

An Artist Speaks “The intellect travels in many different directions”: Talkin’ with Eleo Pomare (1937–2008)

Rachel Fensham  with Notes from the late Glenn Conner

Since the death of Eleo Pomare on August 8, 2008, many dance scholars, artists, and institutions have honored the legacy of this influential African American artist and choreographer. In the accompanying bibliography of primary and secondary sources, I would note the 2021 program on Eleo Pomare as “Trailblazer” in the Salon Series NYC #2 led by the Clark Center for the Performing Arts. These recorded sessions include interviews with dance researchers, such as John O. Perpener, former dancers and collaborators, as well as selected video footage of Pomare’s choreographies. The commitment of the Clark Center and other archives to the documentation and reactivation of Pomare’s history provide inspiration to students, artists, and researchers wishing to learn more about his creative dynamism and cultural significance, and this interview sits in that wider context of historical accountability.

For my part, I met Pomare in 2007 in the context of research about the transnational influences upon Australian dance because—unbeknownst to many American dance scholars—both he and Carole Y. Johnson, a dancer from his company, have helped to shape indigenous and settler dance practices in Australia.¹ For nearly fifty years, Pomare and the eminent Australian choreographer, Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, were also kindred spirits. As the artistic director of the Australian Dance Theatre, she had invited the Pomare Company to perform in Australia in 1972, and they collaborated for many years as teachers and artists.² It was Dalman who introduced me to Pomare, and through that relationship I was made welcome. My subsequent article, “Breakin’ the Rules’: Eleo Pomare and the Transcultural Choreographies of Black Modernity” (2013), focused particularly on his international horizons in Europe and Australia, which was also a way to decenter the politics of his frequent representation as the “angry Black dancer” (Dunning 1983).

During an extended interview conducted at his apartment in New York City on November 12, 2007, and in the last months of his life, we discussed Pomare’s career, often looking at pictures together while he advanced his views on a wide range of topics. Besides his rebellious, independent subjectivity, I encountered an artist of great conviction whose dance imagination ranged widely across ideas about music, dramatic narrative, religion, and history. Like many others, I was

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impressed by the scope of his political and artistic rigor as well as his realization of a distinctive choreographic style and repertoire. His life partner and assistant, the late Glenn Conner (1938–2017), attended the interview, offered cups of tea, and subsequently provided valuable background notes that I've included here (in italics). Between Glenn and myself, every attempt was made to ensure that references to works were given accurately and dates added, although as with many dance programs, individual titles vary at different times and places. However, I must acknowledge that I am an outsider to Pomare's lived experience and to the "Black dance" community of the United States, and that my interaction remains a minor part in the important process of celebrating and re-historicizing Pomare. I was, however, touched by the charismatic qualities of the man, the person, and the artist.

Giving voice, particularly for performers, is a mode of expression never confined to one interlocutor, and it was my strongest impression that Pomare always wanted to be heard, in the deepest sense of being listened to—through his writing, teaching, and dancing. In the transcript of this interview, and leaving the sentences as they were spoken, I can hear the melodious timbre of Eleo's voice as well as the precise attention of his memories to insights about making dance across the borders of race, gender, and cultural experience. I have also shared the interview with students as a text for reading aloud and found that they respond as if they themselves are hearing and saying these words, and hence they gain important critical insights into the racialized politics of choreography. I hope that publishing this text as a dialogue allows Pomare's contribution to twentieth-century dance history to be sung again and again, as much as these words acknowledge the extent to which Black artists need to be seen, remembered, and, importantly, heard.

This extended extract focuses on Pomare's role as the choreographer of mature creative works that intermingle with his formation as a Black artist and activist after he returned from Europe to live and work in New York in the mid-1960s. It begins with discussion of his creative work in the community during the period of the Vietnam War and the movement for civil rights. Pomare reflects upon his early training and choreographic experiments as well as describes the construction of some of his best-known performance works. He ends with some thoughts on political advocacy and his influence on dance policy and dance criticism, and throughout the conversation Pomare shares insights about his philosophy as a Black dance artist.

