

Mapping Our Heartlands: In Memory of Doctor Pam Dahl-Helm Johnston

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Johnston P., 2007. *HEARTLANDS: Anatomy of the Human Heart* Exhibition, Kendal Gallery in conjunction with Women's Arts International Festival, Kendal Cumbria

My relationship with my heart is close; intimate. I heard it beating before I was born. I have heard it beating all my life. I will hear my last heartbeat as I die. It is what I share with all in the family of humanity (Johnston, P., 2007).

When Pam and I finished writing *Remembering Ruby* – a tribute to author and Bundjalung elder Doctor Ruby Langford Ginibi for a special edition of *Coolabah Journal* – I had little idea that within six months I would also be mourning my dear friend, fellow academic, artistic colleague and sister in arms, Doctor Pam Johnston. Now, just over a year after her death, I am grateful to have been given the opportunity by *Coolabah* to edit this special collection of pieces commemorating the extraordinary life and times of Pam Dahl-Helm Johnston. Pam's life is remarkable for any number of reasons: her inimitable spirit and remarkable resilience in the face of many difficulties is a quality that those close to her will remember well. However it is her achievements as an activist and artist that give us an opportunity to show how the life of this remarkable woman was shaped by the context of her times and the changing discourses of representation, identity and gender politics in the peripatetic cultural landscape of Australia

in the 20th and 21st centuries. This edition of *Coolabah* commemorates Pam in terms of her contribution to the world of art through her expansive oeuvre of exhibitions, two doctoral degrees and numerous publications as well as her great achievements as an artist in that world. Pam was also a tireless worker for the broad range of communities she was a part of and in her promotion of understanding between cultures as well as between genders and their attendant sexual proclivities.

Pam identified as a Gamileroiⁱ person from around the Tamworth area and her art and life has comprised an ongoing journey of understanding of what that means in terms of her own and others' lives and her interaction with community as a result of this understanding. As a consequence of this she became an active member of the burgeoning Indigenous art movement of the late twentieth century and part of what Henry Reynolds describes as 'the sudden and brilliant efflorescence of traditional painting in all its regional diversity [that] mirrored the dramatic emergence of land rights on centre stage in national politics' (2013, p. 24). In an article by the art editor for independent Aboriginal weekly newspaper *Tunggare News*, coming out of Redfern Sydney, she is described as having 'attained seniority as an elder of the Gamileroi (Kamileroi) people whose women identify with the long-legged emu ... from around Werris Creek, south west of Tamworth in the direction of Moree' (Desovski M., 2002, p. 17). The article goes on to quote Pam as expressing her love for and identification with the land through the notion of being in the land rather than on it, a concept that has been explored by many other Indigenous Australian, artists, writers and philosophers.

When I'm actually developing my imagery, time stands still. I truly exist in that moment. There is nothing else. For me the process of painting and drawing has a sense of religiousness about it ... It is the creative process itself that has most significance for me. It is the time when I understand the nature of universal religion and truth as an elemental balance. The exploration of that thing inside myself that comes out of my complete solitude and undergoes a metamorphosis into a complete visual work, be it a sand painting, an installation, a musical work, a drawing, a painting, a photograph (Johnston P., in Desovski M., 2002, p. 17).

The contributors to this edition of *Coolabah* have all known Pam in a number of different ways but what links them, apart from their relationships with Pam, is their interest in art and representation and so too, this edition explores how one woman managed to define herself through the world of visual representation and, in so-doing, articulate something of what it has meant to be woman and Indigenous in a life spanning the 20th and 21st centuries, a time of great ferment and change in the world of art itself and in particular the ways in which Indigenous people have articulated multiple identifications through that same world. Pam was an activist and so her personal identifications are also political in the sense that all her art contained a philosophical engagement with her life as a community worker in women's refuges, jails and other places where her values in relation to human rights and equality were put into action. At times these identifications were controversial and called into question the very manner in which we identify ourselves. As a long-time friend and fellow academic we had numerous discussions about the ways in which we could incorporate multiple identities (rather than one fixed identity) within ourselves. What we have here in this collection of remembrances and tributes is a monument to the capacity of one person to contain multiple identities and to show how in the global context of the 21st century this is a necessary aspect to the spiritual and emotional survival of the contemporary artist.

