

The Swarm: Language as Fiction

written by Guest Contributor | September 17, 2018



In May 2018 I was invited to give a keynote speech at a symposium held at the Literarisches Colloquium in Berlin. The broader symposium focused on the realities of African writing, at least as perceived by the European observer in this instance. Or even [I might suggest] the seemingly surprising existence of 'African' writing as something more than an indeterminate mass of otherness. I had been rather underwhelmed by the well-trodden and somewhat reductive premise of the event. Similarly I had been left equally underwhelmed by my own experiences of under evolved colonial legacies and the respective social fallout of such since moving to Europe from London. I opted to frame my talk a little differently to what had been requested, with an aim to dig deeper into what I consider to be the limited semantics of contemporary identity politics.

It has been said we're often taking a picture because we have seen a picture like it. But do we question the veracity of these pictures enough? And in this moment might we apply the same questioning and reasoning to our use and understanding of language? We are often saying something, regaling a tale and succumbing to a narrative, because we have heard – or have been fed – one just like it. Do we question the veracity of language enough?

A wasp or swarm of wasps that feels threatened will sting continuously until they feel safe again.

Many species of insects are known to move in large numbers, a behavior we commonly refer to as a swarm. A swarm can serve a variety of purposes to the species that has favored this form of movement. A swarm is likely to exist primarily to protect the home of that [particular] group of insects. A coming together en masse serves as a useful method for survival and self-defense – the home being where their life form is preserved by new incarnations of themselves, a fluidly cyclical reincarnation and continuation. Given the method and the organic molecular function and make-up of these species, a definition of the wasp or other such swarming insect as a singular-being proves rather defunct.

Many insect species also swarm in order to travel. They flow from spot to spot looking for a suitable place to nest. This is a curious place at which to pause and ruminate on what characteristics and attributes the swarm may use to determine what makes for a suitable home. Is there detection of a certain expectant temperature for the duration of their stay? Through the patterns of nature's interplay with itself, can the wasp or other said swarming insect species detect the appropriate humidity of its prospective real estate? How much of the swarm's collective activity is a conscious intuition beyond an automatic biological function of a collection of suitably pre-programmed molecular forms?

When this collective identity finds a suitable place to nest, how does it settle itself on its precise formation? How does it read and render the space it has chosen to colonize, and how does it understand and automatically structure the proportion of its cities and subsequent social hierarchies in accordance to the form of this newly colonized space?

The nomadic spirit of wasps and some other swarming insects leads them ordinarily to abandon a nest after a season. This flowing mass of objective continues on, and what remains is an arid husk of intricately formed series of passageways, levels, and enclosed spaces. Remnants of a history, a time of some life and a center of ideas. These abandoned nests resemble the relics of our own historic clusters. Cities and one time bustling architectures become coffee stained in color – from the nest's initially imperially bright white facades – and become arid and brittle to touch, the moisture and respiratory viscosity of civilization long since departed. The disused nest disintegrates into dust upon touch, returning to the earth to contribute to the forming—or even reforming of another future idea—layers upon layers as stories to be taken forward.

Language itself takes the form of a fiction. Husks of ideologies, cultures and conflicts are refilled and re-swarmed, sagging under the weight of this recycling and splitting or fragmenting in a way that isn't a disintegration, but rather a multiplication akin to the nature of the way cells refract and replicate life. Each new cell-form carries with it identities amalgamated from previous swarms, previous seasons of being, full of the enduring tenets of the human experience. Lost languages are often decried rather than graciously embraced within eternal reincarnation and endurance like the spirits of Shona, or like the spirit as sensed through the accepting soul of a Buddhist monk, or examined in relation to the Heideggerian scope of time.

Much contemporary discourse circles around the concept of 'The Singularity,' a phrase coined to determine the point in our quantumly accelerated existence when the automated processes and intelligences we have constructed essentially outrun our own neural capacities and then accelerates off in its own thoroughly nurtured sentience to determine what the future of existence will be. A becoming of one with machine. The result of The Singularity – many claim – is indeterminate and beyond our own faculty of comprehension, and certainly beyond our own limitations of language. Indeed, when existence becomes managed and directed by only a chosen few upon an invisible, somewhat particle-like level, our limits of comprehension float to the surface and we wail in frustration at our own futility. There is also scope for alternative

readings of 'The Singularity,' and not necessarily metaphorical readings.

New nests are formed by new swarms and an inequality grows exponentially, but not necessarily the inequality we know as the narrative of poverty thrust at us, but an inequality of knowledge and understanding about how these new worlds are built. As new platforms are laid out benevolently for us to discuss and explore, new languages are formed unwittingly in real time. The structure of these new nests or rather these new cities, are amorphous in their form but are dynamic, utilizing and manipulating the space of language around us; we find ourselves caught up in the movement of these new swarms, as opposed to being at the helm of one's own destiny. Thus, 'The Singularity' could also be witnessed as a swarm, a congealing of thought, myth, story, fable and feeling. Increasingly, this dynamic swarm carries us off with its power, mixing and swirling the stories upon which we were raised, the images we consumed, the films we absorb, funneling every experience through the same narrow pathway that leads us into a circular vortex around this newly demarcated city. It then becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle ourselves from the forces of this dynamic swarm, given that we are nowhere near its own organic destiny and purpose and have become rudderless to an extent. It is difficult to stem the erasure that occurs so swiftly – an erasure of language, of experience and of histories – and difficult to combat when the hierarchies of every language culture and experience have plateaued. The Singularity can be seen occurring to us as a mono existence, or a mono experience, rather, in which this alien swarm determines what stories we ourselves are able to tell. This new autonomous swarm sprung out with technological force from a broad secular consumption and from our inhabitation of a congealed monoculture. There is a kind of inevitability to a singular experience arising when the new environments for us to share our languages have become the most dominant export of American exceptionalism.

