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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 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

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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.¹ 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.² 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 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

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 19th 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 newspaper, and has been since its launch in 1972, explicitly campaigning on all these issues.

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) Wolf (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 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*).³ However, the *Gàidhealtachd* is also the Hebridean islands and one of the traditional *Gàidhlig* name 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’.

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.

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 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 sociolinguistic 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 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 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 ‘desocietalised’ *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 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 and subjectivities as encounters of ‘relational validity’ for its futures (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015).

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