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Frozen in Time

Teaching Imperialism through Lead Toys in Interwar America



ANNE BOYD

The author argues that, in the early 1920s, many urban White Americans saw in the Arctic an escape from a world of rapidly expanding technology and became captivated by images of Inuit communities. To pass down an antimodernist form of imperialism to children of the period, educators used lead ethnographic “Escimo” figurines, which rendered Inuit communities as relics of the past. Drawing on visual and documentary evidence, she holds that these ethnographic toys functioned as a form of interactive education that taught young American children about the potential possibilities, as well as limits, of Arctic imperialism. She discusses these toy sets as pedagogical tools and how they helped convey ideas about race, authenticity, and citizenship. **Keywords:** empire; Indigenous; Inuit; material culture; visual culture

Introduction

THE BOSTON CHILDREN’S MUSEUM currently holds a set of ethnographic figurines, composed of lead, that shaped American understandings of imperialism as well as the development of Indigenous communities. The figurines, labeled “No. 71: Escimo Life,” worked as a form of interactive education for young children during the period between World War I and World War II as part of a larger series entitled *New Ways of Teaching History*.¹ While the toy set intended to teach children in the United States about Inuit communities in the Arctic, the “Escimo” set was produced in Europe and exported through Gustav R. Julien of Hamburg, Germany.² Hand painted and thin, the toys render Inuit people as collectively frozen in time, becoming nostalgic reminders of an imagined past within a rapidly changing world.

Despite their makers’ promise that these toys offered a new way of teaching history, the figurines also provided an object lesson in antimodernism, inviting

students to seek inspiration from societies that were perceived to be primitive by elite White Americans. Literary critic Shari Hundorf has argued that the Arctic provided a powerful source of inspiration for urban Americans and Europeans seeking better ways of living after World War I and that it “augmented the modernist suspicion of progress (a primary rationale for colonial domination) and technology.”³ This antimodernist impulse was not entirely new—it was rooted in the discourse of overcivilization at the turn of the century, whose proponents argued that urban residents of the Western world were increasingly detached from their own elemental nature. The reported closure of the American frontier in 1892 led prominent figures like future U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt to seek out new models to help cultivate a renewed form of rugged masculinity, one inspired by non-Westerners and their relationship to wild, natural landscapes.⁴ This discourse expanded exponentially in the interwar years in the wake of immense technological change shaping the realm of warfare and beyond. These figurines demonstrate the efforts of the many middle- to upper-class White Americans and Europeans who worked against this tide of change, striving to preserve a world that they believed was in danger of going extinct. A piece of this type of preservation came in the form of the collection of cultures through art, objects, and photographs as a means to own and control them. These toys function as a component of such a practice of collection, because the repetitive nature of the figurines meant that their users—whether they be children or adults—would have literally compiled them together, and, as we will see, this compilation inherently involved a level of control.

These Escimo toys suggest that a key piece of this interwar, antimodernist impulse was both a passing down of an idealized vision of Inuit people, which rendered them as communities of an uncivilized or undercivilized past, as well as a return to the idea of benevolent imperialism. In particular, these toys depicted Inuit people living in an environment largely considered uninhabitable (yet desirable as the nation’s last continental frontier) and using rudimentary tools that contemporary Americans would have considered relics of the past. In other words, the Inuit figurines in this set were rendered as what Robert G. Lee and Sarah Z. Gould have called “foreign Others,” forever outsiders who were not perceived as threats to White Americans.⁵ Such a framework offered representations of the so-called Escimo as both a visual escape from the horrors of World War I and a justification of conquest as a contemporary endeavor. That this particular image was incongruent to the lived realities of many Inuit communities in the 1920s, was irrelevant to the many proponents of such a worldview.

By the time Julien exported Escimo toys to the United States, White Americans and Canadians alike had been making physical contact with Inuit communities for more than forty years. By the 1920s, many communities had become part of Western economies, modes of education, religions, and more. Many communities certainly made an effort to uphold their traditional practices and cultures, but Inuit people in the 1920s were generally different from their counterparts in the 1880s because of their increasing contacts with Western societies. For instance, people in Inuit communities sometimes ate the new foods to which Canadians and Americans introduced them, while they continued to hunt their local animals and maintain their longstanding diets and cultures.

The distinction between the imagined representation and the reality of Inuit lives proves key to the antimodernist impulse at play during the 1920s—not only did the vast majority of middle- and upper-class White Americans obtain images of Inuit people from popular culture, they also understood these images to be true representations. The American art world, for example, had already established a large body of work on landscapes of the arctic by the mid-nineteenth century that rendered the region as a desolate landscape, incompatible with human life except for those in the uniquely rugged Inuit communities and some bold explorers. Well-known works such as Frederic Edwin Church's *The Icebergs* (1861) and William Bradford's *An Arctic Summer: Boring through the Pack in Melville Bay* (1871) illustrated vast, open lands that appeared both intriguing and uninviting to upper-class consumers. Representing Inuit people as they might have been in the 1880s or earlier presents them as a people close to nature, simultaneously understood during the 1920s as desirable and curiously dangerous.

