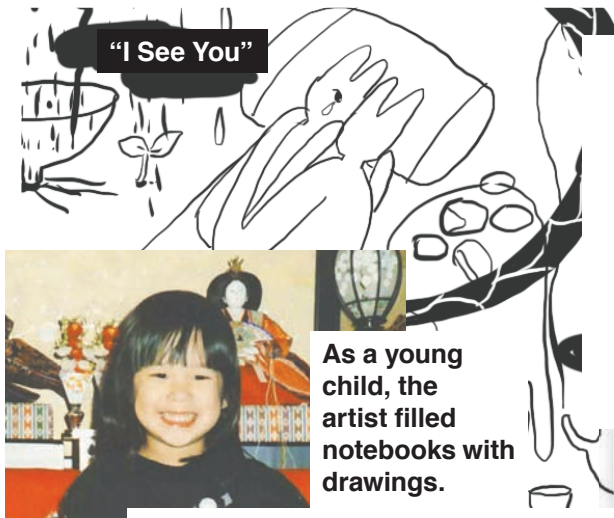
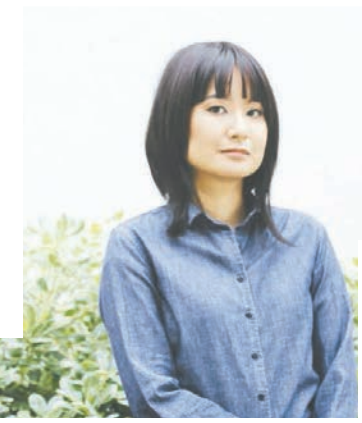


'I am a Japanese American woman. I am second generation. I am a daughter of immigrants.'

– Yumi Sakugawa

PHOTO: DAKOTA LEE STROUD

As a young child, the artist filled notebooks with drawings.



At 20, Sakugawa wrote about her coming-of-age experience or *Seijinshiki,* and she later used the photo for her "Memoirs of a Non-Geisha" columns.

COMMUNITY'S CHILD: **COMIC ARTIST ON RACISM, IDENTITY AND ART**

Before becoming a celebrated artist, Yumi Sakugawa cut her teeth in community work and laid bare her soul in the pages of this very newspaper.


PACIFIC CITIZEN

MEMOIRS OF A NON-GEISHA

An Asian American Wedding

BY YUMI SAKUGAWA

Yumi attended a Vietnamese American wedding with her boyfriend David Chien.

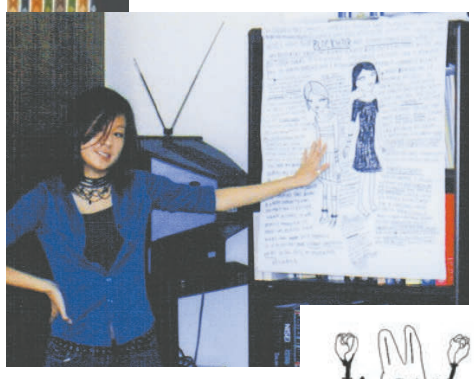
Last weekend, I attended a Vietnamese American wedding.

The ceremony took place in the banquet hall of a fancy Vietnamese restaurant, where a Christian priest led the wedding vows. The reception afterward took place in the adjacent dining area, where Vietnamese soup, seafood and fried rice were served one course at a time.

During the dinner, family and friends stood up to give their heartfelt wishes to the newly married couple in Vietnamese and English. At one point, the bride changed out of her white wedding gown

race, which means that should a wedding occur in the future, they would have their own unique set of cultural challenges to confront when they plan their own respective weddings. Such as my other Vietnamese American friend, who may one day marry her boyfriend who is a quarter-Chinese and three-quarters white. Or my Hindu friend who dreads telling her parents that her Taiwanese Hapa boyfriend does not fit into her parents' mold of an ideal husband who is of the family's geographical

"Memoirs of a Non-Geisha" ran in the *Pacific Citizen* from 2006-10.



In 2004, Sakugawa participated in Los Angeles' Nikkei Community Internship, a program that places young Japanese Americans in paid internships with JA community organizations.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF AMY PHILLIPS

"I Am Not Afraid of Heartbreak"

Sakugawa's art also centers on healing and self-love.

By Lynda Lin Grigsby, Contributor

Once there was a comic artist who filled the pages of books with drawings of humanoids going on earthly and outer space adventures. Sometimes, the humanoids were in the shape of bunnies or one-eyed beings navigating very human emotions and relationships. People found the artist's drawings and writing very relatable, so they shared her work on social media and eventually bought her books and merchandise. The artist grew her brand to international acclaim.

