

A Seminar Talk - an appendix to:
Ge mig en kniv är du snäll

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Preface

A Seminar Talk - an appendix to: *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* is a written talk that takes place at a theoretical MA seminar at Konstfack. Both the book *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* and its appendix contextualize an ongoing artistic process. - I'm integrating myself into Swedish society by learning Arabic.

Through exploring language learning methods that put focus on learning Arabic in dialog, the work takes part in a discussion about limits of language, culture, communication and Swedish society. As a strategy I've used working with the private routine to discuss, investigate and make an intervention in the public realm.

Ge mig en kniv är du snäll is made out of fragments relating to this process. It guides you through my first experience of the language and demonstrates how contact with Arabic makes me view complexity of Sweden. The appendix has a more theoretical approach and discusses the works connection to subjects like: performance of identity, integration politics and Fluxus art.

Introduction

The seminar takes place at seminar room S4 at Konstfack. 15 persons are seated on red chairs around a white square shaped table. The light is a bit dimed. A spotlight focuses on the MA student who is about to begin her talk. Amongst the audience you find a curator from Malmö who is the student's project advisor, two Konstfack professors from the Art Department, MA students from Konstfack and a Post Graduate student from the Ethnographic department at Stockholm University.

The student, we can call her U, waits for everyone's attention. She looks up and addresses the audience.

I would like to start with a quote by Andrea Fraser:

Effective critical intervention is not easy, is not simple and is not fast. It takes time, it takes analysis, it takes research, it takes risk, and it takes commitment.¹

I see my work as an intervention in the private and public realm, but is my intervention an effective critical intervention? What would effective and critical mean in this project and for what purpose? I will get back to these questions later on in my talk.

I think that all of you in this room know that I learn Arabic as an art project. I've used different methods to learn the language and that these methods are means to look into the act of communication and also a way to get knowledge about Swedish society.

All of us could agree upon that we learn about the world

through communication. As a small child you learn how to navigate through the world by starting to communicate and being in dialog with the people around you. You could say that the tool of communication unfolds itself at the same time as the world around you unfolds itself when participating in dialog. You gain knowledge through learning how to navigate with language. So all of us in this room are connected to the practice of language learning as a mean to gain knowledge and get access to different realms. Beside this fact I would like to share some of my own personal connections to language learning as a tool of gaining knowledge.

U lifts up a leather bag and puts it on the table in front of her. She pulls out a blue hard cover notebook.

I found this at my dad's place a couple of months ago. Let me read some for you.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Vi åker skridskor. | - [Gsano li skridskor] |
| (Let's go ice skating.) | |
| Vi ska äta godis nu. | - [Gdoshlina chakar vejga] |
| (We will eat candy now.) | |
| Vi ska gå någonstans. | - [Gsano dockså] |
| (We are going somewhere.) | |
| Vad ska vi göra? | - [Men ksäjmina] |
| (What are we going to do?) | |
| Vi ska leka i altanen. | - [Machta3ina bo balqon] |
| (We will play in the garden.) | |

This is actually my first dictionary, written with some friends.

We were about ten, eleven, twelve something. They spoke Syri-
oio, a language used by a Christian population around Turkey,
Syria and Lebanon. I managed to learn enough so they couldn't
tell secrets to each other anymore in their own language, which
I thought was very good.

U passes the book around.

Another connection to language learning as a method of gain-
ing knowledge is that I went to Mississippi in the United States
as an exchange student at the age of sixteen. The confronta-
tion with a different system of social codes is something we
all experience when entering new realms. This in combination
with learning a new language in a clear way opens up for new
ways to see the world around you. To be able to enter new
realm you use language - It's through language you try to hand-
le and make sense of the situation you are in. Learning a langu-
age forces or pushes you to perform. It forces you to practice
your ability to communicate.

Language at issue

U turns a page of her manuscript.

But now, let's have a look at the context surrounding my pro-
ject.

From the leather bag she pulls out a white booklet in the A6 format.

When doing this short inquiry about the language situation at the Konstfack's MA program I realized that language issues are a hot topic at the moment.

