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Re-membering Land That Knows Our Footsteps.

A Celtic Window into Decolonising Systemic Training

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Abstract

This paper explores systemic constellation practice through a Celtic perspective, tracing how land, water, story, and ancestral memory shape the field of belonging in a post-colonial era. Drawing on lineage, practice-based research, collective field inquiry, and collaborative research projects including Mapping the Empire and Tending Hope, the paper argues that ungrieved collective grief and historical silences shape what systemic practitioners are able to perceive within relational fields, influencing both constellation dynamics and the frameworks through which systemic training is taught. Through migration triangulation, the unacknowledged dead within lands and waters, and feminine wounding, the paper proposes a decolonising reorientation of systemic training that restores relationality with place, the more-than-human world, and the unacknowledged dead. This perspective expands systemic practice beyond the parental dyad into a wider ecology of kinship, memory, and care.

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I come to this work as a Scottish & Celtic practitioner and researcher, shaped by the landscapes, waters, stories and histories carried in these lands. I use Celtic not as an ethnic boundary but as a cultural and cosmological orientation carried through land, language, and story. My lineage carries both the memory of those who remained through the Highland Clearances[i] and those who left in the migrations that followed. These intertwined inheritances, belonging and displacement, rootedness and rupture, have shaped my practice since long before I had language for them. (Mackay, 2022b)

While this paper emerges primarily from my experience within family constellation practice and training, alongside practice-based collective field research through Mapping the Empire and Tending Hope[ii], the wider argument offered here extends beyond constellation practice alone. argument offered here extends beyond constellation practice alone.

Fàilte| Welcome

My original academic training was in physics, and my understanding of collective relational dynamics has been shaped through engagement with quantum social science and collective field theory, particularly the work of Alexander Wendt and his proposition that human beings can be understood as relationally entangled "walking wave functions" (Wendt, 2015). Drawing on earlier collaborative research exploring collective trauma, entanglement, and "collective agreements not to know" (Fierke and Mackay, 2020, 2022, 2023), I approach systemic fields as shaped not only by interpersonal and familial dynamics, but also by wider historical, cultural, ecological, and cosmological inheritances. While the critique developed here emerges most directly from constellation practice and training contexts, I suggest that these wider collective entanglements inevitably influence all systemic practice, including the frameworks through which practitioners are trained to perceive relational phenomena.

The relational space between practitioner and client is never empty; it is already inhabited by visible and invisible inheritances, collective histories, and the epistemological assumptions embedded within professional training cultures.

From the very beginning of my systemic work, I was drawn beyond the formal structures handed to me. The presence of the dead – the unacknowledged, the unruly, the unnamed, the forgotten – to name but a few, was never abstract. It was felt. So too were the silences, the invisible loyalties, vows and promises inherited across generations. I found myself working with the unseen, with stories that lived in bodies, with emotional auras that felt older than any one individual life. When clients could not find belonging in their close familial system, I instinctively brought in the land, not metaphorically, but as a stabilising force, a witness who held the blood and bones of those who were here before, and an active participant in the field. (Hirsch, 2008; Kidron, 2009)

My earlier research with the Mapping the Empire provided an initial structure for exploring these wider patterns of transgenerational and collective trauma. It was through this research trajectory that many of my instinctive recognitions began to take shape conceptually. Again and again we found the same thread: ungrieved grief. Where grief cannot be witnessed or metabolised, it hardens into malignant silence, and those silences become transgenerational inheritances shaping identity, safety, and belonging.

This dynamic resonates with what Fierke and Mackay (2023) describe as "collective agreements not to know," in which societies sustain forms of silence around historical trauma in order to avoid confronting inherited grief, guilt, or shame. Such agreements shape not only public narratives of history but also the relational frameworks through which individuals and practitioners learn to perceive systems. In this sense, ungrieved grief can be understood as creating an incoherence between what has been lived, what is told, what is ignored, and what is subsequently re-written (Cronen and Pearce, 1999; Simon and Salter, 2019). When grief remains unacknowledged within the wider cultural field, it often reappears indirectly within families, communities, and therapeutic spaces. Systemic practice therefore encounters not only personal histories but also these wider inheritances of silence and ungrieved grief.