So who exactly dictates language?

The Singularity can be witnessed through the mixed reality of bumping into a Kardashian clone on a busy high street, the clone oblivious to this collision, as she is drawn along by the power of this swarm and with pendulum-like physics; we watch the back and forth interplay of this infinite loop of experience. The Queen Bee, the Kardashian in this sense, elicits a scent, a rite that in itself is fabricated through the aphoristic nature of contemporary presentation, and The Queen's output finds itself out there as multiple poor imitations of digital photo filters masquerading as poorly executed sedimentary real world makeup adorning multiple female subjects that have been caught up in the Queen's own swarm.

The swarm has become a singular narrative: it houses every cause, idea, and micro activism. The secular myths and stories and narratives determine who goes forth and whom will stay. We are asked to choose a side, determine a position. Able to assimilate almost any cause, this swarm carries within it patterns within which our language must sit.

Our language, certainly our new language, is beholden to this new congealing of experience and story. We use our experience of fictional tropes to speak new common image-driven languages, while words have taken on new thrillingly

malevolent dynamism within this autonomous swarm. A diet of superhero futurist fantasy sets off absolute drivers of binary comprehensions of experience. Yet, it is clear Hollywood won't save you. Arguably, one of the clearest drivers of a new language being formed is the whipping up of us into a custom framework for hysteria. Dissemination, deflection and chaos become a practice to withstand and decode; an embrace of the surreal and the postmodern become themselves sharp edged tools of weaponization.

If you were to search online for a categorized library of the many histories of the shona spirit, what would you find? If you were digitally researching the deep histories of 'Eshu' in West Africa, what would you find? Who initiated this new character set with which we must speak to each other?

Amongst the swarm, your war is little or no different to my war. It all just falls into a time of dominant narratives – and the dominant education fed to us comes from a source. The swarm itself has an eye at its core, and we must find a sharp-edged insight to be able to transgress these boundaries of predetermined experience. Yet, we are often lost in this micro-activism whilst new cities are formed (refugee centers, for example) as the swarm itself moves independently forth from place to place, leaving in its wake new lines of control that gain strength at every navel gazed at and every disagreement sown.

Barely noticeable in this newly protectionist huddle within the swarm is the tightening of the feedback loops housing our individual myths and perception. Perception itself is altered by the dynamic reshaping of our languages, and our ability to break down forms and representations from afar is brought into much tighter focus and more restricted view, like a television moved across the room to be positioned closer to an ageing viewer.

New clusters form within the swarm as a byproduct of accelerated learning; systems learn and relearn what we see and how we see, these mathematical formulas re-imagine the scope of our experience through a funneling down into a tight pathway, working invisibly to determine what we thought was actually our own ability as free willed conscious beings. Does this autonomous swarm begin to bring the notion of consciousness itself into question? Our awareness and ability to feel external factors and to shape our own stories is something we take for granted, but what happens when this sentience finds itself being driven forward externally akin to the navigation of a self-driving car? Will we ask ourselves what stories we can tell and what language we can use?

New moralities are formed from history and the swarm appears to determine which moralities we must exist within and whose story we must tell; yet this singular idea shapes a way of seeing, and we find ourselves creating new rules for this new morality. Transgression appears increasingly beyond reach as if one's moral standing in society determines whether one might have access to the space for telling a story, a fable, or the ability to conjure the imagination to inhabit another mind or experience. These new moralities, a product of this swarm, dictate the binary balance of our experience: in order for a story to exist there must be a scapegoat. The creators of this swarm are well aware of the need for the scapegoat, and it is therefore

planted at the center of this vortex – the scapegoats of history are used to shape the narrative of today, or, the newly acquired scapegoats help determine what our rituals and unwavering understanding of each other shall be.

Within a colony, the worker bee is usually cast as sterile, or at least he/she lacks the divine reproductive capability of its Queen. Yet, we understand the worker bee to carry a great responsibility for the growth and pollination of much of the world's sustenance.

A swarm can be examined as a method for power, the likes of which have always thrived on the erasure or perversion of history and the current self initiated and even perpetuated erasure of a fluid, amorphous existence makes this particular incarnation of power and control a somewhat simple task.

Amid this coming together of every myth, every experience and every history, is there room within the workers' remaining freedom to own language? Is there room to break the hegemonic narratives structuring the stories we have been told to tell of each other and gain more progressive and inclusive knowledge (and ultimately power) for the future? Will there be room to roam the outer reaches of this swarm with its set of dynamic forces, and challenge—or at least momentarily transgress—and disentangle from this absolute form that has dictated how we got here today?



Michael Salu is a writer, artist and critic, whose work and ideas are executed through a multidisciplinary practice. His writing, art and talks have centered on where the evolving semantics of technology, language and identity meet. His written work has appear in a number of literary journals, anthologies and art publications including *Freeman's Journal* and *Catapult*, and he has just completed his first novel. He has exhibited and screened art projects internationally and is the owner and creative director of S.A.L.U, a multidisciplinary creative studio collaborating with clients around the globe.

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