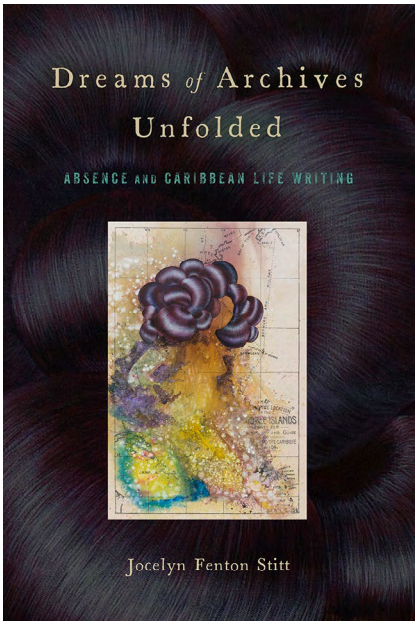

Jocelyn Fenton Stitt, *Dreams of Archives Unfolded: Absence and Caribbean Life Writing*

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Reba K. Charles-Dickson

In *Dreams of Archives Unfolded*, Jocelyn Fenton Stitt adopts a Caribbean feminist decolonial lens to explore how life writing addresses the historiographical gaps surrounding Caribbean women. By focusing on subaltern women whose voices were often excluded from colonial records, Stitt considers the intersections of identity, history, slavery, and gender. Drawing on the work of historians such as Marisa J. Fuentes and Tiya Miles, along with literary critics such as Lisa Lowe and M. Jacqui Alexander, Stitt examines how Caribbean life writing centres the experiences of marginalized women through what she calls "absence aesthetics" (4). She illustrates how Caribbean women writers use these aesthetics to "unfold" the archive, revealing the nuanced lives of subaltern women and moving beyond the limited, exploitative narratives often preserved by colonial archivists. For Stitt, absence is not a void but "a generative space for Caribbean epistemologies," where writers reconstruct untold stories, reclaiming cultural identity and memory by prioritizing community knowledge over colonial frameworks (4). She defines "absence aesthetics" as a narrative strategy that embraces incomplete stories and encourages alternative methods of discovery, allowing for the unearthing of previously unknown histories (15). Throughout the book, Stitt demonstrates her "interpretative affiliation" methodology (17), applying a Caribbean feminist decolonial perspective to examine life writing—non-fiction accounts of Caribbean women's lived experiences—across linguistic and racial divides. This approach allows her to uncover both corroborations and contradictions in these texts, identifying shared aesthetic elements in their topics, forms, and structures (16, 17). Stitt's methodology is particularly useful for researchers who rely on archival sources but struggle to find comprehensive evidence, offering a new way to interpret fragmented histories.

The first chapter of the book offers some of the clearest examples of Stitt's approach. In this chapter, Stitt contrasts differing perspectives on recovering the past and the shared concept of freedom through fugitivity and marronage, drawing on Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*. Both writers engage with absence aesthetics as they navigate the challenge of archival recovery in telling their stories. Hartman attempts to reconstruct the impossible history of her ancestry and a woman's experience in the middle passage, using colonial archives, returning to ancestral lands, and employing critical fabulation to piece together fragmented narratives. In contrast, Brand highlights the act of forgetting as a crucial aspect of her family's history, particularly as it enabled her ancestors to become Maroons. Despite these differences, Stitt argues that both Hartman and Brand view freedom through the lenses of fugitivity and marronage, as these concepts allow them to imagine new futures. Their "imaginative possibilities" inspire readers to envision a future where connections are rebuilt through the community's collective desire for freedom (Stitt 42). This connection between fugitivity and marronage is particularly significant in the Caribbean context, where the quest for freedom remains an ongoing struggle. Stitt points out that, for many, this struggle persists under the weight of neocolonialism as Caribbean people continue to redefine their cultural identities and address the archival absences of their past.

The theme of fugitivity continues in Stitt's analysis of absence aesthetics in Maryse Condé's *Victoire*, where Stitt introduces the concept of "speculative autobiography." This narrative approach allows writers to reimagine the past by acknowledging the limits of available evidence rather than fictionalizing gaps in the historical record (Stitt 49). Condé, haunted by her maternal grandmother Victoire, reconstructs her life story despite the scant evidence, much of which is based on rumours surrounding Victoire's life as a "restavek" (unpaid child labourer). Stitt argues that Condé refuses to let archival impossibilities—the barriers to telling stories of colonized and marginalized people due to a lack of documentation—prevent her from narrating her grandmother's life (48). Had she done so, it would have reaffirmed the colonial structures that nearly erased Victoire from history. Condé navigates the complexities of her grandmother's identity, social status, and life decisions—describing Victoire as a light-skinned, poor, enslaved labourer who wore Creole garb and spent a year marooned in Martinique with a new love interest (Stitt 50–51). By drawing on rumours, hearsay, interviews, and archival documentation, Condé deals with the *absence of aesthetics* in Victoire's story. In the Caribbean, these forms of narrative—rumours and hearsay—function as what Lauren Derby calls "fugitive speech forms," conveying undocumented stories that challenge conventional archival practices (qtd. in Stitt 60). Stitt notes that this raises important questions about what constitutes an archive, who it serves, and who should be remembered (44, 60). Condé's focus on her grandmother, rather than on her more widely celebrated grandfather, underscores the importance of centring marginalized voices in life writing. Stitt asserts that Condé's dedication to recounting her grandmother's "felt absence"

