

#ItHappenedToUs:
How Chosen Families support Queer Survivors of Sexual Assault

“Survivors are trained from birth to be exquisitely sensitive. for our own survival’s sake. At the first sign of a thrown water glass, the first whisper of footsteps coming down the halls at 3am behind a smiling face, we’re gone. We do not forget these lessons – we still need them everyday.” – Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha “browngirlworld: queergirlofcolor organizing, sistahood, heartbreak”

“...Stories of queer in-community sexual assault need to be told. We need these stories: so we can love one another without re-perpetuating our trauma, and so we can build communities where we can heal. We need these stories so we can live.” – Leah Horlick, “For Your Own Good”

In November 2015, I encountered a series of photographs that shook my world.

Although they were taken in the United States – thousands of kilometres from where I stood in Johannesburg, South Africa – these four photographs grabbed the most vulnerable and secret parts of me and refused to let go.

I found them while flipping through my Facebook timeline on an otherwise unremarkable day. They were part of a post shared by [Jamal T. Lewis](#) – a queer Black multidisciplinary performance artist working on a much-anticipated upcoming documentary entitled [No Fats, No Femmes](#).

The first of the shared photographs showed a young Black man, stoically seated cross-legged on a blue mattress, a slick of silver duct tape over his mouth. In the photograph, the young man is holding up a white placard marked with bold black words proclaiming:

“Hello, My name is Timothy. 2 months ago I was sexually assaulted on THIS very mattress. My perpetrator is still here. This is a silent, peaceful protest to represent the Queer Erasure at Morehouse College. Help me tell my story! (Read my FB post & stand in solidarity w/ me against sexual violence.)”

With his sparse and powerful protest, Timothy Tukes – at the time a junior studying English at the historically Black college – evoked both the unknowable bravery and the radical vulnerability displayed by many sexual assault survivors who weaponised their experiences into displays of fierce activism. Most closely for me, Timothy’s silent protest echoed [Emma Sulkowicz](#)’s activism. Just a year before Tukes’ protest, Sulkowicz, a Columbia University visual arts student, famously carried the mattress on which she had been raped around the New York City campus, as part of an endurance performance art piece entitled [“Carry That Weight”](#).

As heart-quickenning as the photograph of Timothy seated atop his mattress was, it was the accompanying photographs of Tukes’ protest that hit me like a thunderclap to the sternum. The photos showed other Black students surrounding Timothy, some standing silently in solidarity with him, each of them with stern faces. A few held up coloured

placards marked similarly with black pen. Each of their messages was as bold and as commanding as Timothy's own, but in an entirely different way.

One announced:

"I STAND IN SOLIDARITY with my BRISTA! End sexism, homophobia, patriarchy, SEXUAL ASSAULT! #ItHappenedToUs"

Another proclaimed:

*"YOU WILL NOT [ERASE] him/her/us... We refused to be ERASED!!!
#ItHappenedToUs"*

The one that gripped me the hardest, held up by a protester standing to Timothy's right, read:

*"I GOT MY BRISTA'S BACK!!!
I GOT MY BROTHER'S BACK!!!
I GOT MY SISTER'S BACK!!!
I GOT MY BRISTA'S BACK!!!
I GOT MY BROTHER'S BACK!!!
I GOT MY SISTER'S BACK!!!
#ItHappenedToUs"*

This passionate and silent display of solidarity affected me on multiple levels.

On one layer, it was a fierce display of Black love. A group of Black students showed up in formation for one of their own. They unashamedly and publically, claimed him as a "[Brista](#)": a queer Black vernacular word most commonly used as a term of endearment between queer Black men that combines the words "brother" and "sista". In this way, the group of people gathered around Timothy claimed him as family, and were thus connected to him and to each other as chosen family.

On another layer, the placards moved me because they challenged all who viewed them to think about the issues presented before them as both individual and institutional. Each of the placards screamed that the protest was not only about Timothy's sexual assault, but also about the structural conditions that led to his sexual assault. It was about institutional silence and queer erasure in sexual assault advocacy; it was about rape culture on university campuses; it was about "*sexism, homophobia, patriarchy, SEXUAL ASSAULT!*" and more.

Most profoundly, the aspect of the protest that affected me the most was the repeated hashtag: *#ItHappenedToUs*. Never had a hashtag so succinctly encapsulated the widespread and uncountable pervasiveness of queer sexual assault as this one. Also, never had a hashtag so cleverly captured the often uneasy and uncomfortable connections between survivors than this one. And most importantly for me, never had a hashtag mirrored the impact of my own sexual assault on my chosen family. As the placards so bravely admitted, when I was sexually assaulted, it didn't just happen to me, it happened to us.

Even though more than two years had passed between my own sexual assault and seeing Timothy Tukes' protest, I was triggered into vivid flashbacks that made it feel as if it happened only the evening before. I remembered everything, but was particularly reminded of the impact that sexual violence had on me, and the people close to me. I was reminded of the way it ripped through both my biological and chosen families irrevocably.

