

# SCOTTISH AFFAIRS

Volume 30 . Number 2 . 2021

Special Issue: Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd* Futures

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The Futures of Scottish Gaelic under the Microscope  
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*Scottish Affairs* is Scotland's longest running journal on contemporary political and social issues. Founded in 1992, this quarterly journal has become the leading forum for debate on Scottish current affairs. The movement towards setting up the Scottish Parliament in 1997–9, and then the debate in and around the Parliament, brought the need for a new analysis of Scottish politics, policy and society. *Scottish Affairs* has provided that analysis, addressed to a readership both inside and outside universities. The journal publishes articles on matters of concern to people who are interested in the development of Scotland. This includes articles about similarly placed small nations and regions throughout Europe and beyond.

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# **SCOTTISH AFFAIRS**

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## SCOTLAND'S GÀIDHEALTACHD FUTURES: AN INTRODUCTION

*James Oliver and Iain MacKinnon*

### Abstract

This special issue of *Scottish Affairs* is the first to be solely dedicated to matters relating to Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd*. *Scottish Affairs* has a broad, interdisciplinary readership and this informs our approach as guest editors for the special issue. As such, the focus for the issue is to be future-oriented, whilst necessarily being informed by cultural context, contemporary society and lived experience. By curating the articles in these terms, an aim is to encourage an ethic of engagement with a spectrum of topics (not exhaustive) of contemporary research and debate of relevance to the *Gàidhealtachd*, and to encourage relational perspectives and creative horizons across that spectrum. Therefore, the special issue is not constrained by a single disciplinary focus or structure; although, in important, different ways, the articles are oriented to forms of disciplinarity and practice. This emphasis on emerging debates within the *Gàidhealtachd* includes their intersections and orientations with situated experiences, subjectivities and voices. Whilst the theme of the special issue is 'futures', this is not in a superficially speculative or unproductive sense. Rather, it is ontologically oriented: to the spaces and cultural articulations of encounters and entanglements of people, places and social or community networks. Nevertheless, and not least because of the finite space

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*James Oliver is an associate professor in the School of Design, the College of Design and Social Context, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. He is a guest editor of this issue of Scottish Affairs.*

*Iain MacKinnon is an assistant professor at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University, England. He is a guest editor of this issue of Scottish Affairs. James and Iain are both from crofting communities in the Isle of Skye, where they had their formative cultural and social experience, including primary and secondary educations.*

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afforded in a collection or volume of writing, the special issue does not claim to be representative of all dimensions, experiences or understandings of the *Gàidhealtachd*. Some are yet to come – *sin mar a tha e*.

**Keywords:** futures; *Gàidhealtachd*; ontology; place; plurality

### **Introduction: summary and relevance**

The articles in this special issue present a spectrum of analyses, dialogues and enquiry on issues of contemporary social and cultural distinctiveness and diversity in an expansive *Gàidhealtachd*. Whilst our particular focus is on Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd* (hence its *Gàidhlig* spelling), we respectfully acknowledge that Scotland is also a multicultural, multilingual country.<sup>1</sup> The *Gàidhealtachd* is a long-standing manifestation of that plurality, and it is not the only indigenous language and culture, or diverse cultural community in Scotland.

This curated and edited volume is a series of papers and commentary on, and expressions of, the *Gàidhealtachd*. The scope is broad, reflecting various relationships between particular experiences and manifestations of culture and community, but also including relationships with 'place'; where for many, tradition and lore coheres the *Gàidhealtachd* as a complex ontological space and entanglement of relations between the human and more-than-just-human – *an tìr, an canan 's na daoine* – the land, the language and the people.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the special issue encompasses critical questions and enquiry around experiences, expressions and environments of 'place' – diversely conceptualised and related to – as articulations of community, of societal inclusion and recognition, of cultural assimilation and elision, sociolinguistic and human ecological approaches to the environment. All of which reflects a profound legacy of the consequences of dominant powers, processes and structures of cultural assimilation and minoritizing. For further reference, see Crichton-Smith (1986), Hunter (1976, 2014), Kenrick (2011), Mackenzie (2013), MacKinnon (2017, 2019), McIntosh (2004, 2013), Newton (2011), Stroh (2017) and Wightman (2011). These dialogues and questions are as important as ever, and resonate all around the world, and are not unique to the historic *Gàidhealtachd*.

Briefly, however, and by way of a broader social context, the contemporary relevance here is neither opaque nor surprising, given the deep legacy of social and structural inter-connectedness, and entanglements of global colonial projects – of accumulation and appropriation, dispossession and displacement, including through the commodification (i.e., monetising for profit) and



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alienation of environments, places and people. Related to this there have been significant globalised and localised contexts of resistance to such problems of equity and justice, including on socio-cultural relations, climate, and economics; and so, we have also seen significant global consciousness and solidarity with key issues and movements such as Anonymous, Black Lives Matter, School Strike 4 Climate, Idle No More, Standing Rock/Dakota Access Pipeline.

These social protest movements are informed by previous movements and reveal a socio-cultural shift and an immanence of what cultural theorist Raymond Williams (2011) referred to as 'structure of feeling', pointing hopefully to global futures that refuse to be apologetic for or ignorant of inequity and injustice. Moreover, whatever and wherever the critical civic and societal issues are, they are also differentiated and located; therefore, situations of communities, cultures and human agency remain relevant, as they must also within the *Gàidhealtachd*. The *Gàidhealtachd*, then, can learn much from a more explicit international engagement and comparative analysis with communities and cultural contexts experiencing ongoing assimilations and minoritizing. For example, and for further reading see: Escobar (2001, 2017), Lewis and Maslin (2015), Moreton-Robinson (2015), O'Sullivan (2016), Satia (2020), Stewart-Harawira (2005), Todd (2016), Trouillot (1995), Tuck and McKenzie (2015), Tuck, McKenzie and McCoy (2014), Tuck and Yang (2012), Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Whyte (2013), Wolfe (2016).

The creative purpose of this special issue, then, is to stimulate serious, reflexive and ethical dialogue on *Gàidhealtachd* situations and relationships. Dialogue is an important modality of human (and humane) social action; it can further relational ethics of understanding and agency, individual and collective, including on key issues of debate for the communities and cultural contexts of Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd* – and their futures. In inviting contributions on this theme of futures, we also devised and shared a short briefing paper with each author, to use as a prompt or reference. The 'brief' is incorporated further in the next section of this article.

### **Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd*: semantic depth**

Readers of *Scottish Affairs* will be well aware that to write about Scotland, as with any culture, nation or society, is to reference a broad semantic range of meaning, both conceptual and material; and a myriad of community and individual contexts of self-articulation and understanding. Similarly, to speak of Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd* is to reference a plurality. But just as it would be

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unusual to not think of Scotland in relation to place/s, similarly, a significant dimension of what the *Gàidhealtachd* means also addresses a relationship with place/s; not least because the *Gàidhlig* word for the Highlands (of Scotland) is *a' Ghàidhealtachd* (or place of the *Gàidheal*).<sup>3</sup> However, the *Gàidhealtachd* is also the Hebridean islands and one of the traditional *Gàidhlig* names for the Hebrides is *Innse Gall* (or islands of strangers).

A key yet simple starting point, then, is that the *Gàidhealtachd* is not a homogenous, singular or undifferentiated place. There are some particular and general interpretations of what it is, demographically, linguistically, spatially, but as indicated above, in essence *Gàidhealtachd* means 'place of the *Gàidheal*'. Now, immediately the conceptual density and framing of this meaning is interesting and revealing, as it is an index of relationality (relations and relationships) between place, people and language (and culture more broadly). So, while 'place' is an inherent dimension here it is also a socially and spatially dynamic concept, open to situational encounters and entanglements and therefore subject to the material difference and mobility across lived experiences and interpretations of place.

To state the obvious, the *Gàidhealtachd* has indeed been subject to social and cultural change, and it has had to adapt over time and space, over its histories, geographies, and relational spaces. Therefore, articulations, experiences and manifestations of the *Gàidhealtachd* are active and lively: as active and lively as the individuals that configure its diverse communities of practice, place and possibility. This does not obviate shared experiences or identifications; it does leave 'open' questions of 'futures'.

More recently, this change has also been informed by the digital age, moving beyond the traditional analogue social spheres of community communication and cultural productivity. For example, the online Duolingo language learning platform now has *Gàidhlig* on it, with a huge uptake that expands the digital dispersal and differentiation across a language and learning community quite radically. That does not mean, of course, that everyone who signs up to Duolingo is immediately a member of the *Gàidhealtachd*. What it does present though is some actual limits of possibility for the *Gàidhealtachd*. So, you've now learned some *Gàidhlig*, what are you going to do with it, use Google Translate more critically? This is an open question – posed because thinking about the *Gàidhealtachd* is effectively a multidimensional and future-oriented project, particularly as the *Gàidhlig* language does become more socially and digitally dispersed across global engagements. The value in this ongoing dynamic of possibility with futures is the space it affords us to interrogate assumptions, complexity and perceptions around the everyday social and cultural ecologies and ethical concerns for the *Gàidhealtachd*. How we orient and configure our

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thinking and understanding towards complex challenges has a direct relationship to our actions in everyday life, and this invites more than simple reflection. Therefore, how we contend with and configure our lives in ethical relation, not only to each other but our collective cultural challenges and responsibilities, is fundamental to *Gàidhealtachd* futures.

Nevertheless, if it holds (as it should) that the *Gàidhealtachd* is broadly future-oriented, it does not hold that we dismiss as irrelevant other culturally established articulations and concepts of the *Gàidhealtachd* – its epistemologies and ontologies of people in place. Likewise, how we acknowledge and come to terms with our own historical contributions in the expansionism of colonial projects across the world – and therefore our implication in the various diminishments, dispossessions, subjugations, and enslavements of other peoples, communities and cultures across the world – is as profound a task.

### Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd*: ontological depth

Why organise a special issue on Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd* Futures? As discussed in the section above, over time there has always been a dynamic to the social shape and situation of the *Gàidhealtachd*. The *Gàidhealtachd* is plural. One particular conceptual reason for this special issue is to focus on the plurality inherent in the language of 'futures', and to capture a sense of cultural agency and ownership, and a hopefulness, in prompting the future as a space of possibility, for multiple and mutual ways of making meaning and ways of being in the *Gàidhealtachd*. Practically, there are a few other reasons for the special issue too.

One reason is that 2021/22 is a year of population census across the UK, which invariably stirs up conversations on the situation (and putative 'health') of the *Gàidhlig* language and its vitality in Scotland (and also beyond). Nevertheless, language planning and policy are not our specific focus, although issues of language communities and revitalisation will be addressed.

Another related, coincidental context (but also further impetus) has been the emergence and public impact of the *Soillse* research network's socio-linguistic report on the vernacular communities of *Gàidhlig* which prompted significant and swift political debate and response, including a community consultation led by a team of MSPs. An element of that research is reported in this special issue (Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul, this volume). Briefly, at least one other reason is that the guest editors also have an ontological relationship (*dùthchas*) with the *Gàidhealtachd*. We (the guest editors) grew up on our respective family crofts in different parts of Skye and we knew each other in

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high school. We were just a couple of years apart in school age and we both stayed at the boys' residential hostel during the school week. There we debated theology and played a lot of football. This certainly informs a focus here that is more broadly about 'communities', not in a closed, exclusive, homogenous or singular sense, but as social spaces and places of processes, practices and situations of producing cultural relations.

Of course, as with any cultural context, there are still various social and cultural boundaries to understand and even negotiate within and at the edges of the *Gàidhealtachd*, but we are mindful to not be reductive about or objectify 'community' or 'culture'. Rather, the aim is to garner some essential discussion on a complex social and cultural situation; to that end, we emphasise an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary endeavour, with an applied outlook that engages in a range of academic discourse. The edited collection and contributors here therefore do not claim to solely represent or define the communities of the *Gàidhealtachd*—indeed, we aim to engage these (our) communities as much as wider publics on these themes. Furthermore, each contributor has their own, significant voice and they have their own connections with Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd*.

### **Special issue contributions**

The special issue is split into three main sub-theme sections, with three articles in each; plus, there is this introduction article and a book review at the end of the collection. In total there are eleven articles focussed on Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd*, and a total of 12 contributors. There is limited space in a journal issue, but we wanted to have as broad and creative a range of articles and voices as possible.

Section One has our longer articles, of standard journal length, and they all deal with a major theme within the collection, that issues of land (and place), language and people, cannot be considered in isolation. The articles each ably handle this theme with their respective stylistic attention and substantive detail:

**Mairi McFadyen** and **Raghnaid Sandilands'** writing exemplifies a layered account and multidimensional, future-oriented approach to land and culture – for transformative thinking and doing in the *Gàidhealtachd*. The authors work in collaboration on projects of what they term creative cultural activism, which enfold *Ceist an Fhearainn* / The Land Question into inter-related layers of language, ecology, language, place, kin and community. In their contribution they describe their 'convivial' approach to the creation of environmentally and

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socially just futures: they call this 'cultural darning and mending'; one which 'invites people to take agency in their own location and place, entering into an ethical and reciprocal relationship with the land, its past, people and their stories.'

**Conchúr Ó Giollagáin** and **Iain Caimbeul** focus on weaknesses in what they call an 'asocial' approach to language planning for *Gàidhlig* in Scotland. They also elaborate on different options for supporting empowerment of the vernacular community through an *Urras na Gàidhlig* – and in doing so for an appropriate (re)-territorialising of the *Gàidhealtachd* – by which Government can seek to move away from the imminent prospect of a 'desocialised' *Gàidhlig* future. The article is informed by the major research publication *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020) a significant intervention critiquing prevailing language policy and ideology as supporting a rapid demise of the communal social presence of *Gàidhlig* in its last remaining heartland areas.

**Iain MacKinnon** examines claims about *Gàidheal* identity that have been made following what he describes as a 'socio-linguistic turn' in Scottish *Gàidhlig* studies in the twenty-first century. He argues that the creation of an *Urras na Gàidhlig*, in addition to ameliorating the societal and linguistic condition and negation of *Gàidheil* as an ethnic group, could also have implications for their recognition and status as an ethnicity within Scotland.

Section Two features emerging scholars with diverse and important perspectives on the *Gàidhealtachd*. They introduce some lateral and equally relevant approaches on the themes of land, language, people, using a shorter essay format. The articles are powerful articulations and reflections on the 'critical legacies, critical conversation' we need to have.

For **Cass Ezeji**, the *Gàidhealtachd* is less a matter of a territorial space and more about embodiment in people. Her article viscerally describes moments of marginalisation and prejudice that come with being someone who is *Gàidhlig* speaking Afro-Scottish. She links this to perspectives on history that privilege *Gàidheil* as victims, rather than as also being perpetrators and beneficiaries of other people's oppression. Ezeji argues that understanding 'the full Gaelic picture' requires 'embracing the diversity of its speakers and normalising non-white faces speaking our language.'

**Gòrdan Camshron**, a PhD student at the Soillse research centre at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), argues that the development of broader networks of Gaelic speakers within and beyond Scotland will not be sufficient to maintain a communal native speaker presence for the language. For this group, the linguistic crisis is part of a wider societal crisis which is also demographic, economic and infrastructural. He argues that from an acceptance

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of this group's vulnerability an 'alternative rooted progressiveness' can open for them to resist social erasure.

In the third article in this middle section **Déirdre Ní Mhathúna** shares research findings from a survey of *Gàidheil* on their views about the work of environmental agencies in the *Gàidhealtachd*. The findings suggest a lack of mutual understanding between the two groups. Ní Mhathúna proposes that the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge may be helpful in understanding native perceptions of place and of sharing knowledge about place that are often transmitted through *Gàidhlig*.

The concluding section of articles is titled: a plural *Gàidhealtachd*. Diversity within and between place/s is acknowledged throughout this special issue, and the plurality of the *Gàidhealtachd* emphasised. Here the section authors continue the essay format to expand the dialogue with cultural perspective from beyond the particular geography of Scotland, acknowledging a wider set of relations that, ultimately are deeply connected with and relevant to the *Gàidhealtachd* and its future.

**Lillis Ó Laoire** writes from Ireland with autoethnographic reflections that communicate the linguistic vulnerability and the wider political and economic forces impacting the vitality of community Gaelic in his home county of Donegal in Ireland. He urges empathy and understanding of lived experience to reorient ourselves from 'ontological and epistemological violation' towards a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable future.

**Emily McEwan-Fujita** writes from Canada about relationships to place for Gaels in Nova Scotia, highlighting the similarity and difference between Scotland-oriented and Nova Scotia-oriented Gaels, in the context of significant language shift. Emily highlights the vital need for further research into the diverse 'ways of being Gaelic in the world' and the relationship with place/s.

**James Oliver** writes from Australia, on Boon Wurrung Country in Melbourne. In a summative role for the special issue, James reflects on his experiences of cultural (ex)change, across time and place, and international context. This has profoundly influenced his creative and social practice and relationships with the *Gàidhealtachd* – emphasising an ontological (re)turn to place, and its ethical relations and futures.

We hope that this special issue of *Scottish Affairs* stimulates broader engagement at this nexus of emerging and ongoing debates within the *Gàidhealtachd*, and on the vitality of relationships, new and old, that make it materially relevant and alive. The *Gàidhealtachd* is not one-dimensional, nor is it a mere metaphor or index of history or homogeneity; it is place/s and social networks, variously embodied and emplaced – including sites, situations

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and subjectivities as encounters of 'relational validity' for its futures (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015).

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### Notes

1. There is also a Canadian *Gàidhealtachd* and an Irish *Gaeltacht*, each with its own historical and cultural context.
2. *An tìr, an canan 's na daoine* – the land, the language and the people – this slogan is associated with the nineteenth century Highland Land League, a key political movement and party during the land wars in the Highlands and Islands. It is also part of the masthead of the *West Highland Free Press*, and has been since its launch in 1972, explicitly campaigning on all these issues.
3. *Gàidheal / Gàidheil* (Gael / Gaels) is an ethnolinguistic identity and cultural concept. Longstanding tradition suggests indigeneity (*dùthchas*), with interrelations (to different and varying degrees) between land, language and lineage. More recently, however, *Gàidheal / Gaidheil* is also shorthand for *Gàidhlig* speaker/s.

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## ON ‘CULTURAL DARNING AND MENDING’: CREATIVE RESPONSES TO *CEIST AN FHEARAINN* / THE LAND QUESTION IN THE *GÀIDHEALTACHD*

*Mairi McFadyen and Raghnaid Sandilands*

### Abstract

Mairi McFadyen and Raghnaid Sandilands offer an account of various collaborative contributions and activities relating to creative cultural activism in the context of the *Ceist an Fhearainn* or the ‘Land Question’ in the *Gàidhealtachd*. They introduce the metaphor of ‘cultural darning and mending’ to describe a playful yet questioning creative approach that invites people to take agency in their own place, entering into an ethical and reciprocal relationship with the land, its past, people and their stories. They argue that the act of ‘taking cultural ownership’ is a vital step in consciousness-raising for land reform, a creative process that allows us to make imaginative connections that cut across time. By drawing on our pasts to assemble environmentally and socially just futures, they suggest that creative, cultural and convivial activism holds the potential to create the circumstances necessary for transformation and change.

**Keywords:** Gaelic; cultural activism; creative mapping; landscape; land reform; place

### Introduction

This essay reflects a creative response to *Ceist an Fhearainn* / The Land Question in the context of the *Gàidhealtachd*, informed by a socio-cultural criticality and praxis rooted in a creative ethnology of place. It is an essay

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*Mairi McFadyen and Raghnaid Sandilands are two independent researchers, writers and creative practitioners living on opposite sides of Loch Ness in the Scottish Highlands.*

*Mairi McFadyen and Raghnaid Sandilands*

in two parts: first, we trace the contours of our various involvements and entanglements with cultural activism and consider the context of the wider movement for land reform; second, we share some examples of a playful approach to cultural activism in context, introducing the idea of ‘cultural darning and mending.’ Using archives, maps, placenames and local knowledge, this future-oriented creative ethnology is an invitation to rediscover and reimagine our connection to the landscape, a ‘bringing to life’ of the relations between people, place, language and culture. As we argue, this process of ‘re-membering’ (McIntosh, 2003) is a vital step in the wider process of consciousness-raising for land reform, drawing on our pasts to ‘assemble socially and environmentally just futures for sustaining people and places’ (McCullagh, 2020).

First, a further introduction to us, the authors: Mairi, who is based in Abriachan on the north side of Loch Ness, has a background in academic research and teaching in the fields of ethnology, cultural anthropology and human ecology. In recent years, she has been working independently as a freelance educator, writer, facilitator and activist organiser, contributing to various festivals and events. While not a fluent Gaelic speaker, she has studied Gaelic in different contexts and would describe herself as a lifelong learner. Raghnaid, a Gaelic speaker originally from Lochalsh but now based in Farr in Strathnairn on the south side of the loch, has a background in Gaelic education and works as a translator. She is involved in community initiatives in Strathnairn, including the *fèis* for local school-aged children, where she has run several creative place-responsive projects; Fearnag Growers / *Lios na Feàrnaig*, a community allotment project; and Farr Conversations, which hosts talks and events. Raghnaid is also a writer and independent publisher.

We first met each other during the heady years running up to the referendum for Scottish independence in 2014, both actively and variously involved in campaigning in support of independence at local and national levels. Mairi, at that time based in Edinburgh, was volunteering as a core organiser for the non-party and creative campaign National Collective<sup>1</sup> and the colourful ‘Yestival’, touring village halls across the country; Raghnaid, along with her neighbours, helped initiate ‘Farr Conversations’, a talk series set up to ‘oil the wheels of engagement with issues affecting Scotland by hosting lively nights in one Highland hall.’ Mairi has since moved to the Highlands, working in collaboration with Raghnaid on a range of different projects. These projects, alongside our various blogs, articles and essays are documented on our personal websites.<sup>2</sup>

## **Whose Land is it anyway?**

In 2015, very much carrying on the energy and spirit of the grassroots referendum campaign, Raghnaid organised an evening event for Farr Conversations called 'Whose Land is it Anyway?' – a prompt to think about the land and our relation to it, at a time when land legislation was a live issue in the parliament. Land activist Lesley Riddoch came as the guest speaker, joining musicians Julie Fowllis and Eamon Doorley. Julie, working with Raghnaid, set about finding forgotten songs from Strathnairn in preparation for the night: a hunting song, a milking song, songs in praise of the Macgillivray chiefs, a lullaby. Julie re-paired song words with new tunes, finding old recordings among the archives. A map of the area was created, showing Gaelic songs and also stories of the area – a small memento for those who came along on the night. The cover design was a take on the old blue and black Bartholomew maps, with Gaelic on one side and English the other. In an article for the West Highland Free Press (Sandilands, 2020), Raghnaid reflects:

The village hall was packed and I recall the rustling of those two hundred maps being opened ... Here was a chance to bring to light some of the detail and character particular to the place. In privileging songs, stories, droving routes, names that were too long to fit on council road signs, making this map felt like an affirming, quietly radical thing to do.

One of the songs was a hunting song by Aonghas Cameron of Stratherrick, *Seinn lùro bhinn O Ho*:

*'S toil leam àirigh nam badan  
far am b'èibhinn leam cadal,  
's am biodh fasgadh ri gailleann  
aig aighean 's aig laoigh.  
Agus frìth nan damh donna  
's nan ceannardan troma,  
leam bu mhiann dol nan coinneamh  
nuair a chromadh a' ghrian...*

I like the wooded high pasture  
where I am glad to sleep,  
where there'd be shelter from storms  
for heifers and calves.

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And the deer forest of the red stags,  
of the heavy antlered heads,  
how I loved to meet them  
when the sun descended...

It was beautiful to hear the songs, warm and soaring and about love of place, brought back into the airspace. At the end of that night, a friend said to Raghnaid, 'if you know the stories, you love the place, and if you love the place you look after it.' This simple sentiment is at the heart of why such activism is important: it invites people into an ethical and reciprocal relationship with the land, its past, people and their stories. It asks people to take agency in their own place, to 'dig where they stand,'<sup>3</sup> to be part of a story that is slowly accruing and unfolding. Raghnaid describes this work as 'cultural darning and mending': the act of finding those disparate and disconnected threads from the past, weaving them back together with purpose. The suggestion being that whatever the deconstruction or diminishment that may occur, the individual may make imaginative connections that cut across time, allowing them to reimagine their heritage whole. This process allows us, perhaps, to begin to create the circumstances necessary for transformation and change.

The following evening, Raghnaid headed over to the west coast where Mairi was busy co-hosting a 'Changin Scotland' weekend of 'politics, culture and ideas' at The Ceilidh Place in Ullapool. In a spontaneous last-minute decision, Mairi invited Raghnaid on to the stage to join a panel discussion about cultural sustainability in the Highlands alongside Pàdruig Moireasdan from North Uist and artist Mhairi Law, now living in Lewis. Here Raghnaid shared her experience of the night before and talked about the idea of 'taking cultural ownership' as a form of cultural activism. A lively discussion followed about the dynamic potential of creative map-making as a way to connect with cultural memory, language, local stories and the environment and to spark the touchpaper of new tradition-making.<sup>4</sup>

Lesley Riddoch later wrote about her experiences in Farr in her book *Blossom* (2014), remarking upon just how many people turned out to this small rural hall, the energy of the local organisers (and the quality of the home-baking). She recalled that discussions lasted long into the night. She also mused that grassroots campaigners in local communities such as this 'weren't crying out for change, they were *creating* it.' There is such energy in gatherings such as these in Farr and Ullapool; connections are made, enthusiasm and inspiration found or renewed. Folklorist Hamish Henderson (1919–2002) described convivial ceilidh gatherings as moments of 'resolve, transformation and insurrection,'

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where ‘poetry becomes people’ (1985: 1). These are the spaces where the sparks of change are to be found, where community action is resourced by culture and creativity.

## **Our Land**

In the years following the referendum campaign, the OUR LAND campaign burst onto the scene, an initiative created by Common Weal, Women for Independence, the Scottish Land Action Movement, the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) and fronted by land activists Andy Wightman and Lesley Riddoch. The aim was to raise public consciousness of the case for radical land reform in Scotland and to highlight the limitations of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 – legislation that was hard-won by dedicated MSPs (Gibson, 2020). A festival of activities and events took place, including a gathering at community-owned Abriachan Forest, a flash mob and bike ride on an estate in Duns in Berwickshire, a mass picnic on disputed and derelict land in Angus and, in Farr, a kayak demonstration on a local loch.

Activism can be a complex, subtle and creative process. People are often inspired not so much by the nuts and bolts of what is important (e.g., facts and figures, legislation) as by what is interesting and exciting, what captures the imagination. Creative cultural activism gives energy and colour to movements of all kinds; art and creative expression – in all forms of visual representation as well as music, literature and theatre – can galvanise those involved and communicate to those outside what the movement is all about. Performance can bring people together in conviviality and common purpose, creating a space to imagine and rehearse alternative realities. Perhaps the most effective example of this is the cèilidh play *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (McGrath, 1974), toured by theatre company 7:84 in the 1970s. This play reflected back to communities in the *Gàidhealtachd* their own history and culture, often for the first time. It is widely held to be a significant cultural moment, a tipping point that connects the radical roots of land agitation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the modern story of community land, leading to the early buy-outs in the 1990s (Hunter, 2012).

Inspired by OUR LAND and our shared experience of creative activism during the referendum campaign, we decided to start our own modest project based in the Highlands, which came to be called FEARANN/LAND.<sup>5</sup> The name is a nod to our inspiration from the publication *As an Fhearann – From the Land* (MacLean & Carrell, 1986), itself based on an exhibition in An Lanntair on the Isle of Lewis to mark the centenary of the Crofting Act. Our idea was to host

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events and to create a platform where people could share knowledge, ideas, blogs, projects and resources – with the hope of inspiring more people to engage creatively with land and culture debates across the Highlands, opening up networks for creative collaboration. The first event we held was in Abriachan as part of the citizen response Architecture Fringe<sup>6</sup> festival *Common Senses* in 2018. The event celebrated twenty years of the Abriachan Forest Trust, which took forest land into community ownership in 1998.<sup>7</sup> A generation later, what could we learn from the story of this place? Through talks, workshops and an exhibition, we asked, what will the Highlands of the future look like? Futures designer Zoë Prosser, who had been researching what we can learn from community land, gave a talk and workshop emphasising that we can all contribute to the community land movement in small but significant and creative ways.<sup>8</sup> Mairi gave a talk on visual culture, imagined landscapes and the ‘radical roots’ of land reform in the Highlands,<sup>9</sup> while Raghnaid shared research of a local clearance at Dunmaglass, looking at the ease with which people can be disassociated from the history of their own place, the processes at play, the missing narratives and what replaces them.<sup>10</sup> That evening we were joined by musicians Hamish Napier, Griogair Labhruidh and others for a ceilidh with songs, poetry and music.

Later that summer, Mairi was invited to join the Community Land Scotland Conference 2018 to contribute to a workshop exploring approaches to creative cultural activism, and to take part in an afternoon panel discussion ‘Land and Culture – A Sense of Place’ alongside Issie MacPhail from the Assynt Crofters, Polly MacInnes from Sleat in Skye, Lucy Conway from the Isle of Eigg and chaired by Agnes Rennie from the Galson Trust in Lewis. This was another convivial and energising gathering, where Mairi met artist Rachel Skene, at that time working for the *Garbh Allt* Community Initiative, who that year purchased the 3000-acre West Helmsdale crofting estate from landowner Sutherland Estates (one of areas worst affected by the Highland Clearances). The following year, Rachel came to Abriachan for the second FEARANN/ LAND gathering to offer her thoughts on how visual art can engage, create a dialogue, provoke and inspire. We were also joined by artist Adam Scarborough from the Inverness-based CIRCUS Art Collective<sup>11</sup> to share his experience working with the Centre for Creative Cultural Activism in New York.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Ceist an Fhearainn / The Land Question***

It might be expedient here to give some context to *Ceist an Fhearainn* itself. To quote Highland historian Jim Hunter (2013), ‘Scotland has the most

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concentrated, most inequitable, most unreformed and most undemocratic land ownership system in the entire developed world.’ While land reform is not solely a Highland or rural issue – and to frame it as such allows those who wish to resist reform to marginalise, trivialise and contain it (Wightman, 1999) – the sheer scale of privately-owned land in rural areas is remarkable. In the *Gàidhealtachd*, contemporary land ownership patterns are still rooted in historical injustices, tied both to the legacy of the Clearances and, as recent research has highlighted, to the international slave trade across the globe (MacKinnon & MacKillop, 2020). The ongoing legacy of this coloniality of power is destructive in a myriad of ways. In the *Gàidhealtachd*, the effects of clearance are still felt, with a fragile economy, rural housing crisis and the decline of the Gaelic language (Ó Giollagáin, 2020). In his essay, *Real People in a Real Place*, Iain Crichton Smith (1982) spoke of historical ‘interior colonisation’ alongside a growing materialism which, he believed, had left Gaels in a cultural milieu increasingly ‘empty and without substance.’ As Hunter (2007) and MacKinnon (2019) have noted, such a view resonates with post-colonial perspectives made by writers and scholars of indigenous peoples across the globe.<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest or promote an equivalence here between the experience of the descendants of enslaved people and others who experienced colonisation by modern, imperial states; rather, such perspectives describe symptoms of human-ecological disconnect, alienation and loss of meaning – an indicator of just how far our human psyche and culture has become divorced from our natural environments.