During this period, I articulated what I later called the "migration triangulation," first described in Your Invisible Inheritance (Mackay, 2020) and expanded through later collective mapping research. It names the spiralling entanglement between those who left, those left behind, and the Indigenous peoples who were displaced and dispossessed. These relationships are not linear but a cyclical spiral,

a constantly reconfiguring field of grief, longing, guilt, erasure, and, hopefully, repair (Mackay, 2022b). Migration triangulation emerged from a recognition that these inheritances cannot be understood through isolated or opposing positions alone. Instead, meaning often resides in the spaces between them: between leaving and remaining, belonging and displacement, grief and repair.

One moment in my practice made this personally vivid. Whilst facilitating a constellation workshop in the United States, I met a participant who turned out to be a relative, a descendant of those who left Scotland during the Clearances. Meeting on another continent, we carried mirrored aspects of a shared migration wound. The encounter brought the dynamics of migration triangulation into sharp relief (Mackay, 2022b).

Around this same time, it was quite a year, a conversation with a Native American elder opened another doorway. We were speaking about ancestral remembrance at Halloween in the US, discussing Samhain offerings in my lineage, spirit plates in his, when he asked me the Gaelic word for something and I realised I did not know. The grief was immediate and huge. It was the grief of language loss, of cultural suppression, of a rupture created by empire long before my lifetime. From that moment, learning Gaelic became not an academic pursuit but an act of remembering, a return to the stories written into my bones. This journey, from instinctive practice, to collaborative research, to lineage repair, is the ground from which I write.

Contemporary developments in systemic constellation and therapeutic practice have increasingly drawn on intersectional and social justice frameworks to address questions of power, inequality, and historical harm within relational systems (e.g., Butler, 2002; Halberstam, 2011; Tuck, 2009). These perspectives have widened the lens beyond individual psychology to include structural and cultural dynamics shaping lived experience. The approach offered in this paper builds alongside these developments while focusing on a dimension that often remains less explicitly addressed: the cosmological ruptures created through colonisation and the ungrieved grief embedded within land, lineage, and cultural memory.

The cosmology that shapes my work today is my own: the Celtic, Scottish, Highland and Island worlds of my ancestors – known and unknown – where land, water, myth, story, and the presence of the dead formed a coherent system long before empire silenced it. When I root myself here, I can see more clearly outside of my own self and associated wounds, and feel the generations of curious, and sometimes unruly, support behind me. There will always be more to learn, to uncover. And there are still many blind spots within the landscape that I weave from. I am getting there.

Colonisation as a Severing of Land, Story, and Cosmology

Before entering this section, it is important to recognise how the severing of land, story, and cosmology within indigenous cultures forms the foundational rupture shaping all that follows. (Kinealy, 1994; Devine, 2018; Tuck, 2009)

Colonisation is often described as the taking of land, but in Scotland, as well as Wales and Ireland, one of its deepest impacts was relational: a severing of the bonds between land, people, story, cosmology, and grief. Long before the British Empire looked outward, these lands were already absorbing internal forms of colonisation, through dispossession, famine, linguistic suppression, religious and political domination, and the gradual dismantling of communal life. What was taken was not only land, but

also the systems of meaning that held communities, and generations, together. (Mackay, 2022b). This rupture extended beyond material dispossession into the erosion of relational, ecological, and cosmological ways of knowing, echoing McCarthy and Duncan's (2025) concern with recovering forms of wisdom and connection that have been marginalised by dominant Western epistemologies.

This severing moved through multiple layers. The loss of land severed ancestral orientation – the sense of where one stands in relation to those who came before. The suppression of Gaelic languages and poetics, the outlawing of keening, lamenting, and cycles of the year, ruptured the transmission of story and cosmology. And the violence directed towards the feminine lineage, the Scottish witch executions, mother-and-baby homes, Magdalene laundries in Ireland, 'Blue Books'[iii] in Wales, all created a generational field of fear, shame, and self-erasure. For men, conscription and war contributed to what I have elsewhere called the "silent soldier" inheritance: a prohibition against grief, a collapse in paternal belonging, an inner denial of existence of self and progeny, that became a form of survival. (Mackay, 2021)

These ruptures are not abstract: they appear in the body. Across a series of systemic constellations and collective mapping processes exploring the legacy of the Irish Famine, including workshops with descendants of Irish migrants living in the United States and later practice-based research within Tending Hope, one of the most striking recurring patterns was the active yet largely unconscious disappearing of the children. Not metaphorically, but literally, within the field. Mothers could not see them. Fathers could not, or would not, look at them. Descendants in the present could not orient towards them. As I wrote in earlier work, "the children called out: 'Please don't leave ... please don't go.' Yet no one could look at them" (Mackay, 2022c).

