"Violence Against Lesbians at Sisterfire"
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“Violence Against Lesbians at Sisterfire”

On June 28, 1987, at the Sisterfire festival held in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, there was a violent incident between lesbian vendors and two male gay male volunteers. Violence Against Lesbians at Sisterfire, as it was titled, was committed by the two women involved, Lin Daniels and Myriam Fougere. Their article was given to Roadwork, whose response follows.

On June 27, 1987, we were physically attacked by a man at our booth at Sisterfire. In short, Myriam (a lesbian sculptor) and I were at a booth at Sisterfire’s Marketplace. Myriam shows her work to women. We opened our booth after having been moved from a site surrounded by male vendors to a place surrounded by women. We happily opened our booth to women. We informed men who wished to view her work that “Myriam shows her work to women, she gets her inspiration from women, and she does not choose to show her work to men.” For the most part, this worked well.

One man, however, later in the afternoon, did not like being denied access to women’s space. After having had two explanations from Myriam about her politics, he left. Five minutes later, he came back with a very tall male friend, and demanded further explanations. She explained again. He then threatened us, called Myriam a “bitch,” told her that “he didn’t like her attitude,” and told her that he would stay there as long as she did. He said “move me.”

I then sought a security guard. When she arrived at the booth, she demanded to hear “both” sides before removing him. She reminded me that she first remove him, at which point he reached over “security’s” shoulder, and hit me in the face. I attempted to defend myself and was held back by two craftswomen. Myriam then attempted to defend me, and was held back by two more craftswomen. He then went past the “security” woman, and proceeded to grab Myriam’s throat. He let go only when he noticed more and more women coming to the scene. No attempt was made by the “security” woman to defend us. The craftswomen, at that point, acted as “security,” standing between us and the men, trying to contain the situation, while “security” was frantically calling for help with other Sisterfiresparks, wondering what to do.

This went on for at least one hour. It took over an hour for the organizers of Sisterfire to remove one man from the site. At which point he assaulted 2 lesbians, in full view of at least 20 women. It was horrific.

What followed was even more horrific. Myriam and I were interrogated by Sisterfire organizers. We were asked about our politics. We were asked about what we did to “provoke” his violence. We were called “racist” for denying this black man access to the booth. We were told that just asking this man to move on, however politely, was violence, and that he responded to violence with violence. We were told that Myriam had no right to deny men access to her work at Sisterfire. We were asked to clear out and accept a refund on the space. We were told that the man might be allowed back on the site the next day. We were told by a festival organizer, that from her personal point of view, Myriam’s work is beautiful, but that it is not appropriate for Sisterfire because there are families walking around, including men and children, and perhaps her work would be better suited to Michigan. We were told, in essence, that by virtue of our lesbian separatist politics, the organizers, at that point, were not sure as to how they would proceed in that regard. The meeting was to be reconvened the next morning, after the organizers made their decision.

Approximately 50 women began the meeting that next morning, and as it progressed, at least 200 women were assembled. We were then told by the organizers that the man would be allowed back on the site, that they considered that violence took place “on both parts” (our denial of access, in their language, constituted violence), and that they would not ban this man, their employee, from the site. When the woman demanded that Sisterfire release the names of the violent men, we were told that we were conducting a “witch hunt,” that we sounded like a “lynch mob,” and that this was not going to give in to that kind of mentality.

This went on for at least one hour. One woman who came with her daughter was forced to send her home. Her daughter witnessed the assault. She is a 15-year-old black child who was raped two months ago. Seeing us being attacked by a man and not protected in a place she considered safe was too much for her to take, and so she left. Her mother stayed, however, and opened our booth at 11:00 and stayed open until 7:00 and that child’s mother didn’t leave our side the entire day. In her own words: “I couldn’t prevent my daughter from being raped, and I couldn’t prevent what happened to you yesterday, but I cannot and will not allow any further violence to you today.”

Other acts of solidarity were also taken place. Since the organizers refused to announce what happened, on any stage, and refused to warn women that these violent men were in their midst, five women took the responsibility of forming groups of 2-12 women, ALL DAY, to tell them what occurred. The craftswoamn put signs on their booths which simply stated, “We do not condone violence against women at Sisterfire,” to eliciting questions, and the individual craftswoamn would retell the story to every woman who asked.

What followed this violence was a female solidarity-forming action. Lesbians, straight women, and women of all racial backgrounds united to protest this blatant indulgence of men’s violence against women. We were moved by the solidarity. At least 10 Sisterfire workers and volunteers came to us and offered their support, and told us we did not agree with Sisterfire’s handling of the situation, and vowed never to return or to have any of the craftswoamn participate.