There are also visible reminders of this destructive process in the landscape itself. After years of sheep and deer farming, huge areas of the Highlands are in a state of degradation, landscapes that ecologist Frank Fraser Darling famously described as a ‘wet desert’. The overpopulation of red deer, now a hundred-year old problem, represents a major obstacle to any attempts at reforestation, with overgrazing making natural regeneration all but impossible (Planterose, 2019). As the *REVIVE Campaign for Grouse Moor Reform*<sup>14</sup> has shown, almost a fifth of Scotland’s land is retained for recreational blood sports in the form of grouse shooting, with devastating consequences for the environment and for biodiversity. These environmental problems are in part compounded by the global tourism industry which exploits a dominant visual culture, largely shaped by a 19th century European Romantic imagination, in which the *Gàidhealtachd* is imagined as a wild, people-less landscape with majestic stags and castles – a dreamlike place that belongs to the past (McFadyen, 2019a). Such a vision has its provenance in an elite way of seeing, and ultimately serves the vested interests of landed power (Small, 2019). With the reform of ownership patterns, it becomes possible to imagine alternative

possible futures through the processes of ecological restoration, repopulation and regeneration.

In the *Gàidhealtachd*, arguments for environmental and cultural regeneration can sometimes sit in conflict, with a tension arising between those activists who believe that culture and language are vital to renewal and those who prioritise landscape conservation (and who may find arguments for culture and language revitalisation alienating). This tension is sensitively discussed by Hunter in his book *On The Other Side of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands* (2014 [1995]). For example, the idea of 'rewilding' (and its various interpretations) has become popular in recent decades, but the use of this language can strike a discord with those communities who have experienced the effects of clearance, and there is a risk that such rewilding projects perpetuate existing and paternalistic patterns of land ownership. Hunter makes the case that rewilding and 'repeople-ing' must go hand in hand; these aims are not mutually exclusive. While community ownership of land does not necessarily mean it will be well-managed, it is a vital step towards breaking up systems of power. Through devolving power to communities, this ownership model encourages local responsibility, embracing the kinds of relationships between people, resources and power that foster community resilience, ecological stewardship and democratised decision making.

## **Local Culture**

In recent years, *Ceist an Fhearainn* has taken on a renewed sense of urgency in the context of climate and ecological breakdown. Research has shown that across the globe there is a causal link between the loss of cultural and biological diversity. In many cases, damage to culture and language comes first, followed by a disregard and abandonment of local knowledge. This severance leads to a profound human-ecological disconnect, as well as damaging environmental consequences. As Love (2019) articulates:

As we face a potential emergency in biodiversity loss from human activity and human-caused climate change, these complex interactions of language and biodiversity are a reminder that our cultural lives are wrapped up in the natural world too. Just like an animal species, our languages evolved in the context of the environments that surrounded them. When we change those environments, we threaten much more than just the physical living things that thrive there.



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Language and its creative expression through song, story and poetry encodes human experience and memory, forming a cultural ecology which passes on knowledge of flora and fauna, geological forms and weather patterns, revealing the ecological rhythms that encompass us. Writing in the 1970s, folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, in his 'Appeal for Cultural Equity' (1972: 22) wrote:

A grey-out is in progress which, if it continues unchecked, will fill our human skies with smog of the phony and cut the families of men off from a vision of their own cultural constellations. A mismanaged, over-centralized electronic communication system is imposing a few standardized, mass-produced, and cheapened cultures everywhere...

The human species not only loses a way of viewing, thinking, and feeling but also a way of adjusting to some zone on the planet which fits it and makes it liveable; not only that, but we throw away a system of interaction, of fantasy and symbolizing which, in the future, the human race may sorely need.

Lomax's call for cultural equity takes on new meanings in our contemporary world; the 'future' he speaks of here is our today. In the context of land reform, recovering ways of 'viewing, thinking and feeling' becomes not just a matter of cultural democracy, but an ecological and existential imperative.

One of the responses to our current multiple and interrelated global crises is the call for re-localisation (Hodge, 2019). This movement urges people to consider the health of the entire planet and to take action in their own communities and cities – in words often attributed to Scottish ecologist Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), to 'Think Global, Act Local' (MacDonald, 2020). Localism is not just about natural resources, but about local culture more broadly – celebrating those diverse forms of creativity and collective consciousness that restore and sustain us as human beings. Such an emphasis on the 'local' can be perceived or interpreted by some as parochial or inward-looking; worse, it can be seen as dangerous nationalism, and, as we have learned from history, has been appropriated or co-opted to these ends. The kind of localism advocated here, however, is absolutely antithetical to any form of populist or exclusive xenophobia. As Mairi (McFadyen, 2019b) wrote in an article for online magazine *Bella Caledonia*:

Advocating for local culture is not about reifying places and forms of non-capitalism as untouched or outside of history as part of some sort of romantic hankering for paradise lost, it is to stand up against the destructive and homogenising forces of capitalist modernity.

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A re-engagement with the ‘local’ – in all its multiplicity and contradictions – is part of a radical agenda: the revitalisation of ecology and democracy, working towards a shared vision of a thriving, equitable and convivial society.

## **A ‘Storied Landscape’: Taking Cultural Ownership**

Below, we share examples of Raghnaid’s creative practice, a creative ethnology that embodies something of Trevelyan’s ‘archive of the feet’ (1913, in Gange, 2017) – a pursuit she playfully calls her ‘B-road Studies’ (Sandilands, 2020). Ethnology is a form of interdisciplinary anthropological research and practice that, at its heart, seeks to understand how we, as humans, *make life meaningful* (Kockel & McFadyen, 2019). It is often concerned with a relationship to the past and how we ‘make sense’ of it in the present. As a practice, ethnology values human relationships and emotional connections, recognises the diversity of human experience and understands the importance of our ecological connection to place; as such, it has much in common with human ecology. A creative ethnology is future-oriented. An applied creative community ethnology can inspire a radical re-engagement with local place, not by looking backwards and re-performing fixed heritage, but through the act of future-heritage making. This creative process influences how people use their present understanding of pasts for future forecasting or future assembling (see McCullagh, 2002; NicCraith & Kockel, 2002).

In Gaelic culture, there is the cultural concept of *dùthchas*, a word which conveys both a ‘sense of place’ and belonging linked to the stewardship of the land, *dùthaich*. While there is a legal element to *dùthchas* in terms of land tenure, we invoke it here in terms of culture and an expansive sense of cultural ownership. *Dùthchas* also speaks to our cultural inheritance – our cultural or collective memory, our heritage, or *dualchas*. These words are all connected: together they form a matrix of belonging in which land and culture are inseparable. As Raghnaid (Sandilands, 2020) writes, ‘a story that belongs to a place is an invite; an invite to *take cultural ownership* of the environment around you.’ Reflecting on her experience with her own family, she writes, ‘finding stories of people and places ... has been a means to make this place feel like home, more vividly *our own*.’ To seek out the intimate history of a place is to find connection there, a sense of belonging, agency and care. This requires an active engagement, attentiveness and a ‘storied relationship’ to the land, rather than a solely sensory awareness of it (Lopez, 1997).

In her experience, local stories and legends have an immediate appeal for children; they invite young minds to inhabit the whole landscape, ‘from the tops

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where the heroes live to the loch bed and the kelpie there,' at a time when their imaginations are 'in sympathy with the magic' in such stories, to quote children's author Mollie Hunter (Hunter, 1976: 99). In her own community of Farr, Raghnaid has drawn on the tales of the legendary *Fionn MacCumhail* and his band of warriors, the *Fianna*, to help animate the imaginations of local children. This was a strong oral tradition in Scotland, as it was in Ireland; it marked people's minds and there are traces of it still in the landscape. In 2017, Raghnaid decided to theme the local *Fèis Farr*<sup>15</sup> on *Fionn's* adventures, an excuse to dive into the archives and pull out the early maps:

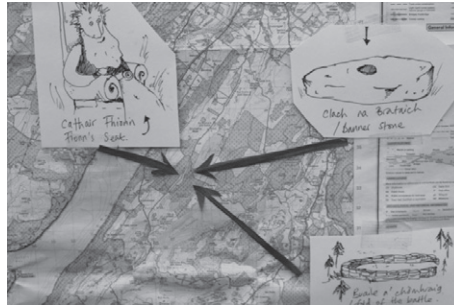
A little scribed mention of '*Cathair Fhionn*' on the first edition OS maps of the area, excised from the next edition, was the first clue. The Canmore online archaeological catalogue mentioned several sites nearby connected to this lore; as well as the '*cathair*', the stone seat for the victorious *Fionn*, there was a fold where the *Fianna* readied for battle, *Clach na Brataich*, the banner stone and tumuli of the fallen.

To paraphrase ethnologist Tiber Falzett, Raghnaid would like to think that there is a 'quiet but revolutionary power to finding the beauty and shared value of stories within the small places we call home.'<sup>16</sup> She reflects, 'everyone knows the Disney stories, but what child doesn't need to know about their very own giant and pan-Celtic superhero, *Fionn MacCumhail*, fighting Vikings just up the road?' (in McFadyen, 2018). With the help of the talented Angus Macleod, the drama officer for *Fèisean nan Gàidheal*, the stories she found that year were the catalyst for drama, role-play and games, shadow puppet re-telling, songs, banner making as well as visits to the sites themselves. Coming upon the old stone fold of *Buaille a' Chòmhraig* for the first time was a memorable thing: a large circle of white lichen covered stones, disappeared in plantation wood and largely forgotten for a generation.

The following summer, the *fèis* children created a giant charcoal map, *Am Mapa Mòr*, of the area. With the help of artist Catriona Meighan, they spent a series of afternoons outside in the community woods, hearing stories in Gaelic and English and drawing them into the landscape, along with their familiar places and wildlife; of ospreys, red divers and squirrels. Sitting by the *sithean*, the fairy hill at the back of the wood, one boy was busy knocking his charcoal stick on the paper. 'It's the sound of the fairy blacksmith's hammer' he said. This is just one example of the open, instinctive ways children take to hearing stories of their own place, those set in the sphere of their first world.

The map key gave a précis of the mythic stories and details of the landscape features that were drawn into this map, among them: *Fionn* and the Vikings fighting on Drumashie moor, *An Rìgh Bàn* and *An Rìgh Dubh* / the Fair King and

**Figure 1:**  
***Cathair Fhionn, Clach na Brataich and Buaille a' Chòmhraig (Sandilands)***



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**Figure 2:**  
**Creating *Am Mapa Mòr* (Sandilands)**



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the Black King, bringers of the dawn and night; Fairy hills noted by local historian Andy Cumming in his papers; standing stones; the Kelpie in Loch Ruthven and the crannogs in the same loch (one of which reappeared in the dry summer and is uniquely marked on *Am Mapa Mòr*); red throated

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divers for *Lochan nan Eun Ruadha* / Lochan of the Red Birds, who still nest there; and *Piobairean Srath Èireann* / the Strathdearn pipers – the name given for the strong winds from the south east that blow across the *Monadh Liath*.

Mairi later invited Raghnaid to speak about these projects as part of a Traditional Arts, Outdoor Learning and Learning for Sustainability day for teachers, educators, tutors and practitioners at The Shielling Project<sup>17</sup> in Glenstrathfarrar, near Beaully. The Shielling is pioneering in its educational approach, bringing together history, Gaelic culture, language, archaeology, ecology and rural skills to help build new relationships with the land. Raghnaid shared a wonderful story about her wee boy and his wild imagination, who asked one day:

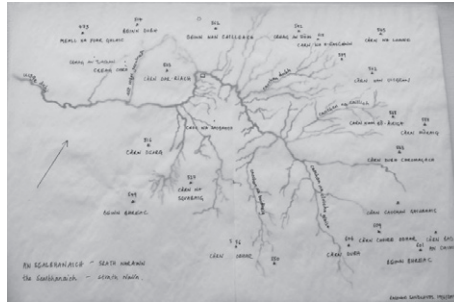
*‘A bheil fámhaire nas motha na crann-gaoithe?’ (Tha tuathanas gaoithe air a’ bheinn pìos bhuainn)  
‘Chan eil mi cinnteach, dè do bheachd a fhèin?’ arsa’ mise.  
Fhreagair esan ‘Uel, nan robh, dhèanadh iad fidget spinners matha dha Fionn.’*

‘Mum, are giants bigger than wind turbines?’ (there is a wind farm on the hills nearby)  
‘I’m not sure. What do you think?’ I said.  
He answered, ‘If they were, they would make a good fidget spinner for Fionn.’

This fun is not just for the wee ones. Gaelic broadcaster and storyteller Ruairidh MacIlleathain (Roddy Maclean) came to Farr to give a talk on the links between landscape features and the legends of *Fionn* for adults. In the geographic area of the *Gàidhealtachd*, there are generations who have grown up without access to this matrix of belonging through language and culture. For Mairi’s Inverness-born husband Simon, hearing Ruairidh’s talk opened up the landscape to him in a new way. Since then, he has been fascinated by placenames: learning basic Gaelic toponymy has revealed new layers of meaning in the landscape, transforming his understanding of his home place through discovering, for the first time, what John Murray calls the ‘poetry of place’ (Murray 2014; 2017).

At a FEARANN/LAND event in 2019, Raghnaid gave a talk on *An Sealbhanaich: an Unmapped Placename in Strathnairn*, showing us that in placenames there exists a rich cultural memory, a lexis of intricacy and colour that serves to give ‘àiteal den t-siubhal fhada,’ a ‘gleam of the long journey’ (Thompson. 1995: 48). This suggests that seeking to understand placenames could serve both to illuminate the present and to orientate us towards

**Figure 3:**  
**Hand-made map of *An Sealbhanaich* (Sandilands)**



alternative futures. *An Sealbhanaich* itself is a large plateau in the hills between Strathnairn and Strathdearn, which today is just another bleak grouse moor; the only signs of human life are butts and traps of different sorts, and wind turbines. The name *An Sealbhanaich* has its roots in *Sealbhan*: a herd, drove, number of cattle or of small cattle (sheep and goats). A possible translation could be ‘the place of the herds’ or ‘the place of the herding’. This would suggest an area rich in transhumance. There were sheilings here; one stone fold remains. It was once forested with pine and birch – many bog pines are visible in the peat hags. Travelling roughly in a circle, starting from the north east, some of the placenames around the basin of *An Sealbhanaich* run as follows:

- Càrn na h-Easgainn* – cairn of the bog/fen
- Càrn na Loinne* – cairn of the shimmer / heat haze
- Càrn nam Bò-àirigh* – cairn of the shieling cattle
- Càrn Mòraig* – Morag’s cairn
- Càrn Dubh-chromagach* – crooked black cairn
- Càrn Caochan Ghiubhais* – cairn of the pine streamlet
- Càrn na Sguabaig* – cairn of the sharp gusting wind
- Cnoc na Saobhaidh* – hillock of the fox’s den
- Càrn Dearg* – the red cairn
- Càrn Bad an Daimh* – cairn of the place of the stags

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*Beinn Bhreac* – the speckled hill  
*Creag an Dubhair* – crag of the shadow  
*Meall na Fuar-ghlaic* – rounded hill of the cold hollow  
*Beinn Dubh* – the black hill  
*Càrn Ruidhe Rèithe* – cairn of the level flow  
*Bèinn nan Cailleach* – hill of the old women  
*Creag an Eòin* – crag of the bird  
*The Uisge Dubh* – black water, the main water course coming from the plateau, with some of the smaller burns that feed it being;  
*Caochan na Buidheig* – streamlet of the buttercup.  
*Caochan Breac* – the speckled streamlet  
*Caochan Dubh* – the black streamlet  
*Allt Uisge Gearmhraidh* – burn of the winter water  
*Caochan na Caillich* – streamlet of the old woman  
*Caochan na Cloiche Glaise* – streamlet of the grey stone  
*Allt na Slànaich* – burn of the healing  
*Allt an Rànain* – burn of the stag's bellow

In her blog, Raghnaid (Sandilands, 2020) writes:

These names tell of other times and speak of human capacity, a diversity of habitat and wildlife, an awareness of conditions in the sky and underfoot, old beliefs maybe ... This place had its own function. The people had purpose and a busy working life and spoke another language, Gaelic.

The making of a simple hand-made map as a means to counter a forgetting, by filling out names and considering unseen connections between the past and the present, is a process of remaking that suggests that the liberty is ours to imagine things otherwise. Rather than the usual reasons for a map – as a means to measure, as a record of physical ownership, as a way of getting from A to B – it is possible to make comment on larger matters of belonging, cultural ownership and the environment.

### **Re-memembering, Re-visioning, Re-claiming**

Based on her research in the Outer Hebrides, Fiona MacKenzie's book (2013), *Places of Possibility*, suggests that community land ownership '... can open up

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the political, social, environmental, and economic terrain to more socially just and sustainable possibilities.' We suggest here that the act of taking cultural ownership is a vital step in consciousness-raising for land reform, a way-marker on the path towards making any collective claim of right to the land. McIntosh (2003) maintains that there are four vital stages to the land reform process: awareness-raising, establishing pioneering patterns and examples, the passing of legislation, and capacity building for sustained community empowerment. The first stage is public awareness-raising, which has three steps nested within it: 're-membering, re-visioning and re-claiming.' He writes (Ibid.):

In the first step, it is necessary for communities to re-member (and the hyphen is deliberate, implying putting back together) their own story. It is necessary for folks to validate, or legitimise, their social history, and not just the official version as told, or more often, not told, in the school curriculum.

The restorative act of cultural darning and mending can be seen as part of this first stage of re-membering, this 'putting back together' that McIntosh speaks of. 'Only having grasped and owned the power of their story,' he writes, 'can a people move to step two in awareness-raising, which is the re-visioning of alternative ways in which things could be.' Re-membering builds cultural confidence at a community level, creating the circumstances necessary for re-visioning new possibilities and alternative futures. This leads to step three, which is re-claiming what is necessary to bring that vision to fruition, to bring about transformation. The final stage is the strengthening of local democratic processes, the learning (or re-learning) what it really means to live in a community of place.

In Frank Rennie's view, 'there can be no real development without a consideration of a sense of place.' Reflecting on the community land movement since the early buy-outs in the 1990s, he writes:

The importance of the links between development and place...is fundamental and self-reinforcing to the principle of the ownership and management of land by the community that lives in that place. From a wide range of perspectives, whether it is providing a token measure of restorative justice for the clearances, the incubation of new local employment, or simply having a voice in what the land outside your window looks like and is used for, community land trusts are proving to be an effective vehicle ... Perhaps, in a circuitous way, the broader appreciation of the values of place, the acknowledgement that



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humans are a fundamental part of the ecology of a place...means that we are slowly, finally, coming to a mature recognition of a sense of place as being a valid measure of 'development'.

(Rennie 2019)

The shared values of local place, then, are fundamental to the very principle of community land ownership. If we include the broad recognition of a place to include a range of factors that encompasses environmental, social, political and cultural histories, Rennie writes, then every place is different. The differences may be subtle, but even for neighbouring places, those differences can be profound. There is much we can learn from the Gaelic concept of *dùthchas* here, understood as a cultural, ethical and reciprocal relationship with place. To seek out the intimate history of a place – to find the stories in the landscape – is to find connection, a sense of belonging and care: 'if you know the stories, you love the place, and if you love the place you look after it.'

### **Conclusion**

Our ability – collectively or as individuals – to enact any kind of change is intimately tied to our ability to make sense of the immediate world around us. We need to understand the past to be able to re-vision socially, environmentally and culturally just futures that sustain people and places. Creative, cultural, convivial activism can help us see the world through a new lens, bringing to light that which has been hidden from view. It can challenge the inevitability of injustice, giving people hope that change is still possible. Creating spaces for conviviality opens up opportunities for people to gather and connect, to learn together, to create and rehearse alternative realities – a catalyst for further action. Community activist Chris Erskine (2014) suggests that this is a simple process of 'connection, creation, change.' Our playful approach to cultural activism, grounded in a creative ethnology of local place, is an invitation not only to observe and question the world, but to take participative, creative action: to take agency, to 'dig where you stand' and to enliven the relations between people, place, language and culture.

The act of 'taking cultural ownership' as a response to the Land Question / *Ceist an Fhearainn* is fundamental to the process of moving forwards towards a re-visioning and re-claiming that embraces the kinds of relationships between people, land, resources and power that foster community resilience, ecological stewardship and local democracy. As part of this process, community action is best served and resourced by culture, creativity and conviviality. What we call the craft of 'cultural darning and mending' is a vital part of this process: making

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our own cultural discoveries actively connects us to our pasts, while a renewed sense of connection with place inspires us to think imaginatively and creatively about what our worlds once were and what they could be in future. Just as on that evening in Farr Village Hall, this creativity can be composed of small, quietly radical acts – such as creating a new map, the key to which speaks of the people, songs and stories of a place, and finding new cultural bearings that orientate towards the future.

### Notes

1. National Collective self-described as an ‘open and non-party [...] group of artists and creatives’ who support Scottish independence, with the aim of ‘imagining a better Scotland’. The group was active from 2011–2015. See [www.nationalcollective.com](http://www.nationalcollective.com).
2. See Raghnaid’s website *A’ Siubhal nam Frith-Rathadan*: [www.raghnaidsandilands.scot](http://www.raghnaidsandilands.scot); see Mairi’s website Northlight: [www.mairimcfadyen.scot](http://www.mairimcfadyen.scot).
3. The phrase ‘The Dig Where You Stand’ is adopted from the international public history and adult education movement promoting public participation in research in local history, especially labour history. See Sven Lindqvist *Gräv Där Du Står* (1978): Byrne (2012); McIntosh (2001).
4. See, e.g., Crawhall (2009).
5. See [www.fearann.land](http://www.fearann.land).
6. See [www.architecturefringe.com/](http://www.architecturefringe.com/).
7. For the story of the Abriachan community, see Stewart (2000).
8. For a transcript of this talk plus images, see FEARANN/LAND website: [www.fearann.land/blog/2019/3/27/zo-prosser-futures-researcher](http://www.fearann.land/blog/2019/3/27/zo-prosser-futures-researcher).
9. For a transcript of this talk plus images, see FEARANN/LAND website: [www.fearann.land/blog/2018/6/20/how-we-see-our-landscapes](http://www.fearann.land/blog/2018/6/20/how-we-see-our-landscapes).
10. A blog based on this talk can be found on Raghnaid’s website: [www.raghnaidsandilands.scot/blog1/2018/5/21/the-dunmaglass-cairn](http://www.raghnaidsandilands.scot/blog1/2018/5/21/the-dunmaglass-cairn).
11. CiRCUS are a voluntary collective of practising, professional artists and producers committed to making contemporary art accessible to a broader Highland audience.
12. See [www.c4aa.org/about](http://www.c4aa.org/about).
13. James Hunter (2007) was one of the first to connect postcolonial scholarship to understanding aspects of the experience of the Gaels.
14. REVIVE is a coalition of like-minded organisations working for grouse moor reform in Scotland. See [www.revive.scot](http://www.revive.scot).
15. See [www.feisean.org/en/feisean-en/what-is-a-feis/](http://www.feisean.org/en/feisean-en/what-is-a-feis/).
16. A phrase used by ethnologist Tiber Falzett in a social media post in memory of Gaelic storyteller Seumas Watson (1949–2018) of Queensville, Nova Scotia.
17. The Shieling Project is a social enterprise and community-based off-grid education centre in Glenstrathfarrar. See McFadyen (2018).

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## MOVING BEYOND ASOCIAL MINORITY-LANGUAGE POLICY

*Conchúr Ó Giollaáin and Iain Caimbeul*

### Abstract

This paper exams how asocial symbolic minority-language policy contributes to the social processes of language shift from the perspective of highly threatened languages, such as Scottish Gaelic. In introducing the concept of language shift through Asocial Minority-Language Policy, we argue that symbolic minority-language policy is detrimental to threatened language minorities in that it is ideologically implicated in language shift when it neglects the societal circumstances of minority-language decline. The prioritisation of the symbolic aspect of language policy also hinders a value-for-money approach to official provision for the minority group. This paper calls for a materialist/functionalist approach to minority-language societal regeneration to counter the social irrelevance of symbolic policy. We suggest policy options for moving beyond the symbolic focus on the minority-language condition.

**Keywords:** Gaelic; ideology; language minoritisation; language policy; language shift; sociolinguistics

### Introduction

A language is not just words. It is a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It is all embodied in a language.

Noam Chomsky<sup>1</sup>

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*Conchúr Ó Giollaáin is the Gaelic Research Professor in the University of the Highlands and Islands, where he directs the UHI Language Sciences Institute.*

*Iain Caimbeul is a research fellow of the institute. Conchúr is also the academic director of the Soillse inter-institutional sociolinguistic partnership.*

### *Moving Beyond*

This paper builds on the analysis emerging from the recently published multi-modular sociolinguistic survey of Scottish Gaelic, *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community: A comprehensive sociolinguistic survey of Scottish Gaelic* (Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, 2020) and examines the Gaelic Language Policy (GLP) challenges identified in it. We are primarily concerned with an analysis of the relevance of GLP to the sociolinguistic situation of Gaelic in Scotland, rather than an examination of the sociolinguistic problems of Gaelic speakers. A detailed examination of the contemporary challenges of sustaining the societal transmission and acquisition of Gaelic can be found in Ó Giollagáin *et al.* (2020), which also sets out a language planning model to systematically address the societal vulnerability of Gaelic vernacular communities. The discussion here will focus on examining the incongruity of GLP in the sociolinguistic crisis facing the Gaelic group. Our primary aim is to indicate the need for a materialist/functionalist approach to minority-language societal regeneration. We aim to identify priorities for language policy reformulation and to encourage an analytical refocus on the social-policy requirements of sustaining a highly threatened minority language, such as Scottish Gaelic. We argue that the over-prioritisation of the symbolic aspect of language policy (LP) is an enabling factor in language shift and this type of LP is a hindrance to a value-for-money approach to helping minority speakers and communities address their societal challenges. This paper introduces the concept of language shift (LS) through Asocial Minority-Language Policy. We predict that GLP, under the *status quo*, will soon entail post-LS language promotion without communal or societal context.

### **Contextualising Minority-Language Policy Reform: the *Gaelic Crisis* study**

To set the context for our policy discussion, we first present an overview of the Gaelic crisis, as depicted by data analysed from recent fieldwork in Ó Giollagáin *et al.* (2020). This study indicates that the remaining vernacular communities in the Western Isles, north-east Skye and on the Isle of Tiree are in advanced-stage LS to English. Among the characteristics of this LS to English in these islands are:

- a) the growing prevalence of English monolingualisation in the language practices of the young and young-adult age cohorts resident in the islands
- b) low levels of intergenerational transfer and communal use of Gaelic

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- c) the loss in appreciable social densities of Gaelic speakers among those younger than 50 years old
- d) the contrast in the social use of Gaelic among older social networks of Gaelic speakers with the performed or institutional use of Gaelic among limited networks of school learners/users of the language
- e) the weak levels of fluency in Gaelic among the teenager cohort, of whom 20% report a fluent competence in Gaelic (Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, 2020: 231)
- f) a widespread awareness of the competitive societal disadvantage of the Gaelic group in respect of the official and institutional provision to island communities
- g) the general disregard of ethnolinguistic concerns in how socio-economic and development strategies are pursued in these communities
- h) a widely held perception that official aspiration for the civic promotion of Gaelic in the national context is of weak relevance to the challenging socio-economic context of receding networks of Gaelic speakers in the islands.

In short, despite the presence of comparably significant numbers of Gaelic speakers in these island communities (cf. the residual bilingual nexus in Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, 2020: 6, 64), very few and numerically small Gaelic-dominant communities survive in the remaining social geography of the Gaelic vernacular group (see also McLeod, 2020: 26; Rothach *et al.*, 2016) and the remaining Gaelic vernacular networks therein face daunting socio-economic challenges to sustain their societal presence.

### **The Materialist/Functionalist Approach to Minority-Language Provision**

In our analysis below of the 2005 Gaelic Act – the legislative basis to current GLP – we indicate the weak societal added value which the Act’s language plan process has brought to bear on the difficult social challenges of sustaining the threatened Gaelic group. Similar to Grin (2003), we advise on the need for the judicious allocation of scarce LP resources to achieve the optimal social benefit for the minority. The efficacy of GLP should be assessed according to the level of productive societal outcomes from minority-language LP expenditure, among which language revitalisation in the context of language community



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regeneration should be central. We argue for a resetting of LP goals which are transparent, measurable and accountable to the Gaelic community, for both the indigenous Gaelic group and the Gaelic learner networks. This is critically important if GLP is to be a plausible aspect of public policy in Scotland. Re-establishing the link between Gaelic cultural resources and the societal context of the Gaelic community is urgently required if GLP is to avoid being generally perceived as a vacuous policy response to a language minority in crisis.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, policy aspiration and social outcomes do not sufficiently coincide to substantially reverse the process of decline in the Gaelic group or to encourage a process of revitalisation. Up to the present, GLP has been experienced as language promotion in the context of the Gaelic group's societal demise. In our analysis below, we contend that the post-2005 focus on the status-building agenda, not being sufficiently focused on the social reality of the speaker group, has engendered a Pyrrhic victory for Gaelic visibility in civil administration and in sectoral institutional provision, but it has achieved this by diverting attention away from the ongoing process towards vernacular erasure. We also recognise the challenges involved in re-assessing and refocusing LP, especially in the context of the embedded client-based system of current GLP. It is not uncommon for those with beneficial interests in publicly funded initiatives, emanating from minority language policy, to justify official LP despite the lack of evidence of successful LP uptake in actual communities.

