

Salamishah Tillet's

JOURNEY

The Penn alumna and English professor—survivor of two rapes while an undergraduate—

has become a lauded scholar and teacher and a leading activist

in the effort to end violence against women and girls. BY KATHRYN LEVY FELDMAN

AS an undergraduate at Penn in the 1990s, Salamishah Tillet C'96 experienced some of the best and very worst that a young person's college years can offer. It was here that she made lasting friendships and found the inspiring classes and mentors that sparked her ambition to become a scholar and teacher herself. And it was also here that, during her freshman year, she was sexually assaulted by a fellow student—a trauma compounded by a second rape while she was on a study-abroad program in Kenya during her junior year.

The rapes left her suffering from post-traumatic stress, but with the support of her family and friends, and successful therapy, she managed to recover and share her story and even become an activist for ending violence and empowering women and girls. This work goes on alongside and interwoven with a thriving academic career and a significant presence as a cultural commentator on cable TV, online, and in print.

An associate professor in the English Department, Tillet holds secondary appointments in the Department of Africana Studies and in the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies program. Her 2012 book, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post Civil-Rights Imagination*, which examines the ways in which contemporary African-American artists, writers, and intellectuals explore the topic of slavery, is "a double contribution to African-American studies and American studies at large," says Amy Kaplan,

the Edward W. Kane Professor of English and current department chair. "We see her very much as the future of our department."

Much of Tillet's work as an activist is channeled through A Long Walk Home, a nonprofit she co-founded in 2003 with her sister Scheherazade, which uses art therapy and the visual and performing arts to counter violence against girls and women. A Long Walk Home's programs include the multimedia performance Story of a Rape Survivor (SOARS), based on her own story of healing.

Tillet has appeared on the BBC, CNN, MSNBC, and NPR, written for *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Root*, and currently guest blogs for *The Nation*. She wrote the liner notes for John Legend C'99's Grammy-award winning 2010 album *Wake Up!* on which Legend performed with The Roots. (They've known each since 1997, and have remained close.) She's currently working on a book about the famed jazz and soul singer and civil-rights activist Nina Simone.

In 2009-2010 Tillet won the Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Award for Distinguished Teaching by an assistant professor. She's also the 2013 recipient of the James Brister Society's Dr. Gloria Twine Chisum Award for Distinguished Faculty. Beyond Penn, her accolades include being named one of the country's "30 Top Leaders Under 30" by *Ebony* in 2006 and being nominated (with her sister) for *Glamour* magazine's "Women of the Year" award in 2010; in 2013 she was selected as one of the "Top 50 Global Leaders Ending Violence Against Children" by the Together for Girls' *Safe* magazine.



got consent?

And Tillet and her partner—Solomon Steplight IV EAS'97 GEng'00 WG'05—have a two-year-old daughter, Seneca.

“Salamishah is not a one-dimensional person,” says Steplight with a laugh. “She is not just a professor, not just an activist, not just a mother and partner. She is formidable in each of these areas and she has committed herself to being that way.”

Tillet, now 39, was born in Boston into a politically conscious household. Her father was an accountant from Trinidad, and her mother was an entrepreneur and musician. Both, Tillet says, were “inspired by the Black Power movement.” Her unusual name combines the Arabic word for peace (*Salam*) and Farsi for royal or majestic (*Shah*); her parents interpreted the *mi* as meaning black. “I always took the literal translation as “Peace/black/majestic,” she says. Except between the ages of 10 and 12, when she told people her name was Maggie (from her middle name, Margaret), “I pretty much owned it,” she adds with a laugh.

Her parents separated when she was five, and Tillet moved to Orange, New Jersey, with her mother and her younger sister and brother. She spent her middle-school years in Trinidad, and from eighth grade through the end of high school attended Newark Academy, an independent school in Livingston, New Jersey. While a freshman she ran in the Penn Relays as a member of her school's 4x400-meter relay team. “It seemed like it was an amazing place,” she recalls.

When it came time to apply to colleges, she “somehow circled back to Penn,” attracted by the fact that her cousin was already enrolled, as well as the urban setting, academic rigor, and diverse student body.

An excellent student who loved literature, Tillet nevertheless had her sights set on a law career when she arrived on campus—but a class on jazz and literature taught by Farah Jasmine Griffin (now the William B. Rensford Professor of English and Comparative Literature and African-American Studies at Columbia University) convinced her she wanted to be an academic instead.