In the work of Diana Wood Conroy, Emeritus professor, Visual Arts, University of Wollongong, who was Pam's supervisor for her first doctorate, the Doctor of Creative Arts degree (DCA) for practice-based research, we have an insightful meditation on the ways in which Pam interacted with others as a student and as a lecturer and tutor for "the first Introduction to Aboriginal Arts and Society subject at the then School of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong," that brought "Aboriginal artists, writers and thinkers into the lecture room." This paper raises important points around contemporary issues of identity and its impact on the visual arts in the 21st century particularly for countries like Australia that have built a national identity around a denial of a violent historical past and dispersal of the traditional values of the cultures that were here prior to colonization. She places Pam's work in an ongoing and necessary conversation that needs to be had around these issues as well as highlighting Pam's artistic focus on 'mother genealogy' and foregrounding her involvement in the feminism of the 1980s and 90s, which also provided a means for Pam to explore the disjuncture between western feminism and Aboriginal ideas of women's relationship to family and community.

Trevor Avery, Director of 'Another Space/Lake District Holocaust Project' in the Lake District of the United Kingdom, discusses his ongoing custodianship of Pam's exhibition titled "Shimmer - yinar dhenewan" a Wiradjuri phrase meaning 'Emu Woman' that mirrors Diana Wood-Conroy's memories of Pam at a ten-day artists workshop at Lake Mungo in western New South Wales, doing an "emu walk – stretching out her spine and walking on tip toe." A quote at the beginning of this piece that Pam wrote as part of the exhibition describes the road from Walgett to Lightning Ridge as "shimmering in the heat" where "emu chicks with their mothers were plentiful along the road." It is interesting to reflect on the way that the Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi languages intertwine, sharing much of the same vocabulary. Tamsin Donaldson writing for the Macquarie Dictionary of Aboriginal Words describes how:

... speakers of a group of languages to the west of the Great Dividing Range, for roughly its whole length of New South Wales distinguish themselves from one another. Each of these names starts with the word 'no' in the language concerned, followed by its suffix meaning 'with' or 'having' (2007, p. 2).

Thus Gamil-araay are the people who use *gamil* for 'no' and Wiradjuri are the people who use *wirray* for 'no'. It is hard, in the light of the history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in Australia, not to feel the language of resistance between the lines of identification here and to relate this to Pam's constant awareness of the need to resist the status quo on her own terms. In Pam's relationship with Trevor and what Trevor describes as the "ever-evolving and adaptable installation" that was Pam's work Pam was able to extend the boundaries of the dialogue around her creative ideas to the north of Scotland and to widen the parameters of conversations re the notion of holocaust and genocide as it might apply to Indigenous Australians. For Trevor the conversations with Pam were "to last over fifteen years with Pam visiting both the Highlands of Scotland and later the Lake District of England, home of Beatrix Potter and William Wordsworth," where they drew on the apparently diverse cultural worlds that they encompassed together as well as incorporating and drawing a more general postcolonial impetus in their work together.

Pauline Mitchell, Ruby Langford Ginibi's daughter, writes about the close relationship Pam has had to her family through Pam's work with her mother, and through Ruby's adoption of Pam into their family. Pam won the Portia Geach Memorial Award in 1991 for her portrait of Ruby and it was exhibited at the SH Ervin Gallery in August/September of that year. It is my

view that Pam's relationship with Ruby and in particular her work as her driver, companion, sound recordist and photographer on *My Bundjalung People* (1994) consolidated her sense of identity and belonging. I met Ruby for the first time, along with Pauline and her sister Aileen, when they all came to stay at my house in the northern rivers, Bundjalung country. In our commemorative piece to Ruby Pam describes how our relationship has broader connections to Indigenous ways of relating to an extended family network:

Years ago when Ruby and I were visiting up at Cabbage Tree Island in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Aunty Eileen Morgan asked about Janie. I'd talked about going to see her before we left to go back to Sydney. I explained that she was my stepson's mother but when I introduced her I always said, "this is my son's mother". Aunty Eileen Morgan and old Mrs. Kelly said, "In our way she is your sister. So if you just say 'sister' then we know who you are talking about". From then on Janie became my tribal sister. I've been her son's stepmother since he was three years old so we go back a long way. I suppose, unusually, we share many other lives as well. Intellectually, academically and politically our roads have gone along similar paths so we met and talked frequently about things... It has been an interesting and challenging journey for both of us. Ruby wove into both of our lives in the late eighties and has been an equal part of us since then, the third leg of that road to firming up and contextualizing understandings about a society that we all wanted to challenge. Ruby was Bundjalung, I am Gomileroi and Janie descendent from Romani people. We all had big lives and our connection was immediate. We became a mighty family of women, each of us an important part of a triangle of love and support (Johnston, P., and Conway-Herron, J., 2012, p. 4).