Rendering a racialized stereotype in material form, the Escimo figurines advanced an argument that a return to nature—in this case, one represented by Inuit people—would be a solution to the perceived threats of modernism. And this return to nature could involve a form of benevolent imperialism that had only been a dominant mode of thinking for a brief moment in the late-nineteenth century.⁶ By playing with and learning from these pedagogical toys, American and European children were quietly scripted into a particular set of roles—as appreciators of Indigenous authenticity, or, alternatively, as caretakers for uncivilized peoples within the harsh landscape of the Arctic Circle region. These roles revealed the insidious nature of imperialism during the interwar period, because the act of imagining Inuit people as remnants of an older way of life, or an older stage of civilization, was not always a conscious decision. Further,

the messaging of these toys functioned as a way for contemporary adults to pass down the ideals of imperialism to a new generation, a pattern that reflected a trend begun in the late nineteenth century wherein toys often reflected “adult attitudes, negative as well as positive.”⁷

Materiality—the simultaneous soft and hard substance that is lead—is the primary means through which the Inuit figurines make a case for visualizing Inuits as foreign Others, both a historical relic and a contemporary living community for young children. The Escimo toy set includes over seventy figurines, ranging from Inuit women and children to men holding spears and harpoons to animals and ice formations. Many pieces are duplicates that include the same colors and forms, while others are very similar yet have a slightly different shape or tone (see figure 1). Each piece is small, ranging in height from a few centimeters to a few inches, and very thin in terms of thickness. Since lead is a malleable metal, the thinness of the figures means that they are quite delicate and can be bent and broken. Yet the pieces are also welded to a base, which allows them to stand upright as well as lie down. The physical composition of this set reinforces these scripts—caretaking of the uncivilized, collecting, containing, and controlling imperial others, and reminding users particularly of an imagined antimodern past—as they differ from other contemporary toy sets during the period.

Many features of this set stand out both from other toys used during the early twentieth century. Flat, lead-based toys, for instance, largely depicted (White) soldiers, or, on occasion, a highly stereotyped image of Western cowboys and Indians, rather than Inuit People, making the composition of this set stand out significantly.⁸ Indian toys, in general, were common during this time period as well, although they most often involved the dress and setting associ-



Figure 1. Men figures with dogs and spears. Courtesy of Boston Children’s Museum Collections and Archives, American History Collection

ated with the Western Plains Native Americans rather than the Arctic peoples.⁹ Further, representations of Inuit communities in other kinds of toys during this time period generally fell into a category of ethnic toys that, as historian Sarah Gould has argued, were designed to “emphasize human commonality and downplay racial difference.”¹⁰ For instance, one set of Palmer Cox’s Brownies, designed to “amuse with their exotic costumes and comical antics,” included a stereotyped “Esquimau” character that could be attached to the back of an animal, which, in this case was a polar bear.¹¹ I argue that the Escimo toy set occupies a liminal space between toy sets that downplayed racial difference and those that celebrated the Indian as a positive exterior Other who represented an “authentic reality.”¹² Because the physical make-up of these toys diverged rather significantly from other contemporary toys and renderings of the Arctic—and because material culture depicting Inuits provides insights on American culture and thought otherwise unavailable in textual material—the set of figures function in support of the idea that the 1920s was a decade characterized by an antimodernist impulse that understood the Arctic as a special place.

The Last Frontier: A Brief Historical Overview

The idea that Inuit people might be part of assimilation projects led by White colonists dates to much earlier than the emergence of the Escimo toys in the 1920s. The stories of Inuit Peoples at the turn of the twentieth century often mirror the stories of other Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas, especially those in the West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the late-nineteenth century, the United States shifted its administrative and cultural relationship with Indigenous peoples after the passage of the Dawes Act (1887) from one of state-sponsored violence to one of forced assimilation through compulsory boarding schools.¹³ The United States initially began this project with Indian boarding schools, which forced Indigenous children to adopt “American” social and cultural practices, especially with regard to Christianity, in an effort to rid them of their undesirable Native traits.¹⁴

Yet the rhetoric of benevolent assimilation was hardly the prevailing defense of imperial projects, especially in cases that involved potential overseas territories such as Hawai’i and the Philippines. Instead, efforts to bring conquered lands into the national fold rested on one of two predominant responses from mainland politicians. U.S. officials either insisted that the Indigenous people

inhabiting these lands were already culturally, socially, and physically White, or they ignored racial issues altogether, calling attention instead to more tangential issues such as patriotism or war fervor.¹⁵ In the case of Inuit communities, federal efforts to incorporate Native peoples in the territory of Alaska, the last frontier, rested on the rhetoric of Inuits as close relatives to White people who had not yet experienced the dangers of “overcivilization” Euro Americans had experienced. Assimilationist projects, such as Christian missions, sought to further solidify this perceived Whiteness, by ridding Inuit People of some of their “under-civilized” traits.¹⁶ In other words, the colonialists’ approach to Inuit communities was a kind of hybrid between romanticizing their perceived closeness to nature and hoping to rid them of their “less desirable” Indigenous traits. Like other imperial projects, the exploration of Alaska and the ensuing incorporation of Inuits was cultural in nature and involved varying degrees of Americanization.