2008 was declared by the EU council to be the European Year of Intercultural Dialog - To raise awareness of the importance and benefits of intercultural dialogue in Europe.² A goal of the EU language policy is that all who live in Europe should know two European languages in addition to their mother tongue.³

The last couple of decade's migration has brought many languages across many borders. In Sweden today, at least 150 different languages are used by people as their mother tongue language.⁴ Globalization has caused English to get a more prominent role in Europe and internationally. English is taking over areas where Swedish previously was the obvious language to use, like in science and in the business world. This is happening throughout Europe.⁵ When a language is no longer used in a field, you say it has lost a domain. This creates gaps in the language and with the lack of terminology the language will be impossible to use in that field. Scientists say that this undermines the language, and what then happens to public debate?⁶

Swedish and other languages are not seen as so strong and stable anymore.⁷ A world congress of language policies was held in Barcelona in 2002. A forecast presented to the public indicated that more than half of the six thousand languages currently spoken could disappear during the twenty-first century.⁸ So to save language diversity, or maybe it can also be seen

as “to save the national state languages in Europe” language policy are formed throughout Europe. Even here at Konstfack they are working on a language policy to try to juggle the problematics of an English and Swedish Master program.

Performing identity

Another part of the context surrounding my work is how you look at the concept of identity. Some of the theorists I’ve encountered are Chantal Mouffe and Paul Ricour. Chantal Mouffe has an anti-essentialist approach which means that there is no pure core that is natural or fixed in a human being. Mouffe talks about a person’s identity as pluralistic and by this constructed by several identities. A person’s identities are created through the different discursive formations that the person encounters. By this Mouffe says that identities are something that is created in relation to something else and our identities are therefore in constant change.⁹ Ricour describes the human being as incomplete, and in the creation of her identity she has to look beyond herself to find herself.¹⁰ Both Mouffe and Ricour talks about the notion of the other as necessary in the creation of one’s identity – we create the picture of the other at the same time as we create the picture of ourselves. Here I want to make a parallel to a larger scale and political level and what is part of the creation of a “we” and “them” when it comes to colonialism. Postcolonial Theory addresses the notion of “the other” in relation to colonialism and power

structures.¹¹ A researcher in the field Mikaela Lundhal says that the fantasies projected on “the other” in connection to colonialism is so deeply rooted that we are not even aware of it. What we put in the assumption of the other “reflects” how we see ourselves and how we construct the world we live in. This is usually made on an unconscious level says Lundhal.¹² In the forming of identities we need the other. But this is also used in colonialism to create a “we” and a “them”.

In my project I use this assumption that the identities are in constant development and affected by others and the realms we enter, to investigate how learning Arabic can shift my subjectposition. If the creation of identity is changeable so is the position of the self in relation to “the other”. As I take on Arabic my position and view of the language transform. Since my focus is to learn Arabic through other people these are also a part of the process of changing position.

In the project I’ve had a wish to try to dismantle the projection that I, with help of western media, put on the Arabic language. When the project started out in April 2006 the media had delivered the Bush’s rhetorics on terror for some years. The debate in a Danish news paper’s publishing of Mohammed cartoons had been going on since January. By experimenting with language learning and trying to shift my position I wanted to see if I could move beyond exotism and get a more complex picture of things and get my own experiences of the language. I chose Arabic because of its dominance in regions projected with the mentioned negative western media projections. It’s connected to Islam and often gets to represent “the other”. It’s also a growing language in Sweden with about 200 000

to 300 000 speakers. The language also seemed very difficult to learn, impenetrable even. I wanted to challenge that.

I was also interested in how my own identity would be affected. This was a concern for people around me as well, when they found out I was learning Arabic. Which was shown in numerous islamophobic stories and jokes from relatives, friends, teachers etc.

