

# Benjamin Patterson Full Moon, Warm, Silver Clouds

On May 20, 1962, the morning after his first child is born, Benjamin Patterson writes a touching birth announcement to his own parents. The letter covers all the usual details—the baby’s weight and height, how the birth went, what the hospital is like—but its form is totally unique. Most of the letter is written in the voice of his newborn son, Ennis. Patterson, then a young, struggling musician and composer living as an American expat in Paris, shows off his creativity and experimental writing in this letter. He has been honing these skills making unusual musical scores for instruments, for paper, for bodies moving through a city.

In addition to marking a personal milestone, this moment coincides with a turning point in his career: four months after his son’s birth, Patterson will help launch the first festival of Fluxus, a loose collective of avant-garde artists. And shortly after that, he will move back to the US as he tries to find ways to support his family as an artist.

In this episode of *Recording Artists: Intimate Addresses*, you’ll trace Patterson’s move from classical bassist to Fluxus composer, and from his retirement from art at the height of his career to his return to music 20 years later. Host Tess Taylor unpacks the challenges Patterson faced as an artist, a father (the only parent featured this season), and a Black man in a largely white art world. Anna Deavere Smith reads the letter. Art historian Julia Elizabeth Neal and musicologist, composer, and historian George Lewis contextualize the work, unusual career trajectory, and importance of this understudied artist.

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## Transcript

Episode transcripts are provided to make this podcast accessible to a wider audience. Please note that interviews featured in this episode have been edited for concision and clarity.

**Anna Deavere Smith:** I didn’t stay at the hospital all night, but didn’t sleep either, spent most of the night (very beautiful—full moon, warm, silver clouds, etc.) walking around and stopping at all-night café to keep awake with coffee.

**Tess Taylor:** What happens if you're at the forefront of a new art movement at the same time you're becoming a parent? What if you're *also* the only Black artist in a largely white circle during the Civil Rights movement? How would you rebalance your life?

Welcome to Season 2 of Recording Artists, a Getty podcast dedicated to exploring art and artists through its archives. I'm your host, poet Tess Taylor. In this season, called *Intimate Addresses*, each episode examines one letter by one artist, looking deeply at what it means to make a life in art. Anna Deavere Smith performs the letters as we travel the globe and the twentieth century. You listen as makers collaborate, fight for justice, ask for money, work through pain, and affirm their resilience. What emerges is a sweeping panorama of artists in dialog with one another, and six distinct portraits in creativity.

Today's episode is about Benjamin Patterson. He was a classically trained Black musician who wrote symphonies to be played with crumpled paper and who choreographed dances to traffic signals, only to retire from the art world for decades in the middle of his career. Despite being a founding member of the art group Fluxus, Patterson has been less well studied than other artists in his circle, a fact that is now slowly beginning to change.

But first, our letter. It's May 1962. Patterson is 28. He's writing from Paris, where he's moved with his wife Pyla, after spending two years in Germany. The letter is one of several aerogrammes he's sent back to his parents in Pittsburgh. In ballpoint pen, Patterson keeps in touch about work projects, finances, and family news. This time, the news fills every inch of the page. Patterson is quite literally writing home in a new voice: that of his first son, Ennis, born just hours before.

Here's Anna Deavere Smith:

**Deavere Smith:**

*20 May 1962*

*Paris*

*Hello Grandmother and Grandfather,*

*Since my hands are still a bit blue and stiff I can't write yet, so I've asked Dad to write this for me. First. My trip here to the world was quite nice. Mother was awake the whole time and after we got into the delivery room everything was finished in about 40 minutes. That was about 3:42 P.M. 19 May. Although we started trying to get here exactly at midnight. (Dad wants to write something here. I didn't see that part of the trip.)—*

*Exactly at 12:00 midnight Pyla started having labor pains [3]{minutes} apart and without any warning. We thought it would be a false start. But I decided I get up and shave anyway. After she got to the hospital (about 12:45 they started at larger intervals.)*

*I didn't stay at the hospital all night, but didn't sleep either, spent most of the night (very beautiful—full moon, warm, silver clouds, etc.) walking around and stopping at all-night café to keep awake with coffee. —Let me talk again. By the way my name is Ennis Emmett Patterson. Do you like it? Had I come 10 days later Dad said, I would have had to be Benjamin III, but he said now we can save the bank and post and passport all those signature people a little trouble.*

