4-15-2000

(Un)settling Accounts: *disClosure* interviews Peter Jackson

Paul Kingsbury  
*University of Kentucky*

Jennifer Kopf  
*University of Kentucky*

Matt McCourt  
*University of Kentucky*

Theresa Zawacki

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.09.12

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure

Part of the Geography Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License.

**Recommended Citation**  
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.09.12  
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol9/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Theory at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
Paul Kingsbury, Jennifer Kopf, Matt McCourt, and Theresa Zawacki

(Un)settling Accounts
disClosure interviews Peter Jackson
April 3, 1999

Peter Jackson is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield, England, and has been highly influential in shaping cultural geography over the last ten years. He specializes in the geographies of 'race', gender, sexuality and the cultural politics of consumption. Jackson is the author of Maps of Meaning (Routledge, 1992) and editor of Race and Racism: Essays in Social Geography (Allen & Unwin, 1987). He is co-editor of Constructions of Race, Place, and Nation with Jan Penrose (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), and co-author of Shopping, Place and Identity with Daniel Miller, Nigel Thrift, Bev Holbrook and Michael Rowlands (Routledge, 1998).

Jackson participated in the Committee for Social Theory Distinguished Speaker Series on Masculinity and the Male Body at the University of Kentucky in Spring 1999. Jackson presented his research on the production, content, and readership of men's lifestyle magazines funded by the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council. We began by discussing Jackson's prominent role in shaping the so-called "new cultural geography." Our conversation then addressed the findings of Jackson's research concerning the intersections of masculinity with ad-
forms a reading or interpreted, a circuit allows you to see the theme with the emergence of "new" cultural geography, and how the themes developed throughout your work?

Peter Jackson: First of all I'm very uncomfortable with the "new cultural geography" label. There have been many debates about the novelty of "new" cultural geography and how it sets itself apart from more traditional forms of work. To call it "new" is really unhelpful, polarizing the argument. I think the label came partly from the fact that Denis Cosgrove and I wrote a paper called "New Directions in Cultural Geography" which got abbreviated to "new cultural geography." I just think it isn't the way that ideas evolve. But that said, yes, I do identify myself with what has become known as the "new cultural geography," and I think it's been amazingly successful and has generated lots of new ideas. What I am most proud of is that there are debates coming up that weren't there before. I didn't do it single-handedly but I certainly wanted to be part of that process, where things that graduate students wanted to do are permissible in this so-called new regime.

You asked specifically about representations and practices. One of the best ways of thinking about that is in terms of a "circuit of culture," which would link together processes of production, cultural forms and their consumption, all embedded within particular lifestyles. But the way I characterize the shift over time is that initially there was an awful lot of work that focused on form, the cultural form itself, the text and academic readings of the text, processes of deconstruction and discourse analysis. One of the things that I was concerned to do was to move the process in two directions. First, towards how those cultural forms are read or interpreted, the audiences for them and the possibilities of multiple contested readings; but also to move the arrow back in the other direction, towards the social relations of production. I think the important thing about thinking of a circuit of culture, rather than a kind of linear process, is that the circuit continues to spin. Advertising agencies or people inventing a new product will always be trying to anticipate and second-guess how things will be read, how things might be resisted, and to appropriate some of those resistances. The notion of a circuit allows you to see the connections between things, even if a particular point you are working on is kind of a box within that circuit. I think that's a good way of defining the whole geographical project: to think in terms of making links and connections that other people may not do. There are other trajectories as well that would include moving from an analysis of representations into more ethnographic styles of work, and I have always said that the ethnographic moment is just about to happen but never quite arrives. It's a kind of long awaited and still awaited turn.

I think one way that we might get round that is to place an emphasis on social practices, as in Mike Crang's recent book Cultural Geography where he argues that you can get around this question of "what is culture?" rather than to try and nail it down once and for all, or say that it's the same as ideology or it's the same as meaning; which is to suggest that we look at specific practices and institutions, and the way people mobilize the language of culture. I think that gives us something much more tangible to look at.

dC: It sounds like you have two discomforts: One is with the "new," which implies a break. The other maybe with "geography," in as much as you're suggesting a more interdisciplinary way of looking at practices.

