



SHIFTING IDENTITIES AND FLEXIBILITY IN *EMILY IN PARIS* (2020): EXPLORING LIFE BETWEEN CULTURES

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Abstract

The paper considers changing identities and cultural elasticity presented in Netflix series *Emily in Paris* (2020) with the focal point on the journey of the main character Emily Cooper to Paris after moving to Chicago. The study examines how the narrative addresses the issues of transnational adaptation and the process through qualitative textual analysis of the first season. Emily is faced with cultural shock in language, workplace behaviors, social interactions and she reacts with rigidity which is based on her American origin. With time, she resorts to more performative tactics, incorporating both straightforward communication with French nuance and filtering her experiences over social media in order to build an aspirational image. The show introduces the world of Paris in the form of glossy images of fashion, romance, and the city, producing the worlds of image of success and femininity. These components emphasize identity as something fluid and mediated, where it gets adapted into embodied activities like changing styles and sensory activities. The results point to the fact that flexibility converts the original conflicts into the chances of hybrid development, and transnational life is illustrated as the place of resistance and empowerment. Although the show idealizes some things and is based on stereotypes, it provides details on the actual experiences of expatriates in the world of globalization. The analysis highlights the power of media to be reflective and constructive of cross-cultural relationships and indicates that fictional accounts add to the overall perceptions of belonging of the interconnected societies.

Keywords: *Cross-Cultural Communication, Cultural Elasticity, Globalization, Hybrid Identity, Social Media Representation, Transnational Adaptation.*

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1. Introduction

With the growth of mobility and cultural exchange, people tend to be traveling in bewildering spaces between national identities. *Emily in Paris* (2020), a Netflix series by Darren Star, is a story of an American marketing professional, Emily Cooper, who decides to move to Paris to work. This move introduces her to the French standards in the workplace, relationships, and in everyday life. The show depicts the difficulties and the possibilities of acclimating to a different culture. Identity does not arrive in a given, but rather it is negotiable. Fluidity is a necessity to people residing in different cultures. The paper focuses on changing identities and cultural flexibility used in the series to analyze them in the theoretical context based on border studies, globalization, and media representation.

Modern studies of globalization emphasize the construction of hybrid identities in the transnational conditions. Vertovec (2020) defines transnationalism as the act of having several affiliations that cut across borders that result in fluid sense of belonging. People keep in touch with the cultures of origin and adopt the elements of host cultures. This is a process that promotes hybridity whereby cultural practices do not completely assimilate. On the same note, Rabahi (2025) also addresses the issue of cultural hybridity among the diaspora communities, and how the internet has provided an opportunity to convert the traditions into other forms. Through such reconversion, the migrants are able to retain their heritage and at the same time adapt to the world influences. These works emphasize the point that the identity in the globalized world is not a fixed category but a result of renegotiation.

Mediascapes concept gives an insight into how the media creates a perception of the culture. According to Appadurai, the mediascapes can be characterized as image and narrative flows that create imagined worlds (Appadurai, 1996). In *Emily in Paris*, Paris is presented in a stylized form of fashion, food and romance. Such portrayals shape the dreams of the viewers and support some of the ways of life as desirable. The recent studies carry this thought to television. Dhanalakshmi (2024) explores the issue of diaspora representations in film by stating that media hybridity incorporates local and global aspects in order to produce original stories. The series screenshots the life of Emily through posts on social media and glossy aesthetics, mediating the cross-cultural life. This mediation influences the character growth and view of transnational existence by the audience.

Theories of borders provide us with the understanding of the psychological and social aspects of crossing the culture. Anzaldua (1987) initiates the concept *mestiza* consciousness as a state of consciousness that was formed at the cultural borders. It involves living in ambiguity and being able to maintain opposing sides. Zaytoun (2022) expands on it by the concept of shapeshifting subjects, according to which people are involved in a continuous change as a relational practice. Emily alternates between

American directness and French subtlety in the professional and personal world in the series. This change is a certain consciousness that accepts change. Wang (2024) utilizes the concept of mestiza consciousness to modern literature, which demonstrates the way female writing reconstructs archetypes in the state of hybrids. The signs of empowerment in such applications are adaptation.

