Quantitative visualization of two-phase flow in a fractured porous medium

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Key Points:

- Developed a novel experimental method to visualize two-phase flow in a fracture in a porous matrix.
- The evolution of the air-water distribution within the fracture was measured during sequential drainage and imbibition experiments.
- Capillary head versus saturation curves are sensitive to the pore-size distribution of the bounding porous matrix.

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Abstract

Two-phase fluid flow in fractured porous media impacts many natural and industrial processes but our understanding of flow dynamics in these systems is constrained by difficulties measuring the flow in the interacting fracture and porous media. We present a novel experimental system that allows quantitative visualization of the air and water phases in a single analog fractured porous medium. The fracture system consists of a sintered-glass porous plate in contact with an impermeable glass plate. A reservoir connected to the porous plate allows control of pore pressure within the porous medium. The fracture fills and drains through the porous matrix and flow manifolds along two edges of the fracture. The fracture is mounted in an imaging system that includes a controlled light-emitting diode (LED) panel and a charge-coupled-device (CCD) camera. Flow and pressure are controlled and monitored by a computer during experiments. To demonstrate this system, we carried out a series of cyclic drainage and imbibition experiments in fractures bounded by porous media with different pore-size distributions in the porous matrix. Images of the drainage process demonstrate that the air-water distribution within the fracture evolves differently than has been observed in non-porous fractured systems. Specifically, we observed limited trapping of water within the fracture during drainage. Conversely, during imbibition, because air cannot exit through the porous matrix, significant regions of air became entrapped once pathways to the fracture boundaries became water filled. The differences in phase evolution led to substantial differences in the evolution of estimated relative permeability with saturation.

1 Introduction

Two-phase flow in fractured porous media plays an important role in natural processes such as infiltration into fractured rock and engineered processes such as enhanced oil/gas recovery (Karpyn et al., 2009; Rangel-German & Kovscek, 2002), geological CO_2 sequestration (Vafaie et al., 2023), and remediation of groundwater contaminated by non-aqueous phase liquids (NAPL) (Dearden et al., 2013). Related two-phase flow processes can be broadly categorized as either drainage (non-wetting phase displaces the wetting phase) or imbibition (wetting phase displaces the non-wetting phase).

Early studies of two-phase flow through fractures considered fractures in a non-porous matrix. These studies included experiments in transparent models (e.g., Nicholl et al., 1994; Su et al., 1999) or replicas (e.g., Persoff & Pruess, 1995; Wan et al., 2000) and invasion percolation simulations in variable aperture fields (e.g., Glass et al., 1998; Xu et al., 1998; Yang et al., 2012). In such fractures, flow of the two fluids occurs only through the fracture and the distribution of the phases depends on characteristics of the fracture aperture and the nature and history of the displacement processes. Furthermore, both the wetting and non-wetting fluid may become entrapped and immobilized in regions that are isolated from the fracture boundaries.

When the fractured matrix contains non-negligible porosity, flow of one or both fluids can occur through the fracture and the porous matrix. Two general experimental approaches have been used to study two-phase flow in fractured porous media. The first approach uses micromodels that represent a two-dimensional (2D) cross-section through a fracture; the fracture is a 2D channel and the adjacent porous matrix is a 2D slice of porous medium (e.g., Haghighi et al., 1994; Wan et al., 1996; Rangel-German & Kovscek, 2006). Such experimental systems allow direct visualization of the interaction of multiple phases within the fracture and porous matrix, but neglect the 3D interaction of the phases within the fracture induced by aperture variability.

The second approach combines two-phase flow through cores of fractured porous rock with X-ray computed tomography to observe the distribution of phases within the fracture and porous matrix (Rangel-German & Kovscek, 2002; Karpyn et al., 2009; Arshadi et al., 2018). This has the advantage of providing measurements of the distribution of two or more phases within the pore space (both fracture and porous matrix) in fractured cores. However, the temporal and spatial resolution of CT scans constrains the scalability of these studies. For example, Arshadi et al. (2018) imaged 5-mm segments of a larger fractured core at a 2.5-μm voxel resolution. Such high spatial resolution facilitates identification of phases within pores in the matrix, but limits the size of the fracture that can be imaged.

We developed a novel fractured porous media experimental test cell that consists of a translucent porous glass surface mated with a transparent non-porous glass surface. Quantitative visualization techniques facilitate direct measurement of the evolving phase distribution within the 15$\times$15-cm fracture at a spatial resolution of ~ 75 μm and a temporal resolution of ~ 1 Hz. We demonstrate the new system through a series of drainage and imbibibition experiments in fractures with two different pore-size distributions in the porous matrix. We details the experimental system and fabrication of the fracture model in Section 2 ; Section 3 describes the experimental procedure used to demonstrate the results along with the required data analyses; Section 4 presents the results of the demonstration experiments; and Section 5 provides concluding remarks.

