The cesspool of colonial cinema:  
*Coup de torchon* by Bertrand Tavernier

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**Abstract**

*Bertrand Tavernier’s 1981 film* *Coup de torchon* *might be mistaken for a simple allegory of colonialism. If indeed *Coup de torchon* is an allegory of the colonial situation, then it is the allegory of colonial ideology itself. As the film exercises its Fanonian critique, it also challenges post-colonial cinema and represents a radical shift of responsibility: if post-colonial cinema only exists from the point of view of the (ex-)colonizer, can there be an African film by an African director that a European audience would not automatically absorb?*

Bertrand Tavernier’s 1981 film *Coup de torchon/Clean Slate*, a scathing critique of colonialism, has received little critical attention, apart from reviews, which have not touched on the film’s unique perspective and biting rendition of not only the colonial, but also the post-colonial situation. Indeed, owing to its carnivalesque appearance, *Coup de torchon* might easily be mistaken for a simple allegory of colonialism: the colony as a Sartrean hell devoid of moral boundaries, where debauchery and fornication are the rule (Daney 1981; Kael 1983; Garrity 1986: 41). This simplistic reading, however, does not do justice to the complexity of *Coup de torchon*. In the following, I map out the different points of intertextual contact with psychoanalytic theory, and the theory of biopower as laid out by Giorgio Agamben to explicate how Tavernier’s film uncovers and erodes the foundations of colonialist ideology, before turning to a discussion of the audience’s own emotional investment. If indeed *Coup de torchon* is an allegory of the colonial situation, then it is the allegory of colonial ideology itself. Moreover, I argue that, as the film exercises its Fanonian critique, it also challenges accepted notions of post-colonial cinema that see this ‘other cinema’ as an undoing of colonial oppression, thereby appropriating it as an easy remedy against a Eurocentrism that is too deeply embroiled in the essentializing process of reception of these cinemas to be swept away in one ‘clean stroke’.

*Coup de torchon* follows the plot of its literary source, the American *neo-noir* novel *Pop. 1280*, written by Jim Thompson in 1964. Although Lucien Cordier is the chief of police of a small colonial town, he is respected by no one. Constantly humiliated by his wife, her lover, his superiors and the local pimps, Lucien’s public image as bumbling fool works to his advantage when eventually he lashes out in a murderous spree. He murders the pimps and the husband of his mistress, Rose. Then Lucien manipulates the situation so that Rose has to kill his wife and her lover in self-defence. Shot on location in former French West Africa – now Senegal – it is defined by a specific

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**Keywords**

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Post-colonial Cinema  
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1. In her article on Bertrand Tavernier  
Lynn A. Higgins  
briefly addresses  
*Coup de torchon’s*  
intertextual connections between  
the novel, the French *film colonial*, and the American Western,  
an interesting point  
I cannot discuss here (Higgins 2003: 311–13).
colonial African chronotope. Set in the place from which slaves were shipped to the Americas, and confined to an exact point in history, a few months before the beginning of the Second World War, this double framework is crucial for an understanding of the film. It establishes the surrounding discourse of colonialism and post-colonialism as intertexts and – for the filmic text itself – it creates the atmosphere of a constant state of emergency.

In one of the last scenes, two cars with loudspeakers face each other; one shouting that there is war, the other one responding that there will be no war since ‘they’ve signed at Munich’. With our 20/20 historical hindsight, we know that appeasement was not a successful moment in foreign policy. The film, however, does not indulge in a reactionary view of history, painting a simplistic ‘what-if’ scenario asking whether the Second World War could have been prevented, as if history were composed of a manipulable chain of interchangeable, possible events. Such a linear view of history is exactly what the film criticizes. In a more emblematic move, the film places the historical information that it purveys in quotation marks.

The precise localization of Coup de torchon allows us to reaffirm the colonial frame as a frame, to transgress its authority and to analyse it as an exceptional state. No cafard – the infamous notion of homesickness-blues – provides an excuse for occasional erratic behaviour; on the contrary, the laws of civilized behaviour are already suspended. Indeed, Coup de torchon can be read as an illustration of the very situation invoked by Homi Bhabha in The Location of Culture, where he links Frantz Fanon’s anti-colonial project with Walter Benjamin’s insight that we live in a state of emergency and exception, where the law is in permanent suspension (Bhabha 1994: 41–42).