As we discuss below, GLP currently prioritises the programmed acquisition of Gaelic (e.g., in schools or other formal planned situations) over the spontaneous acquisition (e.g., in families and communities) of the language. A materialist/functionalist approach to GLP reform should be relevant to varying social networks of speakers and learners and should ensure the equitable distribution of LP resource to support their acquisitional and functional requirements, whether spontaneous or programmed. Supporting the social requirements of the minority-language group in their various social geographies is required (cf. Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, 2020: 362). Credible minority LP should be primarily focused on the societal reality of minority-language speakers and learners rather than on superficial aspirations for an imagined future.

In calling for a root-and-branch reappraisal of GLP and for the implementation of a socio-economically relevant process of minority community development, we acknowledge that the regeneration of Gaelic group from the current vulnerable situation is going to be very challenging, but a language-in-society approach, suggested here and in Ó Giollagáin *et al.* (2020)

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(henceforth as GCVC), is much more likely to yield productive outcomes than the GLP *status quo*.

### **Differentiating Gaelic Language Policy from Minority-Language Policy and Planning**

Given the level of threat to the social continuity of the Gaelic vernacular group, as depicted in GCVC, this paper will examine whether the vernacular group in these island communities has been subject to a process of LS through Asocial Minority-Language Policy (ALP) (cf. GCVC: 386). LS via ALP refers to a societal process in which a subordinated language minority undergoes LS and cultural assimilation into the majority language of the socio-politically dominant group, despite the official status which has been offered to the minority. ALP refers to the ideologically asocial aspects of LP which prioritise the civic symbolic capital, rather than the social capital, of the minority-language group. In opting for minority-language symbolism, ALP is not sufficiently focused on creating a realistic pragmatic by which the minority can improve their social capacity to withstand the pressures threatening their societal continuity. This 'societal circumvention' in ALP ideology obscures or minimises the social reality of LS. The resulting ideological obfuscation, rather than clarification, in LP serves to enable LS to the detriment of those in the minority community wishing to reverse the process. In ALP, LS occurs within the context of circumscribed ethnolinguistic rights extended to the minority and in conjunction with the provision of limited state resources and institutional support to promote issues of cultural and linguistic diversity. LS via ALP is, therefore, a societal process that occurs within the framework of official recognition which has been sanctioned by majority political culture, but where the dynamic of ethnolinguistic erasure continues unabated in contradiction to well-meaning official aspirations - a case of social outcomes not corresponding with stated policy. This contradictory aspect of language demise despite official recognition will be discussed further below.

In addition to delineating the features of ALP, this paper will identify the core elements of GLP, as an example of ALP. GLP's primary feature is that it prioritises language promotion without being sufficiently focused on issues of language protection (see the discussion in Ó Giollagáin and Ó Curnáin (forthcoming) on Language Protection). We will discuss how GLP relates to the international discourse of minority-language rights and how it interacts with the societal issue of language loss or death.

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We do not employ the concept of Gaelic language planning, as distinct from policy, in this article because it does not pertain to much of the current official dispensation for Gaelic affairs in Scotland. Language planning from the minority-language perspective is in essence rooted in:

- a. a pragmatic dynamic between language communities, official bodies and mechanisms of local and civic political leadership based on a collective understanding and desire to implement the required interdependent strategies to improve the societal condition of a minoritised or disfavoured language group; and
- b. mutually reinforcing institutional collaboration and cross-community cooperation to enhance the communal agency and capacity of minority-language speakers to sustain themselves as a differentiated socio-cultural group.

Given the obvious limitations in current GLP in mitigating the assimilative trends and dominance of English in the remaining social geography of vernacular Gaelic, the language plans and procedures emerging from *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* 'Gaelic Usage' initiatives fall short of what could be considered effective language planning. (See also Spolsky's (2009: 5) discussion on the 'ambiguity' of the term 'policy' in relation to language management.) Certain constituencies of Gaelic speakers can, of course, benefit individually and sectorally from GLP provisions, but equating current GLP with relevant language planning for Gaelic communities is not credible as GLP does not engender a cooperative systematic engagement with the societal reality of Gaelic in Scotland.

The implementation of GLP has not led to a productive dynamic between communities and public bodies. Much of the cultural logic of Gaelic sectoral provision arising from the 2005 Gaelic Act is not rooted in a systematic overview of Gaelic societal priorities. For this reason, the Act's mechanisms emphasise the symbolic appeal and civic aspirations for Gaelic, as opposed to more targeted socio-cultural and socio-economic planning mechanisms which could be advantageous to a threatened language group. The Act mostly provides for the individual participation in Gaelic institutional promotion while neglecting to specify social structures and supportive collective initiatives which could prolong the lifecycle of a fragile language community. Similar to Scott's (2020) contention about aspects of 'high-modernist' social planning, GLP is impeded sociolinguistically by a social policy misjudgement whereby the human subject is abstracted out of context: '[t]he power and precision of high-modernist schemes depended not only on bracketing contingency but also on standardizing the subjects of development' (Scott, 2020: 343–346). Standardisation in

GLP is primarily focused on the dominant culture's interest in the civic appeal of Gaelic cultural capital, rather than on the social capital or the societal salience of the Gaelic group.

### **Derivative Thinking in the Legislative Framework for Gaelic Language Policy**

The primary legislative instrument in Scotland guiding the implementation of GLP and the disbursement of public funds for Gaelic affairs is the 2005 Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act. As Dunbar (2011: 69) has pointed out, the act may have raised the public profile of Gaelic issues in Scotland, but there is still considerable public debate as to the effectiveness of this legislation for minority language societal engagement (cf. Allan and Crouse, 2020). The 2005 Act established *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* as the statutory (LP) agency and a semi-state Gaelic promotion body. The provisions of the Act set out the framework for the creation of Gaelic language plans in Scottish public bodies.

*Bòrd na Gàidhlig's* language plan framework borrowed from the process previously implemented by the Welsh Language Board across the public sector in Wales and from legislative provisions in the 2003 Irish Official Languages Act (Dunbar 2006: 17), which in turn were modelled to a considerable extent on the 1988 Canadian Language Act.<sup>3</sup> Gaelic language plans were to be the formal policy instruments to increase the profile and visibility of the language by providing for the use of Gaelic in the delivery of certain public services with the expectation that this would help raise the status of Gaelic in the public domain. However, the limitations of the 2005 Gaelic Act are evidenced in the weak societal added value which the language plan process has brought to bear on the more difficult social tasks of encouraging language revitalisation in the context of language community regeneration. The limitations of the provider-focused emphasis on the language plan process can be linked back to three fundamental analytical omissions in how the Act was conceived and devised. These conceptual weaknesses relate to issues of context, diagnostics and strategic feasibility:

**Context:** The underlying thinking informing the aims and provisions of the Act was derived from frameworks developed for other sociolinguistic contexts (Canadian, Welsh and Irish). This derivative aspect of the Act's sociolinguistic foundation meant that it lacked sufficient context-specific originality for a highly threatened language. Additionally, the Act lacked specificity regarding remedial measures to

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protect the vulnerable societal state of the vernacular group. This contributed to an ambiguity in the strategic vision of the Act as an instrument of societal engagement. It offered little more than the largely symbolic civic promotion of a non-dominant minority language. This is one of the generic features common to much of the language-planning framework entailed in these forms of language legislation.

**Diagnostics:** The operational framework emanating from the Act presumes the existence of a speaker group that is more stable and demographically robust than is the case of Gaelic in Scotland. There is an obvious element of political and administrative expediency involved in not addressing difficult social issues of minority language regeneration. For example, symbolic LP in Ireland since the 1970s has been sufficient to placate those with a professional or heritage/culturist interest in Irish. The Irish-language referent class (see the discussion on the minority-language referent class below) has been recruited to this asocial LP framework by the distribution of public resources focused on the programmed and civic use of Irish. Managing the symbolic-focused demise of the language group has been the core aspect of Irish LP from the 1970s onwards (see Ó Giollaáin 2014a, 2014b). The superficial assumption that LS dynamics could be arrested by the circumscribed practice of Scottish Gaelic in public bodies and the growth in the numbers of Gaelic learners as a result of school provision for Gaelic has not been borne out by reality. This weakness poses a credibility issue for the continued reliance on the Act, as it is currently formulated, as the primary policy instrument supporting Gaelic in Scotland.

**Strategic Feasibility:** Given the combined effects of the lack of specific context in the Act and the misapplication of sociolinguistic diagnostics to the contemporary condition of the Gaelic group, the level of innovation that would be required to protect existing Gaelic vernacular communities and promote new networks of Gaelic speakers was always going to be impossibly constrained, as was initially predicted (see Dunbar (2000: 69, 74; subsequently 2011: 63) on aspects of community engagement in GLP). The formulaic civic promotion of a disadvantaged minority language is proving to be too ineffective in arresting the legacy of previous unsympathetic policies which have shaped the decline of Gaelic, and in reversing the dominant social position of English in Gaelic's social geography.

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Fifteen years of the Act's implementation has resulted in an unbalanced focus on formal education and the adult learner community while the critical sociolinguistic state of the vernacular Gaelic group has not been afforded adequate official attention and resource to deal with the level of challenge involved.

### **The Individualisation of Gaelic Affairs**

The implementation of the Gaelic Act since 2005 has occurred in tandem with a growing sense of the individualisation of Gaelic affairs, whereby socially adroit and talented individuals avail proactively of the opportunities which the sectoral promotion of Gaelic has provided. Gaelic affairs in Scotland are now characterised by an incongruous juxtaposition of the language's challenging societal situation and the civic aspirations for Gaelic. A dwindling vernacular-speaking community has been largely disregarded in the official promotion of opportunities in Gaelic-medium broadcasting, in the promotion of Gaelic performance and the arts, and in facilitating participation in GME innovation and in scholarship on Gaelic heritage and culture. The promotion of the civic appeal and of the cultural assets of the indigenous Gaelic group in various minority-language sectors is now clearly at odds with the societal requirements of protecting the Gaelic group's sociolinguistic viability and continuity. In selecting for individualised engagement with Gaelic culture, GLP signifies rather than addresses the growing social atomisation of the remnants of the Gaelic indigenous community as it is terminally assimilated into English-language dominant society. In this asocial context, the mechanisms arising from the Act became a source of middle-class advantage for those associated with the sectoral provision of Gaelic officialdom. The incongruity of individualised opportunity in the context of collective sociolinguistic demise has contributed significantly to the sense of estrangement of the Gaelic vernacular group from GLP officialdom.

### **Neo-liberal Gaelic Policy**

In the official disregard of issues of Gaelic societal decline, GLP has been developed as a state-backed neo-liberal endeavour, combining the asocial civic promotion of Gaelic with the over-prioritisation of aspirations for GME to reverse the societal shift to English (see the discussion on GME in GCVC: Chaps 4 and 8). (Re)establishing the link between GLP, on the one hand and Gaelic

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cultural resources (episteme) and the societal context of the Gaelic community (demos), on the other, will be required if GLP is to avoid being generally perceived as an empty official gesture. Surely, if there is no provision to help sustain the Gaelic collective then the process of acquiring Gaelic and participating in secondary affinity networks of learners becomes more challenging. Socially avoidant GLP risks becoming untenable in a post-collective future. If GLP cannot engage with actual communities of Gaelic speakers now, how can its underlying thinking expect to produce social outcomes for a putative Gaelic future? It has been the reluctance and unwillingness to envisage a future emerging out of pragmatic and productive interactions with the Gaelic community's current social condition which demonstrates the symbolic future-oriented aspect of much of GLP aspirations. This is a common feature of prescribed sociolinguistic approaches to language minorities undergoing LS. The ideological discourses informing much of official LP are more of a constraint on formal processes to alleviate the social pressures towards LS than a benefit to the language minority. In the case of minority languages in general, the limited sociological relevance of the civic promotion of minority-language revivalism is detrimental to the language minority. This form of detrimental LP evades the vernacular demise of the language group by focusing on vague ideological aspirations for minority civic promotion, rather than on socio-economic capacity-building measures which could enhance the societal position of the minority.

### **Gaelic Sectoral Expenditure**

Overseeing the creation of Gaelic Language Plans among largely English-medium public bodies is the primary statutory duty the Act assigns to the *Bòrd* (Government of Scotland, 2005: §3(2)(a)). *Bòrd na Gàidhlig's* GLAIF budget (Gaelic Language Act Implementation Fund) has allocated in the period from 2006–07 to 2018–19 some £16 million of funding to assist public bodies in the implementation of their language plans. An ongoing systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of this significant allocation of public funds should be conducted to ascertain what positive language outcomes have been achieved as a result of this expenditure. The *Bòrd* allocated £632,360 to GLAIF projects for 2020–21 representing 33% of the 'Gaelic Usage' development budget. Overall, £1,063,660 was allocated to GLAIF related projects for 2020–21 representing 27.6% of the *Bòrd's* development budget of £3,855,000 (Source: BnaG Board Meeting 2 December 2020 – Financial Report to September 2020).

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*Bòrd na Gàidhlig* set aside £112,110 out of its 2020/21 ‘Gaelic Usage’ budget of £1,895,100 to support the *Taic Freumhan Coimhearsnachd* scheme (Community Roots Support), 6% of this 10-item budget line (cf. *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* 2020) and 2% of the Bòrd’s overall budget for 2020/21. This national scheme represents *Bòrd na Gàidhlig*’s main community initiative funding. This relatively small sum is not sufficient to support any credible, coordinated community effort to prevent language loss in the Gaelic vernacular group, even if it were all targeted on the vernacular context.

Table 1. indicates governmental spending on various sectors of Gaelic development from 2005 to 2019. Public subventions to support Gaelic broadcasting have absorbed 46% of the Gaelic development funding over this period, with support for Gaelic-medium education accounting for 26% of the spending, while 19% of the spending was allocated to support the civic promotion remit of *Bòrd na Gàidhlig*. Evidence of the positive political commitment to Gaelic affairs in Scotland can be found in particular in the expenditure on centrally funded Gaelic media. From the perspective of the demographic size of the speaker group, the governmental financial assistance for Gaelic in traditional and new media can be ranked proportionately among the most generous minority-language media budgetary allocations in the world.

Other positive aspects of GLP expenditure should, of course, be acknowledged. These include the growing access to GME and other curricular innovation for Gaelic language and culture. The civic focus on the importance of Gaelic to Scotland has increased the public visibility of Gaelic and has encouraged a sense of inclusiveness for those involved in Gaelic initiatives and for those wishing to participate in the activities of Gaelic organisations. GLP has contributed significantly to an awareness of the inclusive advantages of cultural diversity in Scotland. GLP resources support cultural creativity, technological and educational innovation which have been of interest to many people beyond those directly associated with Gaelic organisations. The recent significant engagement with Gaelic Duolingo reflects a desire to learn Gaelic by people living in Scotland, and abroad, and indicates one of the positive cumulative effects of the continued implementation of GLP.

## **Defining and Categorising Participation in Gaelic Language Policy**

Table 2 sets out a schema of social categorisation of participants in Gaelic social and official networks which have arisen from the existing Gaelic policy framework and the distribution of its related funding. The columns indicate the



**Table 1:  
Scottish Government Expenditure Allocations to Primary Development Areas for Scottish Gaelic 2005 to 2019 (£Million)**

Category	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	Total	As% of Total
Gaelic Broadcasting	8.5	11.9	11.9	12.4	12.4	12.4	11.8	11.8	11.8	12.8	12.8	12.8	12.8	12.8	168.9	46%
Gaelic Education	3.9	5.2	6.1	6.6	8.9	8.2	7.6	7.9	6.6	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	93.8	26%
Bòrd na Gàidhlig	2.9	4.7	4.4	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.2	69.5	19%
Capital expenditure	0	0.3	0.4	0.4	1.2	1.1	1.4	1.4	6	4	4	4	4	4	32.0	9%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>15.3</b>	<b>22.0</b>	<b>22.8</b>	<b>24.9</b>	<b>28.0</b>	<b>27.1</b>	<b>25.9</b>	<b>26.3</b>	<b>29.6</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>364.2</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Scottish Government - [https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-18-01112/Bord na Gaidhlig Annual Accounts 2006-07 to 2018-19](https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-18-01112/Bord%20na%20Gaidhlig%20Annual%20Accounts%202006-07%20to%202018-19)

**Table 2:**  
**Schema of Social Categories arising from Gaelic Language Policy**

1. Category/ Group Status	2. Referent Class	3. Professional Category	4. Social Group
<b>A. Power</b>	<i>Devising &amp; Resourcing decisions</i>	<i>Operational Recipients responsible for implementing policy</i>	<i>Social Recipients</i>
<b>B. Roles/Position</b>	Cultural and Philological Scholars	Junior/Middle-ranking media professionals	Autochthonous middle class
	Creative/Aesthetic Practitioners	Middle-ranking LP professionals	Middle class L2 Acquirers
	Senior Media Professionals	Language-specialists professionals*	Non-professional L2 Acquirers
	Senior LP Professionals LP and Language Status Academics	Local language officials	Non-professional vernacular speakers of Gaelic
<b>C. Influence</b>	Devise LP policy Decide on LP priorities and context for resource allocation Frame public perception Expectation management	Institutional, sectoral and local influence. *Teachers; translators; publishers/editors; corpus planners and other language professionals	Influence of participating in non-specialist minority-speaker social interactions. General L1 and L2 members of communities/networks

groups and categories operating within these networks/social contexts and the rows indicate the power, roles and influence of the various participants. This categorisation identifies three groupings of which two have power and influence over decision making processes which determine the distribution of socio-economic advantage entailed in GLP and shape the social interactions of those engaging with the Gaelic official bodies. The most important determinant in the distribution of advantage from public policy initiatives is the nature of the Referent Class (Column 2). The Referent Class denotes those individuals with whom the political or power class consults when decisions on policies and official priorities are required. Reading the columns from the top and from left to right indicates the current hierarchy of influence in Gaelic affairs. The Referent Class is normally drawn from those having significant institutional power and professional expertise. Row B in Column 2

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shows the set of professionals which constitutes the Gaelic Referent Class, and Row C in Column 2 indicates their influence over GLP. The Professional Category in Column 3 is made up of those with the professional skills to implement the policy decisions of the Referent Class. They are the operational recipients of the GLP which the Gaelic Referent Class devises. The Gaelic Social Group in Column 4 are the social recipients of GLP which the Professional Category has operationalised for them. The breadth of policy concerns devised by the Referent Class and put into operation by the Professional Category determines the scope of GLP as experienced by the Social Group. The public policy question arising from this categorisation centres on the scope of the civic and professional supports available to the Gaelic Social Group resulting from GLP priorities. The Social Group experiences GLP as a series of institutional projects in which cultural promotion is backed by educational and media initiatives which are reliant on the skills of language and technical professionals. In the practice of GLP arising from the Act, the socio-political dimension of public strategy for the Gaelic Social Group has remained inchoate.

One of the strategic weaknesses of the language-board approach (e.g., *Bòrd na Gàidhlig*) for a societally fragile language group is that state-backed processes of socio-economic development are not necessarily integrated into language-community supports. *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* is a relatively small state entity with no specific responsibility or budget for community development. The current language-focused sectoral priorities of Gaelic promotion imply in essence that socio-economic development is undertaken by English-medium state bodies which serve a geographic rather than a specific cultural population. In this context, socio-economic modernisation and language promotion are strategically bifurcated.

### **Socially Dissociated Minority-Language Promotion**

The socially dissociated promotion of Gaelic official status is evidenced in the language-sector development approach of the 2005 Act's GLP aims. This dissociation is seen in the insufficient strategic focus on efforts to reverse generations of ethnolinguistic decline among the Gaelic group. The promotion of Gaelic mainly in schools, media and status-building language plans in public administration has been beneficial for the civic profile of Gaelic in Scotland, but GLP has been ineffectual as a social policy instrument because it does not address the societal decline of the existing Gaelic group. If the 2005 Act had been framed to contend with the societal vulnerability of the

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Gaelic group in Scotland, the potential for aligning status-building measures with communal engagement would have been significantly enhanced. There is a stark divergence between the civic assertion of 'equal' status of Gaelic with English in Scotland and the reality of the communal struggles of the remaining Gaelic vernacular communities to resist their end-game assimilation into English monolingualisation. This reality gap poses a severe credibility issue for continuing with the existing GLP processes which have emerged from the Act.

Unlike the proportional dominance of L2 acquirers of Irish in Ireland (Ó Riagáin, 1997, 2008), most fluent speakers of Gaelic in Scotland have acquired their proficiency through the spontaneous processes of familial or communal transfer (see the discussion below on Calvet's (2006) spontaneous acquisition). Despite the official promotion of GLP for over a generation, no coherent policy or set of initiatives has been devised or implemented to date to sustain and develop this cohort of speakers in their various community and networked contexts in the islands, or in Gaelic migrant networks in urban Scotland. While the focus on the societally less complex issues of school provision and institutional supports for Gaelic learners may be laudable as LP aspiration, it is questionable on equitable and demographic grounds, especially when dissociated from the broader social context of Gaelic vitality. The unbalanced attention on these formal supports has constrained the capacity of GLP to address the multidimensional social and institutional requirements of various categories of Gaelic speakers and learners. Due to the lack of focus on the social aspects of Gaelic promotion, the appropriate interdependence among various speaker categories has not evolved as a mutually reinforcing social dynamic to improve the overall societal position of Gaelic in Scotland. In other words, the basic problem is that existing GLP has concentrated on the emergence of context-neutral future Gaelic speakers without paying sufficient attention to serving the requirements of the threatened Gaelic group. This neglect of the present and prioritisation of aspirations for the future has created two inter-related difficulties: a) the future-oriented institutional focus in established GLP has created a democratic deficit for the Gaelic present, and b) due to the neglect of social circumstances, GLP, as it currently exists, can only aspire to have a post-communal future.

This in-built strategic lack of relevance is addressed in the recommendations of the GCVC study. The core suggestion is that the Language Protection remit of LP in Scotland should be delegated to a Participatory Community Cooperative Trust (*Urras na Gàidhlig*, cf. Chap. 9 GCVC) which would come under the direct control of representatives of the various vernacular communities participating

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in the activities of the Trust. In practical terms, this would mean that Gaelic promotion (civic revitalisation) would remain in the hands of *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* and that *Urras na Gàidhlig* would take responsibility for Gaelic protection measures (societal maintenance and regeneration) among the vernacular communities in the islands. In bringing balance to these complementary dimensions of language development, governmental oversight of these two aspects of more effective GLP could ensure the necessary interdependence and interaction between them. Asking *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* to assume a language protection role in relation to the documented Gaelic vernacular crisis is problematic on several levels:

- a. During its 15-year existence, the *Bòrd* has not demonstrated sufficient aptitude or ambition in relation to language protection measures, as evinced in the various iterations of their National Gaelic Language Plans (see for example *Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2018*).
- b. The *Bòrd* is not viewed as an official entity which is particularly close to the concerns of vernacular Gaelic speakers (cf. GVCV: 279).
- c. The performance of the *Bòrd* in relation to its more-established language promotion measures has attracted public criticism arising from findings of an Audit Scotland investigation (cf. Auditor General of Scotland 2019) and from subsequent scrutiny in a parliamentary committee investigation (cf. Scottish Parliament Public Audit & Post-Legislative Scrutiny Committee, 2019).
- d. The project-based approach of the *Bòrd* (cf. *Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2020*) has generated a clientelist dynamic (cf. McLeod, 2020: 52–53 and Jones *et al.*, 2016) in various Gaelic communities, networks and public entities which is often dissociated from the societal reality of speakers in communities.
- e. The defensive approach of *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* to the findings and recommendations of the GVCV in the months following the publication of the study in July 2020 suggests so far that the *Bòrd's* inclination and resolve to reassess its strategic position and operations are limited.

### **Theoretical Frameworks for Analysing Language Group Decline**

Hermann Batibo (2005), specialising in African languages, emphasises the hierarchical dynamic in language-group relations with stronger or weaker

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languages – see also de Swaan’s (2000, 2010: 56) ‘global language system’; and Dorian’s (1981) critical mass perspective):

However, in the final analysis one should remember that all languages of the world are part of a food chain in which, at one end, there is English, the super-international language that dominates all the languages of the world, and, at the other end, there are the weakest languages. Every language except English is under some form of pressure. This means that, apart from English, the maintenance of the world’s languages is a relative matter. Some languages are able to sustain themselves better than others. (Batibo, 2005: 107)

From this perspective, the capacity of a language group to maintain its societal position is contingent on its collective ability to control or manage its sociolinguistic relationship with the group’s socio-geographically relevant competitor(s).

Louis-Jean Calvet (2006) has produced a societal diagnostic for language vitality which is particularly compelling for recessive minority-language communities. His analysis of language group vitality rests on three aspects: the Ecological Position, Mode of Acquisition and Direction of Acquisition pertaining to the societal situation of the language (Calvet, 2006: 60–61):

**The Ecological Position** refers to the relative position of languages in interlingual power dynamics between stronger Central Languages (cf. de Swaan, 2001) and weaker Peripheral Languages.

**The Mode of Acquisition** contrasts the Spontaneous Acquisition (e.g., in families and communities) with the Programmed Acquisition (e.g., in schools or other formal planned situations) of a language.

**The Direction of Acquisition** contrasts the societal context of Vertical Bilingualism (e.g., the processes by which languages of asymmetrical status are acquired) with that of Horizontal Bilingualism (e.g., the acquisition of language with similar societal power).

Applying this three-component diagnostic to Scottish Gaelic, based on the statistical data of the GCVC, we can define the societal situation of Scottish Gaelic in its:

**Ecological Position** as a peripheral endangered language with small vernacular group (c. 11,000, GCVC: 343) in advanced LS, which benefits from institutionally circumscribed formal supports.

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**Mode of Acquisition** as an increasingly programmed language, with dwindling spontaneous capacities for familial and communal acquisition.

**Direction of Acquisition** as conforming to the compulsory Vertical upward Acquisition of English for remaining Gaelic vernacular speakers, alongside the optional downward acquisition for non-vernacular acquirers who are in a position to benefit from the programmed opportunities for Gaelic acquisition.

In the context of the symbolic civic promotion of Scottish Gaelic without sufficient measures for vernacular protection, the following three-component prognosis for Scottish Gaelic, under existing circumstances, will emerge as indicated in its:

**Ecological Position** as a peripheral non-vernacular secondary language.

**Mode of Acquisition** as being reliant on programmed acquisition.

**Direction of Acquisition** as vertical downward acquisition of a low-status language by speakers of a high-status language, i.e., minority language bilinguals who are almost exclusively L1 speakers of English.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Gaelic's existence in Scottish society is limited to four dimensions: societal, institutional, ideological and cultural. In the societal sphere it exists as a vestigial vernacular language of about 11,000 people in the islands, in which a majority belong to the 50-year plus age cohort, as demonstrated in the GVCV, and in small, private social networks of migrant speakers and L2 affinity networks in other parts of Scotland. In the institutional dimension, Gaelic is mainly experienced as an L2-acquired language in marginal educational provision from which little discernible socially productive use emerges, outside of its institutional context. As a result of the ideological activism underpinning its official status (cf. McLeod, 2020: 245–273), Gaelic is a focus for symbolic assertions in civic politics and in identitarian discourses. Gaelic is also widely accepted as a source of aesthetic inspiration for cultural production in the arts and media. However, in all these dimensions the social and cultural capital of the Gaelic group exists in a subordinated relationship to the societal, institutional and cultural power of English-language pre-eminence.

In a post-vernacular situation, aspiring to acquire or display a minority identity is a commendable option. However, in the minority-language context where both ascribed (communally acquired) and achieved identities are possible (see Goodhart, 2020: 31) on 'achieved identities', LP should focus sufficiently on the various social geographies, and on relevant social and formal

supports for vernacular and programmed minority-language practice and identity. The problem with prioritising achieved over ascribed identity is that this form of LP is disempowering for the vernacular group without providing for the integration of minority L2 learners and vernacular speakers in cohesive language protection and promotion measures, i.e., it is dually negative. Armstrong (2020) discusses the issues involved in opting for minority-Gaelic identity and performance, particularly in programmed, culturist contexts. He discusses performed identity and minority-language competence which circumvents societal processes of acquisition and functionality.

### **Language Shift in Asocial Minority-Language Policy**

This section considers the implications of implementing language policies which avoid or are in denial of the process of language loss among the minority-language speaker group. As stated above, Language Shift (LS) in Asocial Minority-Language Policy (ALP) is defined as a societal process by which a language minority undergoes socio-cultural erasure as a result of succumbing to the asymmetrical socio-political pressures of a subordinating majority group, despite the majority's formalised stated aspiration to symbolically promote the minority as a distinct social entity. In other words, the official relationship between the majority and minority language culture is depicted as ostensibly positive and non-hostile in relation to the ethnolinguistic interactions between the small bilingual minority and the stronger monolingual majority. LS in ALP occurs, therefore, in contravention of publicly professed ideals of state bodies.

LS via ALP differs from more hostile versions of majoritarian LS, whereby the majority overtly disregard the socio-political requirements and cultural context of the disadvantaged minority (cf. Wee, 2011). LS via ALP can proceed according to similar socio-political processes found in hostile majoritarian LS, but the version of LS in ALP has added dimensions: a) the minority is being assimilated into an ostensibly sympathetic dominant culture; and b) they operate in accordance with the ideological and administrative constraints entailed in being granted official status and associated limited institutional provision. In other words, LS via ALP refers to the social process of minority language loss in the context of official minority-language promotion.

Besides the obvious trend towards societal language loss, the primary characteristic of LS in ALP is the neglect of the strategic implementation of coordinated social initiatives aimed at protecting and enhancing the social position of the language minority in the symbolic focus on LP. This disjuncture



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between the symbolic engagement with the minority language issues and the challenging social reality of being a speaker of the subordinated language is experienced more profoundly in the districts where higher social densities of minority speakers are found, as they witness the reduction in generational minority-language transfer and the associated contraction in domain use. On the other hand, in districts with no or marginal speaker densities, some formal recognition or institutional practice of a formerly disfavoured minority language may appear as positive progress. In this regard, symbolic LP is more focused on the majority's interest in the minority culture than on the social stability of minority-speaking communities.

