On understanding the power of your creative work

Writer and translator Neige Sinno discusses the narrative form as an act of resistance, unexpected turns in a creative career, and believing in what you've built

August 12, 2025 -

As told to Jamie Hood, 2833 words.

Tags: Writing, Activism, Process, Success, Collaboration, Adversity, Politics, Creative anxiety, Promotion, Failure.

I'm always curious about origin stories. We could talk about the origin of *Sad Tiger* or perhaps how you came to writing, if either feels animating?

I can't remember exactly how it happened. I've always been working on this material because I don't have any other life, and you work with what you have. I didn't want to do *Sad Tiger* in the first person, as a memoir. I thought I would work on it as fiction, and it came as a surprise—the first person narrative voice. I had to use this voice for another book, which is coming out now in French, which is *not* about abuse, or not exactly. It's about being a foreigner in Mexico, and I had to use the first person because I didn't want to make my voice seem universal. That voice is neutral; I had to make a subjective voice. When [*La Realidad*] was finished, I wrote the first pages of *Sad Tiger*, and it just sounded so right.

I had the same feeling with *Trauma Plot*. I spent ten years trying out different voices that kept failing, voices that couldn't hold. Landing on the voice was what opened the book for me.

I'm not sure *Sad Tiger* was failing in other forms, and I'm not sure I understand why [I have] this shame around the first-person narrative, but it's the energy that opened the door.

In *Sad Tiger*, you talk about the first-person singular as a trap. What was it before?

Fiction: short stories, a novel. I know it's not about me, so I didn't want the reader to think it's only an individual testimony. I thought it would be easier to make it fiction—a more collective experience—but I changed my mind. I tried to build this collective "us" that I use in the end of the book. But it's hard. I am not a spokesperson. Every trauma is different, but we must realize, also, there are commonalities. You are never in [total] solitude. I like how you use that word, "solitude," in *Trauma Plot*—I like it, also, in French. It's the core of trauma, but maybe it's also the core of human experience. We die alone; we go through this life alone. Maybe it's a matter of my age, understanding it's true for every one of us—we share this feeling of [solitude], being lonely. It's paradoxical, it's contradictory, it's something you can't share because you feel it alone, but everyone else feels it too.

I liked how you connected trauma to more routine feelings like happiness or sadness, which are commonplace and yet have singular qualities as felt individually. Something difficult to articulate while doing interviews for *Trauma Plot* was this strange tension between how people speak about rape—talking about it as an anomalous or extraordinary event—and the fact that it's everywhere, and all the time. Rape culture is foundational to how

we're formed as sexual beings in some awful way, so rape is both a deeply individual and isolating experience of trauma, *and also* a central undercurrent of our sexuality.

It's a strategy. The insistence on rape's anomalousness allows us not to do anything about it, because "it's only about you." Patriarchy makes us feel alone in the shame. It asks us to imagine rape as private: *it's just your little personal trauma*. I fight with this tension in the book; I don't know if I can resolve it. I didn't find an answer. I still feel like it shouldn't be a story. It shouldn't be told. Rape shouldn't exist, so it shouldn't exist as a story, either. At the same time, if we don't make up narratives for this, rape keeps reproducing itself, again and again. It's the nature of this oppression. It's something that's silent.

Was there a precipitating event that compelled you to write the story?

In Mexico, I became involved with political activists, small groups of women who asked, "What can we do about the violence committed against us?" We were invited by Zapatista women—a movement of indigenous people in the south of Mexico [who've] been in insurrection for thirty years and are building autonomy—who sometimes invite people outside their communities for celebrations and political meetings.

The women decided to invite lots of other women to an only-women encounter for three days. We went there twice, in 2018 and 2019, and for the second one we focused on violence against women—everywhere, but particularly in Mexico—and five-thousand women [came], women from everywhere, from the countryside, indigenous women, women from the city, women from outside, from Europe, from wherever.

We were in the forest, protected by these people who were taking care of us. The first day was the Day of Denunciation, the second, Solutions, and the third was a celebration. People would take the microphone to talk just about violence against women. I was only listening, but I was struck by how many women talked about being abused in childhood, again and again and again. Still we never talk about this; it's not a topic *in society*. There were women whose daughters were killed by their partners, women experiencing femicide, all kinds of rape, all kinds of violence.