*Anyway, Dr. Barzin was very happy with us both, Mother and me. Said Dad could be very pleased and proud. (Dad says he still can't believe it all happened so normally and without any problems.) I weighted 5.9 pounds (2.9 kilo) and was 48.5 centimeters long. I suppose to look quite a bit like daddy, but we will see more about that in two or three weeks—My grandmother Schneider and Uncle and Aunt called yesterday and said hello, Grandmother will come Friday (25 May) when we move back to rue Juge. Here in the hospital sometimes I get mixed-up and say hotel, is like a penthouse. We have a corner room (alone for the moment, but perhaps some else will come anytime) with floor to ceiling windows on two sides over-looking some of the most beautiful scenery and greenery in and around Paris. The food also very good.*

*But daddy must go to the post office now, if you are to receive this soon so I must stop.*

*In any case I'm happy to be here, I feel quite well and promise to have Dad write again soon.*

*So goodbye for now and lots of love to all,*

*Ennis Emmet Patterson*

*Written for by Ben*

*P.S. Thank you received Telegram this morning*

**julia elizabeth neal:** This just reiterates my interest in Patterson's usage of storytelling as a critical form of self-presentation. And that it's something he's using also to communicate with his parents speaks to how much his everyday experiences also fed his work.

**Taylor:** Art historian julia elizabeth neal, who teaches at University of Michigan, noticed the way that Patterson's writing finds whimsy in daily life. And avant-garde composer George Lewis, who teaches at Columbia, noted that the date of the letter coincides with groundbreaking events in Patterson's art career.

**George Lewis:** That would've been around the same time as they were doing the famous festival of Fluxus. Emmitt Williams and Ben Patterson curated that together. That was the festival in Wiesbaden, that introduced Fluxus to the world. And so it was very interesting that as they were introducing Fluxus to the world, they're also introducing Ennis to the world.

**Taylor:** As well as noticing that Patterson's son Ennis was born so close to an inflection point for Fluxus, Lewis also heard a more intimate texture in the letter itself:

**Lewis:** In a way, he and Ennis are collaborating on an artwork. A kind of a doubly-reflected self-interview or something like that, where he's taking on multiple roles and making a kind of art out of life.

**Taylor:** In some ways, it makes perfect sense that Benjamin Patterson—whose first art form was classical bass—would have written a birth announcement as a duet for two voices. When I first encountered Patterson's work, I was drawn in by its way of calling me into dialog, too. Upending and unconventional, the work feels musical, disruptive, low-tech and, as julia noted, fed by the everyday. Patterson's projects invite audiences in. They ask them to stop just being audiences and to start being participants instead. And then they ask those participants to notice what they are doing in the world. While Patterson's offerings sometimes seem simple, the effects can feel profound.

But first let's retrace how Benjamin Patterson arrived at this point. Born in 1934 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to a middle-class Black family, Patterson began his life as an omnivorous polymath. He ran track at state meets. He excelled at science. He read the encyclopedia for fun. His mother was a trained pianist, and his father was a violinist. And Patterson was a classical bassist who eventually studied composition and conducting at the University of Michigan. He was brilliant and ambitious. Here's George:

**Lewis:** Early on, this desire to become a classical bassist, from high school and also in college, was outside the expected frame. He had a goal of becoming the first Black double bassist to play in a symphony orchestra in the US. That didn't happen, but that was certainly congruent with other experiences of African American classical musicians over the years, and even after.

**Taylor:** The racism in the white music world in the 1950s ran deep. Many American orchestras did not desegregate until well into the 1970s. Unable to play the bass in America, Patterson left for Canada after college. He played in and conducted the Halifax Symphony Orchestra followed by a stint as the principal double bassist with the Philharmonic Orchestra of Ottawa. Next, he moved to Germany to join the US military's Seventh Army Symphony. Paradoxically, he was allowed to play in a US orchestra only by being in its military and only by living elsewhere.

