

**GEICO Caveman:  
A Contemporary Tale of Mediated Otherness and Political  
Correctness**

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**Abstract**

Since 2004, the insurance company GEICO has presented an advertising campaign centered on the idea of caveman living in the twenty-first century. The commercials, along with the slogan, “GEICO: so easy a caveman could do it,” constructed a fictional minority in American society, who are shown as both self-consciously irritated by the advertisements and as struggling against the discrimination they represent. This paper aims to understand the socio-cultural meanings driving and produced by the GEICO caveman phenomenon and the pedagogical implications revealed by the public’s responses to and interpretations of it.

From the cover of a fictional character in popular culture, the advertisements reveal the hidden fears and desires of the majority: the stereotypes that the majority tends to project upon the minority and the fetishism toward dominant values. Meanwhile, the authorship of the caveman is shared by everyone who is exposed to it. The caveman offer no less than a representation of representational otherness, a further othering act of the popular-cultural other. By in effect ridiculing the notion of political correctness, the GEICO caveman point out the limits of political correctness for effecting real equality and ultimately the paradox of attempting to achieve liberal ends by autocratic means.

**Keywords:** GEICO caveman, the other, political correctness, pedagogical visual culture

**1. Introduction**

Along with tender piano accompaniment, in a modern yuppie living room, a commercial is playing on the luxurious LCD television, in which the protagonist states, “It’s so easy to use GEICO.com. A caveman could do it.” “What is that supposed to mean?” asks one of the caveman present in an angry voice. “Did you hear that?” The piano stops. The caveman who had been playing it raises his hand. His face is shown out of focus. A third caveman offers the last word: “It’s really condescending,” he says as he looks up from his laptop. The shot stopped on his face.

Since 2004, GEICO, an auto insurance company, has presented an advertising campaign centered on the idea of caveman living in the

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twenty-first century. The initial three TV commercials, joined by a further eight follow-ups produced in 2006, have been and continue to be shown on television. The commercials, along with the slogan, "GEICO: so easy a caveman could do it," constructed a fictional minority in American society, who are shown as both self-consciously irritated by the advertisements and as struggling against the discrimination they represent. The humor of the caveman series lies in the protagonist's anger and frustration at prejudice so blatantly presented. The first three commercials alone stimulated hundreds of discussions on the Internet<sup>1</sup> - discussions that affirm the iconic status of the GEICO caveman in popular culture. In 2007, the caveman continued to be a presence in popular culture, making appearances in a variety of contexts including the *Super Bowl 2007 Pre-game Show*, the interactive website *Caveman's Crib*, and the pilot episodes of the sitcom *Caveman* on ABC. Through such media, the GEICO caveman continues to develop in detail in a diversity of contexts.

This paper seeks to understand how the GEICO caveman, a fictional minority, function in American society, a society in which discourses regarding race relationships are self-conscious and controversial and evince high levels of both sensitivity and insensitivity to the issues inhering in a population marked by racial diversity? Does the popularity of this fictional minority perhaps signify and even fulfill a need to create an obvious other in society? What does the caveman represent?

Through exploring answers to these questions, this paper also hopes to extend the discussion of this phenomenon from the field of media culture studies to the purview of critical reflection of educational concerns.

## **2. Making the Other**

The caveman phenomenon discloses the very operation of *othering* in the reality of the cultural arena. One of that operation is the use of stereotypes. Stuart Hall argues that stereotyping is most often found in the representation of the other as an approach to simplify and to exclude the other.<sup>2</sup> In the advertising spots, all the caveman look the same. This reflects an entrenched feature of the dominant society's attempts to make sense of the other; the other is reduced to certain traits in order to be identifiable, is seen as having overly simplified characteristics that deny individual differences.

In fact, the caveman phenomenon has been criticized for exploiting stereotyped images of minorities in American society. This criticism has become louder as viewers have watched the thirty-minute sitcoms, which have made this use of stereotypes more blatant. For example, black stereotypes are largely adopted to describe caveman in the sitcom; that is caveman are depicted as good dancers, athletes, and sexual partners. As a result, the caveman is no longer an ambiguous other; rather, it is an explicit

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representation of an actual other in society. In addition to the obvious reference to black stereotypes, audiences have identified different stereotypes in the characters. On the Internet forums, caveman are regarded as representing many different racial groups. For example, Adam Goldberg charges the commercials with anti-semitism, claiming that “they portray White Anglo Saxon Protestants as somehow superior to the obviously neurotic and whiny Jewish caveman character.”<sup>3</sup> An Italian, though shows a different attitude toward this identification, identifies his/her image in caveman too:

As an Italian, I find the commercials extremely funny and my Italian friends and family feel the same. The hairyness [*sic*] (an Italian feature) and the sensitivity of the caveman (another Italian feature) should make it obvious who they are making fun of.<sup>4</sup>