“I didn't grow up having academics in my family,” Tillet explains. “I didn't know you could be an English professor, but Farah provided a lot of insight as well as a model for how I could do work that was relevant.”

Besides regular office visits with Griffin, Tillet also frequented the periodicals section in Van Pelt Library, soaking up the scholarship in academic journals. “It was at this time that I made a conscious commitment to writing my own scholarly works in accessible language and to be politically engaged,” she says.

Both her Trinidadian and African-American heritage and her personal trauma played into her scholarly interest in slavery, as she noted in a 2013 interview in *The Penn Current*, a publication for University employees. “I'm dealing with flashbacks, and then I'm reading these novels written in the 1970s and early '80s in which African-American writers like Toni Morrison or Octavia Butler have their characters reliving slavery ... Why would you go back to this moment of complete disenfranchisement at the same moment you've become full citizens? ... You're 'thoroughly American' and you're going back to the moment when America was founded on your back.”

Tillet dual-majored in English and Afro-American Studies at Penn, graduating *magna cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa. She went on to earn a Master of Arts in Teaching from Brown and her doctorate in the History of American Civilization from Harvard (along with a master's in English). She returned to Penn in July 2007 and has taught a variety of undergraduate as well as graduate courses on African-American literature, women in jazz, and film.

One course, Race Films: Spike Lee and his Interlocutors—which she co-taught in Fall 2008 with anthropologist and filmmaker John Jackson [“John Jackson, Ethnography, and the Hebrew Israelites,” Mar|Apr], currently dean of Penn's School of Social Policy and Practice [“Gazetteer,” May|June]—was inspired by a course she took as an undergraduate, Blacks in Film and Television, taught by the film historian Donald Bogle. She wrote her final paper for that course on Spike Lee's films, which may have helped convince the filmmaker to come to the 2008 class. “He was willing to spend the afternoon at the end of the semester with our students, which was fantastic,” Jackson recalls. “He was so in his element that it's no wonder he's now teaching pretty consistently at NYU.”

In the classroom, Tillet has served as the same kind of example that Farah Jasmine Griffin was for her, judging by the testimony of several former students.

“I'm part of a unique cohort trained by Salamishah during her first years of Penn,” says Joshua Bennet C'10, currently a PhD candidate in English at Princeton. “I wanted to be a professor since I was 17, but none of my models looked the way she looked or taught the way she taught. She opened my eyes—not only to the possibility of teaching, but to the importance of having real social engagement with my work.”

Kaneesha Parsard C'11 thought she was bound for law school until she took Tillet's freshman seminar on African American women writers and filmmakers. Instead, today she's working on her doctorate in African American studies at Yale. “The concepts she taught us in black feminist theory changed my thinking, especially about myself,” she says. “I think that four out of the 12 students in that seminar are currently PhD candidates. I remember telling her I wanted to go to law school and she told me: ‘We'll see if you don't major in English and go to graduate school.’”

Tillet was also there with a pep talk when a “terrified” Parsard was applying to PhD programs. “She helped me realize that working with her had given me the skills to put together a research project and make myself attractive to graduate schools,” she recalls. “Being in her class helped me make sense of where I fit in the academy. Watching her first years as an assistant professor helped me realize, ‘I can do this too.’”

Not all her admirers are professors-in-training. Samuel Mondry-Cohen C'10—whose job as manager of baseball analytics for the Washington Nationals is a fair distance from the ivory tower—credits Tillet's classes with shaping his world-view. “Salamishah taught a mode of thought that was relevant to more than books,” he says. “Technically it was a black feminist perspective, but it was more than okay with a white male. She is very concerned with people on the margins and what it means to be placed there. I was lucky to find her and very quickly I just wanted to be around her.”

An avid sports fan herself, Tillet encouraged Mondry-Cohen to pursue his passion for baseball. Even so, he admits to contemplating an academic career. “If I could be the type of academic that she is, then I would.”

This past June 19th—aka Juneteenth, the holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the US on June 19, 1865, when “General Order No. 3” proclaiming that “all slaves are free” was issued in Texas (which up until then had been ignoring the Emancipation Proclamation, the last state to do so)—Tillet was in Providence, Rhode Island, reliving her own journey to freedom.

Along with her sister Scheherazade and Regine Jean-Charles C’oo, assistant professor of Romance Languages and Literature at Boston College, Tillet was giving the keynote address at the annual conference sponsored by Day One, Rhode Island’s sexual assault and trauma resource center.