The way Chantal Mouffe talks about the forming of identity as a continuous performance leads us into the work of Judith Butler. Butler talks about performance and performativity. In short performativity can be explained as doing instead of being. Butler argues that the everyday ritual-production of ourselves is a kind of embedded performance. We never step out of performance and it's the medium through which we come to be what we are. Butler emphasizes the notion of when we think of performances as in opposition to something real or the authentic. The real or the authentic is only deep seated performances which we don't recognize as such.¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes queer performativity as an ongoing project for transforming the way we may define- and break boundaries to identity.¹⁴ Butler argues that a performance appears on an individual level whereas performativity can be understood as institutional or structuring.¹⁵ I see Butler's description as performance being connected to the small scale and everyday routine - the private. And performativity what happens when we put all of our performances together and how it builds structures on a larger scale - the public. To learn Arabic is an intervention in my private sphere. My intent has been to let it affect my daily routine and explore the connection between the private

and the public. It's in the private daily life an effect has to be made for things not to remain only in theory. As a strategy I've used working with the private routine to discuss, investigate and make an intervention in the public sphere. I use the language learning methods to place myself in new realms and the work is at most occasions situated outside the traditional art institution. The emphasis to learn in dialog with other people brings in my surrounding community as the project moves along. In varied extent both I and other people encountering the projects are the subjects in focus and the objects affected.

Performance and performativity also have a connection to play and more staged performances where the audience is aware of that the performance is art.¹⁶ Examples of more staged performances in this work are my writing performances at the Sollentuna Art Fair and in the citysquare of Örebro.

Integration

I also would like to mention the connection to integration politics which was one of the starting points of the project. An idea was to discuss integration politics with the work by doing an interventionist action. I have been influenced by ideas that are very similar to Qaisar Mahmood's. In his book *Small, medium eller Large* he discusses how the whole society is a part of integration politics. Mahmood says that even though a pluralistic idea of identity is put forward in the Swedish integration policies, with an emphasis on the need for the whole society to

be included, political action is still acted out in an essentialist manner - Focusing on separate actions for “new Swedes” not including the whole society.¹⁷ To not include the whole society in integration politics create segregation and alienation which affects every person in a society according to Mahmood.¹⁸

A title I've used on the work has been “I'm integrating myself in the Swedish society by learning Arabic”. It comes from this idea that the whole society is a part of the integration process. Society is in constant change and everyone is a part of integration whether active or passive. It goes in line with an established theoretical discussion and with my work I've wanted to try it out in practice.

The title turned out to be a very effective way to learn about my surrounding society. The title became a projection space for expectations, assumptions, prejudice and critique. It's been interesting to see how a title can be an artwork in itself, in the way it can be a platform for thoughts and discussions. I've experienced how the title can make the word *integration* be turned upside down and viewed from different perspectives. A problem with the title is that it takes all focus. Almost all of the discussions about the work last year were about the title. A critique was that I with the title tried to open already open doors. I can agree to that in theory but when doing the work it's very clear that so is not the case in practice. One of the goals of the project is that a title like this will be seen as banal, but in a general sense we are not there yet. Another critique is that the title is seen as me trying to represent immigrants speaking Arabic. I don't agree with that. My standpoint is that we are all a part of the process of integration in society and therefore

integration is my issue to be concerned with, as for anyone. To let other aspects of the project be more in the spotlight I have not used the title so much this year, even though it's still the title of the work.

Instructions and the act of communication

The writing performances I made at Sollentuna Art Fair and the city square of Örebro are examples of my constructing of, or experiments with, different methods to learn Arabic. The finding of learning methods is what has driven the project forward. In the text *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* the learning methods are at most times presented as instructions. Like for example number 4.

U reads from "Ge mig en kniv är du snäll".

Instruktion 4

Find a shop where they have Arabic speaking staff.

Ask if you can make an internship in the shop.

Learn Arabic words from the staff in the shop.

Instructions put an emphasis on the act of doing and *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* can be argued to be a performative text. All texts can be seen as performative when read by a reader, but you can also make a more narrow definition and understand performative text as urging the reader to action, for example manifest

...[or instruction]).¹⁹ The text *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* describes and suggests action that can be performed. The instructions can be acted out at different levels, either in your mind or trigger an actual doing. Instructions have been very much used in Fluxes and Conceptual Art. In the conceptual artist Yoko Ono's book *Grapefruit* (1964) Ono explore the variety of registers which an instruction might inhabit. Often her instructions are like 'thought experiments'. The instructions seem as an attempt to capture the hesitation between speculation ('imagine if...') and command.²⁰ Ono sees her instructions as unfinished so you have to finish it in the mind or act it out - To expand your horizon of what's possible.²¹ Whereas Ono's instructions stay with being thought experiments, the instructions presented in *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* have all been acted out by me in the project.

