“AGENTS OF AGGRESSIVE ORDER”:
LETTERS, HANDS, AND THE GRASPING POWER OF TEETH IN THE EARLY CANADIAN TORTURE NARRATIVE

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Introduction
This paper brings together a most fascinating and under-examined body of early New World writing that belong to a genre of writing I call “the torture narrative” with the insights of Marshall McLuhan in order to offer a way of thinking about body parts, especially hands, teeth, tongues, and eyeballs, and their extensions through technologies such as alphabets, manuscripts, books, and weapons. At its core are questions about the nature and effects of the changes wrought by the early-Gutenberg era—a period characterized by vast scientific and technical discoveries, rising nationalisms, explorations, and conquests—in the New World. Rather than explore the ways an early New World print culture reflects or distorts discrete historical or ethnographic facts about colonial contact, I want to probe the ways the torture narrative speaks to the conditions of speaking and writing, and therefore to the discursive and textual production of the New World subject and New World space. My inquiry seeks to understand both the violence in, and the violence of, representation at founding historical moments, but its relevance far exceeds Renaissance or American studies. At stake in this discussion is an appreciation of a mode of intellectual inquiry that is attentive to the relationship between media technologies and the social worlds they reflect and transform.

I. McLuhan’s Theories: Break-Boundaries and the Effects of Alphabetization
Fascinated by turbulence, over-heating, explosions, implosions, and reversals, Marshall McLuhan is a thinker of boundaries, limits, and all modalities of transformation. In Understanding Media, in order to better understand historical moments of great change, McLuhan proposes the notion of “break-boundaries,” a term he borrows from Kenneth Boulding. In McLuhan’s hands, the notion of the break-boundary offers a way to think about the peculiar rhythms of the evolution of cultures and societies, which, after periods of relative stability,
undergo periods of radical transformation that yield vast cognitive, psychic, corporeal, and social changes. It is important to remember that McLuhan’s argument, like that of many other communications theorists, is that these sudden changes and reversals are not caused by the specific political decisions made by leaders and forged on battle fields as the disciplines of history and political science may suggest, nor by the environmental and geophysical events like ice ages, volcanic eruptions, or perhaps global warming that anthropologists and geographers would turn to in order to explain monumental cultural shifts. Rather, they are caused by the adaptation of new technologies (or ‘extensions’ of our bodies) such as alphabets, roads, printing, electric light, the Internet and PowerPoint. Harold Innis, to whom McLuhan is widely indebted, explains it thus:

the use of a medium of communications over a long period will to some extent determine the character of knowledge to be communicated.... [E]ventually ... the advantage of a new medium will become such as to lead to the emergence of a new civilisation. (34)

In seeking to understand this process whereby new civilizations might emerge, McLuhan observes that in any medium or structure there is a “break boundary at which the system suddenly changes into another or passes some point of no return in its dynamic processes” (McLuhan, Understanding Media 38).

“[P]rinting from movable type,” he offers as example, “was itself ... the major break boundary in the history of phonetic literacy, just as the phonetic alphabet had been the break boundary between tribal and individualist man” (UM 39).

It is useful to outline a few of McLuhan’s points about ‘break-boundaries.’ First, break-boundaries are often a product of the encounter, clash, or as he puts it, “cross-fertilization” between two systems “such as happened to print with the steam press, or with radio and movies (that yielded the Talkies)...” (UM 38–39). For McLuhan, these encounters are so loaded he turns to nuclear physics as well as to libertine literature to metaphorize them. The chapter in Understanding Media devoted to Hybrid Energy, subtitled ‘Liaisons Dangereuses’ in homage to Laclos’s great epistolary novel about the exercise of sexual power, opens with the provocative comment that “The crossings or hybridizations of the media release great new force and energy as by fission or fusion” (UM 48). With these metaphors, McLuhan seems to be telling us that we’re looking at something that is at once productive in that these encounters of systems generate entirely new ones; transformative in that cognitive, psychic, social, political, aesthetic and even moral systems are all profoundly affected; and potentially explosive, even dangerously so. “In fact,” McLuhan remarks,
“of all the great hybrid unions that breed furious release of energy and change, there is none to surpass the meeting of literate and oral cultures,” which he adds, “is, socially and politically, probably the most radical explosion that can occur in any social structure” (UM 49).

Second, break-boundaries are linked to McLuhan’s thesis about reversals. In Understanding Media, as if to emphasize that his picture of these historical processes is in no way a straightforward teleology, he details how systems meet points of reversal where things become their opposites “just as earlier forms reach their peak performance” (UM 12). For example, after centuries of Gutenberg’s intensification of the spatial, the visual, the linear, the secular, the imperial, and its bifurcations of state and self, electricity returns us to the audio-tactile and interconnectedness of the tribal. This point about reversals becomes one branch of the famous ‘tetrad’ in the Laws of Media (1988).

Finally, and most importantly, McLuhan argues that break-boundaries render our environment visible to us. He offers as an example the moment just before an airplane breaks the sound barrier, when sound waves become visible on the wings of the plane (UM 12). [Figure/link: This phenomenon is known as the Prandtl-Glauert singularity] McLuhan suggests that just as “soundwaves” might become visible under extreme circumstances, any encounter between two systems, or any moment of rupture and reversal “offers an especially favorable opportunity to notice …[their] structural components and properties” (UM 49).

