



African Literary Archives at the Vanguard: An Interview with Sylvia Arthur

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Abstract

This interview centers the literary activism of Sylvia Arthur, the founder of the Library of Africa and the African Diaspora (LOATAD), a decolonizing library, archive, writing residency, and research institute in Accra, Ghana. LOATAD has a mission of celebrating and championing Africa's rarely acknowledged contributions to the global literary canon. A storyteller who uses the power of narrative to build cultural institutions and movements that reframe history, Arthur is an advocate for

the restitution of African literary archives to the continent and the diaspora. She is also the creator of *A Women's Oral History of West Africa*, which chronicles an alternative history of West Africa through the stories of African women aged 60+, who have been largely overlooked and erased from official narratives. A Ford Global Fellow, an Africa No Filter Narrative Champion, and a 2022 National Geographic Explorer, Arthur was recognized by *Brittle Paper*, Africa's premier online literary brand, as Literary Person of the Year in 2023.

Keywords

Sylvia Arthur, African literary archives, African storytelling, Library of Africa and the African Diaspora, African feminist narratives

Introduction

A globally recognized storyteller, Sylvia Arthur is doing critical work in transforming the African literary tradition. As the founder of the Library of Africa and the African Diaspora (LOATAD)—a decolonizing library, archive, writing residency, and research institute in Accra, Ghana—Arthur showcases the power of lesser known and well-known African and diasporic authors, writers, and creatives whose stories and voices have been chronically overlooked by Western academia, media, archives, and publishing. Using the power of narrative to build cultural institutions and movements that reframe history, Arthur is an advocate for the advancement, restitution, and affirmation of African literary archives on the continent and the diaspora.

As the founder of *A Women's Oral History of West Africa* project, Arthur has created an alternative history of how West African women elders are chronicled. At 59 years-old, women in West Africa have the lowest female life expectancy in the world (Arthur). Arthur has interviewed 100 West African women in Benin, Togo, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia, over 60 years-old, to create an extensive oral archive, to record their stories and preserve their legacies as a correction to their erasure from official histories. As Arthur notes, these “...women are rejecting the imposition of silence and ‘immanent and imminent’ death that overshadows their

lives...and as women who have lived beyond expectation, they are unicorns, survivors, and fugitives” (Arthur). Offering profound perspectives on the lives of elder West African women, Arthur provides insights into how they live, love, survive, thrive, and defy stereotypes by capturing the joys, challenges, lives, and afterlives of West African womanhood.

A Ford Global Fellow, an Africa No Filter Narrative Champion, and a 2022 National Geographic Explorer, Arthur was recognized by *Brittle Paper*, Africa’s premier online literary brand, as Literary Person of the Year in 2023. The interview questions were written by Jaimee A. Swift (swiftja@jmu.edu), Assistant Professor of Black Politics at James Madison University, and the questions were sent to Arthur, who wrote her responses, with Swift subsequently editing Arthur’s responses for clarity and length.

Swift: *Your work uplifts, situates, frames, and even reframes the African literary tradition, especially African women’s literary tradition(s) and canon. Who shaped your praxis of literary activism? More specifically, who are African women storytellers and writers who guide and mobilize your work?*

Arthur: My praxis and activism are rooted in a lifelong visceral aversion to injustice that manifests through racism, sexism, and class. I grew up in the United Kingdom, influenced by African American culture at a time when Black British culture—especially literature—wasn’t afforded the space to breathe, and the availability of African literature was practically non-existent; it simply wasn’t accessible. I grew up reading a lot of Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and (Caribbean-American) Rosa Guy, among others. As I grew older and started college, I read a lot of bell hooks, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde. At the same time, it was the era of neo-soul and conscious hip-hop, and that all fed into my consciousness-raising.

When I was in school, there were no Black writers on the curriculum, and although I loved English class, I instinctively knew this was wrong. Since I was always surrounded by books and literature at home, I came to realize that social justice encompassed literary justice, and that the suppression of access to literature and knowledge, as well as the erasure of African peoples’ epistemic contributions, constituted a form of violence. There’s a quote from Stephen Chan in his book, *African Political Thought: An Intellectual History of the Quest for Freedom* (2021) that says it

all: "...[B]ut the question of access to literature and, through literature, currents of dissent, is an important one in resistance to colonialism and to postcolonial repression" (239).

