

SPECIAL SECTION

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

Muddy Glee, 18 years later ...

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Abstract

In this short paper, we thank the authors of the papers in this special section, and briefly respond to their insightful and important contributions. We then each provide a brief account of how the 2004 paper emerged, and reflect on our fieldwork 'journeys' since its publication.

KEYWORDS

feminist, fieldwork, intersectionality, Muddy Glee

1 | INTRODUCTION

We are delighted that 'Muddy Glee' was selected for Area's Classics Revisited series. Our sincere thanks to the editors, to the participants in the online discussion, and to the authors in this section, who have set out such thoughtful responses. We have to admit to also having felt a little apprehensive. After nearly 20 years, what would we and others make of this rather personal set of reflections, based on a slightly unusual intradisciplinary collaboration?

When we were formulating this paper in the early 2000s, it felt particularly challenging for Louise to consider publishing in this field. Women physical geographers were certainly having these conversations, and some had written and formally spoken up. But Louise was aware that co-authoring this paper could raise eyebrows among some physical geographers, with incomprehension or even hostility not out of the question. At the very least, Louise could have been criticised for the 'opportunity cost', given she should have been writing 'real' papers. As Sara Thornton, Sarah Cook, Lydia Cole, K. Anggi Hapsari, Norliyana Zawawi, and Susan Page point out in their response, for some working in the field of tropical peatlands, even *reading* a paper like this could be considered a distraction from their 'real' work. Emma's main concern, on the other hand, was that we were telling a different story to most of the feminist critiques of geographical fieldwork to date. We wanted to emphasise that our paper did not conflict with these contributions; rather, by bringing slightly different perspectives, relationships, and experiences, we could add more threads to these earlier critiques – hence the 'rounding out' in the title.

As Annie Hughes and Amita Bhakta rightly point out in their papers, while we checked in on race and disability, there was no deeper discussion of these issues, and certainly no acknowledgement of intersectional identities and experiences – something Anya Lawrence also draws out carefully. Indeed, all of the contributions set out deeper and more nuanced considerations of intersectional marginality and power than we did, including mental health and the affective impacts of 'fieldwork', as powerfully described by Faith Tucker, Catherine Waite, and John Horton. We concur with Morag Rose when she says we need 'an environment where staff and students feel able to disclose and be respected: not just accommodated'.

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While we discussed GIS, remote sensing, and other ‘non-physical’ forms of scientific research, there have since been remarkable transformations in the possibilities of ‘distant’ and ‘digital’ fieldwork, recently accelerated and enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are yet to see the longer-term consequences on research, knowledge production, partnerships, and the discipline. Amita Bhakta and others point to nuanced impacts and outcomes in and around fieldwork, including through the intersections of gender, race, disability, and sexuality.

The commentaries by Martin Zebracki and Aydan Greatrick, and by Anson Mackay and Isabel Bishop, left us reflecting on why we did not say more about sexuality. By 2003/4, Emma had started to come to terms with her own sexuality, but it had not been an easy journey through the internalised and externalised homophobia described by Anson in particular. Their papers left Emma wondering whether she had been subconsciously concerned that by linking women's enjoyment of fieldwork to her nascent queer identity, the paper might be undermined or dismissed as representing (a heteronormative construct of) ‘butch’ women. What we did talk about at some length as we formulated the paper was the fact that we had both been competitive athletes and were keen sports players. We emphatically did not want to imply that women needed to compete with (some) men on masculinist terms; that is, our positionality as younger, reasonably physically fit women (at the time!) was irrelevant to the paper. We sought to make it clear that our paper was not about women who could ‘keep up’. Many of the papers in this collection bring sharp clarity to the importance of not simply extending able-ist subjectivities to others. Something we also missed off was any discussion of childcare and fieldwork - something now brought home to Louise more closely, as she discusses below. In their paper, Tanja Bastia, Jessica Hope, Katy Jenkins, Charlotte Lemanski, Paula Meth, Nina Moeller and Glyn Williams provide an important set of reflections on the diverse circumstances, possibilities, and (lack of) choices around childcare. Their insistence on not just their own differences, but those of their children's wishes and positions, is nicely made. Many will find this resonates also with care for elders, and indeed for siblings and even companion animals.