The colonial situation that Coup de torchon depicts is thus not a regrettable exception, but an apt portrayal of the everyday situation as a permanent state of emergency, where the human subject is stripped of everything human. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who also evokes Benjamin’s concept, calls this biopolitical production ‘bare life’. His concept of bare life concerns life from the strict and limited point of view of the political, and designates the slight increment that is left over when all political rights are stripped away from the human subject. The conflation of life and politics resides in the nature of sovereign power, indeed the only power that can decide on the exception: ‘The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact that the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order’ (Agamben 1998: 15). The paradoxical nature of sovereign power implies not only that laws can be suspended in times of crisis, but is tantamount to a permanent state of exception. The same foundational momentum that creates any sovereign state must necessarily create the conflation of politics and life in a state of exception. The perfidious mechanism described by Agamben is at work in the colonial situation depicted in Coup de torchon. Imperialism does not proclaim outsiders to the nation-state as outsiders in the mode of a simple ‘us/them’ distinction. ‘Them’ would indeed imply a true outside to the state. Rather, the modern state is like a machine that works to abolish the outside by expanding its sphere of influence by acquiring colonies, just as it produces the condition under which people can be reduced to a bare life.

But how can a realist text like Coup de torchon avoid playing into the seductive power of a suggestion of depth, ‘through which the authenticity
of identity comes to be reflected in the glassy metaphorics of the mirror’ (Bhabha 1994: 48)? The brilliance of Coup de torchon is not to provide a counterperspective, that idealizes ‘the native’ as somebody who has supernatural powers, thereby again firmly assigning the places of nature and culture.¹ Coup de torchon stresses the performative character of the colonial construction by showing its mechanism at work.

An analysis of a key moment in Coup de torchon illustrates this construction. Anne, the schoolteacher sent by the French government to educate the indigenous children, is a benevolent person who wants the best for them. However, she is as much an agent of colonial power as Lucien, the policeman. When the schoolteacher finds Lucien’s confession on the blackboard where he declares that he is Jesus and that God made him commit the crimes, she asks the children whether they can read the confession. When they answer that they cannot, Anne declares that this is ‘the Marseillaise, the French National Anthem’, and begins reciting it. The meaning of the uplifting lyrics suddenly comes to the forefront and builds an ironic comment on the colonial situation: ‘Arise children of the fatherland/The day of glory has arrived/Against us tyranny’s/Bloody standard is raised.’ The ‘writing on the wall’ cannot be understood by the colonized; its obscene content stays literally ob-scene, covered over by a song to the glory of the very nation that does not accept the colonized, but treats them like children. In France, school is the pre-eminent republican space, a place where children are educated to become good citizens. Transposed to a colonial setting, however, this ‘pedagogy’ reveals its ideological foundation. The French Revolution is retroactively posited as the mythical founding event of the nation, thus becoming exactly that: a unique and unrepeatable event that the colonized are to share vicariously with the French. But what if these ‘children’ should fully accept their lessons and rise against the tyranny of the oppressor? As Cooke puts it: ‘While teaching French grammar and history, the seeds of revolt were planted’ by the agents of the mission civilisatrice (Cooke 1973: 174).

Figure 1: Lucien Cordier (Philippe Noiret) in Coup de torchon.
The inherent tautology in the construction of a colonial other is thus unfolded in this short sequence in the classroom. Imperialism, as an ideology, was from the very beginning a discourse of self-observation and self-description, in that the colonial powers, in this case the French, had to justify their colonial endeavours to themselves. A nation could not simply set out to conquer some far-away indigenous people. The \textit{mission civilisatrice} provided the needed justification for the colonial expansion (Chipman 1989: 19; Ngando 2002: 14–18). However, more than self-description, the \textit{mission civilisatrice} was posited in a self-reflexive mode which by its very self-reflexivity provided the only possible answer to the ‘why’ of the colonizing impulse: what indigenous people lack is indeed (our French) culture! The discourse of the \textit{mission civilisatrice} shows here not only its tautological character, but also its structural affinity with the mechanisms of identification.

