

“From Bricoleur to Rasquache: Reflections on Unplugging Popular Culture  
and Making Future Matters”

[PDF of 5 brief Power Point slides precedes this paper that explains presentation title change.]

I recently finished a manuscript called *Unplugging Popular Culture* in which I analyzed scenes from popular culture texts that featured youth who used unlikely and diverse materials to construct meaning. I focused primarily on what some people refer to as Generation Z, those young people born between the mid 90s and the first millennial decade. In scenes from varied texts like *13 Reasons Why*, *Jurassic World*, *Get Out*, *Supernatural*, *Stranger Things*, and *Pitch Perfect*, I discovered that young people must play or compose in different ways, some analog and some digital, in order to meet their personal needs as well as the needs of their communities. In many sections of this book I focused on the resurging interest in all things analog: brick and mortar bookstores, LP records, Moleskine journals, and more. I began to explore what it meant not only to possess analog tools but to adopt what I called an analog sensibility. I then connected this resurgence to the stories that are being told in the 2010s and found that teens and young adults are frequently depicted WITHOUT their smart phones. Therefore, my claim was that pop culture was, in some ways, showing people going “unplugged,” just like the MTV 1990s live music program years ago.

I also argued that these characters act as what Claude Levi-Strauss would refer to as bricoleurs. This is where, however, the argument leaves a hole. I tried to address this hole in my conclusion, but as most of us know, at some point you have to stop typing and save things for later. Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* discusses the role of bricoleur as someone who takes the available resources of a given situation and is able to create something new. The bricoleur does

not anticipate or request tools that are absent but fulfills the objective of a given time and place with the objects and concepts already present: “It might be said that the engineer questions the universe, while the ‘bricoleur’ addresses himself [or herself] to a collection of oddments left over” (19). They’re able to “‘make do . . . with a set of tools and materials which is always finite” (Levi-Strauss 17). Guitarist Mike McReady of Pearl Jam once explained to *Rolling Stone* that *MTV Unplugged* “forces you to play differently. You can't rely on feedback. It forces you to use dynamics, and to look at each song in a different way. Some songs turned out good acoustically, and some just didn't quite happen.”

The term bricoleur has many explanations and examples, found both in Levi-Strauss and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Its original use was connected, as Levi-Strauss says, to “ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting, and riding.” Upon rereading and reflecting, I see where the bricoleur is not only a resourceful maker of new ideas and object but someone financially sound, or, we might argue, someone who possesses enough resources to engage in leisure sport. In the same breath Levi Strauss also uses the middle-class inventor Mr. Wemmick from Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* as a main example of bricoleur. The character lives in “a suburban castle with” a “miniature drawbridge.” In a somewhat similar way, the OED states the definition is “person (esp. an artist, writer, etc.) who constructs or creates something from a diverse range of materials or sources.” Drawbridges, full-time creative careers, and time to play games...all these activities suggest a form of privilege. A diverse range of resources also signals the degree of access a person must have to be effective in bricolage.

I have now begun to see the limitations of the word bricoleur as a name for young people who use diverse materials to. I should have seen it all along—Hannah Baker from *13 Reasons Why*, who composes her memoir on cassette tapes, has parents struggling with debt, but they still

own and run their own business. The children from *Jurassic World* who arm themselves against dinosaurs clearly grew up in privileged circumstances since the family affords flights to Costa Rica and the world's most exclusive biological preserve. Rinse and repeat.

Christopher Bonanos, who traces the history of the Polaroid, explains why kids might be drawn to analog resources: “When most every bit of information you see and hear every day is digital, the great mass of it appears consistent and uniform. Digital TV has no snow; digital music . . . sounds flawless. That eerie near-perfection leaves many people feeling a little bit numb” (163). Young people are also known for using analog purchases to look and feel smarter, more authentic, and more creative. Tom Standage, editor *The Economist*, explains that even with digital versions of magazines online, his particular publication has seen sales rise not with older readers but with younger ones who see the magazine as a “social signifier.” Her further explains that a magazine’s “finishability” provides young readers with a sense of satisfaction, the kind a person might experience when finishing a difficult text. Standage says, “You can’t show others you’re reading it with the digital edition. You can’t leave your iPad lying around to show how smart you are” (Sax ch 5).

### **Young Bricoleurs in the 2018 Media**

To change the subject for a moment, the alumnae of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, who lost seventeen of their classmates to gun violence on February 14, 2018, appeared on stage at the 2018 Tony Awards. In this appearance, the group of former high school students sang one of the more optimistic numbers associated with musical theatre: “Seasons of Love.” These students have matched optimism with concrete action as they tour the United States to encourage people to vote against NRA-sponsored politicians in office. One of the most

recognizable faces is Emma Gonzalez, the teen known for “calling bullshit” on today’s lawmakers for turning their backs on common sense gun legislation.