Eleo Pomare: After spending my time in Europe I felt that any art that I was looking for, or would want to create, would be in the USA; and in defining art, American art using American cuisine, I came to the decision that it comes out of the Black community. American art really is what the Blacks brought as slaves, or have cultivated in this foreign country that they were forced to come to, and so if you live here and you travel abroad, you'll find out the impact of Black America everywhere you go. I mean even amongst painters, people like Picasso, they finally had to admit that this art really is out of Africa, whether you know it or not.

Rachel Fensham: What was it like to return [in 1965]?

EP: In spite of everything [the movement for civil rights] that was going on, I was the only choreographer, Black or white, who was dealing quite openly with the political situation here. And I got myself on the list of people who were considered incendiary and dangerous by the government. Because I think the concept of guerrilla theater, which I was very much into, is a people's theater.

RF: Where did you work at that point, were you in the uptown or downtown area?

EP: For the street theater, the community would invite us into their community. There are some places, even Black places that were middle class and upper class who said, "We don't want that shit here at all." But our dancing could be done outdoors, so Dancemobile, which Carole Johnson assisted in forming in New York, went anywhere it could.

Glenn Conner (GC) Note: Dancemobile was managed by Carole and her successors in a planned way. Neighborhood and public park venues were prepared and announced in advance. A truck bed was set up as a stage with a trailer as a dressing room, and for night concerts "festival" lighting was set up. If it rained, dancers and audience took shelter until it passed, or if it didn't pass, they sometimes had to cancel or book another night.

RF: That project was an important stage for Black dance development, but let's talk more about your choreography during this period, and the kind of works that you were making with your company?³

EP: Well, lots of my works are very cerebral and part of its style I would call "early cool." When I say early cool, I am thinking of a work like *Narcissus Rising* [1968]. This has a focus on gesture [*Pomare demonstrates gripping the space in front of him*] and for ten minutes I'm doing all such things, manipulating actions, but the dance internalizes itself to the point that the action creates a screen between the viewer and myself. In that way the viewer has to question themselves: "It's not what you think it is, Mrs. Jones, you know."

Or, another example is when two dancers, Liz [Elizabeth Dalman] and Carole Johnson, dance the Bessie Smith piece, *Gin. Woman. Distress*. [1966].⁴ Gin being alcohol, any woman could be on alcohol. And woman is woman. Distress they both share, they're both sharing the same events but treating what they had in their bodies for breaking the self differently. I thought it's an education for the audience. If you want to look at the alcohol element, you can look at that but not only that.

Politically, when we talk about my sort of guerrilla theater, or rebellious warfare, I also made a duet for myself and another dancer where we wreck the studio in a strange way. It began with one person with a pail of white acrylic paint . . . one person with black acrylic paint and we proceed to just throw it at one another until it becomes this ugly shade of black and white. This was followed on another level with Carole doing the Bessie Smith and then right after Carole, Liz does it, so you have black and white paint, you have Black and white women, and you have a gray situation . . .

RF: I'm interested in this comment about your work being very cerebral because, while I might agree, reviewers often read your work as very emotional. That suggests a kind of confusion about how people interpret modern dance, that it's emotional when it is actually intellectually challenging.

EP: But it is this cerebral quality that makes it emotional.

RF: Okay, but to understand how, let's go back to your training. What style of work were you doing when you were at school. What did they teach at the High School of Performing Arts?

EP: We were really prepared to be professional right at the highest level and if we could not attend Julliard, you pressed on. Instead of going to Julliard I decided to research what was happening. On leaving the high school you had to be adept at two different modern dance techniques. Graham was a must and Humphrey—

RF: Humphrey as well was being taught?

EP: Those two, but lots of people like myself studied outside of school because there was a rigidity and very systematic framing of modern dance, and of course there was composition, acting and related things. But we came out of the high school as very finished products.

RF: So, at the school they were teaching you to choreograph, you were beginning to choreograph so it wasn't just technique, technique, technique. There was opportunity—

EP: We did a great deal of choreography and we had to take acting, three acting classes a week and diction training—

RF: Okay, so quite rigorous.

EP: The school was interested in creating theater monsters and this is what some of the teachers would say: "When you leave here, you are ready to command an audience." That has disappeared now, the school is in a huge building and it's turning them out fast and has given way to bad style, like the movie *Fame* [1980].