So how about these different levels – To let the instructions stay in your mind or act it out. With my instructions I present one of the methods I've used. In the project it's been important with the actual doing. I connect the doing with what I've spoken about previously - the performance of identity and it's connection to the everyday ritual and how this can shift your subjectposition. To expose myself to the learning of Arabic language to get sensory, intellectual and emotional experiences is a part of my artistic strategy. To combine this with the development of investigatory language learning methods in contact with my surrounding society is a process. To be in this process forms a goal of the project. To access the instructions as an "imagine if" can create a platform for discussion where my artistic method can be shared, analyzed and discussed.

In my project I've focused on dialog. The format of instruction goes against this by being a one way transmission. My instructions are told in monolog but suggesting interactive action. My instructions are not commands, they are suggestions that can be ignored, imagined or acted out.

Mike Sperlinger discusses how instructions are inherently political and imply hierarchy, whether of authority or knowledge.²² They are hierarchal in the way they tell someone to do something and give the author preferential right of interpretation. By this an instruction requires a "we" and a "them", a "we" who instructs and a "them" who receives. Instructions like manifests have been used in political opposition and by this challenging the position of the "we" and "them". An instruction has different levels of authority, it is for example a cookbook instruction or an instruction of how to build a car differs from a colonial power forcing it's interests on a oppressed people. At different extent an instruction can also be chosen to be ignored. As just mentioned my instructions are suggestions, which can be ignored, imagined or acted out. They are also a way to tell about an artistic method.

My interest was already from the beginning to learn Arabic in dialog with other people. An example of this was when I spent a couple of weeks in a fabric shop where the staff spoke Arabic. The fabric shop was already a platform for critical discussion, and I had the opportunity to be a part of that for a couple of weeks. In the shop I learned words related to the shop. The couple who owned the shop was from Syria and in this way I came in contact with the Syrian dialect. One consequence of learning Arabic in Sweden is that I come in contact

with many different dialects. The dialects can differ quite a lot and are also different from “standard Arabic” which makes out the written language and is used in formal situations and in media. It’s very good for your comprehension to get access to different dialects but very confusing when you try to speak.

In the shop I met Teresa. I was in the shop for a quick visit about a year ago and the owner introduced us to each other. She was doing an internship in the shop at the time to practice her Swedish. I had been there to practice my Arabic a couple of months earlier. We are about the same age; she is an electrician from Iraq. Almost right away she asked if we could study together. I thought that was a good idea and we went home to her place right away and made chicken. The first Arabic - Swedish sentences you can read in *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* are from this first occasion. Since October 2007 we’ve met on a regular basis. The first year about one to three times a week. She teaches me Arabic and I teach her Swedish.

The project explores the difficulty of the communicating act. The learning of a new language is both an obstacle that slows the communication process down at the same time as the new language opens up for a deeper understanding. Learning a language in a dialog with others and by this also entering new discourses bring forth differences, conflicts and misunderstandings. To study so intensely together as Teresa and I have done does not only test your patience it is also a continuous confrontation with value systems, habits and expectations clashing. We experience this in all relations in varied extent. In dialog you are confronted with the other person’s ideas but you are also confronted with your own. Teresa and I have built a close

relationship and when you move beyond the stage of politeness in a very effective way you meet both yourself and the other. One example was an incident that happened when I had spent the night at Teresa's house and she was coming with me to Konstfack. We were going to listen to a fifth year student's gallery critic, because I wanted Teresa to see how I would be criticized at my examination. Anyway, just before we're about to leave, and before I'm able to say no. She has sprayed me all over with her favorite perfume - a really strong and heavy scent. We were running late and there was no time for me to wash it off. It was all over my clothes. So at Konstfack I had to sit at the gallery critic with this strong scent. To be in this project has many times been to be in the uncomfortable. You have to stay in the situation and try it out before you know where it's heading. Maybe you're only feeling uncomfortable because it's new to you.

You could say that my work is exploring the notion of pluralistic identity in Sweden. During these two and half years I've worked with this project a complexity has folded out that is full of conflict. At times it just seems easier to put the lid on and smile. When Teresa and I interact it's not only us interacting. With us in our communication we also have all the people surrounding us taking part in our communication, pulling and pushing in how we are allowed to interact. One of the clearest examples is that both Teresa and I have been warned. Teresa because relations with me might hurt her reputation, and I because learning Arabic might make me a Muslim.

