Fan Studies Must Be on Crack: Anti-Fandom, Fan Convergence, Crackvids, and Riverdale (2017-)

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“Can’t we, in this Post-James Franco world, be all things at once?”
(Veronica Lodge, Riverdale 1x01, “The River’s Edge”)

In 2018, the YouTube channel “justaudrey” posted a video that would spiral into a prolific, if niche, trend on the platform. Astutely titled “Riverdale Having Bad Writing for 2 Minutes Straight,” the video offers exactly what it advertises: curated clips from the CW television series Riverdale (2017-) which, according to “justaudrey,” encapsulate the show’s “bad” dialogue. At time of writing, “Riverdale Having Bad Writing for 2 Minutes Straight” boasts over three million views and a deluge of derivatives with equally distinct titles, like “Everyone in Riverdale Being Absolutely Cringe,”1 “Riverdale Can’t Stop Being Cringe,”2 “Riverdale is Back, and It’s Better Written than Ever! *Not*,”3 “The Riverdale Cast Dragging the Writing of Their Own Show,”4 “This ain’t it (Riverdale is Really Bad),”5 and “Riverdale is Getting Worse.”6 As their names and digital context seem to indicate, these videos are user-generated (in other words, produced by any digital media user), anti-fan texts in their purest forms, embodying the dislike, disdain, and derision their creators feel toward the Riverdale series.

But the “Riverdale Bad Writing/Cringe Compilation” phenomenon is more complicated than it initially appears, and this reality has everything to do with digital media and anti-fan studies. While distinguishing between lovers, haters, consumers, and producers seems easy, these roles are hard to parse in the digital spectatorship era. On the internet, user-generated media rivals, remediates7, and exists within the multi-billion dollar entertainment industry, and both entities supply content to audiences who, with every passing day, seem to blur the boundaries between fans and anti-fans (affective states that, in audience studies, tend to hold oppositional emotional opinions toward a media text). Scholar Emma Jane solidifies this sentiment in her 2019 essay “Hating 3.0: Should Anti-Fan Studies Be Renewed for Another Season?” that explores the logistical and ethical problems associated with contemporary audience scholarship. Much has changed technologically and culturally since Jonathan Gray’s pioneering theoretical frameworks on anti-fandom, and Jane questions their utility in a landscape where “online domains can make it extraordinarily difficult to

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5Cheryl Gilbert, “Riverdale is Getting Worse [+4x11],” YouTube, February 2, 2020, Video, 2:06, https://youtu.be/6pxS0ZqAYG8
divine whether a given text is a form of fandom, anti-fandom, both at once, or neither.” Jane’s essay comprises an early chapter in Melissa Click’s book *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, and while Click’s entire collection thoroughly interrogates audienceship in virtual contexts, research concerned with anti-fandom and its digital products remains vastly underdeveloped — a troubling reality given how frequently fanworks like vids, art, and fiction, all altered dramatically by digital technologies, factor into fan scholarship.

With that frame in mind, this study will use an anti-fan lens to investigate how user-generated digital media complicates scholarly models for fandom, anti-fandom, fan objects, and fanworks. After briefly reviewing foundational anti-fandom scholarship, I return to “Hating 3.0” and locate Jane’s wider argument alongside Henry Jenkins’ “convergence culture” framework. In merging their theories, I extract and propose “fan convergence” to describe the process whereby nuanced complications and slippages between audience roles manifest in user-generated, convergence culture-driven digital media texts. I then interrogate fan convergence in “crackvids,” an underexplored fanwork genre that exemplifies, in its videographic variant, the crossroads between fannish devotion and convergence culture impulses. As a case study, I focus specifically on the “Riverdale Bad Writing Compilation” phenomenon and the wider context of YouTube-hosted *Riverdale* video edits, positioning “crackvids,” in all their contradictory variations, at the ambiguous intersections between fandom, anti-fandom, fan object, and fanwork to reveal how fan convergence pervades audience-generated content, including media traditionally associated with fannish devotion.

