

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

## DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Spring 2005

### Review of *Circle of Goods: Women, Work, and Welfare in a Reservation Community* By Tressa Herman

Alice Littlefield  
*Central Michigan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Littlefield, Alice, "Review of *Circle of Goods: Women, Work, and Welfare in a Reservation Community* By Tressa Herman" (2005). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 747.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/747>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Circle of Goods: Women, Work, and Welfare in a Reservation Community.** By Tressa Berman. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. xviii + 154 pp. Photographs, map, figures, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.50 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

This slim volume makes an important contribution to our understanding of contemporary reservation economies in the Northern Plains, a subject that has received insufficient attention from anthropologists. Berman's nar-

ration demonstrates the intersection of kinship, the informal economy, ceremonial exchanges of goods, government assistance programs, and the cash economy on the reservation, home to the affiliated Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribes who were settled there in the 1860s. Her analysis addresses several themes: the circulation of goods within a symbolic system of social and power relations; the centrality of women in kinship and community relations; and the reorganization of reservation economy and social life in response to changes in federal policy.

The Termination-era construction of the Garrison Dam and the resulting loss of land and relocation of tribal members have contributed to a precarious reservation economy in which women pursue mixed livelihood strategies combining wage work, craft production, land-leasing, some stock-raising, and various forms of government assistance. Berman traces what she calls the “ceremonial relations of production” involved in feasts, honorings, giveaways, and other ceremonial events. Clan relations channel flows of food, hand-sewn quilts, and other goods to those participating. “Focalwomen,” known for their ceremonial rights and medicinal knowledge, play central roles in the concentration and redistribution of both goods and power and the affirming of cultural meanings.

The circuits of ceremonial exchange are not insulated from the cash economy. In the market context, cash from wages can be converted into art, which can be converted into cash for disposable goods, which may in turn enter into ceremonial networks (feeding people who attend a wake, for example). Cash also flows across reservation borders to and from relatives living elsewhere.

Berman discusses the limited successes of past reservation economic development programs, with their emphasis on individualism and the formal sector. In the depressed rural areas of the Northern Plains, job training often does not result in paid employment. Berman interrogates the concept of “work” as used in the welfare-to-work rhetoric of policy makers. Combining multiple income strategies and pooling and sharing resources with kin have been at the heart of survival strategies throughout the reservation period, but the 1990s welfare reforms threaten to undercut this long-term adaptation. In the words of many reservation women, welfare reform is “termination all over again.”

This study is based on years of research and residence at Fort Berthold, and the heart of it consists of the distilled voices of Berman’s many associates on the reservation. It is suitable for course adoption; upper-level and graduate students will find the book both engaging and theoretically challenging.

As an anthropologist with great interest in reservation economics, I hope to hear more from Berman. **Alice Littlefield**, *Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work, Central Michigan University*.