

**Orkney**  
**Landscapes of Future Resistance**

Laura Watts  
 Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University UK

www.sand14.com  
 l.j.watts@lancaster.ac.uk

performed at 4S/EASST 2008  
 Erasmus University Rotterdam  
 August 2008

Copyright:  
 This online draft script may be cited or briefly quoted in line with the usual academic conventions. You may also download it for your own personal use. This script may not be published elsewhere (e.g. mailing lists or blogs) without the author's explicit permission. If you copy this script you must include this copyright note. This script must not be used for commercial purposes or gain in any way.

## Background

Anyone Anywhere Anytime; Ubiquitous; Always On: this is how the future of information and telecommunications access is often discussed within high-tech industry. It is a story of technological progress marked out and measured by quantifiable increases in bandwidth, software versions, processor speeds, and revenue. It is a future where 'everybody in the world will have a mobile phone'. It is a future where landscapes are colonised by mobile phone antennae, optical fibre cables, satellite dishes, electricity pylons, and air-conditioned rooms filled with telecoms switching equipment; a profit-making colonisation of people and place with the assumed moral authority of technological development.

Yet the places where the high-tech industry imagines and makes this future, in its everyday practice, are not everywhere. Influential sites of future-making are located in certain places and not others: in Silicon Valley, in historic proximity to the defence industry, and within easy reach of global transport hubs such as London Heathrow. The future is situated, both in epistemology and geography. Future-making is inseparable from the landscapes of its production. For example: ubiquitous telecommunications access is imagined in places with the densest proliferation of telecom networks, where mobile phone signal is already everywhere, where the landscape does not resist such infrastructure - has long been colonised by cell sites and optical fibre. Here, a future of pervasive telecommunications is merely a copy of what is, multiplied and replicated in other landscapes.

But what happens when landscapes kick-back? How might the topography and temporality of the landscape resist a future copied from elsewhere? Drawing on Karen Barad's approach to intra-action, how could landscapes as sociomaterial phenomena intra-act with the futures imagined and made there? How does this engage with current debates in STS concerning the ontic effect of materials and place?

Set in contrast to the mobile telecoms industry around London, this will be

an ethnographic account of the landscapes of high-tech industry on Orkney, an island archipelago off the north coast of Scotland. This is a place with one of the world's densest proliferations of enduring technology: not the scaffold of radio antennae, but the sandstone monoliths of Neolithic stone circles, chambered tombs, and standing stones. Here, the everyday practices of those working in the renewable energy industry, in web design, in virtual modelling, are made through, and with, a very particular place; a place whose island hills and seas resist wireless transmission and the mere replication of an Anyone Anywhere Anytime future.

by Future Archaeologist

I am the Future Archaeologist. I am method. I speak as a method, situated in a place. Situated in, speaking from, the islands of Orkney; from this archipelago riven from the north of Scotland by the turmoil of oceans; tethered to the world by prehistoric sea-passage to Ireland and England; Viking ships to Norway, undersea power cables to Scotland; oil pipeline to the North Sea.

But my method, who I am, is Future Archeology, not simply a roll-call of history. What I do is make futures from fragments of evidence, as archaeologists make pasts from fragments of evidence. I am here, in Orkney, making futures from fragments of this place, making evidence, and making myself, of course (Verran 1998).

Standing besides me is The Visitor. He has come seeking Orkney futures for investment. See him in his frayed black-hooded top, jeans, clean white trainers, surf-stubble beard, straight off the plane from some world centre (Beijing, Los Angeles, London). He seeks the marine renewable energy industry here in Orkney, tidal and wave power generation, and site of the so-called jewel in the crown of the Scottish government, the European Marine Energy Centre. He is here for the energy in the chill air lifting the hairs on your neck, the energy of the salt water you can taste in each breath. The energy that presses hard against the door, holding it shut during the long grey winter storms; Atlantic waves that loom vast as they crash over the cliff-tops into fields and grass. Terrifyingly rich renewable resources.

I think Silicon Valley is important, the Visitor says. What is it about Orkney that is unique that separates it from the rest of the world? ... I want to know the secret behind the marine [energy] business... I want to uncover the secrets of marine renewables.

Follow me, Visitor. Uncovering secrets is within the realm of archaeology (Holtorf 2005). So follow me, into the Orkney night, into its underworld, to

uncover the secrets of its futures.