2 Experimental System

The experimental system (Figure 1a) includes a test stand that rigidly supports a 12-bit CCD camera (Quantix KAF-6303e; 2048×3072 pixels), red LED backlight panel (with an emitted wavelength of ∼625 nm) and the experimental model. The test stand can rotate from $-90°$ to $90°$ so gravitational forces acting on the fluid in the fracture can be varied. The spatial resolution of images of the fracture plane was 75 × 75 μm. Opaque fabric covers the test stand to minimize stray light in the imaging system. Similar experimental systems have been used to study a range of flow and transport processes in single variable aperture fractures (e.g., Nicholl et al., 1999; Detwiler et al., 1999, 2002)

[Figure 1 about here.]

In this study, we have developed a novel fracture test cell that includes a porous fracture surface. Figure 1b shows a schematic of the fractured porous medium test cell. A porous glass plate (bottom) mated with a smooth glass plate (top) served as the 15×15-cm fracture surfaces. A unique feature of this configuration is that the bottom porous surface is both permeable and translucent, so transmitted light can be measured during experiments. Thus, changes in measured transmitted light intensity reflect the evolving distribution of air and water within the fracture (see Section 3.2 for details). Furthermore, using porous glass with different pore sizes provides the opportunity to directly quantify the influence of matrix porosity and permeability on two-phase flow processes in fractured porous media. The example experiments presented here used two different pieces of porous glass surfaces (Rudong Shundao Glass Instrument Factory, China) with reported pore-size distributions of 4-7 μm (FF - fracture with fine pore-size matrix) and 16-30 μm (MF - fracture with medium pore-size matrix).

Two 1.9-cm-thick fused-quartz windows supported by aluminum frames enclosed the fracture surfaces. Clear polyvinyl chloride (PVC) gaskets separated each fracture surface from the fused-quartz window creating empty cavities between each fracture surface and the supporting window. A needle through the gasket into the lower cavity provided an inlet/outlet for water flow in/out of the porous matrix. To prevent leakage from the edges of the porous lower surface, a rim of dyed epoxy was applied along the peripheral edges of the porous glass (see Text S1, Figure S1 and Figure S2 for additional details).

After placing the smooth glass and the porous glass surfaces in contact to create the fracture, normal stress was applied to the frame by tightening the connecting bolts to a uniform torque (typically 1.7 N·m). Figure 1b shows a rigid frame surrounding the fracture with bolts that apply force to the no-flow boundaries (left and right sides) and flow manifolds (top and bottom). The flow manifold has a $\sim 3 \times 5$-mm channel along the entire width of the fracture to ensure that pressure gradients along the manifold channel are negligible relative to pressure gradients within the fracture.

Fluid entered and exited the fracture through tubing connected to the cavity needle and the flow manifolds. For the experiments presented here, a Marriotte bottle connected to the cavity needle served to control the head in the permeable matrix (bottom fracture surface). The Marriotte bottle was positioned on an analytical balance (Mettler Toledo MS4002S/03) on a variable-height stage, which allowed reproducible head changes of up to $\pm$ 70 cm relative to the middle of the fracture plane. We define the capillary head as:

$$\Psi = \frac{p_{\mathrm{a}} - p_{\mathrm{w}}}{\rho_{\mathrm{w}} g} = \frac{p_{\mathrm{c}}}{\rho_{\mathrm{w}} g} \tag{1}$$

where p_{a}, p_{w}, and p_{c} are the atmospheric, water, and capillary pressure, respectively, ρ_{w} is the density of water and g is acceleration due to gravity. During all experiments, a pressure transducer (Validyne DP15-42) monitored p_{w} at 0.167 Hz. Mass flow rate in and out of the fracture was recorded by the analytical balance. A computer connected to the experimental system controlled data acquisition from each of the sensors (camera, pressure transducer, and balance) using Labview (e.g., Bitter et al., 2006). Manometers adjacent to the pressure transducer facilitated periodic calibration of the pressure transducer but were isolated from the fracture during drainage and imbibition experiments. Because Marriotte bottles lead to small pressure oscillations when bubbles release from the vent tube, we terminated the vent tube with a 16-gauge needle and applied a 0.4 atm vacuum to the head space in the bottle. This caused a steady stream of bubbles from the vent tube and negligible pressure oscillations. To minimize evaporation losses from the Marriotte bottle, we humidified the vent air entering the bottle (Figure 1).

3 Cyclic Drainage and Imbibition Experiments

To demonstrate the capabilities of this new experimental system, we carried out several cyclic drainage and imbibition experiments. Horizontal experiments were carried out in the MF and FF models (Experiments MFH and FFH, respectively) to investigate the effect of the matrix permeability, and one vertical experiment was conducted in FF model (Experiment FFV) to explore the added effect of gravity. Note, results from MFH and FFH are discussed in Section 4; the results of FFV are included in the Supplementary Information (Text SS5).

