

# KEEP ON DANCING

Travels through California and Mexico

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## Contents

Acknowledgments.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Background.....	5
The places my writing would take me.....	7
The ways I would get there.....	8
California: Sandra.....	8
Mexico: Marion.....	21
Conclusion.....	35
Sharing the work.....	37
Appendix 1: travel itinerary.....	38
California.....	38
Mexico.....	39
Appendix 2: Meanwhile Gallery Artwork.....	40

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## Introduction

From April to December 2019 I travelled through California and Mexico, meeting friends and family, tracing the steps of my Aunt Sandra Bogart and my Grandmother Marion Grant. What I hadn't realised when I set out, was that this journey would be just as much about my own coming of age into being a writer, and being an independent woman in the world, as it was about those two women.

In this report I set out the questions that I began with when I started the trip, and then look at how the answers to them became something that was much more personal, to be found inside myself, rather than solely through the interviews and research I was conducting.

The purpose of the Winston Churchill McNeish Writers' fellowship is for a promising writer to be immersed within another culture by travelling and living overseas, and for their horizons to broaden and shift so their writing is enhanced. I was certainly immersed, and my horizons were broadened, shifted. I explored new forms of writing, adapting to the reality of being on the road, and of course, being faced with all the challenges that culture-shock and solo-travel bring. In these nearly eight months of writing I became a real writer, and for that, I am sure James would be proud.

## Background

I applied for the funds from the Winston Churchill foundation to research for a work of fiction based on the lives and travels of my late Aunt Sandra Bogart and my Grandmother, Marion Grant.

Sandra was born in September 1952 in the border town of Calexico, California. Her father was a Jewish Russian immigrant and seafood importer living in the desert. Her mother, a housewife in post-war America. Sandra grew up speaking Spanish and wearing beaten bronze earrings the shape of coyotes. She studied at Berkley in the early 1970s and later at San Diego State University.

Marion Grant was born in December 1928 in Wellington. Her father owned a construction company that built The Old Hutt Road when it was just The Hutt Road. In 1954, after returning from a jaunt in London (quite reckless at the time, she turned down her suitors) she came back and met, danced with and married my grandfather, Knox Grant. In 1955, my uncle Knox Junior was born in Upper Hutt.

And so life goes on. Little Sandra and Knox grew up on different sides of the Pacific and in 1982, in a queue at Suva airport, the two of them met. A random queue to get on a plane. A fate that brought them together.

They married in 1984 in Marion and Knox Senior's garden. Knox and Sandra moved back to California and in 1987, after buying a travel agency in the Wairarapa, Marion took a trip around Mexico and at the end, visited them in California. Knox Senior came to visit from New Zealand and the four of them drank and swam and saw art in the dry summer. A week after they returned home, Knox Senior died.

In the early 1990s Sandra's marriage began to founder and she moved to New Zealand and next door to my family, her "out-laws" as she called us, effectively swapping nationalities with my uncle who remained in America. My brothers and I soon became her surrogate children and she our second *mom*, the one who taught us new ways to sing happy birthday (*feliz cumpleaños*), had clothes covered in toucans and giraffes, and taught me (I can't speak for my brothers) about sex.

Around the same time, Marion moved to London as a widow, single in her sixties, where she stayed for almost 20 years. During this time Sandra and Marion exchanged many letters, discussing what it meant to be women, alone in the world, so far from their families, yet independent and full of the excitement and possibilities of new places.

My father designed Sandra a house in the pohutakawa trees at Waipu Cove, overlooking the Hen and Chicken islands, where she lived for 18 years. Sandra was full of joy. She brought belly dance to New Zealand, to the North, played ukulele, planted trees, wrote and made a community many days travel from where she was born. Her garden was full of cacti and she died in October 2015, just six months after my own mother had passed away. I lost two mothers in one year.

In early 2018 I finished writing the first draft of my first novel, based around my mother's death. The Fellowship research I undertook in California and Mexico will become the basis for a second novel, but more immediately, when I was on the trip I wrote a travel memoir that came naturally as I was meeting people and journaling my experiences.

## The places my writing would take me

In this project I was looking to explore three main ideas:

- The search we are all on for an interesting and fulfilling life and the role that travel has in this
- The lonely difficult aspects of travelling and being away from home and how the sense of home can shift and change when away
- How strong independent women are formed, looking at Sandra and Marion as examples for a starting point for reflecting on my own experiences.

These three themes carried me through my research, thinking and writing while I was travelling.