I was twenty-one, about to enter my third year of varsity, and the first year of my Honours degree at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada. It was summer break, and I had invited one of my closest varsity friends to stay with my family and I in South Africa for six weeks. My friend was white, queer and Canadian, and I was eager to show them aspects of my life in South Africa, as well as introduce them to some of the people I held incredibly close to my heart. The first four weeks of their visit were both idyllic and fraught with tense and complicated moments.

Two weeks before their departure, my friend snuck into my room one evening while I was groggy on 'flu medication from a cold I caught in Cape Town. That evening, they stood over me while I was asleep, snuck into my bed and sexually assaulted me. Initially, I tried to struggle. I did not cry out. I pretended to be asleep.

The next morning, and for weeks and years after that, I pretended as though it had never happened. We both did. Partly because we were so enmeshed in each other's lives. We shared a place of learning. We shared friends. We shared chosen family. Because of this, more than anything, I felt as though I could not tell anyone because it would result in the rupturing of so many relationships.

The slick of silver duct tape across Timothy Tukes' mouth reminded me of my own severe, self-imposed silence. An agonising and enduring silence that was, in itself, a kind of secondary violence.

I kept silent for so long because I did not have the words to describe what it was that had happened to me that night. The myths and dominant discourses surrounding sexual violence condemned me to silence. They revealed themselves in the toxic questions I posed to myself: We were both queer, so how could it have even happened? I didn't speak up, I didn't say "No", I didn't confront what was happening, I didn't stop it – so how could it have been sexual assault? I was the one who invited this person halfway around the world to stay in my home, I invited them into my family – so wasn't it also (at least in part) my fault?

For a long time I was covered by a persistent and a malignant veil of shame. A veil that only lifted once I found the courage to turn to my chosen family in Vancouver – the people who I hoped could hold me and support me while I was so far from home. At the time, I was too afraid to tell my biological family for fear of their reactions to the myriad complications of a queer sexual assault that occurred in our own home. I wanted to protect them, just as I had thought my silence protected and preserved the relationships in my chosen family.

And just as Audre Lorde warned me (and so many of us) in her [essay](#), “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, my silence did not protect me.

The first person I told was my partner, who had once known and cared for my abuser as part of the constellation of chosen family we had created in Vancouver. Their pain on hearing me recount my experience was simultaneously an expression of deep love and empathy for me, as well as a reflection of the betrayal of trust that would eventually fracture their relationship with my abuser irreparably.

In spite of their pain, my partner’s instant and unconditional belief and support gently nudged me into finding the courage to tell other people in our chosen family.

I remember sitting cross-legged in a dorm room and feeling my tongue loosen as I told my Kenyan chosen sister what had happened, eyes both brimming with tears. I remember being tenderly held by my *kuya*, my Filipino chosen-brother, in a Portland room overflowing with love and heartbreak. I remember sending my Chinese genderqueer love a draft of the e-mail where I finally summoned the courage to confront my abuser, their kind and generous reminder of my own bravery is something I carry with me always.

The support and solidarity I received from my chosen family not only lifted my veil of shame, it also pushed me to retrieve the sections of my humanity that had been rendered invisible by the power my abuser held over me. And just as the placards held up by Timothy Tukes’ supporters called attention to the systemic and institutional, I began to understand and locate my abuser’s power in the same way.

Shailja Patel, a Kenyan feminist activist, poet and author of [Migritude](#) asserts that if “you want to understand how power works in any society, watch who is carrying the shame and who is doing the shaming.” Because of my abuser’s power over me – power expressed through months of manipulation and white entitlement to my time, space and ultimately my body – I internalised their violence as something that I unquestionably deserved. Informed by their whiteness (whether intentional or not), my abuser marked and recognised me, a queer Black South African femme, as a body safe to violate.

Thus, my own story can be located and understood within a global, imperialist white supremacist, heteropatriarchal matrix where certain bodies are marked as more vulnerable to sexual violence than others. So many of these bodies are connected by complex interlocking histories and present realities of colonisation, apartheid, settler colonialism and slavery; and the systemic erasure of these aspects contributes to our silence.

[Leah Horlick](#), an award-winning queer Canadian poet, activist and community organiser, speaks about these vital connections in [For Your Own Good](#) – a landmark poetry anthology exploring queer sexual assault. She writes, “I have connected with many brilliant, articulate racialized and dis/Abled youth, trans* women, and sex workers who have always been at the forefront of calling out queer in-community violence – because they overwhelmingly experience the most severe, isolating, sexualized, and fatal abuse at the hands of our so-called queer and feminist ‘communities’.”

Just as I drew strength from my chosen family to puncture the silence and shame I internalised about my sexual assault, I choose to believe that the collective silences we break around queer sexual assault can stir strength and courage in others. Whether survivors have their own chosen families or not, those of us who have the immense privilege to speak can gently nudge others to shed the shameful veil so many of us wear. I know this, because Timothy Tukes' silent protest roused me into writing these words.

And through both tiny and large expressions of solidarity, we can be each other's chosen families.