I Reviewing Anti-Fandom

In his 2003 article “New Audiences, New Textualities,” Jonathan Gray became an early advocate for scholarship on anti-fans and anti-fandom. Academic studies, according to Gray, have long-neglected viewers who “watch distractedly, in bits and/or casually” and even “hate or dislike certain texts” altogether. These audiences, described as nonfans and anti-fans, respectively, are an untapped arena for dissecting the dimensions between media texts and audience interaction; echoing Clifford Geertz, Gray notes that fan studies “have helped us to explain the winkers, but as yet there has been little work into the twitchers, parodists and rehearsals.” Despite the ease with which prefixes like “anti” suggest polarization, Gray is also quick to clarify that fan and anti-fan roles tend to run parallel:

...hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and “effects” or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture.

Seen through this lens, the dynamic between fandom and anti-fandom operates like a mirror, mapping different emotions onto similar devotional levels; in fact, anti-fan dedication “can in its own way be just as productive as fandom,” a comparable equal to fannish adoration. In a

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9Jingyi Gu, “Celebrating and Discussing the Queerly Masculine: Hollywood Superheroes Reimagined in Fan Videos,” (Graduate Thesis for Georgetown University, April 2017), 16; Dorothy Stachowiak, “Fannish Pareidolia: Criticism through Creative Composition,” (University of Maryland, 2015), 59.


13Gray, 2005, 842.
rhetorical appeal to balance and equity, Gray argues that this reflective relationship makes anti-fan research increasingly critical: “anti-fans have long been fans’ Other, but let us now let them speak for themselves.” Already steeped in the push-pull logic of proportionality and equivalence, Gray positions fans and anti-fans as foils cut from the same cloth.

II  Defining Fan Convergence

Gray’s work set the stage for Anti-Fandom, where anti-fan lenses and digital technologies collide to complicate audienceship in the contemporary media landscape. Comparing early scholarship with Anti-Fandom reveals the field’s rapid evolution over less than two decades — Gray even reflects back on “New Audiences, New Textualities” in an exclusive Anti-Fandom chapter, criticizing the “atomic model” of audienceship he proposed in 2003. But “Hating 3.0,” more than any chapter, responds directly to shifts in scholarly utility. While Emma Jane explores various concerns in “Hating 3.0,” including digital hate speech, abuse tactics, and “e-bile,” her research broadly interrogates “questions about whether the complex tangle of players and texts in contemporary media scenes are still conducive to meaningful analysis using anti-fan approaches.” This “complex tangle” has, according to Jane, “resulted in a radical collapse of traditional distinctions between broadcasters and receivers, producers and consumers, professionals and amateurs, and texts and audiences.” Just as the barriers between media continue to blur and assume new meanings, audience demarcations follow suit; distinguishing between “winkers,...twitchers, parodists and rehearsals” is becoming an increasingly challenging, nuanced task with decreasing efficacy. Jane attributes this “radical collapse” to “dialectical, iterative, and user-producer driven” networked digital media culture, and while “Hating 3.0” never mentions Henry Jenkins’ book Convergence Culture by name, the overlap between these texts is impossible to ignore. Emerging from digital technologies and user-generated media platforms, convergence culture broadly connotes the space “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.” The impulse to reuse, repurpose, and reappropriate media texts across platforms is central to Jenkins’ framework, particularly when enacted by audiences and users, who feed into the complex infrastructure woven by “participatory culture.” Fittingly, Jane’s final case study in “Hating 3.0” echoes Jenkins’ theory, and pulls convergence culture into anti-fan discourses. Jane explores the YouTube channel “Bad Lip Reading,” which publishes videos that overdub the vocal performances from existing visual media texts to humorous and satirical effect — its most popular videos, for instance, draw clips from the Star Wars and Twilight film franchises, televised political events, and NFL games, transforming these mainstream media properties into “surreal word salads.” “Bad Lip Reading” is a user-generated paratext, but also a “powerful, mainstream media