In terms of African women storytellers who guide my work: The Ghanaian feminist, Ama Ata Aidoo, is a writer I greatly admire because she was fearless, uncompromising, and ahead of her time. The issues she wrote and talked about boldly were—and in some cases—still are considered taboo in Ghanaian culture like polygamy, women's independence, and the enduring and multifarious impacts of colonialism. Yet, she didn't shy away from them. She wrote strong female characters whom I/we recognize in my/our sisters, mothers, and friends, even to this day. She didn't do caricature; she wrote the truth, and her work is timeless. I also love Nawal El Saadawi and what she represented as an African woman from the northern part of the continent. In addition to being an influential writer, a medical doctor, and a staunch advocate for women's rights, she fully embraced her identity as an African woman. Also, I love Zora Neale Hurston and Audre Lorde.

Swift: *What was the political, social, and creative impetus in founding The Library of Africa and the African Diaspora (LOATAD)?*

Arthur: There was so much going on in the world when I established the library in 2017—not least Brexit—but I had the idea for LOATAD in 2011. I was living and working in Brussels, which is the capital of the European Union. It's a very transient city that attracts people from all over Europe and the world and it's very political. However, the people I encountered, although they claimed to be worldly, had no idea about Africa and the Diaspora beyond stereotypes and aid. Their ideas about the continent were so backwards and offensive that I did what I always did: I retreated into literature. But Brussels was also the place where I started collecting books seriously. It was where I experienced, in adult life, the necessity of fugitive spaces because, as Black people in mainland Europe, we really needed them. There were many individuals who decided to create cafes, art spaces, book clubs, and other gatherings in their homes for those of us who needed community and respite. In hindsight, that was inspirational to me.

In terms of the creative impetus, the library is a portal—a portal to the past refracted through the present, and a huge step into the Black/African future. The first space for the library, which was a tiny office above a pharmacy in a small office

block, I used to say was like my bedroom. It was a re-creation of my youthful bedroom, with lots of books crammed into a tiny space. Then we moved the library to a five-bedroom house, which I said was like my living room. Now, the library is in a two-story, five-bedroom house, which I say is like my home, although I've never actually lived anywhere so lavish! In every case, the idea is that when you come to the library, you come home. Whatever else is going on or has gone on outside of these four walls, you can come and escape the world and be attended to by our greatest storytellers, our thinkers, our greatest imaginations, and minds. You can come and feel safe in ancestral and contemporary knowledge that lets you know that you are not alone.

Swift: As a grassroots and community-oriented, knowledge-producing institution dedicated to African and African diasporic knowledge preservation and dissemination, in what ways do you see LOATAD as an archival incubator and intervention for and to African women's archives, narratives, and archival practices?

Arthur: As an institution, we unapologetically celebrate women's contributions to the African and global literary canon. In fact, we define the canon; we don't adhere to what "the world" says is worthy and valuable. We unashamedly center the work of Black women writers, knowing that they are the truth-tellers, the archivists, and the memory keepers of our history. LOATAD has always created space for women's narratives to thrive, from our women-only writing residency to our festival, WomanFest, which challenged narratives around women and girls in contemporary Ghanaian society. In 2019, we created two women's oral archives—Women Speaking Women and Women Reading Women—to preserve the oral stories of everyday Ghanaian women and bring to life the words of African women writers. Since starting the library, I have consistently struggled with how to make it a truly inclusive space, given that illiteracy can be a significant barrier in accessing literature and literary spaces in Ghana, particularly for women. Given that writing is a predominantly middle-class endeavor—requiring, as it does, a certain amount of formal education and depending on one's location, an advanced understanding of the English language—as a career, it excludes many people. Books also exclude those who cannot read. One way we have attempted to overcome these barriers is by incorporating orality into the library.

Furthermore, the aesthetic of the library also celebrates women. As you enter the library, there's a framed picture of Toni Morrison hanging above the door. In 2014, I had the privilege to see Morrison live in conversation at the Hay Festival, where she revealed that she'd never been to Africa. When she became an ancestor in 2019, we brought Morrison to Africa via the library. We held a celebration of life service for her, during which we read the first chapter of each of her eleven novels in community and poured libations in her honor. Her portrait had always hung above the door, which a member of the public named the "Door of Return." The significance of that name being twofold—in honor of visitors to the library returning to knowledge of themselves and in reference and contradistinction to the "Door of No Return" at Cape Coast and Elmina Castles, from where our people were enslaved and shipped across the Atlantic. Morrison's presence, along with that of Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Bâ, Bessie Head, Maya Angelou, and many other literary ancestors is felt strongly throughout the library.

Honoring our literary ancestors is a reminder of who we are as an intellectual and enduring people and serves as a stimulus for us to continue building on their literary legacies. I say all this to emphasize that the archives, narratives, and archival practices of Black women writers form the foundation of the library. Without them, we wouldn't exist in the way we do, and we wouldn't affect writers of all generations and genders in the way we have and continue to do.