The three women performed *Story of a Rape Survivor*, the multimedia presentation of Tillet’s recovery from her sexual assaults. SOARS is told through intimate, black-and-white photographs of Salamishah taken by her sister, accompanied by a diverse cast of musicians, dancers, and stage performers



who bring the story to life. The music is the music Salamishah listened to during her recovery; the spoken words are taken from her journals. The 90-minute production is a powerful story of rebirth and transformation.

The Tillet sisters do about 30 performances of SOARS a year. They introduce each one, telling their stories and joining the cast in a “Talk Back” at the end of each show. When asked how she could relieve her experience again and again, Tillet says she focuses on the end.

“The two times when girls are most susceptible to rape are during freshman year and while on a study-abroad program,” Tillet notes. She experienced both.

It was in October of her freshman year that a senior “frat boy” she was dating sexually assaulted her. “He was continually pressuring me to have intercourse, but I wanted to wait. One night at his fraternity house, I said ‘No,’ but he didn’t listen. Afterwards, I didn’t tell anyone and tried to convince myself that it was consensual,” she says. “It was out of my framework that someone you knew could rape you.”

She was 17 years old and her world was shattered. She suffered from flashbacks. Two months later, her then-boyfriend was concerned enough to arrange her first therapy appointment at Penn. “It didn’t go so well,” she says. “After that I just shut it down and never dealt with it.”

During her junior year abroad in Kenya, Tillet was violently raped by someone she considered an acquaintance shortly before she was scheduled to leave the country. “He was supposed to take me home but instead he took me to a room somewhere. I was forced to spend the night with him because I had no money, no transportation, and no phone and no idea of my location,” she relates. “I thought he was going to beat me. He pinned me down and violently raped me. Once again, I was silent.”

Upon her return to Penn, Tillet was haunted by symptoms of post-traumatic stress—more flashbacks, along with body tremors

Images from *Story of a Rape Survivor*, which combines photos, spoken word, music, and dance to tell the story of Tillet’s recovery from sexual assault.

and nightmares. This time she sought professional help and was referred to Edna Foa, a therapist who was conducting a clinical trial using PTSD methodology for rape survivors—uncharted territory at the time.

Results published last year in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that the methods used by Foa (professor of clinical psychology in psychiatry at Penn and director of the Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety) were two to three times more effective than standard counseling, not only at soothing the psyches of the victims but at eliminating their symptoms. The intensive 14-week treatment, called prolonged exposure therapy, is now being used for rape victims at the center as well as by therapists at Women Organized Against Rape.

“Part of working through the trauma was owning the experience,” Tillet says. “I had to work through my experiences collectively in order to heal from them.” It is difficult and terrifying work that requires the commitment and cooperation of the patient, who must relive and confront her experiences again and again. “I still consider myself remarkably lucky to have been enrolled in this trial,” Tillet adds.

In the fall of 1996, a year after the violent episode in Nairobi, Tillet began sharing her experiences. The first person she told was her sister, then a sophomore at Tufts University. “She told me on the phone, and it was totally overwhelming,” recalls Scheherazade. “I remember thinking that the one in Kenya had happened on my birthday, May 15.”

In the fall of 1997, Tillet published her story in *Generation*, a feminist newspaper on campus. Entitled “Hollow Body, Skin



and Bone,” it contains the manifesto that would become the basis of her life’s work:

“I am telling my story because I no longer want to run. I want to wash away the shower of shame and impotency that I was forced to feel. I want the world to understand that men and women and children are being raped and molested everyday.

“Because people are being ripped open, destroyed and silenced. Because some college men and women can relate to what I am saying and heal. Because some readers can use my words to speak what they deem unspeakable, unconquerable and unnamable. Because some people can take memories of violation and distrust and forge them into cities of power and liberation. Because someone somewhere is being raped right now. Because someone somewhere is dying to tell his or her parents, friends, lover and perpetrators ... Because I need to tell the world that I am healing, feeling and living with these memories. Because I believe in a world in which survivors find their voices and no longer cry alone.”

Scheherazade spent the summer of 1997 with her older sister in Philadelphia and saw firsthand the strength it took to heal. That fall she took a semester off from Tufts, enrolled in the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and took a social-documentary class. And then she started taking photographs of everything her sister did.

“My teacher was taking photographs of a family recovering from HIV, and he encouraged us to take photos of things that were going on in our family,” Scheherazade recalls. “There were no visual models for sexual assault. The closest I could find were photos a husband had taken of his wife dying of cancer. So I just took pictures of everything.”