The Germany to which Patterson arrived in the 1950s was war-torn and scarred. The word Patterson used to describe it was *traummerfeld*, which means rubble-field. But Germany was also full of potential for a young Black musician interested in new ideas. In the wake of the war, the CIA funded arts and music as peacemaking tools. International artists including David Tudor, John Cage, and Nam June Paik were joined by Lithuanian American impresario, networker, and publisher George Maciunas. Together the group crafted unusual performances, sometimes in neglected spaces, sometimes with instruments, sometimes without. Sometimes they smashed the instruments they were using to bits. It was boundary breaking stuff. Nobody even knew what to call it yet.

When Patterson arrived in Germany, he had already been exploring new music practices. One evening in 1960, after a disappointing meeting with Karlheinz Stockhausen, a pillar of West Germany's burgeoning avant-garde music scene, Patterson picked up a flyer blowing in the street for a music festival taking place the next day at the studio of experimental artist Mary Bauermeister. He went, and found, in a moment, a new circle of friends.

Among artists like John Cage and David Tudor, Patterson began to build his own voice as an artist. His new group was devoted to "anti-art" and to decentering the artist as primary genius. In practical, or impractical, terms, some of this began with highly trained classical musicians attempting to alter what an instrument, or a performance, was. Cage "prepared pianos" by adding bolts, erasers, and screws to the strings and soundboards. His songs popped, clanged, and screeched. Other musicians used clothespins, lemons, tea kettles, and combs. Not all these experiments happened that first night at Mary Bauermeister's. But Patterson's first meeting with these new friends was life changing:

**neal:** He definitely found a community.

**Taylor:** Julia says Patterson fit right in:

**neal:** What I hear so often from musicians is how easy it is sometimes to just jam

with people. That you're in a space, you guys are really absorbed with the act of doing. So I would assume that actually, his ease of transitioning into that is probably something he has carried with him.

**Taylor:** Patterson wasn't just jamming, though. The moment was transformational. Here's George on what changed:

**Lewis:** He became a composer. That's the biggest watershed I can think of: from working on interpreting other people's works to becoming a composer. You're going through a certain looking glass. And this, with seemingly very little preparation. One day it looks like, almost, he just snapped his fingers and did it.

**Taylor:** Patterson's compositions seemed to come through a looking glass as well. Rather than conventional scores, Patterson's pieces appeared as invitations or instructions. Some arrived on onion skin paper, typed as letters. Others turned musical scores into visual art, blurring boundaries between disciplines.

Amid the innovations of that time, Patterson was trying to find his niche. In 1960, he saw David Tudor play a famous experimental piece called *Kontakte*, for piano, electronics, and percussion. Tudor told him that he'd practiced the piece for 120 hours.

**Lewis:** And he said that seemed like an awful lot. And there must be some piece that one could do without having to study for thirty years and give that kind of time. And he found that the results of the *Kontakte* rehearsals were somehow underwhelming. So he laid awake at night, days and days, and came up with the idea of using paper to create a piece.

**Taylor:** The result, in 1960, remains delightful to this day. Patterson's *Paper Piece* uses instruments available to almost anyone: sheets of paper and paper bags. *Paper Piece* turns these everyday items into a sonic collage. Written for 5 performers, the score specifies a duration—10 to 12 and half minutes—and then provides open-ended instructions. These are manual, musical, and full of joyful silliness. One reads:

"CRUMPLE

"RUMPLE

"BUMPLE"

And for the bags, "POOF" and "POP!"

Who among us does not want to be invited to bumble paper for 12 and a half minutes? In contrast to the elitist past and the esoteric art of his own day, Patterson was building something almost anyone could share.

For George, radical accessibility and liberation were the point.

**Lewis:** I could say that it was a very freeing experience. It wasn't something the Seventh Army Band was doing. And a lotta people were looking for freedom. Freedom is a Black American trope. You weren't being regulated by anyone, you weren't being told what to play or what to do. It just seemed that he was ready for these radical freedoms and that he found a community that enabled him to do that.

**Taylor:** Patterson's new freedoms were wide-ranging. During early 1960s, even as he was beginning to compose, Patterson's archive reveals him working in multiple registers. His notebooks are full of collages, including one called *A Case for Bombing*

*Pause.* In it, the former bassist of the Seventh Army Orchestra imagines a world where military actions might cease. "If the pause were long enough, some airmen could play golf, and attend concerts at rest camps," Patterson writes, next to the image of a cellist in a gas mask. He goes on, "others might go home to see their kids...and then maybe if the pause lasts a long time we will stop fighting and go home to raise sheep."