RF: So, you were being trained to be an artist, really to learn?

EP: Yes, we were trained to be artists.

RF: That's right, and were there many other young Black people there doing it?

EP: No. The famous Dudley Williams [who danced with Alvin Ailey] was in my class. The school was, I think, started up in 1945—

RF: Immediately after the war, yes.

EP: Eartha Kitt also graduated from the high school . . . in the first go-round of classes. We used to say we were like a fly in a bowl of milk. All milk . . .!

RF: Lots of little black and desperate flapping wings.

EP: A few black dots. But I'm glad that I did it and was a part of that particular group.

RF: At the New York Public Library, I picked up a program from the high school concert that you did, I think a piece about a boy?

EP: Must be *Wind and Quicksand* [1957], which evolved from *Cantos from a Monastery* [1956]—I didn't know any documentation of that ever existed. I got a straight A on it but it became A minus because my costumes were poorly put together.

RF: Oh yes, that's it . . . you choreographed that for yourself at the end of the school. It's beautiful, and the files in NYPL include the poem that you were inspired by.

EP: Oh my, someone is always watching—it must have been brought in by one of my ex-students.

GC Note: Eleo graduated from the High School for Performing Arts in 1953. He was not yet sixteen years old.

I can remember a part of this *Wind and Quicksand*. I had a composition teacher who said, "Eleo, you know the piece has to be in ABA form, or ABCA form, or this form." And I said, "I'm not going to be a damn school professor, you know, so you wouldn't do what I would do." Well, Doris Rutger was her name, and she said, "Eleo why do you like to do this? It's fall and recovery, you can jump but it must come down, but don't try to just stay down."

RF: So, you were trying to use the floor, were you?

EP: Yeah. I choreographed a section of that dance which had a minute and a half totally on the floor on my knees. I think there might be one of the reviews somewhere. When the newspapers came out, two critics came up and said, well, and this is after graduating, that the piece was good enough to start showing. My composition teacher, you might have heard of him, was Louis Horst—[*whistles*]—fantastic, fantastic, not a teacher, an educator.

RF: Right, brilliant . . .

EP: Yes, he was an educator, and he would say, "Look, if you can't find the music in the shop, make it. You can bang tin cans together, use tap water running, do anything." He was the one who said just break the rules. Just put something—I put a Black man in that space—and all of the papers wrote that a whole new area in modern dance had been opened because today no choreographer had been completely on the floor on their knees, never leaving the spot.

RF: So, the quicksand is the floor, you were across the . . .

EP: Across, moving on one diagonal procession across the floor on the knees. The piece also started touching on religion and guilt because I was dressed as a kind of monk and at the very end when he finally stands up, in the middle of doing something that resembles the making of the cross, he falls flat on his face and the light just goes down, bang.

RF: So, he can't get up, in fact he's . . .

EP: No, he can't get up.

RF: But he's not crucified.

EP: There is nowhere! He is . . . he's lying on both . . .

RF: He's caught between . . .

EP: He's trapped between—"Lord I believe I've found my unbelief."

RF: The other thing about that program is that you've got these two pieces of poetry and no other Black dancers seemed to be referencing specifically the words of poetic form. In your work you've often responded to literature or dramatic writing and music very profoundly by having a dialogue with them.

GC Note: Cantos from a Monastery (1956) came first and was a solo made on himself and coached by Louis Horst. The choreography was incorporated into The Wind and Quicksand, with music by Bela Bartok, and Cantos became the closing scene. The Wind and Quicksand was presented in a concert given four years after Eleo left the performing arts high school by his company, whose name at that time was Corybantes, for the students of a junior high school, but held in the auditorium of a nearby high school. The story below is about the making of the first Cantos, when Eleo was a student himself.

EP: I did this piece for Louis, and he had a way of sitting like that, mouth open and eyes glued to what was happening. I did it once and he said, "Do it again." We're talking about fifteen minutes, do it again, do it again, three times, then he said, "The last time you danced, you made it clear. The first two times you emotionalized." He said, "You looked as if you went on stage to commit suicide, nothing can be that big." And he said, "The last time you were able to separate you from the dance and you were able to put it back together when you wanted it to. You kept the audience away from you so that they could see and then you pulled them in when you wanted to."

