



Artist Rieko Chacey

Interviewed by AA&CC Director Joanna Pecore
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I teach at Towson University and live in Baltimore County. I came to the area in the summer of 1999.

Before 1999, I was in Japan. I'm from Tochigi Prefecture. That's in the Kanto area. It's a suburb of Tokyo. I grew up in Japan until I graduated from high school. Then I came to the United States to get a college degree. My plan was to go back to Japan and get a bilingual job there, but I ended up staying here in America. I stayed in the U.S. after my graduation from Towson University, because I met my husband while I was a student. We got married when we were both students.



Rieko Chacey

I studied at Towson for my undergrad degree. I majored in graphic design and became a professional graphic designer. And while I was working full time as a graphic designer, I went to University of Baltimore and got an MFA in Integrated Design.

My story is not like the typical Japanese people you meet in the United States. I would say 99% of Japanese people who come to the United States to study are very, very academically driven. A lot of medical doctors in training come here and get the latest medical technology in the U.S. and go back. And a lot of career-driven people come here. But, unlike them, I was kind of running away from my family. My family was quite dysfunctional at that time.

I think my family has a generational history of dysfunctional fathers. My home wasn't a safe environment for me, and my father wasn't a good leader. Knowing my father and what he has shared with me, I know my paternal grandfather was also not like a leader type man. He didn't work. When he was a young adult, there was World War II between Japan and America. All the males, like middle school and up, were drafted to engage in the war. But my paternal grandfather, for some reason, he was selected to be an engineer, an airplane engineer in Tokyo, while all his peers were drafted. But after the war, father, my aunts and my uncles, they all said, "Oh, you know, your grandfather stopped working. He got sick."

They all said he was just really weak. And to connect the dots of their story, I think my grandfather designed and produced airplanes for Kamikaze, suicide bombers' airplanes. My guess was that my

grandfather might have found out what he was engaged in professionally. And at that time, there was no recognition of PTSD. They did not say he was mentally ill or anything, but something happened to my grandfather. He didn't have a job, did nothing at all. And his wife worked full time raising three kids. My grandfather stayed home and painted. He wrote poems. My father often said, "My father didn't do anything for me, didn't teach me anything," meaning that my grandfather was distant.

My generation's parents are the children who were raised by the Japanese people who went through World War II. My grandparents had war experience. My maternal grandfather didn't want to talk about it at all.

My parents' generation were raised by those withdrawn men, who did not have a lot of energy to do anything. And then, my father didn't know how to be a father, I think. And those things put me in a place where I really wanted to leave my family.

During the first few years of living in the United States, my experience was pretty ordinary, like any foreigner living in the United States. You know, they are all amazed how big grocery stores are, how big the packages are, and milk containers. But one thing I noticed was...I asked this to my American friends. I noticed that people, definitely in my generation, back in my college days...people definitely hung around with the same race of people. While I was in Japan, I consumed some American media like Hollywood movies and MTV music videos, and in all that media, I saw all the diverse, racial people acting as friends and going around together. But on campus at Towson, I didn't observe that. So, I asked my American friends about it. I thought, "Racism is bad. We are all equal. But then in real social life, people still only hang out with friends within their race." And what I learned is that it's not the race, it's the cultural background they are brought up in. For example, if you are African American, you have more in common to talk about with other African Americans because the culture,



Rieko Chacey, pictured dressed in kimonos during her childhood in Japan.
Photo courtesy of Rieko Chacey.

the ethnicity, are the same. The same racial people share the common ethnicity and culture within that community. So do Asian Americans. So do Caucasian Americans. That's why it's not that the Caucasian people only hang out with Caucasian people. It's just easier to talk to people when they have a lot more in common to talk about. So, I learned while I was in college it's not racism. It's just what connects people or the culture and the background they have in common.

I have Asian friends. I have Caucasian friends. I have African American friends. And I have a lot of mixed friends. And so, I open up to their social patterns. I feel what makes me feel like I belong is people who have the same kind of passion. Like, people who are artistic, who are creative. When I meet people who are creative and artistic, instinctively, I feel a click, whether they are African American or Asian or Caucasian. And my students are completely diverse. My colleagues are completely diverse. And it's just like it's the content of the person that connects me or makes me feel like I belong, despite race or ethnic background.

I don't consider myself to fit into American culture. The majority of people are extroverts. The majority of people are like business-minded people, very organized, like Type A. I don't fit into Type A. When I was young, it hurt me that I'm out of box. I'm different. It took me a long time to accept that. But I don't feel like I fit into the American society because American society spotlights people who are athletic, good looking, extroverted and social butterflies. I am introverted. And the way I think is quite different from



Rieko Chacey, *Love + Home + Baltimore*, 2024
Digital Collage, 24" x 16"



Rieko Chacey (center) pictured with her husband and three children.
Photo courtesy of Rieko Chacey.

other people. So, I don't fit in. But I try to find a small group of people who are like me, regardless of their ethnicity or racial background, to feel like there are people like me, even though they are a small number of people.

I think we will live around the Baltimore area probably for the rest of our lives. My family is my home. Home is not a physical place, but people like my husband and my kids. So, wherever my family is, I think that would be my home.



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