

## **Liza Dalby's *Geisha*: The View Twenty-five Years Later**

JAN BARDSLEY

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

In this retrospective review essay, Jan Bardsley considers the role of Liza Dalby's *Geisha* (first published by the University of California Press in 1983) in both past and recent academic discourse, offering a description of how she uses the text in undergraduate classes to raise issues of identity, representation, gender, and race.

### **The *Geisha* Boom: From *Memoirs of a Geisha* to Academic Studies**

Rarely does a dissertation-turned-monograph achieve the kind of wide readership enjoyed by popular author Liza Dalby's 1983 book, *Geisha*. In 2008, the Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition—the book's seventeenth printing—appeared, complete with a new preface by the author. Supporting this new edition is Dalby's skillfully designed Web site, which provides more information about geisha, includes numerous graphics, and offers responses to frequent questions for Dalby from readers.<sup>1</sup> As this review essay argues, *Geisha* still provides an important window on the arts practiced by geisha, a history of their profession, and their reception in modern Japan through the mid-1970s. Despite minor flaws in its structure and mixed reviews of Dalby's methods by some anthropologists, *Geisha* has much to offer as a text in undergraduate classes on Japanese theater and geisha. I propose that Liza Dalby's book deserves a fresh look in 2009, one contextualized by the worldwide attention to geisha of the last decade, Dalby's own celebrity as an expert on geisha, and the history of geisha role-playing in Japan and abroad.

Discussion of Dalby's *Geisha* must be prefaced, of course, with a few words about the "geisha boom" initiated in 1997 by Arthur Golden's novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and the 2005 film version written by Robin Swicord and released by Sony Pictures (Swicord 2005). Golden's novel has been described as a Cinderella story, and therein may lay its success as well as its power to enthrall. *Memoirs of a Geisha* is a rags-to-riches tale of Chiyo, an impoverished girl from a fishing village who is sold to a Kyoto *okiya* 置屋

(geisha house) and trained in the arts amid the intense competition of dueling geisha. She eventually becomes the celebrated geisha Sayuri, endures the War and Occupation, wins the affections of the man of her dreams, and finally leaves Japan to live a wealthy, if circumspect, life in Manhattan. A favorite among book clubs in the United States, *Memoirs of a Geisha* enjoyed fifty-eight weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, has been translated into thirty-three languages, and has sold over four million copies worldwide. Reader responses to the novel posted on the U.S. bookselling site Amazon.com as of July 2009 number over 2,400. Although Dalby's book has fewer postings (only forty-four) on Amazon.com, readers often recommend it for fans of Golden's novel who wish to learn more about the real lives and history of geisha.

Not everyone is a fan of Golden's story, however; *Memoirs of a Geisha* has also been criticized by scholars and Asian American artists, activists, and feminists for its revival of orientalist fantasies of Japan and Japanese women as erotic and exotic. (For a trenchant response, see Allison 2001.) Fans of MAD-TV can catch comedian Bobby Lee's hilarious send-up of the movie trailer of *Memoirs*, replete with his own Sayuri impersonation, on YouTube. Guerrilla artist Scott Tsuchitani staged a similar protest in 2004, this time against a major art exhibit devoted to geisha in San Francisco, by papering the city with a brilliantly comic poster of himself posed as a nerdy geisha who wore thick, dark-rimmed glasses; the subtitle read, "Orientalist Dream Come True: Geisha: Perpetuating the Fetish."<sup>2</sup> Despite this dissent, *Memoirs of a Geisha* has created an enormous appetite for more revelations on geisha. The book's popularity has no doubt paved the way for the publication of several other books on geisha in English, including academic studies. The question of geisha masquerades and their complex connections with orientalism, however, are issues to which I return in this essay's conclusion.

In 1983, though, Dalby's *Geisha* was unique as the first academic study devoted to geisha. As historian Gail Lee Bernstein wrote in her 1984 review of *Geisha*, even though "'geisha' is possibly the best-known Japanese word in the Western world," before Dalby's book "reliable information on these intriguing women was largely unavailable" (222).<sup>3</sup> Although books in English (fiction, travel essays, commentary on the status of women in Japan, and Madame Butterfly narratives) referring to geisha or even starring geisha heroines had been published ever since the early Meiji 明治 era (1868–1912), no American author before Dalby (e.g., Bacon 1902; Fraser 1908) had conducted this kind of participant-observer research.