I think that understanding is very reflective of emotion in my work. I've seen people from the back of the auditorium going "oh shit I can't take this!"

RF: Pressed against that edge, are they?

EP: . . . and I work consciously for it.

RF: Because actually that's the power of the artist, when you can hold people at that edge of the precipice: there's the performer, there's the watcher, but you're working them all the time through that gap.

EP: That's a thing for artists to work on—I am in control. You see the angst, the anger, the pain, the everything, I've been through the feelings before what hits the stage, and the process is painful. I've experienced it in the making. I have experienced it in the thought of doing it, the desire to do it, but at that time it is in control of me. When it liberates me, I can go at the movement, that's the whole thing. And I will admit that some of my earlier works were very raw, could be very raw, but without money, without time, you have to get it out before you lose it.

RF: And without resources—I mean time, money, people. Sometimes that happens to artists when they don't get enough support, because they put work out that's not ready or not as fully worked. Is it different for you, that process when you make work for a solo, because often solo work can be more immediate than group work?

EP: I've never considered my dance, myself as a dancer. I became known for my dancing because of my daring [*chuckles*]. I've choreographed things on myself when other people were afraid to do it. They think of their families, their wives, their religion, their education, to hell with that. That's why you're an artist, to get rid of this hypocrisy, some of this nonsense.

RF: Let people see it, let the body . . .

EP: Every solo that I've choreographed on myself, I have choreographed because someone, say with *Junkie*, I started making it on someone and he said, "I won't do that." Or, *Narcissus Rising* and the bike man, I choreographed it, and when the dancer saw the costume, he said, "My mother is coming to that concert."

RF: Oh no, you're joking!

EP: Or, that's too much of your body to have naked. *Burnt Ash* [1971], I think they mention it in one of the reviews, included nudes on stage.⁵ When I was working on it, I said, "This figure, that figure and that figure in the last section will appear naked, no clothing," and no one believed me. One night at rehearsal, my studio was next door, I waited until the complete cast was there, then I took off my clothing and walked out. "I am rehearsing naked now. The rest of you have to join in, or there's no rehearsal."

GC Note: *Burnt Ash* was a protest work against the Vietnam War, joining the rising tide of the anti-war movement during the early 1970s. *Burnt Ash* also cost Eleo a big loss in funding after they did it at City Center in NY.

RF: And what happened, did they stay or go, they stayed?

EP: Yes.

RF: That's interesting because maybe some of these dancers, it is one thing to take your clothes off, it's another to expose yourself. And you were asking them also to expose their vulnerability?

EP: Yes, because at the end of the ballet, everyone turns into corpses, which they did not grasp in Australia, but they were shocked in New York.

You get these kids, these people which you realize are just kids, and they're holding on to a sieve, a big strainer, which they're holding onto for dear life but they're absolutely naked. You get these soldiers who have a similar thing [*inaudible*] and we have this huge rifle sound which goes off. It could be heard outside the theater and they're aiming at these naked children who are just running, who are just running. They were focussed and could not understand, you have taken a person naked, no means of self-defense, and you open a machine gun and then you sit there righteously and say we have the right to be in Vietnam. You know you dropped the bomb and fried people alive and for some people this was too raw. It's beyond raw.

RF: It's beyond raw, it is a violence.

EP: Or, it is saying this is violence, this is the belly of the violence. This is another word I like to use. I want the belly of it, and this piece made a very strong attempt at doing that. The skin has to be touchable . . .

RF: So, your project has been to make a certain violence in the body visible—but has that become passed on to the young men today or Black choreographers today?

EP: One thing I'd like to correct immediately, a few of my works but not all, some of my work has that violence.

Even when I do something as beautiful as my *Back to Bach* [1983], the person who analyzed it for Labanotation said, "This piece is so deceptive because anyone who doesn't know about dance will think it's classically influenced because the hips are at peculiar angles and done with a certain . . ." But she said, "You know this is derivative of the Watusi," and I said, "How did you find out?" and she said, "I'm not a notator for nothing." This is not Watusi and it's not ballet, but it is derived, the flavor of both are there, and with the music of [J. S.] Bach, it becomes a third element.