The case of Tikiâaq, also known as Point Hope, illustrates how these ideas operated at the turn of the century. In Tikiâaq, Alaska, the U.S. Bureau of Education imposed a “Native Alaska” schooling plan for Inuit people in the 1890s in an effort to Americanize the Native peoples in the area. The Bureau of Education appointed the Episcopal Church to lead the school, where Dr. John Driggs, writer of *Short Sketches from Oldest America*, served as a schoolteacher.¹⁷ Driggs was known as a relatively sympathetic leader, and his contemporaries understood their work to be voluntaristic, kind, and benevolent, especially in comparison to the early- to mid-nineteenth century’s state-sponsored extermination projects. Yet his report on the people in the Tikiâaq area illuminates the ubiquity of stereotypes and tropes of Inuit people that, at the turn of the twentieth century, were often read in both a positive and a negative light. Driggs consistently described the people in Tikiâaq as “primitive” and “isolated from the outside world from the most remote time,” because of their use of outmoded technology, the absence of any English-speaking people, their communal economies, and most specially the structure of Inuit societies, which was largely centered around families and kinship. To Driggs, these communities would be considered “civilized” after they embraced the Bible, learned English, adopted capitalism, and restructured their society to focus on masculinity and manhood rather than kinship. Yet many antimodernist White Americans in the 1920s would come to understand these “primitive” qualities of Inuit communities as favorable.¹⁸ It is worth noting, however, that in spite of this Americanization process, the Inuit people of Tikiâaq were relatively successful at maintaining a traditional community by retaining their own structures of power and, in fact, reinforcing the

importance of kinship and family ties. The United States was also not the only nation attempting to assimilate Native peoples into a larger (White) culture at the time. Many European nations also engaged in forming an imperialist network across the globe. The French occupied Vietnam and the Congo, and Great Britain ran its Raj in India.

Even seemingly innocuous objects, like toys, helped even the youngest Europeans and Americans envision distinctions between an urban, “civilized” world of Europeans and Americans, and some imagined, “primitive” Others. Through their particular materiality, which involved soft, bendable lead, these toys hinted that Americans should not only envision Inuits as representations of earlier stages of civilization, but that they were also worthy of some form of care and preservation, albeit by a benevolent imperialism.

Why Objects Matter

Aside from the status of these toy sets as goods exported to the United States by German exporter Gustav R. Julien of Hamburg, their specific provenances, most especially their makers, remain unknown. For this reason, the methods of material culture studies become essential for understanding the kind of cultural power these objects likely had. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz described culture as “webs of significance” in which people are suspended, meaning that any one piece of that cultural web is inherently connected to other pieces.¹⁹ Like other material objects, the Escimo toys help reveal pieces of that web otherwise unavailable in verbal and textual sources, because they provide a link between users, producers, dominant and subversive ideologies, and lived experiences.

The lack of primary archival sources related to the Escimo toys makes identifying their precise role in American and German cultures difficult without the work of careful, scholarly speculation. As such, I employ Robin Bernstein’s concept of “scriptive things” to understand better how children might have engaged with these objects. Bernstein conceptualizes a script as a “dynamic substance that deeply influences but does not entirely determine live performances, which vary according to agential individuals’ visions, impulses, resistances, revisions, and management of unexpected disruptions.”²⁰ Scriptive things are then objects that subtly and not so subtly suggest to a person a particular way to engage with them, primarily because of their materiality, although these forms of engagement may be broken, twisted, or ignored at any given time. These scripts are inher-

ently related to historical context, including contemporary understandings of a particular object, the subject whom the object apparently renders, and other relevant contemporary issues. Although the Escimo toys scripted their users to engage with a particular set of ideological ideas through the particularity of their size, quantity, and material properties, these elements—and the fact that children are often unpredictable and active actors in play—created opportunities for the disruption of the ideas passed down by adults.²¹ For instance, whereas a child may be implicitly or explicitly instructed to handle the toys with care, the sheer number of figurines, in addition to their small size, indicates that a child might not have seen them as irreplaceable, precious objects, but rather as disposable and cheap.