The fields of trauma, intergenerational trauma, entangled memory, and trauma-informed practice encompass diverse and sometimes competing theoretical traditions, spanning psychological, social, relational, neurobiological, and cultural understandings of suffering and its transmission across generations. My own work is situated primarily within systemic, entangled memory, and collective field traditions, informed by constellation practice, practice-based collective memory research, and quantum-social approaches to relationality (Fierke and Mackay, 2020, 2022, 2023). Rather than seeking to explain trauma solely as an individual psychological phenomenon, I am interested in how unresolved grief, silenced histories, and collective agreements not to know continue to shape relational fields across generations, and across time, space, and place. This paper does not seek to adjudicate between these differing traditions; rather, it explores what becomes visible when grief, memory, and belonging are approached through a systemic and collective field lens.

When the children cannot be seen, grief cannot be grieved. And when grief cannot be grieved, silence becomes inheritance. (Mackay, 2022c). In such moments the systemic field appears to narrow around the point of rupture. The system remains oriented toward what was lost, unable to imagine life beyond the trauma. In this orientation the future becomes difficult to perceive, and the children – who represent continuation and possibility – can disappear from the relational field. This narrowing is not only a feature of traumatised families; it can also echo in the professional frameworks through which practitioners are trained to see systemic dynamics. In this sense the disappearing children are not only a constellation phenomenon but a systemic expression of what Fierke and Mackay (2023) describe as collective agreements not to know. When a system cannot bear to acknowledge the scale of loss it has endured, the future itself becomes difficult to perceive.

This is where the complexity deepens. The same potato blight, and imposed hunger, that devastated Ireland in the 1840s also struck the Scottish Highlands and Islands, producing what has been called the Great Highland Famine and intensifying the ongoing Clearances. As crofting communities faced hunger, eviction, and economic collapse, families were drawn into migration or imperial service in the hope, sometimes explicit, sometimes implied, that survival for those left behind might be secured through loyalty or departure. These migrants arrived in North America during decades shaped by the Indian Removal Act (1830) and the forced relocations now known as the Trail of Tears. They settled on lands recently taken from Indigenous nations, or participated in the taking. The loss of indigenous land-based lifeways in Scotland and Ireland thus became entangled with the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in North America. This intersection forms part of what I later described as migration triangulation: the relational field between those who left, those left behind, and the dispossessed Indigenous communities among whom they settled. (Mackay, 2020, 2022c). In this similar time period, Wales, another Celtic region rich in its own mythology, folklore, and culture was targeted by the “blue Books” policies, attempting to desecrate, undermine, and silence the Welsh language and cultural traditions in response to protests from those who relied on the land at this time of blight and hunger as taxes and rents were raised (Roberts, 1998).

These entanglements complicate any simple narrative of “victim” or “perpetrator.” Scottish, Welsh, and Irish descendants carry memories of both being colonised and being embedded within colonial settlement as colonisers. This echoes McCarthy's (2017) Fifth Province orientation, which invites engagement with relational spaces where apparently competing truths may be held together without reducing one to the other. Such histories cannot be adequately understood through binary categories alone. These layered histories show up in the body as confusion, shame, guilt, forgetting of what once was, hunger for belonging, and a longing for intact cosmologies and stories. Without land, without language, without ritual, the descendants of famine and clearance often inherit a profound sense of unbelonging, a searching for something older or truer than the unreachable and unspeakable fragments left behind. It is from this inner fracture that unconscious appropriation can emerge, from a place of loss (Mackay, 2022c). At the same time, the desperation and dispossession that shaped many migrant journeys did not prevent participation in wider colonial projects. Within constellation work exploring migration, racism, and enslavement in the United States, descendants of European migrants frequently appeared entangled not only with the trauma of those who left and those left behind, but also with the consequences of settlement upon Indigenous peoples and enslaved communities. The inheritance is therefore both/and: histories of dispossession coexist alongside histories of participation in dispossession, creating complex fields of grief, guilt, belonging, and responsibility.

