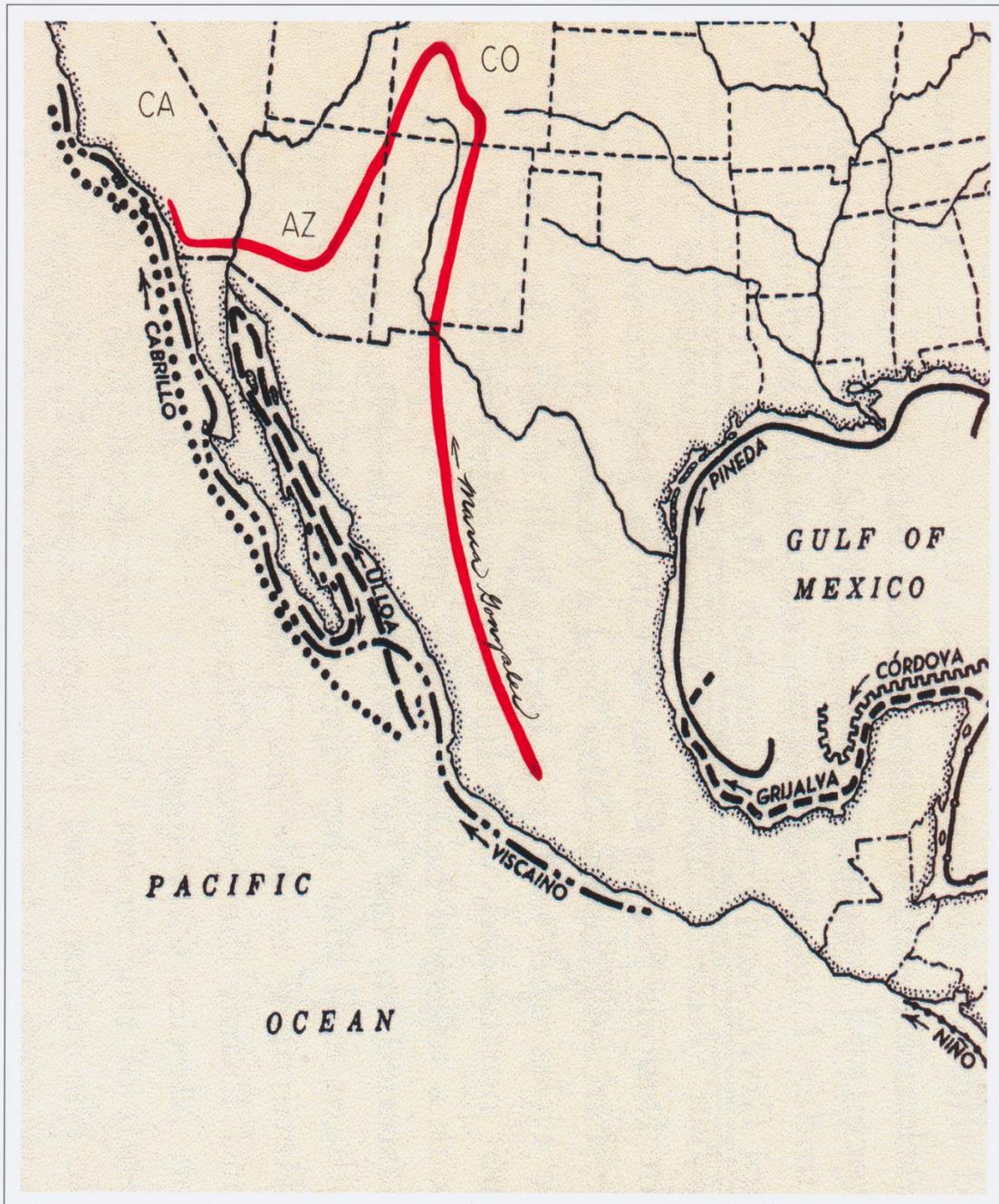


MoMA

Christina Fernandez's *María's Great Expedition*

The artist uses family lore to examine the meaning of migration.

Lucy Gallun, Christina Fernandez May 31, 2019



To Christina Fernandez, her great-grandmother, María Gonzales, is a legend. “She was somebody I was told about.... Somebody to be proud of, someone who had merit—and the reason we were here in ‘America.’” After interviewing family members about María and learning more about the political context that led her to the United States, Fernandez brought her relative’s story to life through a museum-like display. [María's Great Expedition](#) uses maps and texts, as well as photographs, to illustrate the physical patterns of migration and to expose the toll immigration takes on an individual. Each photograph chronicles not only María's experience, but also the changing conventions of modern photography. For this month's [New to MoMA](#), in which we explore a recent addition to the Museum's collection, associate curator of photography Lucy Gallun spoke to Fernandez about her great-grandmother and why migration stories have a particular urgency today.



1910, Leaving Morelia, Michoacán

Lucy Gallun: The various components of *María's Great Expedition*, and how it is displayed—with maps and texts in English and Spanish accompanying each of the six photographs—shapes how we experience it. Can you talk about this strategy? What display formats were you looking to as examples?

