



The Artistry and Activism of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Sept. 19, 2025

DANCE PROGRAM

Frances E. W. Harper 200 Commemoration
The Center for Black Digital Research/ #DigBlk
and the Africana Research Center • Penn State University
digblk.psu.edu/engage/harper-200/

The character of Frances E. W. Harper performed by special guest Sharia Benn

Tonight, we share sketches of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's artistic and activist life through artistic interpretations by choreographers, poets, composers, dancers and actors.

Born free on September 24, 1825, Harper addressed the key issues of her era as a Black woman. Through her work as a writer and activist, she illuminated significant moments in history when many Black people and women were denied freedom.

We believe in the power of the arts to inform us about the past, to illuminate the challenges of the present, and to guide us in creating a more just and equitable future. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper is our guide.

———— Sketch I: Life for Black People in the 1800's ————

*We begin with an introduction to
Frances E.W. Harper, as she sings
“Hush, hush, somebody’s calling my
name.....”*

Choreography: Marion Hamermesh.

Music: Ralph Russell. **Poetry:**

Mine to Mouth by Glenis Redmond.

Dancers: Monique Bland, LaChelle Dickenson, Amber Rance, Alana Romero, Adiah Simpson, Amber Spivey, Luis Mulero, Omari Senior, Monique Relacion, and Kennedy Davis.

The Blessed Hope (1846)

Choreography: Lynnette Young Overby and dancers. **Music:** Ralph Russell. **Poetry performed** by Glenis Redmond. **Dancers:** Monique Bland, LaChelle Dickenson, Amber Rance, Alana Romero, Adiah Simpson, Amber Spivey, Luis Mulero, Omari Senior, and Kennedy Davis.

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

Choreography: Desiree Cocroft. **Music:** Ralph Russell. **Dancers:** Monique Bland, LaChelle Dickenson, Amber Rance, Omari Senior, and Kennedy Davis.

The Slave Mother (1854)

Choreography: Lynnette Young Overby and Adiah Simpson. **Music:** Ralph Russell. **Poetry:** Frances E.W. Harper. **Dancers:** Adiah Simpson and Alana Romero.

Jubilee – Emancipation!

Choreography: Terlene Terry-Todd. **Music:** Ralph Russell. **Poetry:** Frances E.W. Harper from *Sketches of Southern Life (1873)*. **Dancers:** Monique Bland, LaChelle Dickenson, Amber Rance, Adiah Simpson, Amber Spivey, Luis Mulero, Omari Senior, and Kennedy Davis.

———— Intermission ————

15 minutes

Sketch II: Life as a Black Woman in the 1800's

The Two Offers (1859)

Choreography: Teresa Emmons.

Music: Ralph Russell based on the short story *Two Offers* by Frances E. W. Harper. **Dancers:** Monique Bland, LaChelle Dickenson, Amber Rance, Amber Spivey, Luis Mulero, Omari Senior, and Kennedy Davis.

Why I Stand and Speak So

Choreography: Ashley SK Davis.

Poetry: *Why I Stand and Speak So* written and performed by Glenis Redmond. **Dancer:** Tumi Nkomo.

Iola Leroy (1892)

Choreography: A.T. Moffett. **Music:**

David Horton and Vianne Reay based on the novel *Iola Leroy* by Frances E.W. Harper. **Dancers:** Monique Bland, LaChelle Dickenson, Amber Rance, Adiah Simpson, Amber Spivey,

Luis Mulero, Omari Senior, Kennedy Davis and Monique Relacion as Iola Leroy.

Lecture - We Are All Bound Up Together - 1866 National Woman's Rights Convention, New York, New York

Choreography: Lynnette Young Overby and the Dancers. **Lecture:** Performed by Sharia Benn. **Dancers:** Monique Bland, LaChelle Dickenson, Amber Rance, Adiah Simpson, Amber Spivey, Luis Mulero, Omari Senior, and Monique Relacion.

Harriet Jacobs – Overcoming a Life of Confinement

Poetry: “House: Another Kind of Field” written and performed by Glenis Redmond. **Choreography:** Lynnette Young Overby and Amber Rance. **Dancer:** Amber Rance.

Sketch III: My Legacy

Choreography: Marion Hamermesh with contributions by the dancers.

Poetry: *Predecessor* by Glenis Redmond and performed by Luis Dickenson, Amber Rance, Melissa

Jones, Monique Relacion. **Dancers:** Monique Bland, LaChelle Dickenson, Amber Rance, Alana Romero, Adiah Simpson, Amber Spivey, Luis Mulero, Omari Senior, Monique Relacion, and Kennedy Davis with Sharia Benn.

Finale: A Message of Hope

Let My Artistic and Activist Spirit Guide Your Path to a Brighter Future

Choreography: Lynnette Young Overby, LaChelle Dickenson and Amber Spivey. **Dancers:** Monique Bland, LaChelle Dickenson, Amber Rance, Alana Romero, Adiah Simpson, Amber Spivey, Luis Mulero, Omari

Senior, Monique Relacion, and Kennedy Davis with Sharia Benn. **Music:** *Every Time I Feel the Spirit* adapted by Arreon A. Harley-Emerson. Elevate Vocal Arts. **Singers:** Rachel Clark, Jazmin Salaberrios, Libbi Nixon, Dr. Malcom Richardson, Kathryn Quay, and Brittney Stanton.

