

ANNE MURPHY
University of British Columbia

PHILIPP ZEHMISCH
University of Heidelberg



Guest Editors' Introduction

Rethinking Regions

Locality and Circulation in South Asia

The intellectual formation of “area studies” has been subject to significant critique in the early twenty-first century; at the same time, intellectual work continues to be grounded in particular regions and understandings of regions (Fleschenberg and Baumann 2020; Harootunian 2012; Spivak 2008). The “region,” therefore, remains salient. The special issue “Rethinking Regions” seeks to engage with our understanding of the “region” and its continuing relevance, with simultaneous recognition that the cultural formations in specific regions are intimately linked to a broad range of cultural practices across a wide geographic range, and wider cultural forms have particular local articulations. The issue therefore presents case studies that deconstruct and destabilize bounded or fixed notions of the region and replace them with a more dynamic approach focused on context, temporality, and interconnected spatiality. This introductory article lays out the conceptual parameters of the special issue and discusses each article in the context of the larger theme.

Keywords: region—area studies—locality—circulation—South Asia

The intellectual formation of “area studies” has been subject to significant critique, yet most of us continue to think and work in regional terms (Fleschenberg and Baumann 2020; Harootunian 2012; Spivak 2008).¹ This is a necessary feature of historically tuned, highly contextualized work. Such a commitment is not, therefore, to be dismissed easily. At the same time, we know that the cultural formations in specific regions are intimately linked to a broad range of cultural practices across a wide geographic range, and wider cultural forms have particular local articulations. Locally situated knowledge is thus emplaced in a world of globally entangled orders of knowledge (Baumann et al. 2020, 102).

While the vernacular—which may be understood both in linguistic terms but also more broadly as a locally rooted dimension of everyday life—has been examined in recent scholarly literature in relation to the cosmopolitan, there is still room for exploration of the contours of its relationship with the cross- or transregional (Pollock 2006). In what ways could a transregional reading enhance our understanding of specific regions in themselves and in their multiplicities, adding complexity to how we understand the local and particular? How can we usefully investigate the impact of cross-regional circulation on the making of the vernacular/local/regional, in order to enhance our understanding of how boundaries of language, tradition, place, and belonging are both maintained and crossed through the construction of different layers of regional imaginaries? These questions undergird this special issue, which brings together anthropological and historical engagements with the constitution and reformulation of various regionalizing—or, to put it another way, region-making—dynamics.

Thinking about “regions” and “areas”

Seeking to critically investigate academic representations of the “region,” one needs to consider the intellectual and theoretical intersections between regionally situated work and the broader idea of “area studies,” an interdisciplinary venture that explores the particularities that make one cultural or physical place in our world different from another. In the final decades of the twentieth century, this domain of inquiry came under powerful critique for its tendency to replicate colonial and Cold War spatial frames; its promotion of archaic, essentializing concepts that particularize human experience instead of representing holistic aspects and

ontologies; and its adherence, in its institutional as well as intellectual formations, to US-defined geopolitical and economic interests. In Harry Harootunian's words, area studies act as a "desire," one that "has been a silent accomplice, duplicitous in its capacious desire to serve a state that sought to refashion the world through unbound capitalism"; he argues it was replaced by an "identity studies" that replicated, while inverting, many of its forms (Harootunian 2012, 10). Scholars across disciplines thus face an ethical and intellectual question, as Natalie Koch put it:

How do we, scholars-as-situated-actors, represent people and places in a manner that does not further entrench colonial power structures, which have long pervaded academic disciplines and area studies programs? (Koch 2016, 809)

More recently, significant numbers of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and other empirically working researchers have shown a decisive reluctance to label themselves as working on different regions or even to represent themselves as regional specialists. This reflects the prioritization of theory-driven over regionally situated work that is an undercurrent of contemporary anthropological and ethnographic practice, and to a lesser but still significant degree, parallel emphasis on the global and transregional in historically oriented disciplines. There is a longer disciplinary history to this: within anthropology, there has been an ongoing tension between theoretical schools with a more universalist orientation, such as Structuralism and Historical Materialism, and particularist approaches, for example the Historical Particularism founded by the "father of American anthropology" Franz Boas (1897), which repudiated comparative methods and emphasized descriptive studies of particular local cultures (Lewellen 2003, 1,5).

