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## FINGERPRINTS AND PULP: NOMADIC ETHICS IN RESEARCH PRACTICE

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**Maureen Flint**  
The University of Georgia  
[maureen.flint@uga.edu](mailto:maureen.flint@uga.edu)

**Maureen Flint** is an Assistant Professor of Qualitative Research at the University of Georgia. Her background in pattern making and fashion design inform her methodological approach to her research on college students and higher education, and questions of social and spatial justice. [maureenflint.com](http://maureenflint.com)

**Abstract:** This paper thinks with Braidotti's nomadic ethics through the process of making paper to consider the ethical marks and cuts of doing qualitative research. Through the process of making paper, cutting, soaking, blending, pressing, and drying the debris of my dissertation, I consider questions of representation, ethics, and responsibility in qualitative research. Simultaneously, I consider the relations and interactions made possible through an art installation where the handmade paper was displayed as part of my dissertation defense. I contemplate my interactions and conversations with the participants that attended the installation and how these encounters led to new considerations of ethics and representation through research methodology and art.

**Keywords:** Braidotti; nomadic ethics; art-making; representation; qualitative research

*One of the many positive side effects of feminist ethics is that one gets used to time loops or a permanent state of jet lag. A feminist critical position assumes the dislocation of the linearity of time and hence the necessity to inhabit different, and even potentially contradictory, time zones simultaneously: a sort of trip through chronotopia. (Braidotti, 2011a, p. 109)*



I am sitting on my couch, cutting up my dissertation (Flint, 2019) – not the existence of the document itself, which is stored on a flashdrive, the cloud, my computer hard drive, and an external hard drive (no chances, right?), but the debris of my dissertation – notes taken from my proposal meeting, copies printed off and marked and scribbled over, articles printed out for reference, versions upon versions upon drafts. I am cutting pages into strips, then segments, rectangles fluttering from my hands to the stock pot on the floor in front of me. Cutting up my dissertation, I am thinking about Braidotti (2011a), who wrote that “one cannot take shortcuts through their unconscious [...] the critical nomadic project allows for internal contradictions and attempts to negotiate between unconscious structures of desire and conscious political choices” (p. 38). The entanglement of research and artmaking practices embraces what Erin Manning (2016) described as the “conjunction between research and creation” where doing is thinking and philosophy is an experimental practice that co-exists with art and artmaking (p. 41). Theorizing with Braidotti’s nomadic ethics and Manning’s definitions of research-creation, this article “animates the strangeness in the

everyday by reminding us of a lived reality of relation too often obscured by a retroactive distancing between mind/body, self/other, subject/object, artist/artwork, discovery/invention” (Thain, 2008, p. 2). In the reflections that follow, I think and theorize with Braidotti’s nomadic ethics through artmaking and representational practices. Specifically, I loop backward and forward between the process of making paper and the art installation where the handmade paper was displayed to consider questions of representation and responsibility in qualitative research methodology.