3.1 Experimental Procedure

Each experimental sequence involved: primary drainage → primary imbibition → secondary drainage → secondary imbibition. Before each experiment, carbon dioxide was injected through the cavity, porous matrix and dry fracture to displace air from the test cell. Then deionized, de-aired water was injected to saturate the fracture. Prior to initializing the first drainage sequence, the boundary conditions for the fracture were established. For the horizontal experiments, the flow manifolds and all connected tubing were drained so the manifolds were filled with air at atmospheric pressure. For the vertical experiment, the top flow manifold and connected tubing were drained, establishing a zero-pressure, air boundary at the top of the fracture, while the bottom manifold and connected tubing were valved off, establishing a no-flow boundary at the bottom of the fracture.

The drainage-imbibition cycles were conducted by sequentially varying the capillary head in the cavity through a set of static displacements of the Marriotte bottle. Image acquisition began before initially changing the position of the Marriotte bottle and continued until the final drainage or imibibition step. During each step, the valve between the cavity and Marriotte bottle (E) was closed as the height of the bottle was adjusted. The valve was then opened and the fracture was allowed to drain or fill until equilibrium. We determined when equilibrium was reached by observing differences between successive raw images and differences between successive mass readings from the digital balance recording the mass of the Marriotte bottle. Each drainage-imbibition cycle was completed during a single day followed by an approximately 12-hour pause before completing the secondary drainage-imbibition cycle.

3.2 Measurement of Evolving Phase Distribution

To aid interpretation of the images acquired during experiments, we developed an image processing script in MATLAB to convert raw images to binary images that distinguished the two phases (air / water). Figure 2 shows the steps of the image processing procedure. At the start of each experiment, we took a sequence of 100 reference images of the saturated matrix and fracture, which we averaged to yield a single, low-noise reference image (Figure 2a). To account for nonuniformities in light transmission through the porous matrix and fracture, we normalized each experimental image (Figure 2b) by the reference image. The natural logarithm of the resulting normalized field quantifies light absorbance at each pixel (Figure 2c).

[Figure 2 about here.]

Light scattering at the interface between the porous matrix and the fracture complicates differentiating air and water within the fracture. Rather than a sharp edge, the air-water interface appears in the absorbance field as a diffuse zone where the values transition from near zero for water to approximately 0.2 for air (Figure 2c). To quantify the location of the interface, we sought a global threshold that minimized the number of air clusters during the primary drainage cycle. The rationale for this approach is that, during primary drainage, we expect the formation of a connected air cluster originating from the fracture inlet with minimal fragmenting of this cluster until the beginning of the subsequent imbibition cycle. Due to noise in the images, smaller threshold values cause localized water-filled regions to be misidentified as air resulting in an increase in the number of air-filled clusters. Larger threshold values cause some thin air-filled channels to be misidentified, separating the large invading cluster into multiple clusters.

To determine the global absorbance threshold, we developed an algorithm that sequentially incremented the threshold over a range that included the likely global threshold value, binarized the field according to each threshold value and counted the resulting number of discrete air clusters. We repeated this process for each image during the primary drainage cycle. Plotting the average number of segmented air clusters, $N_{\rm ave}$, versus the threshold values for experiments FFH and FFV, $T_{\rm FFH}$ and $T_{\rm FFV}$, reveals distinct minima for these curves. The respective optimal threshold, $T^\star$ for these two experiments were $T^\star_{\rm FFH}$=0.083 and $T^\star_{\rm FFV}$=0.105. We selected a global value of $T^\star = 0.094 \pm 0.014$ (average from the two experiments ± 15%) Figure 2d) as the optimal threshold. Figure 2e and f show the results of binarizing using the upper and lower bounds for $T^\star$ ($T^\star_{\rm lb} = 0.08$ and $T^\star_{\rm ub} = 0.108$) and demonstrate that the most significant discrepancies occur where thin tendrils of water (black phase) connect two larger regions of water. We consider the range of possible interface locations as a source of uncertainty in calculations of saturation presented in Section 4. For Experiment MFH, the optimal threshold was $T^\star_{\rm MFH} = 0.042 \pm 0.006$ (Figure S3).

4 Experimental results

Images acquired during each experiment allow us to quantify the evolving phase distribution within the fracture. Figure 3 compares the primary and secondary drainage and imbibition cycles for horizontal experiments in the FF and MF fractures. The colors reflect air occupancy at sequential values of Ψ during each step of the experiment, with warm colors indicating smaller Ψ and cool colors indicating larger Ψ; black regions remained water-filled for all Ψ. The grey regions in the secondary drainage figures are regions that remained air-filled at the end of primary imbibition.

[Figure 3 about here.]