McLuhan stresses that at these moments when our vision becomes heightened, what we can see promises to set us free. In Understanding Media, he explains it this way:

The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-narcosis. The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses. (UM 55)

Even though he is talking about sensory ratios, and the fact that under ordinary circumstances we take our media environments for granted—because we are immersed in them, they are, of course invisible to us—it is possible to detect in his formulations faint echoes of both Classical and Catholic doctrines of blindness, unveiling, and visionary revelation.
Few would disagree that McLuhan’s agenda is utopian; he has tried to teach that it is literally by seeing and “understanding” media that we locate new and important forms of human agency. This part of McLuhan’s work functions very much as a kind of quest allegory which positions heroic redemption amidst all sorts of physical and psychic dangers and violences. It is as though he is saying we must direct ourselves straight into the dragon’s lair, that is, into the fiery depths of the explosive and implosive encounters that result when two systems collide at the break-boundary, for when we do so, we re-emerge stronger, more knowledgeable and with visionary powers.

I mean to underline the rather mythic elements of his hermeneutic paradigm because I want to connect his McLuhan’s questing to his reading of an ancient myth. This becomes central to his arguments about the break-boundary around alphabetization and it involves (as so many quests do) both bravery and dragons. In a large number of writings, McLuhan returns to the Greek myth of Cadmus, the figure credited with two very important accomplishments: first, the founding of Thebes with the help of warriors sprung from dragon’s teeth, and second, the importation of the Phoenician (or phonetic) alphabet to Greece.

In the myth, as it is told by Apollodorus, Pausanias, Herodotus, and many others, Cadmus is told by the Delphic oracle to follow a certain cow, and to build a town on the spot where the cow should sink down with fatigue. Cadmus finds the cow described by the oracle, and follows her until she sinks. Intending to sacrifice the cow to Athena, he sends his men to the neighbouring well of Ares to fetch water. This well is guarded by a dragon, a son of Ares, who kills Cadmus’ men. Cadmus goes to the well, slays the dragon, and, on the advice of Athena, sows the teeth of the monster. From these teeth, an army of armed men grows, but they fight, and finally slay each other, with the exception of five, who, according to the legend, were the ancestors of the Thebans. Cadmus’ association with the technology of the Phoenician alphabet appears in other accounts (cf. Smith).

Now, in McLuhan’s telling and retelling of this myth, he conflates different parts of the myth which are typically not brought together in the same telling so as to read the dragon’s teeth as symbols of the alphabetic literacy Cadmus sows in the new empire he founds. Explaining the connections, McLuhan says in an interview:

It’s metaphorically significant, I suspect, that the old Greek myth has Cadmus, who brought the alphabet to man, sowing dragon’s teeth that sprang up from the earth as armed men. (McLuhan, Essential McLuhan 242)
His conclusion, that “Whenever the dragon’s teeth of technological change are sown, we reap a whirlwind of violence” (EM 242), requires further elaboration.

In McLuhan’s reading, the Cadmus myth works to connect a series of ideas that are integral to an understanding of media and social change. First, the sounds our tongues and teeth make when we use spoken language are connected through with the technology of phonetic alphabets, which seek to capture these sounds through a limited series of abstract symbols. In Understanding Media, McLuhan elaborates:

in terms of the extensions of man, the theme of the dragon’s teeth in the Cadmus myth is of the utmost importance.... Languages are filled with testimony to the grasping, devouring power and precision of teeth. That the power of letters as agents of aggressive order and precision should be expressed as extensions of the dragon’s teeth is natural and fitting. Teeth are emphatically visual in their linear order. Letters are not only like teeth visually, but their power to put teeth into the business of empire building is manifest in our Western history. (UM 83)

In McLuhan’s reading, the myth further reinforces the point that alphabets are extremely powerful technologies; recall for a moment the passage quoted earlier, wherein McLuhan remarks that “of all the great hybrid unions… there is none to surpass the meeting of literate and oral cultures,” which he adds, “is, socially and politically, probably the most radical explosion that can occur in any social structure” (UM 49). And last, as he states so clearly, the myth proposes the notion that this “radical explosion” has something to do with the violences peculiar to empires.

As he delves into the possible symbolism of the story of Cadmus, a set of relationships based on contiguity in the original myths—Cadmus is connected to alphabets in some accounts, and connected to these dragon’s teeth in others—becomes, in McLuhan’s hands, a relationship based on causality. He wants to show how teeth extend into language which extends into alphabets which extend into armies which extend empires. This is how, with all the dots connected in Understanding Media, he can write: “As the Greek myth of Cadmus points out, the phonetic alphabet was the greatest processor of men for homogenized military life that was known to antiquity” (72). He goes on to detail how what he calls militarism is also a form of industrialism, in that it “concentrates large amounts of homogenized energies into a few kinds of production” (72). Effectively, he is talking about the ways alphabetization sows the seeds of modernity.
But there’s much more to learn here in McLuhan’s handling of Cadmus. One thing has to do with repetition. In *Gutenberg Galaxy* alone, he returns to the example at least four times, and he brings it up again in *Understanding Media* as well as in countless other works including the *Laws of Media* (154). With each iteration, there are minor changes in the way he frames both the myth and the conclusions he draws from it, but with each iteration, he also seems to forge the connections between the parts of the myth more assertively, as though repeating something made it truer.