This is why these histories matter for all systemic trainings. Practitioners who have inherited ruptures in their own lineages may approach the work from ground shaped by silence, cultural amnesia, and ungrieved grief. Without recognising their own ancestral wounds, the disappeared children, the silenced women, the unspeakable masculine grief, the lost cosmologies, they may unconsciously reach for the intact traditions of other cultures to fill the gaps. In such contexts there can also be a temptation within Western systemic communities to turn toward cosmologies from cultures where ancestral relationships with land and lineage remain more visibly intact.

While such engagements may be well intentioned, they risk reproducing colonial patterns of extraction if practitioners bypass the ruptures within their own cultural inheritances. Decolonising

systemic practice therefore requires not only openness to other knowledge traditions but also a willingness to encounter the suppressed cosmologies, histories, and griefs within one's own lineages. Alternatively, they may unconsciously perpetuate the inherited silence of "not seeing" the trauma within systems and bodies.

To reweave land, people, story, and the place of the children, is not only a decolonial act, it is a systemic one. When practitioners return to their own languages, myths, histories, and griefs, the work becomes less extractive and more relational. Giving place to the children, instead of unconsciously carrying forward the "not seeing", also serves to give place to the generations yet to be. When we can do that we are re-aligning with the systemic ancestral field that could conceive of our place, our existence, instead of aligning with the trauma of denial of existence as a response to the great cost of survival. In that ground, systemic training can begin to orient towards futures that honour the many worlds our ancestors inhabited, and the many worlds that continue to shape us now.

The Land and Waters as Archive and Witness

This section deepens the land–water distinction, clarifying how each realm shapes systemic perception and inherited grief. (Basso, 1996; Blackie, 2016)

If you stand quietly enough in a place, the land begins to share its stories with you. Or perhaps it is we who finally become still enough to hear what the land has been holding and whispering all along.

Across many Indigenous cultures, land and waters are understood as living archives, witnesses to story, grief, and kinship. Celtic traditions once held similar understandings: rivers and wells were associated with healing and memory, mountains with guardianship and encounter, and the sea with both separation and connection between worlds. In Gaelic traditions, stories remained inseparable from place; landscapes were not merely locations but carriers of genealogy, memory, and belonging. Stories such as those of the selkies, who move between sea and land yet belong fully to neither, carry enduring themes of displacement, longing, return, and the ache of separation from one's origins. The persistence of place-names, local legends, pilgrimage sites, and seasonal rituals points towards a cosmology in which humans lived within a wider community of land, waters, ancestors, and more-than-human presences. Colonisation disrupted these cosmologies, not only through the loss of land but through the dismantling of the relational frameworks that made belonging possible. (e.g., Smith, 1999; Cajete, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013; Simpson, 2017).

Yet these ruptures are never total. Indigenous scholars and systemic practitioners have long highlighted the ways individuals, families, and communities resist erasure through story, ceremony, language, relationship, and acts of remembering (Wade 1997). Even where land, language, and cultural practices have been suppressed, traces remain within families, communities, bodies, and places. As Macfarlane (2019) observes, "sometimes all that is left behind is trace." In the language of invisible inheritance, what survives may not be a coherent memory but the imprint of one: a grief without a story, a longing without a name, an orientation towards something that has been lost but not entirely forgotten. The impulse to search for lost stories, to learn an ancestral language, to honour forgotten dead, or to return to places of significance can therefore be understood not simply as nostalgia but as acts of relational reconnection and resistance.

In all systemic work, these ruptures reveal themselves. When the dead have not been acknowledged, the land often feels distant or absent, not because it forgets, but because we do. A system that cannot face its dead, nor grieve them, struggles to feel at home in its place or easily access emotions outside of the requisite numbness of non-grief. Parts of us reject the land when those who walked it before us remain unnamed or ungrieved. We enter a painful loop: unable to acknowledge the dead, unable to feel our right to exist upon the land they inhabited, unable to see beyond the absence of them and our own pain.

And how can the next generations connect with a land when their very existence upon it feels denied? How can descendants speak with a voice that no longer knows the language, story, or song of the places that shaped their ancestors?

This is where the elemental world becomes vital to systemic practice. The water on this earth is the only water that has ever existed here. It cycles through cloud, river, body, rain, and sea, carrying the memory of everything it has held. It has washed the faces of dying soldiers, bathed women in hidden institutions, and carried the salt tears and sweat of famine, protest, exile, and birth. When you place your hands in a stream or onto the damp moss of an old tree, you are touching memory, not imagined memory, but the physical archive of the world that made you. (Mackay, 2022a)

The air and fires carry memories too: the unspoken words, the unexpressed cries, the unscreamed screams of those who could not voice what happened to them, the release in the movement towards embers and ashes. Those who have stood on a moor in a winter wind, or lingered by a hearth fire, perhaps know of this.