PJ: Yes, I oscillate between thinking that disciplines are quite important — because ideas don't just come from nowhere, and it's important to see the disciplinary history of particular terms and currents of thought. And, then, a more radical "let's just forget about disciplines altogether, let's be post-disciplinary or anti-disciplinary or something," and follow an idea wherever it leads. So, I oscillate. I don't think it's one or the other. But it's actually neither the "new" nor the "geography" aspect of "new cultural geography" that I'm upset with. It's the sense that there is this organized group of people who almost single handedly overthrew the Berkeley School traditions of cultural geography. Because in certain debates, people like Denis Cosgrove, Jim Duncan, Steve Daniels, and myself are very well aware of the differences amongst ourselves. We've never constituted ourselves as a school, with a kind of program to take over journals or other forms of producing work.

dC: Well, might there be some shared tenets, such as trying to politicize culture, trying to reveal and understand power relations within culture?

PJ: Yes, but that would also link you back to people who are outside of cultural geography altogether. Those kinds of alliances and connections
are much more fluid than this "old" versus "new" construction.

**dC: I'd like to revisit the ethnographic moment, and think a little bit about how it has been pitted against discourse analysis or representational critique. I had at some point framed a question which was resistant to such an opposition. For instance, it might be more useful to examine the opportunities or openings for hybrid methodologies that engaged ethnographic methods as well as representational critiques. This mixing of methodologies was in some sense present in *Shopping, Place and Identity*, the study of North London shopping centers which you co-authored.**

**PJ:** That project was certainly designed to be multi-method: to go from social survey work at the point of sale, through focus group work in communities and neighborhoods, through to full-blown ethnographic work at the level of individual streets. We tried to write the book in a way which said that some things are more or less public representations of the discourse of shopping that people feel they ought to articulate, against some of the more private or everyday moments when people might actually do something rather different. So, for example, they echo the points that Danny Miller has made repeatedly, that elderly consumers feel a sense that they ought to use the local shop but in fact they are at least as interested in modern representations of shopping in the supermarket or the mall. There's a sense that they oughtn't be, and they are living out a contradiction. When they are asked in a focus group or in an interview situation, they'll say one thing and their practices may be completely different from that. This is one of the advantages of ethnographic work, that you can observe social practices. But I think you're right, the so-called ethnographic component should not be contrasted wholly with modes of analyses of discursive representation because what you do with a focus group discussion is transcribe it and then use that as a series of representations that are coded in particular ways. It's a kind of iconography of the transcript as opposed to iconography of the built environment, or the painting, or whatever that form of representation is. So, I think there are similar kinds of processes of deconstruction or interpretation. There's a real danger that ethnography is represented as "giving voice" in a non-problematic, unmediated way. I think that is an illusion. On the other hand, I still think that ethnographic work, by reproducing words on the page that someone else has spoken, allows the possibility of different interpretations. It's one of the things that other forms of academic analysis of the built environment overlook, for example in Jon Goss' recent paper in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, there is a sense of an academic conceit that "we know best," what these places mean for consumers. I think asking them and talking to them is a good check against that kind of single interpretation.

**dC:** Perhaps there are ways, then, of making discursive analysis responsive and responsible to an ethnographic approach, and vice versa?

**PJ:** Yes, but people don't tend to do it. The other thing is that there's a sort of uneasiness about "had" forms of discourse analysis. There were times when I used to go to conferences and it was always representations of this or that city, or this or that painting, or this or that place, and you just knew beforehand what was coming. It was predictable and fairly formulaic. I'm sure ethnography can be equally formulaic, but in my experience it tends to have more surprises with it, at least that was the case in our North London shopping project.

**dC:** Do you think these empirical "surprises" are moments in which one can begin to mobilize a research project politically?

**PJ:** Yes, I do. I think you can have a version of ethnography which exaggerates the claim that you are giving voice to those who have previously been denied it. But I think the very demonstration of multiple voices, of plurality and different views does give rise to the notion that one dominant view is not inevitable, that there are different possibilities. I wouldn't say that discourse analysis isn't equally capable of having a political message with multiple readings of the same text. I think it is. I don't think the politics are inherent to the method.