The adoption of the Escimo toys for teaching children about “Geography and the Study of Nations” illustrates how the use of objects for educational purposes might be serviced for injurious purposes.²² In the midnineteenth century, teachers adopted the practice of object lessons, which aimed to “lead a classroom of students from examining an object or image to writing a composition about it,” thereby working to develop students’ “perceptive skills, reasoning ability, and vocabulary.”²³ A similar practice followed in the early twentieth century, when parents and reformers used educational toys to teach children at an early age about the world, especially in nursery schools. This method of teaching, which mirrored European models, became especially popular among middle-class reformers in the 1920s who stressed the importance of play with objects to teach young minds.²⁴ The vast majority of children who would have the opportunity to engage with objects as a means to learn in a classroom (or at home) would have been White and members of wealthy families, establishing for them a place of privilege that would have felt normal.²⁵ The Escimo toys, in other words, are situated within this history of object lessons and the use of play for education. Keeping this context of educational toys in mind, I examine the relationship between the toys’ materiality and the larger context of antimodernist imperialism during the interwar period as one that is mutually reinforcing.

According to the toy set’s box lid, the German Escimo toys were either designed or exported as a “new way of teaching history,” particularly in the context of “geography and [the] study of nations.”²⁶ An additional note on the box states explicitly that the toys were for use in “museums, history classes, etc.,” although an American family might also use the toy set in its own home.²⁷ There exist no extant records of how—or even if—the toys were used within classrooms



Figure 2. Container for toy set. Courtesy of Boston Children's Museum Collections and Archives, American History Collection

and in the context of the 1920s. But toys were increasingly more common in schools for children in wealthy families, suggesting that they were quite likely used in classroom settings.

Teachers in the 1920s were likely to be well versed in the antimodernist discourses, particularly because reformers were the most interested in the use of toys as a pedagogical tool, and thus they were already primed to consider various forms of reformist policies (imperialism included).²⁸ Even if some teachers were less interested or engaged in imperial discourses, the toys' settings in schools set children up to play with the toys simultaneously with appreciation and care, because a teacher may remind them to "be careful." In other words, it is quite likely that children would be predisposed to taking care of the toys and being

gentle with them, an important facet of the idea of antimodernist imperialism during the 1920s.

Inuits as Objects of Curiosity

During the interwar period, American imaginings of the Arctic collided with the ideal of antimodernism to create a cultural fascination with the region's Native inhabitants. American society had grown concerned about the fragility of nature and the Inuit people and, as a result, sought both to witness and protect each. For instance, collectors began to hoard objects brought back from the Arctic, while many of the scientists who traveled so far north attempted to observe rather than transform their Inuit subjects. For most Americans and Canadians, however, this impulse took the form of engaging with cultural objects and renderings of the Arctic, including books, films, exhibitions, and trinkets, appreciating them as either true representations of Inuit culture or as remnants of the communities living in the distant north. The Escimo toys render this impulse of cherishing Indigenous communities and their perceived proximity to nature into material form through their content, size, and malleability, scripting the next generation to appreciate their "uniqueness" and "authenticity."²⁹

The representational composition of the Escimo toys is foundational to the ways in which they shape children's interactions and basic understandings of Inuit people. The set features numerous pieces that contextualize the human figurines, including polar bears, ice floes, dogs pulling sleds, and walruses. Like other contemporary representations of Inuits in children's toys, such as Palmer Cox's Esquimaux Brownie, these contextual pieces help shape a stereotyped and oversimplified understanding of their environment and everyday lives. The Escimo set in fact seems to build upon the "polar regions" section of Cox's *The Brownies around the World* children's book, which describes the Brownie characters' journey through what is present-day Alaska.

Reviewing thus the region cold

...

The Brownies various methods tried
By which to cross the country wide;
They turned to use whatever they found
To aid them as they journeyed round.

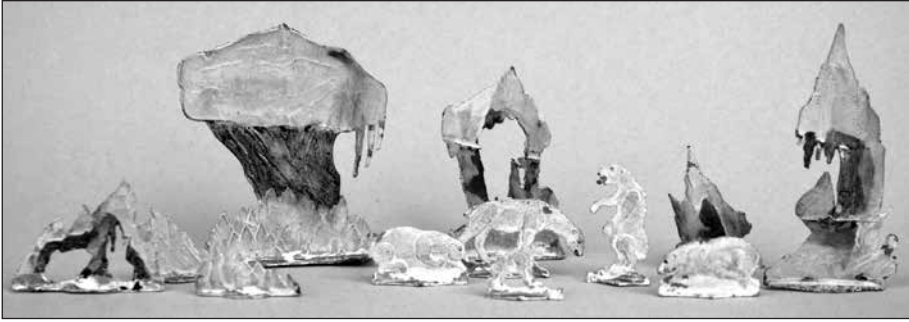


Figure 3. Polar bears figures and ice floes. Courtesy of Boston Children's Museum Collections and Archives, American History Collection

The cunning band some dogs secured,
To cold and hardship well inured,
And on rude sledges void of art,
In which large skins played leading part.³⁰

Julien's Escimo set likewise features sled-pulling dogs, a harsh, icy landscape, and other animals associated with the Arctic, and the Inuit characters themselves wear the large skins that Cox's Brownies find so useful in their journey (figure 3). Thus, according to this toy set, the Inuit is not complete without an icy environment, Arctic animals, and Indigenous modes of survival.