Artist Talk Back

Glenis Redmond, Ralph Russell, A. T. Moffett, Amber Rance, Lynnette Young Overby, Shirley Moody-Turner, Martha Jones, and Carmin Wong.
Facilitated by P. Gabrielle Foreman.

Biographies

Director: Lynnette Young Overby

Lynnette Young Overby is Professor Emerita of Theatre and Dance at the University of Delaware. Overby is a graduate of Hampton University (BS), George Washington University (MA) and The University of Maryland, College Park, (Ph.D.) Lynnette was University of Delaware's Director of The Community Engagement Initiative and Founding Director of the Partnership for Arts & Culture. Since 2009, in her role as Artistic Director of the Sharing our Legacy Dance Theatre, she has collaborated with P. Gabrielle Foreman, literary historian and MacArthur Fellow, a host of composers, poets and performers to reveal the history of little-known African Americans through dance and theatre.

Special Guest: Sharia Benn

Sharia Benn is the founder, president, and executive artistic director of the Sankofa African American Theatre Company in Harrisburg, PA. Sharia holds a special passion for combining acting and historical studies to engage audiences through productions highlighting historically significant African-American people and events. She is highly sought after for her original play and performance "Voices of F.E.W." that chronicles the life of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911). As a contemporary champion for civil engagement, Sharia has worked tirelessly to birth and grow the Sankofa African American Theatre Company of Harrisburg to authentically and honorably amplify Black voices, artists, and stories on stage.

Dancers

Monique Antonia Bland received her BFA in Dance Performance from the American Musical and Dramatics Academy. She performs with companies based in the tri-state area.

Kennedy Davis is in 8th grade at First State Montessori Academy. She trains at Pieces of a Dream Academy of Dance and Wilmington Ballet Academy of the Dance where she studies modern (Horton Technique), ballet, jazz, acrobatics, tap, hip hop, and contemporary.

La-Chelle Dickinson is a company artist with Roxey Ballet and is honored to give voice to meaningful stories as an ensemble member of Sharing Our Legacy Dance Theatre.

Maya Jones is a dancer, writer, and student at the University of Delaware, where she is double majoring in English and History with a minor in dance. Trained at the Hudson Valley Conservatory and Keenote Music Studio, she has a background in musical theater that enriches her performance style.

Melissa Jones has been dancing for over 20 years, primarily at Baltimore Dance Tech. Melissa has participated in various freelance performance opportunities, performed at The Arena Players, and contributed to Sharing Our Legacy's Dance Theatre.

Luis Mulero, a graduate of the prestigious Cab Calloway School of the Performing Arts, is a dynamic violinist and passionate teaching artist dedicated to bridging the worlds of music and dance through performance and education.

Tumi Nkomo is a choreographer, dancer, and dance educator who has danced professionally onstage and on-camera with her work showcased nationally and internationally. She served as the lead choreographer for the Mantsho x H&M 2019 Campaign, and as a guest teaching artist at the University of Delaware, and choreographer and costume designer for the Chilean 2022 tour of TheKoiWay.

Monique Relacion dance is more than movement; it's a powerful voice preserving history and speaking for those who are no longer able. She considers it a privilege to be part of this production honoring Frances Harper's legacy.

Amber Renee Rance is a choreographer, performer, arts-based researcher and creative artist based in Wilmington, DE. Amber has performed across

the world in multidisciplinary productions, including "Same Stories, Different Countries" and "Women of Consequence" with Sharing Our Legacy's Dance Theatre.

Omari Senior is a senior dance major at Cab Calloway School of the Arts. She is an active member of CAB's Dance Team and Company. For the past 10 years, she has been taking classes at Pieces of a Dream and currently focuses on tap, acro, modern contemporary, hip hop and jazz.

Alana Noelle Romero is a third-grade student at Marbrook Elementary School – Spanish Immersion. She has been a dedicated student at Pieces of a Dream, Inc. Academy of Dance in Wilmington, DE since 2020, where she trains in ballet, tap, acro, and lyrical.

Adiah Simpson is currently a company member of Pieces of a Dream Dance Theatre and a faculty member of Pieces of a Dream Academy of Dance, where she is happy to share her passion for dance.

M. Amber Spivey is a performing artist, storyteller, educator, and creative entrepreneur. She is a guest artist with Sharing Our Legacy Dance Theater, Pieces of a Dream, Inc. and JDY Dance Theater, and also works as a professional teaching artist throughout Delaware.

Choreographers

Desiree Cocroft is a dynamic leadership coach, speaker, and consultant dedicated to empowering leaders to reach their fullest potential. Her leadership journey began in the arts as the co-founder of Signature Dance Company, a Milwaukee-based organization that has, for over 21 years, inspired and empowered Black and Brown girls and women through dance and the performing arts.

Ashley S. K. Davis is a dancer, choreographer, actor, teacher, and social change artist who finds great joy in encouraging people to discover their inner artist. Ashley serves as the Artistic Director for Delaware Institute for the Arts in Education.