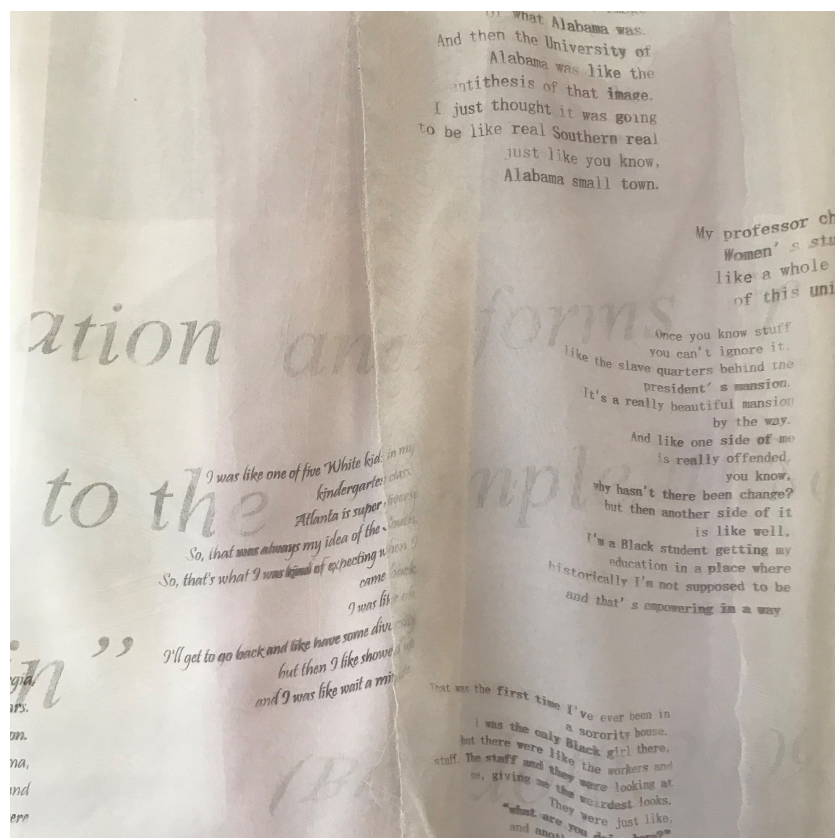


## Enough

*Enough* echoed through the study – posed in meetings with my advisor, scribbled in the corner of research memos, as I wandered around the installation before my defense with a committee member. “Have you done enough?” was asked during my dissertation defense itself by a committee member – enough to successfully defend, enough to graduate, enough to collect five signatures on a piece of paper and walk across campus with them in a manila envelope, to be stamped by the graduate school. Enough. Braidotti (2011a) wrote of nomadic becoming as “neither reproduction nor just imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness” (p. 25). Nomadic becomings, empathy, and intensive interconnectedness precipitate other enoughts. Did I represent the students who took part in

the study adequately, richly, evocatively, enough? Did my research do enough in the world? Did I say enough to make a difference? And so, as I began to add cup after cup of water to the stock pot I had filled with scraps of paper, I contemplated: Enough.

My research, an exploration of how college students navigate the sociohistorical context of race in higher education, sought to enact the emphatic proximity and interconnectedness of Braidotti's nomadism methodologically through artful and multimodal methods. I sought proliferation, affirmation, and cartographic accuracy, creating multiple entry points for students (and me along with them) to map their embedded and embodied locations of belonging on campus. Throughout the research project, I asked how their experiences and identities entangled with the history of campus and how the histories of race and structures of white supremacy on a college campus become (in)visible. We had embarked on guided walking tours of the campus, taken photographs, made and marked maps, and dialogued together. We wondered, together, how belonging and race were co-constituted, how the histories of campus mattered for the notion of belongingness, how white supremacy persisted in higher education, how belongingness functioned in the climate and context of the university. The installation that accompanied my dissertation defense was a (re)composition of these artful methods: in one corner, an audio compilation of students encounters with histories of race and racism on campus played, while in another corner,





student's voices overlapped as they told stories of their first perceptions of the campus. Across the surfaces of the room, excerpts from transcripts were (re)compiled. On one wall, text had been transferred to panels of fabric, on another, scraps of paper were sewn to hanging panels of tulle, along with the fragments of transcripts visible in the handmade paper strewn across a table. Stories echoed across the room multimodally as text and audio overlapped with the interactions of the participants attending the exhibit. Across the art installation and the dissertation document, text and audio interconnected, congealing, contradicting, and diffracting.

## Fingerprints

In the stock pot the segments and scraps of paper float in the water I have added to it, overlapping, congealing, and intersecting with each other. The stories on the paper are fragments of those shared by students over the two years of the study, and yet my fingerprints and annotations smear the pages, sticking together sections and thoughts, tracing lines and paths through stories and notes and articles and paragraphs – fingerprints that comprise pages, even as they layer and blur and overlap to such an extent that the ridges are no longer visible, fingerprints and marks that remain, even as the paper becomes soggy and fragile in the water.