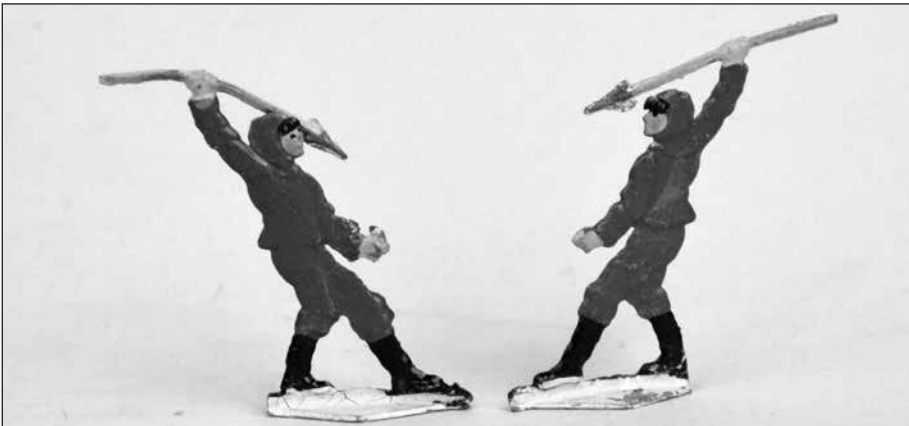


Figure 4. Figures of two men posing with spears. Courtesy of Boston Children's Museum Collections and Archives, American History Collection



Figure 5. Figures of three men holding fish. Courtesy of Boston Children's Museum Collections and Archives, American History Collection

To most contemporary Americans, these images of the Arctic were not something they would ever see firsthand outside of books. Although there were numerous expeditions to the region in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, such as Robert Peary's infamous voyage to Greenland in 1897, they were never for the everyday consumer and tourist. In other words, Inuits geographically existed comfortably outside the world that most Americans occupied. Users of the Escimo toys, then, might become curious and fascinated with an environment they were likely never to see in person. Geographical distance, in other words, allowed children the freedom to explore and understand the Arctic environment without having to make the dangerous voyage northward.

The figures within the set, responding to their contextualization pieces, reinforce this oversimplified image of Inuit lifestyles. Many of the male figures, frozen in time, are postured as if they are about to fish and hunt with spears and harpoons (figures 4 and 5). Reinforcing the idea that Inuit communities lived a hunter lifestyle, these figures display a bloody and gruesome firsthand killing of animals with premodern technology. The user is spared seeing the actual result of such methods of hunting, however, because none of the animals in the set is depicted on the receiving end of the Inuits' weapons. This image of Inuit communities relying on killing animals firsthand to survive relegates them to an imagined past in which violence was a part of everyday life. In the 1920s, a rugged hunter lifestyle would have been at odds with the contemporary butcher-shop experience of urban Americans, in which the killing of the animals took place

outside the view of everyday consumers. Additionally, the presumed recipients of this violence—polar bears, seals, and fish—were (with the exception of fish) considered exotic and inedible for civilized peoples, thereby relegating Inuit people as a primitive Other. Yet, read in a post–World War II context, the older, more primitive lifestyle of Inuit people rendered in these toys might actually be understood as a desirable return to a society that has not witnessed the horrific consequences of modern warfare. In other words, the toys rendered Inuits as both geographically, environmentally, and culturally distant from contemporary America, making them out to be foreign Others.³¹ This complicated image of Inuits living a simpler, closer-to-nature lifestyle was illustrated perhaps most clearly in Robert Flaherty’s 1922 film *Nanook of the North*, which explored the alleged everyday activities of families in the Arctic.

Nanook of the North renders Inuit people as simultaneously fragile and in an older stage of civilization. Flaherty begins the film by describing Nanook’s (the main character of the film) land as a “hunting ground,” relegating the community’s livelihood as one centered around the killing of animals (as opposed to engaging in American commerce, for instance).³² The majority of the film follows Nanook on various hunting trips, stressing that the community would not survive without the consumption of fish, walrus, Arctic foxes, and other wildlife. The film shows Nanook on a fishing trip operating rudimentary tools, such as a harpoon, to catch fish, while he kills the animals with his teeth. Literally overjoyed with his catch, Nanook smiles at the camera as he holds the bloodied fish.