Ideally, of course, increasing the symbolic value of the minority language among majority language speakers should be advantageous to the minority language communities, if this form of language promotion is conducted alongside a broader programme of socio-economic and cultural supports for the *in situ* minority-speaking group. However, it is more typical for minority LP to be focused on the individual optional take-up of minority-language opportunity, made available via limited institutional (mainly educational) provision. If the ultimate aim of minority-LP is not made sufficiently explicit in recognisable, mandated, social strategies which protect and develop the social use of the minority language in existing communities and putative new networks, language promotion bodies will struggle to transcend the symbolic aspects of their engagement with the language. This neoliberal constraint on policy development precludes the adoption of the required systematic approach to the language minority's social challenges. Though laudable in their own contexts, the prioritisation of the following commonly adopted minority-language promotional efforts represents an evasive and asocietal aspect of minority-LP, if implemented independent of social context:

- Promoting minority-language curricular initiatives and educational programmes
- Increasing the aesthetic appeal of the minority culture among majority speakers
- Increasing the visibility of the minority language in the administrative and civic sphere
- Interpreting the cultural assets of and developing identitarian discourses for the minority in a multitude of electronic media platforms.

When symbolic assertion obscures societal reality the minority group is left in the unappealing position of having to acquiesce in a policy process

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which fundamentally ignores the primary socio-cultural issue threatening their social continuity and sustainability – namely, the social pressures which cause language group decline. This is especially true for the communities in which the greatest levels of intergenerational language transmission had traditionally occurred. Officially sanctioned minority-language promotion which evades this core issue is the central feature of ALP.

LS in ALP is recognisable in the supposedly socially neutral civic promotion of minority language cultures where LS is clearly evident. ALP, of course, can only be superficially neutral as LS is the result of the well-established ideological and structural dominance of the stronger socio-cultural competitor. This tension between the civic expectation of official policy and the troubling reality of the speaker group creates an ethnolinguistic dissonance: speakers are left to invest hope in a LP which is not sufficiently grounded in how receding minority languages exist in society. This dissonance is further exacerbated by status-planning measures which overly identify (Fishman, 1991: 382) with the aspirations of centrally devised LP, especially the formal provision for schools and other institutional supports. The limitations of foisting aspirational expectations on schools in the absence of more productive LP outcomes in society has been highlighted in the Irish context (Ó Riagáin, 1997). Fishman (1991: 130) frames the limitations of the symbolic approach as follows:

Clearly, no matter how important they may be, courses, concerts and reading or listening matter whether for the old or for the young do not themselves create a speech community. Neither goodwill nor competence nor even leisure-time language use translates automatically into the basic building-blocks of home-family-neighborhood-community life that alone can lead to inter-generational language transmission.

On one level, deference or adherence to utopian thinking in GLP is understandable. This can often come from a sense of respect for, or a fear of losing favour among, the official hierarchies promoting the policies. On the other hand, the detriment involved in prioritising measures rooted in utopian aspiration is that:

- a) the language minority can be desensitised to the social processes undermining their socio-cultural viability.
- b) they can often be recruited or enticed to support the symbolic assertions in LP despite the marginal impact that they have on the more pressing social reality of the threats to their sustainability.

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- c) they absolve the language majority of their culpability in the assimilation of the minority.

GLP is more focused on maintaining obeisance to the sectoral framework for Gaelic promotion than sustaining Gaelic as a community language. This is the critical obfuscating aspect of GLP in relation to LS. Stressing the symbolic importance of the minority language in contexts where the social dimension of language planning is underdeveloped can encourage identitarian reassurance about the importance of diversity, without being of sufficient benefit to the minority undergoing decline (see Brooks and Roberts 2013). However, those who attach some socio-political value to the utopian aspects of the LP are more likely to be in a client-based relationship with the officials administering the budgets emanating from LP (cf. McLeod, 2020: 53 on Gaelic clientelism). For this reason, it is not uncommon for those interested in minority language issues to justify official LP despite the lack of evidence of successful LP uptake in actual communities.

Fishman (1991: 382) explains the lack of natural affinity among officialdom with the day-to-day social concerns of a low-status language group as follows:

The most general reason for the neglect of RLS (Reversing Language Shift) is probably the fact that RLS is an activity of minorities, frequently powerless, unpopular with outsiders and querulous among themselves; it is an activity that is very often unsuccessful and that strikes many intelligent laymen and otherwise intelligent social scientists as 'unnatural' ... It is hard for self-serving mainstream intellectual spokesmen and institutions to be sympathetic to the lingering, cantankerous, neither fully alive nor fully dead quality of many (perhaps most) efforts on behalf of receding minority languages (and the majority of sidestream scholars too are ultimately dependent on the mainstream for their perspectives, if not for their very livelihoods).

### **Limitations in Societal Engagement in ALP**

Aspects of Gaelic LS via ALP can also be observed in the lack of acknowledgement – despite previous warnings – of the parlous societal reality and the marginal level of social engagement at the heart of GLP. The weak relationship between GLP and Gaelic community development has had a soporific effect on Gaelic communities. The official neglect of Gaelic community development in the context of Gaelic societal decline meant that the civic promotion approach was unlikely to animate participation in GLP efforts. GLP may have encouraged

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a public deference to the authority of those who have been charged with responsibility for less-than-optimal official policies, but it is erroneous to interpret this deference as community support among the Gaelic group for Gaelic officialdom. If policies cannot be reformulated relatively quickly, GLP risks becoming part of the problem and an obstacle to finding official mechanisms by which the Gaelic minority can protect their societal situation against language loss.

We summarise below the various components in which LS via ALP occurs according to four criteria: 1) process; 2) structure; 3) mentality; and 4) societal trend:

**Process:** On the one hand, the societally dissociated focus on the status-building agenda in minority LP allows for the full institutional agency and social integration of majority speakers in the social geography of bilingual minority speakers. And on the other, this focus does not enhance the agency or cooperative capacity of the language minority to intervene collectively against the social process driving their assimilation into the dominant culture. The continuation of the social process towards LS, despite the implementation of LP, gives rise to a credibility issue for minority-language promotion in that LP aspiration does not result in the expected strategic advantage for the existing community of minority bilinguals. In ALP, policy aspiration and social outcomes do not sufficiently coincide to substantially reverse the process of social demise or to encourage a process of revitalisation among the minority.

**Structure:** Minority LP is backed by well-meaning official rhetoric about the importance of social and institutional respect for linguistic diversity, but it is generally restricted to supports which are provided by specialists in technocratic language sectors. As many of the minority-language specialists are often recruited from among out-group individuals who have acquired a proficiency in the minority language through formal educational supports, there is a tendency in LP to enable this outgroup agency and to promote their high-achieving perspective in minority LP formal provision. In other words, minority LP reflects more the concerns of the LP service ascendancy charged with implementing LP than the expected target recipients of LP, particularly in the vernacular context (see the discussion above on the Gaelic Referent Class and the Professional Category). To this extent, ALP represents an institutionalised assignment system rather than a communal support arrangement. While the establishment and

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development of minority language sectoral provision may require ideological justification against majoritarian prejudice, ALP generally eschews a materialist/functionalist analysis of the social requirements of the minority, especially in the non-specialist, day-to-day social sphere relating to the orality<sup>4</sup> of the minority culture. This weak focus on socio-economic and societal contexts brings about a provision-led system in LP, rather than giving rise to a dynamic which builds communal capacity to address collective challenges.

**Mentality:** As minority LP is sanctioned by mainstream political mechanisms, the sectoral supports tend to evolve in accordance with how the minority is perceived or valued in majority political culture. The cultural assets of the minority are often more attractive and comprehensible to the majority than the complexities of reinforcing the vernacular group's social capital. For this reason, LS in ALP occurs within an intellectual and discursive framework which is primarily 'culturalist' and can be reinforced by a 'perspectivist' approach in postmodernist sociolinguistic discourses.<sup>5</sup>

**Societal trend:** Contrary to official and ideological assertions of minority-language support, ALP appears to adopt a neutral aspect in relation to majority-language practice as it becomes detrimental to core domains for minority language sustainability. This superficial neutrality in ALP has three primary negative effects: a) LP acquiesces in the social processes of LS; b) the language minority group is not afforded socio-economic resources and strategic supports to counter the established societal trends towards its erasure; and c) it prevents the development of overarching minority-focused Language Policy and Planning (LPP), i.e., it obstructs a comprehensive approach to minority social policy. Therefore, in the societal trend towards minority language erasure in Scotland, we observe the successful outcome for LPP focused on English (more normalised than specified) and the redundancy of the LP focused on Gaelic.

In the context of the lack of strategic resistance to the monolingualising dynamic of English-language normativity, language promotion without language protection would inevitably conclude in LS in vulnerable Gaelic vernacular communities, despite GLP's aspirations. There are two processes at play here: a) the long-term assimilation of the Gaelic group into English-language socio-cultural dominance; and b) the incongruity of GLP collapsing in on its own contradictions. The occurrence of advanced-stage

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LS within the remaining social geography of vernacular Gaelic after over a generation of GLP initiatives has exposed the social irrelevance of promoting a minority language without communal protection.

LS in ALP can, therefore, be depicted sociolinguistically as:

LS in ALP = socially disengaged LP + loss of societal salience  
+ contraction of social geography + remotely controlled modernisation + sectoralisation of language use; ALP  $\neq$  RLS.

Up to the present, GLP has been experienced as language promotion in the context of societal demise of the Gaelic group. Following LS, GLP, given the *status quo*, will entail language promotion without communal or societal context, and could be depicted as follows:

Post-LS = GLP + language bodies + programmed secondary acquisition;  
Post-LS = Post-societal Gaelic.

In short, GLP, following the conclusion of the LS process under the *status quo*, would be restricted to Gaelic promotion in the absence of Gaelic society.

## **Options for GLP in the context of LS via ALP**

In this section, we examine the LP options which could be adopted in current LS circumstances. The following discussion builds on the analysis and recommendations of Chaps. 8 and 9 in GCVC.

### **Option 1**

Continuing with the *status quo* is an option, meaning that no new initiatives or strategy would be considered to tackle LS in ALP. From the perspective of those living with LS, this would entail continuing with the bureaucratised box-ticking of *Bòrd na Gàidhlig's* language-plan processes (cf. Williams (2013: 104) on the 'over-bureaucratized process' in Irish LP). Those supporting current GLP could continue to emphasise the importance of Gaelic identity to civil society in Scotland by accentuating the expected outcomes of institutional provision for Gaelic. This would require coordinated official efforts to deflect attention away from the decline of the day-to-day use of Gaelic in communities. This *status quo* option would essentially prioritise the programmed acquisition and institutional practice of Gaelic as a compensation for its vernacular loss. This would amount to the easy option, but for reasons discussed above, it would lack credibility because the Language Board approach has not prospered in either L1

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or L2 Gaelic contexts. It would also demonstrate to the public that *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* is incapable of deviating from a path dependency which is primarily focused on the status-building provisions of the 2005 Act, despite the weak relevance of GLP to current circumstances and underproductive outcomes deriving from its underlying thinking.

### Option 2

Abolishing *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* and transferring responsibility for Gaelic affairs to the Scottish Government could also be considered. In a post-LS situation, the rationale for Gaelic-language promotion will become more questionable, as GLP will be promoting a language for which no native-speaking, vernacular community survives. Post-LS GLP could be considered as an empty civic gesture after the sociolinguistic horse has bolted. In addition to jettisoning some of the pretence of current aspects of GLP, this approach would entail an admission among relevant public bodies in Scotland that reversing LS is too difficult as a societal initiative and too onerous as a collective task for exhausted, peripheral communities who had previously endured pressures of ethnolinguistic erasure or who had been disillusioned by ineffectual GLP. In the post-LS situation, a refocus of policy on educational and cultural identity issues might adequately satisfy the aspirations of those interested in Gaelic heritage following vernacular decline. In this approach, the Scottish Government could oversee a council-led series of curricular and educational initiatives to support the learning of Gaelic in schools and colleges. This educational promotion could be reinforced by grant aid to support the establishment of Gaelic affinity networks or Gaelic social clubs for those who have learned the language to practise it and to develop their interest in Gaelic culture and heritage with like-minded individuals. The political drawback of this approach is that it abandons the vernacular Gaels to their fate. But, on the other hand, it would represent a more honest version of the prevailing trend of the GLP *status quo*.

This option would represent the line of least resistance for English-speaking Scotland for two reasons: a) it consigns to history the seemingly intractable socio-cultural challenges of having to contend with the social policy responsibility for a subordinated minority culture; and b) it confines publicly backed Gaelic affairs to complementary domains of educational innovation and to opportunities associated with cultural heritage. It is predicated on a relatively banal, post-societal version of Gaelic culture which might be sufficient to maintain civic perceptions of how Gaelic contributes to versions of national

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identity in Scotland, but which is not ambitious enough to burden policy makers with the socio-political concerns of a minority-language group. Although this could be considered a severe option in official circles, it would at least dispense with the notional aspect of support for Gaelic communities inherent in much of recent GLP.

### Option 3

Amending current GLP to include language protection measures alongside existing language promotion could be feasible. This would entail establishing *Urras na Gàidhlig*, a Gaelic Community Cooperative Trust, as suggested in Chapter 9 of GCVC, to implement revitalisation measures in the remaining vernacular context of Scottish Gaelic in the islands. *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* would continue with its language promotion remit in the national context and would attempt to coordinate its activities in a complementary way with the language protection remit of the newly established *Urras na Gàidhlig*. The benefit of this option is that it would allow for the continuation of existing official activity of language bodies while broadening the societal remit of GLP to include relevant social supports for Gaelic-speaking communities in crisis.

### Option 4

Abolishing *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* and establishing *Urras na Gàidhlig* as a language protection agency for Gaelic vernacular regeneration could also be considered. This option could be combined with elements of Option 2 above, especially with regards to transferring language promotion responsibilities to the Scottish Government. In this case, *Urras na Gàidhlig* would take responsibility for supporting and developing the use of Gaelic in communities, with a primary focus on its vernacular context (as discussed in more detail in Chap. 9 of GCVC), and the Scottish Government would focus on the national context. In collaboration with the councils, the Scottish Government would concentrate on developing curricular provision for Gaelic and give practical support to those who wish to establish networks of Gaelic speakers. A version of the Irish *Glór na nGael* community-support model could be advantageous to emerging L2 networks of Gaelic speakers. Option 4, therefore, combines a strategy for L1 regeneration (protection and maintenance) with a networked L2 heritage model for Gaelic. Subventions to organisations and grant aid to Gaelic projects in the arts, media and academia would continue under this option. Among the



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advantages of adopting this option are: a) the priority it gives to a community focus in Gaelic development; b) existing Gaelic communities would be liberated from the utopian illusions of symbolic GLP by providing for dynamic, practical community supports; c) it would allow for the emergence of community-based minority-language civic culture or ideologies which are rooted in their own specific situations and which are capable of being inclusive and empathetic towards the various requirements of participants in the different social geographies, networks and formal supports associated with Gaelic identity and practice. This would facilitate a much-needed horses-for-courses approach to Gaelic affairs at a time of obvious existential crisis for the Gaelic group. It would also encourage ideological plurality in Gaelic affairs and would be a check on the unhelpful discursive influence and priority claims of L2-focused language-policy ideologues in the socio-geographic context of the L1 Gaelic crisis.

### Option 5

The Scottish Government may wish to consider an entirely new departure for Gaelic policy that would be based on a review and reorientation of the 2005 Gaelic Language Act towards a community-development model for Gaelic language planning and policy. The rationale for this new approach is rooted: a) in the obvious need to move beyond the limitations of symbolic LP, as discussed above and in GVCV (Chaps 1, 8 and 9); and b) in the strategic obligation of societally focussed LP to increase the language-revitalisation capacity of the minority by enhancing their competitive socio-economic advantage. In this option the existing act would be superseded by a Gaelic Language and Community Act which would establish two new official components to replace *Bòrd na Gàidhlig: Urras na Gàidhlig* with a vernacular-regeneration remit (cf. GVCV), and the **Gaelic Language Commission** as the national language body for Gaelic development in Scotland. The Commission would set the strategic agenda for key aspects of Gaelic revitalisation:

**Acquisition and status planning:** Language Planning and Policy to enhance educational provision and opportunities for Gaelic acquisition, and to increase the civic status of Gaelic in general, also entailing research and evaluation of LPP efficacy.

**Language practice:** Development of Gaelic social networks.

**Cultural elaboration:** Gaelic in the arts, media, literature and heritage.

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Relevant formal structures and mechanisms of the Scottish Land Commission and Community Land Scotland could be similarly adapted to inform the operational procedures of the Gaelic Language Commission. The establishment of this commission would entail the appointment of a board of three commissioners with responsibility for the three policy domains above.

*Urras na Gàidhlig*, as set out in GCVC, would be the independent development body to support community regeneration initiatives in the vernacular context, and to provide advice and funding to the Gaelic Language Action Groups operating under the auspices of the *Urras* in the Highlands and Islands. The Commission and the *Urras* are envisaged as complementary bodies which would be expected to support the use of Gaelic in society, in existing Gaelic communities and in new networks of speakers. The Commission would have a national focus while the *Urras* would serve the specific regional context of Gaelic in the Highlands and Islands. However, the community-development approach of the *Urras* could be extended to other regions of the country as the Gaelic speaker networks expand. These bodies would receive core funding directly from the Scottish Government to finance a small executive staff and to support their development activities.

### **Concluding Remarks: Societal Virtues in Gaelic Policy**

The next phase of the public debate on Gaelic affairs should focus on the societal situation of the language and on developing an evaluative framework which can maximise value for money in the allocation of scarce public resources. This would help in moving GLP beyond the ineffectual aspects of the circumscribed language-rights discourse. The post-2005 focus on the status-building agenda, having been divorced from the social reality of the speaker group, may have improved Gaelic's civic profile but it has achieved this by deflecting attention away from vernacular decline. Its institutional dynamic will eventually burn itself out when the various status holders in Gaelic officialdom appear to be the most relevant recipients of Gaelic policy provision. This will become more apparent as their set of policy assumptions bear even less relevance to the expected target group with which they seek to interact. It remains to be seen how the dwindling and ethnolinguistically threatened and under-resourced speaker group will engage with the final stages of LS in ALP and whether this will entail acquiescence or resistance to the GLP *status quo*. It is already abundantly clear that, under the *status quo*, Gaelic policy will outlive the vernacular speaker group. In the *status quo*, Gaelic may have a future through institutionally backed heritage, but without communal salience in

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society. In this post-Gaelic future, a vicarious life for Gaelic through English-mediated language networks appears to be the only option on the horizon if radical change cannot be effected. A post-vernacular outcome for the GLP *status quo* will, of course, obviate the need for the complicated formal processes of that *status quo*. In this sense, GLP's avoidance of the Gaelic group's difficult societal challenges could soon transition into the corporate demise of Gaelic officialdom.

The contradiction of promoting Gaelic-themed projects and initiatives with the simultaneous acquiescence to the growing social prevalence of English in island life is an obvious factor in how the credibility of official Gaelic policy has been undermined in these communities. This superficially neutral aspect of Gaelic policy in relation to key domains for language vitality – families, local neighbourhoods, youth socialisation, communal cultural practice, comprehensive educational provision, and socio-economic advantage for speakers – has more or less voided the well-meaning aspiration in overall Gaelic policy from the perspective of the vernacular group. A false sense of progress and renewal in Gaelic officialdom has masked the malaise in the Gaelic community. Formal Gaelic policy is only tangentially relevant to the Gaelic crisis and deepens the sense of malaise among the Gaels.

Due to the asymmetrical power dynamics between the residual Gaelic group and the more dominant English-speaking community (stemming from ethnolinguistic subordination), the Gaelic bodies have been spared from more vocal public criticism of their less-than-optimal engagement with the reality of Gaelic demise in these communities. The dissipation of energy on short-term Gaelic promotion projects, along with the understandable inclination of existing clients and budget holders to protect their own interests, has not led to an open and honest official appraisal of what is happening to the Gaelic group and of how effective Gaelic bodies have been in supporting them. Crystal (2000: 108–109) has identified a shoot-the-messenger response to research indicating language endangerment among those who 'refuse to accept that their language is "endangered" ... they may object most strongly to having such labels used about them'. However, the lack of sustained focus on the strategic needs of Gaelic native speakers has undoubtedly undermined the authority of Gaelic officialdom in these communities. More of the same non-systematic approach of short-term projects is unlikely to increase the confidence of the Gaelic group in official Gaelic bodies. GCVC indicates that the vernacular recipients of Gaelic policy have little confidence in the prescription which has been devised for them.

The language planning model set out in Chap. 9 of GCVC is anchored in the concepts of minority-language social protection and capacity building to

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address societal challenges. GCVC advocates the prioritisation of strategic initiatives to protect and regenerate Gaelic orality in the remaining vernacular context of Gaelic's social geography, as the core aspect of future language planning and policy for Gaelic. This would entail emphasising a language-in-society approach to Gaelic affairs in Scotland. This community-oriented language development would aim to integrate institutional provision for fluent speakers and learners in a way which is consistent with the symbolic value of Gaelic to the national sense of cultural diversity and tolerance, while embarking on a socio-economically relevant LPP agenda in the vernacular context (see GCVC, 2020: 362–363).

Focusing on sustainable orality in Gaelic development will require a strategic repositioning of GLP, in line with a materialist/functionalist approach to minority-language societal strategy. This new strategy would require coordinated support schemes and resources to be focused on the use of Gaelic in families, local neighbourhoods, youth peer-group social activity and in more ethnolinguistically ambitious minority-language education. These initiatives will only succeed if they can be given relevance in the importance community-development activity attaches to Gaelic revitalisation and in the socio-economic opportunity accruing to Gaelic speakers from these collective activities. As pointed out in GCVC, it has to be acknowledged initially that the regeneration of the Gaelic group from the current challenging situation is going to be very difficult, but a language-in-society approach is much more likely to yield productive outcomes and to make participation in the Gaelic collective more dynamic, interesting and beneficial for all involved.

## Notes

1. This quotation is from Noam Chomsky speaking in the documentary film, *We Still Live Here: ÀS Nutayuneân* (2010); directed by Anne Makepeace: [www.dailymotion.com/video/x3h1my](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3h1my). [Accessed 4 February 2021]
2. We use the term Gaelic group to refer to the vernacular context. Gaelic communities mostly refers to the more general social context of Gaelic, comprising its vernacular, migrant community, learner and L2 networks.
3. See texts for similar clauses and responsibilities in the other international contexts: Canada: <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/o-3.01/fulltext.html>. [Accessed 4 February 2021] Wales: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1993/38/section/5>. [Accessed 4 February 2021] Ireland: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2003/act/32/section/13/enacted/en/html#sec13>. [Accessed 4 February 2021]
4. Orality refers to the communicative function and the cultural practice of a language in spontaneous social interactions; see Lewis and Simons (2016: 118–119) on the concept of sustainable orality.

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5. Culturism refers to a focus on the cultural resources of an ethnolinguistic group independent of how those resources emerged or exist in society (cf. Crystal 2000: 125). Comparable to culturism, perspectivism refers to a focus on identitarian language ideologies independent of the salience or the practice of language in society.

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## RECOGNISING AND RECONSTITUTING GÀIDHEIL ETHNICITY

*Iain MacKinnon*

### Abstract

This article analyses some claims made about the *Gàidheal* identity in Scotland, with particular reflection on a distinct ‘sociolinguistic turn’ within *Gàidhlig* studies and related research over the last two decades. Through critical analysis of a major sociological survey on the structuring of various markers in framing *Gàidheal* identity, a normative basis is provided to then assess other identity classifications made by some academics whose work is focussed on the single identity-marker of the *Gàidhlig* language. It is argued that identity claims predicated on the specific nature of the *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn fail to capture the complex reality and living histories of actual *Gàidheal* identities (and claims on those identities), in particular, the socio-cultural importance of place-based practices and understandings. Recent proposals for a *Gàidheal* ethnolinguistic assembly may enable modes of articulation and recognition to develop which better capture those realities, as well as supporting societal and linguistic regeneration among the indigenous group.

**Keywords:** ethnicity; ethnolinguistic; Gaelic; identity; recognition; sociolinguistic turn

### Introduction

This special issue on Scotland’s *Gàidhealtachd* Futures facilitates wider discussion on the future place and situation of Scotland’s *Gàidheil*.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I investigate some ways in which the collective, nominal identity ‘*Gàidheal*’ is being defined, articulated and recognised in ideologically oriented

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*Iain MacKinnon belongs to the township of Camuscross in the Isle of Skye. He works as a researcher at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University.*



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academic discussions about the future of *Gàidheil*, *Gàidhlig* and the *Gàidhealtachd*.

In particular, I examine a reductive trend in some recent identity claims associated with a sociolinguistic turn in *Gàidhlig* studies over the last twenty years. Section **I** of the article outlines the nature of the *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn with particular reference to what has been described as the robust critique (Chalmers, this volume) of *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic scholarship made in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (GCVC), a major report examining the condition of *Gàidhlig* in its remaining vernacular, or ‘heartland’, communities (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020).

Section **II** then critically assesses a major sociological survey of ‘markers’ of *Gàidheal* identity (Bechhofer and McCrone, 2014) and asserts that contemporary perspectives on identity elide the importance of place – and the practice(s) and politics of place – to being *Gàidheal*. Moreover, I argue that this elision may be a corollary of the lack of attention *Gàidhlig* language scholarship and policy has given to vernacular concerns, a major conclusion of the GCVC report. The following sections **III** and **IV** then use the sociological survey findings as a normative basis for assessing identity claims made by academics associated with the sociolinguistic turn. Finally, section **V** considers the GCVC’s proposal for an ethnolinguistic assembly. In particular, I assess whether a self-governing assembly of this sort could help expedite a necessary transformation in the way that *Gàidheil* are recognised in Scotland today, even to the extent of a national consciousness re-emerging.

This topic of recognition is central to my analysis. It was brought to prominence by the Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor (1994) in his essay *The Politics of Recognition*. Taylor argued that the idea that our identity is formed by a process of recognition has become important in contemporary societies and that struggles for recognition are at the root of many political contests over gender, ethnicity and race:

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (1994: 25)

This article, then, assesses some recent claims made by academics about how Scottish *Gàidheil* are, or should be, recognised, and considers to what kinds of future these various forms of recognition might lead us.

I.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, and particularly from the late 1940s onwards, there was an emphasis in *Gàidhlig* studies on field recordings of *Gàidhlig* speakers to ‘rescue’ for posterity aspects of vernacular traditions and practice which were in the process of being lost (MacDonald, 2011). During this same period little sociolinguistic work was conducted (McLeod, 2001: 23). In the twenty-first century scholarly focus has increasingly turned towards research to rescue or revitalise the language itself. The specific character of this *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn has been identified and detailed in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (GCVC) (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020: 10, 385, 392) which argues that academia’s growing interest in language revitalisation has created a ‘university led discourse ... increasingly articulating a self-sustaining ideology based on individualised interest in the minority language,’ and is primarily concerned with the ‘aspirations and assertions of individuals in relation to a peripheral practice of a marginal culture’. GCVC contends that this ‘individualised cosmopolitanism’ is interlinked with the development of a political agenda focussed on civic promotion of *Gàidhlig* nationally, with a specific goal of creating ‘new speakers’ of the language throughout Scotland. The report further states that in new speaker discourse, ‘Gaelic is presented as an additional or occasional competence or identity to be acquired in the near or more distant future’ and supports a view of *Gàidhlig* as ‘a non-primary, minority and complementary cultural practice to the dominant and normative English language culture in Scotland’.

According to the GCVC authors, this linked academic and political project ‘actually normalise[s] vernacular decline’ in the existing minority ethnolinguistic speaker group, mainly situated in the Western Isles. The report notes ‘the marginal position of vernacular concerns in language planning and policy in Scotland’ with ‘almost non-existent support for the autochthonous group and the absence of independent agency of the Gaelic speaker group’. It argues that current policy has ‘failed to address the critical contraction of the speaker group’ and, such is the rapidity of decline indicated in the survey findings, the GCVC authors conclude that on current trends *Gàidhlig* will cease to be a living language of community anywhere in Scotland within a decade (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020: 9, 10, 361, 374, 392). In their contribution to this special edition (Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul, this volume) two GCVC authors conclude that *Gàidhlig* language policy should be refocused ‘on the societal reality of minority-language speakers and learners rather than on superficial aspirations for an imagined future’.

## II.

In trying to understand how this desocialised *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn may have influenced the kinds of identity claims found in contemporary scholarship, it is useful to establish a normative position from which to assess those claims. The most likely candidate for a normative assessment is the most comprehensive analysis of Scottish *Gàidheal* identity in the twenty-first century carried out by sociologists Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone (2014: 119). They surveyed four markers of *Gàidheal* identity in order to answer the question: what makes a *Gàidheal*?

The markers were:

- *Gàidheal* ancestry
- ability to speak *Gàidhlig*
- living in the *Gàidhealtachd*
- being born in Scotland

Their survey, incorporated into and adapted over several rounds of the Scottish Social Attitudes surveys, was sent out to addresses in postal areas reporting the greatest concentration of *Gàidhlig* speakers, and contained a range of questions to draw out how the various combinations of these markers make a difference to people being identified as a *Gàidheal*. A total of 537 responses were received. On the basis of these returns the authors stated:

We could then relate how willing the respondent was to accept persons with such markers of being a Gael to their own sense of being a Gael. Were, for example, those who had a strong sense of themselves as Gaels more likely (or not) to accept a claim from someone with various combinations of these markers? ... [H]ow do these markers ... stack up against each other? Does having the language trump residence and/or ancestry? Would you be taken for a Gael if you have ancestry, but neither residence nor language? (2014: 119)

The respondents' evaluation of the different categories of markers put forward in the survey then enabled Bechhofer and McCrone to develop an understanding of what they called the 'rules' that underpin them:

By identity rules, we mean probabilistic rules of thumb whereby identity markers are interpreted, combined or given precedence over others. They are guidelines, though not necessarily definitive or unambiguous ones, to the identity markers which people mobilise in their identity claims, as well as those they use to attribute national identity or judge the claims and attributions of others. (2014: 130 n. 7)

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They found that of those people who defined themselves predominantly as *Gàidheil* (2014: 126):

- 80 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people with ancestry and language ability, but who were not living in the *Gàidhealtachd*;
- 64 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people with ancestry living in the *Gàidhealtachd*, but who could not speak the language;
- 58 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people able to speak the language and born in Scotland, but without ancestry;
- 29 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people with ancestry, but not able to speak the language and not living in the *Gàidhealtachd*;
- 28 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people able to speak *Gàidhlig* but not born in Scotland and without ancestry.

Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 122) also asked respondents whether ‘being a Gael is mainly about the Gaelic language and history, music and literature in Gaelic ... [or] mainly about Gaels gaining control over things like fishing, crofting and land use.’ The authors envisaged the former attributes as indicative of ‘cultural’ ideas about identity, and the latter as related to the ‘political’. They asked respondents to place themselves on a scale between the two positions. In putting this question, the authors wanted to test whether they could differentiate between the nature of their respondents’ *Gàidheal* and Scottish identities. Bechhofer and McCrone had hypothesized that being ‘a Gael could be largely a “cultural” matter (after all, language is important), whereas being a Scot might be a “political” issue, a matter of governance’. However, they found that ‘strong Gaels [were] more likely to see Gaelic identity in political/economic terms, rather than cultural ones’. Arguably, the survey’s exemplification of what counts as ‘political’ and what counts as ‘cultural’ may reflect a sociological understanding of these terms: crofting, fishing and land use are routinely described as part of a form or ‘way of life’ and many *Gàidheil* may consider them to be as cultural as language; and on the other hand, language and history are equally sites of political struggle.

However, the survey responses indicate that *Gàidheil* generally believe that political commitment to material practices such as crofting, fishing and land use are at least as central to being a *Gàidheal* as are language and culture. This finding suggests that, although Bechhofer and McCrone did not include it among their identity markers, what we can call *the practice(s) and politics of place* – above and beyond simply being resident in the *Gàidhealtachd* – appear in fact to be salient characteristics in articulating *Gàidheal* identity. (For the importance of place in the context of the

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*Gàidhealtachd*, see also Oliver (2002; 2005) and McIntosh (2008)). Although in their discussion Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 128, 129) emphasised the importance of ‘participating in the social and cultural life of the community’, the research finding is clear evidence that further consideration of *practice(s) and politics of place* as a marker of identity can facilitate a more satisfactory discussion of ‘what makes a *Gàidheal*’. For the purpose of this article, what is certain is that the finding further complexifies the subject of *Gàidheal* identity and poses considerable challenges for reductive linguistic perspectives.

On the basis of their finding that, ‘Someone who has Gaelic and was born in Scotland is just as likely to be accepted as a Gael as someone who has the blood and lives in the *Gàidhealtachd* but without the language,’ Bechhofer and McCrone conclude that, ‘Gaelic identity should be considered as open and fluid, rather than fixed and given’ (2014: 127). This finding effectively contests the notion of *Gàidheal* identity as fixed or rigidly determined, nevertheless, the assertion that it is therefore ‘open and fluid’ is less convincing when the survey’s findings are taken in the round. Arguably, using the concepts ‘fluid’ and ‘fixed’ metaphorically in this way cannot capture the range of assessments about identity that Bechhofer and McCrone found among *Gàidheil*. In their discussion the authors state that it ‘seems a priori likely that ancestry plus language plus residence in the *Gàidhealtachd* would raise the 83% [for language and ancestry markers alone] to close to 100%’ (2014: 125). That set of markers would appear, then, to be archetypal for being recognised as a *Gàidheal*. Beyond that idealized, yet widely existing, set of markers there are also a number of less archetypal variants featuring fewer of the markers. Bechhofer and McCrone’s work shows that these variants exist in gradients of recognition: from the 83 per cent of *Gàidheil* who believe that ancestry and language without residence still makes you a *Gàidheal*, to the fewer than 30 per cent who would recognise as a *Gàidheal* someone who speaks *Gàidhlig* but was not born in Scotland.

Therefore, these putative ‘identity rules’ employed by *Gàidheil* to recognise other *Gàidheil* do not simply operate in an ‘open’ or ‘fluid’ way (beyond any claims on identity for oneself). The survey has disclosed ‘guidelines, though not necessarily definitive or unambiguous ones’ by which some ‘identity markers are ... given precedence over others’ in the processes by which *Gàidheil* recognise *Gàidheil*. What Bechhofer and McCrone’s survey has outlined is an apparent hierarchy of belonging based on the respondents’ evaluation of the relative importance of the different sets of markers given to them in the survey.

Their analysis may therefore be considered to have outlined a *Gàidheal* equivalent of the non-arbitrary and respect demanding ‘observable realities’ of the social world, which the sociologist Richard Jenkins (2014: 130) exemplified

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using Norwegian identity and which Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 114) adopted:

... you cannot turn up at the Norwegian border (or any other), claiming to be 'Norwegian' if you do not have the relevant passport, or language, or ancestral or historical connection to Norway. Your claim has to have some basis in commonly accepted, even legalistic, rules. 'I am one of you because I want to be,' is rarely sufficient to let you join the national club.

Crucially, however, the 'identity rules' of this *Gàidheal* 'national club' exist in an ontologically different state to those of Norwegians; being a *Gàidheal* is not mandated authoritatively by a state or state-like structure and there is no *Gàidheal* passport. Indeed, Scotland's decennial census form does not officially recognise *Gàidheil* as an ethnic group, requiring *Gàidheil* who wish to identify as a *Gàidheal* to be placed among the country's 'Other white ethnic groups' (Registrar General for Scotland 2011: 9). For historical reasons, and unlike Scotland as a whole (or Norway), there are no legally defined boundaries or borders for the *Gàidhealtachd*. Unlike these other examples, there is no official, 'legalistic' status for these rules and the identity they mark out. Instead, they are more or less 'commonly accepted' or normative rules self-generated by *Gàidheal* society and largely implicit in its self-understanding. Through Bechhofer and McCrone's survey they have found a general articulation.

### III.

Although necessarily reductive, Bechhofer and McCrone's empirically-based analysis of markers of *Gàidheal* identity can nevertheless be used as a normative foundation to critically assess some claims about contemporary *Gàidheal* identity coming from academics associated with the *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn. One such set of claims is being promoted by Dr. Tim Armstrong, a language activist and a senior lecturer in *Gàidhlig* at the University of the Highlands and Islands. He asserts that he is engaged in: 'an ideological campaign to reimagine the *Gàidheal* as an exclusively cultural and linguistic identity ... completely unrelated to ancestry or race' (Armstrong, 2019). Comparable revising propositions about *Gàidheal* identity can also be found in writing of Wilson McLeod, a professor of *Gàidhlig* at the University of Edinburgh, who asserts that a linguistic based identifier becomes a necessity as language becomes 'the only real and relevant marker of distinctiveness' among *Gàidheil* (2014: 151).

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For Armstrong, in his series of research-related writing and dissemination (2019, 2020a, 2020b) about the campaign to reimagine *Gàidheal* as a linguistic identity, his conclusion is that many modern *Gàidhlig* speakers are shut out of the *Gàidheal* identity on the basis of, in his terms, 'race' because, 'the fact is, currently, the "Gael" identity is typically based on a complex conflation of ancestry and language' (Armstrong, 2019). In Armstrong's opinion, 'the identity of a "Gael" in Scotland is still predominantly defined by ancestry, and therefore, by race' (Ibid.). Disposing of *Gàidheil's* sense of belonging to a lineage would therefore remove what he describes as 'the potentially racist foundation of ancestry' (Ibid.). As a language activist, Armstrong believes that reimagining *Gàidheal* as an exclusively 'cultural' and 'linguistic' identity will have multiple benefits. Depriving *Gàidheil* of a sense of ancestry will, in his view: make the identity *Gàidheal* more accessible for language learners who do not have *Gàidheal* ancestors; strengthen the *Gàidhlig* language; remove 'uncertainty about who is a "real" Gael' (Ibid.); and remove the identity's association with low-status, shame and poverty. Although he does state that *Gàidheal* identity should be cultural as well as linguistic, he elsewhere argues that *Gàidheal* should be 'predominantly defined linguistically' and advocates 'redefining the Gael as a strongly linguistic identity' (Ibid.). 'Culture' is of course a vast concept, in some accounts comprising ideational, material and practical aspects, and incorporating the realm of meaning and values (Goldberg 1993: 8). Nevertheless, aside from language Armstrong does not offer significant aspects of culture which he would recognize as forming part of *Gàidheal* identity. Therefore, the language appears to be the sole cultural object of his concern.

Armstrong's writing effectively imposes a binary choice, and false dichotomy, between considering *Gàidheal* as a racial (and potentially racist) identity or as a linguistic identity. Framing the debate in this way subtly and casually dismisses the idea and histories of *Gàidheil* as an ethnic group. While ethnicity in academic discourse is also a complex and contested term, a generally agreed starting point is 'that ethnicity is about "descent and culture"' and that ethnic groups can be thought of as 'descent and culture communities' (Fenton, 2003: 3). This more capacious way of understanding *Gàidheil* as a collective identity may act to repair the reductionist cleavage of Armstrong's assertions. That Armstrong has overlooked this ethnic perspective on a language considered indigenous within Scotland is curious for at least three reasons. Firstly, Armstrong considers the Basques as an example to follow in terms of shifting from an ancestral to linguistic focus for identity; yet the article that he cites to support this (Urla, 1988) is framed in terms of Basque ethnicity. Secondly, and more importantly, Bechhofer and McCrone's (2014: 129) research

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survey of *Gàidheil's* own views on identity, cited by Armstrong, concluded that *Gàidheil* constitute an ethnicity within Scotland. Thirdly, and although not mentioned by Armstrong, at least as significant, a Scottish Government commissioned review of hate crime in Scotland last year carried out by former Scottish High Court judge Lord Bracadale concluded that 'that there is a fairly strong argument that Gaelic speaking Gaels belong to an "ethnic group" within the meaning of the current aggravation' on race as a protected characteristic (Scottish Government, 2018: 52).

Armstrong's argument that a sense of ancestry should be dissociated from the *Gàidheil* sense of self-understanding in the future has radical implications. Ancestor literally means those who go [*cedere*] before [*ante*] us. This includes our parents and grandparents (see, for example, UK Government, 2020). At face value, then, Armstrong appears to be asserting that the influence of our parents and grandparents on identity and ontological 'being' is, in his own words, 'dangerous' and 'potentially racist'. Proposing to eliminate the sense of ancestry from an already minoritised *Gàidheil* identity in favour of language alone raises questions for the future of *Gàidheil's* cultural memory and creativity. For instance, ethnologist Mairi McFadyen (2019) writes about Grimsay musician Pàdruig Morrison's participation in the 'Kin and the Community' project, where he responded creatively to ethnographic recordings made by his grandfather, a crofter and bard who passed away many years before Pàdruig was born:

The audience witnessed past and present fuse together as Pàdruig and friends accompanied his forebears in real time, unlocking layers of memory and meaning and inviting us to reflect on who we are and where we come from...[T]his work of creative ethnology is a moving reminder of *what it is to be human*. We live in a society that has forgotten to value what it is to be human, in a world where far too many people get left behind. Our economy cares not for localities, cultures, ways of life or the cohesion of kin and community. (McFadyen, 2019)

What would the future be for projects exploring identity in this way if *Gàidheil* were to adopt an ideological position that kin and ancestral influence are 'dangerous' and 'potentially racist'? Would this require us to surveil and regulate, even extirpate vital online archival resources such as *Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches* – a collection of field recordings made by ethnographers from the School of Scottish Studies and elsewhere – in case users were exposed to ideas or evidence of ancestry through the cultural connections of people and place? How does this stand in relation to international understandings of minoritized indigenous cultures and peoples and their recognition and place in society?



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Eliminating a sense of ancestry would also require fundamental re-evaluation of past works of creativity. The rock band *Runrig* have probably done more than any other individuals or groups to encourage contemporary *Gàidheil* to take pride in who we are, as well as bringing more non-*Gàidheil* towards the *Gàidhlig* language and aspects of our culture. Yet an appeal to ancestry has always been at the heart of their muse. The incendiary song *Fichead Bliadhna* [Twenty Years] from their second album invokes the ancestral term, '*Clànn nan Gaidheal*' [children of the Gaels], to describe people awakening to oppression. *Runrig's* sixth album includes the song *Sìol Ghoraigh* [the progeny of Godfrey], an anthem of praise to the ancestors from whom they are descended. According to the poet Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul, this song:

... takes a powerful stand against the shame of the local simply by naming it. Here is a bold declaration that we can survive, that you, you are important. For in that song there is that wonderful naming of people in Gaelic by their *sloighneadh* [family ancestry]: a hammer chant that declares what it is to be Donald, to be Ranald, to be Mary, to be Jean, to be human, to be a Gael. (A. P. Caimbeul in Morton, 1991: 8)

In Armstrong's *Gàidhlig* future such statements, and creative work, would be ideologically suspect. Yet this sense of belonging to a minoritized indigenous cultural tradition of which family and ancestry are essential parts is integral to the grounded and inspirational *Gàidhlig* and English language cultural productions of *Runrig*, Aonghas Pàdraig and many other creative *Gàidheil*. Moreover, these artists are not simply operating on the basis of familial relations. An examination of their cumulative cultural productions discloses a rich and complex understanding of themselves and the people to whom they belong. Eliminating, by ideological force if such a thing could be achieved, any element of the complex inter-related weave of these artists' self-understanding would diminish them, as Mairi McFadyen observed, not only as artists but fundamentally as human beings.

It appears that one underlying challenge for Armstrong's ideological campaign is the lack of a method for detaching his desired 'linguistic' identity from his undesired 'ancestral' identity (or, for that matter, from identity based on 'residence' or 'place'). At present, his planned reduction of identity to language would leave *Gàidheil* with a hugely impoverished – and surely unrealistic – conception of what it means to have an identity in the first place. Now of course, this argument is not to diminish the real importance of language to identity; as Charles Taylor and other hermeneutic philosophers emphasise, we are 'language beings' (Taylor, 1995: 14. See also Taylor, 2017). Instead, it is to place language as an important, even galvinising (and I would

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consider in the longer term likely a necessary), but not sufficient component within a greater, and more complex sense of *Gàidheal* identity and collective self-understanding. As Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 127) concluded: 'There is no simple metric for being a Gael.'

Armstrong's elision of ethnicity may be related to his views on what he described as 'the old core Gael identity' which, in his opinion, should be abandoned because it is considered 'shameful' and is characterised by inferiority: 'low status ... poverty and social exclusion' (Armstrong 2019). It is certainly true that these and other related discursive terms have been deployed over several centuries by a range of ideological campaigners (including some genuine racists) to describe and diminish *Gàidheil*. However, shadowing this longstanding discourse of inferiorisation there has also been a responding discourse of resistance. In order to characterise 'the old core Gael identity' exclusively by the kinds of deficit terms used by ideologists of inferiority, Armstrong has correspondingly had to exclude the activists, bards and scholars of this resistant stream. By excluding those voices from his analysis, and by emphasising the view that poverty, shame and low status are the essential features of *Gàidheil's* core ethnic identity today, Armstrong leaves himself open to criticism that he is contributing to an ideology of *Gàidheal* 'inferiorisation' (for the concept of 'inferiorisation', see Fanon (1994)) while at the same time advancing a new form of cultural *misrecognition*.

#### IV

As a resolution, Armstrong considers the idea that, 'One possible answer to this problem ... of the low status and shame associated with being a Gael' would be 'to distance Gaelic from the old core identity, [and] to create a new idea of a "Gaelic speaker"' which is independent from the term *Gàidheal*. However, he rejects this idea as he believes the term *Gàidheal* can still be useful for his campaign because it remains 'powerfully affective' and can be 'repurposed as a linguistic identity' to emphasise continuity with 'Scotland's people, Scotland's geography and Scotland's past' (Armstrong, 2019). In this way his writing may be seen as responding to the writing of Wilson McLeod, who, like Armstrong, is a fluent adult learner of *Gàidhlig* originally from North America. McLeod has repeatedly emphasised language-based identity terms while questioning the contemporary status and significance of the term *Gàidheal*, arguing that it 'has become increasingly opaque' or even "'a hollow category" to some extent' (McLeod and O'Rourke, 2015: 155; McLeod, 2018: 88). He has advised that 'One means of overcoming this difficulty is to use language-based identifiers

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such as *luchd na Gàidhlig* (literally “the people of the Gaelic language”) in place of “Gael(s)”. (McLeod, 2020a: 314). Indeed, he has asserted that ‘the ethnic identifying label *Gàidheal* has come to be replaced in many contexts’ by language-based terms of identity, a process that is necessary because, in his view, language is becoming ‘the only real and relevant marker of distinctiveness’ among *Gàidheil* (McLeod, 2014: 149, 151). McLeod’s views on ethnicity may have shifted somewhat recently. In a book published in 2020 he argued, on the basis of Lord Bracadale’s argument on *Gàidheal* ethnicity, that ‘there may be some theoretical potential’ in conceiving of *Gàidheil* as an ethnic group. (2020a: 41) However, he concluded the book by emphasising a position on *Gàidheal* identity that seems similar to Armstrong’s reduction to language use. (2020a: 335, 336) The replacement of ethnicity with language appears to be a trend in more recent work. In a blog for the *Centre for Education for Racial Equality in Scotland* on ‘anti-Gaelic rejectionism’, McLeod used Krystyna Fenyö’s (2000) historical work to argue that ‘attitudes to Gaelic in the wider Scottish population have been described as a complex mixture of “contempt, sympathy and romance”’ (McLeod 2020b). However, the book *Contempt, Sympathy and Romance*, as Fenyö (2000: 11) notes in its introduction, is concerned primarily with ‘[t]he extent of hostility, contempt and at times sheer hatred towards the Highland Gaels’ in the mid-nineteenth century. It analyses racialised thinking towards *Gàidheil* during the period, and it even considers whether the Highland Clearances can be thought of as a form of ‘ethnic cleansing’. (2000: 90–92, 179–184). Language is not the book’s primary concern, and on the occasions when it is mentioned it is considered an attribute of a wider ethnic identity.

In order to justify the assertion that the meaning of the term *Gàidheal* is becoming unclear, McLeod invariably makes use of a partial quotation from qualitative research analysis from James Oliver: ‘when Gaels are spoken of, no one is quite sure what one is and few claim to be one’ (2005: 22). However, McLeod’s reuse of the quote to generalise from a site-specific research context, in effect, misrepresents what Oliver was discussing. Moreover, it is clear from Bechhofer and McCrone’s research – published following Oliver’s article but before McLeod’s assertions – that promoting a generalising claim based on the idea that ‘no one is quite sure what a Gael is and that few claim to be one’ is misleading. Although in many parts of Scotland few would claim to be a *Gàidheal*, Bechhofer and McCrone found that in their more strongly *Gàidhlig* speaking survey areas more than 80 per cent of their respondents considered themselves to be *Gàidheil*, at least to some degree (2014: 120). Their findings led them to posit near universal acceptance among *Gàidheil* for a set of markers which constitute an archetypal

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*Gàidheal* identity along with less archetypal, and less generally accepted, variants on the archetype. If clarity is lacking, it is in the lack of agreement among *Gàidheil* about where the boundaries of the identity lie, a disagreement which appears to be routine in judgements about ethnic or national identities; it can, for example, also be found among Scots in relation to Scottish identity (Kiely et al, 2001).

The complex understanding of *Gàidheal* identity disclosed above contrasts with McLeod's view that language is becoming the only real and relevant marker of distinctiveness among *Gàidheil*. In his recent assertions (McLeod, 2020a: 314; 2018: 88) that language-based terms are not only becoming more popular but are also being used in place of the ethnic term *Gàidheal*, McLeod cited as evidence another of his own articles (McLeod 2014). This earlier article also made the claim about replacement but gave no evidence in support. However, it did refer to a then forthcoming paper, of which McLeod was also lead author, which was said to provide evidence that 'the term *luchd na Gàidhlig* is perceived by some "new speakers" as being more "inclusive" than *Gàidheal*' (2014: 149, 150). However, the co-authored article on 'new speakers' of *Gàidhlig* in Glasgow and Edinburgh did not discuss the term *luchd na Gàidhlig* at all. Indeed, while one of the people interviewed used the term *luchd na Beurla* [translated by the authors as 'English speakers'], in the same sentence the same interviewee eschewed the *Gàidhlig* equivalent in favour of *luchd-ionnsachaidh na Gàidhlig* [translated as 'Gaelic learners'] (McLeod, O'Rourke & Dunmore, 2014: 31). Although the term *luchd na Gàidhlig* may be being used in some instances, the sources cited by McLeod gave no evidence for this, let alone that the term is replacing the ethnic descriptor *Gàidheal* 'in many contexts'. These evaporating reference chains, as well as the limited quality of evidence provided for the critical argument on the disintegration of *Gàidheil* as a recognisable ethnic group, opens up the question of whether, when describing the replacement of the ethnonym *Gàidheal* as a term of recognition, in favour of the linguistic 'the people of the Gaelic language', McLeod may in fact be advancing more an aspirational ideological position than an evidence-based reality.

The discussion in the rest of this section of the article relates the lingua-centric propositions for changing *Gàidheal* identity assessed in sections III and IV to the individualised, cosmopolitan sociolinguistic turn in *Gàidhlig* scholarship outlined in section I, and it draws on analysis from Ireland by Conchúr Ó Giollagáin (Ó Giollagáin, 2016). Prominent members of the new-speaker group, strongly rooted in the dominant English language culture and forging an additional or secondary identity by way of language acquisition, use their institutional influence to begin to assert claims for recognition of their

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own language-based identity on the basis of, but simultaneously at the expense of, the pre-existing ethnolinguistic group whose language they have acquired. Furthermore, bound by their narrow ideological focus, some proponents of efforts to reduce to language the complexity of *Gàidheil* identity may see this transformation as a way of eliminating what they understand as a wider societal context and legacy of ethnic 'shame, low status and poverty', impeding establishment of a newer and forward-looking, language-based identity. Nevertheless, such a campaign would do nothing to alter the socio-cultural troubles and complex societal issues that are integral to the everyday and lived reality of many *Gàidhlig* speakers in the vernacular community today. (For some contemporary societal issues in the islands related to 'shame, low status and poverty', see Ross (2015), Ross (2012), Ross (2018), Adamson and Partners (2013)).

Wilson McLeod (2020a: 333, 334) has acknowledged there are 'deep-rooted structural problems' in heartland areas. However, he believes *Gàidhlig* policy for those areas has been 'too little too late' and that 'broad-based community level interventions' have become 'impracticable'. Ó Giollagáin (2016) has asserted that academic institutional leaders rooted in the dominant group have used their 'cultural capital' to become predominant in Irish Celtic Studies departments – it has been observed that learners of the language also predominate in *Gàidhlig* related academic posts in Scotland (McLeod 2001: 19, 20). Ó Giollagáin's position can be extended to argue that the adoption of a language-focussed ideology may serve to entrench the status and position of members of that group institutionally. At the same time, if we choose not to deal with the reality of societal crisis in the weakening and declining minority culture group which contains the greatest concentration of *Gàidhlig* speakers, then approaching revitalisation as a linguistic project may serve to further marginalize this group and hamper the potential for communal leadership to emerge commensurate to the linguistic and societal tasks.

## V.

In this article I have analysed two radical and related propositions for changing the way that *Gàidheil* are recognized in Scotland today. Were either of these propositions to be realised they would arguably be moves towards the end of *Gàidheil's* recognition as a distinct ethnic group. In contemporary Scottish public discourse aspects of *Gàidheil* identity are already routinely misrecognised (MacKinnon 2012). In other cases, such as

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the census, *Gàidheil* are not explicitly recognised at all. Charles Taylor (1994: 25) argued for such processes of misrecognition to be considered a form of oppression, projecting a 'confining' or 'contemptible' picture on the subject group, 'imprisoning them in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being'.

An alternative proposition, which appears to be a more realistic prospect for maintaining a societal presence for *Gàidhlig* in Scotland, is the recent suggestion for an ethnolinguistic assembly for *Gàidheil* (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020: 419–443; Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul, this volume). In addition to holding a community cultural and development function beyond language revitalisation, the proposed assembly might fundamentally change the ways in which *Gàidheil* are recognized in Scotland today. It would have the potential to bring the informal identity rules identified by Bechhofer and McCrone to conscious deliberation, even to some level of adaptation and formalisation. A *Gàidheal* assembly would provide an authoritative focus for deliberation on and then enactment of policies that, in addition to their material effects, would also have the effect of formalizing a space of recognition of *Gàidheil* as a rights-bearing group indigenous to Scotland. This form of recognition could act as a step on a cultural path of recovery and regeneration, a journey to which contributions to this volume also act as markers. Moreover, as Bechhofer and McCrone observed, strongly self-identifying *Gàidheil* hold firm political and economic views and aspirations related to their identity and ethnicity, including to culturally distinct, place-based knowledge and practices (and creative adaptations) that are seen as integral to community wellbeing and identity.

If an assembly comes into being, it is likely to emerge in relation to pressing issues relating to the ethnic group, and out of such issues it would develop both a focus and locus of concern. Given recent academic and political discussion, the initial focus of concern is likely to be linguistic, and the locus of concern the vernacular language community, living in an area that would be considered part of the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*. However, as the fuller range of supra-linguistic societal concerns relating to community cultural development among the wider community of *Gàidheil* are elaborated in assembly the focus and locus of concerns may develop and complexify, leading to an emergent but porous *Gàidhealtachd* territorialisation around the politics and practice(s) of place, including the language in which those places of the *Gàidheil* maintain their human presence and life.

Despite their observation that there is a strong political marker of *Gàidheal* identity, Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 127–129) conclude that *Gàidheil* constitute an ethnicity in Scotland rather than a nation. They reach this

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view on the basis of Erikson's (1993: 6) argument 'that many ethnic groups do not demand command over a state ... when the political leaders of an ethnic movement place demands to this effect, the ethnic movement therefore by definition becomes a nationalist movement'. Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 128) believe that *Gàidheil* would need to advance a 'claim to statehood' to be considered a nation. However, self-governing nations exist within larger sovereign orders – including states – both in practice and as aspiration (Lätsch, 2012: 77; Graham and Petrie, 2018; Sinclair, 2017. Christie, 2007. See also Carleton (2021)). Assertions of indigenous nationhood can and have been made without demands for separate statehood.

A more perspicuous distinction between ethnic and national groups has been drawn by Will Kymlicka (1995: 10) who defines 'national minorities' as 'cultural diversity [that] arises from the incorporation of previously self-governing, territorially concentrated cultures into a larger state.' The cultural diversity of 'ethnic minorities', by contrast, arises from individual and familial immigration' where immigrants 'coalesce into loose associations.' What I would add to this is that ethnicity is not optional; national minorities are also ethnic minorities. Under this categorisation, *Gàidheil* appear as a 'national ethnic minority' (See also the important discussion in Newton (2011: 215–216, 231–233)).

In the light of Bechhofer and McCrone's findings, generating *Gàidheal* identity over time can be understood as a complex and developing but rule-bound and enduring process of collective self-making and self-maintenance, largely achieved implicitly in the face of a dominant and typically hostile social and cultural environment (MacInnes 2006: 92, 266). The proposed *Gàidheal* assembly has the potential to create a protected space for the regeneration and recovery of an indigenous national group.

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## Note

1. In this article I write the ethnonym *Gàidheal* [plural form *Gàidheil*], the linguistic term *Gàidhlig* and the territorial term *Gàidhealtachd* in their *Gàidhlig* forms, except when quoting other authors using the Anglicised versions of these *Gàidhlig* terms.

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## SPEAKING OUR LANGUAGE: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

*Cass Ezeji*

### Abstract

In this essay Cass Ezeji, a singer and linguist from Glasgow, explores her experiences of Gaelic Medium Education (GME) as a child with no direct roots to *a' Ghàidhealtachd*. She challenges the limitations of Scottish history taught in schools as well as perspectives on the Gaelic language. She considers the historical context of Afro-Scottish identities as a means of broadening the way we think about Gaelic and its speakers, whilst shedding light on a neglected diaspora.

**Keywords:** Afro-Scottish; colonial history; decolonial; Gaelic; identity

### I.

Many of us speak Gaelic in school or at work and switch to English at home. This doesn't make those Gaelic speakers less legitimate. Others speak it at home with their parents and siblings, in front of *a T.bh*. Some of us only speak Gaelic with our *sean-phàrantan*. They are keepers of an oral tradition that was once passed down to them. The keepers of the songs that once sang you to sleep, the custodians of memories, bitter-sweet. They possess a Gaelic vocabulary that brims with *na faclan* that, for most, are long forgotten. Disappeared. They know the palpability and *feeling* of words.

Elsewhere, Gaels compete in the Mòd every year (you win some, you lose some). Others prefer not to participate but love to sing *puirt à beul* in the privacy of their bedroom. Some young Gaels love to read Catriona Lexy Campbell's novels where the Gaelic kissing scenes we've all been waiting for come to life. Elsewhere, Gaelic is spoken all day with the children they teach. When evening comes around on a Friday, they let off steam *sìos a' Phairc Bar*.

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*Cass Ezeji is a singer and linguist from Glasgow.*

Cass Ezeji

A nursery teacher plays her accordion with vigour, her long braids sway back and forth with every key change. Everyone cheers her on, *Siuthad!* But not too much drink mind, she has a Hip Hop class in the morning.

On Sundays elders attend Gaelic mass, youngsters play *ball-coise* in Partick, shouting across the pitch. The other team can't understand, which you'd think would be an advantage ...

In Edinburgh a recent school-leaver and talented actress texts her pals in Gaelic, tuning out of the sound of her parents speaking in Shona.<sup>1</sup> *Tha mi a' teacsadh :) xx*

Contrary to what my seventeen-year-old-self anticipated, I also frequently text and email in Gaelic.

We are a' *Ghàidhealtachd*.

## II.

Our identity is made up of many facets; where we are born, who our parents are, the ancestors we descend from and the languages we speak. It is also the places and cultural environments in which we are raised. I never considered the language I learned in school to be a part of my identity. I thought of it as a language belonging to someone else, it was not mine to claim. Gaelic rolled off my tongue slowly at first. I was a cautious and shy child. Eventually I began to speak with more confidence. I do not remember this sensation, nor do I remember the process of *a' Ghàidhlig* becoming imprinted in my mind, forever ingrained.

I was four years old when I began Gaelic Medium Education (GME), the first all-Gaelic primary school, formed by the powerhouse Dr Donalda McComb. This is one of the cultural environments in which I grew up. I remember my Primary Two teacher and the games we used to play like *tunnag, tunnag, gèadh*. I remember the delight I took in the compactness of the alphabet. No need for 'J, K, Q, V, W, X, Z'. They don't exist in this world. I enjoyed school, I enjoyed speaking this seemingly secret language that my mum couldn't understand. My childhood friends outside of school (also the mixed-race children of single-parent mothers) weren't in on the secret either. Why not?