In the foreword to *My Bundjalung People* Pam writes:

Ruby Langford Ginibi tells us that there are three types of Koori people in Australia. They are, she says, the traditional tribal people, the mission bred ones, as she is, and the urban koori. She emphasizes that we are "all one mob". The culture Ruby writes of is a living culture rooted in the very landmass we call Australia, and stretching its fingers from the beginning of time to live and breathe today (1994, p. xi).

Through her relationship with Ruby, Pam found the more steadfast sense of belonging that I believe she longed for all of her life. The tension of growing up as 'urban koori' meant that early on in her life Pam's Aboriginality was a hidden part of her identity. This was a strategic form of survival for many Indigenous Australians of Pam's generation. Growing up in the 1950s and identifying as Aboriginal meant the full weight of Australian mainstream prejudice both social and judicial could be thrust upon a family so that you were not seen as a citizen of your own country. Pam describes the effect of this as creating a "dichotomy between the outside world (the European world) and the inside world (the Aboriginal world) and understanding this gave me my knowledge of the world and my compassion" (Johnston P., in Johnson Riordan, L., Conway Herron, J., and Johnston, P., 2002, p. 41). Later in this same paper, co-written by our colleague and cultural theorist the late Doctor Lorraine Johnson Riordan, Pam and myself, Pam writes about the way that:

My extended family has spent most of its life hiding its aboriginality for a number of reasons. This meant that I have been rejected by Aboriginal and non-

Aboriginal people when trying to claim my identity. Without those cornerstones of “self” that are linked with identity and hope, I was very vulnerable in a number of ways (Johnston P., in Johnson Riordan, L., Conway Herron, J., and Johnston, P., 2002, p. 42).

Like other writers and artists who grew up in the urban environment of 1950s assimilation Pam’s identification as Indigenous has been fraught and at times contentious. In the era post Mabo with its consequential rejection of Australia as Terra Nullius and the passing of the 1992 Native Title Act the world of identification as Indigenous – after a decade or more of embracing many people who had previously not identified as Indigenous – became increasingly stringent.

The Australia Council definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity combines three elements: descent, identification and acceptance. An Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander is defined as someone who is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, identifies as an Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such in the community where he or she lives or comes from (Australia Council for the Arts, 2014, Online).

In 1989 – after being a founding member of the Boomalli Aboriginal Art collective and exhibiting as an Aboriginal artist at The Works Gallery, Paddington, Boomalli Artists Ko-operative Chippendale, and the Bondi Pavilion – Pam’s Indigenous identity was questioned by some of her colleagues. The new parameters of identification that the government had adapted from recommendations of pan-indigenous definitions in UN reports required Aboriginal artists at the time to provide proof of their Aboriginality. In Henry Reynold’s, *Nowhere People*, he quotes an informant from the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry as saying: “You hear white fellas tell you you’re a Black fella. But Black fellas tell you you’re a white fella so you’re caught in a half-caste world” (2005, p. 225). At this time even Ruby was being asked to provide proof of her identity and the distancing between Pam and sections of the Indigenous art world was exacerbated by the fact that in the 1980s, when Pam was only just discovering herself as an Indigenous person, she painted some Wandjina images traditionally from the Kimberley region and thus iconic images for people of that culture, which, as someone outside of that culture, she was seen as appropriating.

I remember agreeing with Pam and Ruby in discussions with the two of them about the absurdity of people like themselves having to prove Indigenous heritage via a birth certificate. In the light of the ‘Stolen Children’s Report’ and the extreme dislocation and discrimination that had ensued from generations of assimilation policies it did seem absurd and cruel that this tight framing of identity was now being asked of Indigenous Australians by the Australian government. Also, in the light of the kind of pan-Aboriginal discourses that proliferated in 1970s and 80s, how was someone like Pam, of Aboriginal descent but whose family had felt the need to distance themselves from their Aboriginality, supposed to understand the particularities of her own culture let alone the people from the Kimberleys? As a non-Indigenous person it is not appropriate for me to provide the answers here but the questions still remain poignant ones for me. While I understand that traditional cultural parameters have to be protected and respected and cultural sustainability maintained, many light-skinned people like Pam and her family were caught between the lines of assimilationist, social policies developed in the 20th century that Henry Reynolds describes as follows: “Politicians and officials began to implement policies that cut through the web of kinship that linked indigenous people regardless of colour or blood” (2005, p. 9). These divisions between

indigenous peoples familiar with the values of their traditional cultures and those who at best have only an assimilated cultural awareness due to suffering the prevarications of decades of colonial dislocation and cultural disruption are difficult ones to navigate and, in my opinion, part of the ongoing effects of decades of governmental paternalism. For Pam one of the solutions to this dilemma was what she termed building her own Song Cycle:

To reclaim my right to define myself and my right to confirm and document my own history in relation to both my internal and external life. By asserting both my right to my own story and embedding it into history as a subjective/objective narrative, I became the expert of myself – I owned myself (Johnston P., in Johnson Riordan, L., Conway Herron, J., and Johnston, P., 2002, p. 43).