As I blend the now soggy paper in my food processor, identifiable parts whirling into a seemingly undifferentiated pulp, I wonder about the transformation of the paper and text in relation to qualitative research methodology. Braidotti (2011a) wrote that movements to creatively reimagine how spaces can be otherwise are ethical nomadic shifts disidentifying from the logic of conventions. In qualitative research methodology, researchers (e.g. St. Pierre, 2016; Kuntz, 2015; Nordstrom, 2018; Sweet, Nurminen, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2019) have explored how the linearity of methodological proceduralism, what Kuntz (2015) described as a logics of extraction, limit what becomes possible through research. As the pulp settles, words and phrases rise to the top. In the spaces between research and creation, between the artful process of making paper and the traditional research methods of interviews, focus groups, and transcripts, something different becomes possible. New connections are made. Braidotti (2013) noted that nomadic theory “aims at a tendency to dilute metaphysical difference into a multiple and undifferentiated becoming” (p. 309). In other words, the process of artmaking provides the possibility for nuance to linger, to resist the pull toward sameness, toward neat and packaged themes and categories. The pulp has become not an undifferentiated blur, but a reconfigured relationality.

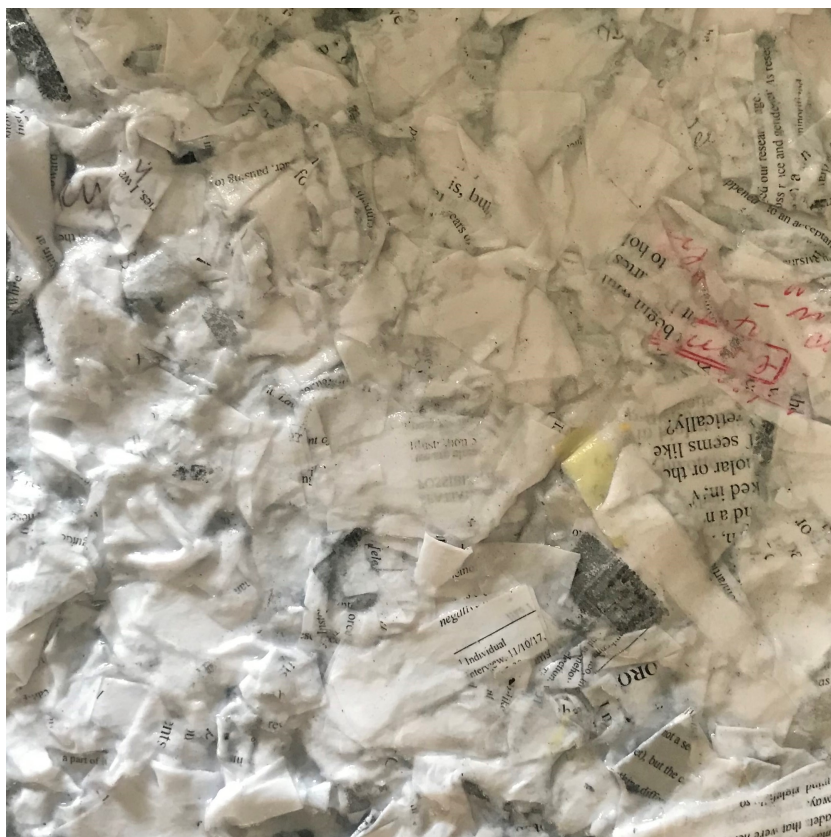
Regarding these reconfigured relationalities, I think about other paradigms and methodological orientations, about Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) who wrote of her methodology of portraiture, “I wanted the subject to feel ‘seen’ [...] fully attended to,



recognized, appreciated, respected and scrutinized. I wanted them to feel both the discovery and generosity of the process as well as the penetrating and careful investigation” (p. 6). Or Beuthin (2014) who reflected on “a pang of guilt that I may have come out further ahead; that I have ‘taken’ something from the participant” (p. 130). Questions of ethics and of representation linger. As I flatten the pulp, pressing another screen on top, I wonder about other flattenings. In speaking from my own embodied and embedded location, my whiteness and womanhood and cisgenderness have left their own fingerprints on this project. My dissertation, guided by Braidotti, moves nomadically, zigzagging between my experiences as an administrator in student affairs, the narratives of students and their experiences on campus, theory, and documents, maps, and images collected and created throughout the research study. Through these nomadic shifts, my positionalities come in and out of view throughout the project, foregrounded in methodological interludes, shifting to the background in analytic sections. Flattening the pulp with my fingertips, I watch as stories coalesce, brief lines of texts that are still familiar, still index the person and place and time it was said, even as they are fragmented.