On Friday's we sang Gaelic songs in the school canteen. The smell of sausages and mashed potatoes still lingered long after *à m dinnear*. Mr Alderbert, a sweet and gentle old man, played the piano and Mrs Hunter conducted us enthusiastically gesticulating to her mouth to remind some *clann* to smile. She was quite eccentric in many ways and that appealed to me as a nine-year old. The sun burst through the windows as we sang *Thoir Dhomh Do Lamh*. I felt

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invigorated. Alive, as we all sang together, our tiny, red-fleeced bodies side by side *'s ar casan ann am basgaid* on the cold linoleum floor. I liked to sing *Mairi Donn* and *Mòrag, 's i Mòrag*, which in my mind translated as:

She's been black every day that I've seen her,  
She was black last year  
And she's black this year  
She's been black ever since I've seen her

This made a lot of sense to me. I felt that there was a part of me in *na h-òrain*. Growing up, I struggled with being mixed-race in an all-white school, but I knew that these words related to me in some way, that they too had family from a distant continent. But when I asked about *Mòrag Dubh* and *Mairi Donn*, I discovered the reference wasn't to the colour to their skin, but to the colour of their hair. Black-haired Mòrag, Mairi the brunette. My curiosity lessened as I realised the stories I conjured about these girls who looked like members of my (then unknown) family who ran in the hills of *a' Ghàidhealtachd* were all wrong. Where was *a' Ghàidhealtachd* anyway? Perhaps I wouldn't have been so curious, or constantly in search of answers if there had been more black and mixed-race role-models in my life at that time. Perhaps there could have been more representation of the diversity of Gaelic speakers. I felt 'different' in school and somehow I had the sense that I didn't belong in the 'Gaelic picture'.

I joined the choir briefly and left even quicker. My voice was too low and didn't blend nicely with the higher, cleaner tones. I abandoned singing in Gaelic altogether and sang in English at school ceremonies, which I knew was a disappointment to some. I couldn't find myself anywhere *anns a' chultar*. I became disillusioned with Gaelic, or what I understood Gaelic to be. I left school at seventeen and never spoke or used Gaelic again. *Cleachd i, neo chall i!*

I didn't lose it though. Ten years later I'm experiencing what I like to call, 'My Gaelic Renaissance Period'. My prime Gaelic years. *Cho Fancaidh!* I have begun to explore the curiosity that was once sparked singing in the *Bun-sgoil* canteen all those years ago. Because surely it wasn't possible that I was the *only* brown person in the *whole* world that spoke Gaelic?

My perception of *a' Ghàidhealtachd* was only as a faraway place, far from *Bun-sgoil*, far from *Àrd-sgoil*, way up North where *cailleachs* baked scones and switched off the radio on Sundays. It wasn't in the city where I lived, it was old-fashioned, and it certainly wasn't spoken by people like me. Through an important process of discovery, largely thanks to the work of Scottish history pioneer Dr David Alston,<sup>2</sup> I now know that *a' Ghàidhealtachd* is also more than

that perceived truth. I am unlearning impoverished histories and biased narratives that omit vital information about our language and culture(s). I am filling in the blanks of *a' Ghàidhealtachd* that I was never taught.

From my perspective, *a' Ghàidhealtachd* is not one place, rather it is many *places* and communities. It is not a monolith. It is not what popular history would have us believe. It is both the bustling cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh as well as the Northern parts of Scotland. Over time *a' Ghàidhealtachd* has evolved, in changing places and ever-adapting generations. Even the way we speak is constantly evolving, for better or for worse. I feel that place has become of less importance and that *a' Ghàidhealtachd* is in fact it's people.

As pupils of GME in particular, we should have been made aware of the aforementioned blanks that demonstrate how faraway places are really much closer to home. The lost identities and the evils of empire were never mentioned. The whole picture is a long and troubling history of Scotland and colonisation, of the exploitation and clearance of black Gaelic-speaking communities that eventually vanished. As Scots we were not only victims, or gallant abolitionists, we were also perpetrators. I was taught about the *Sasannachs* who imposed their language in the Highlands and Islands and of the horror of the Highland Clearances. I was never told though, about where many of those people went when they were cleared from the land. Where they went is important, it too is an extension of *a' Ghàidhealtachd*.

For example, many people from the Highland clans, such as MacDonalDs, MacLeods, MacPhersons travelled to North Carolina where they settled in the colony of Cape Fear. There they enslaved others, forcibly removed them from their families, and even imposed Gaelic as a language and tool of their oppression, restricting their black slaves from interaction with the wider English-speaking enslaving society (see Hunter 1994: 32–35). Over time many of those enslaved and born into slavery in Cape Fear were monoglot Gaelic speakers, as a form of control (*The Scotsman*, 2018). English was the language that would eventually lead to freedom and the inability to speak it would potentially diminish their chances of escape.<sup>3</sup> Following the end of the American Civil war, the Cape Fear colony vanished—a time of great dispersal, and then later, the Great Migration north (circa. 1910–1940) to cities such as New York. What remains, however, are the names. Look through a Harlem phonebook, filled with Scottish surnames. Surnames that have been passed through the generations of emancipated slaves, who travelled to find jobs and a better life.

Others with recognisable clan names, including Campbells, MacIntoshes, MacKenzies, ventured to the Caribbean and West-Indies, leaving behind their wives and children (see *The Herald* (2015), Devine (2015), Mullen (2015)).<sup>4</sup>

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Alongside many other Scottish and British opportunists, they claimed their stake in a slave-based economy. Even our national poet Robert Burns nearly ventured to Jamaica on more than one occasion.<sup>5</sup> Many of these men fathered children by local women. Some relationships were consensual however the majority were not.<sup>6</sup> Their colonial enterprise led to the transformation of the Highlands. Mixed-race children were born illegitimately, and some men took on 'parallel families' unbeknownst to their Highland wives. Most of the mixed-race children of slave owners worked on the plantations but some of the 'luckier' 'tawny children' were sent 'back home' to Scotland to receive an education in places such as Inverness Academy. I wonder what it must have been like for those children, split between two lands, to be seen as 'other' in both, the implications of which would have been immense. The options were either to survive abroad in Scotland with the hope of a future or to work until death at home in the Caribbean.

Highlanders exploited these people on colonised lands. They exploited the men and the women, the mothers of their children. Their actions and the consequences of these actions are irreversible. Forever entangling the history and blood of the Caribbean and Scotland: Jamaica, Barbados and Guyana.

The economy of their Highland communities back home became reliant, even contingent on the 'success' of the empire, as did the sustenance of their (first) wives, their white children and their cultural capital. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the publishing of the first Gaelic dictionary. The first Gaelic dictionary was both campaigned for and published using money from slavery in the Caribbean. At once, one of the most marginalised groups in Scotland, also profited from and spread their customs, culture and language. Their 'success' was ultimately achieved by the marginalisation and oppression of black people. If you are incredulous or uncomfortable, good, these are the facts and we need to know them. Whilst I know this is not Scottish history in its entirety by any means, it is history that needs to be known and understood, particularly in its relationship to *a' Ghàidhealtachd* and how we define this term.

There is no doubt that I would have taken no comfort in knowing that the Gaelic speakers I was searching for in history were either slaves or 'free-women of colour' who lived precariously. However, it would have had a profound impact on the way I engaged with the language. To be reflected in history is to exist.

To understand Gaelic's position in the creole societies of the past is for our language to have lived other lives, to have roots that spread beyond one place. It is to have multiple stories – not all of which are positive. To be erased means that we were never there, that the atrocities never took place, that the entanglements didn't happen at all. This means that only part of the story is

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told. We must ask ourselves, who has ownership of these stories? Who gets to tell history has a profound impact, it shapes us. Therefore, we must engage with the *full* history-with the truth.

### III.

During my 'Gaelic renaissance' I have, for the first time, met other Gaels who also have African and Caribbean heritage. Most of them are younger than me and were also unaware of these histories. They are talented singers, actors and accordion players, storytellers with aspirations for the future of our language. They claim Gaelic as their own yet unfortunately, they are still met with the inevitable:

'That's the last thing I was expecting.'

'Very unusual!'"

'How did that happen?'

'It's so funny to hear *you* speaking the Gaelic.'

Despite the passing of centuries, these comments aren't too dissimilar to the testimonies in papers such as, 'Did you hear about the Gaelic-speaking African: Scottish Gaelic folklore about identity in North America' (Newton, 2010).<sup>7</sup> This paper describes the shock and disbelief locals experienced on hearing black people speaking Gaelic fluently. It saddens me that we are still viewed as a novelty, an impossibility, even. I wonder how long it will take for this perception to disappear completely. It has already been so long. Black people have belonged in Scotland for centuries and so too have non-white Gaelic speakers existed for just as long.

Today the socio-cultural landscape of *a' Ghàidhealtachd* has become ever more diverse. It should no longer be thought of as being made up only of white people, more attention needs be paid to who is speaking our language. GME teaching and Gaelic media must also be representative of its speakers and make moves to be part of Scotland's multiculturalism. This is who we are and this is who we have always been.

Each of us adds to the rich tapestry of a complex, lyrical and endangered language. It is up to us to ensure its endurance and to see it prosper. This can only happen by embracing the diversity of its speakers and normalising non-white faces speaking our language. We must do this with a full



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understanding of the past and its implications, with all the blanks filled in. We must go forward with a clearer vision of the full Gaelic picture.

#### **Faclair – Dictionary**

*T.bh* - TV

*Sean-pharantan* – grandparents.

*Faclan* – words.

*Puirt à beul* – mouth music.

*Sìos a' Phairc Bar* – down the Park Bar.

*Siuthad!* – on you go!

*Ball-coise* – football.

*Tha mi a'teacsadh* – I'm texting.

*Tunnag, tunnag, gèadh* – duck, duck goose.

*Àm dinnear* – dinner time.

*Clann* – children.

*Thoir dhomh do lamh* – give me your hand.

*Casan ann am basgaid* – legs in a basket.

*Na h-òrain* – the songs.

*Anns a'chultar* – in the culture.

*Cleachd i, neo chall i!* – use it, or lose it!

*Cho fancaidh!* – how fancy!

*Bun-sgoil* – primary school.

*Ard-sgoil* – secondary school.

*Cailleachs* – old women.

*Sasannachs* – the English.

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Classinda Mary McDonald. My hope is that one day this work will form part of the school curriculum in Scotland.

## Notes

1. A Bantu language of Zimbabwe.
2. David Alston is one of the first Scottish historians to research and draw attention to the prominent role of Scots in the slave trade and the plantation economies of the Caribbean: [www.spanglefish.com/slavesandhighlanders/](http://www.spanglefish.com/slavesandhighlanders/)
3. An early textual account of Gaelic-speaking African Americans comes from Lady Anne Grant of Laggan (Grant, 2013): 'Emigration has been going on these fifty years and upwards; and there are numbers of people born in America, who never spoke a word of English in their lives. Not only so; but where they have grown wealthy, and have been able to purchase slaves, they have taught them their own language. I myself have seen negroes, born in such families, who could not speak a word of English,' quoted in Newton (2010: 230).
4. See also: [www.flagupscotjam.uk](http://www.flagupscotjam.uk).
5. To quote from Morris (2014: 343), 'It is now more widely known that Scotland's "national bard" was preparing to travel to Jamaica in 1786 to work as what he calls a "negro driver" on a slave plantation.'
6. '... sexual abuse was endemic on plantations and many of the "mixed race" children consequently born to enslaved women lived out their own lives in a state of slavery. Their number, recorded after 1817 in the slave registers, is an indication of the extent of sexual abuse ...' Alston (2015: 58–59).
7. For example, see this excerpt from an anecdote of an encounter between two Gaelic speakers, the 'host' of white Scottish descent and the 'visitor' of black African descent, quoted in Newton (2010: 102): 'Lo and behold! What was it? ... The host stood aghast, and when he found his speech he ventured in Gaelic, "You can't be Satan, for it is said that he can speak all languages but the Gaelic."

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## RESISTING DISMISSAL IN THE *GÀIDHEALTACHD*

*Gòrdan Camshron*

### Abstract

Susan Samata proposes the application of Judith Butler's (2016) theory of vulnerability in resistance, rooted in gender and feminist studies, to linguistic issues, wherein '... vulnerability is framed not as a *prima facie* need for protection, but as the very ground for resistance' (Samata, 2017: 4). Having explicitly identified the looming demolinguistic challenge facing the Gaelic speaker group in the *Gàidhealtachd* (Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, 2020), the next priority is to resist that which threatens potentially disastrous consequences for a language and a culture.

**Keywords:** community development; community revitalisation; Gaelic; precariat; resistance; vulnerability

### Introduction

Our future trajectories are not easily unhitched from our pasts. In choosing to stay in the *Gàidhealtachd*, I have accepted some of the career and personal sacrifices accompanying that decision, in much the same way that many of my contemporaries and those who left before us accepted that 'away' was presented as their only realistic option. My school careers adviser told me that I most certainly was not following my family into the fishing industry; I would be going to university, probably never to return on a permanent basis. To stay in the Highlands represented a failure of ambition for me and the dereliction of

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*Gòrdan Camshron (Gordon Cameron) is currently working on a PhD through the University of the Highlands and Islands. Having worked in the heritage and Gaelic sectors for a number of years, he was a fieldworker on the recent SOILLSE research project which resulted in the publication of The Gaelic crisis in the vernacular community (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020).*

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the school's duty to export its young people into the wider economy. Such systemic poverty of aspiration leaves its scars.

As the concept of the *Gàidhealtachd* (the Gaelic-speaking Highlands, encompassing island and mainland communities) was never discussed at school, its future existence was never considered nor whether my place would be in it. It was never supposed to intersect with my personal future. The erasure of the concept, especially the diminution of connections to Gaelic being all but assured as a result, meant that those of us from a Gaelic-speaking background were firmly appraised of our position in the food chain. Right at the bottom. Growing up in the west Highlands, a Gaelic environment and mindset was always present even if, peculiarly, some of my most *Gàidhealach* ('Highland') friends didn't speak much of the language at all. Despite that, they were *Gàidheil* – Gaels and/or Highlanders, but possessing something that inherently went beyond linguistic or locational vibrancy.

Nearly three decades after I left school, what has changed for the Gaelic speakers in the *Gàidhealtachd*? More pressingly, what do the *Gàidheil*, and those others who live there, actually desire for the language in the region, as the social role of Gaelic falls victim to distractivist and tangential academic gymnastics, and to a trend in policy which eschews engagement with the Gaelic speaker group's contraction?

The Gaelic activist group *Misneachd* state bluntly:

*'S e ath-bheòthachadh coimhearsnachd a th' ann an ath-bheòthachadh cànan aig a' cheann thall, agus tha e soilleir nach urrainn do Ghàidhlig soirbheachadh ach ann an coimhearsnachdan a tha a' soirbheachadh san fharsaingeachd, agus anns a bheil àireamh fhallain de dhaoine òga is daoine aig aois obrach.*

[Language revitalisation is ultimately about community regeneration, and it is clear that Gaelic can only thrive in communities that are thriving in general, and that have a healthy number of young people and people of working age.] (*Misneachd*, 2020: 23)

At heart this is clearly correct, but the virtually unacknowledged elemental truth in the words above, felt by many in the rural Highlands and Western Isles, is the sense of abandonment bound up with current linguistic and economic revitalisation priorities. Why are traditional or indigenous Gaelic communities not thriving in the era of national Gaelic plans and how can this be addressed? Gaelic development in urban, more populated areas of Scotland – broadly – is primarily linguistic, extending to Gaelic as symbol, as educational currency and as an atomised, individualist pursuit.

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There is nothing negative in newcomers to the language choosing to learn Gaelic. The urban project, however, is still being evaluated in the hundreds of fluent learners rather than thousands, so a pragmatic approach would be to invest more in the proximal social and linguistic infrastructure of the *Gàidhealtachd* which is more likely to generate numbers more quickly. Of course, this does not mean cutting the Lowlands out of the equation. It just means a more robust and equitable voice speaking up for the *Gàidhealtachd*.

Gaelic development in the *Gàidhealtachd* is necessarily about more than language. It is bound up with economy, place, employment, resilience, culture and sustainability in a way that is fundamentally different from the metropole. The point is made powerfully and incisively by writer and blogger Catriona Mhoireach (2020) who notes: ‘... the Gaelic language is in crisis because the community that nurtured it is in crisis. This is not a problem that can be solved by Gaelic agencies because, quite honestly, this isn’t a purely linguistic problem.’

Acknowledging the demographic, economic and infrastructural vulnerability of the *Gàidhealtachd*, the very situation we’re in as we await the outcome of the 2022 Census, offers the area and its peoples a powerful opportunity to respond decisively and urgently. The way things are now is not OK. If the future of Gaelic lies in shallow national or international networks (e.g. MacLeod and Smith-Christmas, 2018: 9; McLeod, 2019: 144) then the focus tilts away from the townships and districts which still bear the responsibility of producing Gaelic speakers in numbers while the wider national Gaelic-medium education (GME) project catches up to the crisis. This in turn tilts the focus away from developmental priorities of infrastructure and demography that create resilient, sustainable communities of place.

The ‘thriving communities’ forming the core of the *Misneachd* quotation cited previously often disappear in an academic fog of competing polemics regarding how Gaelic may be used or constituted in the future, or, more frustratingly, in the endless, unfulfilling loops of: Who is a Gael? Where do learners fit in? Gaelic urgently needs more speakers, given the tenor of recent studies on the vernacular community (Munro *et al.*, 2011; Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, 2020). Where those speakers come from, whatever their defining characteristics may be, does not matter. Andrew Dunn’s (2015) position that anyone who chooses to learn and speak Gaelic is a Gael is perfectly reasonable. Learners of all backgrounds will occupy a critical place in the language’s future, but they are still not emerging as a critical mass quickly enough. Atomised national or international networks make limited contributions to the idea that language group membership ‘... viewed as a social group, revolves around the use of the language as social practice within the group’s activities’

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(Williams, 2005: 150). If Gaelic is destined to be sustained by becoming a networked language which lacks any sort of *fotminne*,<sup>1</sup> what, really, is the point?

Wilson McLeod (2020: 333–334) in his recent study of Gaelic policy in Scotland rightly observes that some of the interventions for language maintenance and transmission proposed by groups such as *Misneachd* are likely to be stymied by ‘deep-rooted structural issues’ related to traditional *Gàidhealtachd* areas such as housing and employment. This observation has too often been followed with a shoulder-shrugging dismissal of the ongoing Highland problem – which ‘may have been treated but [it has] never properly been cured’ (Carmichael, 2020) – and a submission to the idea of energy centres for Gaelic in (usually) the urban Lowlands where a number of those structural issues have readier alternative if not perfect solutions. At the same time there is an admission that much of the vibrancy of non-*Gàidhealtachd* Gaelic endeavour remains reliant on the linguistic and cultural capital drawn from the Western Isles, Skye and other parts of the Highlands.

McLeod (2020: 335) further observes: ‘It may be that much of the energy driving Gaelic revitalisation at the national level would dissipate without the continuing production of speakers in traditional communities.’ This is supported by the observation that 20% of Gaelic speakers in Glasgow in 2011 were under the age of 25, with 57% of that cohort aged 18–24, suggesting that in-migration of young adult speakers remains pivotal to urban linguistic vitality (Oates, 2018).

As the Highland ‘problem’ became conflated more publicly with the Gaelic problem in the mid-twentieth century, then today the Gaelic problem is further imagined as a national one with a vaguely supportive populace quietly ambivalent to the language’s fate. This has led to a diffusion of attention, including away from the ongoing diminishment of the *Gàidhealtachd*’s human and cultural resources. In turn, the societal conditions which have enabled the *Gàidhealtachd* to maintain the flow of human capital into the national Gaelic project are eroding. If it becomes even less likely that the *Gàidhealtachd* can sustain the production of those speakers, this leaves the entire Gaelic project, indeed community aspiration, in peril.

In this case, the future of a *Gàidhealtachd* facing demographic, economic and environmental crises requires more contextualised and strategised support. Why not confront those structural and systemic issues and inequalities in a Gaelic context? Strengthening the rural *Gàidhealtachd* ought to develop from a decentralising economic platform and moves to create or reposition jobs in the Western Isles by Cal-Mac, for example, ought to be lauded more widely and followed with action. The embeddedness of institutions dedicated to

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supporting the *Gàidhealtachd* has, however, faced significant challenges in an era of accelerating centralisation of services under central government. As such, there are tensions inherent in a decision-making framework outwith the region and fears that this may do little to stem the gentrification and gerontification of the *Gàidhealtachd*.

Since *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* moved to make GME its default approach in 2019, there needs to be a similar rebalancing of the asymmetries which make it comparatively more difficult to demand the same provision in rural areas than urban centres. This obviously requires local authority commitment and funding.

While some observe that 'Gaelic has widened its social base' (McLeod, 2020: 330), this has not been obviously matched by any significant social depth. The discourse since at least the 2001 Census result has pointed to the seeming inevitability of the greater proportion of Gaelic speakers coming to reside outside the *Gàidhealtachd*. This example of what can be termed a 'shifting baseline syndrome', where we simply come to accept such assertions and the policy positions that generally support them, sets perceived 'norms' in relative deficit and as downgraded and linked to our own generational experiences. This doesn't mean that the trend is inexorable. Nor does it mean that the *Gàidheil* in the *Gàidhealtachd* indulge in cultural amnesia, hell-bent on turning the clock back. Future-making is about new imaginaries with Gaelic in a prominent place alongside the region's other cultural and natural assets, informing lifestyle patterns, local decision-making, land management and ethical economic development.

Discussions on how to make this a reality need to be nuanced to create a local regional economy that functions more equitably. For example, there is nothing inherently wrong with the concept of holiday homes, but regulation and taxation have not been adequately addressed, and so much of the profit pours directly out of the *Gàidhealtachd*. It would be less controversial if those holiday homes were to be owned by full-time *Gàidhealtachd* residents, or as communal assets, circulating money and effort at a micro-level.

An undiversified economic model which places tourism at the centre generally means low wages, seasonality, and a precariat Highland class. For the *Gàidhealtachd*, this now relates to a linguistic, even cultural, *precariat*,<sup>2</sup> facing challenges to participate fully in a fractured Gaelic social economy. It remains generally more beneficial, in the continuing age of *Gaelic-as-an-economic-asset*, for younger economically active Gaelic speakers to base themselves in metropolitan Scotland, and engage in, for example, the off-shored production of services such as media which are broadcast back to the *Gàidhealtachd* they left behind. In doing so, especially if migrating from the Western Isles, these migrants may find themselves as part of a more imperilled linguistic precariat in



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an urban setting where the numbers of Gaelic speakers are scattered more widely in the population, where the speaker density hovers around the national average of 1.1%, and often reliant on networks and institutional supports, rather than rooted in social practice.

Gaelic speakers are exposed economically and societally both within and outwith the *Gàidhealtachd*. Some have attempted to counter this narrative with subtle attempts to redefine the *Gàidhealtachd* as a wider psychogeographical province. By simply applying the concept to Scotland as a whole, the *Gàidhealtachd* undergoes a distracting and misleading expansion such that the speaker numbers increase, and funding interventions can be made at a superficial level in spheres such as education and media, glossing over the vulnerability in traditional Gaelic communities.

### **On resistance**

Resistance exists in the vulnerability of accepting that the situation currently facing the *Gàidhealtachd* is a critical one, on different levels and in different realms. The most obvious crisis is that of the Gaelic speaker group which is approaching the point of complete collapse.

The ‘vulnerability as resistance’ proposition sits as something of a counter to the rejection of the Gaelic death discourse (e.g., McEwan-Fujita, 2020) and closer to the prognosis and community revitalisation model outlined in our recent research at UHI/SOILLSE (Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, 2020), which proposes a societal approach to dealing with the challenge Gaelic faces in the *Gàidhealtachd*. Butler’s (2016: 12) position states that ‘vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment.’ Taking the stance that the Gaelic-speaking *Gàidhealtachd* is better-served with a group-focussed approach founded on subsidiarity and decentralisation positions the vulnerability of the speaker group’s situation as a strength.

### **How resistance may be manifested**

Resistance lies in being seen in some quarters as directly in conflict with the organisational and civic trajectory followed by legislative and development bodies over the last 15 years, and which has led to a dissipation of energy across a national veneer rather than targeted interventions of depth.

Resistance will lie in the vulnerability of properly challenging the primacy of our cities and urban centres in realms such as GME provision, which is easier to

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campaign for in areas of greater population. Resistance will lie in the vulnerability of being able to say that not every decision about the *Gàidhealtachd* automatically means having to include every Gaelic speaker. It lies in the humility and self-awareness of being able to say not every decision about Gaelic's future is about 'us' if it relates to provision and support in the Lowlands. There is a vulnerability in saying 'Not every decision is about you' to those whose primary existence is not bound up in the future of the *Gàidhealtachd*, but this will be a crucial act of resistance.

Resistance is not only about Gaelic language revitalisation, because this is not always a priority for many in the *Gàidhealtachd*. It is embedded in small acts and gestures as simple, yet as meaningful, as choosing to contribute more to the circularity of very local economies, and systems for the future must be centred on a more circular economy utilising the natural assets of the *Gàidhealtachd* for its peoples, not for multinationals, to improve economic and social conditions. This will necessitate investment in the sub-optimal grid connections which currently constrain possibilities across the rural north which has some of the highest energy prices and most severe levels of fuel poverty.

Here, then, resistance must emerge in the form of more cohesive responses from vulnerable communities to counter the co-ordinated campaigns of interest groups to influence consultations such as those related to Wild Land Areas, such that we offer cultural and linguistic evidence-based responses which prioritise the *Gàidheil* and the Highlander in their situations. This includes the confidence to seek to inform policy which directly impacts the speaker group, such as the National Gaelic Language Plan, from which many in traditional communities often feel removed.

The future must relate to more dynamic interpretations of the *Gàidhealtachd's* place in the Scottish Government's policy architecture including the National Performance Framework and the Natural Capital Asset Index, and how Gaelic fulfils environmental, economic and cultural aspirations.

One of the most interesting and clearly strategised concepts which one might term an act of resistance is *e-Sgoil*,<sup>3</sup> which is rooted in a clear diagnosis of the existential threat posed by the continued extraction of young talent from the Western Isles and the *Gàidhealtachd* more widely. The project has the necessary elements to enable a rolling out across Scotland in a wider sense. Academic and vocational classes being taught at a remove to small class sizes help to make provision of certain subjects more viable and may help stave off further school closures in areas of low population.

The regional vulnerability exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic has focussed attention on the possibility of home-working – as broadband connectivity improves in the *Gàidhealtachd* so the issue of house prices becomes more

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acute. You could do a Gaelic job from anywhere, so calls to move *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* or *Comunn na Gàidhlig* to more rural areas in the Western Isles become even more symbolic. However, without the housing and infrastructural options in place, how can staff move easily even if they commit to doing so? As one contributor to my PhD research (Cameron, forthcoming) observed, we are at the point where the *Gàidhealtachd* has digital enablement while the social resources to facilitate remote working and rural living for our younger people are dwindling.

### **Conclusion**

The suggestion that Gaelic Scotland is a community ‘twice removed from State power’ (Krause, 2005: 4) is at least partially true. The influence of that State power remains profound, yet it is not the only power that weighs heavily on the *Gàidhealtachd*. The influence of landowners of differing hues and outlooks has shaped the mindset that exists to this day, a mindset that often acts as an emotional handbrake on community confidence.

Attempting to lever history and future apart is a problematic and disingenuous endeavour. Here, in the *Gàidhealtachd*, the dead hand of landlordism sits heavy. To paraphrase the misanthropy of the social media age, it lives rent-free in many minds. The connection between the decline of Gaelic in its previously strongest communities and landownership is obvious, even if the pattern of communities taking power into their own hands is changing, especially in the Western Isles.

The link between crofting, land ownership and access to this land, is intricately wound into debates about belonging and place making. It remains linked in legislative form, at least for now. In the autumn of 2020, the Scottish Government consultation on the requirement for the Land Court to have a Gaelic-speaking member raised a number of intriguing and inter-related questions, effectively on the irony that a language-based appointment may reduce the possibility of an experience-based or skill-based pool of candidates emerging.

Crofting is still portrayed as a means to shore up Gaelic cultural, linguistic and environmental assets, given the historic sense of connection between people, place and collective land management activities. Data from the Scottish Crofting Foundation suggests that in October 2020, the total ‘offers over’ value of crofts on the open market approaches £16 million. Stripping from the equation those crofts in which the sale included a house leaves a total of £7.64 million, at an average of £47,455 per croft. If crofting is to truly serve as a

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bastion of support for Gaelic then current legislation and attitudes need to be calibrated so as to offer more and younger entrants opportunities to contribute.

The *Gàidhealtachd* is, of course, peopled by different groups of the linguistic and cultural precariat, whether migrant speakers of languages other than English, or those wishing to access, utilise and protect the sociolinguistic and socio-cultural assets linked to Gaelic for themselves and for future generations. It is clear that this will become all but impossible as soon as the Gaelic speaker group in Scotland no longer functions as an autopoietic linguistic system. Its demography prevents it from reproducing and remaining operational. If we think of its societal metabolism, characterised by the manner in which energy and material flows may be linked to the expression of functions and reproductions of societal structures, too much energy is transferred to urban Scotland where it is largely dissipated in under-productive networks. The status quo in the approach to the Gaelic crisis is dissociative from societal reality and makes for unsustainable native-speaking communities.

If we recalibrate the possible *Gàidhealtachd* imaginaries, among the first steps can be small, local democracy which can help to offer and sustain social group cohesion and encouragement with less onerous participation in the structures needed to ensure that *Gàidhealtachd* voices are heard in decision-making processes related to language and culture. It is from the vulnerability of the group now that alternative, rooted progressiveness may offer resistance. The future challenges for the Gaelic-speaker group in the *Gàidhealtachd* must be met head on, as challenging as this may be, as acceptance of current trajectories is futile.