The caveman also imply stereotypes in regard to gender. Although in both the commercials and sitcom, the caveman are depicted as heterosexual men, the fact that cavewomen never appear opens up a space for possible ambiguity in regard to their sexual orientation. In an article titled “Is Cro-Magnon the new gay?” Chris Rovzar notes, “The caveman dress tidily, and they share a swank, modern apartment (see CavemansCrib.com). In an ad that takes place at a restaurant, one caveman orders roast duck with mango salsa. What could be more incriminating?”<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Symptoms of Anti-political Correctness**

Given that the caveman reflect many stereotyped and often stigmatized images of socio-cultural others, its comedic characteristics could hardly be considered political correct. In other words, the making of the other is precisely the opposite of political correctness. Joe Lawson, the advertising copywriter, states that what he was trying to do was to make a comment on the culture of political-correctness.<sup>6</sup> To try to understand the caveman phenomenon, therefore, it is important to reflect upon political correctness and the movements against it.

In studying the anti-political-correctness campaign in the 1990s, Joan W. Scott identifies three kinds of characters in the counterforce: “paranoids,” “fetishists,” and “imposters”.<sup>7</sup> One may identify these three characters in the play of caveman-making too. In this presentation, only the first two characters will be discussed.

In Scott’s analysis, “*paranoids* project their own fears outward”<sup>8</sup>. They see their weaknesses and limits as a threat from the outside. As mentioned earlier, one repetitive theme of the commercials is the caveman’s emotional reaction to the racist messages, which may be interpreted as being

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oversensitive. This characteristic of the caveman is further developed in the sitcom character Nick. Majoring in archeology and political science, Nick is the most sensitive in regard to issues of racism. In one episode, he is irritated by the high school mascot - a stereotypical caveman - so he beats up the young slim blond woman who is performing the role. In response, she takes off the heavy headgear she is wearing and lies crying on the ground. A caveman who attacks a person of the dominant culture - especially such an emblem of White American culture as a young blond woman - embodies the threatening existence of the other. The plot and all the oversensitive-caveman images reflect how the paranoid majority hide their fear by stigmatizing the other.

In regard to fetishists, Scott remarks, "*Fetishists* worship an object that both avows and obscures the real stimulus to their desire."<sup>9</sup> The fetishism of the mainstream tradition, in particular, reflects the urge to preserve a particular and exclusive culture. In the sitcom, the caveman's fascination with the dominant culture and taste has come into play. In the episode called "The Shaver," the show depicts some of the caveman shaving their body hair in order to fit in with the dominant culture. The shaving of the body hair functions as a ritual of transformation, one that reinvents the caveman's unacceptable body into the desired one, that is, smooth, and, therefore, beautiful and civilized.

Evidently, the caveman's appearance releases the ever-present paranoids and fetishists from the dominant group. Through a variety of caveman presentations in media and visual culture, their suppressed anxiety is relieved through this seemingly harmless humorous subject. Is political correctness perhaps undermined by the majority's actual beliefs and/or practices? The popularity of the caveman commercials suggests that people need a space in which they feel comfortable being politically incorrect. For example, while laughing at black stereotypes has become largely unacceptable, there is no constraint on laughing at the caveman. Allison, a store manager in a shopping center, says, "It's not supposed to be funny. It's really dealing with race. But it's a caveman."<sup>10</sup>

#### **4. GEICO Caveman: A Site of Critical Pedagogy**

In Kevin Tavin's view, critical pedagogy and visual culture are "dialogical partners"<sup>11</sup> that challenge what has long been held as the legitimate tradition of education and art history;<sup>12</sup> likewise, the GEICO caveman phenomenon offers an ongoing lesson that is not susceptible to effective teaching in regular formal or informal educational settings.

First, though GEICO caveman may reinforce the negative stereotypes of existing others, the ambiguity in regard to the caveman's identity offers an open text that provokes diverse interpretations. The cultural meaning of the

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caveman phenomenon, therefore, is not fixed; instead, it invites audience reflection and critique. As mentioned earlier, people have widely varying interpretations of the caveman's identity such as African American, Jewish, Native American, Italian, and/or gay. The making of the other and its articulation is not a process engaged in by an individual or even multiple authors; rather, the authorship of the other belongs to all who are exposed to the work, in this case, the advertisements and spinoffs. Moreover, while some regard the caveman as a racist creation,<sup>13</sup> others may read it as a satire of race relations. For example, a Native American says,

I'm Native American and I can totally identify with the Geico caveman. The brilliance of the ad is that anyone can empathize. Media references often refer to my communities in the past tense or even nonexistent. I think the caveman creates racial empathy.<sup>14</sup>

Second, by self-consciously playing out the most sensitive issue in society, the reality of racial politics can be examined and challenged. As the GEICO caveman illustrate the process of making the other through various kinds of media exposure, the public witnesses are exposed to the mechanism of othering. A critical reading of discrimination against socio-cultural others in reality might be a result. It is apposite to compare the caveman with Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez- Peña's famous performance, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*, which premiered at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1992. This performance literally exhibited a couple of Native Americans in a cage for public viewing. The Native Americans, played by the artists themselves, not only represent the colonialism experienced by native Americans but also, and more importantly, evoke the already internalized colonial character of many spectators.<sup>15</sup> The GEICO caveman share a similar spirit; that is, the presentation of the caveman suggest an opportunity for a pedagogy of multiculturalism and social equity, creating an opportunity of anti-othering through this most apparent act of othering. In discussing methods to contest racial stereotyping, one of the counter-strategies Hall provides to fight against the stereotypes is to confront them directly.<sup>16</sup> From this angle, even though the caveman phenomenon could be covert racism offering itself as simple comedy, the phenomenon still provides an opportunity to re-examine race relations in society. The dynamic conversations it stimulates could in fact be valuable negotiations.