Swift: You are the creator of A Women's Oral History of West Africa, an audio archive documenting the narratives of women from Benin, Togo, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia who are over the age of 60. This incredible work offers an alternative oral history of postcolonial West Africa by centering the realities, perspectives, and narratives of a demographic of women, who, as you put, "...already outlived themselves statistically." Can you share more about the process in creating the archive? Why was it so important for you to chronicle stories of everyday West African women, who, as you write, are "...[n]ot just the ones who make it onto the cover of Time or who lead international organizations"?

Arthur: Archives recreate and reinforce hierarchies. Those who make it into the rarified domain of the archives are usually those who fit a particular narrative of whom the powers-that-be deem worthy, and are rarely women of color, let alone African women. The contributions of everyday women are missing. This isn't a mere oversight; it's an intentional overlooking at best and an erasure, at worst. This project

seeks to counter this by affording West African women the place they deserve in the archives, where every woman and every woman's story is of equal value. The perception of African women in the world and even among many of us ourselves is that we don't have anything to say, or more importantly, we don't have anything to say that's worth listening to. In Western media, we are offered three types of African women (although there aren't many stories about African women, generally): mute beasts of burden, which make up the majority of representations; victims who need saving from men, the culture, and themselves; or the exceptional high-flying African woman who has broken through her circumstances (i.e., that being an African woman is to ascend to the world stage or that one must be like the Ellen Johnson-Sirleafs, Ngozi Iwealas, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichies of the world). In African media, the representations are slightly different—middle-class women dominate the media as journalists, presenters, politicians, and so on. In contrast, everyday women are less visible in anything other than the news.

I wanted to create an egalitarian archive of women's life stories from across the spectrum of African women's realities—class, education, religion, dis/ability—but, particularly, of those who would otherwise be left out of official records because they are deemed to have contributed little to society; as if raising children, working in the home and the market, and being the backbone of our communities and cultures isn't enough. Since women in West Africa have the lowest female life expectancy in the world, documenting their stories is crucial to demonstrate their existence and to defy erasure. Their stories, in their own words, provide a blueprint and a legacy for future generations to follow and build upon. My ultimate goal for the project is to create the largest oral archive of African women's stories.

In terms of the process, I worked with a local multilingual fixer/translator and a photographer in each of the four countries I visited for this project: Benin, Togo, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia. Due to the extensive network I have through LOATAD's residency programs, particularly the West African Writers Residency, I was able to reach out to writers in each country and ask them to recommend people to work with. I spent between one and two months in each country, interviewing women over 60 years-old living along the coast whom the fixer/translator had already done the groundwork of finding. Sometimes, I would find women myself by talking to people I met randomly while out and about and telling them about my work—they would then recommend their mothers, grandmothers, or aunts. An

interview would last approximately 90 minutes and would take place at the woman's place of work such as markets, farms, offices, schools, her home or in a community space. All the interviews were recorded in audio format, and a few were also in video format. Each woman then posed for a portrait.

*Swift: How did your intimate encounters with your interlocutors from *A Women's Oral History of West Africa* expand and even challenge your literary and archival praxis, ethos, and perspectives? What did you learn about yourself during this process?*

Arthur: Conducting the fieldwork and interviewing the women reinforced a shift in my thinking that has been occurring since I established the library in 2017, namely, questioning my belief in the primacy of the written word. As someone who has always loved and been surrounded by books, I believed that writing was the apex of linguistic expression. However, the written word is exclusionary, privileging those from certain classes, backgrounds, and geographies. Obviously, in today's age of audiobooks, access to written literature has been democratized to a certain extent. Still, snobbery persists regarding the value of orality and traditional forms of knowledge and knowing. In other words, I learned that life experience and the oral expression of knowledge, gained through living, are just as valuable as written expression and education through books.

Regarding how it challenged my praxis, on a practical level, I made various adjustments to ensure the process of documenting the stories was more equitable for the women I interviewed. For example, formal documentation that I would usually use in a written format such as letters and consent forms, I adapted into aural and oral formats to make it more accessible and less intimidating for those unable to read or write. The actual interview process involved creating significant emotional space for the women to contemplate their responses, since many, if not most, had never been asked about their lives in detail, so they really needed to think and reflect on how to answer the questions. And the onus is on me, as both a journalist and an African woman, to ask questions that are relevant to the women and their context, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach that's irrelevant or insensitive. That said, I wasn't afraid to ask any question. There were no taboos for me. I think as a diasporan, I was able to get away with asking questions that a local journalist wouldn't have gotten away with, so much so that sometimes my translators were reluctant to or would outright refuse to ask my questions. I received a lot of grace

from the women, who perhaps assumed I was ignorant of local customs, or they felt more at ease sharing the intimate details of their lives with me because I was slightly removed from them—a familiar or familial stranger, as it were.