In what kind of cultural practice does repetition occupy a most central role? In *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan refers to print as a “ditto device,” but generally, within printed texts, and even (thanks to the increasing burden of originality that has developed since the Renaissance) in the works of a single author, we do not usually expect to see exact passages repeated. In fact, in so far as the technology of print allows us to reread and cross reference, repetitiveness is often considered a stylistic flaw.

I want to suggest that repetition of the sort we witness as McLuhan turns again and again to Cadmus and the dragon’s teeth *more* resembles the practices of orality. (And indeed, contemporary “oral” practices like songs, sermons, and some styles of poetry still rely on repetition through refrains and other elements that recur.) McLuhan’s repetitive iterations themselves have to do with a kind of genealogy McLuhan sets forth through them, for again and again, McLuhan credits his reading of the Cadmus myth to the work of Harold Innis. One long quotation from *Gutenberg Galaxy*, which shows just how central the equation Innis + Cadmus is for him, can serve as an example. McLuhan writes:

> It need no longer seem strange that peoples like the Greeks and Romans, who had experienced the alphabet, should also have been driven in the direction of conquest and organization at a distance. Harold Innis in *Empire and Communications*, was the first to pursue this theme and to explain in detail the simple truth of the Cadmus myth. The Greek King Cadmus, who introduced the phonetic alphabet to Greece, was said to have sown the dragon’s teeth and that they sprang up armed men. The dragon’s teeth may allude to the old hieroglyphic forms. Innis also explained why print causes nationalism and not tribalism; and why print causes price systems and markets such as cannot exist without print. In short, Harold Innis was the first person to hit upon the *process* of change as implicit in the *forms* of media technology. This present book is a footnote of explanation to his work. (*GG* 50)
Clearly here, another set of connections are being forged between otherwise disconnected things, which becomes an analogy that invisibly but most effectively conveys something about the history of a set of ideas. The myth of Cadmus (which, as I’ve said, for McLuhan, tells about how the sowing of alphabets begets empires), is getting caught up with another story (that is, the story of how Innis’ idea that it is productive to examine the history of the forms of media technology begets McLuhan’s own attention to the forms of media, which in turn eventually begets his famous aphorism that exploded him onto the world stage, “the medium is the message”).

McLuhan claims here that the Gutenberg Galaxy—his own book about print culture—is “a footnote of explanation” to Innis’s work. This is a rather writerly way of picturing the relationship between these two men’s works. But I think it is most relevant that he uses the print culture notion of footnoting within a series of passages in which he provides a lengthy discussion of a myth—a product of an oral culture—and that these passages are themselves (according to the conventions of print culture) seemingly unnecessarily repeated throughout his books in a manner that recalls some of the conventions of oral cultures. Indeed, throughout these Innis + Cadmus passages, McLuhan repeats the observation that “myth, like the aphorism and the maxim, is characteristic of oral culture” (GG 25).

So, as he makes his point about Cadmus’ myth, by enacting this collision of some of the tactics of print culture and some of the tactics of oral culture, McLuhan is making visible a break-boundary. He is also dramatizing what it means when he says “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (UM 8). Through his own reversals of the medium, we see precisely how print can “contain” oral conventions.

Let us further consider containers, then, for although McLuhan does not explicitly pull this argument out of his reading of the Cadmus myth, it is certainly visible through his set-up when we go back to the original tellings of the myth by Herodotus, Apollodoros, Pausanias and others. In the Cadmus myth, the dragon is guarding a well. The travellers encounter him because they need water. In many of the visual representations of Cadmus that remain from antiquity, this symmetry is clearly figured: Cadmus is holding a vessel, standing next to the dragon who is by his well. The well stretches above the ground rather than below it, even further reinforcing the parallels between the two vessels.

[Figure/ link: Kadmos and the dragon]
In the story, the dragon erupts from his container, preventing Cadmus from filling his own container. Cadmus slays the dragon. Now, when Cadmus seeds the soil with the dragon’s teeth, they too will erupt to become warriors, who then erupt into violence. Finally, Cadmus tricks the fighting men, and manages to ‘contain’ their energies by having them help him build the city of Thebes.

What I am arguing here is that the myth tells us that containers are always temporary and can be broken. This can be understood in socio-political terms, that civilization always threatens to erupt into savagery, or alternately, that repression always threatens to erupt into freedom. This can also be understood in technological terms. Here, it is useful to recall the work of the contemporary media theorist Friedrich Kittler, who, taking McLuhan’s work a step further, has understood communications media as ‘storage’ devices. All that remains of people, Kittler maintains, is what media can store and communicate. What counts, then, are not so much the messages or the content they put into these containers, but rather, in strict accordance with McLuhan, the way they affect the arresting and storing of sensory phenomena and memories (Gane).