In many collective constellations I have facilitated, land and waters emerge as co-witnesses, the ones that hold what the human system cannot yet bear to acknowledge. Mountains can anchor the field when lineage collapses. Waters can hold and steward the emotional entanglements of migration, drowning, famine, and silence. These appearances are not symbolic but phenomenological: the body recognises what the mind has forgotten, by choice or inherited agreement. (Mackay, 2022a)

For this reason, systemic practice must begin to reinclude the more-than-human realms. In my own work, I often open with an invocation that returns us to the relational ground beneath colonisation's exclusions, a way of remembering ourselves back into connection with the human, the ancestral, and the elemental. I include it here in full because it is a practical example of decolonial systemic orientation in action:

I am (your name).
I have a place on the land.
There are lands and waters that know me.
There are lands and waters that yearn for my footsteps.

I am descendant of the known and unknown, the seen and unseen, the silenced and excluded, the shamed and the shunned.
Those who could speak their stories and those who could not.
The leaders, the healers, the writers, the dreamers, the wounded, the fighters, the innocents, the outcasts, the refugees; the tenders of the land, the sea, the souls, the animals; the parents, the elders, the carers, the children - and all those souls denied existence.

I am your descendant.

My heart is beating.
I am alive.
I am remembering.

This invocation is not poetry for its own sake. It is systemic orientation, a re-establishing of relationship where rupture once lived. It creates the conditions for the field to move again.

I often follow this with a simple embodied practice: standing with the ancestors who wished you into existence, feeling their presence at your back, then turning toward the generations yet to come, your dreams, your future self, those who will call you ancestor, and saying:

I am so glad that you exist.
There is nothing here for you to hold.
I am so glad that you exist.

Then gently, to those behind you:

As I cast my gaze upon them, I feel your gaze upon me.
I am remembering myself home.

In these small movements, the land, the dead, and the future generations all become presenced again. The field expands. The body softens. The system and soul begin the journey of remembering how to belong.

Reintroducing land and waters into systemic training is therefore not an aesthetic preference or a spiritual embellishment. In this remembering, systemic practice becomes less extractive and more rooted. Less hungry, more whole. And it opens the doorway into the next part of the work: the specific histories carried in the Celtic field, the famines, the silences, the dispossessions, and the ways these histories continue to shape our systems today. (Mackay, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c)

Celtic Histories as a Systemic Case Study

Here, we shift into the structural architecture of rupture, using Celtic histories as a systemic map for understanding colonisation as an example of the power of re-membering indigenous ways. (Levin, 1994; Trevor-Roper, 1983)

The Celtic lands offer a particular kind of teaching about colonisation, not because their wounds are unique, but because they sit at an intersection many descendants now carry in their bodies through the ubiquitous and insidious spread of the legacy of the British Empire: the experience of being both colonised and, through migration, entangled in colonising worlds. These lands also hold a memory that is not abstract. It lives in the mountains and moors, the peat, the waters, the languages, and the stories that survive despite everything. When we look at Celtic histories through a systemic lens, what becomes visible is the architecture of rupture itself, and the pathways for repair.

To understand the depth of this colonial rupture, it is helpful to distinguish between the unacknowledged dead held in the land and the unacknowledged dead held in the water.

For generations, land holds the bones, stories, and cosmologies of the people. Even when the dead were unacknowledged or unspoken, they remained somewhere: in home soil, in place, in the same

ground their descendants continued to walk. There was at least the possibility of orientation. It is interesting to note here that one viscerally inherited disruption to this is the legacy of the war dead, the bones in foreign soil that yearn for home.