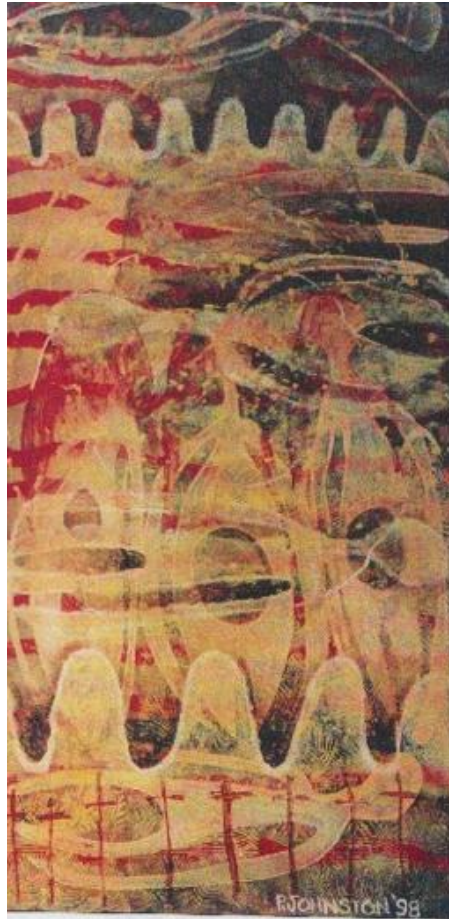
For C.Moore Hardy and Cate McCarthy, two members of the 2+2=5 art collective, their friendship with Pam was integrally interwoven with the notion of themselves as artists and the development of the collective around the need to redress what they describe as “the competition, lack of support and the myopia of the art market they were entering” and a perceived need to support one another and to document each others’ lives, through consistent, supportive, yet critical analysis of their work. Many of the members, including Pam, met at the National Art School in Sydney in the 1980s, a time of high ferment in both the art world and in second wave feminist politics with its emphasis on the relationship between art, gender and representation. Both writers emphasise the importance of community to Pam be it the 2+2=5 collective or her work at the local Plunkett Street school in Ultimo or the years she worked with Aboriginal students in Long Bay and Mullawa prisons. As artist and colleague Elizabeth Day writes:

I was aware of the work that Dr Pam Johnston was doing in her art classes with the Department of Corrections for a number of years as I also worked in various institutions between the 1980s and 1990s, and 2000s. Pam was a highly committed teacher and always had large classes of students keen to learn through her enthusiastic support of their Aboriginality and constructive determination to empower inmates not only in the reclaiming of their culture through art-making but also in literacy in relation to their culture. She gave her students a lot to work with in the prison environment where there is a vastly disproportionate number of Aboriginal inmates.

Pam Johnston was, like many of the staff in Education, herself a practising artist. She had often talked about the important place of artists within that often arid environment, and bemoaned the fact that as employees of the Department we were unable to take on exhibitions that would air our views in relation to the correctional environment. She had talked to me about her desire to bring about an exhibition of staff members to complete the circle of what she saw as (as I understood it) our work in the prison system.

I think it is a great loss for our centres not to have someone with the sense of purpose that she had as an artist, a researcher and a teacher. We live now in an era where Education is being dramatically ‘dumbed down’. There is a diminished number of Aboriginal teachers in the centre at Long Bay where she worked. I think it takes someone with her energy and idealism to work with institutionalised Aboriginal inmates.

Art and especially Aboriginal art classes in prisons have done much to re-ignite a sense of direction in the lives of young Aboriginal people and it is a great loss that Pam Johnston is no longer with us (personal correspondence Elizabeth Day, March 16, 2014).



Johnston P., 1998, *Ripple Yinar Dhenewan 6*
Exhibited Aberdeen Women's Centre Aberdeen , Scotland and
travelling throughout UK.

