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Classics Revisited: Revisiting Louise Bracken and Emma Mawdsley's 'Muddy glee'

From 'Muddy glee' to muddy reflections on fieldwork and writing

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Abstract

'Muddy glee' by Bracken and Mawdsley made an important contribution to highlighting gender discrimination in fieldwork and the heterogeneity of fieldwork experiences. In the past couple of years, the ability of many researchers to engage in fieldwork has also changed dramatically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, we reflect on Bracken and Mawdsley's paper and our own experiences and perspectives of fieldwork in recent years. We discuss a previous paper we co-authored (entitled 'Pushing the limits': experiences of women in tropical peatland research), and the benefits that these papers (e.g., 'Muddy glee' and 'Pushing the limits') may provide. We highlight the value of sharing personal experiences in science (which is often seen as an 'objective' space), and how writing for ourselves can be an empowering and community-building act.

KEYWORDS
academic writing, COVID-19, experiences, fieldwork, wetland science, women in science

1 | INTRODUCTION

Bracken and Mawdsley's 2004 paper '"Muddy glee": rounding out the picture of women and physical geography fieldwork' highlighted gender discrimination in fieldwork and challenged notions of what physical geography fieldwork looked like. The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted many fieldwork activities and we, as field researchers, have collectively had to adapt. For this piece, we re-group as co-authors from our paper '"Pushing the limits": experiences of women in tropical peatland research' (Thornton et al., 2019) and reflect on 'Muddy glee' and our current fieldwork situation. Here we follow the same approach as our paper 'Pushing the limits', separately responding to a set of questions. Our reflections were then collected over email, anonymised, and thematically analysed by Thornton and Cook. We invited all co-authors to validate and provide further input

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on the paper draft before submission. Ethical approval for this process was granted by the University of Leicester. We reflected on the following questions:

1. Reading 'Muddy glee', what resonated with your fieldwork experiences, and how have your experiences been impacted (both positively and negatively) by the pandemic?
2. Thinking of 'Pushing the limits' and 'Muddy glee', what do you think the benefits and/or drawbacks of writing these papers are? Could you reflect on your experience contributing to 'Pushing the limits' (i.e., was there anything that you enjoyed or did not enjoy, anything that stood out to you, both positively and/or negatively during the process)?

We structure the following paragraphs around our reflections on fieldwork and the process of writing. Times of crises are often times of individual and collective reflection and re-invention. As Arundhati Roy writes, pandemics 'have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew' (2020, np). We therefore use a common thread of 'reflection' running through this piece (Figure 1).

Our reflections are accompanied by anonymous author quotes. We draw inspiration from Ahonen et al. (2020, p. 448), where, in our collective writing we embody our individual and collective struggles 'and convert them into words'. In our efforts to reflect on our writing process, we also join Ahonen et al. (2020, p. 448) in their and others' (including Helin, 2019; Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018) call for the need to rethink writing in a way that accounts for 'the embodied, affective and reflexive experiences of the author/s'. By doing so, we bring to the foreground our subjective experiences as scientists, in what is still the patriarchal 'objective world' of science. We also challenge that latter notion by doing so, and discuss this further in our reflections.

Our reflections are also 'muddy': there are aspects of our experiences that we do not yet discuss, we still may not have processed. It feels like a difficult thing to do, like wading through mud, or trying to see in muddy waters, discussing 'positives' that have come from a pandemic that has taken over 6 million lives (World Health Organisation, 2022). We keep this and all its tensions in our minds, thinking too of the ongoing injustices occurring worldwide when it comes to equal access to vaccines and healthcare. Our reflections here are in many ways incomplete. Also, in our approach to writing collectively, what important details and nuances do we obscure? We nod here to the work of Kiriakos and Tienari (2018) and their reflections on what academic writing can be (see 'Academic writing as love'), as well as Helin (2019) who suggests that writing is a process of 'offering the tentative' to others, and one that is emergent, relational, and unfinished.



FIGURE 1 Reflections of the forest canopy in the waters of a peat-swamp in Indonesia.