Today, over twenty-five years after *Geisha*'s initial publication, the situation is noticeably different. Readers can further their knowledge of geisha through autobiographies and biographies of actual geisha, cultural histories, photo-books, and scholarly studies of the geisha arts. One of the

newest and most important studies, *The Gei of Geisha: Music, Identity and Meaning* (2008), authored by ethnomusicologist Kelly M. Foreman, builds on Dalby's explanation of the geisha arts, providing in-depth analysis of performance structures, geisha's relationships to arts masters, and contemporary patronage. Superb essays on geisha history, their reception in Japan, and Euro-American fascination with them are compiled in *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile* (2004), a volume that grew out of the 2004 exhibit that Tsuchitani protested; it was curated by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, and also presented at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco the same year. The volume includes an excellent essay by Dalby, "The Exotic Geisha," on the topic of Western geisha fantasies, as well as a fine essay on geisha fascination by Allen Hockley.

Much can also be learned about geisha past and present in Lesley Downer's *Women of the Pleasure Quarters: The Secret History of the Geisha* (2002), which is valuable for her several interviews with geisha; her biography of a Meiji geisha-turned-actress who became famous abroad, *Madame Sadayakko: The Geisha Who Bewitched the West* (2004), vividly depicts one geisha's unusual life.<sup>4</sup> John Gallagher's photo-book, *Geisha: A Unique World of Tradition, Elegance, and Art* (2003), presents the history of the geisha profession, performance practices today, geisha costumes, and the geisha's daily life in a colorful form. One can also learn about the geisha arts from the memoirs of Iwasaki Mineko, the geisha who took Arthur Golden to court for publicly acknowledging her help in the research for *Memoirs*; she charged that Golden had agreed to protect her privacy, and the two reportedly settled out of court. Iwasaki's book, *Geisha, a Life* (2003) recounts her girlhood growing up in the Gion geisha district in Kyoto and her career as a geisha. She takes unabashed pride in building her case as the star geisha of her day. Although Iwasaki's book has much to say about the artistic practices of geisha, many of my students took issue with what they saw as her "narcissistic and conceited" self-presentation.

In considering the library available on geisha, we must remember that countless women, also referred to as geisha, did not enjoy the glittering life of the Gion but, instead, worked in small establishments that forced them into sexual labor. This other side of early twentieth-century geisha life has been captured in Masuda Sayo's *Autobiography of a Geisha*, translated by G. G. Rowley (2003), which describes her life in a rural *okiya* as one of violent abuse and forced prostitution. William Johnston's *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star: A Woman, Sex, and Morality in Modern Japan* (2004) traces the life of the notorious Abe Sada 阿部定 (1905–70), who suffered from advanced syphilis and, in 1936, severed her lover's genitalia after killing him. Read together, these highly varied accounts of geisha reveal the twists and turns in the history of a profession that extends back to the Edo 江戸 period (1600–1868), demonstrating the diversity of geisha experiences—glam-

orous, tragic, and sensational—and the elasticity of the term *geisha* itself. Moreover, Japanese novels translated into English, such as Kawabata Yasunari's famous *Yukiguni* 雪国 (*Snow Country*, 1952), Nagai Kafū's *Udekarabu* 腕くらべ (*Geisha Rivalry*, 1918), and the Meiji-era short stories of Higuchi Ichiyō (1992), provide still other portraits of how the figure of the geisha was understood in modern Japan.

