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Rethinking 1000 Fat Cranes

BY GUEST WRITER | SEPTEMBER 5, 2008

The following is a post by a guest blogger who wished to remain anonymous. I jumped at the opportunity to host it here because this project has raised questions for me as well, though I've been unable to put language to what, exactly, was irking me about it.

To be clear: this should NOT be construed as a personal attack on anyone, including the individuals mentioned by name; it's just raising legitimate criticism, and further highlighting the ongoing, neverending challenge of framing our fat activism in an anti-racist context. I like to think this movement is plenty strong enough to withstand and benefit from even the most difficult and painful criticisms. I also like to think that we, as individual fat activists, are likewise engaged enough and committed enough to accept other perspectives thoughtfully and with grace, even when they are hard to hear. I hope you agree.
-Lesley the admin

Lately one of the most talked-about fat activist projects has been Marilyn Wann's 1,000 Fat Cranes. Marilyn inspired my own activism, and much of her work has been an important part of contemporary fat liberation and fat activism, so it is not without some trepidation that I offer criticism of one of the most beloved icons of fat activism.

That said, I have been grappling with how to discuss the Fat Crane project ever since I first heard about it. I applaud the intention behind Marilyn's efforts, and the efforts of those participating, to reduce size-based discrimination and to attempt to expand their horizons outside of simply a U.S.-centric activism. Charlotte Cooper and others have rightly criticized U.S. fat activists for often being remarkably insular in our work, forgetting that there are fat activists working outside our country and people experiencing size-based prejudice outside our country.

That said, virtually every aspect of the Fat Cranes project has struck me as in some way racist, ethnocentric, and inextricably intertwined with a frustrating tradition of cultural appropriation and cultural imperialism. It frustrates me that the vast majority of white fat activists who I know are lauding the project as truly revolutionary and important, without giving thought (or at least without giving voice) to some of these more problematic aspects. In a few places (on the Fat Studies list, in the comments of a Joy Nash's post on the Fatshionista LJ and in select private journal entries) there have been the seeds of dissent and discussion on the issue, but they have largely been met with silence or ridicule. Note, for example, the person who "LOL"ed at dreamalynn's criticism of the project in the LJ.

What, specifically, are my criticisms? First, for those who aren't aware, here is the basic premise of the project (which had its debut on August 6th), as described on the project's Myspace page:

1,000 Fat Cranes is a response to the Japanese government's decision to measure everyone's waist.

WHERE AM I?



Two Whole Cakes is a blog written by Lesley Kinzel, a mouthy fat broad who deals in body politics, social justice activism, and pop-cultural criticism, usually from a feminist-flavored perspective.

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1,000 Fat Cranes asks the Japanese government: Please end the war on waistlines...please make peace with people of all sizes.

What the MySpace and the original email were lacking, obviously, is any substantive context. Why are we sending these? Why did we choose an important Japanese cultural symbol to apparently educate the Japanese government about sizeism? What assumptions are going into this project about the role of (predominantly white) U.S. activists sending cranes to Japan? The message, to me at least, comes across fairly clearly as we white Americans know better than you, and we'll appropriate your cultural symbols in a (not-at-all racist/ethnocentric) attempt to help you fix the mess you've gotten yourself into.

And, oh yeah, we'll premiere it on the anniversary of the day we bombed Hiroshima.

Why do I bother writing this? I suppose, really, I'd like to see some more substantive discussion of what this project is all about, of why the white, middle-class, American woman decided she wanted to educate Japan using Japanese cultural symbols. I want to see a discussion of cultural appropriation, of exporting American politics without much consideration for Japanese culture or Japanese politics. Is sizeism okay anywhere? No. But neither is a group of U.S. activists becoming, in large part, the Great White Savior of the non-Western world. There have been some powerful critiques of the racism and ethnocentrism of U.S. fat liberation by a handful of fat activists (including especially by others here at Fatshionista and elsewhere), but why aren't all of us speaking out about these problems?

The Fat Cranes project seems like a great opportunity instead of just participating because there's a big name and it's labeled a fat liberation project, let's have a little criticism of the problems within our own movement. This post is my attempt to continue the discussion on race and racism in fat activism, and to really start a discussion about this particular project. I hope I won't be the only one talking about it.

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with Lesley Kinzel & Marianne Kirby

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