Figure 6. Figures of women with children. Courtesy of Boston Children’s Museum Collections and Archives, American History Collection

The film makes these gruesome scenes appear natural to the Inuit people, especially as children often participate in the hunting trips. Yet Flaherty's depiction is tamed by the fact that this kind of activity was necessary for their very survival, rather than a superfluous demonstration of their masculine might. One of the first scenes of the silent film includes text that claims "the sterility of the soil and rigor of the climate no other race could survive; yet here, utterly dependent upon animal life, which is their sole source of food, live the most cheerful people in all the world . . . the Eskimo."³³ Inuits, in other words, possessed the knowledge, strength, and cultural capacity to live in this icy landscape, whereas Flaherty's viewers would find it difficult without the Inuit guidance afforded to Flaherty himself. The Escimo toys reflect many of these images in *Nanook of the North* (certainly viewed by more people than those who bought and engaged with the toy set), illustrating a level of continuity between imaginings of the Arctic during the period.

The Escimo set is further culturally distanced from White America, and therefore made more "authentic," in its depictions of Inuit dress. Each figure in the set wears black boots, tan pants, a tan parka. Many wear black mitts, with the exception of a few of the men and women. The children are dressed more colorfully, wearing yellow, blue, and red clothing, and the women's hats are blue and red (figure 6). While the Inuit dress in Julien's set are not entirely accurate, this imprecision is not surprising given that the toymakers in the business of producing imagery of Indigenous communities rarely sought authenticity. Instead, as Sarah Gould has contended, they sought familiarity.³⁴ The set's imprecision is in part due to the size of its figurines, but the ill-defined qualities of the dress also allow the set to align with popular understandings of traditional Inuit attire. The men holding fish, for example, resemble those in *Nanook of the North* and even Cox's Esquimau Brownie (figure 5). Perhaps most clearly, the Inuit's cold-weather garb differs greatly from the clothing most contemporary Americans would have worn, making the figures out to be unfamiliar yet comfortably authentic and desirable. As Philip Deloria has contended, Americans at this time conceptualized Indigenous societies as authentic and desirable only when they could be located outside American culture. In other words, Indigenous people who had been assimilated into American society were far less desirable—and considered less authentic—than those who still engaged in what was considered traditional (and therefore primitive) practices.³⁵ Including apparently traditional dress in the Escimo set contributes to this sense of authenticity, and while it is not clear what contemporary users would have thought about the toys, this context

of valuing the primitive and foreign Other suggests that these details would have contributed to a sense of curiosity and appreciation of (stereotyped) Inuits. Yet the set also seems to suggest more than just an appreciation or longing for the simplicity of Inuit life, because the materiality makes the figures delicate and in need of preservation.

Benevolent Caretaking

Other than the box's suggestion that the toys be used as a way of teaching history, the Escimo toys did not come with any kind of instruction for use, nor are there existing records of how children interacted with them. However, their size and materiality allow us to glimpse some of the many possibilities of use and the cultural implications resulting from such use. Perhaps most significantly, small, bendable lead figurines that comprise the toy set script children to engage and play with them with a level of intimacy and care, although it is conversely possible that this same bendability would encourage users to damage them.

It is not self-evident that all other contemporary toy sets would script any kind of care. Although it is true that nearly all toys in general required responsible play to prevent damage, many toy sets actually explicitly encouraged users to engage in a kind of harm or disfigurement, while others were comprised of materials such as rubber that allowed for even more injurious forms of play. Black target toys such as Selchow and Righter's "The Negro Target" from the early 1880s, for example, explicitly invited users to harm the toy (by pulling a wooden ball on an elastic cord and releasing it to hit a toy Black man's head) while simultaneously teaching these users that harming racial Others was acceptable and in fact encouraged.³⁶ Similarly, historian Robin Bernstein has explored how children enjoyed hanging, pinching, and otherwise hurting black rubber dolls in the late-nineteenth century, noting that the material itself was what allowed these children to engage continuously in this kind of play.³⁷

The Escimo toys, however, did not explicitly script this kind of violence, promoting a different idea of how to engage with racial Others—in this case, Inuits. The level of care required to keep these figures safe introduces children to the role of a caretaker. A child must be gentle and, to a certain extent, loving toward the toys so that they maintain the same form and appearance that might have originally drawn them toward the set in the first place. Although there are many different ways in which a child may play with the toys, such as creating

a diorama or enacting a story, their actions must involve a level of gentleness. Yet the materiality of these toys serves as only one piece of this caretaker script. The delicacy of the toys reinforces the actual composition to specify the role of caretaker in the context of global interwar imperialism.