I first met Pam in 1975 when she was introduced to me as the new girl friend of my ex husband and my son Tamlin's father, Carrl. I remember sensing it was going to be a serious relationship and thinking, well, if this stunning looking woman was going play a big part in my son's life then I had better get to know her. I do not think at that point I could have imagined how close a friendship we would have and the length or breadth of it. Before too long we were sharing parenting. My son Tamlin had his longed for relationship with an older brother in Pam's son Cass and they were both enrolled in the same alternative school in Melbourne so we would take the kids to and from school. We found that we both enjoyed a similar sense of politics, activism, feminism, music and an intellectual life that had very much to do with our interests in identity and belonging and the way that art, writing and music comes out of a shared sense of place and identity. In the very early years of Pam's relationship with Carrl we actually lived next door to each other in neighbouring apartment blocks on St Kilda Road in Melbourne. Not long afterwards Pam and Carrl moved to Goonoo Goonoo – an old cattle and sheep station just outside of Tamworth in Pam's beloved Gamileroi country – where Carrl's music career boomed and Pam was able to reconnect with her Aboriginal heritage. Our friendship was consolidated when Pam and Carrl moved to

Sydney in the early 1980s with their baby son, Dance. I had already moved to inner city Sydney from Melbourne with Tamlin when Pam and Carrl moved in to a housing commission house in Woolloomooloo where Keera was born. I still remember coming to visit Pam in the back bedroom when she was nursing her tiny baby daughter, Keera.

Pam was living in the heart of an inner-city art world and became a founding member of the Kelly Street Collective Gallery Ultimo, “a democratic artists’ space with a broad community access philosophy,” and had started working in women’s refuges and housing co-ops where she “initiated and established Aboriginal support groups in women’s refuges and ... worked as an organizer with the Marrickville Women’s Refuge in Sydney” (Isaacs J., 1989, p. 99). Her knowledge of what to do when needing housing came in very handy a few years later when Tamlin and I were on the verge of being without a home on the streets of Sydney. Apply for emergency housing Pam advised me, adding:

... and when you go see them – I know what you’re like – don’t you go under-selling your situation and saying you’ll be all right. Make sure they know you’re in dire straits, tell them you’re living on the streets, don’t make light of it whatever you do.

I took her advice. I don’t remember what I said, but it worked and I ended up in government housing. At the same time I applied for university and was accepted into a Communications degree at UTS. This was at a time, thanks to Gough Whitlam, when you could get a combination of Austudy and the Sole Supporting Parent Benefit, so with that and good housing I was in a more secure position than I had been in years, and I have Pam’s sage advice to thank for that.

The last year of my undergraduate degree was 1988, an auspicious year for those like Pam and me who had been involved long term in the struggle for land rights. For my final essay in literary studies at UTS I decided to write about Aboriginal Australian women writers. A new book came out that year called *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* by the then Ruby Langford and I went to everything I could where she was speaking. Over the years to follow I came to know Ruby and her family well through Pam and her friendship with us all.

After graduating with a Masters degree in Creative Writing from UTS and starting a PhD, I moved to Byron Bay in 1995 where I eventually started work at Southern Cross University as a tutor/lecturer in creative writing. Pam came up north in 2001 for my wedding to my long time friend and special companion Peter Herron just one week after my father had died. She organized a special women’s ceremony on the beach at Byron Bay with permission from Bundjalung elder Auntie Eileen Morgan, the night before our wedding. So while the men were all bonding down at the pub in Lennox Head the women were lining up for a blessing in the water at Belongil Beach. I remember getting up at dawn next morning to go down to the beach, drawing love hearts in the sand and saying prayers for my father at the very same place where we had had the ceremony the previous night. That beach will always be special to me and now that Pam is no longer with us it will be even more so.

Pam’s son Cass had also died only a couple of months before my father and I had sung with a number of other women singers at his funeral in her house in Woolloomooloo. We were all there for Pam and her family. I will never forget Cass lying in state in an open coffin and having the realization, as I watched Tamlin, Keera and Dance interacting together, how my

life had become inextricably bound up with Pam's. It was at this moment that what Aunty Eileen Morgan had said about Pam and me being sisters became viscerally true for me.

