

PLAYING WITH CHILDREN: IMMEDIACY WAS THEIR CRY*

STUART C. AITKEN

I sit on the plaster ledge of a simulated cave in a museum and scratch vigorously under my arm (simulated animal skins are a bit itchy) before swinging off the bench and busying myself with bones strewn across the floor. I pile the bones up and then, unsatisfied, pull them apart before taking some pains to balance two or three of them in what I think is quite an intriguing sculpture. My back is to the entrance of the cave, enabling me to satisfactorily ignore my handler's entreaties to come and meet some new visitors. My handler, Lisa, plays the part of a spelunker, replete with hard hat and carbide lamp. Lisa is a real caver and a qualified museum interpreter who helps young children understand what it is like to live in a cave. I am not a real caveman, nor am I an interpreter, but today I am an important prop in Lisa's exhibit. She has brought a small group of young children (the oldest looks about five) to meet "Urg."

That's me, with an eponymous title because that's all I say (Figure 1). Verbal reticence is part of my performance as a cave dweller who lived 4,500 years ago.¹ Five youngsters cower behind Lisa as they enter the room of the cave in which I am playing with the bones. Their caregivers and a newspaper photographer come in behind them. Lisa calls to me again, and I sniff the air. Then I slowly turn to face my audience. I can see that the children are interested in me but are too nervous to leave Lisa's protection. The photographer's camera flashes, and I give a start. Feigning terror, I scamper to the back of the cave and cringe behind a fake limestone formation. For some reason my actions embolden two of the children, who tentatively approach me and, taking my hand, lead me back into the center of the room. I am crouching at about the children's height, enabling one of them to throw her arms around my neck as if to ward off the advances of the photographer. The ensuing photo opportunity is spoiled by another child, who scolds the photographer for advancing to frighten me. And suddenly I am theirs: Lisa and their caregivers are forgotten as the children surround me with affectionate touches and protective, playful body language.

I am not sure what I became in that simulated cave in my simulated animal skins—a pet, a plaything, a confidant, an ally against adults—but for the next half-hour I felt as though I were a trusted part of those children's world. We played with the bones, and then they took me out of the cave and showed me the rest of the museum. They explained how coke machines work and that the frightening skeleton of an Albertosaurus wouldn't hurt me. They showed me the museum exhibits and explained how they should be used. They got a kick out of using me to scare

* Some of the work in this essay is elaborated on in *Geographies of Young People*, a mostly theoretical book (Aitken 2001).

✦ DR. AITKEN is a professor of geography at San Diego State University, San Diego, California, 92182-4493.