Given that the phenomenon is open to multiple interpretations and exhibits a critical performance that challenges the act of othering, a possible partnership between visual culture and critical pedagogy is affirmed, and, at the same time, the deficiency of political correctness in fostering real equity

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and tolerance is disclosed. The GEICO caveman's critique of a hypocritical society may signal that respect for the socio-cultural other doesn't really exist; that is, people have only absorbed the idea that certain kinds of prejudice are no longer acceptable and have become hyper-anxious to at least express conformance to certain ways of thinking, communicating, and behaving in order to avoid giving offense. In discussing the politically committed pedagogy of higher education, Valerie L. Scatamburlo points out that "the suggestion to teach the conflicts as if they were fixed, stable, and immobile does not provide any grounds for exploring how 'the conflictual' gets articulated in specific contexts."<sup>17</sup> In a formal education setting, to teach political correctness directly is to teach politics. However, in popular visual culture, the pedagogical functions can be multilayered, almost always politically incorrect, but also more inspiring.

### 5. Conclusion

The caveman phenomenon offers a tricky but valuable cultural lesson. From the cover of a fictional character in popular culture, it reveals the hidden fears and desires of the majority: the stereotypes that the majority tends to project upon the minority and the fetishism toward the dominant value. The authorship of the caveman is not limited to an advertising agency, a proprietor, or a television station; instead everyone who is exposed to it, participates in the related processes of creation and interpretation. This representation of otherness is a further othering act of the popular-cultural other. The witty lampooning of political correctness plays a significant role in adding multiple dimensions to interpreting this contemporary tale of the socio-cultural other. By in effect ridiculing the notion of political correctness, the GEICO caveman do indeed point out the limits of political correctness for effecting real equality and ultimately the paradox - and inevitable failure - of attempting to achieve liberal ends by autocratic means.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> R Walker, 'Pop-culture evaluation: What an ad campaign spawning potential sitcom characters really reveals', *New York Times Magazine*, 15 April 2007, p. 20.
- <sup>2</sup> S Hall, 'The spectacle of the 'other' in S Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage, London, 1997, pp. 223-290.
- <sup>3</sup> A Goldberg, Message replied to Geico, 'Geico: Defending the Caveman', 2007, retrieved 13 October 2007, <<http://www.thirdwayblog.com/geico/geico-defending-the-caveman.html>>.
- <sup>4</sup> Anonym, Message replied to Geico. op. cit.

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- <sup>5</sup> C Rovzar, 'Is Cro-Magnon the new gay?', *The Advocate*, vol. 988, 2007, p. 16.
- <sup>6</sup> N O'leary, 'Your big idea, their next great thing', *Adweek*, vol. 48, no. 11, 2007, pp. 8-9.
- <sup>7</sup> JW Scott, 'The campaign against political correctness: What's really at stake' in C Newfield & R Strickland (eds.), *After Political Correctness: The Humanities and Society in the 1990s*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1995, p. 112.
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 112.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113.
- <sup>10</sup> L Storer, 'Geico featured in new TV show', *Knight Ridder Tribute Business News*, 30 March 2007, p. 1.
- <sup>11</sup> KM Tavin, 'Wrestling with Angels, Searching for Ghosts: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture', *Studies in Art Education*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2003, p. 209.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 197-213.
- <sup>13</sup> M Washburn, 'Mark Washburn column: A racial theme in heavy makeup?', *Knight Ridder Tribute Business News*, 27 July 2007, p. 1.  
S Collins, 'Reporters confront execs behind ABC's Geico-inspired 'caveman,' saying the show's theme is an unflattering allegory', *Los Angeles Times*, 27 July 2007, p. E. 25.  
G Garvin, "'Caveman' creators combat race charges", *Knight Ridder Tribute Business News*, 27 July 2007, p. 1.
- <sup>14</sup> Anonym, Message replied to R Williamson, 'The caveman that keeps on giving', 2006, retrieved 13 October 2007, <[http://adweek.blogs.com/adfreak/2005/10/the\\_caveman\\_tha.html](http://adweek.blogs.com/adfreak/2005/10/the_caveman_tha.html)>.
- <sup>15</sup> N Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Routledge, London, 1999.
- <sup>16</sup> S Hall, *op. cit.*
- <sup>17</sup> VL Scatamburlo, *Soldiers of Misfortune: The New Right's Culture War and the Politics of Political Correctness*, Peter Lang, New York, 1998.

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