One of my favorite words at the moment is "unsettling" something—shaking it up, making things a little bit less stable than they were before. I think that opens up fractures that can be quite productive. And there are all kinds of political moments. Someone said [in the previous day's seminar] "Is there political potential in the advertising industry?" Well, the short answer, is yes, I think there is. It's not what it's designed to do, but I think because there are many readings of things, because advertising isn't always successful, you can unsettle something that looks very hegemonic and very powerful. And that seems to me something good for the social sciences to be involved in, in a critical social theory kind of way.

**dC:** Can you tell us more about the political potential of the advertising industry?

**PJ:** It's not so much the advertising industry itself. The paper I wrote
on black masculinity and advertising [in Gender, Place and Culture, 1994] shows how a major pharmaceutical industry selling a fizzy drink chooses, I think disarmingly, images of black men to do that. It's not done through some liberal, progressive notion that we need more black men in British advertising. It's interesting that the figures chosen have very little that intrinsically relates them to the product. So, as I pointed out in the article, it wasn't just black men that they used, it was particular black men who, it was assumed, certainly a middle-class British audience would know. If you substitute other personalities in those adverts you see how it would look completely different. Michael Jackson or Mike Tyson would have conveyed completely different images around masculinity and blackness than the people who were chosen [British athletes and sportsmen Daley Thompson, John Barnes and Linford Christie]. These guys were chosen because of a set of connotations, but those specific connotations only make sense in relation to these bigger, dominant, fearful, rapacious, pathologized representations of masculinity.

**dC:** So does it make them more frightening because we now have black men who are like middle class white people? Or, does it almost deny their existence and erase them?

**PJ:** No, I don't think it does make them more frightening and neither does it erase them. There's always that dialectic between desire and dread, but in this case we were able to desire, with dread in the background, because we know, or are assumed to know, the characteristics of those individuals.

**dC:** Does it make them less harmful though? I'm just surprised because the rap music mentioned in that article seems to me to be the emblem of pathologized representations of masculinity.

**PJ:** But it wasn't a specific band that would connote fearfulness. It was a generalized rap-like soundtrack. It was a bastardized kind of all-purpose rap, like Muzak. So, it was a technique of sanitizing rap or distancing it from its more fearful connotations. I think it is a quite interesting example: it's black as something that was urban and contemporary, but not black that was in your face and aggressive and homophobic.

Normally, you can't talk about images as if they are wholly manipulated and constructed in a very deliberate sense. With advertising I think you can. This is thirty seconds worth of advert and a lot of intellectual and financial resources are going into it and not much is left to chance in a commercial sense. It was almost a lucky break I had with that particular piece because the advertising agency and the pharmaceutical company would talk to me. You normally have the ad on the screen and you try to infer from that what the intent was. And, you infer that the ad might be read in different ways. In that particular case, a lot of information was much more available.

**dC:** You've also written at least one article on teaching about racisms and race [Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 1989]. How do you approach these topics in large lecture halls?

**PJ:** In the London system [where I taught before moving to Sheffield], we had tutorials associated with the lectures so that you could discuss things more frankly among a few students and a professor. That relied on the people teaching the tutorials being engaged with those issues, and sympathetic to what we were trying to do in the lectures. So the tutorials helped a bit to open up the spaces for people to say unpopular things, whereas now I'm faced with massed ranks of students. I think you can really do is try to raise questions and get people thinking about race, gender, sexuality, crime, health, disability — it's mad — everything in eight lectures. What this first year undergraduate course does, at best, is show students who've had a quite conventional high school education what kind of literatures there are, legitimizing different kinds of study. What's hard to deal with is the orthodoxy of the middle-class liberal white professor telling you to be better people, to which students might respond: "what do you know, it's easy for you, you're British, you can say that." All you can do in that first year slot is lay out your store, in a sense, saying these are the sorts of things I'm interested in, these are the sorts of debates that happen in geography. If you're interested, you can pursue them. You can open a dialogue that you hope to pursue in smaller second and third year classes and when students are working on their projects and dissertations.