Although *Memoirs of a Geisha* did not sell well in Japan, that nation, too, has experienced a rise of interest in the *karyūkai* 花柳界, “the flower and willow world.”<sup>5</sup> This is true despite the impatience sometimes voiced by Japanese with Euro-American fantasies about “geisha and Fujiyama.”<sup>6</sup> One can speculate that post-*Memoirs of a Geisha* excitement abroad has had some influence in renewed Japanese attention to the geisha. For example, Dorinne Kondo (1997) discusses how fashion advertising coaxes Japanese, imagined as cosmopolitan and worldly, to see Kyoto as “authentic Japan” and to participate in feeling Japanese by shopping in the old capital. Moreover, we can argue that, since geisha—along with samurai, sumo wrestlers, and sushi—are so fixed in the global imagination as signifiers of Japan, it is impossible for Japanese to regard them through eyes free of a westernized perspective.<sup>7</sup> Still, it is crucial to observe that the geisha has had a remarkably more interesting history than her stereotypical fantasy images in the West or even today in Japan would suggest; for example, geisha cheered public speakers in the 1890s, launched patriotic activities during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), were maligned by the Japan Women's Christian Temperance Union and supported by infamous New Women in the 1910s, and performed classical dance at the seashore in swimsuits in 1930.<sup>8</sup> Books published in Japan today by and about geisha project a considerably more ladylike image, focusing on geisha etiquette and femininity training.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Bardsley forthcoming), the apprentice geisha in Kyoto known as *maiko* 舞妓 have attracted much curiosity in Japan of late. In April 2008, one hundred young women populated the *maiko* ranks, bringing their numbers back to what they had been in the 1950s. Moreover, blogs by *maiko*, books by and about *maiko*, *maiko*-related goods and services, and even *maiko* movies, *maiko* murder mysteries, and TV dramas, have all been part of the fad. Interestingly, Liza Dalby responds to this new excitement over the *maiko* in the preface to the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition of *Geisha*, observing how today's *maiko* recruits are likely to have no training in the classical arts, apply for the job by e-mail, and may quit after a few years rather than graduating to careers as full-fledged geisha (2008, xxi–xxii).

Responding to interest in the *maiko* in both Japan and abroad, the photo-book *A Geisha's Journey*, published in Japanese and in English translation, depicts the life of a young woman known as Komomo as she progresses from *maiko* to geisha (Komomo and Ogino 2008). Komomo's con-

temporary familiarity with Kyoto arts lessons, geisha parties (*ozashiki* お座敷), and preparation for public performances meshes with the descriptions in Dalby's *Geisha*, despite the gap of over two decades between the women's experiences. It departs radically from the geisha narratives of pre-war brutality told by Masuda (2003) and Abe (Johnston 2004). Thus, when speaking about geisha, one must be precise in delineating historical location, class status, and relationship to geisha hierarchy—all factors which bring us as well to Liza Dalby's incarnation in the mid-1970s as the "American geisha." As anthropologist Anne-Elise Middlethorn wrote of *Geisha*, praising Dalby's attention to historical context: "What [Dalby] so insightfully gives to us is a 'snapshot of a particular era' and of a particular segment of the geisha universe" (2000, 111).

### Liza Dalby, the "American Geisha"

Liza Dalby's *Geisha* has played a major role, too, in building an audience outside Japan for later geisha publications, although her work began decades earlier. *Geisha* had its origins in Liza Dalby's fourteen months of field research in 1975 and 1976, conducted mainly in Kyoto, for her Stanford University doctorate in anthropology, which she completed in 1978. Dalby also made use of interviews with geisha, reporting that one hundred geisha from fourteen communities responded to her questionnaire (1983, xv). Although conducting fieldwork in Japan was not unusual for an anthropology student, some scholars were especially impressed with Dalby's immersion in the geisha world. Historian Bernstein, for example, commended this aspect of Dalby's research, writing that "the field work for *Geisha* was a *tour de force*" (1984, 223).

As an exchange student in Japan during high school, Dalby developed proficiency in the Japanese language and the *samisen* 三味線, the stringed instrument played by geisha and associated with them since the Edo period. Dalby's linguistic and musical skills made it possible for her to live in an *okiya* in Pontochō 先斗町, one of Kyoto's five renowned *hanamachi* 花町 (flower districts) where geisha work and many live, and to try her hand at performing as a geisha herself. The suggestion that she learn about geisha by actually working as one came from the mother of her *okiya* who said, "You know, you'll never really understand geisha life unless you try it" (1983, 102). Finding herself "attracted to both the glamor and the discipline" (102–3) of geisha, Dalby took on the challenge, eventually making her debut as Ichigiku. She learned to walk gracefully, practiced playing *ko-uta* 小唄 ballads performed at *ozashiki* on her *samisen* for hours, and became adept at wearing kimono. She performed alongside geisha and formed friendships with many former geisha who operated teahouses and bars in Pontochō. As she attended one *ozashiki* after another and worked at her new