To take up a nomadic ethics is also to take up a responsibility and accountability to one's co-implicatedness, to exercise critical vigilance, to be accountable for the choices and cuts made through the process of research, for the asymmetrical starting locations of embedded and embodied subjectivities in becoming. As I think about enough, I wonder and

question my complicity and co-implicated-ness with the structures of white supremacy. In researching how students encounter and story the histories and contexts of race on campus, the structures of hegemony and domination and oppression I was trying to resist and remake through my research bubble up. “There is a lot of you in this dissertation” a committee member had said during my defense. White supremacy is not just about race, but about the hegemony of whiteness, masculinity, maleness, heterosexuality, Christianity, and cisness. Through focusing on the ways history is made (in)visible in the present, I have told many stories and not others. I have left off or truncated the wholeness of the students, despite multiple entry points, methods, and representations: Cladius<sup>1</sup> who told me he experiences his queerness before his Blackness, Elizabeth’s struggles to conform to the expectations of femininity in her sorority, Sierra’s experiences as a Muslim woman following the 2016 U.S. presidential election. These are stories told during interviews, walks, and focus groups that are mentioned, alluded to, but always faceted, partial, incomplete in both my written dissertation and in the installation.



I sift pulp through a screen, pressing the water with my fingers, forming an uneven surface; I think about the stories not told, the lines not followed. I think about Elizabeth, who, after I had invited her to the art installation accompanying my defense, emailed me to ask what stories I had included of her. Responding to her email, I remembered her interview, the sunny November day, sitting in the courtyard of her sorority house sharing a meal – her

discomfort in that space with some of the stories that she had told, her concern with the way she would be represented, shifting in her seat and glancing up at the columns and windows above us. In my email response back to her, I sent her the dissertation document and reminded her of her pseudonym to search for mentions of her stories, encouraging her to offer any suggestions, offering to meet her for coffee if she wanted to talk through anything. Upon pressing send, even as I felt the story I told about her was faithful, I worried that she would feel that I had misrepresented her, nervous about speaking for her.

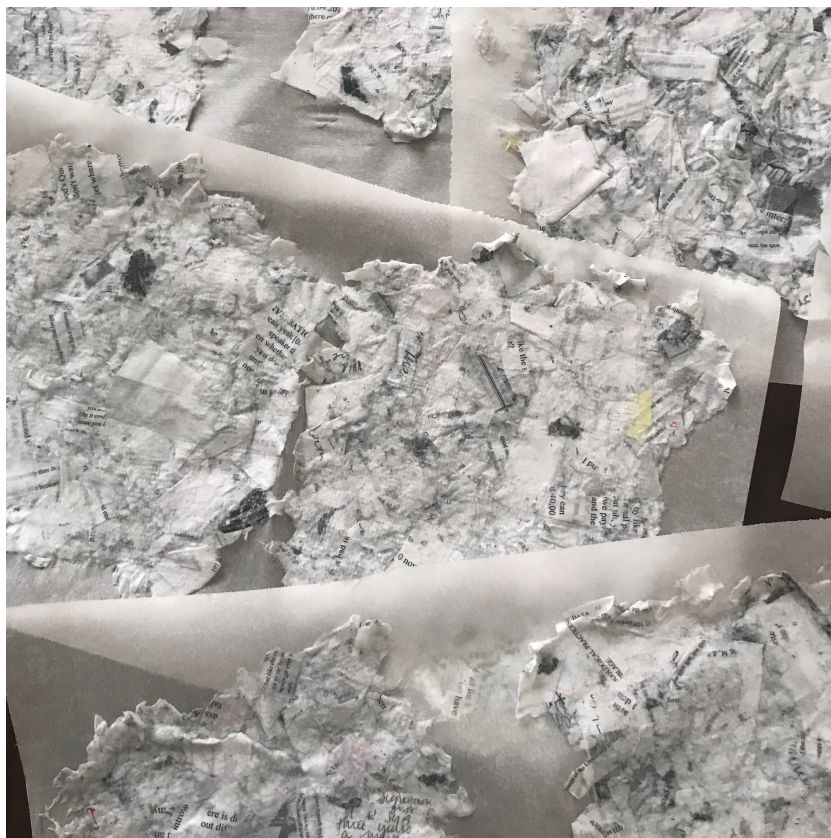
I smooth the paper pulp across the screen, and as recognizable fragments of feedback and stories come to the surface, I wonder about the fragments and parts I have told about her, included in my story. In the installation where the paper was displayed, another wall was hung with fabric panels, one for each student in the study. Each sheer fabric panel hung from floor to ceiling, marked with excerpts from individual student narratives. The translucent columns of gray, green, and purple overlapped slightly, simultaneously composing a portrait of each student while resonating and overlapping with one another. In the final moments before the exhibit opened, I had stood in front of Elizabeth's panel, an 18-inch-wide piece of light green chiffon. Behind the translucent fabric, running horizontally, another fabric panel read "I am seeking modes of representation and forms of accountability that are adequate to the complexities of the real-life world I am living in. I want to think about what and where I live – not a flight away from the embodied and embedded locations which I happen to inhabit" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 7). Elizabeth had told me she would not be able to attend the installation, and in that moment, I wondered if others would, and how they might respond to the configuration I curated. I wondered if the portrait I had composed of her were the stories she would have told.