In terms of what I learned about myself, I learned that I am a daughter of West Africa. I love this region. In some ways, I feel rooted here. Some years ago, I was in a village in central Ghana I didn't know, and as I looked around this nondescript place, I *thought* I was in the middle of nowhere, but I *felt* otherwise. After a while, I began to feel comfortable, like I belonged there, or at least that somewhere within, it wasn't alien to me, and I wasn't alien to it. There was a connection. That's when I corrected myself—there is no such place as nowhere. Everywhere is somewhere to someone. And that's how I feel about West Africa following this project. Everywhere in West Africa is somewhere to me and, I hope, I am someone to it.

Swift: *Your literary activism and organizing are reminiscent of other African and African diasporic oral history and storytelling archival initiatives such as the Black Women Oral History Project; Projet Archives des Femmes du Mali; and Women Writing Africa. In what ways do you view your work as a part of and linked to the profound legacies of global African women's storytelling and memory work?*

Arthur: I see my work as a continuation of the legacy of many, and I would particularly like to acknowledge here Awa Thiam, who wrote the groundbreaking classic feminist text, *Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa* (1986). When I began *A Women's Oral History of West Africa*, I shamefully did not know about her or her work but a visitor to the library recommended it after hearing about my project. I worked hard to track it down, as the English translation is no longer in print (it's widely available in its original French, *La Parole aux négresses* (1978), as well as in a new edition). When I read it, I realized that my work is the oral version of her written work, almost 50 years later. I am extremely grateful to be following in her footsteps. My work is also significantly informed by, and influenced by, Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Françoise Vergès.

Swift: *What are your hopes for the lives and afterlives of African women's literary, oral, and narrative expressions, imaginations, possibilities, and realities?*

Arthur: I hope this project will extend the lives of West African women by providing them with a place in a future they statistically may not get to experience. I hope generations of women will engage with the archive and find themselves reflected in it and find inspiration to document their own stories, create their own narratives, shape their own lives, and build their own archives. In addition, I hope it will help to redefine what we consider knowledge to be—who has it, who gets to share it, how it's shared, and who learns from it. It's a similar hope for the library, where many of the writers we celebrate on our shelves were in danger of being forgotten. We preserve, bring to life, and honor them in the hope that they and their legacy will continue to inspire and expand imaginations and possibilities for those who encounter them.

Swift: *In your work, you use the ocean as a significant locale to understand West African women living in coastal communities. However, the ocean is an important physical and symbolic site for understanding the connectivity, memories, and even erasure of African and African diasporic identities, narratives, and self-determination. In your opinion, how can the symbology of the ocean inform historical and contemporary solidarities among African women storytellers on the continent and beyond?*

Arthur: The ocean provides a framework and a site in which to anchor our solidarity, the Black Atlantic, as defined by Paul Gilroy in his seminal book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). There is so much to write about, to write for, and to write against. Black women in the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa continue to suffer under global systems and national cultures. Our roots are the same and our oppressions are similar—from premature death to precarious work, to vulnerability to violence. Today, the Atlantic is a graveyard for African brothers and sisters who are trying to get to Europe.

In many West African nations, the sea is a site of contestation as foreign trawlers encroach on the traditional artisanal livelihoods of local fisher people, raiding the waters just as they once raided villages, towns, and cities, centuries earlier. When I visited Barbados 10 years ago, a man who stopped my friend and me near a beach told us that there is no land between Barbados and Africa: “You can literally sail from here to Africa without encountering any other land.” He said it to solidify our connection as children of Africa, divided by the water but united by it also. I say all this to say that the water continues to connect us, that history may be past but it's

not dead and is ever present. The ocean, as a unifying feature of the Black Atlantic, must continue to inform our solidarities wherever and everywhere we are.

Conclusion

Sylvia Arthur's literary activism is a profound iteration and testament to the radical lineages and legacies of African and African diasporic women writers, who, just like the Atlantic, have created ocean ways and pathways of literary, political, and ideological power, solidarity, and perseverance despite the devastating ruptures of colonialism, enslavement, and epistemic and state violence. Moreover, Arthur's work, in querying archival traditions that historically and presently render African women elders as invisible, or relegated to archetypes and stereotypes, speaks to how she is challenging and transforming both Eurocentric and Western archival and storytelling standards as well as African and African diasporic archival and literary methodologies, narratives, and representations. Here, Arthur's work is not just simply archival or literary—it is praxis of witnessing. It is a praxis and ode to the possibilities of the African and African diasporic feminist literary imagination. Because of Arthur's archives, we can now witness and imagine the emotional, political, spiritual, and social breadth, width, height, and length of African women elders as they testify about the intricacies and intimacies of their labor, love, loss, and life.

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