A.T Moffet serves as Executive Director of Delaware Institute for the Arts in Education (DiAE). Previously, A.T. led the Dance Program at Washington College, taught at the University of Delaware, Winona State University, and the Cowles Center for Dance & the Performing Arts in Minneapolis. A.T. was the recipient of a 2020 Plant Life in the City Fellowship and a 2017 Individual Artist Fellowship in Choreography from the Delaware Division of the Arts.

Teresa Emmons earned her post graduate degree in Dance from The Juilliard School in New York. She has danced professionally with the San Diego Ballet, The

State of Alabama Ballet (now Ballet South), and all over the United States in a wide variety of classical and contemporary roles. She has choreographed and conducted classes for regional and professional dance companies including Philadanco, Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet.

Marion Yager Hamermesh of Wilmington, DE is a dancer, teacher, and choreographer. She has earned a B.A. in Cultural Anthropology from Beloit College, an M.Ed. in Dance from Temple University, an M.S.E. in Computer and Information Science from the University of Pennsylvania, and an M.J.S. from Gratz College. She contributed choreography to Sharing Our Legacy Dance Theatre's *Women of Consequence* (2018) and *Mary Ann Shadd Cary* (2019). She has been a teaching member of the Hanover Dance Collective for 40 years.

Terlene D. Terry-Todd has been a dancer, actor, choreographer, and professional teaching artist for over 35 years. Terry-Todd has received numerous awards and accolades for her choreography, contributions to the arts and her work with special needs children. She has served on the faculties of both Howard University and American University and has been appointed to numerous arts council's boards, the Virginia State Commission on the Arts Advisory Panel and held various national leadership offices.

Composer

Ralph Russell composes for large and small ensembles including several dance productions with Dr. Overby: *Women of Consequence*, *David the Potter*, *Same Story*, *Uprising*, and *Re-Entry*.

Arranger

Arreon A. Harley-Emerson, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Choral Music in the School of Music at Penn State University and the Founder and Artistic Director of Elevate Vocal Arts. At Penn State, Harley-Emerson directs *Essence of Joy* that is devoted to the performance and preservation of musics of the Black Diaspora, and teaches courses in choral conducting and music education.

Artistic Director's Coordinator

Amber Renee Rance – see p. 5.

Stage Manager

Abby Connolly is a junior at the University of Delaware. She is a History Education and Theatre major, with a focus on stage management. This is the third dance show she has worked on, and she is very excited to be a part of this production.

Student Lighting Designer

PJ Jobson, Penn State University.

Artist Talkback Panelists

P. Gabrielle Foreman co-directs the Center for Black Digital Research/#DigBlk and is the Colored Convention Project's founding faculty director. She is

the Paterno Family Chair of Liberal Arts at Penn State University.

Martha S. Jones is the Society of Black Alumni Presidential Professor, Professor of History, and a Professor at the SNF Agora Institute at The Johns Hopkins University.

A.T Moffet – see p. 6.

Shirley Moody-Turner is associate professor and award-winning teacher of English and African American Studies at Penn State University and is the former co-director of the Center for Black Digital Research.

Lynnette Young Overby is Professor Emerita, of Theatre and Dance, University of Delaware.

Amber Renee Rance – see p. 5.

Glenis Redmond is grounded in many worlds as a poet, teaching artist, and imagination activist. She is the first Poet Laureate of Greenville, South Carolina, a Kennedy Center Teaching Artist, a Cave Canem alumni, and the author of six books of poetry.

Ralph Russell – See above, left column.

Carmin Wong is a poet, playwright, and scholar of Black literature and orature. She is a #DigBlk Scholar pursuing a dual-title PhD in English Literature and African American and Diaspora Studies at Penn State University.

#Harper200 Dance and Symposium Supported By:

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Frances E. W. Harper at 200: Commemorating Her Life and Legacy

The year 2025 marks the 200th anniversary of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's birth. This dance performance is one of several exciting scholarly and arts programming and community events to commemorate Harper's life and legacy that the Center for Black Digital Research/#DigBlk is hosting. Learn more at:
digblk.psu.edu/engage/harper-200.

#Harper200 Organizing Committee

Lauren Barnes, Jacqueline Barrios, Denise Burgher, Sergio Carmona, Lauren Cooper, Samantha de Vera, Rachel Fernandes, Gabrielle Foreman, Sherita L. Johnson, Brandi Locke, Lynnette Young Overby, Courtney Murray Ross, Gabby Sutherland, Eunice Toh, and Takina Walker.

Additional Collaborators and Partners:

Jim Casey, Chanel Edwards, Eden Mekonen, Janel Moore-Almond, Amber Rance, Jormailin Valdés Pareras, Carol Rudisell, and Curtis Small.

Additional Contributors:

Kenisha Brown, Hunter Reed, Norma Sannon, Tahfiq Williams, and members of the Center for Black Digital Research/#DigBlk throughout the years.

Front image of Harper by Courtney Murray Ross. Program design and related #Harper200 promotional materials designed by Lauren Cooper with production assistance by Gabby Sutherland.

Scan for
Program
online