Forced displacement, through famine, eviction, enslavement, war, and clearance, tore the living from the land that held their dead. A different kind of fracture emerges here: the dead remain in place, but the living can no longer reach them. This creates a lineage without ground, a grief without location, a people left wandering in a story that no longer has coordinates. The descendants of such displacements often carry a quiet, disorienting shame as they wander the liminal space of those who left/those left behind: not because they did anything wrong, but because the relationship with the dead was severed by circumstances they could not control. This shame, unspoken, unnamed, yet inherited, becomes part of the legacy. (Mackay, 2022b, 2022c)

The dead in the water and seas (and to some degree the unknown lands) carry a different wound. They have no place of return. Those who did not survive migration crossings, those lost to storms, those drowned in shipwrecks or wartime convoys, those cast overboard, those whose bodies were never recovered, they remain unheld by ritual, unmarked by stone, ungrieved by name. Water erodes. There is no grave to visit, no soil to kneel upon, no one site for the grief to gather. In the field, they can appear unreachable, unknowable, suspended between here and there, in perpetual liminality and the denial of existence. Descendants can inherit confusion, abandonment, or the haunting sense that something, or someone, is forever missing. That is, until we remember them through re-membering our sacred connection to waters.

This dual rupture, land-dead who cannot be reached, and water-dead who cannot be found, echoes across Celtic systems and across many Indigenous, colonised, and enslaved histories worldwide. I say this not to conflate these experiences, but to acknowledge a structural pattern: when people are severed from the places that hold their dead, the orientation of the system collapses. When the dead themselves are unacknowledged, the collapse deepens.

There is another layer that often goes unnamed: the colonisation of sea cosmologies. Before empire, the sea was ancestor, deity, boundary, teacher, presence, and gateway. Selkies, kelpies, sea-goddesses – these were not superstitions but systems of relationship. For seafaring cultures, the ocean was alive. It had voice. It had agency. It had spirit.

For empire to expand, these cosmologies had to be stripped away. The sea needed to become empty, neutral, conquerable. A route, not a realm. Once the sea was framed as empty, the dead in the water became even more invisibilised, not only physically, but cosmologically. Their ungrieved presence reverberates through descendants as a wound that has no shoreline.

Behind all of this is a truth I often name in my practice: there are more unacknowledged dead in the world than there are living. This is not metaphor. It is systemic reality. The field in which we live is shaped far more by those unnamed, ungrieved, and unspoken than by those currently alive. When we refuse to look at the dead, to sit with them and their stories, the system becomes fractured. When we acknowledge them, even briefly, belonging begins to breathe its way back into our beings once more.

And yet, the field is not held only by the past. It is also shaped by the vast realm of the not-yet-known, the unborn, the future generations, the dreams not yet imagined. When we sit with the stories written into our bodies and flowing through land and water, we ripple in many directions, not only to the past.

The unacknowledged dead feel the belonging restored, yes, but also, when the invisible inheritance moves from a narrative of *"No one can survive this. No one should survive this. We should never get over this.",* to "*Not everything died*", to "*You exist. I am so glad you exist*.", the generations yet to come feel the ground soften in welcome instead of denial of place. The system widens. Living becomes possible again.

When They Come for the Women: The Gendered Wound

Once land and water cosmologies are dismantled, the feminine – carrier of life, ritual, story, and relational ethics – often becomes the next site of control. (Federici, 2004)

For generations, Celtic women were the carriers of land-based knowledge, second sight, funerary ritual, midwifery and birth lore, healing, song, cosmology, and the relational ethics of community.

In Scotland more women per capita were murdered in the name of witchcraft than any country in Europe during the witch trials. (Goodare, 2025). Herbalists, midwives, keeners, and women with second sight, yes – the keepers of the cosmology, but also women who were outspoken, or powerful in their own way were targeted, they all became threats to the emerging colonial-Christian order. (Mackay, 2021). I could go on, space here does not allow for the depth of discussion required.

After famine and clearance, many of the Magdalene Laundries and mother-and-baby homes arose in the same buildings that once held famine orphans. The feminine was punished not for magic but for trauma, grief, sexuality, and poverty. For being women. A culture without ritual punishes those who feel. (Mackay, 2022a; Smith, 2007)

Men, meanwhile, were conscripted into empire's wars, often returning numb, shattered, guilt-ridden, and voiceless. A culture without land or ritual has nowhere to place the trauma of its people, so silence becomes a feature of masculine inheritance for the next generations. And on it goes.

Women collapse into shame. Men collapse into silence. Children collapse into invisibility and the denial of their existence.

These observations are not offered as universal truths about gender, nor as fixed characteristics of women, men, or children. Rather, they describe recurring patterns witnessed within constellation practice, collective field research, and transgenerational mapping. In my experience, such patterns emerge within particular historical and cultural contexts and are shaped by inherited silences, exclusions, and collective agreements not to know. When earlier stories, forgotten cosmologies, and excluded voices are brought back into view, these gendered inheritances often become less fixed and more complex. What appears as "feminine shame" or "masculine silence" may reveal itself as a systemic adaptation to historical rupture rather than an essential quality of gender itself.

