

# THE APPROPRIATED GEISHA

*Using Their Role to Discuss Japanese History, Cultural Appropriation, and Orientalism*

By Elisheva Perelman

Moving beyond Facebook to the Internet communities of Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr, students would leave older forms of media behind. Or such is their conviction. Of course, previous generations have purported to break ground where their predecessors failed to sow, and sometimes they really do. What is dramatically clear from a perusal of these new forms of social media is what consumes student thought. Certainly some of the topics one finds are of little import, but others are instances of misappropriation of culture, gender, and race, which often breed the hottest discussions among their peers online. As teachers, it would behoove us to listen to our students, not because appropriation is new (it certainly is not), but because their awareness of it is.

In November 2013, Katy Perry appeared on the American Music Awards, an event televised as Grammy competition to nearly thirteen million viewers in the United States alone.<sup>1</sup> She looked stunning in her seemingly Asian gown and beautifully sang her latest single, *Unconditionally*. Though her performance was met with vigorous applause and cheers at the venue, her reception online was a bit more staid, with some notes of fury.<sup>2</sup> Was her performance racist? Was Katy Perry essentializing Asia in her combination of a Japanese *kimono* and Chinese *cheongsam*? Did she appropriate Japanese culture as cherry blossoms rained down upon her and her dancers? Debate raged for a while, to the point that Perry was forced to offer her rationale for her sartorial and design choices in the February 2014 edition of *GQ Magazine*, stating that she “was thinking about unconditional love, and I was thinking: *Geishas* are basically, like, the masters of loving unconditionally.”<sup>3</sup> And this seemed to stop it. The Internet moved on. But I didn’t.

As a professor of Japanese history, I realized that, at the intersection of student awareness of cultural appropriation and the courses I was tasked to teach, lay the geisha. For centuries, these individuals had been misunderstood, not least of all by Perry, and had, long before American music merited awards, been appropriated to symbolize any number of equally misunderstood tropes and concepts. By utilizing the fact that students remained intrigued both by Japan itself and by geisha since the publication of the 1997 bestseller *Memoirs of a Geisha* (and its controversial 2005 film adaptation), as well as by questions of appropriation, the geisha themselves could provide a lens through which to analyze questions of appropriate cultural interaction

from the Meiji Era (1868–1912) to the present. By looking at how geisha were utilized to portray Japanese artistry, grace, and not least of all femininity, as well as how they often served as a symbol for Japan as a nation and culture—particularly abroad—students could explore whether our own contemporary appropriation, and scrutiny of it, was novel or unique.

This was the approach I took to the introductory-level survey course for undergraduate students in Asian studies titled *Geisha in History, Fiction, and Fantasy*. On the advice of my colleague, Jan Bardsley, I opened the course with Arthur Golden’s smashingly successful *Memoirs of a Geisha*, utilizing the work in counterpoint to turn-of-the-twentieth-century Western novels about Japanese women, including *Madame Butterfly*, *A Bride of Japan*, *A Flower of Yeddo*, and *A Japanese Marriage*, to explore Orientalism within Euro-American (and in the case of Dawes’s *A Bride of Japan*, Euro-Australian) literature.<sup>4</sup> Undergraduate students, while often familiar with terms like “cultural appropriation,” were often hard-pressed to define “Orientalism,” either from Said’s original definition or from its analogues across Asia.<sup>5</sup> For our purposes, therefore, Orientalism consists not only of the dichotomy of Occident and Orient, or the prioritizing of the former over the latter, but the conceit that the latter requires the Occident to enlighten the Orient to the latter’s own intrinsic value. This might manifest then as the idea that Perry can perform as a geisha to convey the true art of something perceived,

both in “the West” (Euro-America and the ANZAC [Australia and New Zealand] nations) and Japan, as so inherently “Japanese.” As far as students are concerned, however, at this point, despite not knowing the terminology, they could quickly grasp the concepts, pinpointing examples to compare obvious instances of the notions with the more slippery potential manifestations of it in Golden’s work.

From there, students explored the actual everyday practices of the geisha, both historical and contemporary. For this section, students employed works such as Liza Dalby’s seminal *Geisha* and presented their findings to their peers in small groups, with discussions of the historical origins of the geisha and *geiko*, the makeup of the *okiya* (geisha household), the artistic skills necessary for *jikata* (musician) and *tachikata* (dancing) geisha, the *zashiki* parties in the *ochaya* teahouses, and the fashions employed by the women.<sup>6</sup>

Having an appropriate background in both the customs of the geisha and the vocabulary and

## Was Katy Perry essentializing Asia in her combination of a Japanese *kimono* and Chinese *cheongsam*?



Screen capture from Katy Perry’s performance on AMA’s 2013 YouTube video at <http://tinyurl.com/loq9l2q2r>.



*The Courtesan* (after Eisen) by Vincent van Gogh.  
Source: Wikipedia at <http://tinyurl.com/p7quzrk>.



1885 program cover for *The Mikado*, by W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/p2jugl8>.



Signed photo of Geraldine Farrar in Puccini's 1907 New York Metropolitan Opera production of *Madama Butterfly*.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/puv3tfk>.



*Caprice in Purple and Gold No. 2—The Golden Screen*, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, 1864.  
Source: Tokyo Jinja website at <http://tinyurl.com/nkz6vl2>.