Scheherazade documented all the components of her sister’s healing process: the individual and group therapy sessions, the self-affirming messages she left herself on the refrigerator, the books she read, the music she listened to, the spiritual quests she undertook, the poems she wrote, the drawings she created. She chronicled her sister’s workout sessions, her evenings at the jazz club, and her burgeoning activism with rape survivors.

At the time, in between finishing her master’s degree at Brown and starting her PhD at Harvard, Tillet was the research assistant to Charlotte Pierce-Baker, then an adjunct professor at Penn, for her book,

Surviving the Silence, a collection of first-person narratives of rape by 10 African American women. Through Pierce-Baker, she met Aisha Simmons, currently an adjunct faculty member in the Women’s Studies and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Studies program at Temple University, who was beginning to work on her groundbreaking documentary, *NO!* The award-winning film explores rape and other forms of sexual assault through the first-person testimonies, scholarship, spirituality, activism, and cultural work of African Americans. Tillet created the study guide for the documentary, in which she and her sister are both featured.

“Having models of older black women breaking the silence with art changed me and my sister forever,” Tillet says. “My sister saw how present my recovery was.”

When Scheherazade returned to Tufts for her senior year, she learned of a grant being given by the Women’s Center for a project documenting the impact of sexual assault on families. “I was the only one at the meeting, so I asked them to support my project,” she remembers. Her photographs became the basis for SOARS, which took shape during her senior year at Tufts. “Salamishah was now at Harvard, so we lived together and transformed the photos into a multimedia production.” They recruited their friends to dance, sing, and act and staged three sold-out performances at Tufts.

“The woman who was the director of the Women’s Center emailed her colleagues at places like Harvard, Dartmouth, and Penn, and we started getting requests to bring the program to other campuses,” remembers Scheherazade. “We knew we had something, but we wanted to be clinically responsible in our documentation of the power of art in healing.”

To that end, Scheherazade earned a master’s degree in art therapy from the Art Institute of Chicago and became a certified rape-crisis counselor. In 2003, the sisters formed A Long Walk Home (the name comes from a poem Salamishah wrote after the sexual assault in Kenya), acting on the advice of their “silent founder” Steplight (“the business guy”), who suggested that forming a non-profit would increase their impact.

Based in Chicago, A Long Walk Home partners with rape crisis centers, universities, and high schools to provide innovative and inclusive programs for under-

served communities. Through national and local programs, including SOARS, summer and after-school youth institutes, campus training sessions and workshops, A Long Walk Home has educated more than 100,000 survivors and their allies.

In 2009, the organization added a program focusing on adolescent girls called the Girl/Friends Leadership Institute. The program empowers teenage girls to use art to advocate for themselves and other girls and to design campaigns and policies to end dating violence, sexual assault, and street harassment in their schools and communities. So far, 200 girls have participated. The goal is for Girl/Friends graduates to run their own programs within eight years, creating leaders who in turn train future leaders. A Long Walk Home also offers individual workshops and lectures for audiences of all ages, including art educators, college leaders, students going abroad, and youth activists.

“Our mission is to create a world without violence against women and girls,” says Scheherazade, who serves as executive director. “We are creating a program that reaches everyone. We are taking the most vulnerable and making them leaders, creating a movement to heal the world.”

The Rhode Island performance was an abbreviated version of SOARS, featuring Jean-Charles (who acted in the African American Arts Alliance while she was at Penn), and without the dancers and musicians. Jean-Charles has been friendly with Salamishah since their Harvard days (she was a year behind) and is on A Long Walk Home’s board of directors. She has been appearing in SOARS since 2001, using spoken word and body language to act out two poems from Salamishah’s journals that open and close the performance.

The opening poem, “Do You Know What Rape Feels Like?” is so powerful that Jean-Charles says she prepares for the performance by offering up a prayer to all the survivors she has met. “The more I performed, the more people would disclose to me,” she adds, prompting her to become trained as a rape/crisis counselor. The closing poem, “I Died and Was Born the Same Day,” is an anthem of hope for rape survivors.

In Rhode Island, a survivor in the audience confessed the opening poem had made her sob uncontrollably. “I never heard anyone put into words something so grotesque and so beautiful at the same

time,” she said. “I wanted to run up on the stage and hug you.”

“It always happens in a performance,” says Steplight. “There is always an ‘Aha’ or an ‘I’m free’ moment, and it is always extremely rewarding and deeply poignant to hear people share that in a public setting. The ability to create a safe space is like creating an opportunity for people to learn more about themselves.”