16Jane, 43.
17Jane, 51.
18Jane, 51.
20Jane, 51.
22Jenkins, 3.
23Jane, 50.
text in its own right,” with “sophisticated production values” and audience numbers that rival traditional media — at time of writing, the channel boasts over eight million subscribers. While “Bad Lip Reading” applies a comedic, even parodic lens to the texts it appropriates, describing the channel as an unmitigated anti-fandom project simplifies the multiple slippages clearly taking place, be they between affective fans, mocking anti-fans, audience-generated amateur content, or complex industry media production. According to Jane, these slippages produce “the complex and ambiguous nature of the objects and subjects of the channel’s anti-fandom” and further complicate audienceship discourses in the digital age; fittingly, they also allow “Bad Lip Readings” to slide neatly into convergence culture.

What unfolds, then, in the fusion between Jane and Jenkins, is critical to ongoing audience research in the digital age, and particularly concerning user-generated media. When combined, their theories suggest a phenomenon I characterize as a kind of “fan convergence.” If a convergence culture exists where “new and old media collide,” fan convergence is the specific site where various audience and user identities — fans, anti-fans, amateur producers, industry, etc. — overlap and merge, becoming ambiguous, slippery, and contradictory. While scholars like Axel Bruns and Alvin Toffler have gestured toward this concept through their frameworks on “produsage” and “prosumption” respectively, I use fan convergence to highlight how emotional affect unfolds amid these slippages. Drawing from Jane, “a single individual might simultaneously hold many roles” in fan convergence, decidedly blurring, in some instances, the push-pull logic between fans and anti-fans proposed by Gray in “New Audiences, New Textualities.” Expanding from Jenkins, I contest that these slippages become visible in the media texts that audiences produce and reproduce for convergence cultures.

Fan convergence has a wide, all-consuming conceptual reach, undoubtedly a vestige from the broad scopes Jane and Jenkins tackle in their theories; rather than a genuine innovation on Convergence Culture or “Hating 3.0,” fan convergence simply acknowledges overlaps that already exist, and a pervasive, if unnamed, phenomenon already visible in digital media and audience studies. As a tool, however, fan convergence has the potential to bridge gaps in audienceship discourses, accept nuanced contradictions and ambiguous interplays, and invite collaboration between fan and anti-fan research. Despite casting a wide net, fan convergence can also operate inside niche media genres; in fact, specificity is a vital asset when narrowing fan convergence into a lens with real academic utility, especially when fandom and anti-fandom intermingle.

III Establishing Crack, Crackvids, and Riverdale

With this frame in mind, I would like to consider a particular kind of fan convergence, and a kind principally relevant to Jane’s questions in “Hating 3.0.” If fan convergence manifests in audience-generated digital texts, that reality must apply to texts traditionally linked to distinct audience roles. Thus, it stands to reason that fan convergence could unfold in forms conventionally aligned with fannish devotion, like fanart, fanvids, and fanfiction. This possibility allows us to consider cases where anti-fandom (among other audience identities) blends with, appropriates, influences, or exists inside fandom — an increasingly viable concept in a digital era where fannish practices are more mainstream than ever and opportunities for audience-generated derivative content seem

25 Jane, 51.
26 Jane, 51.
27 Jenkins, 2.
30 Jane, 51.
endless. And while “Bad Lip Reading” certainly serves Jane’s wider claim, and collides nicely with Jenkins’ convergence culture, it is also worth interrogating more explicit fan and anti-fan texts in conversation, investigating how fan convergence pervades and connects oppositional audiences. Consequently, I propose my own case study for fan convergence, one that exemplifies the ambiguity of audience-generated media and — practical nonexistence on academic radars notwithstanding — aligns closely with traditional fan scholarship: crack.