The Escimo set was not the only flat, lead toys in circulation during this period. Other common flat, metallic toys were toy soldiers, which were generally made to represent historical battles (or ideas of historical battles). Gustav Julien, the same exporter who sent the Inuit figurines to the United States, also exported two sets entitled “No. 8/10 Old Rome Camp” and “No. 1092/70 Ancient Times: Roman Battle with Caesar,” both of which depicted soldiers from ancient Rome. Within the United States, the Grey Iron Casting Company sold numerous toy soldiers (although they were made of iron rather than lead and produced slightly later than the Escimo set’s circulation), including everything from a “legion drum major” to a generalized “cadet.”³⁸ These kinds of toys were as delicate as the Escimo set, but their stated purpose was in fact to teach children about the history of past wars rather than to understand their present lives or to prepare them for future wars.³⁹ By contrast, the Inuit figurines represented a contemporary living community, albeit one rendered within a series designed as a “new way to teach history.”⁴⁰

Also common throughout this period was the inclusion of Indian figurines. For instance, the McLoughlin Brothers trade catalogue from 1909 advertised a Wild West Game, which represented “a campaign of hostilities between Indians and soldiers” containing “eight colored metal soldiers and eight Indians as playing pieces.”⁴¹ The cowboys versus Indians (or in this case soldiers versus Indians) theme was extremely common in both toys and literature during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, allowing children to play the part of either the “childish and primitive” Indians or the “brave, heroic” cowboys and soldiers.⁴² Yet the Escimo set does not include any soldiers or Indians that a child might use as an antagonist, allowing for a more open-ended script.⁴³ Additionally, the Indians that were rendered into these cowboys and Indians toy sets most often depicted stereotyped (and usually inaccurate) Western Plains Indians, rather than Inuits, inviting the question of how the Escimo toys offered a different and distinct mode of play.

Based on the types of figures included in the Escimo set, one possible pattern of play involves the enactment of a family storyline—an important difference from other miniature toy soldier sets. Aside from Arctic animals and chunks of ice, the majority of the figures in the toy set are Inuit people who

comprise a traditional family consisting of a married man and woman with one or more children. Many of the women stand alongside at least one child and are not partaking in any kind of physical work, such as hunting (see figure 6). In contrast, most of the men are holding weapons, some with dogs, and often-times they are posed as if they are midhunt (see figures 1, 4, and 7). For a child who is likely interacting with the toy set delicately, moving the figures around to create a family might be sensible. A child might pair a woman with one baby and one small child with a man holding a spear alongside a dog. This pairing might mirror the child's own family (minus the spear), especially if the family belonged to the middle or upper classes, who had begun in the early twentieth century to limit the number of children they produced.

The potential for children to act out the kinds of families that were common in middle- and upper-class White society reflects the limits to imagining foreign Others in toys. Although many Inuit families adopted sex-based skills (i.e., men most commonly hunted while women took care of the children), these divisions of labor were permeable and not a reflection of assigning greater inherent value to one sex over another. Additionally, Inuit communities are both matrilineal and matriarchal, a fact not evident in the toy set, which includes over thirty-five men and only four women. In other words, the (perceived) similarity between American familial lifestyles and those of the Inuits instills the idea that the “correct” way for Inuit families to live is in a single-family home with rigid gender



Figure 7. Figures of two men holding spears. Courtesy of Boston Children's Museum Collections and Archives, American History Collection

roles, although these roles are permitted to still be “primitive.” Of course, the relationship between the family-making scripts of the toys and a child’s personal understanding of Inuit families and imperialism more generally is not linear nor determinative—yet it is precisely the insidious nature of the relationship that characterizes the passing down of imperial ideologies throughout generations.

Our hypothetical child’s third-party role as a caretaker and civilizer in the artificial Inuit families has parallels in the larger social context of the United States during the Interwar period with regard to gender and families. Julien’s particular rendering of Inuit people mirrors the gendered expectations for White, middle-class Americans in the 1920s which relegated women to marriage and housework from an early age (usually in their early twenties).⁴⁴ Work outside the home was not expected nor was it the norm, and even those women who did work for wages were usually young, single, and poor—a condition that many assumed would be temporary until a woman could find a husband. American society expected men to be breadwinners and in charge of the more laborious household tasks such as fixing appliances. The Escimo toys render these gender- and class-specific social ideals onto the Inuit figures with important modifications: The specific duties of each gender match the stereotypical lifestyle of Inuit communities. Instead of repairing household appliances or working full time for salaries, for example, the Inuit men are hunting, presumably to provide food for their families. The women are paired with children, demonstrating their primary purpose as mothers, yet they are not inside homes and are in fact dressed to be outside in frigid temperatures. In other words, the men and women in the toy set reflect gendered expectations of the traditional White American family yet maintain particular aspects of Inuit lifestyles that Americans might have considered worthy of protection and preservation. The Escimo toys reflect the antimodernist impulse so important to interwar imperialism by negotiating between the assimilation of particular White American values (having a traditional family and rigid gender roles) and the preservation of the more desirable parts of Inuit life considered to be true to nature (hunting for food and the avoidance of modern technologies that might threaten civilization).