John Cage had responded to atomic warfare with pieces that consisted entirely of silence. Now Patterson, a new composer in Cage's circle, was imagining "bombing pause" as an almost musical interval in which a peace might form. For him, it was as if peace was a practice that might begin with imagining one incredibly long rest.

What began as reforms to the classical genre blurred into a form known as the "event score." Here, the art appears as a series of cards or scripts or even recipes that suggest an action for the participant: the art becomes its performance by the audience, rather than the sole act of the artist.

Around 1962, the year Ennis was born, Patterson crafted a brilliant, poetic series of event scores. He drafted it over several months in a refillable 3x5 notebook and he called it *Methods and Processes*.

One of its scores called *Carpenter Piece* reads:

*Equipment*

*One piece of wood*

*One saw*

*One hammer*

*Five nails*

*Saw first very slow- adagio-*

*Saw second very fast, vivace*

*Nail, rubato, various tempi*

*May whistle any tune as accompaniment*

What I love about these pieces is the way that they find a certain magical syncopation, a possible music just under the surface of life. For George Lewis, who's a composer, these pieces go even deeper, to a spiritual level.

**Lewis:** He said that these were pieces that you could do for yourself, by yourself, so that they would have a meditative quality. I likened them to spiritual exercises by the Stoics, the Stoics being the people in ancient Greek philosophy who were involved in spiritual exercises. And there is an aspect of Blackness that involves stoicism. The most important one being attention; paying attention to yourself. And all about not knowing thyself, but care of the self as being the important thing.

**Taylor:** George also saw Patterson's pieces as invitations to deeper self-knowledge:

**Lewis:** It seems to me that this spiritual aspect of these tiny, small acts are inviting you to be introspective, to learn more about who you were, to find out how you live in the world and what your place is in it, and to examine the world and be critical about the world, and to engage in dialog with it, using his pieces as a kind of medium.

Through these things, you would attain illumination.

**Taylor:** In June 1962, Patterson composed a piece about literal illumination. Called *Traffic Light—A Very Lawful Dance—For Ennis*, this score feels like it might have grown out of Patterson’s moonlit walk through Paris the night his son Ennis was born.

**Deavere Smith:** I didn’t stay at the hospital all night, but didn’t sleep either, spent most of the night (very beautiful—full moon, warm, silver clouds, etc.) walking around and stopping at all-night café to keep awake with coffee.

**Taylor:** *A Very Lawful Dance* contains instructions for crossing the street at green lights, waiting at yellow lights, and stopping at red lights. As a parent myself, I can imagine how this piece resembles one of the many explanations a parent gives a child. You can picture the parent, in love with their brand-new human, who is just registering light and color at all. And the parent explains that the world is one long dance of color and light. Our odd human lives are made of going forward and slowing and stopping, before going again. Or, as Patterson puts it in his instructions, “a performance may consist of an infinite, an indeterminate or a predetermined number of repetitions.”

Patterson also describes the dance as “lawful.” George heard something charged in Patterson’s use of that term.

**Lewis:** When you think about driving while Black, people are driving the speed limit ‘cause they don’t wanna get stopped by the cops, because if they get stopped, they always say something like, “Well, you know, the taillight was out,” or “You were driving over the speed limit,” and you knew you weren’t. So even if you try to become lawful, the attempt is often in vain because you’re assumed to be an outlaw or assumed to be someone who needs surveillance.

What I liked about this performance was that Ben was very cheerful about this, in that these stoplights and all that were surveillance motifs.

**Taylor:** In September 1962, when Ennis was 4 months old, Patterson’s art movement finally got a name: Fluxus. The name was coined by George Maciunas, and it meant flow, shift, variable, change. It also came to represent a non-hierarchical network of artists forging a radical accessible new art.

Patterson helped found Fluxus and launch the very first festival of Fluxus art in Wiesbaden, Germany, that September. The concert began with Patterson’s *Paper Piece* from 1960. From the wings two performers entered the stage briefly carrying a 3 foot by 15 foot sheet of paper over the heads of the audience. Other performers tore holes in an onstage screen. Still other performers dumped other pieces of paper into audience. These read: “Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, intellectual professional and commercialized culture...purge the world of dead art.” This was as close as Fluxus came to having a manifesto.