For both experiments, air entered the fracture only after Ψ exceeded the air entry pressure of the fracture ($\Psi_{\rm a,e}$). Initial air entry occurred after the step from $\Psi = 274$ mm to 325 mm for FFH and after the step from $\Psi = 174$ mm to 190 mm for MFH. The different values of $\Psi_{\rm a,e}$ reflect differences in the fracture aperture along the two flow boundaries for the two experiments. Though the nonporous glass surface and porous matrix were placed in contact to create the fractures, the size of the sintered beads used to create MF were larger than those used for FF (Figure S4), resulting in a larger aperture and lower $\Psi_{\rm a,e}$ for MF. The Laplace-Young relationship relates $\Psi_{\rm a,e}$ to the corresponding fracture apertures (see supporting information Text SS4 and Figure S5 for details) and suggests that the apertures along the flow boundaries are between 43 and 50 μm for FF and between 71 and 77 μm for MF.

The binarized distributions of air and water within the fracture at each increment of Ψ (Figure 3) allow us to quantify the areal fraction of the fracture occupied by water, S_w^A. This serves as a surrogate for volumetric water saturation, which we cannot precisely quantify because we have only estimates of the fracture aperture and not aperture variability within the fracture. Figures 4a and 4b show Ψ plotted against S_w^A for each cycle of Experiments FFH and MFH, respectively. The Ψ versus S_w^A plots exhibit significant hysteresis, which can be understood by comparing the phase distributions during different cycles of each experiment.

[Figure 4 about here.]

As primary drainage proceeded through sequential steps of Ψ, air entered regions of progressively smaller aperture. For both FFH and MFH, the air first filled regions near the air-filled flow manifolds and then advanced through the center of the fracture until it connected the two manifolds. Then, with further decreases in Ψ, the region occupied by air expanded towards the no-flow boundaries. The similarity in the large-scale displacement pattern in both experiments likely reflects the influence of the clamping pressure applied to the aluminum frames during fracture assembly (Section 2), which leads to smaller apertures around the perimeter of the fracture. The small-scale features of the displacement patterns differ for the two experiments, likely due to the difference in the porous matrix, which influences the magnitude and variability of fracture aperture and matrix permeability.

A common feature of both experiments is the relative absence of regions of trapped water within the drained region of the fractures (i.e., isolated black regions surrounded by colored regions in Figure 3). This differs from experimental observations in fractures bounded by non-porous, impermeable surfaces, where regions of the draining phase become disconnected from the fracture edges and entrapped within the fracture (e.g., Detwiler et al., 2002; Chen et al., 2017). Here, water regions that become isolated during drainage eventually drain through the porous matrix if the aperture is large enough that Ψ exceeds the local air entry pressure in the fracture.

During primary imbibition, water fills the smallest aperture regions along the no-flow edges of the fractures first and then gradually advances towards the center of the fracture with each increment of Ψ. After water filled the fracture along the two flow manifolds, the remaining air became entrapped and immobilized (dark red regions in second row from top in Figure 3). In contrast to the drainage process, the trapping observed during imbibition is similar to that observed in fractures bounded by non-porous, impermeable surfaces. As a result, potentially large regions of air may become entrapped regardless of the presence of secondary porosity in the bounding porous matrix.

During secondary drainage (DR2) in FFH, air spreads more readily through the fracture than during DR1 due to the regions of trapped air remaining after IMB1. The result is that similar distributions of air and water within the fracture occur at lower values of Ψ during DR2 than DR1. This can be observed in Figure 3 where the distributions of air-filled regions at Ψ=398 mm in DR1 is similar to Ψ=374 mm in DR2. Likewise the distribution of air-filled regions at Ψ=423 mm in DR1 is similar to Ψ=398 mm in DR2. Note, this history dependence is not observed for the imbibition cycles, where the initial distribution of air within the fracture was almost identical for IMB1 and IMB2, resulting in a nearly identical filling order (Figure 3). Similar behavior was observed in MFH, but because the drainage process occurred over a narrower range of Ψ, the differences between DR1 and DR2 are less pronounced.

In addition to the smaller $\Psi_{\mathrm{a,e}}$ during primary drainage for the horizontal experiment in Model MF (Experiment MFH, Figure 4), another significant difference between FFH and MFH was the distribution of the air and water phases during each sequence. Specifically, the air clusters in MFH are more compact with less roughness of the air-water interfaces. Previous scaling analyses of two-phase displacements in fractures between non-porous matrices suggest a reasonable explanation for this behavior (Glass et al., 1998, 2003). The competition between interfacial curvature in the fracture plane and across the fracture aperture have been shown to control the geometry of the air-water interfaces; smaller fracture apertures with more aperture variability lead to more tortuous interfaces than larger aperture fractures with less aperture variability.