## The ways I would get there

### California: Sandra



The first part of my research started with reviewing the many documents, photos, letters and journals that Sandra had left after she died. I was also able to access Sandra's hard drives containing the files from her computers from the last twenty years. This was a very special and private look into her world. I gained an understanding of who she was and how difficult her life was at times, how vulnerable she was. Like me, she was a person who used her diaries as a way to work through her insecurities and issues. I was also reminded of how much power and verve she had:

*If I didn't keep busy learning and doing new things like telling stories, writing columns in the Northern Advocate, teaching dance, taking photos,*



*and making docos, I would rather have been a singer in Tina Turner's band!*

The strength of her commitment to living her best life became the core of my questioning when I spoke to her friends and family. In my interviews I always asked:

- How do you think Sandra was able to throw herself into almost anything – landscape gardening, writing, physical therapy, ukulele – seemingly without caring whether she was good at it or what anyone thought?
- What was it that made this little girl from a town on the California-Mexico border grow up to be the most vivacious and interesting woman living in Northland, New Zealand?
- Why did she want to leave California and what was it that you think she found in New Zealand?

I visited and interviewed the following people in California between 20 April and 20 May:

- Mark and Michele Nasitir, Santa Monica
- Martha Wilkins, Santa Barbara
- Kathy Sommer, Corona del Mar
- Jill Thrasher, Sherman Gardens Library, Corona del Mar
- Catherine and Robert Bogart, San Diego
- Sarah Garro, The Bishop's School, La Jolla
- Jacqui Crowle and Charles Scott, San Diego
- Marie Crowle, San Diego
- Frank and Libby Deft, San Diego
- Jesus de la Rosa, San Diego
- Javier Lopez, Calexico
- Hildy Carillo, Calexico
- Mike Bogart, Calexico



Martha Wilkins, Michele and Mark Nasitir in Santa Barbara

I was able to take my time meeting with people and have conversations with them over a number of days, as well as join some people as they went about their daily lives – visiting a dying mother in a rest home, having a standing Friday lunch date with a friend, taking the dogs for a walk. Naturally, conversations digressed and new stories both related and unrelated to Sandra were uncovered. I have extensive notes from these conversations, and am working on a travel memoir that brings together my experiences around the key themes I was exploring. This part of the report highlights some of the most interesting conversations I had and insights I gained about Sandra.

I learnt that Southern California feels a lot like New Zealand. There are pohutakawa and eucalyptus trees, manuka and flax. I could see why Sandra felt at home when she arrived in Auckland. I also learnt why she wanted to leave. That beautiful California coast is ravished by development, highways that drown

out the sounds of the ocean. I noticed it even in the little things: everyone I saw had brand new iphones and there were signs outside shops saying things like “your husband called - he said you can buy anything.”



Martha and I at Lotus Land, Montecito, one of Sandra's favourite spots

Martha Wilkins, Sandra's closest friend who had met her at Berkeley, told me that Sandra was depressed by the consumerism, by the industrialization of food, the breakdown of the healthcare system. After all, she studied nutrition at Berkeley. “She wanted to live there, he wanted to live here, and that wasn't really spoken about,” Martha said about Sandra's relationship with Knox. This, ultimately, became the power play in their marriage and when it ended, Sandra got what she wanted – her New Zealand citizenship.

Many of the conversations I had with Sandra's friends, all of whom were well into their sixties, centered around healthcare. Even just thinking about it, let alone having to deal with making a claim, created huge amounts of anxiety. These



discussions were, naturally, also related to their work and working lives. This, it became apparent, was one of the main factors that set Sandra apart from her friends. In discussions with almost all her friends, I learnt how unique Sandra's economic situation was, and how it allowed her the freedom not to develop a singular career.

"Sandra had freedom because she always had the income," Martha told me. "Her father had the properties, and then with her parents dying quite young, there was still inheritance." Martha was looking after her mother who was in her 90s and the residential care is incredibly expensive, so she spoke from experience.



Downtown Calexico at the US-Mexican Border

At a diner in Calexico, Sandra's brother Bob Bogart and I met with some of Sandra's oldest friends: Hildy Carillo and Javier Lopez. I learnt that Sandra's mother Pat was a hillbilly from Missouri with blonde hair and blue eyes. She married Zachary Bogart, 30 years her senior, a Russian Jew who fled to China in

1918 during the Bolshevik Revolution. He ended up an economics professor at Berkeley then came to the Imperial Valley because he was a good business person and could see that there was an opportunity to make money there. The family bought a hotel in a small town called Brawley and later a shrimp fishing business in San Felipe, Baja California.



Me, Hildy Carillo, Bob Bogart and Javier Lopez

The Bogarts lived in a custom-built ranch style house on Third Street, Calexico. It was long and low and had a swimming pool out the back that was above the ground with a small set of stairs at the side and wasn't a tract home like everyone else's, because the Bogarts had money.