role, the more the other geisha, mothers, and customers began to accept her as Ichigiku, and the more she began to enjoy it. Dalby writes with pleasure of the moments in which the way her body language or the way she wore her kimono geisha-style enabled her to pass for Japanese.<sup>9</sup> Thus, she was the first Anglo to become a geisha, or, as her critics might prefer, a “geisha.”<sup>10</sup> Faulting Dalby’s interpretation of her experience as ethnography and viewing her as trying to become more Japanese than the Japanese themselves, anthropologist L. L. Cornell nevertheless empathizes with the way in which becoming a geisha allows for “discovering a role within Japanese society which is so marked by costume, makeup, and behavior that one’s identification as a foreigner recedes” (1986, 485).

Dalby has recounted the humor that ensued at *ozashiki* when the guests would realize that the geisha Ichigiku was an American interloper.<sup>11</sup> Dalby never participated in the formal ritual of sisterhood or charged for her *ozashiki* appearances, but she writes in the original preface to *Geisha* of being interviewed herself in Japan almost as much as she interviewed others, becoming something of a curiosity as the Japanese-speaking American geisha (1983, xv). It was this firsthand experience that led to Dalby’s prominence as an expert on geisha and that continues to draw readers. Amazon.com postings frequently highlight Dalby’s own practice as a geisha in recommending the book to others. As we shall see below, it was Dalby’s accounts of her fieldwork, however, that prompted admiration as well as sardonic reviews of her work by senior anthropologists. Intriguingly, it is also her stint as Ichigiku that places Dalby within a long line of Anglo-women-as-geisha moments, and even more broadly, in a history of geisha performers that has included Japanese men on the kabuki stage and, more recently, ethnically Chinese actresses on screen.

Dalby’s research in Pontochō was only the beginning of what has been a vibrant career. The continued success of *Geisha* must owe something to the way she remains in the limelight as the expert on the flower-and-willow world who was once the American geisha. After the publication of *Geisha*, Dalby used her doctorate and her expertise to become an author and consultant rather than an academic. She has written prolifically and creatively. Her publications include *Ko-uta: Little Songs of the Geisha World* (1979); *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* (1993); *East Wind Melts the Ice: A Memoir through the Seasons* (2007);<sup>12</sup> and two novels, *The Tale of Murasaki* (2000) and *Hidden Buddhas: A Novel of Karma and Chaos* (2009). Dalby has been interviewed by documentary filmmakers (Maltby 1999), given public lectures, and served as a consultant to television and film producers creating geisha-inspired dramas.<sup>13</sup> Filmmaker Rob Marshall, who directed *Memoirs of a Geisha* and hired Dalby as a consultant on Arthur Golden’s recommendation, has spoken highly of her knowledge of geisha, her unique standing as the first American geisha, and her skill in teaching the film’s actresses how to play

the geisha role themselves. One of the featurettes on the *Memoirs of a Geisha* 2-disc DVD captures Dalby patiently training actresses in the *samisen*. Authors' acknowledgements in other English-language books on geisha regularly speak of Dalby's generosity as a consultant on their projects.<sup>14</sup> What began as a year of field research in the mid-1970s launched Dalby on a lifetime of multifaceted, transnational work.

### Dalby's *Geisha*: A Brief Summary

Summarizing a book as richly varied in topic and idiosyncratically organized as *Geisha* is difficult, but a description is in order. *Geisha* has retained its distinctive format throughout numerous reprintings. Its rather square shape, wide margins, and several illustrations (maps, charts, photos, woodblock prints) give the book an appealing, informal air. There is no textbook primness here. The writing is accessible, informative, and often gently humorous. *Geisha* is divided into three major sections: "Relations," "Variations," and "Sensibilities." It is fitting that the longest section by far is "Relations," for, as Dalby emphasizes, being a geisha means fitting into a dense web of relations among members of one's *okiya*, teahouse owners, clients, arts masters, and the many whose vocations support the *hanamachi*. Although outsiders may focus on the attention that geisha offer their predominantly male clients, geisha spend much of their time immersed in a women's world that is tightly organized by fictive bonds of kinship, hierarchy, and the demands of running a commercial enterprise that remains loyal to long-held customs (*shikitari* 仕来り). Sadly, the geisha Ichiume, who served as Dalby's *onēsan* お姐さん (older sister) and to whom she was close, died in 1978 in a fire in Pontochō, tingeing recollections of Dalby's time as Ichigiku with poignancy. Yet it is with passion that Dalby explains the *ozashiki*, the holidays that geisha celebrate, and the rituals of sisterhood.