GC Note: *The Watusi* was a popular dance style in the 1960s and 1970s, based on a Central African dance but made fashionable in jazz recordings.

RF: Are you aware of taking . . .?

EP: I was very aware of my sources when I worked, which is most of the time, especially with an all-Black dance company or an integrated company. I often say Europe has stolen enough, has taken enough, and we can do it in a way that is unique to us. What is being said now is that Black choreographers, and I am so happy about it, are reaching the point where we can weave seamlessly between that which was supposed to be European. We weave that in with the African, and that's where white postmodernism comes from. White postmodernism is dependent on Black street movement. You ask some of the die-hard postmodernists and they say, "It's new." You say, "No, it's just another level of plagiarism, you've pulled there."

RF: There's a lot in your work about religion as well. Say, *Cantos*, or the figure of the preacher . . .

EP: They pop up, but *Cantos* has very little to do with the way one church works, it's about beliefs you know.

Glenn Conner (in person): Eleo's background in South America was heavily Roman Catholic and he was part of the time in Catholic schools and then, the other comes out of the American experience, the street preachers and the charlatans, the ones that took people in, he's got those characters.

EP: And they're Black, I think, *Cantos* is definitely out of the heavy Roman Catholic thing and there's no religion that is more theatrical.

RF: Yes, than the Catholics.

EP: I used to love going to Catholic church on Sunday because of the theater. With people there, it was all systematic bowing, systematic this and systematic that, but those costumes are so fabulous and I loved that . . .

RF: Yes, the Mass.

EP: And then in the afternoons, I would go to the Black Deep South theater.

RF: . . . with the best preachers.

EP: . . . which I loved, and the Black church is where I learned about music, about jazz, about the movements of people, coming from these strange places. They actually danced and I had one piece in which the character's name is Prophet Jones, with huge, huge white robes, which would be all over the place, and you didn't see him, you just saw his jewelry. I'm telling you about Prophet Jones, you saw his jewelry before you saw him!

RF: Glittery . . .

EP: And he was always well lit. These are the Holy Rollers, we called them, and he ended up with a bad reputation. He was fabulous, he had a huge following and he also knew how to take people's money and he loved young boys, so he ended up in jail. One of the solos in one section of the *Radiance of the Dark* [1969] is called "Ode to Prophet Jones."

GC Note: With gospel music from the Edwin Hawkins Singers.

But I play him as a crook in drag, you know, and some of the foolish people down South and other places when I do it, I've had people pray while I'm doing it: "Oh thank you Jesus, Amen!" And I've danced it like the devil, and he's there to get your money, so "sing Sista!"

RF: Oh, Lordy . . .

EP: I call them church paintings. The other one appears in *Missa Luba* [1965], where you get confused about this figure who is behind a mask. You don't know who or what is beyond this mask because he dances the Catholic Mass and his face is covered. The next time the preacher appears he is . . . the question is whether people say it's religious or not. If yes, then I say you haven't thought about [it.]

GC Note: Danced to a Catholic Mass sung by a Congolese boys' choir of the era. Music is out of print. Missa Luba is one of three Pomare works that has been preserved by the American Dance Festival Archives as a classic of African American dance.

RF: You're sounding like Karl Marx, you know, religion is the opiate of the people. You've got another addiction happening there.

GC (in person): That is a thread that runs through Eleo's work—*Homemade Ice Cream* [1990] is another example and the Brazilian one—

EP: Anyhow, what happens is that you realize at the end of the ballet that the missionaries are wearing a mask. In order to rape the Africans, the missionaries have covered their face in African gear to say, "I am indeed one of you, we are all of God's children now give me your money, now let me do this and then I'll leave." So, always as a matter of fact, I'm anti-religion.

GC (in person): There is another interesting parallel. Charles Schulz, the *Peanuts* cartoonist, is a fundamentalist Christian and he early on wrote books and his cartoons were about religious fundamentalism. In one

cartoon, one of the *Peanuts* characters is holding an African mask over his face and says, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, just so you believe in something.” Eleo pursues a similar kind of satire.