This tension emerged in more recent times in globalization debates around the turn of the millennium over how to conceptualize the role of the regional in relation to the transregional, national global, and transnational (Friedman 2002; Inda and Rosaldo 2002; Mignolo 2000; Juergensmeyer 2014, XV). A refurbished notion of the region did emerge in work on transnationalism, where the importance of location was seen in dynamic relation to broader processes of globalization, such as in Arjun Appadurai's (1996) much debated concept of "scapes," which implies the circulation of media, ideologies, finances, and people in enmeshing forms of border-crossing motion and mobility.² Definitions, understandings, and constructions of regionalism were configured in this context in relation to new modes of global interrelatedness, accompanied by intensified patterns of exchange and circulation through cross-border connectivity and movement (Hannerz 1996), leading to a perceived "time-space compression" (Harvey 1989).³ Transregional dynamics ultimately took precedence in such work. In her important work *Friction*, Anna Tsing maintained that while scholars had earlier conceptualized "cultures" as isolated and particular, "it has become increasingly clear that all human cultures are shaped and transformed in long histories of regional-to-global networks of power, trade, and meaning" (Tsing 2004, 3). Much recent work is, in keeping with this formulation, configured in thematic, conceptual, or discourse-oriented terms on holistic topics such as energy, bureaucracy, pandemics, natures-cultures, the Anthropocene, climate change, more-than-human ontologies, phenomenological questions, and futurities, or the ontologies

of species (Graeber 2015; Heywood 2017; Tsing 2015). These topics are often self-consciously presented as more original and progressive in their conceptualization, and claimed as an intellectual departure from an established corpus of ethnographic work by conservative scholars, who, as an American colleague reported to one of us in personal conversation, still work on regions and define their disciplinary identities through them. In other words, regionally informed work on or even about people or ethnic groups is out, at least in some anthropological circles. It is also a dynamic in other fields: Deepika Bahri has noted the relative decline of South Asian literary study, which she argues compares “poorly at best with other area-based disciplinary entities, such as African and Caribbean Studies” (Bahri 2017, 53).

There is validity in the concern that regionally grounded work that induces theoretical knowledge from regionally coherent patterns can espouse a kind of cultural relativism, overlooking ontologies and phenomenologies with broader transregional or transnational salience; instead, they can reify, essentialize, other, and Orientalize “other cultures” that are predominantly located in the Global South. Yet, at the same time, most anthropologists and other scholars who work with empirical data ground their work in particular localities; the anthropologist’s emic experiences contribute to their data, and their “ethnographic authority” (Clifford 1983) proceeds from this first-hand (regional) “field” experience. This is parallel to the role of the archive in the historian’s domain: archives are grounded in place and time, with their own histories of emergence and use, in a significant way. There is a discrepancy, therefore, between a theoretical commitment to the universal and the “trans-” and the regional grounding that sustains scholarly inquiry, across disciplines.

Naming this concern about broad thematic analytical frames must not suggest that we disregard the value of the exciting and important topics and approaches mentioned. Instead, we propose that such approaches can have a productive impact on our understanding of regional locatedness as a contested form of everyday negotiation in the lives of almost everyone living on planet Earth. Despite recent trends in scholarship, perhaps, people from around the world do (one might say stubbornly, in the eyes of those who see this as *passé*) express their belonging in regional or local affiliations, often linked to notions of ethnicity, language, geography, and positionality vis-à-vis dominant groups or states. There are grounds, therefore, for embracing a critique of regional particularism without disavowing the importance of regional/local/particular dynamics, histories, and movements. The universalizing forces of climate change and anthropogenic destruction of the Earth must therefore, due to global participation in an interconnected sphere, be brought into productive conversation with multiple located and grounded ontologies that construct regions as assemblages of diverse human and more-than-human entities that deserve to be conserved and protected against impending destruction through capitalist modernity.