"Relations" includes two especially informative chapters on geisha history. These are my personal favorites in the book and the ones that I wish to highlight. I hope more research will be done in this area. Dalby's *Geisha* is the first work in English that so succinctly presents how geisha history intertwines with histories of the pleasure quarters, prostitution, labor law, the changing status of women and work (as well as the cultural differences between wives and non-wives), and modern forms of entertainment. The first chapter, "Pontochō of Long Ago," describes the inception of the profession during the Edo period, its relation to the Yoshiwara and other pleasure quarters, and the way the modernization efforts of the Meiji era forced changes in the way geisha organized, charged for their services, and became drawn into patriotic activity. The second history chapter, "Geisha Renovation," discusses the pressures on geisha in the 1920s and 1930s to compete with other forms of sexualized entertainment, such as revues and

the services of café girls (*jokyū* 女給). One learns that Pontochō geisha experimented with the tango and other kinds of ballroom dancing in the 1910s and performed Rockette-style numbers in the 1930s. Dalby explains how geisha lost their edge as fashion innovators, became curators of tradition, and were given all kinds of conflicting advice about how to keep apace with the modern world by various men in a 1935 advice book known as *Geigi tokuhon* 芸妓読本 (The geisha reader).

The two other sections of the book take us to other geisha milieu and explore the arts. The section titled “Variations” describes the difference between geisha (unmarried, independent, and thus, beyond the pale in Japan) and wives (married, mothers, and respectable, if somewhat constrained by their wifely role), and introduces other geisha areas, specifically Akasaka in Tokyo and the rural Atami Hot springs. Anthropologist David Plath felt that Dalby, steeped in the “haughtiness” of high geisha culture of Pontochō, sneered at the rural geisha (1984, 459); but Dalby sees this as making “no secret of [her] own biases” (1983, xvii). Here, Masuda Sayo’s autobiography gives a more sympathetic view of the life of one hot springs geisha, recounting her own experiences in this world before the War. “Sensibilities,” the third section, gives an overview of the geisha arts—including the Edo aesthetic of *iki* 粋, the *samisen*, the grand dances, the language of kimono—and closes with a chapter on Dalby’s return to Kyoto six years later. A helpful glossary of Japanese geisha terms rounds out the book.

### ***Geisha* in the Undergraduate Classroom**

I regularly assign *Geisha* in my undergraduate class “Geisha in History, Fantasy, and Fiction” for several reasons. Dalby’s explanations of geisha life, *ozashiki*, arts practice, and kimono work well to introduce these topics; and, as mentioned, the history chapters are unique. Echoing some early criticisms of the book, I, too, find that its structure, which strikes me as poetically haphazard at times, makes it hard to appreciate the work as a coherent narrative. As Bernstein pointed out in her 1984 review, the book’s seventeen chapters and subsections “make the text seem fragmentary”; chapter titles can be obscure and not informative; and the book can be “occasionally confusing, repetitive, or contradictory” (224). This may be due to the way that much is introduced as Dalby encountered it. For classroom use, I have found it most effective to assign chapters individually along with other articles or documentary videos as we take up such topics as the arts, parties, kimono, and so forth. If I were focusing more on geisha role-playing, however, then I would have the students read the book in one week with discussion questions geared to the persona of Dalby/Ichigiku as a performer. Others do like the structure of *Geisha*: Praising Dalby’s scholarship as “sound,” anthropologist Takie Lebra applauds the book’s organization,



finding that Dalby's "entire book reads like a drama, with picturesque flashbacks and interludes, wherein predominates a sense of time-flow as if emanating directly from the 'floating world'" (1984–85, 702).

