

July 22, 2015

# How A 'White Man In My Pocket' Can Help You Understand Privilege

The Huffington Post | By [Priscilla Frank](#)

Posted: 04/03/2015 6:52 pm EDT | Updated: 04/03/2015 6:59 pm EDT



"Privilege is plastic," artist Kenya (Robinson) explained in an interview. "Just like 'race' is a plastic material. It's totally made up. It's a story. It has no space in reality."

Kenya carries a white man in her pocket. Not a living, breathing human being, but a small figurine, something you'd pick up at a discount store. It was gifted to her by an old boss at the Brooklyn Children's Museum and it reminds her of a very important message: *you are more privileged than you think*, no matter your gender, socioeconomic status or the color of your skin.

"It was the first time I had a black woman as a boss," Kenya explained. "After the day was done we would meet and debrief about what we were going to do next. Somehow the conversation veered -- she asked me if I had a boyfriend. And I was like, 'Noooo, but I want one!' And she said, 'You know what, Kenya? You need a white man.' I could tell she was leading somewhere. Then she says, 'I have a white man.'"

"She pulls this sucker out, a figurine you could get from a discount school supply store. It comes in a set of six, I believe. He was this little businessman, still in the plastic. She said, 'You know what, I think you could use him.'"

Thus the project #WHITEMANINMYPOCKET was born.

00:40



**HD**

For Kenya, the unorthodox exchange between coworkers happened at the most fortuitous of times. "There was all this bullshit happening with white people apologizing for things they had said. Steve Martin had tweeted something offensive and Paula Dean made her comment. I thought, you know what? You've been getting so out of pocket I'm going to put you in my pocket. And I took him out of the wrapper and I put him in my pocket. And that's what started it."

The artist imagined that the male figurine clad in business casual could serve a variety of purposes. For one, the miniature flips is capable of flipping any power dynamic, theoretically restoring a sense of agency to those silenced and stymied by patriarchy and prejudice. But the stoic little men, first and foremost, serve as a reminder of the illusory makeup of privilege -- an invisible commodity available to those who step up and own it.

kenya9 • 71 weeks ago

Following

[#whitemaninmypocket](#)

19 likes 1 comment

"As someone who strongly identifies as a black, American person, all of the violence inflicted upon black bodies -- verbally, emotionally, physically, spiritually -- it's really overwhelming. I needed something. I needed to create privilege for myself because every message that I was receiving told me I wasn't privileged at all. But, you know what? I am breathing. I am able to express myself in a positive way. That is a big privilege, but sometimes I forget that."

When Kenya began the project, her white man lived publicly online -- primarily on Instagram -- through a thorough photography archive that documented its daily goings on. She soon noticed that strangers who caught a glimpse of the #WHITEMANINMYPOCKET often reacted viscerally and conspicuously. "There's this Chinese bakery that I've been going to for years," said Kenya. "One day, I'm looking for change and I pull out my white man and put him on the counter. Normally this place is all business, but the woman at the counter, she just started laughing out loud. I then realized this thing had power."



So Kenya decided to extend her project beyond Instagram, making a tiny army of pocket-sized white men. Her first idea, inspired by the Terra Cotta soldiers in China, was to construct a multitude of ceramic figurines and then bury them. She then changed gears a bit, opting instead to create her diminutive crowd from chalk -- a material she likes for being "really white" in hue. For an upcoming June exhibition (location to be announced), she plans to make thousands of them.

"I've been wanting to really expand the sense of scale," Kenya explained. "I am not going to make what I call a 'big dick' sculpture. But I can make so many multiples that it feels overwhelming in the space."



In the meantime, Kenya hopes that even saying the words "white man in my pocket" in anticipation of the exhibition will mobilize others to strive for change, and own their inner privilege. "Black people often times whisper the word white. It's like, if you can't say the word then what hope do you have of changing the conversation? You have none. I wanted to create something where, at least, people will practice saying 'White man'... We're not talking about race. We're talking about the relationship between black people and white people. And when we use words that are confusing, it's blocking the real conversation."

The miniature figurines, she believes, can serve as visible, tangible reminders of that abstract idea of privilege, a word that's commonly used but perhaps not too often understood. "You already have more privilege than you think you have," she said. "Privilege is plastic material anyway; it's just a made up thing. If you say it enough, people will agree."