RF: But it is a double deception and opiate, isn’t it?

EP: That is the way life is, you know.

RF: In America, religion is all pervasive but it makes people passive, actually no, it’s not passive, they take it into themselves. The Black community, in particular, have been shaped by their involvement in religion in some parts of the country, haven’t they?

EP: Well, it’s lucky they had it at an early stage, but now it’s time to “get off of your knees.” That’s not my quote, that’s my New York uncle who came from South America—all the way from Latin America—to be ED-U-CATED. He wanted to be a psychiatrist actually, what are you kidding? I mean they laughed at him when he applied at schools. Part of his awareness was that the Black community could not . . . he studied religion and became a preacher but after all was said and done, he was an atheist.

GC Note: Eleo was sent to New York alone and was looked after by a Pomare uncle and aunt; hence the name Pomare, nee Eleo Forbes (pronounced For-bess). His mother came to NYC some years later.

So, I was brought up by an atheist and he’d say this religion is to keep control of you. This is how this church has been designed and this is why God is that color. He’s the one that always went, “We spend too much time on our knees, Black people should get up off their knees.” And so, when you see my religious paintings, because they are made to look appealing, please analyze this and see what you come up with.

When I went to Africa, off the coast of Nigeria, there’s a place called Badagry Bay. I had gone to a huge festival, a dance congress [actually Festac ’77, also known as the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, held in Lagos, Nigeria, 1977], in a big stadium.⁶ One of the pieces I took to be seen was *Missa Luba*, which has this priest who’s at the back of this big African mask and when he takes it off, he’s a suffering Negro and then, in another section he turns into a white missionary. As a pageant, this piece is made to look delicious, with beautiful costumes.

Anyhow they said, “Oh, we’d like to take you to Badagry Bay.” When you enter Badagry Bay, there’s this huge church and this Christian hymn is being sung and right next to it, a huge cabin-like shack and all of these chains. I said, “Why is this place so important?” They said, “This is the port in Nigeria where the slaves were shipped.” You look and you see just water and then they said, “Would you like to pay so many naira to try on one of these things?” It goes around your neck and it goes around your feet and it’s hooked into a boat. This is the way the slaves were brought to America. Now can you imagine anyone asking someone like me to PAY to feel the weight of those chains? I exploded, and they said, “We’ll call the police and have you arrested if you don’t stop what you are doing.” I had to . . .

RF: And a church next to it! What kind of souls are they praying to . . .? This is human bodies we’re talking about, not souls but imprisoned bodies?

EP: And of course, they immediately pulled *Missa Luba* off the program. After the way I behaved, they totally disagreed with my showing that ballet. Several pieces that I’ve choreographed in different countries, you find out the power of the government. The government in Brazil had to see the works and the church had to see a program before you perform.

RF: Art is dangerous still, isn’t it?

EP: Yes, it is. In Italy we travelled with two and a half programs because they’d say, “We’re going to a Catholic town.” Okay, there goes that ballet, put this in. The same in the USA, “Oh your work is too provocative.” Then I’d make something cute that will work in Atlanta and the critics loved it. I said they had their “bad taste,” but then this became fun, to pull wool over their eyes. I had to feed the banshees and if they think bull crap is good looking, we’d just better do it well.

RF: But you had a couple of reviewers who seemed to have been very strong supporters of your work, from the *New York Times*—a woman, Jennifer . . .?

EP: Jennifer Dunning thinks I’m a genius [Dunning 1983]. And Bill Moore.⁷

RF: Critics are important too, aren't they?

EP: Well, you know, at the time that I appeared, the white writers, the white USA did not in any way want to admit that there is a Black person around who choreographed.

GC (in person): "This is terrible. The music for *Bernarda Alba* [*Las Desenamorades*, 1967] is absurd," said one.

GC Note: It is inaccurate to state that Las (not "La") Desenamorades, as in "the unlovely, unloved," is a full-length choreography of Garcia Lorca's The House of Bernarda Alba. Choreographed in 1967 to John Coltrane's "Olé," Eleo insisted that Las Des . . . was inspired by the Alba but based on his grandmother and her many daughters.