Art critic Claire Bishop puts emphasis on the need of critically analyze social engage works as art and not only jud-

ged on ethical criteria. Bishop also discusses the importance to point out the difference and conflict that occurs in dialog based work. Not to settle and be pleased because dialogue has occurred.²³ To bring into light things that might be difficult to handle. Language learning as a method is a way to encounter difficulties and conflict - In the communication act but also difficulty in encountering new ideas. Language has the ability to bring forth difference, obstacles and conflict, but It's also with langue we try to understand, analyze and cope with encountered difficulties. The difficulties with the communicating act, the resistance of learning something new, takes effort. When Teresa and I first met, the difficulties in the act of communication becomes very obvious. Teresa spoke little Swedish and my Arabic skills were minimal. Constant misunderstandings and confusion occurred between us. To learn Arabic in Sweden in the way I've done is a slow process. At times very frustrating. I've encountered many dialects and it's been a struggle to get people to teach me dialect. The written language, Standard Arabic, is viewed as much more proper. Many times I've been told comments like: dialect is barbaric, Standard Arabic is better so you learn something useful, so you can talk to everyone. Dialects and the very formal standard Arabic differs a lot. You need to know dialect to be able to understand people talking on the street. If I would learn Standard Arabic I could probably make myself understood in a very formal way but not be able to understand others speaking Arabic. Since broadening my understanding is important in the project I've kept the struggle of learning dialect. A difficulty was also that I realized that since Teresa come from the northern parts of Iraq from a Christian

minority that speaks Kildani. Kildani is her first language, Kurdish her second, spoken in the community, Standard Arabic was the teaching language in school and she learned Iraqi dialect when she came to Sweden and got friends from Bagdad. All of this put some extra obstacles in the way, but since both Teresa and I had the same strong commitment to get the other persons knowledge I decided to continue to study with her even though Arabic was not her mother tongue. With Teresa I've studied both the Standard Arabic and the Iraqi dialect. Other people have also been involved in our study sessions, and the best learning environment has been when I've been able to listen to other people speak and try to participate in dialog.

When Teresa and I moved our studies out on the subway or to the waiting in line at the grocery store we became aware that a connection with the people around us often occurs. Most of the time the audience created does not intervene, but on some occasions some share their opinion about the correct use of Swedish grammar or laugh surprisingly out loud. Like in any relation Teresa and I have the positions of a "we" and a "them" interacting. When getting an audience like in the grocery store Teresa and I together become a "we" or a "them" - In relation to the people watching Teresa and I become a team. The public events are a part of the method and they communicate and explore in varied extent what I encounter in the work. Other examples have been my writing performances where discussions created between me and amongst the audience were also part of the work.

I think I've used about thirty different language learning methods. Like the internship in the fabric shop, the writing

performances, studying with Teresa, etc. At most part the work is immaterial but some parts also turn out into material outcomes. In my work I've had a focus on the exchange in dialog which is immaterial but the sentences Teresa and I write during our study sessions are examples of when parts of the dialog are documented and by this become a physical outcome.

U reaches down in the bag and brings out a box. When the red lid is removed you see two rows of white paper cards that are stacked tightly together.

These are 734 cards with sentences written by Teresa and me during one year concerning what we were doing at that particular time.

U grabs a bunch in the middle and scatters them in front of her on the table. She picks up some of them up and reads.

Kom, vi lagar mat. (Let's make dinner.)	- تعالي, نحضر الأكل
Jag är trött. (I'm tired.)	- أني تعبانه
Vi är framme nu. (We have arrived now.)	- وصلنا هسة
Han skrattade åt dig. (He laughed at you.)	- يضحك عليك

You can also find these word cards on my webpage. At the web

page you can take part of our story at the same time as you can learn the sentences in Arabic, Iraqi dialect, if you'd like.