Despite rapid digital proliferation and widespread colloquial use in fan communities, crack remains criminally under-researched in fan studies. Dorthy Stachowiak broadly positions the term as a genre-defining adjective for fanworks “composed in a humorously bizarre, illogical, or satirical manner,” noting that, as a fan-aligned word, crack derives from the statement “the [fan] must have been on crack when they [made] this.”\(^{31}\) And while crack can apply to any fanwork, its relevance to digital media and convergence culture exists primarily in “crackvids,” or crack videos, which take a markedly different approach to video editing than the vidding tradition explored by Francesca Coppa.\(^{32}\) According to Jingyi Gu, crackvids are ‘pop culture mash-ups that situate the subject of a creator’s fandom (usually a media text) in conversation with “lines, images, or sounds from popular internet slangs, tropes, and viral videos.”’\(^{33}\) Consequently, the convergence culture impulse to spread, reappropriate, and remix media is a critical crackvid tenet.

While crackvids exist for virtually any visual media fandom, they tend to follow universal generic conventions. In the interest of consistency, the example I supply here explores Riverdale, the televisual adaptation of the Archie Comics series produced and distributed by the CW network since 2017. Astutely titled “The Riverdale Crack” and posted by the YouTube channel “Sim Mallec,” this video is among the most popular in the Riverdale fandom, boasting over five million views (as of April 2021). “The Riverdale Crack” follows a uniform structure whereby remix-based jokes appear in discrete, clearly defined segments. To demarcate distinct sections, “Sim Mallec” inserts a unique convention consistent across the crackvid genre: SMPTE color bars and a jarring audio tone, two attributes traditionally associated with the calibration of videotape (Fig 1).\(^{34}\) Individual gags vary in “The Riverdale Crack,” but regularly invoke memes, music, images, and other cultural references. The video begins, for instance, by comedically situating Riverdale inside the opening sequence for The Suite Life on Deck (2008-2011), a television series that shares a lead actor (Cole Sprouse) in common with Riverdale. “Sim Mallec” also edits the show’s original footage excessively. In one joke, they freeze an individual frame depicting Cheryl Blossom (Madelaine Petsch) and proceed to progressively magnify her face in a pattern that rhythmically matches CupcakKe’s song “Mouth Wide Open.” In others, they “shake” footage and overlay a rainbow tint to humorously convey emotional intensity. The central conceit in “The Riverdale Crack,” and crackvids generally, is an appeal to chaotic, comedic absurdity through digital remediation and remix.

That crackvids rely on ludicrous concepts and disjointed humor has led many, including Gu, to conclude that these texts lack “logical storytelling”\(^{35}\) or an overarching significance beyond entertainment and fan resonance. This assessment appears to stem from an implicit, if unfair, comparison with vidding, an especially pervasive video-manipulation genre in fan studies. According

\(^{31}\)Stachowiak, 59. One would be remiss not to mention the complex, racialized history from which crack, as a concept and term, originates (see Felner). While it lies beyond the scope of this paper, investigating fan-aligned crack with this lens is a critical avenue for further research, especially when considered alongside recent work from Rukmini Pande, among others, concerning race and media fandom.


\(^{33}\)Gu, 16.


\(^{35}\)Gu, 16.
to Francesca Coppa, fanvids use music and deliberate editing to “comment on or analyze a set of preexisting visuals, to stage a reading, or occasionally to use the footage to tell new stories.” Coppa describes the fanvid structure as a “visual essay that stages an argument” and allows the fan creator to assert their various interpretations of their fannish object. Yet, despite a comedic tone, “The Riverdale Crack” likewise projects “Sim Mallec’s” fannish lens, producing arguments and analysis through absurdity and humor. Various jokes in “The Riverdale Crack,” for instance, heavily imply that Veronica Lodge (Camila Mendes) is bisexual and attracted to her female friend Betty Cooper (Lili Reinhart); “Sim Mallec” frantically cuts and magnifies Riverdale footage to emphasize interactions between Veronica and Betty, often accompanied by suggestive music like “My Neck, My Back (Lick It)” by Khia or “That’s My Girl” by Fifth Harmony. The editor further amplifies these jokes by fading between original Riverdale scenes and referential photos that presumably imply their personal, cathartic emotional response to watching the two characters onscreen (see fig. 2 and 3). “The Riverdale Crack,” however humorous or tongue-in-cheek, nevertheless demonstrates intense fannish adoration and, further, highlights “Sim Mallec’s” interpretive lens through a fanvid-aligned structure.