In naming the desecration of the feminine, which is an inherited legacy transcending gender, we begin to weave the sacred back in. Celtic histories show us, with clarity and compassion, what happens when land, language, dead, and cosmology are removed from the system, and what becomes possible when they are restored.

For systemic training, this matters. To redesign systemic training for a decolonising era, we must restore the relational worlds colonisation dismantled, and re-member beyond a patriarchal lens.

Re-designing Systemic Training for a Decolonising Era

To distinguish methodology from pedagogy: the critique that follows addresses the colonised frame of systemic constellation training, not the approach itself. (Hellinger 1998) Early constellation work was shaped in part through encounters with Zulu cosmology during Hellinger's time in South Africa. While this influence opened important space for recognising ancestral presence within systemic fields, the ways these ideas travelled into Western training contexts have not always included sustained engagement with the historical and colonial conditions in which those encounters occurred.

Access to systemic training and international conferences also reflects wider global inequalities. Participation in many professional training pathways requires significant financial resources, which can limit participation from practitioners in communities most affected by colonial histories and structural racism. As a result, the voices most visible within the evolution of systemic practice often come from those with the greatest access to resources, while practitioners working within other cultural contexts may remain underrepresented.

In recent years I have noticed a growing emphasis on what are often described as "keep it simple and safe" constellations. Safety, of course, matters deeply in any therapeutic setting. Yet there is a risk that this language can also become a subtle form of containment. When systemic constellation work is constrained to what feels manageable within the moment, the deeper historical and collective dimensions of the field can quietly disappear from view. In this sense, "keeping it simple and safe" can unintentionally become "keeping it simple and silent," reinforcing the cultural agreements not to see or speak the deeper griefs that shape our systems.

The way systemic constellation practice is often taught remains shaped by colonial inheritances. Not because those who developed it were malicious, but because the field emerged within patriarchal, Christianised, Western worldviews that influenced what counted as systemic and what was rendered invisible. Over the years I have worked with clients who felt further wounded by interpretations that privileged obedience over safety, gratitude over protection, or reconciliation over complexity. When practitioners are trained within constricted frameworks, the client's field can become similarly constrained.

The Systemic Field Is Vast – Much Vaster Than We Have Traditionally Been Taught

If the land and waters hold the memory of collective rupture, then the body becomes the meeting place of those ruptures. Every person who walks into a constellation carries far more than their personal story. They carry the ungrieved grief of their ancestors, the silences their culture taught them to maintain, the griefs their family never named, the histories their nation prefers to forget, along with the echoes of land they and their ancestors have dwelled upon. It is a busy space. Their body remembers what the mind has been trained not to see. (Butler, 2002; Halberstam, 2011)

Contemporary systemic, social constructionist, and ecosystemic practitioners have increasingly challenged narrow understandings of the system itself, drawing attention to the wider social, cultural, political, historical, ecological, and more-than-human contexts within which lives unfold (Simon and Salter, 2019; McCarthy and Duncan, 2025). Simon and Salter's invitation to attend to stories lived, stories told, stories ignored, and stories re-written offers an important reminder that systemic life extends far beyond the consulting room. My own work builds on these conversations through

collective field research and entangled memory mapping, exploring how ungrieved grief, silenced histories, and collective agreements not to know become woven into relational fields across generations, and across time, space, and place.

Traditional systemic training has often narrowed this inheritance. It has been taught through a lens that privileges the parental dyad -mother and father- as the primary field of influence. But no field is that small. No soul is shaped solely by two people. To insist otherwise is to shrink the vastness of human belonging into a structure that cannot hold it. These absences, and more, distort the field.

This narrowing of the field can be particularly violent for queer clients and for anyone without biological children. Many come carrying an unspoken belief, implanted by culture, that they have "no descendants." As though legacy is genetic. As though the flow of life can only be measured through blood. As though their existence contributes nothing to the generations yet to be.

This is not only nonsensical and untrue. It is cruel. Every lineage has contained, and will continue to contain, queer lives. The belief that lineage is only biological is not systemic; it is a colonial legacy.