Glass et al. (2003) derived the dimensionless parameter, $C/\delta = \frac{\langle b \rangle^2}{\sigma_b \lambda_b}$, where C is the dimensionless curvature number, a ratio of in-plane to out-of-plane interfacial curvature, δ is the coefficient of variation of the fracture aperture, and $\langle b \rangle$, σ_b, and λ_b are the mean, standard deviation, and correlation length of the aperture field. They showed that small C/δ led to tortuous air-water interfaces and as C/δ became larger entrapped regions of air became more compact. Though we cannot directly quantify C/δ for our experiments, the air-entry apertures provide an estimate of $\langle b \rangle$. Because the aperture variability in our fractures are induced by the pore-scale variations of the porous surface, both σ_b and λ_b likely scale with the respective pore sizes of the porous plates. Because the maximum pore sizes for MF are approximately 4 times larger than those in FF, this suggests that C/δ is an order of magnitude larger for MF than for FF. This likely explains the difference in the structure of the air-water interfaces for the two experimental sequences.

It is not possible to directly measure the relative permeability of the air and water phases during our experiments, but we can estimate these values through numerical simulations in the measured air-water distributions. For these simulations, we considered only the influence of the geometry of the air and water on estimated relative permeabilities. Detwiler et al. (2005) showed that the role of aperture variability on estimates of fracture relative permeability were minor relative to the distribution of the flowing phases within the fracture. We used the local cubic law to simulate flow of both air and water through the fracture for each value of Ψ represented in Experiments FFH and MFH. Figures 4c and 4d show the relationship between the estimated water and air relative permeabilities, $k_{\mathrm{r,w}}$ and $k_{\mathrm{r,a}}$, respectively, and the areal saturation $S_{\mathrm{w}}^{\mathrm{A}}$ of the water phase.

The relative permeability curves (Figures 4c and 4d) are qualitatively similar to what has been measured in both porous and fractured media in other studies, suggesting the potential utility of empirical permeability-saturation relationships for modeling flow through fractured porous media. However, the potential for the development of fracture-spanning regions of either air or water can strongly influence the evolution of $k_{\mathrm{r,w}}$. This is most notable in comparing $k_{\mathrm{r,w}}$ during primary and secondary drainage for FFH and MFH. The large region of air that forms at the entrance to FFH (Figure 3) caused a significant decrease in $k_{\mathrm{r,w}}$ once $\Psi_{\mathrm{a,e}}$ was exceeded. Conversely, in MFH, the more compact shape of the evolving air region led to a more gradual decrease in $k_{\mathrm{r,w}}$.

5 Concluding Remarks

We have presented the development and evaluation of a new experimental system for exploring two-phase flow processes in porous fractured media. Use of light transmission through the translucent porous fracture surface allows us to quantitatively delineate the distribution of the evolving air-water interface within the fracture. Example experiments in two different fractures demonstrated the role of changing pore pressure in the porous matrix on the distribution of air and water within the fracture, which exhibited significant hysteresis from the primary drainage through subsequent drainage cycles

The primary advantage of this method over other approaches (e.g., 2D micromodels with a channel bounded by a porous matrix or X-ray CT in rock cores) is the ability to resolve the distribution of air and water within a fractured porous medium at: (i) spatial scales that are much larger than the scale of aperture variability and the resulting regions of entrapped phases during displacement processes; and (ii) temporal scales with the potential to resolve potentially rapidly evolving interfacial dynamics. In addition, the demonstration experiments presented here used a smooth glass plate as the upper fracture surface, but such experiments can be readily extended to include a rough upper fracture surface to explore the relative importance of fracture-matrix interactions and two-phase flow processes within a bounding variable aperture fracture.

6 Open Research

All experimental data and processing algorithms required to reproduce the results presented here are publicly available (Liao et al., 2023).