Trends, of course, vary across disciplines. Beyond anthropology, in fields such as geography, there has been a call to return to the region as an analytic since the early twenty-first century, after the heyday of criticism; this has been called area studies’ “third wave” by James Sidaway (2017), in an edited volume by Katja Mielke and Anna-

Katharina Hornidge. As Natalie Koch (2016) has suggested, it may be time now for a “critical area studies” to emerge out of earlier more programmatic rejections of the regional. In this, she draws on earlier discussion of the need for an antidote for the “thin knowledge” that operates in politics and government; as described by Gerard Toal in 2003, this is “to re-think the commitment to the systematic and global and re-assert the importance of regional geographical knowledge, especially in the light of contemporary geopolitics” (Toal 2003, 654). While Toal’s call to action for regional thinking too easily adheres to the US-driven geopolitical analytic that undermined the intellectual purchase of area studies in the first place, that is not the only way to imagine the need to think through space with attention to place. In this same period, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak spoke of a “rekindled hope of a new regionalism,” one that was not reduced to the geopolitical interests of the United States but instead pursued an “exercise for imagining pluralized Asias” that would not construe the notion of the region in competitive terms (that is, *this* region versus *that* region; Spivak 2008, 2). Spivak instead proposed that “expanding versions of postcolonial theory would have to ‘pluralize’ Asia, rather than singularize it so that it was nothing but one’s own region” (Spivak 2008, 8); this is mirrored in Harootunian’s call for a “critical regionalism” that does not replicate the flawed logic of area studies in nativist terms (Harootunian 2012, 18).

What we need, perhaps, then, is what Neilesh Bose (2017, 43) calls “a decolonized variant of area studies,” where the region operates at multiple levels: the supranational, the continental, the national, the subnational, the natural, the cultural, the very local; all of these are produced and replicated simultaneously through interactions and movement, and in relation to the construction of space as metropole/colony, center/periphery. While paying due respect to the analytical legitimacy, valor, and rigor of recent approaches to large themes and theories, therefore, we fundamentally disagree with the devaluation of regionally situated knowledge production. We believe that most questions of planetary significance may be only addressed by thoroughly understanding the regional dimensions of knowledge and action. Putting them into a comparative theoretical framework would be the next, albeit important, level of abstraction. Neglecting the local situatedness of knowledge, in all its complexity, would, in our view, debase the ontological and phenomenological dimensions of knowledge. At the same time, these regions themselves need to be interrogated, to see how they are constituted in multiple and sometimes contradictory terms.

For us, the debate on the regional is not one of cultural relativism against universalizing tendencies but one of rethinking and thinking through the region by addressing questions of contemporary theoretical relevance that must always be situated and attentive to the ways in which such situatedness is produced. Here, the regional and the local must be seen as overlapping modes of self-description in a world that is turning ever more self-reflexive with regards to notions of identification and belonging. There are different types of regions, which we seek to analyze: semantic, metaphorical, linguistic, geographic, environmental, and military, et al. By examining these different kinds of regional formations, we can allow the region

to function as a multivalent and changing form, which produces knowledge in the process of its very own production, and at different temporal and spatial scales.

Crucial for an understanding of emerging forms of regional modernity, as the negotiated space between the local and the global, is a renewed emphasis on the nation-state (Sivaramakrishnan and Agarwal 2013). While globalization was once seen to destabilize the nation-state idea (Appadurai 1996), implying shifting notions of sovereignty, territoriality, citizenship, and belonging, the emotionally and politically loaded nation-state concept continues to be relevant for peoples across the world—a recent *Asian Ethnology* special issue, edited by Frank Korom and Jan Magnusson (2021), highlights the plurality and multiplicity of the nation-state concept by discussing several regional examples of South Asian nationalisms. The changing dynamics of imagining the nation-state imply the renegotiation of its administrative, territorial, and ideational units, be they subordinated, dependent, or autonomous. This has profound effects on how the idea of the region itself may be understood in relation to the internal boundaries of districts, regional states, or provinces; in relation to external borders; and, lastly, in relation to the global public sphere, which is perceived as increasingly unbounded, multi-scalar, and composed of different ontological dimensions. Changing perceptions of the “global” have therefore caused a shift in what the “local” means, which, in turn, complicates traditional notions of the “regional”—both at the analytical and at the demotic level.