Javier told a story about the summer of 1967. There had been a cricket infestation that had taken over the town, whole streets shimmering with them. They were ruining businesses and eating all the arugula in the fields. Farmers were laying off their labourers. The family living next door to the Bogarts were desperate. The father lost his job as a labourer and they couldn't make ends meet. But that wasn't really the whole truth, Javier said. It was because he was addicted to heroin. Many people were back then. The Bogarts bought a pool table off the neighbours for a hundred dollars to help them out, Javier remembers. So that summer all the teenagers hung out at the Bogarts' place. The father next door died the following year and the mom and children had to go back to Mexico to stay with family. That's the way things were back then.

"Sandra's mom was the coolest," Hildy said. "Pat Bogart." Hildy was eating a bun-less burger because she was on a diet. She leant over so I could hear her better and pushed a bracelet up her arm so it didn't fall into her salad: it was a piece of twisted silver, the same as one Sandra gave me when I was twelve but have since lost. "We never called her just Pat, it was Patbogart one word." Hildy touched my arm. Her fingernails were shiny purple and long. "My mom was like 'no friends' and all we ate was rice and tortillas at home, but at Sandy's house Pat Bogart had Betty Crocker brownies and we could always sleep over." The girls would buy Archie comics with money Pat gave them. There was no such thing as pocket money for Hildy, who was expected to clean her house and help her mother with the laundry as a normal activity. It didn't warrant being paid.

The Bogarts were the wealthiest family in Calexico. This meant that in the drug riddled 1960s, Sandra's parents had enough money to send her away to boarding school in La Jolla – The Bishops' School, for girls. There's no doubt that Bishop's gave Sandra opportunities she would never have had if she stayed in Calexico. A large number of Bob and Sandra's friends at school died before they were eighteen from heroin overdoses. Sandra was one of the lucky ones.



Sandra at The Bishop's School in 1970

I visited The Bishop's School, a pretty mission style set of buildings sitting on the hills high above the Pacific Ocean, in the northern part of San Diego. I met with Sarah Garro the Alumni Relations advisor who was kind enough to give me a tour around the school and had been in touch with some of Sandra's classmates to fish out stories for me. A classmate sent a lovely email, describing Sandie, as she was known then, as outgoing, dependable, always volunteering wherever help was needed and had a "deceptively sly sense of humor."

The school treats their alumni with a lot of respect, so I was welcomed and given a place to study for the day, to look over yearbooks and photos and have a tour of the old boarding house that had been turned into classrooms. A nice young

geography teacher in chinos showed me the work they'd been doing. "But we share with a French class" he said, showing maps of the world next to tables of verbs. He told us that this year he has more than twenty students. "But that's not normal, we try to keep the classes small" he said, as though I had a child who wants to go there. I wondered again, not for the first time on this trip, whether I am likely to end up childless like Sandra. Life, I realise, doesn't always go to plan.

In her senior yearbook, 1970, Sandra's classmates provided the following "catch phrase" paragraph about her:

"Boarding council president...sandie...laughter... farout...cactus...expressive eyes... denise, he has that look...indians...worry...guys at every port...lazy...virgo...rasty jokes...diablito bonito...mona lisa...what a drag...sewing...lazy...i can't wait...convivial..."sure, why not?"...on the road again."

There are many of these qualities that I can relate to Sandra as the woman I knew. Expressive, laughing, convivial, on the road again. Lazy, however, comes up twice and that doesn't seem to fit. Maybe it's actually something more like what Martha described to me, that Sandra was interested in so many things that she never finished anything before she moved onto the next exciting project. Indeed, her hard-drives are filled with half written stories and unedited short films. I recognise this feeling in myself – the sense that I can do anything, the only thing holding me back is my own fear and perfectionism, the worry that everything has to be perfect.

My trip precipitated the reunion of Martha and Michelle Nasitir, who had both studied at Berkeley with Sandra and hadn't seen each other for almost 20 years. In our conversation, that lasted several hours, I asked them about being feminists in the 1970s, whether marriage was important to them and their friends back then. I was trying to figure out whether Sandra represented an outlier in her group of friends, a single woman who could never stay coupled up for long.



Michele answered “no!” straight away to the marriage question, but then backtracked - both her college roommates married the boyfriends they had at Berkeley. But the aim wasn't to become full time mothers, they both agreed. They always had it in their minds that they would go to college and then get a job and support themselves. They were that generation. The first, really, Michele said.

Thanks to Sandra's father's rental properties in Santa Monica, she never had to get a job to support herself. Instead, she followed her passions and turned her hands to many things. I started to realise that Sandra's approach to life was in part the result of an economic freedom rather than simply having the self-confidence to try being a filmmaker one day and a belly dancer the next.



Sandra getting ready for a dance, San Diego, 1980s.