**dC:** Certain recent writings on masculinity maintain a resistance to social construction, a resistance which is based in an appreciation for the somatic body, over and against the "excesses of a cultural turn." How would you position yourself ris-à-ris this charge of excess? And, what do you see coming out of this kind of engagement?

**PJ:** I think it's partly dependent on a misunderstanding of what construction theory is about. Demonstrating that something is socially constructed, conflictual, or contested, opens possibilities for doing it differently, whether that something is masculinity or constructions of 'race'
or whatever. And, I think part of the danger was that too many of our articles and papers regarded construction as the end of the story: “it’s constructed. There, I’ve proved it.” And, to my mind, that is not at all what we should be doing. We should be taking constructedness as the starting point — not the end point — and, then, we should be following through, by tracing the process of the construction of racialized or gendered identities or whatever it is. This allows us to show that though we thought of things as firmly biological or firmly material, or as God-given or natural, that this grounding, in fact, shifts over time. That’s not to say there is no material body — that seems to me not a helpful thing to suggest — or that there aren’t biological differences between human beings. But, by analyzing the way in which those distinctions have been categorized, which is anything but self-evident, you can open up that process to show that particular ideological processes are going on, serving particular interests and marginalizing others. Demonstrating constructedness shows the possibility that it can be done differently, that there’s a political process involved. That seems to me, in a nutshell, the constructionist’s agenda. And, I don’t see that as being something that has to be opposed to an insistence on identities being embodied. It is what we construct upon and through those embodiments — those physical biological things — that to me, as a social scientist, is the significant thing. That doesn’t mean that other people can’t approach the body or masculinity or whatever in completely other ways.

Where we get into politically murky water though, is this whole debate about strategic essentialism, where it’s suggested that if we call something constructed it implies that it’s merely a construction, it’s a fiction, it’s something that’s ephemeral, it doesn’t really exist. Again, it seems to me that’s not inherent to construction theory at all. You can say something is constructed and still be very interested in the real, material consequences that follow from processes of construction. So, it’s not mere constructionism — which seems to me would disable political movements that wanted to use a label like ‘black’ or ‘disabled’ or ‘woman’ or whatever it might be — but I can see how those anxieties are present in the construction debates.

dC: Tracing and situating these different processes of racialization and gendering reminds me of your discussion earlier about thinking of cultural practices as part of a “circuit.”

PJ: The fact that you can show that it’s being done differently, there’s nothing inherent to a particular form, that there are many place-based forms of, in this case, masculinity seems to me a really helpful thing.

It’s not the end of the story, but it is a place that opens up a set of debates on difference and a process that might not have taken place otherwise.

dC: You mention the attempt to situate against-the-grain readings with reference to dominant meanings, whether of race or masculinity or other modalities of power. This strategy of identifying a dominant reading becomes a potentially problematic practice, especially in reference to our earlier discussion about what a “bad” discourse analysis might look like.

PJ: It implies that we know what the dominant reading is, or that we know that something has an intended reading or intended audience. Sometimes things do, and sometimes they don’t. Usually, you try to infer a dominant ideological form against which something is oppositional. It’s a fairly crude distinction I think.

dC: Perhaps that difficulty leads to another question I had. In a recent Transactions article, you differentiate a critical position on commodification from one that David Harvey has articulated. He’s quoted as saying that “the job of social scientists is to lift the veil” on the geographical and social ignorance which is, it seems, fetishization: the commodity hiding its social relations of production. But, I wonder if the position from which a dominant or hegemonic reading is identified requires some similar privileging of perspective?

PJ: Let me try to rephrase, then, what I was trying to say. It’s always a mistake to disagree with David Harvey! His position is normally well thought through and well articulated. But he’s part of a whole series of readings of the commodity form which suggests that it’s to do with masking and veiling real social relations of production. And that academics are in a good position, a privileged position, a unique position, to lift the veil, to reveal what’s really going on. It seems to me a conceit that academics are uniquely privileged, that they understand what the poor ordinary folk out there don’t understand. I don’t think that would be David’s position. At least, I can’t imagine him articulating it in that way.