Walk with me. Walk into the heart of Orkney, the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site. Walk along the rising isthmus, into the dying summer-purple heather of the Ring of Brodgar stone circle. Look: see the ring of hills all around us, the lochs encircling us- islands within islands- an island ontic (Rainbird 1999; Richards 1996; Verran 1998). And see the barrows, the burial mounds, black waves behind the stones. Once, they said, the Trows lived in those mounds: small and fierce, stealer of bodies, enchanters of the night who would ensnare the unwary visitor and drag them into the mound, perhaps never to return; caught in the land, the Orkney soil forever in their veins.

See these stones, Visitor. Look at carefully at their colour, feel their edges, planes and fissures. They are from many different strata, many different layers of rock from different places, from different people, around Orkney. This is a place of construction, which may never have been completed, says an archaeologist (Richards 2004). It's an orchestration of a particular people-place, the making of a particular people-place. An island making technology, a technology making island – making enduring futures; an ongoing island experiment.

Look through the lichen marking the four thousand years through which this technology has stood, and the four millennia through which it may yet stand in the future.

My family goes back here thousands of years, says a local wholesaler. Orkney is a nation to Orcadians. It's not nationalism, its pride in your place. So please forgive me if I feel strongly about how it looks... This is my home.

Place is shorthand for people, here, explains the renewable energy director. If you depopulated Orkney and filled it with [different] people it would not be the same place.

Place and people are entwined, inseparable, a particular natural-cultural landscape that makes stone circles and renewable energy devices, and is made by them (Barad 2007; Ingold 2000).

Now, remember these words on the PowerPoint slide you were presented with during daylight: Export as a way of life. Which you dismissed as: ...generic, applicable to anyone who wants to be an innovator.

Let me excavate the secrets in those words, beneath your dismissal.

See the shape of the future done here, in the export of energy from The Orkney Hub.

In Orkney, you are at the heart of things, and the centre from which to move outwards is the islands, not London. Here you are at the centre of the circle, on an island surrounded by water that touches coasts and tidal estuaries around the world. Here is made the centre, in island Orkney ontics. London and Los Angeles are made periphery.

Orkney has to help itself, says a partner in a wind-turbine farm. The UK mainland, the American continent, are just other islands, different places with different needs: the international is always local somewhere, I'm reminded by an art curator. If Orkney does not benefit then it's a rum deal, says the renewable energy maker. Forget all your knew about scale, about the importance of the large, of the global, of Silicon Valley, Visitor.

What matters here is self-sufficiency, a self-reliance perpetuated by an island landscape. Self-generation is (and has been) a necessary way of life when so-called global couriers categorise you as non-UK, non-domestic, oversea. If they deliver at all.

Export as a way of life. Outwards from the centre, from the beating heart.

So an Orkney island community trust says: we aim as an island to be 100% renewable by 2012; and a renewables industry representative says: we have a roadmap for marine renewables to reach the European

Union 2020 energy targets.

Whereas Secretary of State in London says: The UK's proposed share [of the EU target for 2020] would be to achieve 15% of the UK's energy from renewables... Our aim is to reap the maximum benefits for the UK, whilst minimising the costs...

And from London pours forth a stream of government and corporate tourists, taking snapshots of the Orkney rhetoric and its roadmap, learning how to self-generate an industry, for it does not yet exist in London. Just like you, Visitor, they had to come here, to learn and translate, and to try and move Orkney futures elsewhere.

But are self-generated futures, generated by this particular archipelago landscape, and the landscapes generated by these futures, even moveable? Are future made places, place made futures, simply exportable?

Look closer, Visitor, remember that PowerPoint slide you translated as: generic, applicable to anyone who wants to be an innovator. It says, collaborative business models. You were hunched over those slides, trying to make secrets to export. Collaborative business models: was no secret, so you thought.

But here, in this centre of many islands and stones, collaboration is endemic. On Orkney you do not compete, you do not put your neighbours out of business, you collaborate: you work together to keep each other in business, the bookseller explains. The landscape is demanding, to endure you must work together.

If you move here, they wait for two winters, two stretches of what my landlady described as: grey skies, grey road, grey sea... wind so fierce you cannot leave your house and go to work. And you wonder, what am I doing here?