From the Free State of Jefferson in Northern California and Southern Oregon (USA), to currently dormant but always possible Québécois movements for greater autonomy within Canada, to Catalanian nationalism in Spain and Flemish assertions of regional autonomy within Belgium, from the autonomous Kurdish zone in Rojava (Syria) to the contested status of Tamils in Sri Lanka and their relationship with Tamil Nadu in India, the notion of the region incorporates smaller localized units and both rejects as well as intersects with larger paradigms of nation, state, language, and ethnicity. The notion of the region is usually crafted by including both global connections and specific localities; landscapes, dialects, cultural or religious monuments and signifiers, myths and legends, as well as personalized narratives and collective (hi)stories lend each region a unique character. Where, we are asking, can one determine the intersecting forms of the “imagined community” (Anderson 1980) at the interstices of states and localities, within and across them, as multilayered and intertwined domains? The articles in this special issue engage with such questions.

Provincialized South Asia as a “region” or “area”

This special issue had its origins as a panel convened at a South Asian studies conference, the European Conference on South Asian Studies (ECSAS), and thus has a specific regional focus on South Asia; at the same time, it investigates constructions of the idea of the region itself. This demonstrates the ways in which regional imaginaries have prevailed, even as they have lost their salience in some disciplinary contexts. While, as Anne Murphy (2017) has argued elsewhere, the term “South Asia” can have real value in reaching beyond nationalizing discourses, this is not always the case: the problematic and conflict-prone potential of the notion of the region

itself can be grasped when looking at notions of South Asia employed by scholars of the region.

In conferences on South Asia, for example, scholars often say “South Asia” when they actually mean India. This may be due to the dominance of Indian scholars in the field and a kind of “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002; Beck 2011) at play, which often lends studies on India a hegemonic, representative status for the whole region. What was British India is, of course, now multiple states, but all too often India is allowed to stand in for all. The picture changes, of course, depending on where scholars are from and in which national cultures they were socialized. Hence, scholars put forward different notions and definitions of the term “South Asia,” especially when encountering it at a conference on South Asia like the ECSAS. This demonstrates that a regional term is made meaningful in accordance with the positionality of the person or institution employing it, and the embeddedness of this person or institution in particular relations, fields, or coordinates of power and knowledge, often produced by or in relation to nation-state interests.

The conceptualization of South Asia as a region as being fraught with conflict is tinted with the dominant discourse of the late colonial period, and has complex contemporary articulations, both in popular discourse and in some academic works that might be understood as exhibiting “methodological nationalism” by lending authority to nationalist politics (cf. Patel 2017). At the same time, attention to the region can undermine the dominance of the nation-form. South Asian nation-states can be construed, for example, as a set of (sub)regions with clearly defined cultural features and histories that precede the existence of the nation-state as, for example, the Indian region of Saurashtra (Tambs-Lyche 1994). The relation between the region and the nation-state in India has thus been expressed as one of “the whole and its parts” that is divided, among others, into regional states formed (mostly) on the basis of linguistic majorities (Berger and Heidemann 2013). Here, regions tend to act as signifiers of cultural and linguistic boundaries, which can function both to limit and to reinforce attention to dominant or hegemonic languages and communities.

But what if the regional becomes a dynamic category that resists attempts by powerful actors to fix it? Ashis Nandy’s description of South Asia—which he calls an “acultural, emotionally empty, territorial concept” (Nandy 2005, 542)—follows this path, valorizing those who defy an agonistic state system that is marked by a kind of fragility caused by both the commonalities that persist across borders in the region, and the effort to deny them. He thus highlights the failure of regional designations that adhere to nation-state divisions, since “these states are poorly grounded in the everyday lives, cultural and political preferences, and moral frames of ordinary citizens” (Nandy 2005, 541). We can see the flexibility of regional categories in Philipp Zehmisch’s ethnography of the migrant and settler society of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, where the notion of the (island) region functions as a “composed whole” of other regional identities; the term “Mini-India” thus represents a region that accommodates a multitude of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, classes, and castes, as well as sects and religious communities of the Indian subcontinent (Zehmisch 2017). Here, a flexible and dynamic notion of the region emerges out of transcultural, diasporic encounters informed by travel, motion, and

mobility that merge, abandon, and fuse elements from regions of origin with new homelands. This culturally creolized assemblage has also been termed by one of Zehmisch's interlocutors as "Southeast India," hinting at its regional proximity to Southeast Asia and a separate regional identity (*ibid.*, 83–85).