Although many of my students report that they become fond of Ichigiku, and even root for her, they find it difficult at times to separate her story from that of the geisha she is studying. As one of my students wrote, "I found myself cheering for her to 'pass' as a geisha." The possibility of experiencing life as geisha has some appeal for many of my students, too. When I screened the *Memoirs of a Geisha* DVD featurette "Geisha Boot Camp" that showed the female cast being taught by Dalby and others to move like geisha, several students thought it looked fun to try. The students generally gave *Geisha* high marks, although some also mentioned that, like Bernstein, they wished Dalby had occasionally "stayed . . . with one person long enough for the reader to get to know her" (1984, 224). Dalby did gain unusual access and briefly recounts fascinating conversations with older geisha, such as one born in 1900 whose career had spanned decades. Personally, I would like to know more about the geisha questionnaires, to which one hundred replied, and what the responses showed. Dalby's experiences tend to dominate the narrative; and of all the geisha introduced, it is Ichigiku one is most likely to remember. Still, Ichigiku's story has earned a place in the history of geisha performances, as I discuss below.

### Scholarly Responses to & Critiques of Dalby's *Geisha*

Reviews of *Geisha* by senior anthropologists have been most mixed on Dalby's accounts of her own experiences. Middlethorn, reviewing the 1998 reissued *Geisha*, determines that the "deliberate inclusion of subjective material is a strength, as it facilitates a series of glimpses into a unique female community which otherwise could only be accessed through secondary sources" (2000, 110). Cornell (1986) found that Dalby's attention to her own experiences ultimately made the book entertaining, but were too much about "The Adventures of the Geisha Ichigiku." She thus excludes *Geisha* from consideration as "serious ethnography" but advises that "*Geisha* would be a valuable resource for those investigating the relationship between theater and culture" (486). Although he judged Dalby's history of geisha "illuminating," Plath (1984) was not impressed with the overall tone of the book nor with what Dalby termed her "interpretive ethnography" (1983, xvi); again, it was all too much about Ichigiku. Thus, he criticized the way "she conflates ethnography with autobiography" (1984, 456).

To be fair to Dalby and her critics, too, I should mention that the field of anthropology was in flux in the 1980s; and, amid new debates on subjectivity and the problem of positionality, many found themselves criticized for their "interpretive" ethnographies. Nevertheless, it is the entertaining

quality of *Geisha* that also gives Plath pause. He remarked that “*Geisha* might just be the first book by an American anthropologist that makes it to the screen as a feature film. . . . Here is a new challenge for Meryl Streep: to play Dalby the anthropologist playing Ichigiku the entertainer” (1984, 455–56). (In fact, a made-for-TV movie, *American Geisha*, loosely based on Dalby’s book, was released in 1986; but the main character was played by Pam Dawber, not Meryl Streep. See Marchetti 1993.) It seems Plath did not intend to be entirely complimentary when he wrote, “Ichigiku is a stunning performer” (455).

Such critique also draws our attention to the ways in which Dalby as Ichigiku caused such a stir when numerous other anthropologists of Japan—even those who have dressed the part of an aerobics instructor, a bar hostess, and a Shikoku pilgrim—have been neither hailed as “the first” nor inspired films (see, respectively, Spielvogel 2003, Allison 1994, Reader 2006). Thus, interest in Dalby as Ichigiku speaks volumes as well about the geisha’s place in American popular culture. Associated ever since the mid-nineteenth century with fantasies of the “exotic East,” the term *geisha* calls to mind sex work even today and colors expectations about Dalby’s geisha sojourn. No doubt many have wondered if Dalby’s fieldwork brought her into contact with the exotic erotic. *American Geisha*, the 1986 made-for-TV movie, apparently played up this possibility, imagining the Dalby character, Gillian, having an affair with a kabuki actor during her stay in Kyoto.

For someone who teaches classes on Japanese theater and geisha, however, the anthropologists’ references to multiple role-playing, Dalby as the stunning performer, and using *Geisha* as way to study theater’s connection to culture are tantalizing. Over twenty-five years after its initial publication, the text is not used in anthropology classrooms. Yet *Geisha* does offer a stimulating text for students of theater to explore the question of who can perform the geisha’s role. This is not an innocent question. Rather, it places Liza Dalby within a history of geisha performances that have crossed the borders of gender, race, and ethnicity in Japan and transnationally, often stirring controversy. Examining such performances pushes us to ask about the “before” and “after” of the geisha makeover—who plays whom, and for what audiences and under whose auspices. Sketching out even some of this history shows that Dalby/Ichigiku, although a compelling performance, is one among many that defy the boundaries of difference.