Another friend of Sandra's, Kathy Sommer, described Sandra turning up at Sherman Gardens in 1987, where Kathy was working, first as a horticultural student intern and then an employee. Sandra was living nearby in Corona del Mar with Knox, having just moved back there from New Zealand. She went by *Sandra Grant* at the time. Kathy hired Sandra, who had come to the nursery with absolutely no experience, just unflappable enthusiasm. Sandra had grown up in the desert and didn't have a garden, but Kathy said she was adamant she wanted to learn, and, it's no surprise to me, developed green thumbs very quickly. Together Kathy and Sandra had wide-ranging powers in the garden. The janitor was Kathy's lover, a handsome young surfer who didn't have a home phone and would call her from the 711 at Laguna Beach, and the three of them, Kathy tells me with a smile and a little giggle, got up to all kinds of mischief.

I visited Sherman Gardens with Kathy and she showed me a rock garden that she and Sandra had designed and made, still intact today. I also visited the on-site library where I met with librarian Jill Thrasher who had gathered together some archived material from the years Sandra worked at Sherman Gardens. I spent a day in the library looking through the material, taking note of everything from luncheon menus to news about volunteer projects Sandra worked on.

Kathy also took me to the nearby Armstrong Gardens where I met Tom Snyder, the manager who had been working there since in 1980s. He remembered Sandra fondly and told me about the dance parties they used to have in her living room while Knox was away, Sandra entertaining a bevy of gay men, dancing in their underwear. There were many scenes like this I collected, filed away in my own writer's archive.



Kathy Sommer at Sherman Gardens

While in Santa Barbara with Martha, I went and saw the writer Anne Lamott give a talk at the theatre where Martha volunteered as an usher. Anne has written one of my favourite books about writing, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, and in her talk she stressed the idea that “perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor,” meaning that in order to be a writer, you just have to get on and do it: there’s no room or time to try and be perfect. If you’re too worried about being perfect, you will never start anything. Martha and I talked about this afterwards, and she told me that Sandra’s motto had always been “do things less well.”

Having this conversation with Martha helped me to relax. I am a person who is a very hard on myself as I always expect the best. A perfectionist. Talking with Martha, and Sandra’s other friends who were all more than 30 years older than me, I learnt to be kinder to myself. There is no point in living your life as though

anyone is judging you, least of all yourself. Sandra didn't do this. Martha doesn't do this. Anne Lammott doesn't do this. I had to realize that I was doing a very hard activity: facing into my grief following the death of both my Mother and my Aunt, and trying to write about it. It was no small task. No one said it was going to be easy. There were many moments in my conversations with Sandra's friends and family where I felt that it wasn't my place to be digging up their memories, their grief, that I wasn't doing this perfectly. But everyone welcomed me with open arms. Martha now refers to me as her New Zealand daughter, and Catherine Bogart wants to take me to Spain, wants to do the trip with me that she and Sandra had planned and never got around to. Just as Sandra developed strong bonds with my family in New Zealand, I now have homes all over California, and endless stories to write about. That is a huge testament and legacy for Sandra, a woman with a voracious appetite for making human connections and expressing herself creatively.



## Mexico: Marion



Every time I speak with my Grandmother I receive new stories. It wasn't until I was in my Master of Creative Writing course in 2017 and was interviewing her about her life, that I learnt she used to own a travel agency in the Wairarapa, and that she had been on a month long trip to Mexico in 1987. When we were having these conversations I had just returned from my first trip to Mexico, a two week flying visit with a friend who had been living in New York. I had been captivated by the energy of the place – the way the markets work, everyone conducting their lives on the street, the relative poverty people were living in and the amount of happiness they expressed. There was always a street parade or a wedding spilling out of a church into the town square.

I wanted to write about Mexico and about Marion's travels through it. Travel is something that I am constantly driven to do as it represents freedom and

expansion of experiences. I have a desperate feeling that I want to meet everyone in the world, go to every little café, understand what daily life is like in Oaxaca, Mexico City, Acapulco. But travel is also difficult. You don't escape from yourself when you travel. And you still need to feed yourself, house yourself, combat loneliness, make friends, find space and time to write.

Marion had told me about the places she visited, the resort towns of Cancun, Acapulco, and Puerto Vallarta. The ruins at Palenque, Tulum and Coba on the Yucatan Peninsula. She remembers buying a yellow silk scarf at a boutique, her favourite word in Spanish is amarillo, yellow. She remembers the vast amounts of Coca-Cola, huge trucks of it coming into small villages along dusty roads. She told me a story about going into the bay in Acapulco, back when it was still a place where people went on holiday, when the hotels above the Pacific were lined with marble and the pools were full of water clearer than the sky. On the boat, looking back to the shore and the cliffs, the buildings perched like pastel cakes, Marion asked the captain what happens to all the run off, the sewerage. He avoided answering. She pushed him, as is the way with my Grandmother, and he eventually relented, told her that it goes straight into the bay. Everyone else on the boat took off their clothes and jumped into the water. Marion stayed on board.