The mother is not only the mother. She is the daughter of a woman institutionalised for grief, or persecuted for her knowledge, or silenced for her desire. She is the inheritor of a lineage fractured by famine, war, church, poverty, or displacement. To focus only on her role as "mother" is to erase her humanity, her cosmology, her entanglements, and her wounds. And an individual may have been mothered by someone who is not a family member or even a woman. (Mackay, 2022a, 2022c)

Similarly, the father is not only the father. He may carry the inherited silence of the war-dead, the unspeakable experiences of those who returned from battle but never truly came home. He may carry the shame of the men who witnessed violence and could not stop it, the numbness of the men who learned early that feeling is a liability, the terror of the boys who were punished for vulnerability.

The field also contains those who never appear on a family tree, the teachers who nurtured us, the neighbours who protected us, the lovers who shaped us, the friends who saw us when our families could not. Then there are the queer elders who lived quietly because the culture would not hold them, the children we loved but did not birth or raise, the communities that carried us when our families did not know how. These are not extras. They are the field. And that field includes the more-than-human realms, the land that steadied us when nothing else could, the waters that held our grief, the animals that loved us without condition.

To exclude these presences from systemic practice is to perpetuate the very harm we seek to repair. It is to replicate the colonial worldview in which belonging is narrowly defined, hierarchy is applied, blood is the only lineage that matters, and the vast network of relationality that sustains human life is rendered invisible.

Every Influent Field Holds Everything

Every individual influent field[iv] contains those who loved differently, lived differently, died differently. To work systemically in a decolonising era requires us to restore the truth that inheritance is not linear. It is not only biological. It is quantum, relational, ecological, communal. It is the story of everything that touched us, shaped us, broke us, or held us, along with the story of everything that we touched, that we shaped, that we broke or that we held.

It is the story of the land we walk on, the waters that carried our people, and the dead, named and unnamed, who move with us whether we acknowledge them or not.

When we widen the field, the body softens. The people standing in the constellation no longer feel alone inside a family system that cannot hold their truth. They begin to feel the presence of everything that made their existence possible. And this matters.

A Closing Invitation

I do not write this as someone standing on firm ground, but as someone learning to listen to the ground itself: the land that remembers what people forgot, the waters that have carried grief longer than any of us have been alive, the dead who lean close when their stories stir, and the generations yet to be, who wait at the edges of the field, listening for what we make possible.

I do not know where systemic training will go next. I do not know which parts of this field I still cannot see, or which shadows hide in my own unexamined inheritance. I do not know which stories will reveal themselves when the next generation is ready to witness them, to sit with them.

But I do know this.

Every time we choose to remember, every time we make space for land, water, and story, every time we honour the dead instead of turning away, every time we break a silence or name an absence, every time we refuse to perpetuate the narrowness we inherited, the field widens. Belonging breathes. Something shifts. And that something becomes a new legacy.

The field is larger than any one of us. Larger than any theory. Larger than any training syllabus. It belongs to the living, the dead, and the unborn, the seen and unseen, the ancestors who held on long enough for us to be here in this moment, and the descendants who will inherit the choices we make now and weave what we cannot yet imagine.

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About the author

Nicola Mackay is a Scottish & Celtic practitioner, researcher, and writer whose work weaves systemic constellations, entangled memory, land-based knowing, and silent inheritances carried across generations. Her practice centres on the stories held in landscapes, waters, and the unacknowledged dead, exploring how grief, belonging, and rupture shape the living field. Through Tending Hope and her wider collaborations, she works at the intersection of trauma, myth, kinship, and collective repair, committed to re-membering what was fragmented and tending the pathways between ancestors, descendants, and generations yet to be. Her writing appears in constellation journals, academic journals, and inter-disciplinary research projects.

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[i] The Highland Clearances took place from 1750 to 1860. People were moved from land that had been inhabited by generations before them, often with brute force, changing the way of life and landscape irrevocably.

[ii] Mapping the Empire was a collaborative research project with the University of St. Andrews focusing on exploring the legacy of empire through a systemic lens (2020-2023). Tending Hope is an organisation that was established in 2023 to explore the impact of collective experiences of trauma on present, past, and future generations.

[iii] The "Blue Books" (Brad y Llyfrau Gleision or "Treachery of the Blue Books") refer to the 1847 British government reports on the state of education in Wales. They disparaged Welsh language, nonconformist ways, and morality of the Welsh people.

[iv] By influent field, I mean the wider, multi-directional field of influences, ancestral, ecological, communal, and more-than-human, that shape life.