The “medium is the message” thus need not be understood as a complete rejection of the importance of the content of a representation—of what it says—in favour of how it is packaged. McLuhan, with his vast training in literary studies, spends far too much time analysing and interpreting the messages of texts for this to be believed. Rather, I think McLuhan is calling for a most complex hermeneutic. While he doesn’t discount the critical questions we make our students in literature ask first—such as, “what’s this text talking about? What’s the story?”—neither is he especially interested in these questions. Rather, he invites us to feel between the lines, or to see into the sounds, and to find there something important about the history of our media, and of the epistemes and cognitive styles they engender. To put this simply, he is inviting us to ask: “What does this text let us understand about itself as a technology—about the production and reproduction and dissemination as well as the multiple effects and influences this kind of technology might yield?” “Can we see within it the traces of a history of our media?” In asking these questions, he invites us to break the containers of our own thinking, knowing that these disruptions can be dangerous but ultimately lead us to new freedoms, because media can configure not only our situations but also our intellectual operations. Finally, and something I find most attractive, through his own writing style, he models the very kind of double-operation he invites us to undertake. By leaving these symptoms and traces of previous media environments, McLuhan makes secondary arguments about the history of
media without needing to state them directly, showing or performing, rather than telling.

II. Early New World Media Environments

Thus armed with these concepts, approaches, and questions, let us turn to the space we now call Canada, and begin our explorations of the tangle of “truths, half truths, plagiarized adventures, and wholesale fictions” (New 40) of the writings of missionaries, explorers and settlers from the sixteenth century onward that together constitute our earliest written record. Despite McLuhan’s vast interests in the Renaissance, and despite his persistent interests in his homeland—for instance, he often claimed that being on the margins of an imperial power allowed Canada to function as an early warning system—McLuhan did not show much interest in early Canada, a period which has recently burst onto the stage of Renaissance studies precisely because its status on the margins of empire allows us to decentre many of the assumptions and categories of thought previously held (Warkentin & Podruchny 4). And yet, the early colonial period in North America seems to be an obvious fit with any inquiry into McLuhan’s legacy because it is, without doubt, to use McLuhan’s own language from *Gutenberg Galaxy*, “[a]n age in rapid transition ... which exists on the frontier between [at least] two cultures and between conflicting technologies.... Every moment of its consciousness is an act of translation of each of these cultures into the other” (GG 141). In other words, this period reveals these break-boundaries in action and thus allows us to understand something about media at the same time.

In a material way, the exploration and settlement of the Americas was both a textual and a corporeal process. I say textual, because as Myra Jehlen and Michael Warner aptly put it, the New World “emerged in crucial relation to writing, books, and publishing. Printed accounts of explorations and conquests did not merely report the building of Europe’s empire, they participated actively in it” (5). This process was corporeal because Europe’s empire was “constructed and controlled by the traveling of European bodies”—indeed, this was the greatest migration of human bodies ever recorded—as well as by “the enslavement, infection, murder” (Dale 2) and often fierce resistance of indigenous bodies.

There is now a substantial body of scholarship treating the rich archival material that tackles the production and reception of the written word and other communications technologies—other media—in the New World. Missionaries and explorers made dictionaries, grammars, and other tools that would help
“translate” one culture into the other. [Figure/link: Roger Williams, The first English-Indigenous language dictionary in North America] They developed alphabets and syllabaries. [Figure/link: Cree and Inuktitut syllabaries]. They also widely represented their teachings through images such as catechisms. Scholars are also beginning to attend to and appreciate the indigenous production of alternative means of representation including through such technological extensions as petroglyphs (or engravings on rock); pictographs (or paintings on rock); wampum belts [figure/link: Wampum]; bark and hide scrolls; totem poles; and even hieroglyphs.

What did the collision between manuscript and early print cultures and oral cultures at this break-boundary look like, and what can we see when we study it more closely? Much of the written legacy of this period explicitly details the painful encounters of natives with European missionaries, explorers, and settlers, who organized their worldviews through various kinds of writings and books. One example that aptly lets us see a kind of intersection between technological extensions like books, and actual human bodies, is contained in the writings of a seventeenth-century Ursuline nun. Marie de l’Incarnation writes about a Huron woman, “one of the oldest and most notable of her nation,” who spoke the following words at a village assembly:

> It’s the Black Robes who are making us die by their spells. Listen to me, I will prove it by reasons that you will recognize as true. They set themselves up in a village where everyone is feeling fine; no sooner are they there but everyone dies except for three or four people. They move to another place, and the same thing happens. They visit cabins in other villages, and only those where they have not entered are exempt from death and illness. Don’t you see that when they move their lips in what they call prayer, spells are coming out of their mouths? It’s the same when they read their books.... If they are not promptly put to death, they will end up ruining the country and no one will be left, young or old. (cited in Zemon-Davis 25)

Here is the oral speech of an indigenous woman already “translated” into writing by a European woman, seeking to interpret the impact of print on her community. We know now that the explorers in the New World brought terrible diseases with them, like smallpox, and so on the one hand, it might be easy to think this speaker has simply conflated otherwise separate causes—one

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biological, and the other technological and cultural. Yet on the other hand, if we believe what McLuhan says about the explosive nature of this particular break-boundary, this native speaker is perhaps unconsciously but quite accurately making connections that describe the explosive nature of the cultural encounters, just as the Cadmus myth does. Recall McLuhan’s claim that “Of all the great hybrid unions that breed furious release of energy and change, there is none to surpass the meeting of literate and oral cultures,” which “is, socially and politically, probably the most radical explosion that can occur in any social structure” (UM 49).