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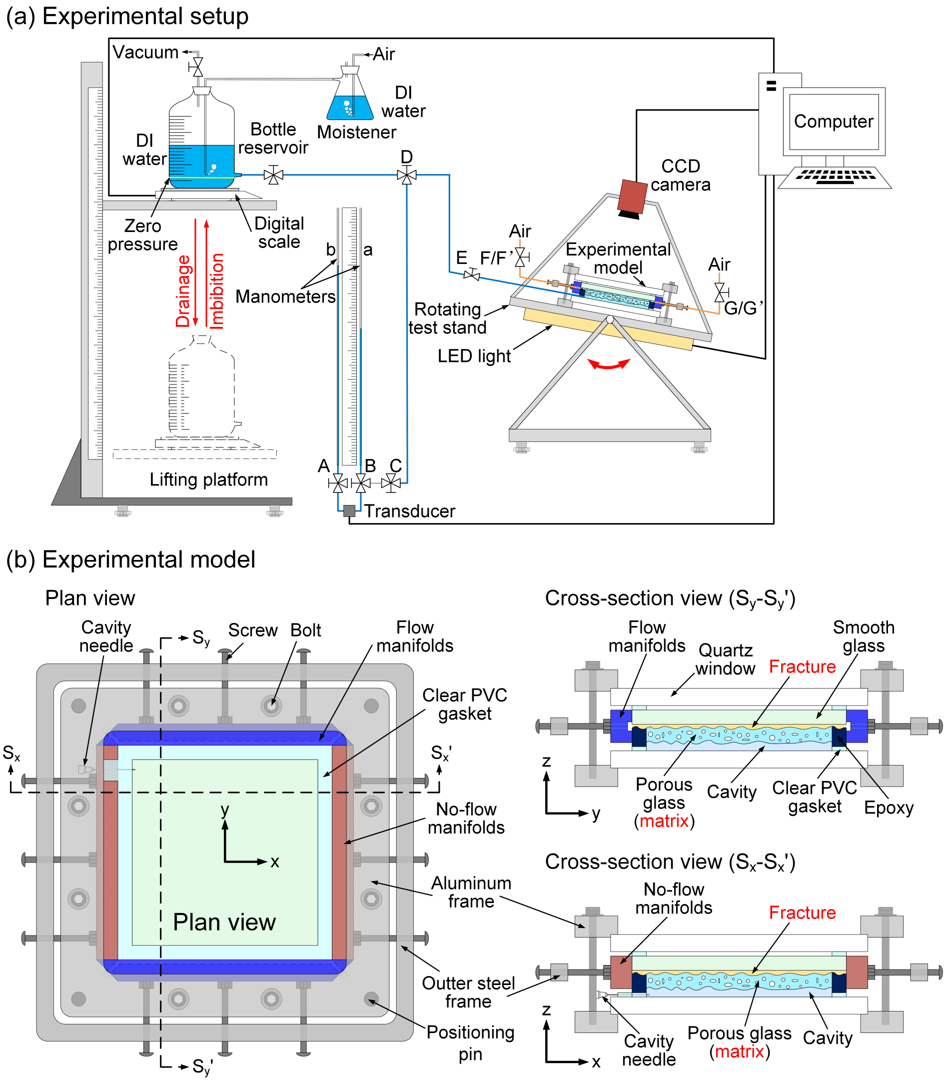

Figure 1. Schematic of experimental system including: (a) an overview of the experimental setup and (b) a plan view and cross-sections of the fracture test cell.