But just because you’re changing art history, doesn’t mean you can support yourself with your art. Life in Paris was challenging. Patterson had been collaborating with artists across Europe, but he was struggling financially. Here’s Julia Elizabeth Neal:

**Neal:** He’s running on finite resources and is intent on earning some kind of stable income, in order to care for his family. And so by going door to door, selling encyclopedias in Paris, that’s one way to earn income; but there’s this hope, this potential for something more.

**Taylor:** The Wiesbaden festival was a last European hurrah for Patterson. He moved his young family to New York directly after. Yet even as he settled in New York, Patterson wrote his parents, hopeful that it would just be a temporary move until they could save more money, perhaps to return to Paris and buy a place. After all, the US had not miraculously stopped being a hard place for a Black artist.

Patterson returned at a politically and racially fractious time, which surely affected him deeply. His notes from the period have an edge, as if he is working through deep political questions. Patterson began to craft event scores that pressed on questions of reading the body in public space. In May 1964, Patterson composed *First Symphony*, in which a performer enters a room and asks each attendee, "Do you trust me?" The attendees are then divided up into two groups—those who answered yes and those who answered no—and the room is darkened. A can of coffee opens, making an explosive noise, scattering grounds on the floor.

If *A Very Lawful Dance* takes color, movement, and law as its materials, *First Symphony* makes a wry primal choreography out of the politics of trust. Julia understood the way that the piece changes depending on who's performing it:

**Neal:** It engages this sense of unexpected fear that individuals might of with a Black individual holding something that pops and seems suggestive or reminiscent of things like guns or bombs, for example. And so it has definitely been articulated in an understanding of the fear of a African American male, especially when one's visual abilities are cut off.

**Taylor:** Another piece unsettled lines around race, sexuality, and gender. Called *Lick Piece*, this score instructs a performer to spray whipped cream on a "shapely" woman and then "lick." George described the circumstances:

**Lewis:** One of the last pieces was the infamous *Lick Piece* of 1964 which was largely infamous because of the photo of him and Bob Watts preparing to lick this white female, something which he could've been lynched for. Not only in the South, but in Greenwich Village. And that at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was raging, he saw insufficient or very little support for, or even understanding of, his place as an African American among his fellow artists.

**Taylor:** We don't really know what happened after *Lick Piece*, or how it was received, but it was among Patterson's final public performances. It was 1964 in America, and Patterson had begun to feel a radical disconnect with his white avant-garde colleagues. He was raising two children and working as a reference librarian to pay the bills.

Whether because he wanted a more stable career for his family, or because he felt that his fellow artists did not see the same America he did, or both, Patterson began to discuss retiring from his life as an artist. In a 1963 letter from his friend and fellow artist Peter Greenham, it's clear the two have been talking about a career change. Greenham writes to him, "But now you are giving thoughts to retiring! And having regular job!" Around this time, George Maciunas suggests Patterson find work as a freelance designer if he needs more money.

This was undoubtedly a difficult time for Patterson. Only a few years after his joyful note announcing Ennis's birth, his life as an avant-garde artist was not meeting his needs—as a parent or as a Black man in America.

George saw this as emerging from the limitations of the art world:



**Lewis:** The sort of failure of a lot of white artists to recognize the situation of what freedom meant. And freedom for them meant freedom to show their art; whereas for Amiri Baraka, who split from these people, just as Ben did, in his own way, a bit earlier, freedom had a completely different meaning. So I can imagine that disappointment.

**Taylor:** Julia saw Patterson's turn away from Fluxus, ultimately, as tied to race, as well.

**Neal:** He has critiqued Fluxus as not being alongside him, in terms of marching for the rights of African Americans in the United States. It is expressive of the kind of alienation he likely felt among them, despite these kinds of energetic moments of collaboration and experimentation.

**Taylor:** Some Black artists turned to Black nationalism, others formed Black arts collectives to deal with the silence of the white art world on racial politics. Patterson did neither. Instead, in his early 30s, he simply told his colleagues he had "retired."

In 1913, Marcel Duchamp had threatened to retire from art to become a librarian. Now, in the mid-1960s Patterson really did retire from art to become one. By 1968, he was working at the New York Public Library's music division at Lincoln Center. For much of the next twelve years, he was an arts administrator. He worked to advance classical music with the Society of Black Composers and the Symphony of the New World, which was the first racially integrated symphony in the US. He also worked at the Department of Cultural Affairs; Staten Island Community College; and the Negro Ensemble. As an administrator, he helped artists, particularly Black artists, appear in new spaces.