It has long been held by colonialist discourse that the white man has a god-given duty to civilize others. Rudyard Kipling’s much-quoted poem, ‘The White Man’s Burden’ (Kipling 1899), illustrates this moment of self-description, projection and identification. As this poem suggests, the essential quality of the colonizer is the Enlightenment ideal of freeing oneself from the bondage of uncultured superstition. Treating the natives like children, who also can be said to cower in the dark of uncultured superstition, becomes the patriarchal gesture \textit{par excellence} of the colonizer. As Fanon points out, ‘a white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening’ (Fanon 1967: 31). But Kipling’s poem also shows a peculiar double bind. There is no arguing with the parental/paternal authority, whose pseudo-argumentative pronouncement, backed by a historicist idea of a linear time, is clear enough: you only became a civilized person because you were forced for your own good to adopt certain values. Unless one owns a time machine to go back in time and see what might have happened without the force of paternalistic law, one obviously cannot prove that the opposite is true. The ‘truth’ of benevolent paternalistic influence, however, only holds if we keep to the historicist idea of linear time with its causal relationships.

Nevertheless, as the much-quoted moment from Fanon’s \textit{White Skin, Black Masks} illustrates, the paternal grip is hard to break. When a mother and her child walk by, the latter exclaims: ‘Look, Mama, a negro!’ Fanon will never be ‘Dr Fanon’ because he is a Negro. But is it not true that he is a black person? \textit{Coup de torchon} leads us to the quintessential imperialist deadlock, a Gordian knot which binds all prior discourses together in a monstrous, undefeatable ontology – the discourse of the oppressor that is always already there and which ties seeing and being together, and elicits questions like: ‘Isn’t it \textit{true} that Africans are black and I am white?’ Or, for the film \textit{Coup de torchon}: ‘Isn’t it \textit{true} that we treat everyone as equals, since we follow the law we brought to the colonies?’

Let us examine how this colonialist ontology takes hold in \textit{Coup de torchon}, how seeing and being come to appear as always having been tied together and how the knot might be loosened. It is noteworthy that Lucien addresses everybody, white and black alike, in a peculiar way. His voice is neither fatherly nor childish, but expresses saintly simplicity, an impossible position outside of that double bind. The sequence with Vendredi, the servant of Rose’s husband whom Lucien killed, provides an example of
Lucien’s unique position. Vendredi, named after Robinson Crusoe’s Friday, finds the husband’s body and brings it back to Rose. For the servant, the dead are still part of the community until they receive a proper burial. In the white man’s world, the body of the dead person is just an empty shell, and in this case, a ‘dead’ giveaway of Lucien’s guilt. Even though Vendredi swears not to tell anybody, Lucien decides to get rid of the potential witness. Before Lucien shoots Vendredi, the following exchange takes place:

Lucien Cordier: What’s wrong? You know I have to.
Vendredi: But Captain, I trusted you. You’re different from other white men.
Lucien Cordier: There’s your mistake. (…) You kissed too much white ass. You asked to get fucked. This is what I do with friends like you. [shoots]

Lucien’s cynicism might appear shocking, but ultimately it shows the absolute incompatibility of the two orders. The existence of the white man, his stance regarding the native, whose real name he cannot be bothered to learn, makes it impossible to achieve the common ground of a symbolic exchange – in one word, trust. At this point, Coup de torchon proves itself to be a Fanonian critique, because the seemingly evident ontological equation of ‘I = white, and other = black and…’ is shown to be an illusion. We should not forget that Lucien is also the only person who openly acknowledges his desires and the enjoyment he draws from his seemingly deranged schemes. The benevolent gesture of the colonialist towards his subject reveals its perverted underside. In an often-quoted pun, Lacan calls perversion the ‘père-version’, the father’s version. A pervert is not a person with uncontrollable desire, but on the contrary, one with fully controlled desire who acts in the name of a law. This does not mean that colonial officers are not sadists who derive a sexual pleasure from torturing: on the contrary, the perversion of the colonial situation allows sadists to be in the position where they may torture with absolute legality. The colonial officer certainly acts according to the law, but the satisfaction he draws from this job – his enjoyment – is not accounted for.

