractious and piecemeal and where assumptions about private and public are questioned:

This self which is unobservable is a mystery. It is imprisoned in the observed. It is constantly struggling to wrest itself from the warp of its public ownerships. Its own language is plain yet secret. Rather, obscured. (51)

In other words, in struggling to ‘wrest itself from the warp of its public ownerships’, other modes of intimate publics can be realized, however fleetingly. One of the many brief examples of such counter-intimacies is when Brand recounts a brief exchange with an Ethiopian parking attendant when she is en route to a reading; he announces that he comes from ‘the oldest civilization’: ‘They build a parking lot and they think that is a civilization’ (102). The shared laughter that follows fleetingly transforms this encounter into a ‘sticky’ moment of diasporic intimacy, one of many that accumulate in the text to provide provisional spaces of belonging.

Autobiographical details feature prominently in Michelle Cliff’s work and hers, too, is generically hybrid and uses itineraries of travel as prompts for self-reflection. *If I Could Write This in Fire* (1992) shifts whimsically between various reflections, often prompted by car journeys in the United States, or her travels further afield as writer, teacher, or tourist. Cliff’s historical perspective pivots around the legacy of empire and slavery, and its violently distorting continued impacts. Where Brand’s mood is often plangent and melancholic, Cliff’s is sharply ironic or angry, focused with particular intensity on her own family’s denial of their black ancestry. Cliff’s text reflects on the force needed to refuse the ‘insane’ system of ‘colourism’ and the privilege that accompanied it. Where Brand embraces a dispersal of self-making possibilities, Cliff suggests a focused, muscular approach; it is a ‘question of grasping more of myself” (228). The title of the collection itself, of course, signals the
ferocious agency needed, as does the quotation from Andrew Salkey’s *Jamaica*, that prefaces it, ‘grab weself like we know weself’ (13). This anger is anticipated in *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (1981) and similarly indicates the energetic anger required to begin authoring a self at all.

That both Brand and Cliff self-identify as queer is significant; clearly in the Caribbean where, as Alexander argues, ‘not anybody can be a citizen’, coming out in writing may be palpably perilous. What is most striking about Brand and Cliff’s queer life-writing is that while sexual identity is crucial, it does not provide obvious anchorage or a stable point of reference; it becomes a (significant) piece in a shifting kaleidoscopic lens in which life experiences and senses of the self oscillate, settle, and shift again.

**Performative Life-story**

Staceyann Chin describes herself as a memoirist and performs her life-stories on stage and via YouTube, blogs, and poetry-slam websites. Her memoir, *The Other Side of Paradise* (2009) is unapologetically a first-person coming-out narrative, asserting her own singular, hard-fought struggle for selfhood in the context of relentless disregard and abuse. The prologue establishes her survival from birth as heroic: having kept her pregnancy secret, her mother delivers her prematurely en route to the outhouse early on Christmas morning. Significantly underweight, and pronounced ‘a miracle or a mistake’, Chin comments, ‘It tickles me to think that from my very first breath, everyone expected me to stop breathing.’

When her mother leaves Jamaica, Chin is left with her grandmother who is forced by circumstances to send her first to one and then another aunt. Both are stern, God-fearing disciplinarians who expel her because she refuses to conform to their rules. Staceyann establishes herself as outspoken and full of ‘back chat’, qualities that anticipate the manner of her public coming out, and her career as a performance artist. The bulk of the memoir
focuses on her dogged pursuit of education as a means of escape. Although hinted at in various episodes, same-sex desire is not articulated directly until the final chapters when she announces her lesbian identity boldly and often. So powerful is socially sanctioned hostility, that when she finally connects with the gay community in Jamaica, they will only recognize her as kindred in designated queer spaces—and never in public at the University of the West Indies. Inevitably, she flouts this public code and is punished by six fellow male students who corner and threaten her with ‘corrective rape’ to ‘curb this lesbian business we hear ‘bout’ (264). Chin escapes and immediately plans to leave Jamaica and not return, ‘until it is safe for Jamaicans to be openly gay’ (273). In ending with her departure for the relative safety of New York, migration is presented unequivocally as an escape from the homophobic nation-space.

As Chin notes in the brief epilogue to the text, since leaving Jamaica she has established a career as a performance poet and playwright (notably ‘Borderclash’ and ‘Otherside’) and she vlogs regularly, including ‘Living Room Protests’ in which she debates abortion rights, smoking, and feminist issues with her young daughter, Zuri. Her considerable following includes Cynthia Nixon who recently directed ‘Motherstruck’, Chin’s play about her pregnancy and motherhood. Of all the Caribbean women writers discussed here, Chin has disseminated her ‘private’ life most publicly and widely, amplified by the variety of online platforms with which she engages. Although there are some continuities with Sistren’s feminist-activist theatrical productions, Chin’s work more resolutely refuses the heteronormative assumptions of ‘family’ and ‘the good life’ and signals the urgent need for alternative intimate publics.

While few of the other writers discussed here make such strident use of a public, performative persona as Chin, there is a powerful sense in their texts that life-writing gives shape and form to an idea of ‘self’, however precarious and provisional. In other words, life
writing performs—or, more accurately, *rehearses*—possibilities for selfhood. Across the diverse range of life-experiences discussed above, Caribbean women fully exploit the pliability and ‘radical instability’ of life-narrative as a genre. The stories, from Prince through to Chin, map an arc of life/self-making shaped by the violent history of the Caribbean but not reducible to it, one that is critically and creatively self-reflective and necessarily multi-voiced.

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**Notes**

27 The narrator offers deliciously vitriolic descriptions of the cliché with which the marriage ends: her husband leaves her for a young, female violinist.
29 Kincaid, *See Now Then*, 145.
37 Julia Alvarez, *Something to Declare: Essays* (London and New York: Penguin, 1998). This is not to ignore the ways that from Woolf onwards, the essay form has long been inflected by ‘the personal’ to dislodge presumptions of masculinist ‘objectivity’.
42 Michele Cliff, *If I Could Write This in Fire*, 1992 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 245. Subsequent references given parenthetically.
44 See for example, ‘Hi there, Kendra, I know you know I’m Staceyann, But I don’t think it’s been confirmed that I eat pussy and not dick’ (252).
45 Going public with her debates with her daughter has attracted the attention of a newspaper in the UK not usually associated with queer debates; see the *Daily Mail*, 7 October 2015, for a predictably moralistic review of ‘Living Room Protests’, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3263818/Precocious-three-year-old-girl-speaks-defend-Planned-Parenthood-alongside-mother-controversial-video-clip.html