But, it works through a kind of depth model, that there’s something superficial, the “surface froth” — or whatever it is — and that underneath that there’s something real and powerful and material and ideological going on. That’s one way you can go in the analysis of commodities or representations, searching for the ‘real’ beneath the surface. To me that’s a really crude model of representation. So an alternative way, I think, that doesn’t privilege the academic reading as much, is to look
for more lateral connections. Phil Crang [Environment and Planning A, 1996] talks about this in terms of displacements and juxtapositions, where you look for connections between things and the power of discourses and representation.

Or, in Danny Miller's work in A Theory of Shopping and the book he's working on now, The Dialectics of Shopping, he is suggesting that acts of shopping and buying and so on are about investments in the self and in social relations, in which we're using the commodity form to objectify a set of social relations. This is most obvious in gift giving, but it's there in all sorts of other processes as well. That is, a kind of investment in a relationship: literally as an investment in the sense that you're buying something, but also in the sense that you're spending your time in selecting the right thing for the person. That seems to me really an interesting way of opening up a debate which is too easily closed down.

So, it's not that the job of the social scientist is this or that. Certainly, the job of the social scientist is to look at the material links in the food chain that shows, for example, that coffee beans from Kenya are produced in a particular set of circumstances and they're consumed from supermarkets in North London. And there are real material connections along that chain. We can certainly demonstrate that. Part of the problem is to assume that people are ignorant in terms of their knowledge, their reflexivity about those processes, and to assume that it takes academics to show them "the truth."

Another part of the problem, though, is the assumption that there is one clear, right interpretation to the commodification process. It's much more complicated than that. There are many steps, opportunities, fissures, and fractures. Even starting from the premise, 'oh, commodification...that must be bad.' I think it was potentially troublesome or dangerous, or brave or foolhardy, to do that paper because it can be misread as saying commodification is a jolly good thing. Advertising is, you know, a tremendously oppositional industry. But I think that the kind of uniform, wholesale condemnation of these processes and the tone of moral outrage is not helpful. It closes off discussion.

The project I'm about to start with Phil Crang and Claire Dwyer on "Commodity Culture and South Asian Transnationality" is about the way in which goods are, to varying degrees, ethically marked. In the food and clothing sectors people will emphasize the 'authenticity' of their product or be seen to be going to a point of origin, to rework the recipe or to get the right materials or whatever. I think the ethnic mark-

ing of goods is capable of a whole range of meanings. It can be within an economic logic that says that in a globalized world, ethnicity is the extra something that will sell. It's bell hooks' argument that we're "eating the other." It can be a claim to authenticity. But it can be something that is denied and downplayed. I don't think that the meanings are given.

dC: On the one hand, you don't see the goal of the academic to be a certain higher consciousness or deeper understanding, but on the other hand you're quite glad that you had access to the advertising agency and to the sponsor of the campaign. How do those fit together?

PJ: I don't think they're contradictory. Academics do have a set of resources, time, and historically embedded knowledge that isn't universally available. One thing is to claim superior knowledge and another is to work within that particular case. You could trace the process through which the advertisement had been put together. 'How are they then popularly consumed? How are they read? How are these texts being perceived?' Many academics don't make that secondary move. They work purely with the text and with a privileged reading of the text, whether it's the built environment or adverts or whatever, rather than trying to see the meaning which is projected onto, or drawn from, those images. And it's here that this kind of democratic or un-privileging of academic knowledge is important.

You know, people talk about unlearning privilege — I think it's Spivak's term — and I'm not sure we should 'unlearn' our privilege. We should certainly acknowledge our privilege. I think we have a responsibility to use our privilege in as progressive a way as we can. We don't simply give it up because someone else will assume it and use it in a way that is socially unacceptable. But certainly, working positively with the privilege we have seems to me a good thing to do.