Alphabetization can be painful. And as Antonio de Nebrija famously noted in 1492, “siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio” (language has always been the companion of empire) (sig. A2r).

III. Reading the Torture Narrative

Although there are hundreds of examples that are as explicit as Marie de l’Incarnation’s, it will be more in keeping with McLuhan’s urgings to look to some less obvious examples that will still yield something profound concerning the history of our media technologies—the containers of our thinking which, in turn, contain our thinking. Enter the torturers and cannibals. As Michel de Certeau writes, “torture is the perfect initiation into the reality of social practices. Its effect is always to demystify discourse. It is the passage from what is said outside to what is practiced within” (41). Sensational scenes of torture that often culminate in acts of cannibalism recur throughout the early English and French writings from the space now called Canada. These scenes typically punctuate long stretches of descriptive scientific or ethnographic prose detailing flora, fauna, distances traveled, and peoples encountered. Whatever the larger work they belong to—whether as a part of eyewitness accounts and presented as documentary evidence of the ‘truth,’ or more overtly fictionalized through lyrical or novelistic strategies—when these scenes of torture appear, they are remarkably similar in rhetoric and structure. To establish the veracity of their telling through a complex of hierarchies regarding eye witnessing and hearsay, narrators turn to the trope of apophasis; narrators protest the difficulty or impossibility of narrating what is then described in exquisitely gory detail. [Figure/link: compilation of torture scenes from the Jesuit Relations, 1664]

“The form of torture of captives,” Joseph Francois Lafitau explains in 1724, “is to burn them over a slow fire, but this scene takes place under such enormously barbarous conditions that the very thought makes us tremble. It is so disagreeable as to make it difficult to give an exact description of it. As it is
necessary to speak of it, however,” Lafitau assures his readers, “here is an adequate description and one which will suffice to convey some knowledge of it” (155). [Figure/link: Torture in Lafitau] Likewise, Samuel Hearne’s much written about gothic scene of a massacre in A Journey from Prince of Wales’s Fort in Hudson’s Bay to the Northern Ocean, 1769–1772 (published 1795) begins with a vain protest about the narrator’s incapacity to translate into though and language the experience he “My situation and the terror of my mind at beholding this butchery cannot easily be conceived much less described….” But as we read on about a massacre which he watches, standing “neuter in the rear,” he detailingly describes, for example, “seeing a young girl, seemingly about eighteen years of age, killed so near [him], that when the first spear was stuck into her side she fell down at my feet, and twisted round my legs [like an eel], so that it was with difficulty that I could disengage myself from her dying grasps” (July 1771). The apophasis in these Gutenberg texts functions a bit like the teasers you see on television networks: “the following programming contains scenes of violence and nudity.” The apology is in fact a promise, and works to ensure the narrative passages stand out from the descriptive prose that surrounds them.

In these scenes depicting all matters of bodily violence, the narrators frequently proceed with an anatomical blazon that moves from body part to body part of the tortured and the torturer. Hands flail and beat and hands reach out. Eyes glare solemnly and eyes look up to heaven. Mouths threaten and mouths pray, plead for mercy, or sing exquisitely moving death songs. These scenes build slowly to an intolerable crescendo that frequently concludes with a barbaric feast, the torturers celebrating their day’s work by ingesting the dismembered parts of their victims. [Figure/link: Cannibal feast, Theodore de Bry] Such scenes are often at great odds with the tenor and tone of the texts in which they appear; they are the radical other of these texts. But they are the desired other. Massive reading markets in Europe and in North America rapidly developed a taste for tales of torture and cannibal feasts. Readers all over Europe ploughed through relatively unexciting documentary accounts of the daily travails of travel, agriculture, and missionary work with heady anticipation for the prize: sensational spectacles of horror and gore. Anne of Austria, the French queen, even claimed, for instance, that she found the story of Jesuit missionary Isaac Jogues’s sufferings more powerful than any romance.

It is on the basis of the recurrence of such scenes, which so tangibly represent the volatility of European contact with the New World, as well as on the basis of their sheer consistency, that I argue we are witnessing in these texts the contours of a specifically New World genre I’m calling the “torture
narrative.” An example of what Linda Williams dubs a “body genre,” and, I argue, the ancestor of the tradition that runs from the gothic to the contemporary slasher horror, the early new world torture narrative is designed to evoke suspense and horror at the range of transformations of the literate, extended, and mediated body set adrift in (what is to the Europeans’ gaze at last) a still uncharted and unwritten space.