Christina Fernandez: I wanted the presentation to be like a natural history museum display, where there is an abundance of information, texts, maps, charts, etc. I was putting forward María's migration story as that of an explorer, akin to [Juan Rodríguez] Cabrillo or [Antonio de] Ulloa. [Their sea journeys appear on María's map.] I recontextualized her story by positing migration as an exploration or expedition, and that explains the title of the work. The display, with texts on a shelf (with corresponding photos above and a composite map on the left) is important as it provides visual weight to the text, elevating its importance as equal to the photographs. Displayed this way, the work feels more whole. I considered doing an audio component, and making the text like the wall label that accompanies works of art, but in the end, none of this seemed right. The composite map foregrounds the photographs and text, giving the audience a context or point of reference to look at María's journey as an "expedition."



1919, Portland, Colorado

This is a story rarely told in the Museum.

Christina Fernandez

The texts that accompany each photograph are crucial components of the work, providing a context alongside the staging of the portraits and the props within the images themselves. Through narrative, you interweave María's experiences together with political events. What was your process of writing these texts? How were these stories about María's life passed down to you?

María was already a legend in my family. She was somebody I was told about, and being the oldest granddaughter, I was always all ears in family conversations. (I think I know more than the adults ever wanted me to know!) But because of this she was sort of in my head, somebody to be proud of, someone who had merit—and the reason we were here in “America.” Her hard work shaped the family work ethic and the desire to achieve both academically and within our chosen careers. I interviewed my grandfather, whose mother she was, as well as my grandmother who became a kind of confidant to María when she lived with my grandparents. (The greatest resource for details about her life was my grandmother.) I also spoke to Natalia, her only daughter, and my mother and aunt. All who knew a little of her story. These interviews not only shaped the text but also the images.

For the social and political contexts, I read a lot. Rudolfo Acuna's *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* and Vickie L. Ruiz's portion of *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* were central to this research. Without these texts, I doubt I would have been able to synthesize María's story effectively...or it would have taken a lot longer. The process of reading and absorbing the information and then, as eloquently as possible, incorporating it into María's story, was one I enjoyed very much. It brought her to life for me, and I realized how difficult things had been for her and others like her. The racism, sexism, and elitism she endured, her desire to leave her country of origin and its religion behind, and branch out into the vast unknown (at least, unknown to her) of the Southwest.



1927, Going back to Morelia

You are also a teacher. In *María's Great Expedition* in particular, how do you find that the roles of artist and educator intersect and/or correspond?

At the time that I created *María's Great Expedition* I was not yet a teacher. The teaching would come later. The work attempts to take on the conventions of photographic movements and styles of the time that they are meant to represent, such as Dorothea Lange's FSA photographic style as the look and inspiration for "1930." *María's Great Expedition* is didactic in the sense that it tells or teaches a story that is rarely or never told in the art museum. It is "educational." Also understanding photographic history and its technological evolution and its effect on the language of the photograph is integral to teaching. So I could say that the development of *María's Great Expedition* during my last year of graduate school was laying the groundwork for how I now teach.



1930, Transporting produce, outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona
<https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/75>

California is the endpoint of María's journey, you yourself live and work in Los Angeles, and the city itself plays a significant role in much of your work. In fact, California audiences will have had more frequent opportunities to see this work than New York audiences, which was certainly on our minds when we pursued it for MoMA's collection. Did you envision how contemporary audiences in California might respond to María's story? What about when the work is viewed in other geographies?

I knew that I was speaking to a specific audience—a Latinx, Southwest audience—at least at the time the work was conceived. I wanted my chosen community to be encouraged and edified by her story. Over the years I have begun to realize that her story goes beyond my family and the geography of the Southwest. I think the recognition of women's strength is something that can never be overdone or overstated. Critically, the work has not been received well for whatever reason, but this has not seemed to impact the interest in the work from audiences or curators. Because of this, I think most people can relate to her migration story. The story needs to be specific enough to be interesting and general enough to appeal to everyone—it's a fine balance. I think the work strikes this balance.



1945, Aliso Village, Boyle Heights, California

The work prompts us to consider how both the hardships of migration and its possibilities continue to shape future generations. At the Museum, we've benefited from the expertise of Megan Feingold, coordinator in the Department of Photography, who as part of her own scholarship on the work has noted its relevance today. This is true on a wide scale but also on a personal level: By picturing yourself in the guise of María, you convey in a physical way how her experiences had a direct impact on you, her descendant. Why did you choose to take on the role? What was the experience of "playing" this part?

I had to embody her. Originally, I had conceived the piece as a family photograph and text piece with handwritten elements. However, I found out that there were only two existing photographs of María. This speaks to the ubiquity and at the same time rarity of the photographic record of one's life at that time. Who gets photographed? I could not work with just two photos. My grandfather had always told me that I looked like María, and my middle name is also María, so I decided to be her in the photographs.

I was given a small honorarium by the Mexican Museum, who originally commissioned the work through curator Chon Noriega. I decided to use the honorarium to produce the work. It was a collaborative process: favors from friends, borrowing a car, a camera, a kitchen. It was quite an undertaking. At the same time, I recognized I could not completely and accurately reconstruct the different time periods, I didn't really even want to do this. I included anachronisms to let the audience know that this is a reconstruction or "reenactment." By including contemporary elements into the photos, I wanted to convey the idea that this migration story is historical but also still relevant and current.

María did her part in creating people that make a difference. I won't go into details about my grandfather's and mother's activism, but María's life became a kind of foundation for courage and independence within my family that certainly influenced me.



1950, San Diego, California



Christina Fernandez. *María's Great Expedition*. 1995–96