EP: Yes, they wrote some terrible things . . . take Clive Barnes from the *New York Times*, when I said, "Who the hell are you?" As a matter of fact, we were on public radio and I said, "Well, who the hell are you—a European, from London, you've been here for six months and can write about my choreography in the wrong way to the point where it's clear that you're uninformed. You look at what is obviously a spiritual and call it a blues. Do you know the difference between a spiritual and a blues?" And I got into him and all of Manhattan heard it because it was right there on radio.

RF: Then the critics couldn't see what you were doing with your work. Or what influences were in it, and how you were making and shaping your ideas . . .

EP: Politically, we all knew what the scene was, and that there's only room for one of you and you have to battle. I had to battle for critics and other people to stop saying, "Oh he's like Alvin." I am not the least bit like Ailey.

I was just starting to get the kind of notices so I could live and someone says to stop that. Then for the artists who were politically inclined, that were dancers, I became their leader. They had no leadership so I started to become involved with forming organizations. The battle was with the New York State Council on the Arts to question their funding of just white dance.

RF: That was in the 80s was it, mostly? That's a lot of work, isn't it? All of that political activity and advocacy can be very absorbing and very complex.

EP: I question this idea of multicultural now because there are some people who are lucky, who can blend. I've had the experience of doing concerts where people come backstage and ask for me and then look at me . . . and basically say, "I didn't know you were Black." Because I have works and can present evenings of dance, where you deal with me as a choreographer and you don't know who or what I am. You either like the work or you don't like it. Until today you know I've had white people who have said I would never have known that you were a Black person. And my answer is "do you expect we all shake our shoulders, we shake our backs." The Ailey Company still make you believe that, and is the world's most seen Black dance company, and they continue a lot of traditional stereotypes.

That's why I shook people up, I made you think or . . .

I really don't think a choreographer needs to walk around doing Black works—and the intellect travels in many different directions. Once in Holland in the early 1960s, Lou [Harrison, American composer] and I wrapped up, or spent twenty minutes just wrapping toilet paper around a space with chairs in it and then invited some dancers, some audience members—to walk around and sit in different places and talk about what they've seen, the texture of the paper and that was performance art—so I've done things like that.

Another time which could have gotten me in jail, down at the St. Mark's Theatre there was a piece called *Locked Up* when critics weren't coming to concerts in that area at that time. The whole thing was for a dollar, and okay, you lock the doors and no one leaves unless you give us a dollar before you see the next piece.

RF: These pieces are all subversions, aren't they? And marvelous because works like *Resonance* [1959, 1965] in Holland have been so experimental . . .

From those decades, I've also seen movements in Liz's [Elizabeth Dalman] choreography as if notating, or in her body she's retained something so that when she teaches you can see a palimpsest . . . a rubbing or a tracing of something in her from your time together. Do you feel that? I mean it's so powerful.

EP: I've taken the same material, and it's like, "oh I know that fall," as if she is teaching analysis of *Night Spell* [n.d.], broken down in detail . . .

Well, I do that with my own stuff and say today I will build a class based on the variations that I used to train for a specific dance.

RF: That's helpful because you need a specific technique to build the movement that creates the look of a choreography.

EP: To make that ballet work . . . this is stylistically typical but I myself have varied movements. You know like when I teach composition to a group of kids like in Brooklyn, people have said, "Did such and such person ever work with you?" And I say, "Why?" And they say, "Well they didn't do your choreography but they sure look as if you had something to do with their training." And, of course, I did.

RF: What things then about your technique are most distinctive?

EP: I'm a small person and the basis of one way I work is, again like Louis [Horst] used to say, "You're a magician, if you're short, you'd better learn how to look tall." As a result, I think my movements tend to have strong awareness of the periphery of the space that you occupy and how you make a movement go in but make it look as if it's going out. In that sense, you find a great deal of lift and drop and coming out.

RF: There's a kind of elasticity in each joint, particularly at the limbs.

EP: At the limbs, yes.

RF: So, there's something coming out from the shoulder joint fully or even at the hip you make that joint fully extended.

EP: Yes, there is isolation followed by peripheral reach. Lots of body isolation is happening but it seems as if the isolation makes you taller because it is moving into and away from the center which is very different from the Graham contraction. I always say there is a spatial fall happening, but it's not a contraction.