was often dismissed as unworthy of biographical study because the intersecting identities of subaltern women are frequently underestimated and misunderstood (44–45). This chapter is particularly compelling because it frames haunting as an absence aesthetic, a concept that enriches research into the monstrosities often associated with Blackness, gender, and sexuality. Stitt's reflections on Condé's work remind readers not only that marginalized communities are capable of telling their own stories but also that these stories do not need to conform to traditional, Eurocentric biographical standards. To do so would risk erasing the very existence they seek to affirm.

In "Repicturing the Picturesque: Genealogical Desire, Archives, and Descendant Community Autobiography," Stitt explores the concept of absence aesthetics within picturesque representations of the Caribbean landscape. She analyzes the life writing of Erna Brodber and Lorna Goodison, who use both archival records and oral histories to illustrate the deep relationships among the enslaved, their descendants, and the land. Unlike colonial narratives that emphasize the exploitation of natural resources and people, Brodber and Goodison focus on the intergenerational connection between residents and the land they inhabit. Stitt introduces the term "descendant community life writing" to describe this genre, in which contemporary authors trace their ancestral ties to the land, emphasizing continuity and connection rather than exploitation (79). Brodber and Goodison confront the archival absences that obscure the stories of the people within these communities, seeking to reaffirm their ties to the land without reproducing harmful colonial depictions that reduce them to picturesque scenery or capitalist resources. Instead, their approach relies on oral histories shared by the entire community, rather than on the perspective of a single individual, thus challenging traditional historical narratives. This method allows for collective agreement and disagreement, producing a narrative that more accurately reflects the views of the community as a whole. Stitt's analysis of Brodber and Goodison demonstrates that the land is not merely a setting but a central part of the origin story for descendants of enslaved and liberated people. It represents a reclaimed space where new forms of identity and community continue to evolve. Through Stitt's reading, it becomes clear that the land functions as both a historical and symbolic site of memory, connecting generations and fostering a sense of belonging that resists the disconnection imposed by colonialism.

In the chapter "'Put My Mom in There': Memorialization as Caribbean Counter-Archive," Stitt examines how contemporary writers use life writing to address themes of time, collectivity, and fallibility, positioning these texts as "alternative means of memorializing Caribbean lives and history" (117). Stitt analyses works such as Ruth Behar's ethnographic memoir *An Island Called Home*; Edwidge Danticat's *we-moir* entitled *Brother, I'm Dying*, and her essay collection *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*; and Irene Vilar's memoir *The Ladies Gallery: A Memoir of Family Secrets*. While Stitt addresses the complexities

within each text, Behar's memoir stands out, raising critical ethical questions about the ownership and control of familial narratives. Behar initially encourages her grandmother, Baba, to keep the handwritten autobiography of her great-grandfather Abraham Levin private but later claims the document after Baba's death, complicating her earlier stance. This act brings to light the tensions between personal memory and public history, questioning who has the right to own and share these narratives. Although Stitt outlines this controversy, she does not provide her own evaluation or critical assessment, which I found necessary. This omission presents an opportunity for scholars to explore best practices for retrieving and preserving familial artefacts. When acquiring such materials, scholars assume roles similar to that of curators in museums, and, therefore, ethical acquisition practices must be followed to preserve the artefact's integrity and significance, avoiding any potential conflict.

Stitt joins a growing body of scholars attempting to reassemble the fragmented cultural identity and memory of the Caribbean by examining how life writing engages with absence aesthetics. Her work prioritizes the lived experiences of marginalized Caribbean women, illuminating gaps in history and reclaiming erased narratives. One potential avenue for extending Stitt's project could involve exploring how contemporary Caribbean communities use digital media—such as video essays, reels, podcasts, music, and virtual art galleries—to address these absence aesthetics. Digital forms offer Caribbean communities the opportunity to assert their cultural identities and challenge colonial archival frameworks, helping to counter the erasure of Caribbean histories. Another promising direction for further study is the realm of Caribbean speculative fiction. Examining how absence aesthetics are negotiated in this genre can reveal what is regained through imaginative storytelling, reconstructing histories once thought lost. Stitt's insights into absence aesthetics and Caribbean life writing offer rich possibilities for my own research, particularly in exploring how these concepts intersect with contemporary digital media and speculative fiction. I am excited to see how Caribbean scholars continue to build on her work.