When we came to our "solutions" moment, we didn't have any. We had small things: build sorority, make groups, organize. We left. As always, when I was on the bus, and then when I was back home, everything I should have said came to me. Not long after that, I started writing. It became a loop and thirty years later, I've written it. I'm stronger. My weapons—my literary techniques—meant I had so much more ability to do this now. I'm much less vulnerable. It happened in this moment, when I felt the collective voice inside me, hearing the stories of all these other kinds of women: very young, very old, telling the same story again and again, which is my story too. It helped me realize—more than just statistically—that it's not only my trauma, it's not just about *me*. It's about *us*. At that point I had the idea of working through pronouns—it's funny how you do this in your book, too. I wanted to start with the "I"—with me, with my younger self, the reader and scholar—and building up, little by little, to the "us" I use at the end. When I say "we the victims," I know I'm not alone in this. I want to connect. I have to build [that connection] with my reader, in the space given to me by the book.

I love this story of the Zapatista women, and it's also making me wonder what your sense of #MeToo was when it happened. Were you in Mexico?

Yes. I've never called myself a feminist. In France, I was a student, but I wasn't in Paris; I was in a small city. I'd never heard of feminist theory. Maybe I wasn't drawn to it—there's a cycle of attraction and repulsion, maybe, with all those topics. But in Mexico, I became involved. We don't even call ourselves "feminists." It's groups of women, and we read texts, we do grassroots work. I help people get abortions, for example, so this is how #MeToo happened for me. It was with those women, organizing things on a very basic level.

My role in these groups is as a reader. I bring texts, I explain things, they ask me to do this. There's a big wave of inclusion in Mexico, and it's why the encounter wasn't called a "feminist encounter." It was called an "encounter for women who are fighting." It's everyone. You don't need theory; you don't need to be a lawyer; you don't need anything. If you want to come, you come. No one is excluded from this fight, which is something I liked—it's about oppression and domination. If we want to fight these systems, we must find ways of relating

different from how we've been taught—without hierarchy, without the "good" victim, without the spokesperson versus the person who cannot speak. I had no idea this would happen to me. I'm a reader, and I used to be very secluded with that [literary] knowledge. I've always had an attraction to people oriented toward action. I have this dream of experience happening to me before I'm able to rationalize it. This version of #MeToo, it happened. Just being in those groups, being a mother, doing stuff. I loved that I was *put into something that is life*, and then I tried to tell about that life. Sorry. This is hard to explain, and it's harder in English.

No, this is great. It feels quite enlivening to me, too, because it's so action-based. Many critiques of #MeToo concerned the fact that it was primarily calibrated around storytelling, which is a funny tension for you and I, because we're storytellers, but I like this foregrounding of coalition-building. Being in the fight together. There's a risk with narrative of it retreating or receding into the purely discursive.

Well, that, too, is a strategy—to say storytelling is not action.

Absolutely. In some sense I think it's important for people to know where their strengths lie. Some are better at organizing, or activism, and some of us are the storytellers. You can dip into these waters variably, but for me, writing is my vocation. It's where I'm best able to connect. But I wonder: what does the rape memoir *do*? I think we both enter this tradition uneasily, as artists and as people who have lived through it and are figuring out where to go from here.

We internalize the critique. I always see the bad side; I have to convince myself that story is also action. It's easy to dismiss what we do, to say "It's just another memoir that's not going to change anything."

My idea was to integrate those arguments—inside the book—and to fight them, to make this visible so the reader has to ask herself those questions. Why do we do this? Why do we dismiss a memoir about rape with these arguments that diminish the work, diminish the art? Why do we think a story about rape, a story about women—aging, giving birth—is lesser? How can we challenge this narrative, change this perspective? There's so much guilt. We're the first to have a critical vision of ourselves, the first to reject our own abilities, and that's one reason I didn't want to use the first-person narrative, to expose myself to those dangers. It's very dangerous. There are so many pitfalls—to do what they're expecting us to do. I had to convince myself of the power of my own work.

When I finished the book, I received 20 letters of rejection and began to doubt myself. All those publishers told me, "Oh, thank you, but we already have so much of this stuff; this is a form we're not interested in; people won't want to read this." Have you seen those videos by Bernardine Evaristo—she wrote *Girl, Woman, Other*—and she says having to publish her books in small houses meant she didn't make a living for most of her life, but it made her vocation stronger, she was the only one who could defend her work. You must truly believe in your stuff. No one else will.