We had an arnazon watch the entire day. One woman who came with her daughter was forced to send her home. Her daughter witnessed the assault. She is a 15-year-old black child who was raped two months ago. Seeing us being attacked by a man and not protected in a place she considered safe was too much for her to take, and so she left. Her mother stayed, however, and opened our booth at 11:00 and stayed open until 7:00 and that child’s mother didn’t leave our side the entire day. In her own words: “I couldn’t prevent my daughter from being raped, and I couldn’t prevent what happened to you yesterday, but I cannot and will not allow any further violence to you today.”

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Sisterfire

In the presence of at least two hundred women who attended the "Sisterfire" meeting on the Sunday morning after the assault, it is up to them to solve those problems. That is not our concern. We are not into tearing down the institutions, as lesbophobic as we found them to be.

Our enemies are not women. Since the assault, though, we have both been walking around in a state of disbelief. It seems as though all that we had learned as women in regard to that very primary issue of violence, has been dashed by women who should know better. Myriam and I have worked in rape crisis centers and battered wives shelters. The very first thing that one has to come to terms with in that context is that there is no justifiable provocation for violence. One does not ask a woman who has been beaten or raped about her politics, what she was wearing, what her "attitude" was, or what she did to provoke him. Even straight TAW agencies have learned that much.

Sisterfire asked us to close our booth, and allowed these men access to the site after their assault. We have been chastised for our politics and made to feel that by virtue of our lesbian separatist views, we do not belong in their "celebration of women art". What message are these actions conveying to men?

Some women at Sisterfire are blaming themselves for not being clear with us that we had no right to woomn's space at their festival. This is yet another example of woomn blaming themselves for men's violence. Our only responsibility is to ourselves, not to men, but because a man assaulted us at their festival, the organizers of Sisterfire have sided with this man and put us in an adversarial position with them. The organizers protected these men and asked us to consider "their feelings". It is expected that they have become "suspects" while these men continue to go unpunished, and can even continue to work for Sisterfire. I have made to feel like "outsiders" who have no right to be in a place predominantly (85% at least) supported by lesbians, while battering men are welcomed with open arms, and protected by those arms.

I, Myriam, an a Lesbian who creates sculpture for lesbians, and want my work to flow back to the source of its inspiration. I believe in Lesbian culture in the making. It has nothing to do with men. If I were to show my work to men, I would not be doing what I am doing. I really believe that we limit ourselves, our art, if we have to take men's vision into consideration.

Some craftswomyn told me that there are some items that they did not choose to sell at Sisterfire because they are not "for men's eyes". Well, I don't have anything for men's eyes. Does it mean that I should be barred from showing my work? Who is the woomn whom I might not otherwise reach? At Sisterfire, men are allowed to view woomn's culture on three stages, and in approximately 150 booths. Why do Sisterfire organizers refuse to acknowledge that perhaps it is necessary to keep some of that culture, which they purport to celebrate, for ourselves, and accept that there are some women who have no desire to share their life's work with those whom they consider their enemy.

Women's oppression does not end magically, because some woomn choose to work in "coalition" with some men. Within woomn's culture, there is (albeit sparsel) woomn only space. If this festival is to be a celebration of woomn's culture, then woomn who work to create that culture must not be made to feel ostracized. This is a contradiction to its (supposed) intent. We opened our booth to woomn, and were made to feel like we didn't belong. It was ludicrous.

We know men to be our common enemies. When rape, attack, kill woomn every day, regardless of their racial background, and there is evidence to indicate that unless woomn stop them, they will annihilate us all. They have no respect for us, our space, and they have proven that one more time. We didn't need this assault, however, to emphasize that we are at war.

We live in New York City, one of the biggest centers of the patriarchy, yet we manage to live there according to our principles, usually without being physically assaulted by men. If we were attacked there, though, we would have recourse against our attackers, even by their laws. Sisterfire's "newspaper," the proposition that even peaceful denial of access to men from one woman's 6'x10' booth in a "women's cultural festival," in a man's world is violence and was justifiably countered by his physical assault, is complete and utter nonsense. It is dangerous, distorted and just plain wrong.

The continuation of their analysis insures woomn of their lack of safety at Sisterfire. If a man, as in our case, just doesn't like our attitude, Sisterfire will justify his attack. Let him hide behind the guise of racism, ageism, or any ism they can think of to justify the violence which emanates from his prick, and change the meaning of violence to suit themselves. I am using the word "prick," not as an "obscenity" as pointed out by Sisterfire organizers, but to emphasize the fact that his violence stems from his maleness, not from anywhere else.

They (the organizers) said at the meeting of craftswomyn that they are in the throes of changing their policies to allow more men into the process, to have them perform, and allow more craftsmen. Next year, before they see the publicity, it would be helpful if they didn't misrepresent themselves.

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If the intent of Sisterfire is to share woomn's culture with men, then let us not dilute that culture to the point where even the primary issue of violence against woomn is put into question. If men have the privilege (and Sisterfire is the only "women's" festival that affords that privilege to men) of "sharing" woomn's culture, then, in the words of a woomn who voiced her opinion about the attack to the organizers, they must at least learn to behave.

In Daniels and Myriam Fougere