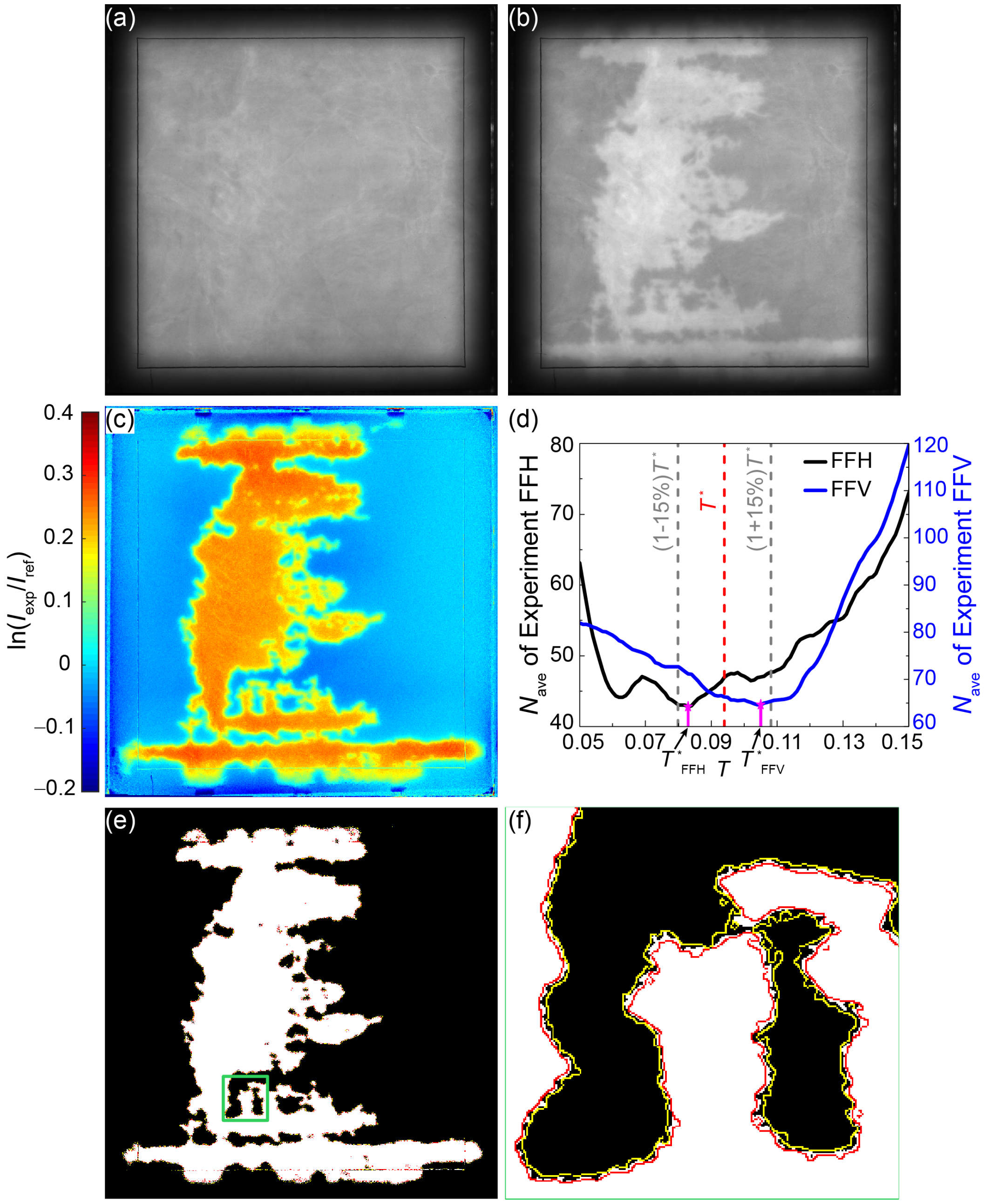

Figure 2. Overview of the image processing procedure, including: (a) The raw grayscale reference image, I_{ref} ; (b) an example of a raw grayscale experimental image, I_{exp}; (c) the corresponding light absorbance field, $A = \ln(I_{\mathrm{exp}}/I_{\mathrm{ref}}$; (d) the relationship between the average number of segmented air clusters, N_{ave}, and the segmenting threshold values for Experiments FFH and FFV, T_{FFH} and T_{FFV}, revealing distinct minima for these curves; (e) the resulting binary image (black - water, white - air) determined using the global threshold with results using the upper and lower bounds of the global threshold indicated by yellow and red lines, respectively; (f) enlarged view of region indicated by the green box in (e).