It's sad, but when the success story happens, it's easy to justify after—it could have not happened, and I could still be like I was two years ago, completely unknown and fighting for my work, but I'm old enough and I've written for so many years, and I've failed so much that I know it's powerful. No one is going to convince me it's not worth it. But it's something I built. I couldn't have written this book when I was twenty. It's from the perspective of a forty-seven-year-old woman who has been silenced in so many ways and who's seen so many people silenced for so many different reasons—always the wrong reasons—so the voice in the book is someone who sees things from a distance. It's not only because I'm a mother, I think I would have written the same book if I hadn't been one, but I'm in the moment of my life where I want to be the protector. What am I going to do at this age when I'm making the world for the next generation, what do I want to make? Where do I want these children to grow up? Obviously, I can't change everything, but I'm doing my part.

I feel the book is a bit cagey about why you decided to write it. You have this list of reasons why not to write it. Maybe this is true for you as well, but I wouldn't have been able to write *Trauma Plot* unless I wrote another book first, because I didn't want sexual assault to be The Thing: my entire writing career. The idea frightened me, and maybe it frightened you as well, the subject overtaking your sense of yourself as an artist.

Well, my dream was the career of Claude Ponti—someone who built a reputation on *his art*, writing about something

else. But it didn't happen for me. I had to make this decision despite it all. The rest of my literary career, people will come to the readings with *Triste Tigre*. Still, I had to do this. When I was a young woman imagining myself as a writer, this is something I didn't want. In the book's success, there's something very bitter … uh … very …

Like bittersweet?

Yeah! [*laughs*] I had to sacrifice the ego; some image I had of myself as a writer. Well, I'm used to sacrifice. With trauma, you're the scapegoat for the family, for society, but I'm comfortable there. It's the place that's been given to me, always. It's complicated. I'm not going to complain, having this book be so successful, but it's not the sacrifice I'm used to making. It's one, though, that I took knowingly. I envisioned some of these consequences and I'm ready to assume them. There's no other way. I had to do this, despite myself, despite everything. It's the nature of the book: it's written despite itself. There's no good way to talk about rape, and it's also not good *not doing it*.

There's something in memoir that almost mandates an orientation toward linear time. Trauma, specifically sexual violence, is dehumanizing, it unmoors and de-subjectifies you. Traumatic memory—you talk about this—often distorts or destroys memory. Maybe you're not able to remember, or not able to recall anything beyond the traumatic events. Which is to say, rape also undoes temporality. If you have no subject and you have no time, what form of narrative can possibly hold?

You write about this in *Trauma Plot*: "What is survival at base but thoughtless repetition? Temporal continuity […] I don't remember walking out of the Gray Room, for example […] The things I thought I'd needed to know […] are no place in my mind. This absence seems somehow profound now: it introduces a possibility that I never really left, that, even if only in some bubble universe to the side of our own, I might still be there." It's exactly this. There's no universe where rape fits.

You call it the "bizarre dimension." It's a disorienting experience, reading your book and seeing places where our language, our precise metaphors echoed. It was also quite beautiful to me; it made me feel less crazy!

It *is* beautiful! You can't imagine how many people talked to me about these moments of recognition. Some had a feeling of living in two parallel worlds, but they'd never heard it said in this way before. It unblocked something. Through writing these impossible things, we relate to the experiences of people who couldn't put words to it.

Rape is the toxin you're moving through; you can't see around it. You might not even realize you're moving through these parallel universes—experiencing a split self—and sometimes it takes someone putting language to it for the revelation to occur.

Because of this connection, the book, strangely, also brought real joy—literary joy. It was playful. Something happy happened to me when I imagined a conversation with a really alert reader, someone who would see these moves I was trying to make. We do have allies. In our books there's a kind of contract implied from the beginning: we're entering this darkness together.

Neige Sinno recommends:

Tatiana Huezo, "The Echo" and "Tempestad" (her documentaries using techniques of fiction are amazing on a tecnical level and they manage to talk about violence in Mexico without being violent towards the viewer or showing violence on screen)

Yiyun Li, *Things in Nature Merely Grow*

Laura Vázquez, *The Endless Week*

Gabriela Wiener, *Undiscovered*

Mabe Frati, "Se ve desde aquí"

Name

Neige Sinno

Vocation

writer, translator, professor