How might we understand what the representation of torture and cannibalism is doing in all of these texts? The typical approach to these scenes has been to read them in relation to a simple binary of European and indigene. Consciously or unconsciously, the argument goes, these narratives are fashioned to persuade a group of European readers of an already widely-held belief, namely that Natives were cannibals and murderers in need of the civilizing influence of the Old World. William Arens is most explicit here when he suggests that the practice of identifying certain groups as cannibals expresses “the most basic form of malevolence which in turn legitimates a patterned response to the other. [European practices of] warfare and annihilation are then excusable, while more sophisticated forms of domination such as enslavement and colonization become an actual responsibility of the culture-bearers” (Arens 141). Now I don’t want to dismiss these arguments, because it is obvious that there are powerful ideological strategies of domination going on at this historical moment, and it is even more obvious that elaborate political, economic, cultural, and even juridical interests are being promoted through these representational strategies. I am arguing, however, that such an explanatory model does not take us far enough into the intricacies of this corpus.

A different and more productive interpretation can start by building on McLuhan’s notions as outlined above to observe that if print culture is inextricably bound with the mapping, naming, and proclaiming of empire, it is in the torture narrative—this genre that develops at a major break-boundary—that one can see this relationship between print, speech, and power being sensed, examined, tested and finally exposed to view. The written word, like all media, has this capacity—to “contain,” that is, to give subtle representation to the changing epistemologies induced by media technologies.

The displaced, fragmented, often cannibalized bodies in this genre serve as concentrated sites which stabilize invested meanings about textuality in all its forms—writing, reading, picturing, and translating—in relation to orality.

2 Williams refers to pornography, horror, and melodrama, which in contrast to other genres that might also instil physical reactions within its audience, create in the spectator a mirror reaction, a kind of imitation of the emotions that are displayed on the screen.
Tortured bodies in early Canada relentlessly indicate *en abîme* what is at stake when one speaks, reads, and especially writes in a new world. It is no coincidence, then, that the scenes of torture are most often condensed around organs of speech and writing—mouths, eyes, and especially hands.

Although there are many examples that could substantiate this claim, I turn primarily to the *Jesuit Relations* because in some ways these early documents which log the first encounters between the scholarly and book-centred missionaries and the oral peoples they met in the new world are foundational. They set up certain patterns of representing the collision of bodies of knowledge, physical bodies, and their technological extensions, that rapidly become generic, by which I mean, they establish a genre writers who follow seem compelled to imitate.

The very first letters collected in the seventy-two volumes detailing the Jesuit missions in North America from 1610 to 1791 were likely conceived of and composed as private reports. The superior in France, Père Jacquinot, was so taken with the account of one writer, Paul LeJeune, and its lively style, that he wished to circulate it among a wider audience, so he had it printed by the printer to the king, Sébastien Cramoisy. After its publication, it became a best seller overnight. The first and subsequent volumes went through multiple editions. This is significant, because it means that at one level at least, most of the letter writers would have at some level been conscious they were addressing a substantial reading audience familiar with the stories of the Jesuits before them at the same time as they were addressing the intimates and superiors to whom they addressed their letters.

The account of the martyrdom of Jean de Brébeuf is probably the best-known and most often referred to account of torture in the tradition. In this scene of violent contact and conflict, Huron torturers appear to be seeking to demystify the Jesuits’ mission and “contain” the circulation of their ideologies. The priests are tortured because they preach the words from a book. The dramatic power of the scene has to do with how the Hurons have read and rewritten the messages of the priests, making literal the core imagery of Baptism and communion. The Jesuits’ written culture proceeds according to a highly abstract logic that depends on the displacements of symbol and metaphor to stand in for concepts that cannot otherwise be readily narrativized or pictured. By refusing this abstract system of equivalences and restoring the literal to the language the Jesuits’ use, the torturers refuse their entire cultural logic.

Christophe Régnault is the epistolarian in volume 34 who describes the martyrdom of Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel L’Alemant (1649) as it was reported
to him by “savages” who escaped the brutal scene. In this second-hand account, the two Fathers are seized, stripped naked, fastened each to a post with their hands tied together. Their nails are torn from the fingers—something that is quite common in the literature of this period.

It is very important to know that for Jesuit priests—these agents of European culture and learning—hands are especially symbolically charged body parts. Hands pray, give communion, write, and build settlements and schools. The Jesuit Father Isaac Jogues for instance needed special papal dispensation to return to Canada after his hands were mangled by torturers because he could not administer the sacraments nor could he write back to his superiors. [Figure/link: Isaac Jogues’ hands in prayer] Father Bresanni, another victim of torture involving fingers, offers this most poignant apology in volume 39:

I KNOW not whether Your Paternity will recognize the letter of a poor cripple...The letter is badly written, and quite soiled, because, in addition to other inconveniences, he who writes it has only one whole finger on his right hand; and it is difficult to avoid staining the paper with the blood which flows from his wounds, not yet healed: He uses arquebus powder for ink, and the earth for a table. He writes it from the country of the Hiroquois, where at present he happens to be a captive; and desires herewith to give you a brief report of that which the divine providence has at last ordained for him. (vol. 39, p. 54)

In the Gutenberg Galaxy and Understanding Media, McLuhan considers literacy in relation to what scholars now call “the visual turn”; alphabetic cultures sacrifice audio-tactility in favour of visuality. Framing this point in relation to his argument about “extensions,” he says that “the book ... is the extension of the eye.” I think it is obvious from the visual layout of the Medium is the Massage that McLuhan also considers the book to be an extension of the hand. To torture hands and fingers, then, would be doubly effective, in that it attacks the instruments of building as well as of communicating.