While Patterson's life during this period was bureaucratic, certainly, it was bureaucracy with an edge. George Lewis shared a portrait of the artist as public servant:

**Lewis:** A lot of the work that he did was a direct benefit to the Black classical music field, which is where he came in. This is where his roots are. And it's a field that had traditionally been very poorly treated. So he found a way to leverage the city government resources, to make certain kinds of change. Because basically, it's art by another means.

**Taylor:** I loved this idea of administrative work as "art by another means." It is important work, necessary work, pipeline building work. And Patterson's brilliance might well have continued this way, had his earlier participation in Fluxus not caught the eye of collector Jean Brown.

Brown was based in a Shaker seed house near Jacob's Pillow in the Berkshires. She was a forward-thinking collector who had begun her career buying works by Duchamp and other surrealists. Increasingly she'd come to admire Fluxus.

She learned about Patterson and approached him about his archive in the mid-1970s, but the acquisition process was drawn out. In 1978, the same year Patterson's third and final child was born, the artist seemed surprised by her continued interest. He wrote: "Is my work really so central to Fluxus that it is purchaseable? I have been a 'drop-out' for quite a while and I guess I am asking for an ego massage."

Brown felt that Patterson really was central. In response, Patterson seemed to love assembling his archive for her. A friendship blossomed, a deal was struck and Jean Brown's purchase of Patterson's Fluxus archive—as well as the fact that two of his

three children were nearly grown—seems to have allowed Patterson to feel that he had the freedom to explore making art again. He had, for the first time, a patron.

In 1981, Patterson sent a postcard to Brown saying that new work was emerging. In 1983 he wrote her, “by now I find it perfectly natural to be rediscovered 20 years later.” He was almost 50 and ready to find himself as an artist again. In 1989, he moved back to Germany, where he “retired from ordinary life” to pursue art full time. Until his death in 2016, Patterson worked on new pieces.

As I learned about Patterson’s life, with its swerves and reconnections, I found the idea of retiring from art and then retiring from ordinary life liberating. Julia saw a certain humor in the whole process.

**Neal:** This idea of retirement is quite interesting because one of the concepts that oscillate in the Fluxus orbit is that art is also everyday life. And in many ways, if we take that quite literally, Patterson was living his art, despite being officially employed.

**Taylor:** This brought me back to George’s idea of administration as “art by another means”—maybe an artist can never really retire. His 1962 letter to his parents, even a birth announcement, has the whimsy of an art project, a play. Maybe the line between art and non-art is very thin, and maybe making us think about that question—about where it lies—is part of his genius.

I thought about the pleasure of Patterson’s work now—with its low stakes, low tech gestures and their deeper, meaningful provocations. Some of it appears on construction paper, or butcher block, or in spiralbound notebooks. One the “scores” is the red outline of one traced foot moving in a square. It suggests the footsteps of a dance. It’s instructive, inviting, evoking activity, march. To the untrained eye, Patterson may not have always seemed like an activist. At the same time, there is no way to engage with Patterson’s work and stay passive.

Patterson began his life dreaming of playing in an orchestra, in a system too limited—too racist—to have him as a member. Eventually, instead he created a form of art that invited everyone who encountered it to become participant, a thoughtful player in the great orchestra of life. As he did, he faced his own life—and engaged others—with a sense of play. A few years after his retirement from real life to return to art, he interviewed himself, in a kind of self-duet, much like his earlier letter after Ennis’s birth.

In this self-interview, he asks how he can reconcile his belief that artists must be “socially critical” or even political, with his own quirky, funny artworks. I leave now with his answer, which draws a connecting thread across his unorthodox career and also holds some insight for us all:

“I do believe,” he writes, “that ‘life’s serious questions’ (as well as policies) begin with art. Art establishes a cultural foundation from which all else proceeds. Naturally one can approach this problem from many directions—dogmatically, didactically, minimally, etc. But personally when making art (and therefore culture), I prefer to use humor as it often provides the path of least suspicion/resistance for the implanting of subversive ideas.”

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