## Composing

As I press the paper pulp on the screen, at times, the pulp tears, gaps and holes emerging. In the tensions between writing and practicing an artful nomadic ethics, zigzagging and non-linearity can become hard to follow. Ulmer (2018) wrote of "composing concepts," through writing and artful engagement with theory as techniques that cultivate generative and creative research practices (p. 4). In the fabric panels, I had tried to embody this radical relationality in the resonance between individual narratives, overlapping at the edges of the columns of fabric. Yet, during the exhibit, a friend had come up to me and said, "I can hear you saying that," pointing to one of the fabric panels. I had explained they are all from the students in the study, and had gestured toward the small square of text that described the piece next to the panels. I was concerned, then, that a piece of the exhibit had resonated differently than intended, even as I could see a glimmer of resonance in what my friend had said, because I did say it, in a sense, choosing those particular narratives from many to stand in for each student, constructing line breaks and punctuation. Through artful methods, my research was composed with Elizabeth, taking her words, the encounters we had together, and stringing them together with theory and literature, with the encounters and



experiences of other students. The composing was an enactment of radical relationality, non-linearity that spoke from embedded and embodied locations while zigzagging across time zones.



I carefully peel back the pulp from the screen onto a piece of parchment paper, placing the square with others on my dining-room table. As the pulp dries, other words and phrases become visible or are covered up, no longer translucent. Some of the pages are brittle at the edges, pieces breaking off as I move them. This breaking off feels random, some pages are tissue thin while others feel sturdy, solid in my grasp. Yet, the variations of fragility and sturdiness became possible through the same movements, sifting, pressing, drying. I think about how the movements of research methodology push some stories to the center and others to the periphery, how the same motions become fragile and fraught in some moments and not others.

Barone (2008) urged for arts-informed research to engender “history-making dialogue or... conspiratorial conversations” through empathy, connections, altered perceptions and emotions, and disturbed equilibria (p. 39). In the exhibit, I had strewn markers and pens next to transcript excerpts I had hung on the wall, inviting exhibit attendees to make their own connections between stories and narratives. I had hoped that the installation would offer a different entry point into the research, offer a dialogue about research practices and

representation. At my advisor's encouragement, I had not only invited members of my committee and the student research participants, but members of the campus community – faculty involved in diversity initiatives on campus, members of the Division of Student Life.

A week or two following the installation, I received an email from a faculty member in my department who had attended the installation, asking for a copy of my dissertation. He wanted to send it on to the university diversity committee; he said, he thought that my findings would be helpful as they considered upcoming initiatives around monuments, buildings, and place. I wondered how he would enter the nomadically non-linear narrative and (affirmatively) messy methodological document that was my dissertation, as I simultaneously wondered about the implications of the nomadic paths I had traced for campus diversity initiatives, the goals of my research around students' perceptions and engagements with the sociohistorical context of race and the perpetuation of white supremacy in higher education. As I sat on a bench, eyes squinting at the glare from my laptop, I composed a bulleted list of considerations and implications I thought may be helpful, attaching my dissertation to the end of the email before pressing send.