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## Notes

1. *Fotminne* roughly translates from Swedish as ‘foot memory’, a term used by the novelist Kerstin Ekman to suggest that the acts which help us remember also help to sustain life, and this offers a response to increasing levels of human detachment from rootedness.
2. Guy Standing (2015), expanding on his 2011 book *The Precariat – The New Dangerous Class*, refers to the precariat as emergent in ‘a new global class structure ... characterised by chronic uncertainty and insecurity.’ The term has been extended to linguistic settings by, for example, Samata quoted above.

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3. *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* (the local authority serving the Western Isles) launched e-Sgoil in 2016 intending 'to enhance equity in terms of subject choice for all pupils, irrespective of geographic location or which school they attended in the Western Isles. It was also envisaged as a means of addressing recruitment issues in key subject areas.' The initiative teaches in real-time via digital technology to pupils across Scotland: <http://www.e-sgoil.com/media/1134/esgoil-faqs-v5.pdf>. [Accessed 20 October 2020].

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## TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE RELEVANCE OF *DÙTHCHAS* IN *GÀIDHEALTACHD* ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURES

*Déirdre Ní Mhathúna*

### Abstract

This short article focusses on an exploratory enquiry into the relevance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in relationship with different cultural, social and environmental actors in the Scottish *Gàidhealtachd*. For many Gaels this relationship can be expressed through the indigenous cultural concept of *dùthchas*, representing an expanded place-based way of knowing and, potentially a ‘human ecology’ that is reconciled with externally determined environmental objectives. The article integrates some brief reflections from written interview discussions during the author’s recent postgraduate studies, which engaged with selected communities from the Gaelic heartlands. The need for more community research exploring in-depth and contemporary articulations of these cultural and ecological relationships is emphasised.

**Keywords:** *dùthchas*; environment; community empowerment; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; rewilding

### Introduction

*An-Dràsta* (Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn, 2020) is an award-winning short film made by young Hebrideans. It reflects on the very real threat that the global climate crisis poses to their (and our) futures. With increasing urgency, our

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*Déirdre Ní Mhathúna is an artist and researcher based in Edinburgh. Her socially-engaged artist practice sets out to amplify indigenous voices in respectful and creative dialogue. Her recent academic studies through Gàidhlig have deepened her commitment to the people and culture of the Gàidhealtachd.*

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younger generations perceive the future in pointed environmental and place-based terms. These issues are especially pertinent to our shared *Gàidhealtachd* future. Climate change mitigation strategies for Scotland currently cite the expansion of environmentally Protected Areas as a crucial path towards Net Zero carbon emissions by 2045 (Scottish Government, 2020). It is likely, therefore, that an emphasis on sustainable environmental and ecological practices within community-owned crofting estates has the potential to play an active part in achieving these goals.

The dominant view of Protected Areas is derived from the pioneering work in the United States of America of the nineteenth century Scottish emigrant and environmentalist, John Muir; for example, where national parks are considered a place apart from areas of everyday human activity. Notable among those who have taken a different view, developing what we now describe as the culture/nature paradigm, was the ecologist Frank Fraser Darling, who honed his conservation ideas of man-and-nature or ‘human ecology’ among the Gaelic-speaking crofters of Wester Ross, famously describing the Highlands as ‘a devastated terrain’ (Darling, 1955; Smout, 2011: 36–41). The means by which the terrain became devastated are, of course, multiple: the development in agriculture of a sheep-farming monoculture; the specialisation of large privately-owned estates throughout the Highlands in providing hunting, shooting and fishing experiences on driven grouse moors; the spread, particularly in the late twentieth century, of commercial monoculture forestry on biologically important peatlands in Caithness, Sutherland and the Cairngorms.

Historically, it is becoming clearer that many such land-use changes happened under the regimes of returning imperialists, often Gaels themselves, who either applied the same colonial logic of extraction and productivity on their new or expanded acquisitions in the *Gàidhealtachd*; or, instead, were influenced in estate policy by the Victorian romantic ideal of wilderness as a space of refuge, including for their capital (MacKinnon and Mackillop, 2020). Today’s large, almost ‘empty’ estates and depopulated glens are the product of these human and animal experiments. While they may appear ideally suited to ‘return to the wild’, a basic knowledge of Gaelic placenames reminds us that this is a landscape that is ‘peopled and historied’ (as one of my research respondents wrote). When we consider the ‘devastated terrain’ of the Highlands and an exhaustion of the land, then, this is a deeply rooted historical and political situation – but we are also discussing a cultural legacy and socio-structural stress on the contemporary environment.

While environmentalists may conceive of these lands as a form of ‘wilderness’ full of potential as Protected Areas, especially in the urgent drive to revitalise biodiversity and for climate change mitigation, many Gaels



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throughout the Highlands and Islands have a different social and cultural framing. This is not necessarily antithetical, nor is it a new phenomenon, but reinforces native connections to land and the formations of meaning from a particular and rooted sense of place. These divergent understandings of the *Gàidhealtachd* reflect the differing valuing of place that is also at the root of the 'devastated terrain' noted above. Such divergence in perspectives is frequently acknowledged within Gaelic communities but has only very recently been considered in national planning frameworks (Scottish Government, 2019; Course, 2018; MacKinnon and Brennan, 2012).

Early in 2020, as part of my postgraduate degree, I researched the contemporary relevance of traditional culture on environmental debates in the *Gàidhealtachd*, and I explored these issues through questionnaire interviews with a selected group of Gaelic speakers and activists. My questions (in *Gàidhlig* with translations into English), invited reflection on the work of large environmental organisations active in South Uist, Applecross, Eigg, Strathglass and Argyll; on the impact of designated Protected Areas on the local communities' sense of place; and if or how they felt their language, culture and concerns about place (their *dùthchas*) were referenced by such environmental organisations and similar interests.

In this preliminary enquiry and reportage from my research on the relevance of *dùthchas* for *Gàidhealtachd* futures, I emphasise that, and following from Hugh Cheape (2021: 54):

Care is taken to respect the integrity of this heritage by leading with *sealladh a' Ghàidheil* or a Gaelic view in exploring concepts such as identity.

### **The Wild Land and Rewilding**

Within the cultural depth and range of the 'Gaelic imagination', Meg Bateman (2009) demonstrates that the land, nature itself, is animate; and plant, animal, human and spirit are interconnected. Historically, and in such cultural terms *fàsach* (wilderness or undomesticated space) was that designated space of explicit interconnection. With the *Gàidhealtachd* experience of cultural and language shift and exclusions, culture's conceptual power (or imagination) shifts also: the wilderness then becomes synonymous with the constructed 'devastated terrain'. In turn, these cultural shifts lead to a perception that is intrinsically linked to the conceptualising of Protected Areas.

Many estates in the *Gàidhealtachd* contain or are bordered by Protected Areas, including nature reserves, various Sites of Special Scientific Interest (or SSSIs) and Marine Protection Areas. This brings crofters and fishermen into

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regular contact, and at times conflict, with conservation specialists. Differences reached a high point in 2014 when as part of the most recent National Planning Framework, the Wild Land map series was published by what was then Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), now named NatureScot (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2014; Scottish Government, 2014).

The public consultation process for the Wild Land Maps elicited much discussion and criticism in and beyond the *Gàidhealtachd* (see MacDonald, 2013). Unwittingly echoing the cultural erasure inherent in imperial mapping projects, the series played upon damaging stereotypes which have been imposed upon Gaels and the *Gàidhealtachd* for centuries (Withers, 2000). The Wild Land series had titles such as ‘remoteness from public mechanised access’ where the Isles of Lewis and Harris scored highly; ‘lack of built modern artefacts’ in which areas with the highest scores bear close resemblance to the extant vernacular Gaelic community areas (as consulted by Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, 2020); and the strangest of all, ‘perceived naturalness’.

There was little doubt in my respondents’ minds that something was awry within the map-making process itself, as this comment illustrates:

*Ciamar fon ghrèin as urrainn do SNH mapaichean a chruthachadh mun fhearann bho bhith a’ sgrùdadh fianais aig bùird ann an oifis? Chan eil sin ciallach no cothromach.*

How under the sun can SNH create maps about the land from examining evidence on an office drawing board? That is neither rational nor fair.

In the time since the Wild Land maps were published a UK-wide call for rewilding has been growing among climate activists. Scottish-based John Muir Trust, itself a landowner of more than 60,000 acres in the Highlands alone, aims to protect and manage wild land by working in public and private partnership. Rewilding Britain is one such partnership which includes several privately owned or charitable Highland estates. Of these, Dundreggan – a 4,000-hectare estate purchased by the charity Trees for Life in 2008 – has attracted considerable public funding, including from *Bòrd na Gàidhlig*, to develop a learning centre on-site and to ‘rewild’ or restore the forest at Glenmoriston.

From the literature, it would seem that rewilding can mean anything from undoing environmental damage on driven grouse moors, to replanting sections of the ancient Caledonian Forest (as at Dundreggan), or reintroducing wildlife such as beavers and lynx (Wynne-Jones *et al.*, 2020). Broadly speaking, it is a strategy intended to restore ecosystems and biodiversity but it can also be seen as a Pandora’s Box, with consequences not currently well understood

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or planned for (Nogués-Bravo et al., 2016). McMorran and Price tease out rewilding as ‘protected and connected “core” areas of wild land,’ and show that from its beginnings, rewilding (like Protected Areas) has been heavily influenced by American environmental strategies which were first developed by the ‘Father of the National Parks’ John Muir (Brown, McMorran and Price, 2011: 295–300). Respondents in my research questioned this concept of wilderness, considering institutional or official designations of ‘wild land’ somewhat meaningless:

*Tha na faclan ‘fàsach’ agus ‘Gàidhealtachd’ gu ìre a’ dol an aghaidh a chèile oir ma tha Gàidhlig ann (agus tha ann an Gàidhealtachd), tha dualchas is dùthchas ann agus mar sin chan eil i na fàsach.*

The words ‘fàsach’ [wilderness] and ‘Gàidhealtachd’ in a way go against each other since if the Gaelic language is there (and it is in the Highlands), heritage and ‘dùthchas’ [traditional culture] are there too and so it is not a wilderness.

### **Community, Culture and Consultation**

Since 2000, land reform legislation in Scotland has been steadily paving the way for greater local autonomy. Today 21% of community landowners are dotted around the north western seaboard and are addressing sustainable land management and renewable energy challenges while concentrating equally on community cohesion. In a recent report on resilience in the face of Covid-19, Calum MacLeod, policy director of Community Land Scotland projected that, ‘the more community landowners there are, the greater their contribution to a Green economic recovery would be’ (in Ross, 2020). The emergence of viable community ownership models and practices, and the many responsibilities entailed, can begin to address longstanding issues of disempowerment and environmental degradation.

Nevertheless, Jim Hunter (2017, 2019) has written on the need to plan well for the repopulation of the *Gàidhealtachd* so that people can avoid conflict with conservation objectives, in particular with rewilding. As environmental governance agencies forge ahead to protect our natural landscape, culturally sensitive consultation methods can also reach those whose voices have to date been absent from the discourse:

*Ron seo, ‘s e glè bheag de chonaltradh a bha riamh ann eadar coimhearsnachd is eòlaichean. ‘S ann a bha sinn a’ faighinn a-mach às dèidh do cho-dhùnadh sam bith.*

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Up to now, there was hardly ever any communication between community and experts. We would find out retrospectively after any decision making had taken place.

MacKenzie and Toogood show that the social aspect of conservation, so important in the context of *Gàidhealtachd* culture, posed significant operational challenges for conservation bodies from the early days of devolution (MacKenzie, 2013: 93 and Toogood, 2003: 163–4). If we think of the scattered settlements and small populations of the *Gàidhealtachd* in comparison with large environmental institutions and their governance responsibilities (such as NatureScot), the difficulty in sustaining communication with environment professionals and scientists working in the landscape comes into focus. At a local level, communities can find it challenging to engage with the many experts for whom their township or island is a valuable site of research:

*Bu chòir fada tuilleadh dhiubh a bhith air an suidheachadh anns na sgìrean fhèin, caran mar a b' àbhaist do Choimisean na Coillteireachd agus HIE a bhith. Nan robh meuran susbainteach dhe na buidhnean seo gan suidheachadh sna sgìrean [...] rachadh barrachd eòlas – a th' aig na daoine sin on ghlùin – a thoirt a-steach dhan obair.*

Many more [organisations] should be based in the areas themselves, as the Forestry Commission and [Highlands and Islands Enterprise] once were. If they were properly set up in the crofting areas, [...] far more local knowledge, which these young people have from birth would flow into the work.

It will take more than one approach or space of relationships to empower communities equitably, not least in the *Gàidhealtachd*, but positive change is emerging. For example, the Community Empowerment Act (Scottish Government, 2015) set out regulations for community consultation and participation across public life which included local authority planning and extended the community 'right to buy'; then in 2019 after a thorough and place-based consultation process, The National Plan for Scotland's Islands set out thirteen strategies, including language and culture, to strengthen island communities (Scottish Government, 2019). Taking a lead from these changes to enhance local decision-making, in late 2020 community meetings were co-ordinated by local councillors and MSPs in the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*, across the Western Isles and including Skye and Raasay, as a response to new research published in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020). The attention from the

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Gaelic community given to this process and its allied civic society support has raised the bar. This grassroots engagement maps out a potential pathway towards more socially and culturally appropriate ecological and environmental futures for the *Gàidhealtachd*. It also suggests room for refreshed, confident and proactive approaches.

### **Collaboration and Traditional Ecological Knowledge**

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) foregrounds long term, place-based and interconnected ways of knowing. TEK first emerged as an English-language term in literature on international development and adaptive management, and quickly found its way into planning and policy documents from North America all the way to United Nations (Whyte, 2013).

[T]he concept of TEK should be understood as a collaborative concept. It serves to invite diverse populations to continually learn from one another about how each approaches the very question of 'knowledge' in the first place, and how these different approaches can work together to better steward and manage the environment and natural resources. Therefore, any understanding of the meaning of TEK is acceptable only so long as it plays the role of bringing different people working for different institutions closer to a degree of mutual respect for one another's sources of knowledge.

(Whyte, 2013: 2)

Definitions and structures that originate in English for international and research purposes can be culturally problematic and tend to privilege institutional agendas for environmental governance. One common misconception is that traditional knowledge (e.g., indigenous or native) is an archive, whereas it is in fact alive, dynamic and diverse. From my research, one response about consultation shows how pertinent these considerations are to the Gael:

Professional bodies are all anglophone in construct, therefore flawed from the outset when trying to interpret, *dlùth, dualchas is a h-uile rud 's mar sin air adhart...*

[interconnectedness, heritage and all that, and so on...]

For these reasons Whyte (2013) advocates that TEK is best understood as a collaborative concept. There is a need to model for coexistence and for a genuine will to collaborate; when combined these can offer a bridge between

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two distinct worldviews (McGregor, 2004). What might this mean? The concept of *dùthchas* emerges as a potential bridge:

A term often proposed in the literature is, typically, *dùthchas*, as offering an insight into Gaelic cultural identity; this is an instinctive trait denoting the individual's sense of belonging to a home place. For the Hebridean, *dùthchas* has dimensionality as a putative total field of understanding embracing landscape, a sense of geography, a sense of history and a formal order of experience in which all these are merged. (Cheape, 2021: 68, also citing Newton, 2006: 29)

Collaboration would require attending seriously to this interconnected 'formal order of experience' and not just as an archive, but as informing, linguistically situated practice. In North America (Turtle Island), for example, to co-create appropriate Indigenous and First Nation research models will involve invitation into and a willingness to participate in culturally significant meetings – processes that are not always compatible with other professional timelines but are crucial to building respect and trust (Parsons, Fisher and Nalau, 2016). Outstanding and contested land claims in Canada spurred First Nations tribes to begin engagement with environmental conservationists in the 1990s; reclaiming the Anishinaabe languages is guiding Native ecologists to a profound reorientation from subject-based science to verb-based, embodied knowledges (Whyte, 2018; Kimmerer, 2017). Another example of successful collaboration is the Aboriginal Forest Planning Process in British Columbia (Karjala, Sherry and Dewhurst, 2004).

TEK stands in sharp contrast to the discourse of development and the erasure of people's aspirations, needs and rights within their cultural landscapes, which has underpinned environmental planning in post-war Europe (Adams, 2009). In *Our Common Future*, the UN set out to address cultural bias by challenging a Western neoliberal worldview at the expense of indigenous people and fragile ecosystems (Nehring, 2009; Brundtland, 1987). As shown in Dalglish (2017), such structural problems have filtered all the way down to our Scottish Landscape Framework. However, a brief exploration of TEK in the international context points to the importance of co-design approaches and of culturally sensitive analysis and dissemination of research findings. Consultations which privilege the agenda and perspectives of externally based actors (such as national conservation bodies) are also expected, through internationally ratified climate mitigation strategies, to advance long-term environmental goals through respectful cultural (including bilingual) engagement in *Gàidhealtachd* localities which are the focus of targeted interventions, such as Protected Areas or 'rewilding'.

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In my exploratory and collaborative research enquiry, embodied knowledge from within the Gaelic heartlands articulates that *dùthchas* as a distinct and richly nuanced worldview is not yet reconciled with the meta-narrative of conservation and sustainability in the light of climate change. Further research is essential if we are to unlock the full potential of the *Gàidhealtachd* as both landscape and homeland.

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## **DOIRLING: THE COBBLED SHORE**

*Lillis Ó Laoire*

### **Abstract**

This paper links subjective individual experience of bilingualism to changes arising from colonialism and globalisation. It uses subjective memory to grasp such worldwide phenomena as linguistic and cultural loss. Briefly linking a recollection from the Northern Territory, Australia, to early bilingualism and a lifelong advocacy for Gaelic languages and cultures, evident from its title, the paper shows how divergent examples cohere in a broader framework, aiming at ways to stem the effects of the Anthropocene by developing sustainable, future-oriented societies.

**Keywords:** bilingualism; colonialism; Gaelic; globalisation; indigenous; language change; sustainability

### **I.**

So much of our discussion on Gaelic languages today centres on comparing numbers. Both those who support them and those opposed use the same statistics to bolster arguments in either direction. The recent survey from the *Soillse* research network quantifying the steep fall among young people speaking Scottish Gaelic in traditional communities, caused shock and generated many columns of print, again on both sides of an entrenched argument.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s, I grew up as a native speaker in a bilingual household where Irish Gaelic was a normal language for communication, alongside English,

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*Lillis Ó Laoire grew up in the Gaelic speaking community of Gort A' Choirce, Co. Donegal, Ireland. He is professor of Irish Language and Literature at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway/OÉ Gaillimh). A noted singer in Gaelic, his interests include song studies, folklore, and the future wellbeing of vernacular Gaelic communities.*

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for household members who did not speak it. A majority of the people of the area were Gaelic speakers. My education for the first nine years was Gaelic medium – the usual situation in the area since the introduction of the Bilingual Education programme in 1904. The Gaelic element strengthened after independence in 1922. The school had about 90 pupils, divided over eight year groups *naíonáin bheaga* (lower infants) to *rang a seacht* (seventh class).

When I met him, my grandfather would ask ‘*Cén leabhar a bhfuil tú anois ann?*’ What book are you in now? This referred to the old system from his time of assigning a book or reader to each year group, by which their standard was assessed. I listened to Irish language news on the television, read by non-native speakers such as Charles Mitchell and Don Cockburn in a standardised norm, based on southerly varieties of Gaelic and wondered at the divergence between theirs and my own. The reporting of the Vietnam War and of Martin Luther King’s death came in Irish as well as in English. There was the intriguing cartoon figure *Daithí Lacha* – (David the Duck). I spoke Gaelic enthusiastically with my siblings, my friends in the school yard and older people, many of whom worked in my parents’ business. The language of Church was Gaelic. I first encountered Gaelic script, with its initially confusing s’s and r’s and its superscript dots to indicate lenition, as a child at Sunday Mass after Vatican II and the introduction of the vernacular as a medium to celebrate Mass.

I spoke English to my father and also occasionally to my siblings though my mother usually intervened if this went on too long, urging us to return to speaking Irish.

This experience of language was comprehensive. *Báite* (immersed) seems like a good description. A family story about me tells that I once ran across the main road, and narrowly avoided being struck by an oncoming car. Outraged at my foolish action, the driver stopped and began to berate me. He spoke in English, but I answered him, ‘*Níl Béarla ar bith agam,*’ (I don’t know any English). He then switched immediately to Irish, to which I retorted, ‘*Níl Gaeilge ar bith agam ach oiread,*’ (I don’t know any Irish either).

Those were the days of *An Screabán*, the local name for the industrial estate in *Gaoth Dobhair* (in northwest Donegal), founded as part of the 50-year commemoration of the 1916 rising. Emigrants returned to work on the estate. There was a measure of prosperity. Many urban Scottish accents of returned emigrants and their children could be heard mingling with Gaelic. Some of the returnees became excellent Gaelic speakers. The language held its own, if only just, supported by the work of the primary schools and one of the local secondary schools.

These observations briefly sketch a series of moments in what, in sociolinguistics, comprises a paradigm of subtractive bilingualism.

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This paradigm exists where two languages, one much more powerful than the other, are in a relationship where the powerful one steadily encroaches upon the speech community of the weaker, eventually eliminating its use, causing it to cease as a vernacular. A subjective depiction such as mine here may seem trivial when viewed from a quantitatively scientific point of view, such as the context of the rapid downward spiral in numbers of people speaking Gaelic fluently, whether in Ireland or Scotland (for Ireland see Ó Giollagáin, 2007).

My description above, however, does not include a sense of the constant press of English, the social allure or force of culture felt by those who gravitated towards it, away from Irish. I resisted that pull, and, perhaps because of my own bilingual background, my desire was to be equally fluent in both languages. I was aware that because of my practice of reading more in English, I felt more fluent in it, though this did not give me any comfort. I made a personal decision to address the imbalance, to strive for equal fluency.

Fragility is a concept that didn't occur to me at the time, but in my brief vignette I can now see that it was central. Given the ceaseless pressure toward English as a means of communication, with the appeal of popular culture overwhelmingly also in English, it is in some ways surprising to me that Gaelic remained so vibrant at the time; and yet, in hindsight, vulnerable, fragile.

## II.

Things changed rapidly. By the eighties, when I was in my twenties, I could hear that teenagers were using English more and more as a means of communication, the 'cool' factor winning out, though there were still many who used Irish. Many continue to use it today, although the pressure has not abated.

Neoliberal social and economic forces play a significant role in increasing the drive toward English language use. With a widespread and taken-for-granted belief that any state intervention in society is justified only for profit, such (neoliberal) ideology contributes to the increased marginalisation of already peripheral communities. As a consequence, an austerity mind-set only supports the drive to provide fewer resources to support initiatives of cultural and community maintenance (Ó Ceallaigh, 2018).

Austerity helped a neoliberally oriented Irish government to reduce its support in Ireland for *Údarás na Gaeltachta*. A minister for the *Gaeltacht*, himself a native speaker of Irish Gaelic, ended the already small subsidy parents received for their Gaelic speaking children in 2011, replacing it with a vaguely constituted care package instead. A welcome resistance to that has been the

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organisation *Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta*, which with its limited resources provides various kinds of support for Irish-speaking families living in the heartland communities.

*The Gaelic Crisis Report* (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020) empirically documents an already well-known phenomenon, the severe (ongoing) decrease of Gaelic usage in Scotland among younger age cohorts, even in the strongest Gaelic-speaking communities. A secondary aim of the report sought to puncture the positive revivalist discourse adopted by many of the Gaelic agencies. It strove to remind them that, regardless of the rise in urban Gaelic medium schooling, in Gaelic in the media and cultural activities, in the number of learners signed up for Gaelic instruction, the most important pillar for language continuity (the vernacular communities) was in dire crisis, and the agencies and institutions were guilty of ignoring it.

The ensuing acrimony was regrettably predictable, reminding me of Paulo Freire's (1996 [1970]) observation that in a struggle for freedom from oppression, forms of lateral violence can be an ensuing production of that ongoing oppression and struggle. Differences among the speech communities emerged in stark relief. New speakers, that is, those who have become active adult users of Gaelic through schooling or other means, were put on the defensive, earning the ire of advocates for traditional communities, some casting them as passing dilettantes. The 'who' of being a 'Gael' generated more furore, bringing forth a conviction that such an identity was bound to kin, land and occupation, and not solely a matter of linguistic competence.

Such debate and discourse show that the Gaelic question is very much a live debate in Scotland as indeed it is also in Ireland. The language in Ireland enjoys constitutional protection, something that may seem trivial in the face of other kinds of institutional and public policy neglect. Yet this status is a powerful ally in the maintenance of the language, whether it actually makes a difference to the day-to-day existence of the language in the Gaeltacht or not. Irish Gaelic is now recognized as a working language of the EU and of a small but growing cadre of translators, charged with the development of the language in bureaucratic spheres. Greater protection is an urgent desideratum for Scotland, as an augmented and stronger official status will help to better channel resources to all sectors involved in Gaelic language development, both urban and rural.

A recent and perhaps more optimistic paper sheds light on the use of Gaelic among inshore fishermen in Benbecula, South Uist and Eriskay. In this occupation, Gaelic remains dominant, used without hesitation or apology by a majority and necessarily understood by those involved. Gaelic and inshore fishing represent an allied interlocking of environmental and cultural

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management, uniquely adapted to this area. One of their number commented in this way:

At home we spoke English as my mother was from the mainland and didn't have much Gaelic. Although I understood Gaelic well, I wouldn't have described myself as a fluent or confident speaker. When I went out on the boats, though, well, they just spoke to me in Gaelic, nothing else. Within a year I was as fluent as anybody.

(Course & MacMillan, 2021: 2)

This statement shows again the fragility of language transmission but is also pointing to ways in which patterns and practices of fluency can be future-oriented, and extend outwards, rather than always being in a deficit pattern of contraction and decline. This is an issue that unites all communities of Gaelic speakers and, globally, users of demographically small languages.

In 2007, I travelled to Kakadu National Park (Northern Territory, Australia). While there I visited the local library in Jabiru one day and witnessed a group of boys, about 10 years old, sitting chatting there. There were four Aboriginal boys and one Anglo-Australian. The conversation was in an Indigenous language, probably either *Kundjeyhmi* or *Kunwinjku*, two of the three still spoken in that area today. Originally, up to twelve Indigenous languages were regularly spoken in the Kakadu region, a statistic that only hints at the catastrophic changes that have occurred across the whole continent since the 1780s and the systematic colonisation of Indigenous lands and the creation of Australia. Prior to this colonisation, several hundreds of languages, social groups and nations flourished on the huge land mass.<sup>2</sup> In the Northern Territory one of the languages which has passed away in Kakadu within living memory, is *Gaagudju*, whose last speaker, Big Bill Neidjie, died in May 2002.

Watching the boys, the power dynamic seemed clear. The Anglo-Australian boy's body language seemed hesitant and timid whereas that of the Aboriginal boys was confident and assertive. I was fascinated by the dynamic as I continued to observe them. It struck me as ironic, seeming to me to represent a kind of microcosmic reversal. The scene amused me a little, while also more seriously reminding me that power relations remain central in all human interactions.

Relationships of power have been pivotal in the way human linguistic diversity has decreased and been diminished. Coupled with a corresponding ecological crisis relating to the loss of diversity in the natural world, such rapid, catastrophic change on a global scale has led to the coinage of the term 'Anthropocene', particularly since the 'Great Acceleration' and the period from 1950 onwards (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). The seeds of that change were planted

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in the first phase of globalisation, dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, when indigenous communities within the islands of Britain and Ireland were subject to conquest from emerging imperial structures, but were then also often entangled as agents of expansion overseas for those imperial structures, and the frequent destruction of the worlds of other indigenous peoples.

Remembering how the Gaelic languages were suppressed and attempting to prevent their final demise links into this global narrative. It brings a perspective to the subjectivity I outlined briefly above. It also provides a context for us to understand those who orient themselves toward the super-languages, and their seemingly infallible, inexhaustible bounty. More and more, especially in relation to our present-day global pandemic, we become aware that what appears inexorable is also a mirage, premised on extractive ideologies whose underside reveals a different picture of profligacy and waste. Understanding the story, in broader terms, trying to change it, can also help us shed the shame and the disorientation of ontological and epistemological violation, freeing us to realign ourselves with inclusive futures of stewardship as we strive for a more equitable, more sustainable world.

The title I gave this short piece is a Gaelic word. In Ireland, the word means a cobbled beach, one covered with stones rubbed round and smooth from their constant motion in the ebb and flow of the tide. A proverb used in conversation by the late King of Tory Island, Patsy Dan Mac Ruaidhrí, gives a sense of its use, *Dá chruaidhe an chloch, dhéanfaidh an doirling cruinn í – no matter how hard the stone, the cobbled shore will round it*, a metaphor for cooperation and collaboration in the face of turbulence and constant change, also perhaps suggesting consensus and even harmony as an outcome of obdurate opposition. My copy of Dwelly's great Gaelic dictionary tells me that it may carry that sense in Scotland too, but that it more frequently signifies an isthmus, sometimes also indicating a promontory (Dwelly, 1977: 349). This semantic range seems immediately to encompass the issues I have touched briefly upon here, pointing to the shared linguistic heritage of our archipelago and the rich interpretive world it reveals.

## Notes

1. *Soillse* research summary: [www.uhi.ac.uk/en/research-enterprise/res-themes/humanities-and-arts-/language-sciences-institute/publications/the-gaelic-crisis-in-the-vernacular-community/](http://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/research-enterprise/res-themes/humanities-and-arts-/language-sciences-institute/publications/the-gaelic-crisis-in-the-vernacular-community/). [Accessed 4 February 2021].
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## CONTRASTING ORIENTATIONS TO PLACE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF NOVA SCOTIA GAELIC IDENTITIES

*Emily McEwan-Fujita*

### Abstract

Emily McEwan-Fujita is an author and former linguistic anthropologist. In this article, based on informal personal and ethnographic observations, she reflects on the ways that Nova Scotia Gaelic users orient to place. Nova Scotia Gaels are mostly adult learners and orient to place in contrasting – but recognizably Gaelic – ways.