Crackvids are one locus around which the discourses I’ve explored thus far overlap, tangle, and complicate. Despite their comedic absurdity, videos like “The Riverdale Crack” remain steeped in devotional fannish perspectives that celebrate and interrogate beloved objects. Yet, crackvids take an overtly different route to adoration than traditional vidding, frequently invoking satire, irony, and even cynicism. The impulse to reappropriate, recycle, remix, and mashup pervades these videos, so much so that they become concentrated convergence cultures in their own right, colliding multimedia together in new, unexpected ways that muddle the relationships between subjects and objects. Like the “Bad Lip Reading” YouTube channel, Crackvids exist in a slippery digital intersection. But these slippages intensify when we consider crackvids in a fan convergence framework and situate them in conversation with other user-generated content that simultaneously opposes, echoes, and influences their fannish perspectives and practice. With this in mind, we can finally return to “justaudrey,” “Riverdale Having Bad Writing for Two Minutes Straight,” and the “Riverdale Bad Writing/Cringe Compilation” phenomenon.

IV Crackvids and Anti-Fandom: Slippages in Fan Convergence

Despite a vicious anti-Riverdale attitude, “justaudrey’s” original video shares eerie similarities with “Sim Mallec’s” “The Riverdale Crack.” Justaudrey segments their video into discrete scenes from Riverdale that, once compiled, attempt to demonstrate the series’ “bad writing.” Like “Sim Mallec,” however, “justaudrey” is a profuse editor; they magnify performances they find especially egregious, cropping frames into extreme close-ups that highlight subtle expressions and gestures. Written statements like “comedy gold,” “why do they talk like that???” and even “??????” appear atop the visuals as asides that suggest “justaudrey’s” emotional reaction to the content onscreen (see fig. 4). But the editing expands beyond original footage. Cultural references and digital memes pepper this anti-fan text, from “He Needs Some Milk”36 to an image of Snoop Dogg onto which “justaudrey” has typed “bitch what the fuck” (see fig. 5). Most damning, however, is the video’s compiled structure, which frequently demarcates scenes with the same SMPTE color bars and audio tone utilized in “The Riverdale Crack” (see fig.6). While “Riverdale Having Bad Writing for Two Minutes Straight” does not overtly label itself a crackvid, we could consider “justaudrey’s” video an anti-fan variation on the form. Like “The Riverdale Crack,” “Riverdale Having Bad Writing

for Two Minutes Straight” is a segmented, visual essay that projects the interpretive reading of its creator; in this case, however, the argument subverts fannish devotion and slips into an entirely different audience role.

As previously mentioned, “justaudrey’s” initial video inspired countless successors, from “Riverdale Making Me Cringe for Three Minutes and 36 Seconds”37 to “The Riverdale Boys Being Absolutely Cringey”38 and everything between. While their pejorative titles clearly suggest anti-fan sentiments, however, the boundaries between audiences are, at best, blurry in these texts — another similarity they share with traditional crackvids. For one, the frequency with which these videos garner millions of views rivals fanworks like “The Riverdale Crack” and the Riverdale series itself, which peaked with approximately two million viewers in 2017.39 As the title of one video, “I Watched the Heathers Riverdale Episode so You Don’t Have to”40 confirms, the users who create these texts must also watch Riverdale, however briefly, to produce their compilations, carefully scanning episodes for worthwhile opportunities just as a fan might, albeit with a less adoring lens. In this respect, the “Riverdale Bad Writing/Cringe Compilation” phenomenon exemplifies Gray’s argument that anti-fan attitudes “can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and ‘effects’ or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture”41 as affective fandom. While we might describe these videos as an anti-fan crackvid subgenre, however, there are more slippages unfolding here than initially appear. Interestingly, this trend has converged with Riverdale’s more conventional fannish discourses, where it can also claim popularity and influence; in an ironic twist, “Sim Mallec” has, since 2018, published multiple videos that appropriate the anti-fan crackvid style established by “justaudrey.” Implicitly fusing “The Riverdale Crack” with “Riverdale Having Bad Writing for Two Minutes Straight,” “Sim Mallec’s” anti-fan videos exemplify fan convergence through multiple slippages. First, they demonstrate one audience member’s evolving relationship with the media they consume; while “The Riverdale Crack” projects fannish devotion, more recent texts oppose this reading and reflect cynically on “Sim Mallec’s” original adoration for the series. In their 2019 video “The Riverdale Writers Must Be on Crack,” “Sim Mallec” edits a brief clip from RuPaul’s Drag Race (2009-) that codifies their perspective: the brief footage captures a conversation between two contestants in which one explains, “I didn’t realize how annoying you were until midway,” and the other responds, “[You] think I’m annoying? Now imagine what it’s like for me to live my life.” Atop the visuals, “Sim Mallec” includes textual “name tags” that symbolically label the characters “Everyone Else” and “Riverdale,” respectively (see fig. 7). Couching their argument in a pop culture reference, “Sim Mallec” aligns themself with the “Everyone Else” character to explore their increasing disillusionment toward Riverdale, ostensibly saying, “I didn’t realize how annoying Riverdale was until midway through watching it.” But the clip also suggests subtle sympathy for the “Riverdale” character, who remains humorously self-aware and acknowledges their “annoying” tendencies. The interplay between fandom, anti-fandom, and fan object is challenging to unravel here, and it tangles further when reconsidering the video’s title: “The Riverdale Writers Must Be on Crack.” In a subtle linguistic shift, “Sim Mallec” completely upends the conventional, audience-

41 Gray, 2005, 841.
centered crack premise, “the [fan] must have been on crack when they [made] this,”42 by redirecting attention toward industry forces, namely *Riverdale*’s creators. Echoing convergence culture and fan convergence, “Sim Mallec” uses “The Riverdale Writers Must Be on Crack” to stage an ambiguous encounter between audiences, media texts, and their personal emotions as a viewer and creator.

V Conclusion

Fan crack, and crackvids in particular, exemplify the nuanced collisions and slippages associated with fan convergence in the digital age. Visible in the “Riverdale Bad Writing Compilation” phenomenon is the ease with which audience-generated media, from any genre, can complicate inside convergence culture’s varied discourses and occupy multiple spectatorship roles simultaneously, including producers, consumers, fans, anti-fans, and everything between. Unlike Jane and “Hating 3.0,” however, I would not argue that case studies like anti-*Riverdale* crackvids render audienceship models obsolete. Rather, they reveal a pressing demand for nuanced, interdisciplinary research that interrogates user-generated content and fan identities, in all their slippery contradictions. While analyzing fanworks is a central fan studies tenet, perhaps broadening this approach to wider digital culture is the way of the future for this rapidly developing field.

42Stachowiak, 59.
Bibliography


Stachowiak, Dorothy. “Fannish Pareidolia: Criticism through Creative Composition.” University of Maryland. 2015.


Figures

Figure 1: Screenshot from “The Riverdale Crack.” Combined with a jarring audio tone, these color bars distinguish between jokes or “scenes” in crackvids.
Figure 2: Screenshot from “The Riverdale Crack.”

Figure 3: Screenshot from “The Riverdale Crack.”
Figure 4: Screenshot from “Riverdale Having Bad Writing for Two Minutes Straight.”

Figure 5: Screenshot from “Riverdale Having Bad Writing for Two Minutes Straight.”
Figure 6: Screenshot from “Riverdale Having Bad Writing for Two Minutes Straight.”
Figure 7: Screenshot from "The Riverdale Writers Must Be on Crack." Note that Sim Mallec has chosen to include a "card" in the top left corner that links to another video on their channel — that card was not in the original RuPaul’s Drag Race scene, nor is it technically a critical component of this video.