ON May 1, the White House released a list of 55 colleges under federal scrutiny for the manner in which they handle sexual-assault complaints, required under the Title IX law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in schools that receive federal funding. This list, the latest version of which has grown to include 64 schools, includes large public institutions as well as prestigious Ivies. (At this writing, Penn was not on the list.) The larger issue, according to *Time* magazine, which ran a cover story on the subject, is not which picturesque campus became the collegiate rape capital of the United States (the University of Montana in Missoula earned this unwelcome distinction), but the fact that one in five women is the victim of an attempted or completed sexual assault during college.

The University of Pennsylvania prohibits all forms of sexual violence, which includes relationship violence, domestic violence, and stalking in any form, as well as sexual assault and rape. “Sexual violence includes a range of behaviors in which an act of a sexual nature is taken against another person without the individual’s consent or when the individual is unable to consent,” the policy states. Sexual assault includes, but is not limited to, rape, which is defined as “a sexual assault involving an act of penetration and includes acquaintance rape.”

Sexual assault is defined as “any physical sexual contact that involves the use or threat of force or violence or any other form of coercion or intimidation” as well as “any physical sexual contact with a person who is unable to consent due to incapacity or impairment, mental or physical, including but not limited to being under the influence of alcohol or drugs or being too young to consent.”

Under these definitions, which reflect changes promulgated by the Obama administration in 2012, what happened

to Tillet on campus in October of her freshman year was clearly rape. Not so when it occurred in 1992. “When I finally got up the courage to go to report it to the sex crimes unit of the DA’s office, they told me ‘No means no’ was not considered rape in Pennsylvania at the time,” she says. “Consent” is such a big piece of the definition of rape that A Long Walk Home sells black tee-shirts emblazoned with the phrase “Got consent?” on its website.

Tillet makes no secret of her history (SOARS has been performed twice on campus), and in her unique position as an alumna as well as a rape survivor, she has borne witness to many student disclosures. Compared to her undergraduate years, “I think there is better outreach and more concentrated activism on this issue,” she notes. “But I am not sure the attitudes and behaviors that encourage people to commit acts of sexual assault on other people have changed significantly.”

Which brings her to the larger subject of violence against women. In the issue of *Time* that included the story on rape, the following article was about the kid-

“Our inability to recognize this fundamental human crisis—up there with climate change—is what keeps me up at night; our ability to solve it, allows me to dream.”

napping of more than 250 girls by the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram in Nigeria. For Tillet, there is a “seamless link” between stories like these.

“We could and should, of course, add the story of the mass shooting at the University of California-Santa Barbara to this list as well because they are so clearly connected by violence towards girls and women,” she says in an email. “I do not mean to say that boys and men are not experiencing violence and trauma, but I am concerned with the various and disproportionate forms of violence women and girls are facing, simply because they are women and girls.”

“I do believe gender-based violence and patriarchy sadly are a common denominator and link us beyond class, race, and nationality. It is exacerbated by other facts such as racism, poverty, and homophobia. Our inability to recognize this fundamen-

tal human crisis—up there with climate change—is what keeps me up at night; our ability to solve it, allows me to dream.”

And therein, perhaps, lies the key to Tillet’s approach as a scholar, activist, and human being: for her, these roles are all of a piece. “A lot of times in academia there is a false binary between theory and practice,” Jean-Charles reflects. “She defies this. She is very public and very scholarly and she does it in an honest and creative way. She’s always making creative, thoughtful connections.”

“The thing about Salamishah is that everything she does, she does all in,” concurs John Jackson. “If she’s watching *Mad Men* on television, she’s watching it critically—analyzing the choices that the creators are making with regard to the development of the characters. One doesn’t choose pleasure or principle. Your job is to do everything at the same time.”

Tillet is well aware that her life was forever changed by her experiences of sexual trauma. And that her public transformation from victim to activist has defined not only her ongoing recovery

but also her career. “All of these experiences, including working through my separate and discrete experiences of sexual trauma, helped shape my activism and my life’s work—to end violence against girls and women,” she says.

But while activism is part of Tillet’s healing, she recognizes it is not for everyone. “It is important that we follow the lead of each survivor and provide safe spaces for them to share their stories,” she told the Rhode Island audience. “It took me a long time to be so public. I needed people to believe my story to back me up.”

Even more important, she needed to believe she was strong enough to trust the power of self-transformation. “The recognition of self-value is stronger than anything that happens to us,” she promises. ♦

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