What we are talking about is not just rhetoric, but ideology: the software, so to speak, of an entire humanist tradition. As mentioned above, the ‘paternalistic grip’, implies and depends upon a linear and deterministic view of history (‘the others are just not as evolved as we are’), and a unified subject with a clear identity, one shaped by the colonial authority. The entire ideology rests on the image of a unified, white male subject, a point the film makes explicitly. However, echoing Freud’s question, Fanon’s ‘What does the other want?’ is posed in anticipation of its own perversion as ‘what does the other, the woman, the native, really want?’ As if aware of the ‘begging’ this question sustains – notably from the sexist standpoint that claims a (woman’s) ‘no’ is actually a ‘yes’, but also from the colonialist – the film pushes the question of desire to its limits. The three female characters – the cheating wife, the amoral mistress and the naive schoolteacher – are precisely the instance where we encounter this pushing of limits, and the point at which the ideological field lacks closure. It is comical and ludicrous when Rose, after Lucien tells her that he has just killed her husband, embraces him, looks into the camera with big eyes and declares: ‘Oh, I am coming!’ In this scene, the film merges two sexist cliches, that of the sensual

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native woman and that of woman as lack, in order to show us that the desire of the other is always opaque on some level, and that the question of desire is always attended by its perverse double. Let us go further than saying simply that the self-image as a whole, unified male subject is challenged by this encounter with another whose existence alone challenges this self-image by its very difference. The colonizer’s answer – the native (or woman) wants equal treatment and I am giving it to him (or her), along with culture, development, etc. – is thus shown to be in bad faith, incongruous with the desire of the colonized which remains ‘opaque’ for the colonizer.

The reason for the impossibility of representing the point of view of the colonized should be clear at this point: There can never be a direct relation between self and other, because the discourse is exterior (‘prior’) to this relation. The construction of identity is always already an identification with something pre-existing. Put in terms of identity, the matrix of colonizer–colonized appears to be a simple subject–object relationship. However, as mentioned above, when we turn the positions around, we do not arrive at a ‘fair’ portrayal of the colonized, but, at a reverse racism, an ‘Uncle Tom’s cabin’ portrayal. Instead of the illusory objectivity of the colonizer that supposedly makes it possible to recognize the other as a human being, albeit one that is less civilized and less educated, we are left with a gaze that sees only a reflection of itself, a conflation of seeing and being (of the perceived and the existent).

This mechanism, which functions the same way as the paternalistic grip, has a built-in self-preservation feature. When the law fails to provide order, the individual colonizer might be to blame for being weak and not enforcing it, but the order of the law itself is never to blame. The law thus becomes a metaphysical force. Lucien, as the town’s chief of police, is in a position of power – he represents the law, but since he is a weak person, the law is not obeyed. All that Lucien does is accept that law fully, and that means he must identify with it. Instead of taking the position of the colonizer, the father-figure, Lucien develops into an Übervater, a superfather. We should be careful not to interpret this as a psychological illness, because, as we have already seen, the colonial situation concerns desire and the structural position of subjects. However, when Lucien fully identifies with his position, he becomes that structural entity. The split between the abstract law and the concrete person ceases to exist. This is why he calls himself Jesus, the son of God. It is this sudden insight that drives Lucien’s actions: his structural position gives him the right to enforce the law, and no longer able or willing to differentiate between himself and his position, he identifies with it fully. As a stand-in for God, he has the duty to enforce the law, and all that he ‘is’, is that duty. Lucien, in short, identifies fully with the sovereign, and because no external ‘providence’ binds Lucien to his existence, he comes to understand that his identity is nothing but a contingency. It is purely by chance that he finds himself in the position of being the law-enforcer at this geographical and political location in history, but this insight sets him ‘free’. And because all that is left is the pure structure of the law, Lucien must now define his identity as that law.