I knew that my own travels through Mexico could be guided by Marion's trip, as well as visiting places that Sandra had spent time in – Mexicali and San Felipe in Baja California. The aim of this part of my trip was to soak in the environment, build up all the real details of being in new places, visit archeological sites and markets, spend time in the resort towns that have passed their prime and, of course, be open to meet new people and develop my own stories.



Girls walking the board walk, San Felipe, Dia de la Independencia

My trip in Mexico started with Oaxaca, arriving from California on 20 May 2018. I was invited there by a woman named Maria Martinez, who is friends with my godfather, who himself was an old and very dear friend of Sandra and Marion. This was a somewhat unexpected change to my itinerary, but very much, I felt, in the spirit of Sandra to make new connections with people and then throw myself into spending time with them. Maria reminded me a lot of Sandra: a very open minded woman who surrounded herself with interesting artistic people. Unlike Sandra, she had decided at age 38 to adopt a baby girl and become a solo mother. In Oaxaca I spent three weeks with Maria and her daughter Paloma. The conversations I had with Maria, immediately following a month of interviews in California, focused a lot on our approaches to creating fulfilling lives, and how families and children play into that. She offered an excellent landing pad for me, and some time and space to decompress after California. In Oaxaca I joined a co-working space and where I met other artists and writers and spent time

reflecting on my travels thus far. I also met Maria's very interesting friends, including an American Academic specializing in Mexican political art, Ed McCaughn, who has been living in Mexico for 15 years and visiting since he was a young man in the early 1970s.



Lunch at Ed's house with Maria and new friends in Oaxaca

On the last day of June it was the Mexican Presidential Election, and the day that I faced into some of my fears and set off out of Oaxaca and onto the tourist trail as a single woman. It wasn't that I was fearful of my safety at all, just worried that I would get lonely. I had never embarked on such a long trip by myself alone – I had previously travelled with friends or stayed with friends and family along the way. I took a night bus to San Christobal de las Casas in Chiapas, the poorest and most Southern state of Mexico, bordering Guatemala. My plan was to spend



the month of July traveling from Chiapas to Merida, visiting many of the places Marion had seen when she was there in 1987.



Me visiting the hotel that D H Lawrence stayed at when he lived in Oaxaca

I soon realised that my real strength as a traveller was my openness. I met people walking in the streets, at cafes, at book stores, even in the air conditioned haven of a car rental office. In my ten days in Chiapas I even developed a writing community and went to two open mic nights where I read some of my travel writing. All the time I was doing what I had always yearned to do – to spend extended time in Mexico and really soak in the culture. In San Christobal I shopped at the markets, practiced Spanish, putting into practice the month of lessons I had done in Oaxaca. I tried every strange dairy product from the store on the corner and took unknown vegetables home to cook in my little Air B'n'B

kitchen. I met many retired Americans who, like Sandra's friends and family in California, spent much of the time talking about healthcare. They had moved to Chiapas to breathe in the clear mountain air, feel the energies of the place. I met a group of young Mexicans who taught me acro-yoga – a practice where two people work together, one holding the other up in the air, moving their body into different positions. They call it *flying*. I met a Dutch woman, Anne, who I spotted wearing a greenstone necklace and struck up a conversation. It was given to her by an ex-boyfriend, but later that year she made her own trip to New Zealand and I invited her to spend Christmas with my family at our beach house, which she did. Later in her trip she spent time with my family up North of Auckland in Waipu, just near Sandra's place. This was a perfect expression of travel just as Sandra would have done it – open, inviting and always looking to connect people.



Delivery of Coca-cola to a small local shop in San Christobal, Chiapas

From the mountains of San Christobal I descended into the jungle on the road to Palenque, the glass windows of the mini-van fogging with condensation on the outside like a jug of water. This part of the trip was the most physically uncomfortable - some days were upwards of 35 degree heat and 70% humidity - but also the most liberating. From that first day in Palenque till my plane from Merida to Mexico City, I spent two weeks in my bathing suit, swimming every day until I got an ear infection and had to spend an hour in the air-conditioned waiting room of a doctor's office in Tulum.

I was most interested to visit the resort towns of Tulum and Cancun where Marion had spent time. She had gone there on a promotional trip supported by the Mexican tourism board who were wanting to expand their tourism market beyond the typical North American crowd. Cancun was identified as a site for tourism by the Mexican government in 1968 and development began in earnest. The land was originally a very delicate low lying sandspit, so to see the absolutely enormous glass and steel hotel monstrosities that have been built there is quite horrific. The most pure expression of man trying to conquer nature.