South Asia itself is one aspect of many different regions: Asia, the Indian Ocean World (Mann 2011), the "Belt and Road Initiative" imaginary and geopolitical project, and many others. As Spivak notes, "[t]here are no ingredients for unification for the regions that are opened up for a generalized cultural production of a revised continent-think" (Spivak 2008, 212). "What inclusive cultural matrix," Spivak asks, "exists in the history of the present for producing a region-think here?" in the case of that broader region known as "Asia." That continent, she argues, is "one continent in its plurality," not reduced to "our own regional identity" (Spivak 2008, 214); she thus advocates for "an anti-ethnicist regionalism" (Spivak 2008, 238) that allows for the articulation of an idea of "Asia" that prioritizes connectivity and diversity. The same can be said of "South Asia," allowing for a kind of global history of the region that recognizes the broader locations and wider valences that inform the region as a contested form.

This special issue

This collection of articles explores the way regions are and can be formed, found, and undermined. The idea of the region is most productive to think with when it is broken, when it is stretched and adapted, a category of difference within a larger arrangement of identifications. Particular localities cannot be understood without considering, first, their material and ideological composition, alongside their narrative, linguistic, and metaphorical dimensions. The contributions in this special issue highlight cultural and historical formations in specific regions of South Asia that are intimately linked to a broad range of practices across a wide geographic range, creolizing many of the pan-regional designations that frame scholarly work. At the same time, particular regional formations occur and take shape within them. Regions can thus be constituted by multiple features: by the physical landscape and more-than-human life forms; by language, religion, politics, caste, and gender; and by racial or ethnic identification. National or political formations constitute only one regionalizing force alongside these others. In what ways can a reconfigured regional as well as transregional reading of space, place, and time enhance our understanding of specific regions, adding complexity to how we understand the local and particular, and greater nuance and local specificity to that which is configured as the cosmopolitan? How can we usefully investigate the impact of cross-regional circulation on the making of the vernacular, in order to enhance our understanding of how boundaries of language, tradition, place, and belonging are both maintained and crossed?

Here, we seek to engage the dynamism and fluidity of the notion of the region itself. We explore its productive capabilities as it generates kinds of knowledge, for instance in notions of gender, caste, language, place and space, mobility, cultural production, bodily practices, and philosophy. At the same time, these notions of regionality are

embedded in far broader, transregional and transcultural, imaginative universes. What joins the articles in this issue, then, is a rethought notion of the region that is a product of, and shapes, the local and the global forces that form it.

The articles that comprise this special issue approach the set of conceptual issues outlined here from diverse locations and times, moving across textual, historical, and ethnographic domains. We open with articles that address the idea of the region through transgression of conventional regional designations, crossing borders and boundaries, while at the same time constructing new kinds of regional configurations and mappings. The first of these, Eléonore Rimbault's article, concentrates on Indian circuses as nomadic institutions that carry an ensemble of people, animals, and infrastructures over long distances. Eluding conventional regional conceptions of space and generic notions of scale, circus actors take decisions on where they move based on histories of collective movement, demonstrating particular ways to think about time and space that reflect a kind of spatial business acumen that is valorized by circus elites. Sarah Merkle-Schneider's contribution explores the complex dynamics between a local tradition dedicated to the deity Ellama, expressed through the adoption of feminine markers by biologically male devotees known as *jōgappa*, and broader transregional articulations of trans*femininity that are configured in more transformative bodily terms. This article suggests the ways the region is written into the body itself, and the sometimes-radical disjuncture between regionally defined and transregional cultural formations that cannot easily be reconciled.