To make both Lucien’s insight and what it means for our analysis clearer, let us consider the beginning and the end of the film. The film
begins with an ostentatious gesture of empathy. Lucien lights a fire for the local children, who are frightened by a solar eclipse. At the end of the film, at the same location, he considers shooting the children. The entire film is bracketed by these two images, and the understanding we have of Lucien at the end of the film provides a frame for a reinterpretation of the scene of empathy in terms of the closing gesture: what appeared as a gesture of protection now looks like its very perversion. Indeed, if we re-examine some shots from the film in the light of these last images, we gain some startling insights into the mechanisms of this perversion. The film’s first shot shows African children playing in the sand. The camera is placed right behind a large baobab tree; baobabs are numerous in arid regions of West Africa and hold a particularly important place in legends and folklore of West African cultures. These legends, of course, have been destroyed by colonization. A hand appears on the tree, and then the figure of Lucien fills the foreground of the picture. Lucien and one of the boys exchange glances. However, there is no establishing shot that shows Lucien and the children together from the perspective of a neutral observer, a shot that, in a more conventional film, would give us an idea of how far apart the white man and the children are. The very same camera set-up happens at the end of the film. Instead of a shot that shows Lucien and the children from the perspective of a neutral observer, the camera jumps between point of view shots of Lucien and the boy along a straight axis, even showing Lucien from behind, thus aligning our perspective with that of Lucien as he looks over the sight of his revolver. What is significant here is the fact that the shot-counter shot imitates most documentary films on African wildlife, whose convention it is to show, for example, a lion and its prey alternately in long shots. These appear as mutual point of view shots, thereby disavowing not only the artificial character of the documentary but also the benevolent interest of the colonizer for his subjects. The cameraman, of course, does not appear, and neither does the neutral observer of our film. What does emerge is the spectator’s perspective, as another example from the film makes amply clear.

Figure 2: Lucien Cordier (Philippe Noiret) in Coup de torchon.
This mechanism of spectatorship is illustrated in the scene where we watch Anne, the schoolteacher, in the shower. In the window, exactly opposite the position of the camera, there suddenly appears the face of Nono, Lucien’s wife’s lover. Faced with the idiotic grin of this Peeping Tom, we realize our own spectatorial position: We cannot not judge her naked body! Whatever our reaction is, we do not close our eyes, but indulge in that judgmental vision with the same idiotic glee we face in our own mirror image – the perverse enjoyment of our position.

This is important as it implicates us in the project of post-colonial dismantling, in the project of the ‘clean sweep’ as attempted by cinema. We become aware of our position vis-à-vis this clean-sweep. Furthermore, this film illustrates how cinema is the ideal medium to deconstruct the power structure of colonizer and other, because cinema is also bound to a subject–object dichotomy, since the camera must objectify everything under its gaze. Film can refer to the stereotype, and, with the same gesture, reveal it as stereotype, stressing that the audience is always part of this apparatus. Coup de torchon finds a dense and poetic image for this process in another mise-en-abîme: On the town square is held a screening of Alerte en Méditerranée (Joannon, 1938), a French spy thriller shot in what was then the French protectorate of Morocco. As Slavin states: ‘Colonial film discourse illustrated and helped construct a culture of racial dominance, of whiteness, that settler elites used during the interwar years to unite the North African community across class and ethnic lines in defense of racial privilege’ (Slavin 2001: 16). The indigenous audience in Coup de torchon is thus forced to pay admission for a film that propagates white supremacy. They exhibit rowdy behaviour, while a translator is needed to interpret the film; clearly, this audience does not master the etiquette of cinema. Then, a sudden sandstorm blows the screen away, sending everybody running for cover. This self-reference to the cinematic apparatus not only stresses that we are watching a scene of colonial cinema in a post-colonial film, probably in a ‘civilized’ manner, but also reveals in a dialectical move that post-colonial cinema is always a reaction to colonial cinema. This chiasmic structure lies at the heart of post-colonial cinema. There is inevitably a blind spot, the spot from where the other sees me (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 9–11, 130–55). The only perception we can have of post-colonial cinema is after the fact – ‘post’. Post-colonial cinema paradoxically only exists for the gaze of the (ex-)colonizer. And yet, because the Western audience expects the film to do the work of creating its own difference after the fact, thus effectively to disregard this late-coming difference, and to assign an easily palatable ‘difference’ to the film, the stakes of post-colonial cinema, as Tavernier brilliantly makes clear, are high. Coup de torchon, a film unique in post-colonial cinema because of its awareness and trenchant critique of this situation, instead demands a real labour of permanent questioning by the post-colonial audience, (ex-)colonizer and colonized alike, because post-colonial cinema exists for their gaze.

