‘Children of the Plains’ Was Little More Than ‘Poverty Porn’

Rob Schmidt
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The 20/20 special about the Pine Ridge Reservation, "Children of the Plains" (watch the full episode [here](#)), has gotten both [positive](#) and [negative](#) reviews. The episode certainly shone a light on a neglected part of America. For that alone, it provided a valuable service.

But the critics were right that it was a maudlin mess. It was closer to a morning-show puff piece than a hard-hitting PBS documentary. Here are some of its problems:

The tone is set early as Diane Sawyer calls the Lakota “hidden” and “forgotten.” These terms may be accurate in some sense, but they’re strangely bland and neutral. It’s as if Americans wanted to help the Indians all along but couldn’t find them.

That isn’t the case, of course. In reality, words like “neglected,” “scorned” or “betrayed” would work just as well. But those would shift the blame from the Indians to the white man, and Sawyer doesn’t want that.

The episode’s first half is little but a grim litany of facts and images: unemployment, alcoholism, overcrowded trailers, crumbling floors and ceilings, and so on. There’s no explanation for why this is happening—merely a statement of its existence. Are the Lakota responsible for their own plight, or is someone—the government or big business—causing it? You won’t learn the answers here.

The stories are manipulative to the point of tears—literally. A boy cries because his mother is an alcoholic. A girl cries because she tried to commit suicide. The school principal, an old lady in a motorized chair, cries because her work is so difficult.

Even when the subjects don’t break down and cry, their stories are framed negatively. Another girl gets pregnant and thinks her future is ruined. A five-year-old’s father is killed in a drunk-driving accident.

It’s not that any of these stories are false or unrepresentative. But they seem chosen for the maximum heart-tugging effect. You’ll suffer with the children in the first half, and you’ll feel their joy as things improve in the second half.

There’s a term for this: “poverty porn.” As the [Aid Thoughts](#) website explains:

Poverty porn is typically associated with black, poverty-stricken Africans, but can be found elsewhere. The subjects are overwhelming children, with the material usually characterized by images or descriptions of suffering, malnourished or otherwise helpless persons.

Not only does the episode’s first half ignore the causes of poverty, it barely mentions the outside world. When it does, it uses the passive tense. Schools were forbidden to teach the Lakota language. Children were removed to boarding schools.

Well, who ordered these things done? Why did they happen? And what were the consequences? Again, you won’t learn the answers here.

Only in the second half does Sawyer mention America’s sins a couple times: broken treaties, slaughtered buffalo, stolen land, unhealthy commodity food. But by then it’s too little, too late. The “poverty porn” feeling predominates.
Sawyer presents two Lakota “talking heads,” and they offer some corrections to the narrative. But they’re young and polite, and Sawyer puts them on the defensive. Surely the federal government isn’t responsible for creating jobs on the rez? she asks the young man. Why do the Lakota cling to the reservation when they could leave? she asks the young woman.

Imagine all the sharp-tongued activists — people like Russell Means and Winona LaDuke — who could’ve demolished the show’s passive hand-wringing. Or the tribal leaders and elders who could’ve spoken more forcefully on the issues. Sawyer doesn’t give anyone with answers a voice; she seems to go out of her way to avoid them.

Similarly, where are all the people trying to make a difference? For every problem on the rez, there are scads of media reports, government hearings, tribal programs, charities and foundations, etc. People tackle problems such as suicide and domestic violence every day. An issue such as Whiteclay’s alcohol sales, which the show touches upon, has inspired protests, lawsuits and documentaries.

True, no one’s come up with a silver bullet to end these problems, but they’ve received a lot of attention. Even if the efforts haven’t succeeded yet, the show could’ve mentioned the attempts. You’d never know people are working on these problems from Children of the Plains.

The message is clear. Somehow the Lakota have become poor without anyone’s noticing it. Fortunately Diane Sawyer, our intrepid white reporter, has arrived to save the day. The children are suffering, but she brings a smile to their faces. With Diane on the scene, everything’s gonna be okay.

The show could’ve cut 10-15 minutes of the sad stuff and used the time to provide context instead. How did the poverty come about? What are people doing about it?

This approach might not have left viewers feeling good about themselves like the Oprah Show. But it would’ve given them a greater understanding of Indian country. That’s the goal of a news program, right?

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