But what you are doing is being transformed. What you are doing is committing to this land made people, to this people made land, committing to

making its future. It is commitment made of dwelling. Many people don't survive here. Two winters and they are gone, the searing burn of the landscape, the people and place, quickly strip away any sublime romance of island life. Those that stay, though, are irrevocably changed, their blood has been salted, merged, mixed. Orkney is part me, say many. It's my home, they say, but the meaning and power of that noun, of such commitment, has gone beyond what I can translate.

Do you know what that kind of home is, Visitor? What did you do to commit to the place where you do business, to your community, to those collaborations of shareholders, colleagues, and corporation?

You dismissed Orkney collaboration, because your version, like mine, is merely an imitation of such commitment to a place. It is a quick-copy of such an island community, so quick in its commitment to a place, that it is quick to dismiss (Baldacchino 2007).

So a London consultants report to inform government decisions on renewable energy making in Orkney says: Although every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this study and the analysis presented, the Consultants accept no liability for any actions taken on the basis of its contents.

Whereas in Orkney, speak and the whole island hears you, holds you to liable. Nothing goes unremarked. Accountability here is an effect of relentless listening, picking over words and deeds; a blistering gaze that offers no respite.

I, Future Archaeologist, quake as I murmur quietly here. I will bleed for these words, for these futures, as they are heard elsewhere in Orkney. Will you bleed for your facts and fictions?

The consultant's small-print (familiar to you and me, Visitor) are part of the legal machinations that mimic such commitment, mimic the effect of such community. They are a flattening of collaboration, as it is in Orkney, that anaesthetises the terror of relentless accountability. The legal smallprint and quick-copy version of collaboration cannot translate the ongoing work of the

enduring landscape here, the archipelagic sense of centre, that makes both renewable energy futures and an implacable accountability for those futures. Quick-copy collaboration makes quick-copy accountability, whose landscape and location shifts and slips easily, slides into small-print (Suchman 2002).

The futures of the renewable energy industry, here in Orkney, are an effect of this particular place. But to know rather than mimic them, you must dwell here. For knowledge is not exported but made and re-made where you are. Orkney is an island experiment in renewables future-making, a landscape that resists slippy quick-collaboration, you have to become a part of the experiment to make and know its futures (Barad 2007).

Well, Visitor, are you prepared to fill your veins with Orkney soil, give yourself to the Trows, just pulling themselves out of those dark barrows on the horizon, give yourself to the enchantment of Orkney, and become a part of this place and commit to its futures? For that is how you become part of its secret.

## References

- Baldacchino, G. (2007). *Introducing a World of Islands. A World of Islands: An Island Studies Reader*. G. Baldacchino. Charlottetown PE, Canada, Institute of Island Studies, University of Prince Edward Island.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Duke University Press.
- Holtorf, C. (2005). *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as popular culture*. Lanham MD, Altamira Press (Rowman & Littlefield).
- Ingold, T. (2000). *The temporality of the landscape. The perception of the environment: essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London, Routledge: 189-208.
- Rainbird, P. (1999). "Islands Out of Time: Towards a Critique of Island Archaeology." *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 12(2): 216-234.
- Richards, C. (1996). "Monuments as landscape: creating the centre of the world in late Neolithic Orkney." *World Archaeology* 28(2): 190-208.
- Richards, C. (2004). *A choreography of construction: monuments, mobilization and social organization in Neolithic Orkney. Explaining social change: studies in honour of Colin Renfrew*. J. Cherry, C. Scarre and S. Shennan. Cambridge, MacDonald Institute Monographs: 103-114.
- Suchman, L. (2002). "Located accountabilities in technology production." *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems* 14(2): 91-105.
- Verran, H. (1998). "Re-imagining land ownership in Australia." *Postcolonial studies* 1: 237-254.

## Acknowledgements

With warm thanks to the innumerable people I have spoken with, and spent time with, in Orkney, to the Orcadian landscape for its inspiration, and in particular to Gareth Davies at Aquatera for use of PowerPoint images.

This ethnography is part of the 'Relocating Innovation: Places and material practices of future-making' research project at Centre for Science Studies, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University UK. Thanks to my colleagues on the project, Lucy Suchman and Endre Dányi, for their always rich and thought-provoking support.