For all its relatively graphic images of sex and violence, Coup de torchon could occasion a cynical detachment on the part of the audience. Explicit or implicit propaganda aims at the audience’s emotional investment, since this essential morality allows for an unspoiled identification with the hero’s
point of view. But *Coup de torchon* stay entirely inside the universe it creates and does not provide another point of reference. Whence the shock when our only point of identification in *Coup de torchon*, the policeman Lucien, turns out to be a bloodthirsty killer. Losing the only point of reference in a text causes vertigo. It is important to underline the necessity of this restriction of narrative focus. Just as Fanon provides almost no answers, and certainly ‘no master narrative or realist perspective’ (Bhabha 1994: 42) that could provide a backdrop for the existing actors, the colonized and the oppressed, *Coup de torchon* presents its protagonists, colonizer and colonized, in a similar fashion that deterritorializes both. These beings are, precisely, presented in the mode of questioning that Bhabha, with Fanon, demands. Rather than facing off as the classic Hegelian couple of master and slave – positions that are assigned even before they are assigned, and where an overturning or switching of roles occurs – the two instead are cast by Tavernier in roles where they produce their difference in a non-static mode in which they can be appreciated critically and seen in their evolution over time, where master and slave are only two possibilities in a relationship that is more dynamic and complex.

To strengthen our emotional attachment – the better to disappoint us in the end and to remind us of our investment in identification – *Coup de torchon* deploys a simple device inspired by Alfred Hitchcock. At first we identify with the underdog Lucien, the cuckolded policeman, and the audience wishes the worst for those who humiliate him: the local pimps, his superiors, the racist husband of Lucien’s mistress and his wife who claims that her lover is actually her brother to take advantage of Lucien. Then, when this pitiful underdog runs amok, the punishments he inflicts exceed by far what we wished for. From a harmless prank – he rigs a public latrine so that the hated local capitalist falls into the cesspool – Lucien’s revenge culminates in the cold-blooded murder of a native servant. Faced with the outcome when our desire to punish ‘the bad’ is put into action, we suddenly realize that we are not willing to bear the consequences. And here we have the lesson of this film in all its clarity: How might one escape from the Fanonian trap, that triangle where one’s identity is always already fixed? We have seen that it is not enough to switch positions. The hope for escape, for loosening the paternalistic grip, lies in the transition, the act of switching, in the migration from one position to the other. This shift of positions signals that we are witnessing a performance, and not an acquisition of essence. The positions inscribed in the matrix of the colonial situation are timeless: ‘I am white, educated, male, heterosexual…’. But this structure is literally timeless – without time. A structure is, while a performance requires time. This is also why *Coup de torchon* has to show us a scenario at the beginning that looks like a fatherly gesture, while at the end, this gesture appears obscene – would it not be better to put the children out of their misery? The film has to go through all the different motions to make its point.

Signalling that this identity is only performative thus undermines assuredness, and it differentiates taking a position from merely switching positions. We still cannot tell what the other ‘really’ is. The performer asserts that the appearance is just a mask, and the essence perceived an
illusion. This truth is not relative; it appears only briefly because it is bound to time.

In so far as Coup de torchon is a Fanonian exercise, an ‘enigmatic questioning’, as Bhabha puts it, it is, literally, an obscene film. Its provocation does not lie in the images risquées, but indeed in its questioning of the essence of post-colonial cinema. If post-colonial cinema only exists from the point of view of the (ex-)colonizer, can there be an African film by an African director that a European audience would not automatically absorb as entertainment, that is, as an engagement in which it is not implicated? From this perspective, the lesson of Coup de torchon reminds us of Wagner’s Parsifal – the wound can only be healed by the spear that made it. The film questions, on the one hand, nothing less than the premises or underpinnings of the notion post-colonial cinema. However, on the other hand, it represents a radical shift of responsibility: a redefined mission civilisatrice in a new context, a repairing though filmic creation that problematizes the very notion of a clean sweep, a coup de torchon. In other words, it is, paradoxically, the white man’s burden to produce a post-colonial cinema and to acknowledge the enjoyment that comes with it.

References

Suggested citation

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