However, it is also possible to initiate a reversal of McLuhan’s own formulation, and consider the hand as an extension of the book. As Raymond Tallis, in his monumental work on the hand details:

The hand ... is both less than a tool, being more of a precursor or precondition of distinctively human tool-use (and tool-making) than a tool in its own right; and more than a tool, for there is no tool yet devised (or likely to be devised) by man
that will come anywhere near the prodigious versatility of the human hand. (222)

Praying, reading, and writing, and building further structures of learning in the New World, the Black Robes could be thought of as agents of this scriptorial culture.

In Régnault’s account of the torture, Brébeuf and L’Alemant’s bodies are beat all over, but because Brébeuf continues to speak of God, he is singled out for extra tortures. A Huron renegade debates with him the meaning of baptism while pouring boiling water over the priest’s body three times. After, Brébeuf is burned with a necklace of red hot hatchets and roasted by a belt of bark and pitch. Still, he speaks. “To prevent him from speaking more,” the renegades in this torture narrative “cut off his tongue and both his upper and lower lips” (vol. 34, p. 20).

As McLuhan’s reading of the Cadmus myth pulls out, the mouth, like the hand, has a fascinating and integral relation to communications media. In an essay called “Sins of the Tongue,” Carla Mazzio looks at the ways tongues are represented in early print culture. Looking over and trying to interpret her European corpus, Mazzio remarks:

What is particularly striking about early modern fantasies of the tongue is the way in which anxieties about the power and vulnerabilities of language itself are consistently displaced onto what is otherwise just a “flabby little organ.” (54)

In early modern European writing, the image of the disobedient, sometimes autonomous, tongue, she argues, indicates “an anxious response to the unsettling dispersion of languages and identities in an increasingly textualized culture” (69). Frequently apprehensive about the tongue’s subversive capacities, these representations, she adds, point to “both the materiality and the metaphoricity of signification” (54)—that is, they lead us back to the medium of speech and its collisions with other media. [Figure/link: The tongue]

In the Jesuit Relations, the Huron renegades are nothing if not apprehensive of the subversive capacities of Brébeuf’s tongue and the bookish discourse it preaches. And, far away from their homes and surrounded by dozens of language groups they do not recognize, the Jesuits are obviously anxious about this global world that they have opened up, through which their own identities cease being locational and instead become virtual and imaginary, taking shape as much through print’s mediations as through everyday life. (I am alluding here to Benedict Anderson’s argument about the “imagined communities” formed across vast geographical distances thanks to the
circulation of print.) Along with evidencing these kinds of “anxious responses,” the torture scene’s attention to the tongue and lips points most straightforwardly to the materiality of orality as a medium.

For Régnault, the narrator of the written account, the silencing of his colleagues through an attack on the tongue and lips places even greater urgency on his own mission of preaching and documenting, but at the same time, he is aware that he too is vulnerable, and one of his successors might narrate the same kind of account about him. This kind of machinery of torture-and-writing is characteristic of the genre; narrators repeatedly reveal that they are conscious of the relationship between torture, telling, and printing; conscious of what the representation of torture does to compel writing and reading; and conscious of what their narratives about torture do to turn the silencing of some into the voice of others.

Elaine Scarry has observed in her seminal work on torture that physical pain is language destroying. Torture sets up a complex structure of unmaking, but, she argues, this structure in turn is productive. She explains: “in torture, it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person’s body to be translated into another person’s voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime’s fiction of power” (18). Although articulated primarily in the context of political and penal torture, her point about the way body violence both unmakes and makes sheds light on what is happening in the iterations and reiterations of the torture scenes in the torture narrative. The unmaking of bodies and silencing of voices here is performative, or to use Roland Barthes’ phrase, “logothetic” (3). Far from destroying language, torture produces a cacaphony (and perhaps in some cases even a symphony) of voices charged with accounting and recounting. Elaine Scarry uses the word “translation,” and in this context where cultures, languages, and traditions are coming into contact and conflict, it is easy to see the myriad ways in which the verbal and nonverbal communication acts that lead to and are part of scenes of torture prompt further translations, which are themselves often creative distortions and hybridizations.

Having addressed the significance of the body-parts targeted in the scene, let us turn to the element in this simple torture scene in the “Relations” that so beautifully dramatizes anxieties about the powers of language itself: its structure. McLuhan claims, “The content of any medium is always another medium.” This torture scene as a whole is structured as a series of embedded debates in which activities of writing frame activities of speech, which, in turn, frame activities of doing. As with McLuhan’s own writing, the key is to look for containers within containers.
Dramatizing anxieties about the power and vulnerabilities of language itself, this torture scene is structured as a series of embedded debates in which activities of writing frame activities of saying, which, in turn, frame doing. The “work” of torture as something which redistributes cultural space—its function as an index locorum—gives way to its affirmation of a locus of utterance. Régnault’s passage begins with a simple relay, as the narrator reports to his superiors what the savages had reported to him: “Voicy ce que nous dirent ces Sauvages” [This is what the savages told us] (vol. 34, pp. 24–25). Within this exterior frame appear a number of more complexly framed dialogues, such as when the Huron renegade, listening to the father speak of Paradise, is irritated and tells him “tu dis que le Baptisme et les souffrances de cette vie meine droit en Paradis...” [You say baptism and suffering leads to heaven] (vol. 34, pp. 26–27), as well as monologues, such as when the narrator explains another time he saw Indians apply hot axes to people’s skin.