RF: And lots of extended space.

EP: Because this part moves, this moves because that part moves, that moves. So if I touch you, your body won't feel taut, it will feel soft and travelling.

[Rather than] aiming to be very aesthetic, I'd say I have been almost very realistic. When are you going to do something terrible? When are you going to really kick arse?

RF: All right, let me go . . .

Notes

1. This interview was conducted for a funded project, *Transcultural and Cross-Cultural Choreographies: The Politics of Cultural Transmission in Australian Dance, 1970–2000*, DP0557670 Australian Research Council, 2005–2008. I was, and remain, immensely grateful for the time and attention Pomare gave to that research while recuperating from illness.

2. In 1994, at Adelaide's Centre for the Performing Arts, he choreographed a major new work titled *A Horse Named Dancer*, and in 1995 he visited Mirramu Creative Arts Centre led by Dalman.

3. In 1968, Pomare, along with Carole Johnson, Rod Rodgers, Gus Solomon, and Pearl Reynolds, formed the Association of Black Choreographers and *THE FEET*, a Black dance magazine.

4. A performance of *Gin. Women, Distress*. with Caroline Johnson as the dance soloist in a bare studio setting, was filmed by videographer Jonathon Atkin and produced by the Foundation for Fine Arts, October 11, 1973. It was viewed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in November 2007.

5. Performed to a sound collage by the composer Marvin David Levy.

6. See Marilyn Nance, *Last Day in Lagos* (New York: Center for Art, Research and Alliances; Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2022), for remarkable photo documentation of this remarkable gathering of Black artists, musicians, and dancers.

7. William Moore was an important Black dance critic who founded one of the first Black dance magazines, *Dance Herald*, and, for a period, the manager of the Eleo Pomare Dance Company. See <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/28/arts/william-moore-59-a-critic-and-scholar-of-dance-by-blacks.html>

Selected Resources for Further Reference

The following collection of primary and secondary sources—compiled with the assistance of Cody Norling, Sariel Golomb, and Dr. Carl Paris—offers opportunities for further research on Pomare, his life, his times, and his work.

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“Artist Promotional Fliers, 1954–1995.” Allan Bell Collection. Special Collections and Archives, University of Missouri–Kansas City, Kansas City, Kansas.

“Bob Johnson Papers, 1949–2003.” Curtis Theatre Collection. Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Eleo Pomare Collection. National Museum of Dance, Sarasota Springs, New York.

Eleo Pomare Dance Collection. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York.

Eleo Pomare Dance Company Archive. Private Collection of Glenn Conner.

“Free to Dance Records, 1987–2004.” American Dance Festival Archives. Rubenstein Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

Hamm Archives. Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, New York.

“Richard Jones Papers, ca. 1970–1991.” Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center. University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst, Massachusetts.

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Choreochronicle of Pomare’s Works: http://eleopomare.weebly.com/uploads/2/7/7/2/27727359/choreography_of_eleo_pomare.pdf Please note that several works change scale from large to smaller ensembles, or solo to group, as well as having name changes according to the mode of presentation. Some of the experimental events referenced in the interview are not listed.

DSA’s list of Black Dance Scholarship by Black Dance Scholars: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MpH-Dk2IYAKcuNqB_6WA19_Gj8QRF28yh9M2nZhRXV8/edit.

“Eleo Pomare: Choreographer, Dancer, Teacher, Poet, Painter, Person Extraordinaire by David Fullard.” 2018. Clark Center NYC (YouTube video). March 19, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuAB-u9NAhU>.

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- “Roberta Pikser on Meeting Eleo Pomare.” 2021. Clark Center NYC. YouTube Video. August 26, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyyZASUqZwM>.

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Legacy Endowment

At Kennesaw State University, a choreographic residency has been made possible by the Eleo Pomare–Glenn Conner Dance Endowment, which is funded by a generous gift from Jay and Debra Yunek. The Eleo Pomare–Glenn Conner Dance Endowment honors their late uncle, Glenn Conner, and his partner, Eleo Pomare. <https://www.kennesaw.edu/arts/academics/dance/performances-events/choreographic-residency.php>.