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2 | REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK DURING THESE TIMES

Fieldwork is often considered the connecting core across Geography (France & Haigh, 2018). This resonates strongly throughout 'Muddy glee' and 'Pushing the limits', with many women discussing the challenges they face in fieldwork (focusing here on fieldwork conducted by academic researchers) but also the great joy and empowerment they find in fieldwork. Fieldwork opportunities have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 and subsequent travel restrictions. This has forced us to rethink the fieldwork spaces where we thrive and to adapt to a new 'virtual' environment. For some of us, this became an opportunity to embrace creative activities (such as ceramics and weaving) outside of the work environment during the pandemic lockdowns in an attempt to find a new 'balance'. This creativity has also been brought into our academic environments by forcing us to become more 'flexible and adaptive' (quoting one of our authors) in our research and teaching. Reconceptualising fieldwork within a virtual space, while less immersive in some ways (Howlett, 2022), offers the opportunity to be more inclusive in other ways: there is perhaps a re-balancing occurring here too. Bracken and Mawdsley (2004) similarly remark on the use of digital technologies (i.e., GIS and computer modelling) as an alternative to traditional fieldwork activities, negating the need to physically travel, thus making research activities more accessible for many.

Thinking creatively about what fieldwork can be and efforts to expand its accessibility are far from new and, as Sima (2020) writes, the groundwork for many virtual approaches to fieldwork was laid by accessibility advocates years prior to the pandemic. Still, our recent reflections include how the 'rite of passage' of fieldwork persists, where you almost have to 'prove' your stamina and ability, and how this is exclusionary to many (Hall et al., 2002; Powell, 2021). As Lawrence (2021) writes, recently there has been much 'looking-inwards' and reflection happening in the geosciences around systemic barriers to inclusion for people with disabilities and other marginalised groups. The pandemic has opened up creative spaces and discussions of what 'fieldwork' can and should mean. This includes virtual fieldwork, remotely working with research teams across countries (as discussed by Bhakta, 2021), and calls for 'patchwork ethnography' (Günel et al., 2020). We have also been reflecting within our own international research collaborations, with travel restrictions demanding a reshuffle (and perhaps a re-balancing?) of activities (e.g., who leads fieldwork?) across these projects (e.g., see Harrison et al., 2020). There have also been negative impacts of the pandemic on in-person interactions that are valuable for effective international collaboration:

> I have not had the chance to meet up with my tropical peatland colleagues in Southeast Asia, many of whom I have known and worked with for 15 years or more … the spontaneity of doing field science as a collective activity has been sadly missed and our scientific interactions have become increasingly reactive rather than proactive.

Our extended time at home during the pandemic has in unexpected ways enabled some of us to feel closer to colleagues, through a shared lockdown experience:

> With everyone working from home and (attempting) to balance work and family life, I think it's made us all more human. I feel a deeper sense of connection to colleagues … It is important we maintain that recognition.

There may therefore be a re-balancing occurring in various aspects of our (working) lives, hopefully mostly for the better and the long term.

Alongside some of the positive 're-balancing' experiences, many of us also reflected on the negative mental health impacts of the pandemic; from the inability to reunite with family members in other countries, to the loss of motivation during lockdown, further exacerbated by the collective loss of our fieldwork activities and being around people who inspire us.

A strong theme in both 'Pushing the limits' and 'Muddy glee' is the 'invaluable' need for female support networks. This support will be needed more than ever to strengthen resilience within the (field) science community as we know that the pandemic has deepened already existing inequalities, including having a disproportionately negative impact on women in the workforce. A study of 40,000 employees conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey and Company (2021) reported that one third of women considered leaving the workforce entirely or downshifting their careers during the pandemic, with this disproportionately impacting women with disabilities. A global report by Oxfam (2021) found these career changes equated to global income losses for women of $800 billion, during the COVID-19 crisis, with women losing more than 64 million jobs in 2020, representing a 5% loss compared to 3.9% for men. One author reflects:

> Many (women) have been forced to leave their jobs in order to take care of children and others during the lockdowns. It is obvious how much work there is still to be done for women's equality, and that is sometimes so disheartening as well.

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Another recurring theme in our reflections was the similarity of 'Muddy glee', a paper written 18 years ago, to our experiences today. This made the paper a useful point of departure to discuss our own experiences as women in tropical peatland science, but this also made some of us wonder: what substantial change has occurred for women in science over the past decades? The percentage of women in the STEM workforce is slowly growing over time (now up to 24% of the STEM workforce and expected to reach over 29% by 2023; STEMWomen, 2022). While there has been progress in increasing the number of women studying STEM topics, women are still underrepresented and disproportionately excluded from leadership positions, and it is worse for women of colour (e.g., Alfred et al., 2018; Gewin, 2020; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Llorens et al., 2021; McCullough, 2020). The issue is not only *inspiring* girls and women to study science, it is also *retaining* women, promoting them, and paying them fairly. Precarious employment in academia during pandemic and non-pandemic years is disproportionately impacting women and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) academics, and is leading to these groups leaving the academic workforce in greater numbers than others (Marsay, 2020; UCU, 2021; Zheng, 2018).