Pam studied for her first PhD at Wollongong University at the same time as I was studying for mine at the University of Western Sydney and we began to do a lot of intellectual work together on identity and representation. Along with our colleague, another dear departed friend, Doctor Lorraine Johnson Riordan, we appeared at a number of conferences with a panel that resulted in the paper 'Decolonising the 'white' nation: 'white' psychology' published in *Political Subjects, Issue 6 of the International Journal of Critical Psychology* (2002). In this panel we each told our life stories from the point of view of growing up in the 1950s. Lorraine's section focused on whiteness and growing up with text books that marginalized Aboriginal people to the edges of the page. We asked our audience to:

Imagine the dislocation for a "white" girl in the 1950s class room, living in Australia learning English History, learning mythological stories of Australian white male heroes, and limited racialised notions of white women's time/place ... and only racist ideas about Aborigines, 'the dying race'. Imagine the dislocations for an Aboriginal girl ... a child who must repress her Aboriginal identity and that her people are a 'dying race' ... and that she must be 'white' to live free (Johnston P., in Johnson Riordan, L., Conway Herron, J., and Johnston, P., 2002, p. 43).

Into this oppositional trope we wove our three stories where Lorraine personified growing up white, Pam growing up black ('blak' as we termed it) and me somewhere in between, for as I was finding out, although my family passed for a white, Christian nuclear family this was not quite so. The success of our panel and the premise of the paper itself lay in the contextualization of the small stories of our lives and the silences that surrounded them within the larger context of a decolonizing methodology where the interpolation of these small stories became a strategy for the re-representation of the dominant white cultural imaginary. The purpose was to open up dialogic possibilities through reframing the cultural narratives we had grown up with. We were interested in the small stories and the way they spoke back to a dominant all-pervasive history via a critical demythologizing process that had a postcolonial impetus at its heart.

Writing in 1984 (a year ominously intertwined with Orwellian prophecy) French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau writes about the view of Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre. For Certeau, it is 'the most monumental figure of Western development' (1984: 93) facilitating the eye of a removed spectator who looks down on the city. In May 2002, I flew over New York City and as the plane passed those majestic architectural monuments of which the twin towers of the World Trade Centre had once been part, I imagined the narrator of Certeau's text being annihilated by those apocalyptic planes disappearing into the towers. The subsequent crumbling of the buildings into a mass of rubble and human remains is a vision whose frightful reverberations were broadcast live around the world. But, to those watching outside and above the panoptic vision of the tower itself, the images of those fateful planes seemed so like the films made by the seers of post-millennium chaos that it was hard to believe they were real. Certeau was arguing against totalising visions that depend on disentangling the voyeur like viewer from the daily happenings of the city and promoting the smaller stories of the ordinary person on the street. Ironically, it's the telling of these stories that have played an enormous part in

the restoration of Manhattan in the aftermath of the events of September Eleven (Conway-Herron J., 2003, online).

In May 2002, the same demythologizing process that we had used in our work was at the centre of our consciences as we travelled to New York for the 12th Berkshire Conference on the History of Women. Pam's son Dance travelled with us and Pam, Dance and I ended up sharing a tiny room in the YMCA on 42nd street. It was the first summer after September 11 and sweltering hot. For all of us the timing of our arrival was very important and we were filled with awe about the importance of the small stories of ordinary people in the aftermath of the falling of the twin towers. But I also had something else on my mind. On the day I had left, Sydney my mother had been taken to hospital. At eighty-six she was frail and forgetful. Since my father had died she was simply fading away. This was before everyone had mobile phones so late at night and in the early hours of the morning I would struggle with my glasses and the tiny numbers on the phone cards and try to dial home from New York. Each time I connected, the voices on the other end of the line were reassuring. Mum was all right; she would last until I got home they said. When I finally got through to the sister in charge of Mum's ward, they told me that Mum had a bad heart and could go at any time. Pam took me by the hand and led me outside. It was the middle of the night but we walked, for hours, up Fifth Avenue to Central Park and back again, down all the small alleyways, and side streets past people and buildings, talking and talking. In the morning, sleepless, but resolved, I made my booking for the next flight home and Pam took me to the airport and put me on the plane with promises to read my paper at the conference. My mother passed away while I was flying home. As the map on the back of the seat in front of me showed the plane turning South and heading down the East Coast of Australia, I thought: it doesn't matter what happens now, I am in my home country. We were flying over the place where two days later I would bury my mother. This was my belonging place. The space between being and longing was finally closed, if not forever at least for the time being (see also Conway Herron, 2003).