### **Geisha Masquerades: Using *Geisha* to Understand Issues of Gender & Race**

Even a semester-long class on geisha merely scratches the surface of this history, but I would like to give some idea of how we encounter multi-layered roles worthy of “Streep playing Dalby playing Ichigiku.” The na-

ture of the transgressions—the border crossing—changes with the times and the locations. We can begin with geisha masquerades in Japan performed by kabuki *onnagata* 女形 (performers of women's roles, generally male).<sup>15</sup> Following theater historian and critic Maki Isaka's work (2006), we observe the close friendships among kabuki actors and geisha, and we attend to the ways that notions of ideal femininity circulated among *onnagata*, geisha, and audience members; we recall how an *onnagata* had trained Dalby in how a woman uses a fan (1983, 274–75). The discussion complicates our view of femininity as constructed and not always associated with women.

Western geisha impersonators are many. We may consider Anglo women's geisha roles by looking at such historically disparate productions as the 1896 London hit musical-comedy, *The Geisha: Story of a Teahouse*, that featured English Lady Molly Seamore masquerading as the geisha Roli Poli, a prank that almost got her married to a Japanese Baron (see Hashimoto 2005);<sup>16</sup> opera singers' early approaches to the playing of Madame Butterfly, sometimes by hiring and then emulating Japanese housemaids (Yoshihara 2003); a 1959 episode of the popular TV show *I Love Lucy* which features Lucille Ball disguised as a geisha; and the 1962 movie *My Geisha* that starred Shirley MacLaine as the spunky American movie star who learns to be a more sensitive wife after performing incognito in Japan as a geisha (see Marchetti 1993 for an analysis). In all cases, the Anglo women-as-geisha manipulate their fiancé's or husbands' fantasies such that the men never recognize their "exotic geisha girl" is actually their own betrothed.

Catching up with the times, we examine still more geisha masquerades. We discuss the controversy that arose when Rob Marshall cast three ethnically Chinese women in the leads of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, angering Chinese who felt insulted by these stars playing "Japanese prostitutes." The debate drew opinions from many quarters; Asian Canadian actor Sandra Oh supported Marshall's decision, arguing that hiring Asian actors along narrow lines of "ethnic correctness" would give them even fewer acting opportunities than they already had. Director Chen Kaige, however, saw the choice as proof that Hollywood didn't know one Asian from another. Of all the topics we discuss, class debate over *Memoirs* casting is always the liveliest, touching as it does our own fraught relationship with representations of race and ethnicity, and provoking discussion about whether there is any way out of orientalism when focusing on geisha.<sup>17</sup> Thus we consider Lee and Tsuchitani's protest against the fetishization of the geisha in American culture as orientalist. We discuss how Lee and Tsuchitani deploy their own bodies in comic ways—Lee in his sketch and Tsuchitani in his posters—as a form of mockery, and also, in effect, for implying how feminized or even invisible the Asian man becomes in "geisha girl" narratives. How does the preponderance of images of exotic Asia affect American perceptions of Asia and Asian Americans?

Returning to Liza Dalby, who had been our guide to geisha history and arts throughout much of the semester, we now see her performance as Ichigiku in light of other border-crossing “geisha.” Her performance stands out because, unlike our other examples of Anglo geisha (such as Roli Poli), she spoke Japanese, studied Japanese culture, respected geisha, and sought to understand their history. Geisha themselves had collaborated in training her and making her performance possible. As with other Anglo masquerades, Dalby’s made mischief, too—and to the delight of customers and other geisha. Dalby’s account also demonstrated a kind of “learning through the body” evident in many other impersonations from the kabuki actors to the Chinese actresses that Dalby trained and, like these other geisha players, demonstrated that such performance was not unique to a Japanese female body. (One can add that Dalby probably accomplished this performance better than the *Memoirs* actresses.) Following Marjorie Garber’s (1991) argument about cross-dressing, one can say that Dalby also raises the possibility that she is not the “American who passes as a geisha”—an understanding that underscores an either/or binary and leads to geisha versus “geisha”—but, rather, that she is something new: She is Ichigiku. This does not mean that Ichigiku is beyond analysis or criticism, only that her performance can be analyzed as the cross-dressed one that she presents.