Marie Tempest as O Mimosa San in *The Geisha*.  
Source: British Musical Theatre website at <http://tinyurl.com/pyruhnu>.

understanding of Orientalism, the class turned its focus to the attempts by geisha to remain relevant in the face of *bunmei kaika*, civilization and enlightenment, reforms. These include the role of women as *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) of the Meiji government; the competition from the *moga* (modern girl) of the late Taishō Era (1912–1926) and prewar Shōwa Era (1926–1989); the attempts to weather the storms that were both WWII and the rise of the *onsen* (hot springs resort) geisha; and Occupation-era geisha girl, who tried to coopt the cache of the geisha of Gion and their ilk, those individuals whom one thinks of as the quintessential geisha. For these historical events, students read works by Amy Stanley, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Masuda Sayo, and Bill Hume, while also discussing the nature of the *dokufu* (poison woman) using William Johnston's translation of the interrogation of Abe Sada.<sup>7</sup>

With this grounding in place, the class considered the nature of geisha as emblematic of both Japanese femininity and Japan itself over time. With the *Japonisme* movement in Western art and aesthetics, students were tasked with analyzing various images to consider what was employed within the works to highlight “Japaneseness.” From there, a trip to the university's art museum contrasted *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints with the *Japonisme* offerings of artists including Vincent van Gogh, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and James Tissot, particularly with regard to the nature of the portrayal of the “Japanese” female. From the visual to the stage, students next explored how

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Japan was portrayed in popular theatrical works of the time, including W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *The Mikado*; Sidney Jones, Owen Hall, and Harry Greenbank's *The Geisha*; David Belasco's *Madame Butterfly*; and Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Acting out scenes from the works in chronological order, students were able to explore how both the depiction of Japan and its relation

to the West transformed over time, and how contemporary events (Japan's victories in the Sino- and Russo-Japanese wars, the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the increasingly stringent US immigration acts against East Asians, etc.) shaped popular culture and vice versa.

With historical appropriation addressed, students were prepared to analyze modern examples of appropriation by Japan and beyond. We considered the differences between definitions of cultural appropriation, cultural appreciation, and intercultural exchange. This led to larger

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discussions and debates about what constituted each, as I provided the class with various examples taken from current media, including music videos, television shows, advertisements, costumes, film, Twitter, and other contemporary visual channels. By incorporating other examples of potential misuse and permitting the class to debate whether these constituted appropriation, students began to understand not only that a consensus was difficult to reach, but also that the same tropes and symbols had been utilized, wrongly or not, for centuries prior to Perry's recent missteps.

For their final projects, students departed from essay writing and editing to offer their own interpretation of "geisha" through a museum exhibit complete with images often acquired online and curatorial notes both for each image and to explain the exhibit as a whole. From there, students incorporated two or three of their peers' exhibits, creating a unique museum as explained in a museum director's essay that juxtaposes and compares interpretations for a more holistic experience. It is my hope that should this

course continue, both at my institution and others, an online repository of these exhibits interpreting geisha can be utilized and referenced as a response to misappropriation.

The course, which I taught twice at a large public university, worked exceptionally well. Students praised the use of geisha as an entrée into both Japanese society and perceptions of Asian culture. Many were shocked at not only how interactive the topic proved to be, even beyond the exhibits with lively debates and discussions, but also how relevant it remains to students today—touching on questions of gender, sexuality, race and racism, and a considerable amount of popular culture. It is perhaps this understanding, then, that may be most useful at the precollege level—provoking dialogues about contemporary cultural appropriation and stereotyping.

Recognizing this potential application of my work, however, I come neither to praise Katy Perry nor to bury her. It is not my intention to have my students lambast her choices, but to think about them. Yes, some of my students have dressed up as geisha for Halloween, have cosplayed as Japanese characters, or have worn kimono during study abroad experiences.<sup>8</sup> Some will continue to do so. Many will now consider what is being conveyed and used having taken my class. The geisha, therefore, whatever else they may do in their working lives, permit my students the opportunity to explore Japan through an interesting and oft-misunderstood approach while also examining a subject that continues to affect them. Do they cheer for the team with *that* mascot? Do they wear *that* costume to the party? Do they support the organization that advertises employing *that* ethnic stereotype? Some still may, but my experience suggests that students are willing to grapple with these topics, and we are fortunate enough to be able to provide the lens through which they can do so effectively. For their part, they provide us insight into their thoughts and concerns through wired modalities. Whenever possible, we should, as Perry might say, approach them unconditionally, both online and then in the classroom. ■

## NOTES

1. "Roar: American Music Awards Delivers Biggest Ratings In Years," *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified November 25, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/q3kmvel>.
2. *Twitter*, user @TheAMAs, last modified November 24, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/oclxwa6>.
3. Amy Wallace, "The GQ Cover Story: Katy Perry," *GQ Magazine*, February 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/kajde8o>.
4. Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha*. (London: Vintage, 1997).
5. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Vintage, 1979), 1–3.
6. Liza Dalby, *Geisha* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
7. Amy Stanley, "Enlightenment Geisha: The Sex Trade, Education and Feminine Ideals in Early Meiji Japan," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 72, no. 3 (2013): 539–562; Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *Naomi*, trans. Anthony Chambers (London: Vintage, 2001); Masuda Sayo, *Autobiography of a Geisha*, trans. G. G. Rowley (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Bill Hume, *Babysan: A Private Look at the Japanese Occupation* (Columbia, Missouri: American Press, 1953); William Johnston, *Geisha Harlot Strangler Star: A Woman, Sex, and Morality in Modern Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
8. Cosplay involves dressing as a specific character, normally from popular cultural fiction, whether literature, graphic novel, film, television program, or video game.

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