What people do not see are the roots that link artist Yumi Sakugawa to the Asian American community. In Los Angeles' Little Tokyo, Sakugawa cut her teeth in community work, hewed a place for herself in community theater and laid bare her soul in the pages of this very newspaper in a monthly column called "Memoirs of a Non-Geisha."

When her community was in pain from rising anti-Asian sentiment and violence, Sakugawa, 36, did what came most naturally to her — she used art to amplify messages of healing and solidarity.

In a March 30 Instagram post, Sakugawa illustrated close-up images of faces — one stoic, the other crying — around a political theorist's powerful words: "It is easy to feel helpless. But that doesn't mean we are weak."

Helpless and strong aptly describe the tension of the Asian American soul in the weeks after a gunman in Atlanta targeted and killed Asian American women working at massage businesses. Since then, anti-Asian attacks continue to pop up across the nation to remind us all that we are descendants of a brutal American legacy.

"I feel the frustration of feeling like a silent minority," said Sakugawa, who is Japanese Okinawan American.

Modern-day activism is more nuanced than it used to be, but preconceived notions of an activist needing to be loud and commanding continue to prevail. Sakugawa is not that. In fact, she is the absolute opposite. Her voice is soft and lilting and often breaks into a musical laugh. She seems infinitely more likely to offer warm hugs than firm handshakes, but Sakugawa is a fierce activist for the community she loves.

On the same weekend Americans took to the streets to rally against racialized violence, Sakugawa facilitated a donation-based virtual webinar for Asian Americans and allies to meditate and move through their emotions. Her webinar raised $1,650, which was donated to the Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders community fund. The fund has raised more than $5 million through GoFundMe.org.

The artist is a self-described introvert. Marching in the streets with a bullhorn might not be her thing, but she wields a unique power.

"There's a quiet thunder. There is a quiet storm," said Janet Lo, who facilitated the movement part of the webinar with Sakugawa.

The artist stays true to her values and makes an impact.

COMMUNITY ROOTS

A little under a decade ago, when Sakugawa was in her 20s, she already had a respectable following on Tumblr, a microblogging and social networking site. She was making self-published comics and zines. Then in 2012, she created a web comic about the depths of platonic love called "I Think I Am in Friend-Love With You" that went viral. It attracted the attention of a literary agent. In 2013, a book was born.

Since then, many milestones have come and gone, including more books on meditation and life hacks. In 2014, Sakugawa was nominated for an Ignatz Award for her self-published comic zine "Never Forgets." She has also done art shows and installations at museums. Her work also has been featured on Buzzfeed and the *New Yorker*.

"I think the projects and opportunities just keep coming, so I feel very fortunate," said Sakugawa via Zoom from her Los Angeles home. She wears thick-rimmed glasses and sips from a can of La Croix while we catch up — and I mean it literally because the intimate phrase "catch up" can be casually dispersed to describe an interaction between strangers. We are not strangers. Before she became an acclaimed artist with loyal fans, Sakugawa and I worked together at the *Pacific Citizen* for one summer in 2004.

We must have had some intense water cooler conversations, but neither of us could remember. For both of us, that summer was the entry point into the Japanese American community, and we navigated it as outsiders.

Sakugawa is Shin-Nisei — or second generation — born to immigrant parents, Haruji and Fumie Sakugawa. I am Chinese American, also a daughter of immigrants.

In 2004, the *P.C.* office was in Monterey Park, a suburb of Los Angeles. I was a burgeoning journalist, recently hired as the assistant editor, and excited to apply my degrees in English and Asian American Studies. Sakugawa was a student at the University of California, Los Angeles, who came to work at our office through the Nikkei Community Internship, a program that places young Japanese Americans in paid internships with JA community organizations. On paper, we fit our roles perfectly, but in reality, it felt different.

"I mean it was just an interesting dynamic with that class because we did have some folks who were already well-connected in the community," said Amy Phillips, the NCI Los Angeles coordinator during Sakugawa's tenure. "There is a sort of like a JA version of an old boys' network."

Sakugawa did not have the pedigree, or the shared family history of the World War II JA incarceration, but she wanted to understand how she fit into the community, said Phillips.

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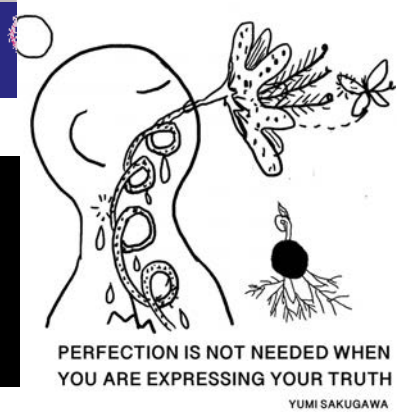
Sakugawa created the Claudia Kishi web comic as an ode to the Japanese American book character, one of the few Asian American characters in 1990s tween books who wasn't a two-dimensional sidekick or stereotype.