While doing research for *My Bundjalung People* I got permission for my adopted daughter, Pam Johnston, to document my research with photographs of my people including the three elders of Box Ridge Mission: my auntie Eileen Morgan, Gummy Mary and Emily Wilson – my extended family grandmothers. We chose sixty photos of people on six missions up home: Box Ridge, Muli Muli, Baryugil, Cabbage Tree Island, Boonalbo and Goonellabah. The research ended in the first Aboriginal photographic exhibition at Lismore regional Gallery on the 5th of July 1991... It was my and Pammy's way of knocking down the racial barriers up home, as we could see there was nothing to show that Bundjalung people were there no Bundjalung art forms anywhere. My first impressions of when I went home after 48 years was that my people and the white people still lived in a divided society, and never had any social interactions whatsoever (Langford Ginibi, R., 2003, p. 14)!

In the years since I have been living in the northern rivers area Pam has been a frequent visitor coming more often than not with Ruby and her daughters Pauline and Aileen. We have had some great times yarning and laughing around our kitchen table. Ruby was often doing research for *My Bundjalung People*, a book that documents four journeys to her beloved Bundjalung country. Pam described herself as the photographer, driver and recordist and general dog's body on these journeys but she actually received a 1990 New South Wales Women and Arts Fellowship for this work and to assist in an exhibition of photographs. Ruby was also working with elders on native title matters, gathering stories and evidence of the

continuous existence on Bundjalung land so necessary for the recently successful native title claims of the Bundjalung people (a clan of the larger Bundjalung group) of Evans Head. Sometimes I would go with them and Ruby would be laughing and talking all the time. You had to be watchful of what she was saying though because often there were snippets of advice about protocol on land such as Nimbin Rocks, the burial place for tribal elders where the spirit man Nymbunji lives, or Wollumbin, that landmark cloud catcher mountain that some people still call Mount Warning because of the way it warned Captain Cook there was land there. One memorable afternoon I went with Pam and Ruby to Box Ridge mission and on the way back we stopped at the cemetery in Coraki. The Aboriginal section of the cemetery had been left in a state of disrepair while the rest of it had been cared for well until some concerned Aboriginal people from the mission decided to clean it up. Now it looked great with a red, black and yellow fence surrounding it and making it distinctive from the *ghubba* cemetery with its angels and crosses protecting loved ones in graves surrounded by neat paths and manicured lawns. In the stillness of the afternoon Ruby sat down next to the headstone for her grandfather Sam Anderson, the great cricketer who bowled Don Bradman out, and began to talk in language to him. As she spoke, patting the wall beside her, I could almost see him sitting beside her having a chat.

In *My Bundjalung People* Ruby describes the exhibition at the Lismore regional Gallery of Pam's photos from the book and a speech that she gave at the opening after Elder Mick Walker had opened it. She quotes Pam as saying:

I wanted to show the love and warmth that I found everywhere I travelled with Ma Ruby doing research for her book, a history of the Bundjalung People. I also wanted to show that Aboriginal culture is a living, surviving and spiritual culture, not some forgotten event. I hope you enjoy the exhibition. It will be handed back to the elders of this Bundjalung country after it's been taken around the state. It's never to be broken up, and it will be stored here in Bundjalung Country. Thank you (Johnston P., in Langford Ginibi R., 1994, p. 208).

Pam also came up north by herself and a few years ago she arrived with her new partner Butch (James Singleton Hooper) on her way to her friend from Tamworth days, singer Clelia Adams, who was giving a birthday party in Mullumbimby. She had told me about this new man in her life that she had met at the Canberra Folk festival and I had the feeling that this trip was a kind of meet-the-extended family opportunity for us all. It was clear that they were very much in love. Over the next few years they travelled overseas together while Pam attended conferences as keynote speaker and exhibited at Kendal and other galleries in the UK. Butch was also a keen biking enthusiast and they began to go on bike trips into the country around Canberra and Sydney on a regular basis as well as to participate in the annual bike races at Phillip Island. Pam took to this biking life with her usual enthusiasm and in January 2012 she bought her own sparkling red Honda CBR250R to ride and started keeping a journal as preparation for writing a book about her bike experiences. I still have the text that she sent me with a photo of her Honda proudly proclaiming "my new bike". People have told me since her death that this writing (which I did not get to read) charted the ever-increasing risks she was taking on that bike and the exhilaration this gave her. A photo on Pam's Face Book page still shows Pam on the bike, visor down, and ready to take off on the road.

When Ruby passed away in 2011 it was devastating for everyone including Pam. One of the last things Pam and I did together was write a monograph on Ruby for *Coolabah* to commemorate the first anniversary of her death. The piece called "Remembering Ruby" was

written as a dialogue in two voices and in it we tried to explain the nature of our relationship, not only to Ruby, but also to each other.