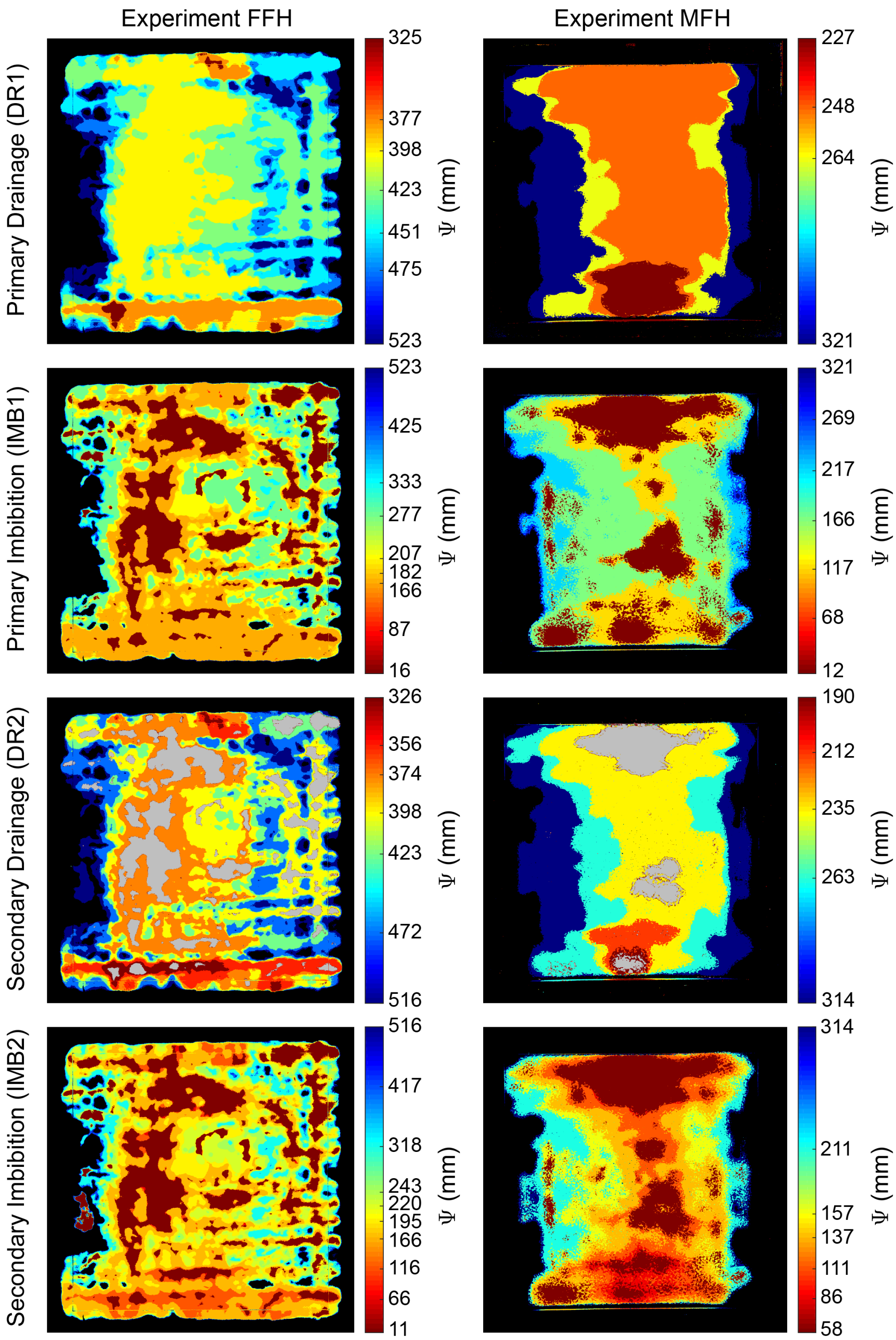

Figure 3. Phase evolution during cyclic drainage and imbibition processes of Experiments FFH and MFH. The average value of the applied capillary head, Ψ, is used to represent each pressure step. Discrete Ψ steps are indicated by the numbers next to the color bar for each sequence and the sequences proceed from top to bottom of each color bar. Warm colors are smaller values of Ψ and cool colors are larger values of Ψ. The color bar range for each drainage cycle begins at the first indication of air entry into the fracture.

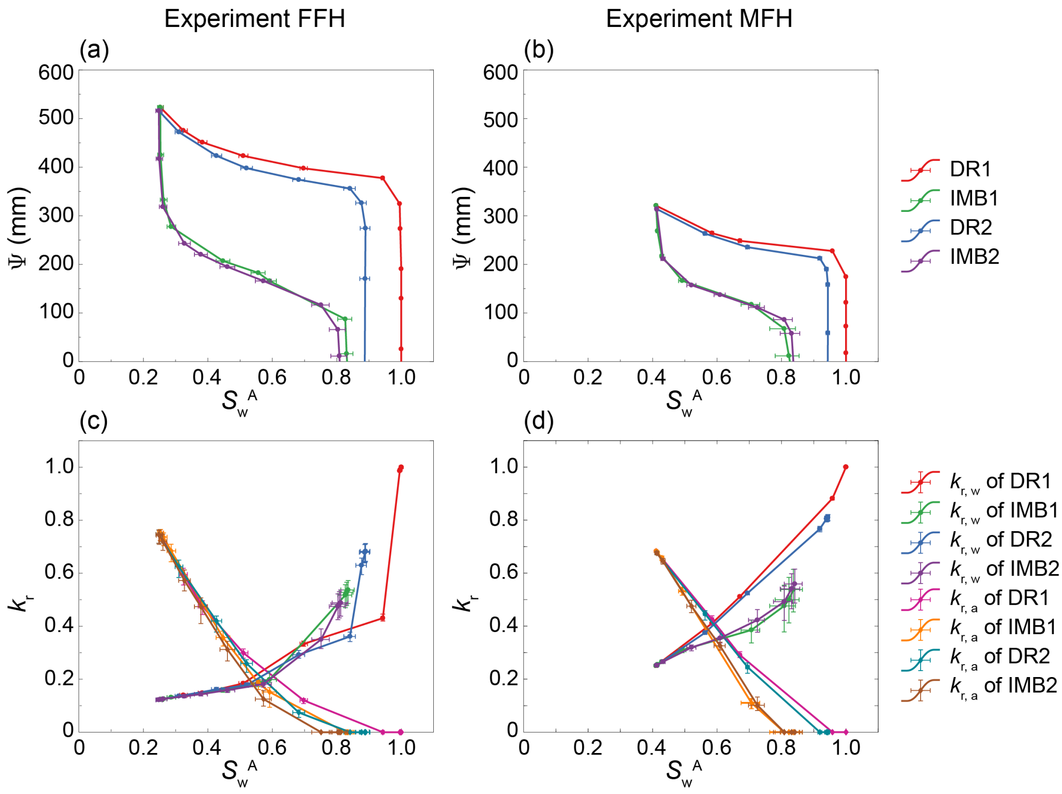

Figure 4. Relationship between applied capillary head Ψ and areal water saturation $S_{\mathrm{w}}^{\mathrm{A}}$ for Experiment FFH (a) and MFH (b), and relationship between modeled relative permeability of water or air ($k_{\mathrm{r,w}}$, $k_{\mathrm{r,a}}$) and areal water saturation $S_{\mathrm{w}}^{\mathrm{A}}$ for Experiment FFH (c) and MFH (d), in which $S_{\mathrm{w}}^{\mathrm{A}}$, $k_{\mathrm{r,w}}$ and $k_{\mathrm{r,a}}$ are the average values during the last 1 min in each step.