The narrator is cautious to underline the fact that for the savages, speech-acts are also material acts. A necessary and inevitable relationship between saying and doing is posited through elegant rhetorical constructions such as: “Le barbare ayant dit cela, prist un chaudron plein d’eau toute bouillante... et a chaque fois qu’il le bapisoit de la sorte le babare lui disoit par raileries picquantes va au ciel, car te voila bien Baptiser” [Having said that, he took a cauldron of boiling water, and each time he baptised him, the barbarian said to him: go to heaven, for you are thus well baptised] (vol. 34, pp. 26–27). There is an immediacy to the “barbarian’s” linking of word and deed that the narrator’s monologue, in contrast, does not possess. Régnault, the Jesuit narrator, weaves together his own eyewitness account of the corpse with second hand reports from people who were at the scene, and then extrapolates, on the basis of other things he has heard and read, about the veracity of these reports. He is able to make connections between discrete events that transcend time, and is able to comment on these events without doing anything.

If the Jesuit’s language is grounded in the body, it is so in the body of the book—the only material body linked directly to “the admirable and incomprehensible mysteries of the faith” (Jesuit Relations, vol. 8, p. 109). In contrast, according to the narrator, for the sauvages, speech-acts are always physical acts that are grounded in and return to the physical body. Not only do their tortures make literal the abstract ideas of communion and baptism, but their speech is constructed here in the service of an entirely pragmatic kind of agency. The repeated refrain “ayant dit cela...” implies very clearly that they cannot say anything without doing it. Whether this accurately describes the Huron mindset at the time is irrelevant; from the perspective of the literate culture, the framing structure of this narrative is thus implicitly charting out
some of the purported differences between two cultures in collision. The framing structure of the narrative works to chart out the differences between two different linguistic strategies—oral and written.

What are the broader social effects of this tendency of the torture narrative to expose to view this period’s relationship between print, speech, and power? As I have already noted, there are limitations to the arguments that see this kind of representation as a simple power struggle between the powerful and the powerless, the colonizers and the colonized, the civilized and the savage. The genre’s rhetorical and narratological codes as well as its ideological work are better understood within the kind of framework McLuhan develops to talk about break-boundaries, that is, in relation to cross-fertilizations and hybridizations. In these texts, the structural relationship between the European self and the ‘savage’ other is not strictly binary. Within literary and non-literary representations alike, the torture narrative depends on a triangular relationship between a victim and a torturer—who are by their very role in this extreme sport both rendered other—and the self of the witness who goes on to narrate the tale. Relations of intractable conflict may characterize the relationship between the torturers and their victims, but the relationship between the eyewitnesses, speakers, narrators, and ultimately authors with the two chief subjects of their narration—victim and torturer—does not necessarily reveal the same kinds of conflicts.

In the torture narrative, the role of the witness is therefore of utmost importance, for it is this witness who, by translating these violent encounters between linguistic and cultural groups into language—into alphabets and print—not only defines the conditions of otherness, but often paradoxically undermines it through strategies of intermingling and hybridizing. Revelling in all kinds of border situations and liminal thresholds, the torture narrative thus can be argued to be working to dismantle the strict oppositions between the modern and the primitive, the European and the New World Indian, the invader, the settler, and the ‘sauvage’ at the very same time as it is establishing and reinforcing these oppositions. As torture narratives translate the strangeness of contact into the languages of the colonizers, new private and collective identities are negotiated.

Many critics have written about the way McLuhan’s theories in some ways seem to elide the social. Brian Cantwell Smith, at the McLuhan Lectures in Toronto in 2005, expressed this concern in the form of a question that is of utmost relevant to media studies: If media can always be shown to “contain” other media, do we get to the point where we can’t talk about the world any more? In other words, do we as critics get so wrapped up in meta-commentary
on communications technologies themselves that we forget entirely about what or why we’re communicating?

I hope that in bringing together McLuhan and the early New World torture narrative, I have shown that by attending to the way media contain other media, it is indeed possible to talk about the social world. The seventeenth century torture narrative shows, on the one hand, the way material forms “regulate and shape cultural practices” (Masten 6), and on the other, it shows the very human ‘stakes’ of media technologies, their monopolies, their importation and exportation, their adoption and adaptations. An examination of this historical moment in early Canada, where one of the most dramatic changes this world has ever known was underway, representations of torture and cannibalism, perhaps because they reflect the explosive encounters of the break-boundary, reflect back something important about human relationship to technological extensions and media environments. At the same time as these texts are reflective, they are transformative. As I have suggested, these writings are deeply imbricated in the construction of new hybrid subjectivities and new imaginary communities, and so are connected to the processes of modernity in mythological as well as very concrete material ways. McLuhan says that it is our responsibility as well as our right to understand these things, for in understanding media, we break out of our Narcissus-narcosis.
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