U lets the cards stay on the table for the rest of the talk

When it comes to Teresa's and my collaboration, we both have something the other person wants, language and culture. I see both her and my positions as flexible and depending on context and time. Both in the relation between us, and in our positions in society. Teresa and I have built a close relationship, but I'm also in this as an artist with ethical and artistic criteria to consider when telling about the work. Researcher Miwon Kwon discusses in her book *One place after another* notions like position and exploitation has to be taken in consideration when working in collaborative projects in the public realm. A crucial part, when it comes to exploitation and exotification, is when the work that takes place outside the art arena is communicated on an art arena; when moved from one place to another. To be able to analyze and critique the work a platform for critique must be created. In the text *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* I try to create a platform for discussion and critique. The text is a presentation of an artistic method and will be an artwork on its own. This talk, which will make out an appendix to *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll*, is also a part of this platform for discussion and critique.

The text - Ge mig en kniv är du snäll

The project has already created an audience when acted out in places like the art fair, the fabric shop, the grocery store and people's private homes. To find ways to communicate the work to an audience not present when it takes place outside the art institutions interests me. Last year I had a big struggle to communicate the work. A lot of things in the work was happening outside Konstfack but it was at Konstfack it was being analyzed. I felt very limited in telling my story about the project. The old title took over and was scrutinized in every discussion. A text like *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* can create an insight of the project but also be an artwork on its own.

Ge mig en kniv är du snäll is a mix of logbook notes, dialogues, word card sentences, instructions and language facts. There is also a connection to the genre of language learning literature. *Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* give fragments from the work that's been going on since April 2006 and guides you through my first experience of the language and demonstrates how contact with Arabic makes me view complexity of Sweden.

It will be published at *Bladstaden*. A small publishinghouse with an interest for collaborations between fine arts and literature.

With the format of a book I can bring the project into new realms, to an audience not present when it takes place in the public realm. With readings of the book, made by me, hierd actors or the private reader, the project once again enter the surrounding community. A number of copies of the book will be handed out as gifts. As well as it will be sold.

During the spring exhibition you can take part of readings from the book, both at Konstfack and at other places in the surrounding community.

Conclusion

In the beginning I quoted Andrea Fraser:

Effective critical intervention is not easy, is not simple and is not fast. It takes time, it takes analysis, it takes research, it takes risk, and it takes commitment.

The project I'm doing is not easy. I've used learning of Arabic to get access to new realm and to broaden my view of my surrounding society. It has made me encounter the struggles in the act of communication and also made me encounter conflicts when meeting new value systems. It operates in areas of complex subjects like identity, the communicating act and integration so it has not been simple. There have been times when I've felt I'm operating in a minefield and the projects have many times put me in the feeling of being uncomfortable. Fraser talked about "not fast" that it "takes time". In the project it's been important to build relations and that takes time. I've developed my method during the work and it's been good to take things slowly and let it develop - try things out and make U-turns.

Analyze and research then? The practical intervention with

learning Arabic in Sweden in dialogue with others is a research method. A part of the research has been to find ways to communicate the project along the way, to be able to analyze it critically. I've had many studio visits and talks, made many efforts to tell about the work and get feedback. At times it's been a really hard time and I've made many failed attempts that has challenged me and showed me the difficulty of the act of communication.

Fraser also mentioned risk and commitment. To do art is a risk. I don't see any safe choices. The complexity of the field I'm operating in is also a challenge. A lot of times I've felt my intervention is working fine in practice, but trying to communicate it is a challenge of exploitation and a risk. To do the project I have to put myself in it, and risk is connected to that. A project like this takes commitment in the sense it requires time and effort. The project has also been a lot of fun.

So what about the critical and effective parts? How do we judge effectiveness and in my work for what goal? A possibility with art projects are that you can use slow and alternative methods to look into a subject. To learn Arabic it would be more effective to go to, e.g. Syria, to study the language, but I see the learning of the language in Sweden as an artistic strategy - a method to look into the act of communication and Swedish society. I see my project as an effective way to be in the struggles of the act of communication and by learning Arabic in dialogue with others it's also been an effective way to get a more complex view of Swedish society. The language learning methods have been used to take the project forward and I see them as a critical tool to make the work take part in a discus-

sion about limits of language, culture, communication and Swedish society. *The book Ge mig en kniv är du snäll* is a way to tell about that.

Thank you.

Notes

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Notes (will be written in a more proper way before I turn the paper in)