I shall close this essay by referring to a conversation I had with Iona Rozeal Brown, an African American artist who has worked in Japan. Observing her brilliant paintings that work with styles common to Japanese woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e* 浮世絵), I exclaimed how interesting it was to see her black geisha and how different they were from the line of Anglo impersonations going back to Monet putting his wife in a gaudy kimono and surrounding her with fans for “La Japonaise” (1876). Brown replied that my interpretation was possible, but she had seen the paintings as representations of some Japanese women’s desires to look black, not the other way around. If we take Ichigiku as our standpoint here, then maybe these paintings, too, imagine a third term that subverts conventional understanding of race, passing, geisha, and “geisha.”

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.lizadalby.com/LD/welcome.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Tsuchitani’s poster is actually a modification of the poster for the exhibit, also seen all over San Francisco in 2004, titled “Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile.” The original poster can be seen at <http://www.scotttsuchitani.com/pages/geisha/fantasy.html>. Included on the site is a letter exchange between Tsuchitani and Dalby.

<sup>3</sup>Other accounts of geisha lives and history that were published much earlier include Fujimoto (1917) and Perkins (1954).

<sup>4</sup>For academic analyses of Sadayakko's life that place her within Japanese theatrical and literary history, see Kano (2001) and Levy (2006).

<sup>5</sup>According to Gallagher (2003, 25), *Memoirs of a Geisha* in its Japanese translation (*Sayuri*) sold only 50,000 copies in Japan.

<sup>6</sup>Downer (2002, 4) recounts how telling a Japanese man on an airplane trip to Japan that she was studying geisha produced this response: "'Fujiyama,' he foamed, spitting out the word which foreigners mistakenly use when speaking of Mount Fuji and a symbol to Japanese of our inability to muster even the faintest understanding of their country. 'Fujiyama,' 'geisha'!?' he snarled. 'Stereotype, prejudice!'"

<sup>7</sup>Scott Nagel (2009), in his review essay in this volume of the *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, corroborates this view with respect to the global perception of sushi as quintessentially Japanese.

<sup>8</sup>See references to geisha in Anderson (2006) and Lublin (2006). For the 1930 geisha swimsuit dance, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrtDoQb1UZQ>.

<sup>9</sup>One comical instance of identity confusion is as follows: Dressed in full geisha costume for the evening of Setsubun 節分, the February 3 holiday that geisha and their customers celebrate in masquerade, Dalby observed that passersby saw her height and her geisha gear and assumed that she "was a Japanese man, a female impersonator dressed in drag for Setsubun. 'Still, he's awfully glamorous,' I heard one man comment" (1983, 133).

<sup>10</sup>More recently, Fiona Graham, an Australian social anthropologist and attendee of Japan's prestigious Keio University, debuted as a geisha in Tokyo in December 2007. For information on her and the geisha life in Tokyo today, visit Graham's Web site at <http://www.sayuki.net/>.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, the interview with Dalby about her geisha experiences in Maltby (1999).

<sup>12</sup>See Gump (2008) for a review of Dalby's *East Wind Melts the Ice*.

<sup>13</sup>Dalby also produced an informative, entertaining musical documentary in 2004 titled *Geisha Blues* that records *ko-uta*—geisha "small songs." The DVD is available at <http://www.uzushop.com>.

<sup>14</sup>Downer writes (2002, xi): "Like everyone who studies the geisha, my first step was to turn to Liza Dalby's brilliant anthropological analysis, *Geisha*, the bible of geisha studies. Ms. Dalby generously offered suggestions and encouragement in e-mails and phone conversation." In the Acknowledgements to *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Golden (along with his ill-fated expression of gratitude to Iwasaki Mineko) thanks Dalby for lending him "a number of useful Japanese and English books from her personal collection" (1997, 434). Rowley thanks Dalby, among others, for her enthusiasm and suggestions for improving her translation of Masuda's autobiography (Masuda 2003, 3).

<sup>15</sup>*Onnagata* are usually men portraying women. In one case, though, a female *onnagata* played a man playing a woman, and she did so well that she earned this compliment: "nobody can tell that she is not a man" (Isaka 2006, 111).

<sup>16</sup>The play is available online through Google Books.

<sup>17</sup>Indeed, images of race and (mis)representations of Asian identity—both globally as well as within Asia—are themes that surface throughout numerous pieces in this volume of the *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, including those by Creighton (2009), Finchum-Sung (2009), Jung (2009), and Law (2009).

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