I arrived at Cancun on a bus from Tulum and was immediately swamped by a barrage of taxi drivers who could speak English and were quoting me exorbitant rates. Cancun is an area that is still heavily frequented by tourists from the United States and is known as Plastic City to the locals. I managed to negotiate a tour with a taxi driver for twenty USD for a cruise of the hotel strip. Not really that much money in the scheme of things, but more than I had been used to spending. My Spanish was getting better by this stage and I was confident and relaxed, the words came easier to my lips. I talked with the driver, Luis, about his life in Cancun. He had lived there since he was a child and loved the warm weather. His son was at medical school in nearby Merida and he had been driving tourists around Cancun for fifteen years. He didn't seem phased by what I saw as a disturbing mark on the environment, but rather, the popularity and development in Cancun meant he was able to make a good living. As we

drove along we listened to music he had on a USB stick plugged into the stereo. *Don't Dream It's Over* by Crowded House came on as we drove, the windows down and the breeze a welcome relief. We sung along together, his words a little garbled in his mouth, but both of us smiling, excited to be making this unlikely connection.



Cancun, hotels stretching to the end of the spit

In Tulum I had visited the ruins on the cliff. It was a terribly hot day filled with tourists who clogged the narrow stone pathways between buildings and jostled for the best photo spots. I was alone and had thought how much more interesting it would have been to have a friend there, or even Marion, so we could at least dart between shaded spots together, imagine what it was like when the Mayans inhabited the space. Instead, I was solo and somewhat mindlessly following the



sun struck crowd, arm to sweaty sunblocked arm with Americans in diamante encrusted jandals.

I also visited the much more pleasant and less populated Coba ruins that were deeper in the jungle and spread out with pathways between the crumbling stone structures. I had gone with three others, a young Canadian woman and two Germans who were staying at the hostel with me. At the entrance of the ruins we hired bicycles and rode beneath the thick humid shade of tall trees. It always feels good to be in a bike gang, and it was in this shared day of travel with these others that I felt far more relaxed, happy and present, outside my own head. It was more fun to be with people, I realised, than to be some kind of solo martyr who was focused on an idea of finding myself. At any rate, I had my whole life to do that, and hopefully, my life would be long like Marion's, not short like Sandra's or my mother's. Relax, I could hear these women telling me. The secret is just to relax and have fun.



Me and Alexe, the Canadian at the top of the Coba Pyramid

I arrived in Mexico City in the final days of July and soon found an apartment with a young Mexican woman, Lula Curioa. I had been travelling quite intensely for a month and needed to sit down and write. Lula is a fashion and perfume designer with a home studio and together we got into an excellent daily routine: exercising and visiting the local market in the morning, buying fresh juice and flowers, then going home to work on our projects. I would often accompany her in the afternoons on buying expeditions to the wholesale markets in the center of the city where she sought out fabrics and glass bottles, essential oils and cardboard gift boxes. Through Lula I met her friends and family, the majority of whom worked in fashion, film, art and as writers. Her brother ran an independent poetry press and her sister-in-law had recently been awarded some funding from the Mexican Government to write her first novel.

I joined three different writing groups throughout the city and met even more people. My evenings were spent at salsa clubs and art galleries, meeting new friends at restaurants and cooking for others with the beautiful ingredients I found in the markets, paddles of cactus and cinnamon sticks as long as my arm. I posed as a life model for an American painter in her cheap and lofty downtown studio, I met a man at a bar that was decorated with dusty matador costumes and started to fall in love. I celebrated Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) with Lula's family, we set up a shrine in our apartment to Sandra and my Mum, Lula's grandmother too.

I had created a life for myself in Mexico City. I was an independent woman who had, quite quickly really, carved out space for myself in one of the largest cities in the world, in a country where many people (especially my Californian interviewees) had warned me not to go. Too dangerous, too poor, not comfortable enough for a nice young woman like me. By the time I left Mexico City in November there were 27 people who came to my going away party and I didn't really want to leave.



Day of the Dead, Mexico City

There was still more of Mexico that I wanted to see. More places that Marion had been to. From Mexico City I travelled to both Acapulco and Puerto Vallarta, resort towns on Mexico's Pacific Coast.

Acapulco was a particularly interesting experience. I took a bus there from Mexico City and felt a great relief as the air got noticeably warmer, the green jungle greeted me, reminding me that all the world is beautiful, it's just that in New Zealand we have such easy access to the natural environment. For everything I loved about Mexico City, the pollution and the constant noise of traffic had been slowly driving me mad. I stayed in Acapulco's old hotel zone that had its heyday earlier than Cancun, in the 1950s when the glitzy Hollywood set would come down to feel the sea breeze through cliff top palm trees. By the 1970s, as Marion had inferred, the bay that Acapulco was set around was polluted by raw sewerage that had been pouring in for years, thanks to overdevelopment and overpopulation. Since the early 1990s there had been an

effort to clean it back up and attract tourists, so Marion's trip there may have been the very beginning of that revitalization effort.



