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.¹ 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.² Was Perry performing as a geisha to convey the true art of something perceived, the latter’s own intrinsic value. This might manifest then as the idea that the latter requires the Occident to enlighten the Orient to the former, 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 present 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.⁶

Having an appropriate background in both the customs of the geisha and the vocabulary and...
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 caché 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.7

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 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 each image and to explain the exhibit as a whole. From there, students in-

terpreting 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. 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

2. Twitter, user @TheAMAs, last modified November 24, 2013, http://tinyurl.com/oclxwa6.
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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