

“Cowboys and Indians”

Sterlin Reaves

BEFORE YOU READ: What do you know about “Cowboys and Indians” from popular culture? Can you trust what you learn from Hollywood movies? Why or why not?

When I was a kid, I watched many television shows and movies that depicted (mostly white) cowboys fighting “Indians.” I was young, so I wasn’t aware that these stories and images were shaping my perceptions about Indigenous people. I’d watch sporting events and see the Washington “Redskins” play football and the Cleveland “Indians” play baseball.

Everything I thought I knew about Indigenous people came from Hollywood movies or major league sports.

These names and the images that went with them normalized stereotypes of Native Americans. Unfortunately, everything I thought I knew about Indigenous people came from Hollywood

movies or major league sports. I believed Indigenous people were “Indian givers.” I believed they were savages who scalped their victims for fun.

In school, nothing I learned contradicted what I saw on television. Then one day, I saw a documentary about Geronimo, an Apache leader and medicine man. Learning about him started the process of changing my views. As I read more history and watched less TV, I realized that the true stories of Native Americans are much more painful to hear. Indigenous people treated the land as if they were one with it. European colonizers invaded the land and saw how it was rich with



“Wild West Cowboys and Indians” plastic toys. How could toys like this reinforce stereotypes?

natural resources. To own and control the natural resources, the colonizers lied to the Indigenous people, tricked them, and murdered them.

This history is sad enough. But it is even more sad that our culture and our education system still don’t tell the truth about it. If you’re not determined to find out the truth, you’ll be left learning your history from a “popular” culture that at best is inaccurate and at worst keeps telling lies and insults about Native people.

Having accurate information and unbiased perspectives matters because you can’t be sympathetic and understanding of other people’s situations when your beliefs about them are prejudiced. As a person of African descent who was born and raised in the U.S., I know what it feels like when people have biased views about me based on inaccurate information.

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See pp. 8-9 of the “Talking About Race” issue for more on the use of racist sports mascots.