PHOTO: DAKOTA LEE STROUD



Lately, Sakugawa's artwork calls for political activism and self-healing.

» Her search for a place permeated her writing. In the Oct. 1-14, 2004, *P.C.* issue, Sakugawa wrote: "While many Yonsei my age have relatives who were in internment camps or fought alongside fellow Americans in World War II, I grew up learning about how my relatives had to take cover in bomb shelters in the countryside while firebombs rained down on them."

Similarly, at the beginning of my time at the *P.C.*, I always felt defined by what I was not. Shortly after my hire, a longtime columnist in a JA newspaper pointed this out in one of his pieces: I was not Japanese American.

"I don't know, I just feel like identity is fluid," said Sakugawa, reflecting with me. "There isn't such a strong binary between those who fit in and those who don't. It really is how you frame it. How you contextualize where you belong."

Her words got me thinking about "Your Illustrated Guide to Becoming One With the Universe," another Sakugawa hand-drawn book about the path to inner peace. Breathe, she urges in the book, and erase the boundaries that separate us from others, separate us from ourselves and "see the underlying energy that unites all of us." A burst of illustrated constellations surrounds the words.

Sakugawa wrote for the *P.C.* from 2004-10. She named her monthly column "Memoirs of a Non-Geisha" in 2006. A lot of her writing centered on the theme of being on the outside — including one column about the time she studied in Singapore, an Asian-majority country. Her Americanness made her stand out. It emanated from her pores and manifested itself even in her walking style.

Her writing for the *P.C.* represents a young soul vibrating and processing her place in the world, but her reflections are more centered and integrated. Now, her intent seems to be to use her art and platform to help the ravaged and the population of people, who like her, struggled to find a place in the universe.

"Always being seen as an outsider can bring harm," she said. "But then also, I think there is something really valuable about seeing the world through multiple perspectives instead of just one perspective. I think it is enriching. And I think it creates capacity for more empathy to other people who may feel that they don't belong or feel that they are not included in mainstream narratives."

Sakugawa was born and raised in Southern California's Orange County, where she attended summer Obon festivals and attended Japanese language school on Saturdays. In her spare time, she filled notebook after notebook with sketches — mostly of bunnies on adventures, a theme likely inspired by her own childhood pet black bunny, Emi.

"She was drawing and drawing whenever she had time," said Haruji Sakugawa, a retired chemist, about his daughter. In elementary school, teachers said Sakugawa's attention would often drift into her own creative world. "I guess that she could not resist her imagination even in the class."

After graduating from UCLA with an art degree, Sakugawa went adrift. She waited tables at a sushi restaurant and then taught English in Japan for a year. She was terrible at both jobs, for sure.

"I was almost fired," she said about teaching English in Japan. "I think the only reason why I didn't get fired was because they couldn't find a replacement quickly enough."

In 2009, after returning home to Southern California, Sakugawa felt a need to be a part of something again. She had been involved in the Nikkei Student Union and an Asian American theater group in college, and she missed the enthusiasm and sense of belonging that a community group provided. To meet the need, she started volunteering for Tuesday Night Café, a free arts and performance series in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo. Alongside other Asian American artists, Sakugawa worked behind the scenes to put to on live performances under the evening sky.

"The community will always be there for you," she wrote in the August 2009 *P.C.* issue about the experience.

Ask any of her friends about Sakugawa's skyrocketing popularity, and they will tell you it happened both gradually and meteorically. It is the paradox of success. A higher profile can obscure the years and years of work, the notebooks and notebooks filled with ideas and cosmic bunny drawings.

The Toronto Comic Arts Festival in 2014 invited Sakugawa to participate and showcase her work. Lo, a former UCLA classmate who is now a frequent participant in her virtual webinars, attended the event and observed fans continually approaching Sakugawa.

"It was crazy to just meet her fans. People just kept coming up and saying, 'Oh, I just want her to sign this, I'm such a big fan of her Tumblr,'" said Lo. "And I think that was my first moment to be like, 'Oh my God, my friend is published, and she has adoring fans!"

Is it OK to appropriate a saying if it is true? Here it is: You can take the girl out of the community, but you can't take the community out of the girl.

Traci Kato-Kiriyama, an artist, community organizer and TNC director, watched Sakugawa transform from a volunteer to a well-known artist without losing her values.