We then bring these ethnographically oriented articles into conversation with articles that explore the historical rootedness of intersecting notions of the regional and the cross-regional. P. K. Basant's article returns to an earlier period with the idea of "Madhyadeśa" or "the middle country" in early India. Basant examines Sanskrit sources to understand how this regional designation was configured in Brahmanical and Buddhist texts before investigating the legacy of these ideas today and the problematic ways in which prior formulations are reconfigured and reproduced in the present. Basant's work thus seeks to uncover the problematic and shifting relationship between earlier conceptualizations of the region and contemporary claims of historical evidence in order to justify sociocultural phenomena such as caste-based inequality. Anne Murphy's contribution explores the ways Waris Shah's mid-eighteenth-century text *Hīr* articulates a Punjabi regional identity, even as transregional and cosmopolitan stories and histories are invoked, complicating our configuration of "Punjabiness" in the text. Here, a notion of the region is articulated in relation to other places. The article by Harald Tambs-Lyche investigates how two economically successful communities of high social status that are viewed as "foreign" by Tulu-speaking people in South Kanara, Karnataka, have been included within, and even enabled, an avowedly local and regional identity formation. Linking ethnographic data on the different castes and communities of South Kanara to a broad historical account, Tambs-Lyche analyzes the contradictory, yet common, process of crafting a regional designation by referring to a kind of "Other" or an "outside," while at the same time encompassing and incorporating that "outside" into the dominant regional formation. Adrián Muñoz's contribution focuses on the intricacies of transregional and transnational negotiations of religious mobility by

highlighting the influence that Indian philosophy and yoga had on Francisco Madero, one of the leading actors in Mexican politics at the beginning of the twentieth century. We see in this article the ways in which the travel of cultural elements both denies and reinforces nationalist formulations. The final article, by Esha Niyogi De, traces film practices that cross national boundaries and create a kind of transregional “filmic region” of both production and consumption. De’s exploration of Urdu action heroine films from the 1970s to 1980s highlights the central role of women in the articulation of an extra-national, aesthetically constituted reframing of space and its demarcation.

Each of the articles in this special issue allows us to consider the region through both what constitutes it and what surpasses it, enabling us to reflect on the “work” the region as an idea does, and where it ceases to offer heuristic utility. Even in cases that challenge conventional notions of the region, the articles tell us that attention to how space is imagined, and how boundaries are formed—in multiple terms—remains one of our central tasks as we seek to understand cultural and historical formations.

AUTHORS

Anne Murphy teaches at the University of British Columbia. Anne’s current book explores the political imaginaries expressed in the Punjabi language in the decades prior to and after the partition of Punjab in 1947. She has published one monograph (2012) and one book-length translation (2022); has edited or co-edited eight books or special journal issues; has pursued numerous interdisciplinary arts/research works and digital projects; and has published numerous book chapters and articles in *History and Theory*, the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *South Asian History and Culture*, the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, and other journals.

Philipp Zehmisch teaches anthropology at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg. His postdoctoral research investigates everyday ethics and politics in the Western borderlands of South Asia, seeking to explore the long-lasting legacies of India’s Partition. Philipp’s award-winning doctoral dissertation *Mini-India: The Politics of Migration and Subalternity in the Andaman Islands* was published in 2017 with Oxford University Press. He coedited *Manifestations of History: Time, Space, and Community in the Andaman Islands* (2016, Primus) and *Soziale Ästhetik, Atmosphäre, Medialität: Beiträge aus der Ethnologie* (2018, Lit) and published journal articles and book chapters on subalternity, indigeneity, migration, partition, anarchy, and love in several South Asian settings.

NOTES

1. The order of the editors’ names is alphabetical and does not indicate a first or second editor or author. Both editors contributed equally to the editing of the special issue and the Guest Editors’ Introduction. Articles in this special issue emerged out of a panel at the European Conference for South Asian Studies (ECSAS) at the Centre d’Études de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud (Paris, France) in July 2018, which the authors convened with Michel Boivin (CNRS/CEIAS). We would like to thank the authors as well as other members of that panel and Michel Boivin for their contributions to

the conversations that resulted in this publication; Raghavendra Rao K.V. and Mukesh Kumar, for work with the images and one of these articles, respectively; the anonymous reviewers; and the editorial team at *Asian Ethnology*.

2. Appadurai, however, was criticized for not paying enough attention to local particularity in his grand narrative of globalization, while his rather metaphorical use of the “scape” has been viewed as rendering the concept “diffuse, not to say fuzzy” (Antweiler 2020, 82).

3. While the dynamics of globalization led to an increase in transnational connectivity, they have also caused deep-seated psychological and ontological insecurity among the masses due to medially augmented perceptions of risk (Beck 2011).

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