The Escimo Life toys, now in the Boston Children’s Museum, occupy a transitional place between a tangible illustration of the antimodernist imperial ideology that defined the 1920s and a pedagogical tool to teach young children both to appreciate Inuits as representations of an authentic and desirable past and to understand them in need of preservation, a mode of benevolent imperialism. Both the materiality and the content of the toy set suggests these two

possible meanings because of the ambiguity of their scripted nature. Scriptive objects, like scripts in a theater, can be followed with precision, adjusted, broken, and reversed. Yet it is precisely the implicit scriptive nature of the Escimo toys that is so insidious, and so characteristic of imperial messaging. The children who played with the Inuit figurines were not likely given explicit messages about broader imperialist impulses. Rather, they were surrounded by images and objects that rendered Inuit and Indigenous peoples as inferior imperial subjects. Growing up surrounded by these problematic images consequently led many to support projects of colonialism, to disavow the need for Indigenous sovereignty, and to understand racial and ethnographic social hierarchies as a natural or necessary way of life.

NOTES

1. Gustav R. Julien, *New Ways of Teaching History: Miniature Metal Historical Figures. Geography & Study of Nations. No. 71: Escimo Life*, paint on lead figures, Boston Children's Museum (date unknown).

2. Ibid.

3. Shari M. Huhndorf, "Nanook and His Contemporaries: Imagining Eskimos in American Culture, 1897–1922," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Autumn, 2000), 126.

4. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (2008); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1894).

5. Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999), 3; Sarah Z. Gould, "Toys Make a Nation: A History of Ethnic Toys in America," PhD diss., University of Michigan (2010), 74.

6. Huhndorf, "Nanook and His Contemporaries: Imagining Eskimos in American Culture, 1897–1922," 122–48.

7. Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (2007), 121.

8. See for example: McLoughlin Brothers, *81st Annual Catalogue: Games, A. B. C. Picture and Building Blocks, Backgammon, Checker and Chess Boards, Scroll Puzzles, etc.* (1909); Grey Iron Casting Company, *Grey Iron Toys* (1940), 2–4.

9. Gould, "Toys Make a Nation," 210; Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (1998), see especially chapter 4, "Natural Indians and Identities of Modernity."

10. Gould, "Toys Make a Nation," 157.

11. Ibid., 123.

12. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 74.

13. Daniel Immerwhar. *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (2019).

14. See Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004); K. Tsianina Lomawaima,

They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School (1994); John R. Gram, *Education at the Edge of Empire: Negotiating Pueblo Identity in New Mexico's Indian Boarding Schools* (2015) for examples of the kinds of practices involved in the forced assimilation process.

15. Eric T. L. Love, *Race over Empire: Racism and U.S. Imperialism, 1865–1900* (2005).

16. For more detail on the contemporary discourse of civilization and overcivilization, see: Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*.

17. Tom Lowenstein, *Ultimate Americans: Point Hope, Alaska, 1826–1909* (2008).

18. John Driggs, *Short Sketches from Oldest America*, (1905), 10.

19. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973), 5.

20. Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), 71.

21. For examples, see Gould, “Toys Make a Nation,” 26; Brian Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture* (1986).

22. Julien, *New Ways of Teaching History: Miniature Metal Historical Figures. Geography & Study of Nations. No. 71: Escimo Life*.

23. Sarah Anne Carter, *Object Lessons: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Learned to Make Sense of the Material World* (2018), 2.

24. Amy F. Ogata, “Creative Playthings: Educational Toys and Postwar American Culture,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 39 (Summer/Autumn 2004), 132.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Julien, *New Ways of Teaching History: Miniature Metal Historical Figures. Geography & Study of Nations. No. 71: Escimo Life*.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Ogata, “Creative Playthings: Educational Toys and Postwar American Culture,” 132.

29. For more on the passing down of ideals through toys, see Gary Cross, *Kid's Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (1997), 48.

30. Palmer Cox, *The Brownies Around the World* (1894), 136.

31. Gould, “Toys Make a Nation,” 74.

32. Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North* (1922).

33. *Ibid.*

34. Gould, “Toys Make a Nation,” 210.

35. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 100–01.

36. Gould, “Toys Make a Nation,” 176–77.

37. Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 210.

38. Grey Iron Casting Company, *Grey Iron Toys*, (1940), 2–4.

39. The Grey Iron Casting Company's toys were actually promoted as an “indestructible” successor to earlier lead figurines, illustrating the fact that bendable lead was not a particularly durable material for these kinds of toys; Cross, *Kid's Stuff*, 66.

40. Julien, *New Ways of Teaching History: Miniature Metal Historical Figures. Geography & Study of Nations. No. 71: Escimo Life*.

41. McLoughlin Brothers, *81st Annual Catalogue*, 27.

42. Gould, "Toys Make a Nation," 186; Deloria, *Playing Indian*, see especially chapter 4, 95–127.

43. One possible way for a child to insert the cowboys and Indians theme into this toy set is to take on the role of being the cowboy (or soldier), while the Inuits serve as the updated version of the Indians. While I recognize this as a real potential use for the toy, there are no records of this use, and their stated purpose of "teaching history" suggests a different kind of play.

44. Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (2006).