Stay tuned for more on Kenya's project. In the meantime, you can [check out the history of #WHITEMANINMYPOCKET on Instagram here.](#)



MORE: [Kenya Robinson](#) [Black Artists](#) [White Privilege](#) [Patriarchy](#) [Kenya Robinson Art](#) [Female Artists](#)

## Conversations

19 comments

[Add a comment](#)



**Sean Stephane Martin** · Top Commenter · Comics artist at Doc and Raider

So cutting through it all, making fun of the little white guy makes you feel better about yourself.

OK, got it. Thanks.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 6 · [Follow Post](#) · April 4 at 6:15pm



**Frank Rauen** · Top Commenter · Metropolitan State College of Denver

Oppression and want to oppress are universal traits. Robert Mugabe and Elena Ceaușescu are proof that no race, gender, sexual identity, demographic group is inherently better than the other one.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 3 · April 5 at 5:43pm



**Sean Stephane Martin** · Top Commenter · Comics artist at Doc and Raider

Frank Rauen True enough, but I fail to see the point of celebrating such actions.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · April 5 at 6:11pm



**Kevin Begley** · Top Commenter · UC Davis

Sean Stephane Martin don't confuse a cognizance ritual with a celebration.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · April 6 at 3:44am

[View 1 more](#)



**Adrienne Traisman** · Top Commenter · Works at Artist

I understand her point , but I think her manner of delivery is a cheap shot and immature.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 2 · [Follow Post](#) · April 5 at 5:34pm



**Kevin Begley** · Top Commenter · UC Davis

You presume that the delivery is intended for you. You need to get yourself a white man, Adrienne; when you read about somebody's idea to keep cognizant of privilege, just give that idea over to the white man in your pocket (it was not intended for you).

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · Edited · April 6 at 3:47am



**Allen Yeager** · Top Commenter

Many of the problems of our brown and black brothers and sisters are self inflicting. Granted things can and should improve. Yet, constantly babbling about them will just cause more silence and flight.

The European white man and the Eastern Asian man today seems to hold all the power and money. Yet, this was not always the case. Things and people will change. Nothing stay the same.

I have always suggested that if a person wants to improve their lot in life-It needs to start at the beginning. Educate yourself. Be content and love yourself. If you wish, find someone who loves you as much as you love them. Have children because you want them and can afford them. Think positive and don't look for trouble.

Do remember one thing: No one owes you anything. Never have. Never will. Once you understand this, you will understand everything.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#) · [Follow Post](#) · April 5 at 9:44pm



**Tim Roney** · [Top Commenter](#) · Works at Travel Impressions

Who edits this page about ART and where is any representation of art and Easter ? Are millennials in charge ?

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#) · [Follow Post](#) · April 5 at 8:03am



**Bob Couillard** · [Top Commenter](#) · Washington State University

Spoken in an Eric Idle voice: "I've got a little white man in my pocket also. Know what I mean? Know what I mean? Nudge, nudge. Wink wink. Say no more."

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · April 6 at 1:16am



**Lawrence McCombs** · [Follow](#) · [Top Commenter](#) · Brief stint at ICC.

I see her little white guy is wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase. How stereotypical.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · April 6 at 12:20am



**Megan Williams** · [Top Commenter](#)

Would it make more sense to you if she said "The Man"? Because that's very similar to what's going on.

The stereotype is the point. It's not like she'd carry around a photo of a White guy she actually knew since an individual White male isn't the problem. The image, the stereotype, and how it's used to confer power and how that impacts her life is.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [2](#) · Edited · April 6 at 9:12am



**Danita Bailey** · [Top Commenter](#)

Great article!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · April 4 at 10:48pm

Facebook social plugin

Huffington Post Search

[Advertise](#) | [Log In](#) | [Make HuffPost Your Home Page](#) | [RSS](#) | [Careers](#) | [FAQ](#)

[User Agreement](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Comment Policy](#) | [About Us](#) | [About Our Ads](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Copyright ©2015 TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. | "The Huffington Post" is a registered trademark of TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. All rights reserved.

Part of **AOL Lifestyle**