Caption: Woman selling bags on the beach, McDonalds in the background

In an effort to put Acapulco back on the tourist map, the original hotel zone, high on the cliffs with fantastic Westerly views, looking straight to the sunset, was abandoned. A new hotel development was built 20 kilometers away. But I wasn't interested in that. I booked into stay at a famous kitsch hotel, *Los Flamingos*, that had once been owned by Hollywood's John Wayne, bought in 1954 as a private hideaway and frequented by movie stars. When I showed up, a Wednesday night in the low season, there were only two other guests. A woman, Anna Laura, from Cuernavaca who had been coming to the hotel for years as she was friends with the current owner. She used to be a professional skydiver and was staying in one of the dilapidated back rooms while she was looking after her cousin with cancer. The other guest was Hugo Zuniga, an artist in his eighties who was in an even more run down part of the hotel where he had been given free range to paint murals on the walls of an entire wing. The two of them entertained me, speaking



in slow Spanish and telling stories of the city as we fed tortillas to the raccoons that poked their heads into the open lobby from the dark garden beyond. In the days I spent there I ventured through the old hotel zone, taking photos of the abandoned magnificent buildings, complete with crumbling Roman columns and cracked pastel plaster, rusty and beaten, vines growing up the balconies like modern day ruins. This desolation set against the glistening blue of the Pacific presented the most dramatic images of my time in Mexico and I truly felt I got a sense of the place it had been, the place it was when Marion visited, and the tensions that were currently present as Acapulco vied for the tourist dollar without really having the necessary infrastructure.



Hugo Zuniga outside his studio at Los Flamingos

I ended my time in Mexico in Baja, at the border with California. I flew into Mexicali on 18 November, the same day as news was breaking that the immigrant caravan from Central America had made it there on their way to Tijuana. In a taxi from the airport I saw a family walking, holding their belongings above their heads, making shade the size of a rucksack. I saw a man pour water from a plastic bottle into a small boy's mouth. The taxi driver told me 100 local residents had died in their homes that summer, the temperatures get to over 50 degrees Celsius and not everyone can afford air conditioners. This is where Sandra's father lived after he separated from her mother. In some of Sandra's school yearbooks she's listed as being from Mexicali, Mexico. It is very difficult for me to get around the town. It's all six lanes of traffic and indoor malls. The center of town is dominated by gangs, drug runners trying to cross the border, so I'm told. I stayed in a hotel where the only option to eat was an overpriced buffet, so I went to the supermarket across the highway to buy snacks instead. In the supermarket there were bags of emergency groceries selling for under 200 pesos: rice, beans, oil, cereal, pasta, tomato paste, toilet paper. I bought cheese and crackers and ate them in my hotel room while I wrote.

From Mexicali I visited San Felipe, the fishing village where Sandra's father had a shrimp hauling business. Like Mexicali, the village was dusty and dry and the tide so long and low that I didn't make it to the water. It was winter and the sun woke and set early. I stayed the night in a motel on the main drag and the next day, 20 November, walked to the shore at dawn. A fisherman on a quad bike asked me if I wanted to go out to the rocks with him. There were still fish in this sea. I said no, that I was leaving soon, and he told me to stay because later in the day there was going to be a big parade in town. So I did and the parade was huge. Dia de la Revolucion. For some reason I hadn't known this, I was still an outsider, moving through the country without fully having integrated. School children from all over the district came together and paraded down the streets in colourful dresses with fake moustaches and cardboard rifles. Their teachers had boom boxes that played the sound of gunfire and the children got down on their

knees and pretended to shoot. There was so much inherited violence in this part of Mexico. Inherited and lived. It's no wonder that Sandra was a strong person, a fighter, and arriving in New Zealand must have been like getting to some kind of vacuumed paradise, a place where she could relax and breathe in air that wouldn't catch in her lungs.



Girls in the San Felipe Dia de la Revolucion parade

## Conclusion

These months were some of the most challenging times of my life. For the first time I found myself outside of an institution. I wasn't in school, or university, or work. I was faced with the experience of being totally in charge of my own time. And that's reality – that's what it's like for writers. So the time I had travelling and writing made me figure out the writing routine that worked for me and what I needed to stay motivated. I read a lot, I found writing communities in Mexico City, Oaxaca and San Christobal, I was open and flexible to new experiences. Without

this time, and without the Fellowship funding, I would not have had the opportunity to deepen my writing practice in this way and to understand what it is really like to be a writer in the world.