"I think that my memories of the early Yumi haven't changed much from my sort of understanding of Yumi now," said Kato-Kiriyama. "She's someone who just really sat really well in their own quirkiness."

In the "before time" prepandemic, Sakugawa continued her relationship with TNC as a performer. One of her favorites was an improvisational, multimedia performance about food memories. Dressed in white, she stood before the audience as a hungry ghost, gold glitter sparkling in the lights of the Aratani Courtyard.

The artist can chart her success through many milestones, including the first time she held her published book in her hand and the first time she saw her books displayed at Urban Outfitters, an upscale retail chain.

Her parents, of course, have a different benchmark for success.

"When Kinokuniya started carrying my books. It was like a reference point for them that was like, 'Oh, this is like really amazing!'" said Sakugawa.

REPRESENTATION

Lately, Sakugawa's artwork showcased on Instagram to more than 125,000 followers has centered on the theme of healing.

Anthropomorphic clouds contemplate with soft gazes urging you to "pay attention to the sparks" in life. The illustrations are in black and white and seem to break down barriers — especially the limitations of the human body. In one piece, a flower stalk wends through the profile of a body like a twisty straw until it blooms out of the mouth.

"Perfection is not needed when you are expressing your truth," reads the caption.

Sakugawa is one of a very few well-known Asian American female artists. She has also struggled with her own mental health. With success comes pressure and a choice: Do you divorce the personal from the art, or do you lay your soul bare in every sketch and interview?

Sakugawa chooses the latter.

"As I became more aware of what it means to be an Asian American artist, an Asian American woman artist, I realized that oh, I also really want people to see the human behind the art, behind the books, and see that I am a Japanese American woman. I am second generation. I am a daughter of immigrants. And even if my works aren't always explicitly Asian American, that is a big part of who I am, and people should know that."

In 2013, when millennial bloggers started turning their attention to '90s pop culture, a lot of the dialogue centered on "The Baby-Sitters Club," a novel series about a group of teenage girls running a babysitting service. Sakugawa took notice. She voraciously consumed "The Baby-Sitters Club" as a preteen self-professed bookworm who worshipped at the altar of Claudia Kishi, the series' only Japanese American junk-food-loving artistic character with her own storyline. In Kishi, Sakugawa saw reflections of herself. She also noticed voices like hers were not being represented in the conversations.

» See ARTIST on page 12

ARTIST » continued from page 8

Most of the bloggers writing about "The Baby-Sitters Club" and Kishi were white, so they didn't really *know* what it was like to have a dynamic Asian American character like Kishi. So, Sakugawa created her own web comic about Kishi, a love letter to the "crazy, unique, extremely confident and just like me, a second-generation Japanese American."

The Kishi web comic took off on the web and landed Sakugawa on the Netflix short documentary "The Claudia Kishi Club." In July, her web comic will also be featured in "We Are the Baby-Sitters Club," an anthology of essays and artwork from grown-up readers.

Remember: There are many paths to activism.

Sakugawa has two pieces showcased in the Giant Robot April 3-21 Rakugaki 3 group exhibit — iterations of a celestial piece called "I Leave Shrines Everywhere I Go." Both pieces sold out on the first day.

"Her work, to me, has a larger meaning because of who she is and what she does," said Eric Nakamura, co-founder of Giant Robot and owner of the Giant Robot Store and GR2 Gallery. "Some people can paint a picture of a cat. It doesn't matter who did it, it's just a cat. I think her images, for me, tell a larger story and involves who she is and what she does."

Sakugawa's books and merchandise are top-sellers in the Giant Robot store, said Nakamura, especially her 2015 book "There Is No Right Way to Meditate."

If art is the gateway to her soul, then be prepared to be greeted with some darkness. It comes from a personal place.

Sakugawa's mental health deteriorated while teaching English in Japan. She didn't have access to the same antidepressant medication she had been taking in the United States, and her job struggles sent her in a downward spiral. Her art often references mental health issues and depicts self-help strategies.

"I believe I have a personal responsibility to speak more candidly about mental health and to be upfront about struggles I've had with mental illness because I know that when more people speak up about it, more people feel seen," said Sakugawa. "I think that's one of the beautiful healing things about sharing art and sharing stories. When you share painful dark experiences, it paradoxically makes people feel less alone and more connected because then they can relate to the vulnerability instead of feeling like they have to pretend everything is OK."

Sakugawa straightens her glasses and nods her head. It's an important point to remember as the global pandemic drags on.

The artist has spoken her truth.

■ **Her 2015 book "There Is No Right Way to Meditate"**

Sakugawa volunteered and performed for the Tuesday Night Café, a free arts and performance series in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo.