Preface | **The Centre on the Margins**

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I'm working in my office, which is a tiny coach house on the margins of the University of Toronto campus. It is Marshall McLuhan's former study, now the McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology, but established in 1963 for McLuhan as the Centre for Culture and Technology (figure P.1).

It's also the site of his historic Monday Night Seminars, where McLuhan held court for his students, the public, and the occasional interested celebrity. These Monday Night Seminars have been ongoing sporadically under the center's various directorships since McLuhan's time. I hear the doorbell ring, followed by the heavy door bursting open. I've always found it quite telling that the media theorist who imagined that the coming electronic age could give way to a world made up only of centers of power without margins was allotted such a small building on the margins of campus to house his center for media study. Its location is also indicative of the marginal status of media studies as an academic discipline during McLuhan's time. In response to the doorbell, I call out an apprehensive "hello" while running down a staircase so narrow that only one body at a time can squeeze through.

There he was again! He was almost always white haired and wide eyed, clutching papers—an essay or an old dissertation, a notepad, and a camera. He would ask me who was in charge of the place. Could he speak to the manager? Could I introduce him to the researchers or the director? Could he walk around and soak up the energy of Marshall McLuhan? He's wondering if maybe he could sit where McLuhan sat for just a little while? He was here to learn about McLuhan. Could I tell him something? He had arrived from down the street, the other side of campus, another town, from the South, and sometimes from across the Atlantic.

P.1 Marshall McLuhan outside the Coach House Institute. Courtesy of Robert Lansdale Photography, University of Toronto Archives.

He would interrupt my classes and meetings. He would appear at the window of the main room with his hands forming goggles over his eyes. He would barge into my lectures asking, "Is there someone here who knows about McLuhan?" Once he walked in and stood in front of me while I was addressing the class and started telling my students he knew McLuhan personally. He would often tell me that McLuhan predicted the digital age. He would tell me how McLuhan's theories are really important because technology today!

I would be polite and nod my head, thanking him for his profound insight. He would write me unsolicited emails and letters and send me copies of his new self-published book, essay, or article typed in Roboto font, and sometimes the audio of a presentation he made on McLuhan. He was entrepreneurial and

so had some of his own business cards made—he was also running a center for technology. Where was it? It was online at this address.com. He was running his own McLuhan speaker series. He would ask me for feedback on his writing. Did I have office hours? McLuhan had told him something I should probably know. He was working on algorithms, cell phones, AI, VR, and driverless cars. Did I know that these media are really important and have effects on culture? Did I know that McLuhan predicted these media too?

He was McLuhan's former student, now a McLuhan consultant, and could teach one of my classes if I liked. He'd had the right sort of access to McLuhan that no one else could claim. He would offer unverifiable accounts of what McLuhan was just about to say, before his sudden stroke, regarding the emerging electronic world. He was an appointed McLuhan Fellow from well before my time and could he please get a key to the building. He is a McLuhan interlocutor; here is what he knows. He is McLuhan's Indian guru and therefore we must have a connection too.

McLuhan was his teacher. He was McLuhan's last student. He was McLuhan's very last student. Did I want to know what McLuhan last said to him? In short, this man would walk into the McLuhan Centre searching for evidence of McLuhan and find me instead. The disappointment was palpable, often making its way to his social media tirades about the Centre's new direction and new occupants. I did not have a direct line to McLuhan. If I had not been his apprentice, could not channel his spirit directly, or contact him via Ouija board, what was I doing there? More to the point, what was a feminist technology scholar doing there?

When I was appointed the new director of the McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology in 2017, the coach house was still infamously known as a clubhouse for McLuhan fans. Like many visitors outside of this orbit, I encountered a difficult space steeped in patriarchal attachment to the great father, replete with essentialist understandings of race and gender along with a disturbing emphasis on global development theories. The Centre also seemed to be plagued by being in constant revival much like its founder. Every few years McLuhan's disciples would predict that he was going to be more important than ever now, again. In an attempt to popularize him, they would elevate his work and legacy while guarding their particular reading of his theories. But fandom, hagiography, endless revivals, and self-serving resuscitations of a revered figure are far from scholarly research and farther still from feminist work.

What I found instead was a space that did not need a revival but rather, a retrieval. Like a hex, I raised a hot pink banner across the coach house

for my first year as director (figure P.2). Not only did I want the space to be visible from the street, but I was going to highlight for my first year what I recognized as a possible feminist version of McLuhan's most famous aphorism, that the medium is the message. To me, the crux of his original theory of media and power seemed to be most alive within feminist scholarship on technology. And by critical feminist approaches I mean in particular the work on technology that does not treat difference and identity as if it is an addendum to technology but rather scholarship that understands how technology alters and can determine the social experience of gender, race, sexuality, and other forms of social difference.

Herbert Marshall McLuhan (July 21, 1911–December 31, 1980) was a Canadian English professor and scholar whose musings on the television set and the media theory of Harold Adams Innis propelled him into media study in the 1950s at the University of Toronto. McLuhan's theories of media are understood to be a cornerstone of communications and media

P.2 The coach house dressed in hot pink *MsUnderstanding Media* poster. Photo courtesy Erin MacKeen.

theory, and his works include *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), *Understanding Media* (1964), and *The Medium Is the Massage* (1967). McLuhan is often referred to as the "father of media studies" for turning attention to the medium's message, to the technology, over the content.[1]

Since 2017 I've been paying homage to McLuhan thematically while gathering the critical feminist, race, queer, and Indigenous media scholars, artists, and activists who take up McLuhan's privileging of the medium in novel and politically significant ways. However, they do so without pledging allegiance to its father. And really, they don't need to. Their work shares a common and enduring thread worth highlighting within feminist media studies but also for McLuhan scholars: these thinkers have been doing the critical work of locating how exactly the medium is the message. Their media study shines a light on the ways that inequitable power dynamics are tied to the properties and capacities of technologies that mediate power in social and institutional spaces. Thus, back to our playful themes at the Centre, rather than McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride* we have the *Mechanical Bro*; rather than *Understanding Media*, we can *MsUnderstand Media*, and rather than argue over which medium is hot or cool we might recognize the *HotMessAge* in which we live and think about the technological possibilities for radical and just social change. And rather than pretend we all live in a Global Village, especially during COVID-19 and the antiblack and anti-Indigenous racism that are all plagues to a better social world, we can consider the *The Global SpillAge*. The purpose of the Monday Night Seminar series guided by these plays on McLuhan's key works during my time as director of the McLuhan Centre has been to highlight and elevate the critical voices that had historically been left out of both the building and the discourse. It is also a means to address the common question I'm often confronted with when feminist scholars ask me, "But you don't really like McLuhan, do you?" I am not so much concerned with the man or his legacy as I am with the way in which his media theory has inspired me to think about power and structural differences. Thus the thematics for the Monday Night Seminar programming over the last few years at the McLuhan Centre are meant to turn toward McLuhan, not away from him. They do not seek to repair him. Rather, they are meant to confront the limitations of McLuhan's problematic examples while taking up the broader potential in understanding that the technological is a specific vector of power that demands a feminist understanding. This book gathers a small sample of the scholars that visited and participated at the center's Monday Night Seminar

series and other related programming over the last few years. What is collected here is not nearly exhaustive or fully representative of the potential and scope of these conversations, but they speak to some of the conversations that have been taking place in the McLuhan coach house on Monday nights and at the center's other public events since 2017. This book offers a re-understanding of McLuhan's *Understanding Media* for feminist ends. The chapters presented here do so in the hopes of a more critical and engaged approach to McLuhan and *a feminist medium is the message*.

—SARAH SHARMA, director of
the McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology
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Notes

1. Marshall McLuhan is often regarded as a central figure within the Toronto School of Communication. This so-called Toronto School includes those theorists at the University of Toronto in the decades from the 1950s to 1980 who focused on the centrality of communications technologies to cultural, social, and institutional change. The Toronto School is often referred to as also including Harold Innis, Edmund Carpenter, Walter Ong, and Eric Havelock. We want to insist here on this page, and along with our other like-minded feminist technology scholars at the University of Toronto, that this Toronto School also includes the first woman professor and, more importantly, feminist in the Department of Metallurgy and Materials Science, Ursula Franklin.