Through the process I also realised how hard it is to write about someone close to you when you are still in the grieving process. I was still grieving Sandra's death and so to be creating a work of fiction from her life felt like I wasn't honouring her in the right way. Plus, the realities of being on the road meant that I was in sponge mode and it was more natural to be writing a non-fiction memoir, blending together stories about Sandra and Marion with my own experiences. I had been reading several books that inspired my writing: Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage*, a hilarious account of Geoff travelling the world while trying to write a biography of D H Lawrence; *Jane* by Maggie Nelson, a book written in poetry, prose and diary entries, weaving together the story of Maggie's aunt Jane who was murdered before she was born; Leslie Jamison's *The Recovering* the story of the author's alcoholism and its impact on her writing process, integrating travels she did through Central America while trying to write. The Fellowship really allowed me to enhance my writing as I explored new and more innovative forms.

In terms of what I learnt from about these women from this trip, and what I learnt about myself, the overriding learning is that you can't escape yourself or your life through travel. While travelling and living in new communities can certainly enhance and broaden your perspective and makes you assess preconceived ideas of values and purpose, no matter where you go in the world, you are still yourself, with all of the background and experiences you have had up to that point. On this trip I experienced loneliness, a sense of being awash, at sea, I felt like I wasn't ready to be writing about Sandra, that I wasn't allowing myself proper time to grieve, whatever that means. But coming through the trip and having made all the amazing friends and connection that I did, I also realise how strong and resilient I am. Just like Sandra I successfully set up a life for myself in

a foreign city. Just like Marion I travelled fearlessly to remote parts of the world that had hardly even featured in my imagination. And just like many people before me, the travel has made me appreciate New Zealand more than ever. I don't know if I will ever *feel* as strong and independent as I always *saw* Sandra and Marion being, but maybe that's the point: on the inside we are rich, complex, and vulnerable, despite what we display on the outside. The very purpose of writing, for me, is to explore my inner world and philosophies, and share that with others, with the hope that sharing will touch something in a reader and we can all feel a little less alone in the world.

### **Sharing the work**

Towards the end of 2018 I was invited to be part of a group exhibition at *Meanwhile Gallery* in Wellington. I created an artwork that reflected my research in California and was exhibited in the gallery from 30 November – 8 December.

I am currently compiling my writing from the trip, as well as continuing to write and reflect on the trip, in order to finish the travel memoir. I am submitting extracts of the writing, in the form of essays, to literary journals for publication.

I was interviewed by Victoria University prior to going on my trip and again since returning, and a story will be published imminently in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences newsletter.

## Appendix 1: travel itinerary

### California

<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>People interviewed</b>
20 – 21 April 2018	Santa Monica, Los Angeles	Mark and Michele Nasitir
22 – 29 April 2018	Santa Barbara	Martha Wilkins
30 April – 3 May 2018	Corona Del Mar	Kathy Sommer Jill Thrasher, Sherman Garden's Library
4 May – 19 May 2018	San Diego Calexico (side visit)	Catherine and Robert Bogart Sarah Garro, The Bishop's School, La Jolla Jacqui Crowle and Charles Scott, San Diego Marie Crowle, San Diego Frank and Libby Deft, San Diego Jesus de la Rosa, San Diego Javier Lopez, Calexico Hildy Carillo, Calexico Mike Bogart, Calexico
21 – 23 November 2018	Calexico	Thanksgiving with Catherine Bogart's family

## Mexico

<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>
20 May – 30 June 2018	Oaxaca City, Oaxaca
1 – 14 July 2018	San Christobal de las Casas, Chiapas
15 – 16 July 2018	Palenque, Chiapas
17 – 18 July 2018	Bacalar, Quintana Roo
19 – 22 July 2018	Tulum, Quintana Roo Coba, Quintana Roo
23 – 25 July 2018	Cancun, Quintana Roo
26 – 28 July 2018	Valladolid, Yucatan Chichen Itza, Yucatan
29 July 2018	Merida, Yucatan
30 July – 15 November 2018 (with side trips listed below)	Mexico City, Estadio Mexico
29 – 31 August 2018	Tepotzlan, Morelos
10 – 14 September 2018	Guanajuato City and San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato
16 – 19 October 2018	Acapulco, Guerrero
10 – 13 November 2018	Valle de Bravo, Estadio Mexico
16 – 18 November 2018	Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco
19 November 2018	Mexicali, Baja
20 November 2018	San Felipe, Baja
21 November 2018	Mexicali, Baja Crossed border by foot into Calexico for Thanksgiving with the Bogarts.



## Appendix 2: Meanwhile Gallery Artwork