3 | REFLECTIONS ON WRITING: WHY DO WE WRITE AND FOR WHOM?

> Writing is political; it produces knowledge. Writing is political; it challenges knowledge. Writing as resistance is personal; you object, refuse, insist. Writing as resistance is collective; you examine, influence, organise.
>
> (Ahonen et al., 2020, p. 459)

The slow progression towards equality in academia and field research in general is frustrating. One of our authors recounted an experience following a presentation she did on our paper 'Pushing the limits':

> After one of my talks about our paper, an older man approached me, saying 'well, you are just saying the same thing that women have been saying over the past decades!' … I responded that he made my point himself.

The widely shared paper outlining the sexual misconduct that has knowingly occurred for *decades* at the Smithsonian's Tropical Research Institute's (STRI) facility in Panama (Jha, 2021) is one more illustration of the harmful conditions that women continue to face in field research. We stand in solidarity with the brave women of STRI who came forward with their stories. Change is not happening fast enough and the reputations of institutions (including universities) and a few powerful men are still too often put above the safety and wellbeing of others.

Some of us therefore also questioned what the impact is of papers such as 'Muddy glee' and 'Pushing the limits': are the people who need to read them actually doing so? This made us reflect on why we write these papers and who we are writing them for. When reflecting on these questions, we found common benefits of writing 'Pushing the limits', including: to prepare others for fieldwork, to inspire, to learn from others, to bring to the foreground the variety of experiences in fieldwork, and to bring awareness of exclusion in tropical peatland research. We also found great positives in the process of writing 'Pushing the limits'. As many of us had never worked with each other before or even met in person, we experienced writing as a way to find, or build, community:

> It gives me comfort knowing that there are women out there experiencing the same and that we found each other to share.

> I also loved that we used the opportunity to connect to other women whom we had never worked with before: in that way we were building these bridges to other women, and seeing such commonalities, and finding strength in them together.

We also found the process cathartic and empowering, by telling our stories and taking that space:

> For me what felt powerful was that regardless of who read or did not read it, I wanted to get these views and experiences down in the literature. It is now part of the 'tropical peatland literature' and there's something in that.

> I think a big part of that was the experience of it being very cathartic, all of us women had so much to say, and it felt great coming together and putting it all down on paper.

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In many ways we also wrote the paper for ourselves. In academia it is the norm to adjust one's writing to suit a certain audience, submitting to a journal with a certain impact factor, to get the maximum number of citations possible. Academic writing, particularly in the sciences, also has the tradition of 'neutrality' and 'impersonality' (e.g., Ahonen et al., 2020; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011). An initial version of our manuscript for 'Pushing the limits' received criticism that our experiences were not unique enough to publish or 'worthy of special consideration'. As we were simultaneously respondents and authors in our paper (as we are in this one), we were also criticised for being unable to present a 'dispassionate presentation of views'. Our first submission was thereby rejected. Having our piece finally published felt like a little victory against disciplinary constraints and norms. By writing for ourselves, we resist and challenge these norms and create a place for personal reflection within an otherwise 'objective' space.

4 | SOME LAST REFLECTIONS

After 'Pushing the limits' was published, we got feedback from a new PhD student:

> Before reading this paper, the circle of women in tropical peat felt very small to me. I now realise that I'm really lucky to be working in a field where the women who share my experiences and opinions are publicly reaching out and advocating to support one another, and I'm inspired to continue to do the same for the rest of my career.

There is real value in sharing personal stories, even though this is still not the norm in physical sciences. But doing so is another small act of claiming our space. All experiences of fieldwork are worthy of attention. Our rejection of the 'neutral' and 'impersonal' resists the 'universal academic' (as a white, English-speaking, cishet male) (Ahonen et al., 2020). We invite other authors to reflect on their writing, what benefits it brings, and what further possibilities our writing and our reflections, our introspections, may create. Thinking back to Roy's (2020) words on the pandemic and those of Zheng (2018) on our need for collective resistance against precarity in academia and 'organising from the margins' (in reference to hooks, 1984), to our fieldwork practices and our livelihoods as researchers: what new worlds can we imagine and what new worlds are we ready to fight for – *together*?

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Author elects to not share data: data were only collected for the purposes of this paper.

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