



# THE LIMITS OF CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION

## VIEWING GUIDE

Presented by  
the Intellectual  
Property Issues in  
Cultural Heritage  
Project



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Video URL: <http://bit.ly/1vgFScD>

## SUMMARY

The scale, scope, and kinds of things that can be commoditized are expanding in the global framework of late capitalism. This presentation explores the limits of cultural commodification, drawing its arguments from the logic of comparative moral economies.

## KEY CONCEPTS

Commodification, copyright, trademark, intangible, heritage, moral economy, alienation.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Alexis define “commodification”? Does this differ from how you had conceived of this term? What kinds of intangible things are commodified?
2. What is a “moral economy”?
3. Karl Marx defined commodification as “the process by which objects, events and activities come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value in the context of trade, in addition to any use value that such commodities might have.” In this sense, do you agree with Alexis that commodification is a form of alienation? Why or why not?
4. What kinds of protections exist for commodified heritage? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these legal avenues? What other forms of protection should exist, and why?
5. Alexis discusses how Indigenous communities at the Sealaska Heritage Institute are tackling the commodification of their heritage by writing letters to companies, explaining the meaning of the images that are being sold, on T-shirts, for example. What are the strengths of this approach to resolving conflict? What might prevent it from being effective?
6. Alexis describes how Aboriginal peoples in Australia have created a cultural park hosting cultural activities that have been designed for public consumption. What are the benefits and the drawbacks of this approach to controlling cultural commodification?
7. Alexis ends her presentation by noting that Indigenous peoples worldwide are wary of anthropologists and archaeologists. What are the concerns of these communities? How might these concerns be alleviated or addressed?



## ACTIVITY / ASSIGNMENT

### A. Cultural Heritage Appropriation/Commodification Case Study

1. Identify an example of where cultural heritage has been appropriated or commodified, and provide a short summary.
2. Outline the perspectives of at least three different groups on this example.
3. Identify any relevant professional heritage association Codes of Ethics concerning this issue. How could these be used to resolve conflicts?
4. What is the current situation of the case study? Was any conflict resolved?
5. Drawing on the points raised in Alexis's presentation, what is your opinion on the use of cultural heritage in this example? Would you have done anything differently? Why or why not?

### B. Indigenous Cultural Heritage and Professional Codes of Ethics

1. Identify five heritage/archaeological/anthropological organizations with Codes of Ethics (local, national and international).
2. Provide a summary of how each code addresses the responsibilities of professionals to:  
a) heritage sites and objects, b) intangible heritage, c) Indigenous communities, and d) the public.
3. Do these codes address the issue of cultural commodification? If so, how?
4. How would you improve these codes to accommodate issues of appropriation and commodification? Use the issues and examples discussed by Alexis to craft an additional statement addressing these concerns.

## RESOURCES

Aboriginal Tourism BC Website.  
<http://www.aboriginalbc.com>

Aboriginal Tourism. Tourism Australia Website.  
<http://bit.ly/SwO3Sj>

Bell, Catherine and Val Napoleon, eds. (2008).  
*First Nations' Cultural Heritage and the Law: Case Studies, Voices and Perspectives*.  
University of British Columbia Press: Vancouver, BC.

Comaroff, John L. and Jean Comaroff (2009).  
*Ethnicity, Inc.* University of Chicago Press:  
Chicago, IL.

Commodification. Landscapes of Global Capital  
Website. <http://bit.ly/1oKLcSC>

Native American and Indigenous Studies  
Association Website. <http://naisa.org>

Stanley, Nick (1998). *Being Ourselves for You: The Global Display of Cultures*. Middlesex University Press: London, UK.

Sealaska Website. <http://www.sealaska.com>

Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park Website.  
<http://www.tjapukai.com.au>

United Nations Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization (2009). *Measuring  
Cultural Participation. 2009 UNESCO  
Framework for Cultural Statistics Handbook  
No.2*. <http://http://bit.ly/1hN2ezd>

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