There is a kind of tension amongst academics who are interested in the popular. It's sexy and hip to be interested in magazines and shopping. Someone said [at the previous day's seminar], "are we boutiquing social theory by talking about masculinity and whiteness or whatever?" I think there's some truth in that. There is a sort of odd attitude that people working in the field I work in are championing the popular. And we don't need to do that. We only need to do that insofar as other people have been previously marginalizing the everyday and popular.

dC: Referring to the terms that you and others have started to gravitate to in talking about consumption, space, and identity, it seems to me that
questions of power. Studies of the new man capture only one part of the process. Sean Nixon talks about new visual codings of masculinity, ways of men looking at other men. They’re still there. I looked at the US edition of GQ this morning in the bookstore and it has the same kind of images of men in smart suits and the rest of it. But they’re now as frequently surrounded by women in underwear, and have become repositioned in a way which says that it’s ok to look if it doesn’t threaten heterosexual masculinities, in a way that Frank Mort and Sean Nixon’s work wouldn’t have predicted. I’d actually be interested in what they would have to say about that because I don’t think they intend their work to be seen in a unilinear way.

dC: Perhaps the concentration on the new man can be read as a kind of praxis which attempts to write the potentially disruptive moments within discourses of masculinity?

PJ: When Nick Stevenson, Kate Brooks and myself started the men’s lifestyle magazine project we were attracted to it because we saw it as a site where new, more progressive forms of masculinity seemed to be emerging in magazines like GQ, Men’s Health, and Attitude. As soon as that project was up and running, other titles like Loaded, FHM, and Maxim became dominant within the sector, re-inscribing more traditional masculinities. They rescued masculinity for red-blooded men. We went from optimism to pessimism and thought this is just too depressing. We had to read these magazines for a year. A dozen titles a month. It was depressing stuff. So we started to look for ambivalences rather than outright resistance to hegemonic masculinities. There was still something historically interesting about the fact that this was happening now, when men were being addressed as men, not just as people interested in football, or photography, or hobby magazines. So what was it about this commercial moment that masculinities could be commodified and turned into a commercial success? How were these magazines being read, perceived, and interpreted? What explained their kind of historical currency?

We fell into the trap that there should be a nice uni-linear direction. Then we realized we’d been wrong and what were we going to do about it now? One of the criticisms of the project was that the ambivalences we identify in the magazines and in the readers, was actually our ambivalence as researchers, desperately trying to find something progressive we could hang on to. That criticism makes me feel uncomfortable because I’m sure it’s partly true. 

108
James Collard, the former editor of *Attitude*, described a kind of po-faced, overtly political campaigning style in gay men’s magazines. He wanted them to kind of loosen up, to treat sexuality in a more light-hearted, commodifiable, consumer-lifestyle kind of way. He shocked me when he said that his magazine is more like *Loaded*, which is the most homophobic, the most sexist magazine of the lot. But he sees the stylistic comparisons even though the content is different. So, I think there are some really interesting contradictory subtexts. Existing analyses have only just scratched the surface. I don’t have any neat answers on what the magazines signify or what uses readers are putting them to, but I think there’s lots of potential for going down that line. What I’ve tried to do is work through some literary research on reading practices. But in fact, most of that literary work on reading practices does not really consider practices, in the sociological sense. That whole process of reading is not a private act but a public social process. People talk about magazines, they lend each other magazines, they learn how to read from friends or parents; there’s a very social process of reading that we know very little about.

But I still hold to the notion of construction theory and its potential for understanding these practices [of reading and constructions of masculinity]. If you show things to be constructed and to be place- and time-specific, that unsettles things and suggests that there’s always the possibility that things could be done differently. That seems to be what we should be looking for: those points of weakness, those fractures, those moments of possibility.
Wayne Hogan

The All-Aroundness of Man

Man with a cup. Man pulling a wagon full of canned Pepsi-Colas. Man surveying the heavens. Man being aware of the vaunted United Kingdom. Man nicking his knee with a hand-pulled cross-cut saw while his uncle's at the other end. Man declaring the Scissortailed Flycatcher is no longer Oklahoma's state bird. (Man saying the Caucasian Crow is.) Man retreating from water, from bones, stepping on his own earth deep-rutted from use. Man racing to catch and pass a breeze with coils of light wrapped 'round his knees, and wins.