**Keywords:** ethnolinguistic identity; Gaelic; language revitalisation; language shift; Nova Scotia; place

### Introduction

Scottish Gaelic, spoken natively in Nova Scotia since Gaels from Scotland started settling there in the last quarter of the 18th century, is undergoing a revitalization in the province. The provincial Office of Gaelic Affairs, established

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*Emily McEwan-Fujita is an author and former linguistic anthropologist. She trained at University of Chicago and was mentored by Nancy Dorian. McEwan-Fujita has been involved with Gaelic in Scotland for over 30 years, and in Nova Scotia for over 10 years. As an academic, she specialized in the linguistic and cultural revitalization of Scottish Gaelic and other minority languages. She lives in K'jipuktuk/Halifax which is in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people. The Mi'kmaq people helped Gaelic settlers from Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to survive in Mi'kma'ki. Their welcome was not repaid. Some Canadian Gaels became powerful politicians and were responsible for carrying out genocidal actions against the Mi'kmaq, including the implementation of the residential school system. They did so even though the settler people signed treaties with Mi'kmaq people promising to live in peace and friendship. All Nova Scotians, both Mi'kmaq and non-Mi'kmaq, are Treaty People.*

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in 2006, promotes the language as does the voluntary Gaelic Council of Nova Scotia which has been active since the 1970s (McEwan-Fujita 2020 [2013]). This paper takes a preliminary look at the multiple and sometimes conflicting ways that Nova Scotia Gaelic speakers and learners orient to place. Based on informal observation and personal involvement in Nova Scotia Gaelic activities over the past 10 years, I sketch the contours of regional identity construction and orientation in order to lay the groundwork for future sociolinguistic field research on the topic by others.

## **A Brief History of Gaelic in Nova Scotia**

Gaelic has been spoken in Nova Scotia since the 1770s. The most detailed account of this history and cultural background is still found in the ‘Kennedy Report’, an in-depth research report by Dr. Mike Kennedy (2002) published by the Nova Scotia Museum. The museum has made the report available as a free PDF online and it is required reading for anyone interested in the situation of Gaelic in the Maritimes and Canada Figure 1.

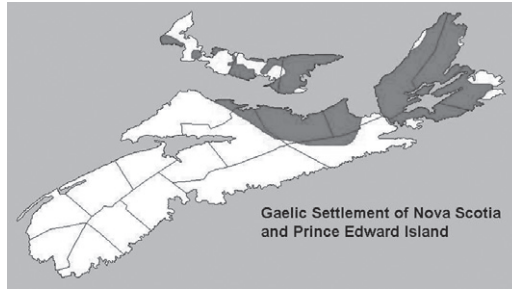
Gaelic speakers settled in Prince Edward Island and in eastern Nova Scotia: Cumberland, Colchester, Pictou, Antigonish, and Guysborough Counties, and the counties of Cape Breton Island. As Kennedy details, Gaelic migration and settlement was a process of chain migration of entire families and communities, who adapted to the North American context while maintaining and developing their language, culture, and oral traditions in Gaelic communities through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Kennedy, 2002: 18–19).

Intergenerational transmission of Gaelic on a community-wide basis ceased in the 1930s and 1940s in Cape Breton, although existing speakers have continued to use the language (for a discussion of the factors involved, see Dembling, 1991; Dembling 1997; Mertz 1982; also see a summary of these factors in McEwan-Fujita, 2020 [2010]).

In the twentieth and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, a few families and individuals have re-started intergenerational transmission, including a few fluent speakers from Gaelic-speaking areas of Scotland who settled in Cape Breton, and younger speakers who achieved fluency in Nova Scotia and in some cases by studying in Scotland. Other language revitalization activities, including adult education, community cultural events, and publishing, were initiated before the cessation of intergenerational transmission and are ongoing (McEwan-Fujita, 2020 [2013]).

Besides the overall lower number of Gaelic users in Nova Scotia, however, the main difference between Gaelic communities of Nova Scotia and Scotland

**Figure 1:**  
**Map of Gaelic settlement of Nova Scotia and PEI, from Kennedy, 2002: 27**



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is that the great majority of Gaelic users in Nova Scotia are not ‘native speakers’ but ‘learners.’ They learned the language not in the family home, but through mentoring programs and formal education as adults, or as children aged 10–16 in the case of the revitalization program *Na Gaisgich Òga* [The Young Heroes] which started several years ago.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Diverse Community of Gaelic Users**

A sense of attachment to place has been recognized as a fundamental orientation in traditional Gaelic culture. This sense of place has been maintained and carried forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by Gaelic users in eastern Nova Scotia. Although all Nova Scotia Gaelic users want the same thing – a social and cultural strengthening of the use of Gaelic – adult Gaelic users in Nova Scotia are not all the same. We differ on dimensions of ideology, culture, and linguistic proficiency. The things we do have in common are that we love Gaelic language and culture, and the future of Gaelic in Nova Scotia depends on how we choose to use the language in our lives, and how we socialize other people into using the language, including younger people.

Something else I have observed is that Nova Scotia Gaelic users have in common a particular sense of attachment to place, in other words a tendency to orient to place in a way that is characteristic of historical and contemporary Gaelic culture. This is done by constructing meaningful relationships between

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particular places and their Gaelic ancestry and kinship, Gaelic music and song, Gaelic calendar and holiday customs, and other cultural practices, in and through Gaelic language use. It is my observation that Gaelic users tend to do this whether they learned to do it while growing up in a Nova Scotia community or were socialized into it in adulthood. Nevertheless, I do still observe broad differences in which places Gaelic users orient to, and which practices Gaelic users employ to orient to place.

The main contrast that I apprehend and have informally observed is between the following two groups:

- (a) Gaelic speakers who orient towards Cape Breton Island as the main or ultimate source of Gaelic linguistic and cultural practices and authenticity;
- (b) Gaelic speakers who orient toward Scotland as that main or ultimate source.

Other cross-cutting orientations to place also exist, of course, and this could also all be further explored through new ethnographic research.<sup>2</sup>

In suggesting that Gaelic users orient to one of these places or the other, I believe that their orientation (or stance if you like) is operationalized in observable practices involving kinship, history and the past, travel, music and song, and Gaelic dialects. The following section offers an initial framework to expand enquiry on what that can mean in everyday terms.

## Nova Scotia Gaels Orienting to Cape Breton

Orienting to Cape Breton as the main or ultimate source of Gaelic linguistic and cultural practices and authenticity can be accomplished through a variety of everyday practices. Briefly, these practices may include the following:

**Kinship:** working out kinship and community connections in conversation (e.g., 'Who's your father?'), such as through having a *sloinneadh* (a genealogical and cultural naming practice of ancestry) or constructing a new *sloinneadh* if there was not one in their family's oral history, and asking their students to construct a new *sloinneadh* if they teach Gaelic language classes.

**History and the past:** putting an emphasis on oral history, and a sense of history as living memory, seeing the Gaelic culture and practices of nineteenth century Cape Breton as most worthy of reconstruction and emulation, listening to and telling *naidheachdan* (as stories are known in Nova Scotia).

**Travel:** If not already living in Cape Breton, then traveling there as often as possible and staying as long as possible for Gaelic learning activities.

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**Dialect:** Preference to learn a Cape Breton dialect and to utilize the [w] sound for broad L, now a shibboleth for a generalized ‘Cape Breton Gaelic’ (McEwan, 2015).

**Music and song:** Expressing a preference for milling songs and using song performances documented in folklore collections as sources; preferences for Cape Breton-style instrumental music and dance traditions and a lesser preference for Scottish ones.

### **Nova Scotia Gaels Orienting to Scotland**

Orienting to Scotland as the main or ultimate source of Gaelic linguistic and cultural practices and authenticity can be accomplished through a variety of everyday practices, which may include the following:

**Kinship:** A deep interest in genealogy, focus on family history and Scottish ancestors who emigrated to Canada in general or Nova Scotia in particular, but no *sloinneadh*; sometimes more recent (twentieth century) emigration from Scotland to Canada; can’t participate in conversations based on local knowledge of Gaelic families in Cape Breton.

**History and the past:** A deep interest in Gaelic history both in Nova Scotia and Scotland, expressed through reading (and writing) books and through travel.

**Travel:** Preference for traveling to Scotland for immersion-based Gaelic language training.

**Dialects:** Preference to learn Gaelic dialects from Scotland, rejection of [w] for broad L.

**Music and song:** Greater consumption of professionally-recorded music, possible preference for certain song types, possible preferences for Scottish instrumental music styles and dance styles.

### **Different Ways of Being Culturally Gaelic**

My understanding is that these differing orientations are socially constructed in ongoing fashion. For example, an individual’s orientation is not necessarily connected to their birthplace, upbringing, or residence. There are, however, geographical constraints on individuals’ actions for cultural participation, imposed by the financial and time cost of car travel, employment obligations, and the differing needs of Gaelic users in urban versus rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

*Emily McEwan-Fujita*

I have necessarily painted these orientations with a broad brush here, perhaps overly broad. New ethnographic research would help articulate a more nuanced picture. These contrasting orientations and practices do sometimes conflict, resulting in lost opportunities for enhanced cooperation and synergy to grow a stronger Gaelic community. However, not every individual orients exclusively to a Cape Breton-oriented or a Scottish-oriented approach, and significant overlap is possible. In fact, it can be argued that each of these orientations is actually vital to the health of the other.

The cultural practices of Cape Breton Island's Gaelic communities, transmitted through generations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with important linguistic and cultural retentions and innovations documented by folklorists, are the anchor and charter for maintaining a unique province-wide Nova Scotia Gaelic community that is now supported by some government funding and limited provision of Gaelic language and culture education in our public schools.

At the same time, Gaelic users and institutions in 'mainland' Nova Scotia are also building and maintaining local Gaelic communities that are respectful of but not dependent on Cape Breton. These users often turn to well-established Gaelic institutions in Scotland as a source of language education and cultural input. They also participate in Nova Scotia's Gaelic language courses, contributing financial support for instructors and institutions across the province. Moreover, periodic Gaelic input from Scotland to both Cape Breton and mainland Nova Scotia – in the forms of permanent and short-term immigration, and Gaelic training for Nova Scotians in Scotland – has helped to sustain, transform, and extend the Nova Scotian Gaelic community for 250 years now.

Some Gaelic users based in the Halifax area, of both orientations, have a small presence in centralized provincial government and institutions which can perhaps slowly help to swing the pendulum of language and cultural policies away from the potential for prejudice and denigration between groups. Gaelic users of both orientations are also active on social media, helping to form a small international online Gaelic community.

Part of **being Gaelic** and **becoming Gaelic** in Canada is being socialized into orienting to place in a certain way, whether one is socialized in youth or adulthood. But the main point is that people are still being Gaelic, no matter how and when they got there. Contributions from all across eastern Nova Scotia and Scotland go into making **Nova Scotia Gael** a viable ethnolinguistic way of being in the world in the 21st century, despite ongoing neglect and prejudice from Canada's institutions and mainstream culture.

### *Nova Scotia Gaelic Identities*

The broad outlines of differing orientations to Gaelic in Nova Scotia are important to grasp because it could help to improve the planning and effectiveness of Gaelic language revitalization efforts in the province. If further research is done in this area, then the main purpose should be to inform this proposal: *that Nova Scotia Gaelic institutions publicly acknowledge and honour these differences and bring them together in a non-hierarchical relationship in language policies and institutions.*

More generally, Nova Scotia Gaels are living in an advanced state of language shift and quite a different stage of language revitalization compared to Scotland (McEwan-Fujita 2020 [2013]). The situation gives a preview of a possible future landscape of Gaelic in Scotland, where intergenerational transmission has effectively ceased and a majority of adult learners are carrying the language forward. Nova Scotia Gaels in this situation are still recognizably Gaelic in their cultural practices. The development of mutual recognition and of shared goals and feelings, and the acknowledgement that there are different yet valid ways of being Gaelic in the world, are of utmost importance right now. Drawing boundaries about which Gaelic users are real Gaels and which ones are not hurts and excludes Gaelic users who are working to maintain and revitalize the language and culture in all its diversity.

### **Notes**

1. See: <https://www.gaeliccollege.edu/session/na-gaisgich-oga/>
2. For example, Dr. Stuart Dunmore will be carrying out a Fulbright research project on Gaelic users in Nova Scotia and Boston in the near future: <https://www.rsefundingawards.org.uk/case-studies/revitalising-scottish-gaelic-in-scotland-and-among-diaspora-communities-in-nova-scotia-and-new-england/>
3. Beginning in March 2020, the public health pandemic restrictions imposed in the province to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have severely curtailed and indeed virtually ended in-person Gaelic activities. Many Gaelic activities such as classes and mentoring programs have been moved online, which is not the same, but better than not holding them at all. We hope of course that the pandemic will come to an end and the restrictions can be lifted as soon as possible.

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## OUR PLURIVERSE AND *GÀIDHEALTACHD*: EMPLACING ETHICAL RELATIONS

*James Oliver*

### Abstract

In this brief essay, to conclude the special issue, I take a reflexive and ontological (re)turn to the *Gàidhealtachd*. After completing our main task of bringing this collection together, an emplaced and ontological turn has been in some measure evident across the articles, emphasising relationships with place/s. In writing up our guest editors' introduction, a related emergent theme, or atmosphere, of place and ontological relations within the *Gàidhealtachd* became important. In continuing with that (perhaps minor) 'turn', in this essay I engage with my lived experiences of cultural change and exchange, including with my research, emplaced within and beyond the *Gàidhealtachd*. This (ex)change has profoundly influenced my creative practice, social practice and research relationships with the *Gàidhealtachd* – reemphasising an ontological (re)turn to place, and its ethical relations and futures.

**Keywords:** *Gàidhealtachd*; emplacement; ethical relations; ontology; place; pluriverse

### Acknowledgements: ethical relationality

Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other. This form of relationality is ethical because

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*James Oliver* (Seumas Olaghair) (Seumas Chatriona Dhomhnuill Aonghais Bhig) is from Glendale in Skye and lives in Melbourne Australia. He is an Associate Professor in the School of Design at RMIT University, where he teaches and researches across Creative Practice Research and Indigenous Practice Research.

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it does not overlook or invisibilize the particular historical, cultural, and social contexts from which a particular person understands and experiences living in the world. It puts these considerations at the forefront of engagements across frontiers of difference.

(Donald, 2009: 6)

*Is mise Seumas Chatriona nigh'n Dhomhnuill Aonghais Bhig mac Dhomhnuill mhic Pheadar mhic Mhurchaidh.<sup>1</sup> Tha mi às an t-Eilean Sgitheanach, bho Gleann Dail.* I am from the Isle of Skye, from Glendale, and I respectfully acknowledge that I currently live and work on unceded Country in Australia and arrived as an uninvited guest. I pay my respects to the people of the Kulin Nation and their Ancestors; in particular, the people of the Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung language groups and their Elders, past and present. I respectfully acknowledge the sovereignty of the First Nations and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways throughout Australia. I have learned from every Elder's Welcome to Country ceremony I have attended that our welcoming comes with an obligation of purposefulness, and a promise to not harm Country, its land, water or children. This represents a shared commitment to the future. Settler-colonial society has frequently been significantly remiss in these duties.

The concept of Country here is ontological, much more than just land, and part of a deeper cosmology. For me, and from my particular experience of research (and pedagogy) collaborations in Australia with Indigenous Practice Research, there is a strong resonance with the ontology of emplacement in the *Gàidhealtachd*. I have commented elsewhere:

*Dùthchas* is that ontological dynamic of embodied experience and emplacement ('on the ground'), and complex entanglement ('in the mind') with relationships of belonging and dwelling, heritage and inheritance, a human ecology with 'place' (including, where relevant, land). It is something like the ontological ethics of what the anthropologist and poet Renato Rosaldo refers to as 'the cultural force of emotions.' This sense of belonging and responsibility, when conceived of as praxis, as emplaced ethical relations, 'is political, social and cultural imagination in action.'

(Oliver 2021a)

## Place as reciprocal reception: cultural (ex)change

Whilst completing the introduction to this special issue with Iain MacKinnon, it struck us that there is a form of an ontological turn in the emergence of a strong

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discourse around the relevance of relationships with place/s in this special issue. By 'ontology' I am referring to how we articulate, practice and/or understand our being, and being in the world – materially and conceptually – and the plurality of iterative relations and relationships with other things in the world, including people and places.

Everyone contributing to this special issue is, of course, doing so from place/s. In the context of the current global pandemic we have also been experiencing various periods and extents of 'lockdown'. Whilst the digital and virtual communication revolution has stepped up a gear (necessarily), we have also had the paradoxical experiences of feeling more and less 'mobile', and more and less 'located'. I think it is likely that questions of place/s have become more pronounced for many people, they certainly have for me. We have, effectively, been ontologically challenged in our everyday relationships with place/s. Certainly for those of us working in universities in Australia, our daily experience of place/s has become nuanced, whereby, for example, the institutional Acknowledgment of Country that colleagues are in the habit of reciting, often no longer applies if you are 'working from home'. It has been interesting to see how this has re-engaged colleagues with often more personalised Acknowledgments, and potentially with feeling more emplaced.

From this point, I wish to elaborate briefly on some key concepts from above and also to position this essay as a form of *coda* to the special issue introduction article – to introduce an ontological journey of turns and returns with place/s – a journey with ontology (re)turns. To expand, in positioning his recent book, *Designs for the Pluriverse: radical interdependence, autonomy and the making of worlds*, decolonial scholar Arturo Escobar notes that, 'The preoccupation with relationality and with the limitations of binary thinking was not invented by the 'ontological turn' (Escobar 2017: 20). Indeed, Indigenous and feminist scholar, Zoë Todd (2016) pointedly critiques the intellectual histories and politics of the 'ontological turn' in terms of how dominant Western paradigms and intellectual discourse narrowly centres itself (in enduring colonial fashion), to continually reference its own theoretical traditions and writers. Similarly, Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie (2015: 633) also critique the drift of flat ontology (a relativism and equalising of relations between things): 'flattened ontological or materialist frameworks de-emphasize the agency of people and politics in attempting to better attend to the interconnected networks or mangles of practice in researching social life;' where they also consider that, '... these turns often do not go far enough to attend to place and land.' And to return to Escobar (2017: 20), he highlights that his focus (on the pluriverse, as ontological and relational) is also a 'commitment to place, the communal, and other practices of being, knowing and doing, ...

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commitment to notions of the human capable of harboring a genuine care for the world.’

Summarised above is a brief intellectual backdrop, developed for the short ontological journey shared below.

## Ontological (re)turns

As noted earlier in this special issue (Oliver and MacKinnon, this volume):

The *Gàidhealtachd* is not one-dimensional, nor is it a mere metaphor or index of history or homogeneity; it is place/s and social networks, variously embodied and emplaced – including sites, situations and subjectivities as encounters of ‘relational validity’ for its futures (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015).

Where do you start a personal story about global intersections? There is no plot as such, and it would be a mistake to pinpoint an individual as central to anyone else’s story, other than their own. But there are relationships, to carry a story, to thicken some truths; whilst there is no plot, everything is still relevant.

My first ‘proper’ academic article was published in *Scottish Affairs* (Oliver, 2005). It was about *Gàidhlig*, identity, and place/s, clearly not far from our themes here. However, reading it now, I am quite surprised at its disinterested academic register and tone of language. It surprises me that I was sitting on such a political fence, given that it was also adapted from my PhD (Oliver 2002), where my conclusions are much more explicit about the need for a place-based formal *Gàidhealtachd*. However, the fundamental reason I am surprised is that in that article I barely reveal who I am, or that I identify as a *Gàidheal*, or that my *dùthchas* centres me ontologically with *Gleann Dail*. And still does – and it was always those things that had actually encouraged me in the first instance to do my PhD and research on *Gàidhlig*, identity and place/s. I think I was discombobulated by a certain kind of academic culture.<sup>2</sup>

Since that time, I have written a range of articles connecting to those similar themes (e.g., see Oliver references section). I have also shifted to more culturally oriented practice-based research (in the creative arts and design), and to another country, halfway round the world. In a sense, I feel like I am away (*air falbh*) in order to return (*till dhachaigh*); in a sense, I already have, I am ontologically (re)turned. Confident and constructive with the autoethnographic sensibility and ‘cultural force of emotions’ (Rosaldo, 2014).

This common theme of place/s is multiple and of universal human and ecological importance. It contextualises ethical relations emphasising our

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emplacement/s. The place/s of the *Gàidhealtachd* are hyper-local place/s of the global archipelago. Place/s should be embraced as hyper-local (as opposed to post-local); they are ontologically more than just location. When I reflect on the cultural collaborations I have had (and still have) across Indigenous Practice Research, here in Australia (and also in Canada and Scotland), the ethics are an ontological (ex)change and emplacement of the 'glocal' too. These hyper-local and 'glocal' intersections, as relationships (and relationality), reveal and demonstrate both 'radical interdependence' and an 'autonomy' of people and place, land and language – and also an ontological (ex)change and (re)turn – that is a critically different ethics of relations from the otherwise homogenising and hegemonic structures, if not outright power, of neo-colonial, corporate modes of globalisation in the name of social networks. To conclude, *Gàidhealtachd* futures are encountered through our emplacement/s – a double ontology of ethical relations and lived experience – place/s as relationships and the space-time of community, both grounded and networked (see Oliver, 2021b; cf. Massey, 2005 and Pahl, 2005).

### **Notes**

1. This is part of my *slionneadh* ('genealogy', also informing my 'patronym'); this version addresses seven generations in Glendale.
2. The same article has, on occasion, been very partially quoted, and certainly out of the broader context of the article and indeed of my wider publications, to suggest I am dubious that people identify as Gaels/*Gàidheil*.

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## BOOK REVIEW

### ***The Futures of Scottish Gaelic under the Microscope***

*Douglas Chalmers*

McLeod, W. (2020). *Gaelic in Scotland: Policies, Movements, Ideologies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 456pp, £95. ISBN 9781474462396

Ó Giollagáin, C., Camshron, G., Moireach, P., Ó Curnáin, B., Caimbeul, I., MacDonald, B. & Petervary, T. (2020). *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community: A Comprehensive Sociolinguistic Survey of Scottish Gaelic*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 504pp, £25. ISBN 9781857520804

The opportunity of reviewing two publications such as these – one by a distinguished author in the field and the other by a series of similarly renowned authors – is not something that often arises in the field of Gaelic scholarship. It is even more challenging when despite sharing much common ground, the prescriptions offered differ fundamentally in key aspects. In this review I have tried to identify where areas for positive dialogue can be constructed.

It is undoubtedly the case that Wilson McLeod's *Gaelic in Scotland: Policies, Movements, Ideologies* is a book that fills an important role of commentary and reflection on the histories and contexts of Gaelic revitalisation language policy and planning in Scotland. It is a genuine tour de force, examining and documenting the development of the language – and to a great extent its art

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*Douglas Chalmers is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Journalism at Glasgow Caledonian University. His main area of research is in the economics of minority languages. He is a Gaelic learner and represents Glasgow Caledonian University on the board of the Soillse research network.*

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and culture – since its early days, although, for many it is the period since the 1970s, which McLeod deals with in greater depth, that may be most relevant.

A hefty bibliography of just short of 100 pages, and a very detailed index ensures that this will surely now be the ‘go to’ book, in terms of understanding Gaelic policies, movements and indeed the ideologies that help make sense of the current situation of the language, art and culture. It is also an exceptionally accessible book, with the author outlining that it has been written with an international readership in mind, and this accessibility is a strength. Although McLeod’s book situates itself as being first and foremost a study of language policy, with its principal focus on the demands of language advocates and the response of public institutions, it does usefully outline some of the current issues in the field of sociolinguistics. This is something that becomes an issue of debate and disagreement with the second book under review here, *The Crisis in the Gaelic Vernacular Community*.

On several occasions McLeod notes the paradoxical position the Gaelic language is in. Despite the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland dropping by more than four fifths in the last one hundred and fifty years, and the language steadily weakening as a living community vernacular, he highlights that this ongoing decline in the total numbers of Gaelic speakers and the intensity of Gaelic use has coexisted with a dynamic of revitalisation, heightened recognition and increased public status. Furthermore, Gaelic is not an issue that divides the country along party political lines, as is the case with minority languages elsewhere; in fact, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 was passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament. In terms of current public opinion towards the language, he evidences the view that throughout Scotland there is a pattern of widespread, albeit relatively shallow, support for Gaelic, with negative views confined to a rather small minority. This is a much more positive situation than was the case in the 1980s.

McLeod also discusses the role of the Gaelic Language Board/*Bòrd na Gàidhlig* (BnG), which was recently subject of a critical report by Audit Scotland. He has written extensively on BnG in the past, and he treats it reflectively here, pointing out that it has always suffered from inadequate funding and staffing compared to the Welsh Language Board, with no staff recruited with specialized knowledge of language planning. He also repeats his well-known critique of the Gaelic Language Act, which has always had far less powers than its Welsh counterpart and other similar acts. Given the abolition of the Welsh Language Board in 2012 – and the transfer of some of its powers to the Welsh Assembly and to a Welsh Language Commissioner, together with the abandonment of its ad-hoc language plan model – McLeod notes, however, that Gaelic language development is continuing to use a model (i.e. a Language



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Board and Language Plans) that was deemed unworkable for the Welsh language a decade ago.

In terms of where the geographical priorities might lie for future regeneration of Gaelic and the Gaelic speaking communities it is here that McLeod's perspective may be seen to differ most strongly from the research presented in the other book here, *The Crisis in the Gaelic Vernacular Community*. McLeod usefully recaps on previous debates on this issue, acknowledging various reports and approaches that have previously suggested that priority should be given to then existing Gaelic-speaking communities in the 'Gaelic heartlands'. For example, this was a recommendation of the Taskforce on the Public Funding of Gaelic in 2000, which suggested the need for most provision in what was considered the 'heartlands' in the north-west of Scotland with less concern given to the rest of the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*, or to the remainder of Scotland and the global diaspora of Gaelic speakers.

McLeod acknowledges the argument that it is not difficult to imagine that a concentration of 25,000 Gaelic speakers in the Western Isles (a traditional *Gàidhealtachd* area) and who were using Gaelic securely as the normal language of everyday community interaction and its social institutions, would be the stronger foundation for the survival of Gaelic – rather than the actual situation of 57,000 speakers nationally, mostly scattered across Scotland in low-density sociolinguistic environments. McLeod believes that such speculation fails to engage with the social and ideological reality of, for example, the Western Isles, now closely integrated with the rest of Scotland, and consequently with the in-migrations and tourism which have impacted community dynamics. He also states that language policy in the Western Isles, including its educational aspects, has reflected the 'choices' and 'preferences' of the people of the islands, including their choices at the ballot box.

McLeod further concludes that, while it may be unwise to make confident forecasts concerning the future of Gaelic, the most likely future scenario is that Gaelic will become a language of second-language speakers in specific social networks of different degrees of thickness, some in the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*, some elsewhere, often sustained through institutional structures such as school education, and facilitated by information and communications technology. For most of these speakers Gaelic might then be used only in particular contexts and situations rather than as their main language of daily life. This is where McLeod's book and its perspective for future Gaelic language policy differs the most from *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community*, which I will review now.

*The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* is also a substantial work that I regard very highly, both in its empirical analysis and basis, and its concern

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for the future of the Gaelic language. It is a work of contemporary socio-linguistic research conducted by *Soillse*, a National Research Network for the Maintenance and Revitalisation of Gaelic Language and Culture, and a collaboration between the University of the Highlands and Islands and several other of Scotland's universities. Although I currently represent my university on the *Soillse* Board, it's perhaps important to say that I have not been involved in any way in the discussion around or production of the book

Based on their empirical research, the book's authors are extremely critical in their analysis of the relevance of the current planning models currently adopted towards Gaelic and argue for a decisive shift and a new agenda in current language policy, marshalling a formidable array of data in support of their prognosis. There are strong arguments put forward for a change in the treatment of the current vernacular community. The data presented outlines how Gaelic has been supplanted as the primary language of family and community practice in the Western Isles. This suggests that the threat to the Gaelic vernacular community is so severe that under current circumstances even marginal vestiges of a Gaelic communal presence will soon be lost. Remaining Gaelic networks in the vernacular communities, they argue will not survive anywhere to any appreciable extent, under current circumstances beyond this decade, and the evidence presented seems hard to refute.

They state starkly that as the Gaelic communities are now experiencing the final social phase of ethnolinguistic erasure, the limited relevance of Gaelic bodies and their current policy initiatives are now a significant hindrance to the Gaelic vernacular community, particularly in efforts to engage positively with such challenging circumstances. The authors argue that there should be a swift re-orientation of language policy and planning efforts away from what they see as formal symbolic institutional provision.

In practical terms, they argue *inter alia* for a rethink of the role of the Gaelic Language Board and for its replacement in the Islands by a community development trust for Gaelic (*Urras na Gàidhlig*), which would be under the direct control of a representative cohort of community members. This would, for example, require *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* to re-evaluate their current direct role in Gaelic -focused development in the Western Isles and channel responsibilities and resources to this new community focused organisation.

The authors believe that this participatory, minority-language cooperative model would give authority and responsibility back to the Gaelic communities of the Western Isles to engage with their own circumstances. Indeed, inspired by and further to this, it is to be hoped that the current community consultations taking place (led a cross-party group of MSPs, including Alasdair

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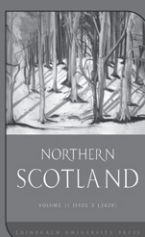
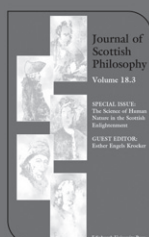
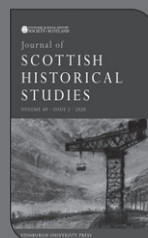
Allen and Kate Forbes, and also with members of *Soillse*) can tease out the extent to which this may be a viable model.

There is some hard-hitting critique put forward in this book, arguing that, since the passing of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act there has been a shifting focus in the various discourses on Gaelic revitalization – from, on the one hand, an engagement with Gaelic as a vernacular of particular geographies and speaker groups, to, on the other hand, what the authors theorise (somewhat abstractly) as an emphasis on Gaelic as a post-spatial, aspirational, innovative, non-vernacular language. It would be fair to say that the analysis and approach taken in this book have already caused significant discussion and debate (sometimes division) within the Gaelic community, and in academia associated with Gaelic revitalisation. This may be partly due to the rather robust manner in which the work of some academic peers is discussed. For me this is a potential weakness if it is seen by some as a barrier to a creative and constructive dialogue on what is indeed a crucial debate, deserving of reflective and serious consideration. Situated in context, there are two aspects to this type of hard analytical dialogue and critique, whereby a strong articulation and recognition of the need to do more for vernacular communities can also drift towards a polemical debate and run the risk of polarising supporters, speakers and learners, both within and outwith these crucial communities, if not approached carefully.

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