Introducing *Reanimating Regions*

James Riding and Martin Jones

Writing regions, undertaking a regional study, was once a standard form of geographic communication and critique. This was until the quantitative revolution in the middle of the previous century and more definitively the critical turn in human geography towards the end of the twentieth century. From then on writing regions as they were experienced phenomenologically, or arguing culturally, historically, and politically with regions, was deemed to be old-fashioned. To describe a region in itself was thought to be a conservative or basic undertaking, which could lead to a simplification or neglect of witnessed peoples and places. And indeed to invoke a regional geography was thought to privilege one region over another, to focus on particularities rather than abstractions, or on the other hand, regional geography seemed simply too rudimentary, unable to describe the modern interconnected and highly networked brave ‘new’ liberal world. The longstanding subgenre of regional geography was as such seen to be outdated. It apparently missed the everyday and personal specificities of identities and places, and arguably glossed over large swathes of political, cultural and historical landscapes, without ever being able to get at, describe, or study the new economic and political spaces of the now globalised world, or indeed to critically examine the existence of these new spaces.

Yet over the past two decades or more there have been attempts to reintroduce a form of regional geography. The new regional geography created in this period was relational,
polymorphic and multidimensional, and the new regional geography was as such able to speak of, document, and deconstruct an era of late capitalism, neoliberalism and globalisation. It was though an attempt which was undercut by a turn towards landscape, space and place in social and cultural geography, and to flat actor-network geographies beyond regionalism in political and economic geography. As such the region became a forgotten trope through which to write the world, and the new regional geography withered.

With this in mind we sought to gather together both scholars presently interested in writing of regions, culturally, politically, and historically, and also the geographers who initially articulated the new regional geography. The discussions that took place during the forum form the basis of this edited volume. Reanimating Regions, the first event, was hosted by the 2014 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Tampa, Florida, and the second setting New Regional Geographies took place in Kensington, London, at the 2014 annual meeting of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers. Prior to the sessions, we proposed that due to the significance of non-representational and relational approaches to space, place and landscape in human geography, and also the related mobilities and aesthetic turn of recent times, there was a new theoretical and philosophical ground from which to reposition and reanimate a new regional geography, or a new new regional geography.

The journey from those sessions to this published text has meant defining or perhaps more appropriately opening out regional geography. In so doing, this edited volume reanimates region through critical and creative theoretical approaches, alongside and enfolded around the more popular geographical terms, landscape, space and place. The foreword articulates a new new regional geography within the history of the region and the regional concept in human
geography and sets out the methodological basis of this assumption. Here acting as an historical overview, original debates on the region in geography are reframed in order to provide a space from which to reanimate regions. Part 1 *Culture* and Part 2 *Politics* take the reader through a number of regions in order to further articulate what region, the regional and a regional geography might be today, while Part 3 *Performance* writes embodied, subversive and personal accounts of regions. To end, we include a piece on the potential directions regional geography might now take, asking *What’s next for Regional Geography?*

This volume we hope marks the continued reinvigoration of a set of disciplinary debates surrounding regions, the regional, and regional geography. For despite taking up an identifiable place within the geographical imagination in scholarship and beyond, *region* remains a relatively forgotten, under-used and in part an under-theorised term. The discipline seemingly lacks, due to the turn elsewhere, an awareness of both the historical role that the region plays in everyday understandings of the world, and via a theoretical reductivism the relationships between region and, place, landscape, and space. As such, geographers are rendered blind to the rich possibilities of a newly animated regional geography, and the once deemed old-fashioned, yet fresh potential of writing regions as a way into debates on conflict, identity, environment, borders and injustice. Comprehending the region as animated, relational, performed, lived, in process, as well as documented, described, created and cartographic, is to accept the region is to be best understood and theorised through its tensions. It is on the one hand a geographic idea that is played out every day beyond the geography of writing, and at the same time a region is a constructed world, where regions of the world are seemingly overlaid from above and lived from within.
We find that *region* is either dismissed in scholarly writing as old-hat or included implicitly, as a bounded generalisation of what is understood on the ground experientially or as excessively present but overlooked. Importantly, our aim in this text is neither to fix what a region is, nor to narrate a singular form of regional geography, and to perform an act of disciplinary colonialism. Instead, we are primarily concerned with reanimating a regional geography and the study of regions – as others have been before – providing an opening for thought on the spatial tensions within and between regions, and deconstructing the apparent disciplinary fault lines between region, place, and landscape.

Across its eighteen chapters, *Reanimating Regions* bears witness to the possibilities of thinking amidst the tension between the political and economic version of regional geography and the cultural and social version. Read against one another the eighteen chapters weave together timely commentaries on region and regions across the globe, with a particular emphasis upon the regional as played out in the United Kingdom, and regional worlds both within and beyond Europe, offering chapters from Africa and South America. This is not an exhaustive exploration of regions across the globe, rather our aim is to theorise and perform regions, emboldening those who wish to write of a region and a regional geography.

In sum the eighteen chapters we draw together here collectively rebalance the region within geography and geographical thought. By renewing the geography of regions, as not only a site of investigation but also as an analytical framework through which to write the world, what emerges is a powerful reworking of the geographic imagination. In addressing both the *political* and the *cultural* this edited volume responds to the need for a consolidated and considered reflection on *region* and regional geography, speaking directly to broader intellectual concerns with performance, aesthetics, networks, mobilities, the environment and
the body. Written by international, interdisciplinary scholars from different intellectual backgrounds, the chapters are informed by a range of methodological and conceptual preoccupations. The empirical focus ranges from the newly emergent radical politics in the post-socialist states of southeastern Europe, to the politics of regions and the phantom region of Central Germany, from an excursion via regional cultural landscape through a flat wetland region of eastern England, to narratives of regional identity in literature, from a connection between region building and musicality in the British Midlands, to an exploration of new regional geography in the remote Northwest of Zimbabwe, and from an analysis of politically disruptive regions in the United Kingdom, to a reimagining of regions through digital fiction in Denmark. We close this introduction then in the spirit of this text as a whole, shuttling between regions, seeking to take aim at the heart of the region through the opening out of region, the regional, and a regional geography, collectively Reanimating Regions.