The high school founders of March for Our Lives, the non-profit associated with educating others about gun violence, have regularly appeared on national news and have even met with members of Congress. Delaney Tarr describes their DC visit in their recently published book *Glimmer of Hope*:

The first day we went to lobby felt magical in a way. We all crammed into two cars and were dropped off right near the National Mall. . . .Dressed in our best business attire, we stepped up to the Capitol building and looked out over the national mall. To commemorate the moment, we took a picture with all of us looking off in the distance. And I think we all felt really powerful there, because it felt like we were there to make real change. That we were getting in there, getting boots on the ground.

I bring this up because in writing my book on analog culture this past year and thinking about today’s young people, I’ve come to realize that yes, the students from Marjory Stoneman are able to move from high tech to low tech environments based on their rhetorical needs; we see them carry signs, design t-shirts, curate Twitter feeds, and speak publicly. They seem well versed in social media activism as well as prepared for the more analog tradition of galvanizing support on the streets with posters. Still, not everyone gets to go to Washington. Not everyone is capable of “getting in there” as Tarr describes in the book. The students able to simultaneously handwrite, tweet, and speak are ones who are capable of shuttling from high to low tech environments, yet they are also privileged to do so. Being able to celebrate analog culture, I fear,

often goes hand in hand with access to the world's scarcities and collections of memorabilia. Perhaps hipsters are still large in numbers.

### **Ideas for the Future**

So what happens when we think beyond the bricoleur? Kelly Medina-Lopez offers the term *rasquache*, a term originating in the study of Chicanx art, involves making do with limited resources, but it also reveals the “physical reality of necessity manifest through the actions and ingenuity of the underdog” and “encourages us to do these things boldly, colorfully, and unapologetically.” Chicanx culture plays a large role in making *rasquache*, but, as Medina-Lopez suggests, the term may be extended to look at other cultures. Similarities exist between Levi-Strauss's definition of the bricoleur, one who makes do with the resources available to him/her, and *rasquache*. Tomas Ybarra-Frausto explains that in *rasquache* “high value is placed on making do. . . . Limited resources means mending, re-fixing and reusing everything. Things are not thrown away but saved and recycled, often in different context (e.g., automobile tires used as plant containers, plastic bleach bottles becoming garden ornaments” (6). It celebrates the underdog rather than the master of leisure. Likewise, *rasquache* reaches its full meaning only when considering its origin, which according to Maria Anderson, reflects and transforms “the sensibilities of the *barrio*.” Anderson reminds us that *rasquache* in Spanish means “left over” or of “no value” and that its original meaning was negative. The word has changed to reflect a new aesthetic and, like Medina-Lopez says, a way of life.

In other words, the resourcefulness of young people today need not be civic minded: in some cases it is loud, messy, unrefined, or unexpected, and maybe it should be. Medina-Lopez adds that *rasquache* “adopts an attitude of living in the moment: the walls of this house may

desperately need repair, but at least if they are bold and bright, they will look nice when they collapse.” It stems from the need to “recycle, upcycle, make do, and make new meaning through whatever available bits and pieces.” Six-year-old protagonist Moonee from the 2017 film *The Florida Project* states it best when she takes her new friend Jancey on a tour of the run down hotel where she lives with her unemployed mother. She points to certain doors and says, “These are the rooms we’re not suppose to go in. But let’s go anyways!” Moments later the electricity in the entire hotel goes out. The door to Washington may not be open, but Moonee finds better places to explore and breaks in when doors close to her. As Medina-Lopez explains, rasquache does not lead to people attempting to “blend in”; rather, it invites “choices [that] are daring and colorful on purpose.”

This is all to say that I discuss rasquache as a replacement for the idea of the bricoleur in my conclusion to the book, but I barely scratched the surface of how privilege infects our views of the multimodal and material. I wanted to argue that young people are able to shuttle effectively between the resources of the high tech world and the low tech one, but this takes into account that a diverse range of resources is easily accessed. Rasquache would allow future youth to adapt rebellious habits that fuel invention but WITHOUT demanding that they hoard vintage items on sale for hundreds of dollars on Ebay. Analog versions of existing technology may be a way to demonstrate versatility, but this versatility, in the hands of a bricoleur, may involve collecting rare oddities as a way of controlling a flow of resources that is off limits to most. The conference theme of making future matter (especially the noun form of the term) has given me a chance to consider just how much work needs to be done to better frame the accessibility and privilege associated with working from an analog toolkit, both in fiction and in real life.

[Works cited available online at [www.kshannonhoward.com](http://www.kshannonhoward.com) in separate document]