Nearly 20 years later, the opportunity to reconsider Muddy Glee has given us the chance to catch up on what has changed in our respective ‘field-working’ (a term rightly extended and contested). We set out our trajectories and reflections here, very briefly:

EMMA: At the time of writing Muddy Glee, my fieldwork was mainly in the Indian Himalaya. The initial stimulus for the paper had been the discussions that Lou and I had about doing ‘mountain fieldwork’. Whereas my physical geography colleagues working in similar environments were dressed in sturdy boots, wicking base layers, multi-zipped and pocketed trousers and so on, most days I walked miles in fairly tough terrain in plastic flip flops, while wearing a *salwar kameez* (walking and carrying far less than the women and men with whom I was living and working, of course). This is not to romanticise or somehow claim that this sort of fieldwork is more ‘authentic’ (I am grateful to my PhD supervisor, Stuart Corbridge, for insisting on this), but Lou and I were struck by the ‘human’/‘physical’ geography differences, in expectations, images, and realities. It led us on to Muddy Glee, a paper that re-thought the positioning of feminist critique in relation to physical geography fieldwork, although we never did write the companion piece on re-thinking ‘human’ fieldwork. One of the pleasures of this collection is that it does this now, with far more diverse, important, and insightful perspectives than we might have mustered.

A few years after Muddy Glee appeared, I started to move away from ‘mountain’ fieldwork. With time and money limitations, my visits to Uttarakhand and India became shorter and more sporadic. Whereas some overseas scholars have managed to maintain deep and long-standing connections with particular people and places, as I turned to middle-class environmentalisms and urban settings, my work in India had become more itinerant. Increasingly, I felt my work was insufficiently grounded and lacked legitimacy when compared to authors like Amita Baviskar, Gautam Bham, and many others. For these and other reasons, my work moved towards development politics, and I now find myself conducting fieldwork mainly in national capitals, including London and Delhi, bringing a different suite of ethical and positionality considerations. To bring this full circle, my dilemma now is that I do not particularly like dressing professionally, and I am rarely comfortable or natural in more formal wear. Flip flops suited me better (this has been a life-long condition, and one which Katie Parsons and Florence Halstead's paper spoke to: while I was fortunate and determined to have a very outdoor life from an early age onwards, I knew even at primary school that this made me feel different, not always comfortably so, from most other girls). While clothes and shoes may seem frivolous, I want to draw attention to the wonderful work of Regina Hansda (2016), who has written movingly and brilliantly about the clothes we (resist or have to) wear during fieldwork.

Classics Revisited has revived my memories of Muddy Glee, and prompted me to think critically about what the paper sought to do, and how ‘field’ work has and has not changed. Whatever its achievements and limitations, the most important thing that the paper represents and reflects to me is the open, trusting, honest, humorous, and searching conversations that Louise and I were able to have. Our circumstances as relatively unencumbered early career scholars

enabled that, but so too did an academic environment that was not quite so punishingly busy or competitive as it is today – a contemporary pressure noted by Anya Lawrence and a number of other contributors. As Thornton et al. make particularly clear, the need for this time and trust has not gone away.

LOUISE: At the time of writing, my fieldwork was split between the UK and Southern Spain. In both locations I was involved in installing equipment to monitor hillslopes and rivers, wet rivers in the UK and dry rivers in Spain. My UK field visits consisted of day-long visits to local rivers and trips to Spain usually lasted one to two weeks. I usually worked with others and was rarely alone since my research was project based involving collaborations and team working that reduced risks around health and safety, but I also found this way of working enjoyable. I would always have been dressed in sturdy boots, wicking base layers, multi-zipped, and pocketed trousers! But my fieldwork always seemed less onerous than Emma's, and it was exploring our different ways of working, our expectations, and what we enjoyed that started the discussions that led to the original paper.

As my career progressed, I continued with some 'traditional' physical geography fieldwork, but I also developed an interdisciplinary strand of research. This involved learning social science methods and a whole new practice. Working with one of our close friends, Liz Oughton, was central to this new direction in my research. I had similar discussions that I had had with Emma with Liz, critiquing practices across disciplines that led to an enjoyable working relationship and a rich stream of research awards and publications. These two strands of work have remained entwined during my career. Growing my expertise in qualitative research methods also fitted around having children and juggling home life, with my career since my social science research undertaken closer to home in the UK. More recently my research has taken me further afield once more, but as with Emma my role in projects is less about empirical data collection and more about project management and supporting knowledge exchange.

Without Muddy Glee I doubt I would have developed such an interest in interdisciplinary research and would probably have taken a very different path through my career. My projects and publications are an eclectic mix, which I have thoroughly enjoyed, and have probably supported my move into senior management. However, I know that some of my physical geography colleagues continue to think my mix of research themes strange. Revisiting Muddy Glee and listening to the presentations brought back some familiar emotions about feeling ill-equipped to contribute to debates beyond my areas of specialism. But I was inspired by the broad range of disciplinary backgrounds of contributors, the wide-ranging aspects of intersectionality that were discussed, and the thoughtfulness of presenters. Perhaps we could revisit these in another 10 to 15 years?

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data were produced for this paper.

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