### Co-im11plicated

The installation had taken place in the two hours before my defense and people had filtered in and out of the room, moving around the space, listening to the audio, reading the excerpts and narratives of the students, becoming emplaced, embedded. Clark and Cladius, both participants in the study, attended. Clark and I walked around together, catching up before she exclaimed in excitement upon finding the fabric panel with her narratives transferred onto it, posting it on her social media pages. Cladius, who had brought a friend, moved more slowly through the exhibit, and paused at the final piece, a compilation of my visual memos and handmade paper. In this final piece, visual memos, compilations of images and text throughout the process of data generation, transcription, and analysis, were interspersed, alongside the handmade paper made from my dissertation documents, across two long tables. On two screens above the tables, an animation of the paths taken during walking interviews played on a loop, paths layering and entangling over a blurred map of the campus. The map, the handmade paper and the visual memos viewed together created conjunctions across the research project, animating the relationality across research and creation (Thain, 2008). I had included in the description an excerpt from my dissertation: “Throughout this project, I wondered and questioned my complicity and co-implicated-ness with the very structures I was trying to resist...” (Flint, 2019, p. 213).

Cladius paused after reading this, turned to me, and said, “this piece resonates with me.” He had not said more, but I imagined that the piece resonated with him because of our shared history across departments of Student Life over his tenure as a student and mine as an employee. In that moment, his resonance connected disparate spaces – my dissertation project connected with experiences in other spaces that we were both a part of, where white supremacy shifted and slipped and was reproduced even as the spaces were created to intervene in those very structures. I imagined the moments of individual and collective resistance and complicity we shared along with those we did not share. Braidotti (2011a) wrote that “being aware of one’s implication or complicity is the starting point for a radical politics of resistance that will be free of claims to purity as well as the luxury of guilt” (p. 104). Following Braidotti, this moment with Cladius, this resonance of complicity, becomes an affirmative starting point to become otherwise, producing the potentiality for new relations and connections. More specifically, pausing with these moments of contradiction, the snags and pulls of responsibility and representation, and questions of enough and composition become radical entry points for qualitative inquiry. These questions make possible troubling and fracturing the dichotomies of self/other or researcher/researched, along with linear notions of method(ology) and research outcomes. The handmade paper recomposes the research project even as it is constituted by it. Making and creating the paper is entangled with the process of research, of the moment with Cladius, even as it offers a canvas for possibilities to come.

Braidotti (2011b) described the faithfulness of nomadic ethics as “coinciding with the awareness of one’s condition of interaction with others, that is to say, one’s capacity to affect and be affected” (p. 307). Considering the affects made possible by the installation in tandem with the embodied movements of papermaking, dislocating from linear time, I have zigzagged between interactions and affects of methodological choices and research practices, seeking faithfulness. I have sought this ethic of faithfulness not as a dogmatic, rigid verisimilitude of morality, but a creative, relational, and imaginative orientation to the world. An ontological orientation to a world that is always becoming. A becoming in the world that is unstable and shifting, seeking an affirmative ethics that embraces relationality and process. The process and practice of becoming faithful, seeking radical relationality through artful research practices can be an ethical move to resist the socializing forces of white supremacy. Specifically, hooks (2013) noted that “as long as [dualistic] thinking serves as the foundation for how most people think about life (in neat binaries) then it will be impossible to eradicate racism” (p. 177). Considering how binaries and dichotomies intersect and permeate research methodology might make possible specific and localized interventions in the reproduction of white supremacy in our research practices as well as in the contexts we research.

Thus, through embracing the potential of the marks and fingerprints marking the data composing my research project, I practice “critical vigilance” to trouble and retrace and



redraw the lines and connections made (hooks, 2013, p. 149). Critical vigilance is both about staying vigilant – ever watchful, ever attentive to the slips and cracks and stutters of the moment, and also about practicing a reflexive non-linearity, what Braidotti (2006, 2011a, 2011b) described as “forgetting to forget” or practicing “critical consciousness as a time machine [enacting] active resistance” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 141). As I cut up the layers of my dissertation, soaking the scraps in water, pressing them through screens, recreating pages, I seek embodied movements, nomadic shifts, forgetting to forget, becoming faithful.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> All student names are self-chosen pseudonyms.