On my first trip to Sydney after my retirement in 2013 I was looking forward to seeing Pam again but only hours after our arrival in Sydney the phone rang and it was Clelia Adams calling to say Pam had died after coming off her bike on her way to the Phillip Island races. Sudden death like this is so shocking that the mind races with reasons why it happened and how. All I know is that this big-hearted woman is no longer with us and that the world is a great deal poorer for her absence.

An email from Butch to me about her bike riding gives an inkling of the enthusiasm Pam had for life and the way she used all of her life experiences in a creative way:

Pam felt that riding a motorbike well was an art and it surprised her that it didn't come naturally to her whereas all her other endeavours did. This failure at first raised a fear in her that she was not used to but was determined to overcome. This was a fear of failure as much as a fear of the bike and could at times be crippling and she would talk with other bike riders, especially beginners, on how they overcame that fear. In her usual way Pam researched motorbike riding as she would any other subject and she was determined to become a good rider. Pam's mantra was 'I don't want to be a fast rider, I want to be a good rider'. Pam's joy and elation after a ride was not from cheating death, because she had no intention of dying, but of the freedom of being in the moment during the ride and expression and dissection after a good ride. Pam said to me once after we had ridden from Sydney to Canberra, a ride I found boring but she didn't, 'You know what I feel when we're out riding? It's me and Butch out on our bikes and I love that!' I knew what she meant! Being who she was Pam recognised the tribalism of motorcycle community and was keen to explore the relationship between riders and their bikes and the cultural differences between the different motorbike groups (tribes). This relationship was the inspiration behind the journal she was writing called "Love, Sex and a Motorbike". Pam wasn't courting death, she was courting life and was adamant that we would live to together to a hundred and that she was taken so cruelly from not only me but all of us when she was will leave an emptiness in my heart and in my soul that will never leave me (Personal correspondence James Singleton Hooper April 28, 2014).

In the catalogue for an exhibition in 2007 titled HEARTLAND: Anatomy of the Human Heart, for the inaugural Women's Arts International Festival in Kendal Cumbria, which also featured artists such as Patti Smith, Marianne Faithful and Germaine Greer, Pam is described as "one of the most significant Aboriginal Australian contemporary artists". A quote of Pam's from the dissertation for the exhibition reads:

Death is, as is life, elemental and defining with the heart at its centre. The heart has always been part of human belonging and human connection. The heart is part of a spiritual landscape that beats its connectedness to all things living. The Heart has a Land that it wanders, that it occupies, that it claims. That land, HEARTLAND, makes us human (personal correspondence Butch Singleton Hooper, May 10, 2013).

Pam and I have had a unique relationship, starting off as young women who loved and had children with the same man. But our relationship became so much more than that. When I think about our family now it is large and extended and encompasses a whole lot of love. Now, all these years later, we have nine beautiful grandchildren between us too. The activism we have shared over the years is also based in that all-encompassing and interconnecting love that we have shared for life and for family. I cannot imagine how I am going to carry this work on now that my sister has gone but I know she would want me to.

Love you, Pammy; here's a favourite song for both of us:

Sweet Sister

*Life is just a journey, we're tossed from side to side.
You know sweet sister that you can't be satisfied
Till you find the answers hidden in the word
And you find the glory
That lay hidden and unheard.
It's only when you see and hear
The message in your heart
And realize the truth within
That can't be torn apart.
I know that the searching ends
When you have realised
That the truth remains within
And cannot be denied.*

*Wo ho ... sweet sister,
See you standing down the line.
You've had your troubles
But you've left them all behind.*

*I feel a strange contentment
When you're standing here by me.
The boat keeps rocking tossing
Turning on the sea.
I can feel the strength within,
The fire deep inside.
That knowledge keeps you buoyed
Against the surging tide*

*Wo ho ... sweet sister,
See you standing down the line.
You've had your troubles
But you've left them all behind.*

(Chi Jimmy & Kuckles, 2001, from the musical *Bran Nue Dae*)



Johnston P., 2010. *Not memory, not history, not longing, not regret ... just Time...*

https://www.facebook.com/docpamj/media_set?set=a.400280599614.184151.739779614&type=1&l=9e5bf8a626 (accessed 12/03/2014)

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ⁱ Some Aboriginal names are spelled in several different ways when translated from the original language to English usage. For instance Gamileroi, the name of the Aboriginal people from north western New South Wales, has been spelled in several different ways such as Kamileroi and Gomileroi. When quoting other texts we have used the spelling used in that text and this has led to several conflicting versions of the word throughout the publication rather than one generic spelling.