Adaptation strategies are also further explained in performative aspects of identity. Sandoval (2000) describes a methodology of the oppressed that entails the differentiated consciousness wherein subjects shift in an on-off strategy between the modes of resistance. This strategy incorporates performative strategies of maneuvering through power structures. In media sense, actors will portray roles that will either destroy or fit the expectations. The series portrays Emily as someone who carried out cultural competence in terms of learning language and adopting style. Such performances allow one to survive in a foreign environment.

Recent literature on cultural representation in media highlights the importance of narratives in form of visuals. Khan (2024) considers the issue of cultural diversity through the anthropological approaches and emphasizes the need to preserve it despite the globalization. Television series are also a part of how people contribute to the discourse on identity because it offers familiar situations of relocation. *Emily in Paris* idealizes some elements and puts conflict in the forefront, creating a consideration of what an expatriate goes through in real-life.

2. Methodology

The given work uses qualitative textual analysis to explore the concept of representation of changing identities in *Emily in Paris* (Season 1, 2020). Interpretive analysis of media stories is best done through textual analysis, treating text and imagery as the primary features of these stories as well as the themes to reveal cultural implications (Brennen, 2023). The method entails a close reading in particular episodes that describe culture conflict, accommodation, and media curation.

Data are represented by the series episodes, which are supplemented by transcripts that help to scrutinize them in detail. The emphasis on parties that depict identity negotiation like relating in the workplace and using social media are emphasized. This is analysed in an iterative manner first viewing to immerse oneself in the data then coding using themes in line with the theoretical framework such as hybridity, performativity and mediascapes.

Dhaenens and Van Bauwel (2022) recommend textual analysis in cultural studies because it is concerned with layers of ideology of contents. According to Lyhne, Thisted, and Bjerrum (2025), the inductive qualitative content analysis formulates a method of category development based on data to guarantee rigor. Dahal (2025) emphasizes the reflexivity and iterative coding in the qualitative inquiry, which is more profound than

quantitative. Kuckartz and Rädiker (2023) also offer systematic steps of the content analysis, combining theory-based and information-driven codes. Alejandro and Knott (2023) emphasise multi-method improvements to discourse, but this research is still dedicated to the interpretation.

The consistency is reached by the way of clear-cut codification and the theoretical foundation. The interpretive nature of findings, due to a single season, and fictional nature, due to reflection instead of replication of real experiences are limitations. This is a way of exploring the cultural flexibility in the series in a subtle way.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the research will be based on the ideas of border theory, cultural globalization and performative identity to discuss changing identities in *Emily in Paris*. The analysis primarily focuses on the mestiza consciousness of Gloria Anzaldua, which is expressed in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzalddua, 1987). This notion refers to a cultural consciousness of ambiguity that is surfacing at the edges of culture, in which citizens will learn to live with contradictions and become flexible in their attempt to exist in many worlds. Anzaldua says that strict following one culture leads to conflict whereas one ought to embrace ambiguity resulting in resilience and new ways of knowing.

On this basis, Kelli D. Zaytoun develops the concept by adding the concept of shapeshifting subjects (Zaytoun, 2022). In her article, Zaytoun understands the naguala of Anzalddua as an embodiment of constant change, based on the consciousness of relationships. Shapeshifting is one of the creative practices, which cross boundaries generating border arte as forms of hybridity. This approach sees identity changes as enabling practices that allow the people to adapt dynamically to the cultural needs.

Chela Sandoval brings with her the element of performantics, which is based on the concept of differential consciousness in the oppressed communities (Sandoval 2000). Performantics means strategic performances, which enable subjects to shift between resisting and adapting modes. In transnational relations, identity is a performance tool, which is performed in daily decisions in lingo, conduct, and societal functions to share the power structures.

Arjun Appadurai's framework of mediascapes complements these views by addressing media's role in shaping imagined cultures (Appadurai, 1996). Mediascapes consist of image flows through television, film, and social media that construct aspirational worlds. In the series, glossy representations of Paris influence perceptions of success, femininity, and cross-cultural life, reinforcing certain identities as desirable while marginalizing others.

Recent scholarship integrates these ideas into contemporary media analysis. Szulc (2023) emphasizes transnational culture as inherently mobile, marked by both exchange and imperial flows, which aligns with hybrid identity formation. Dai and Hardy (2023)

explore academic identity in transnational settings, highlighting micro-politics of cultural change that mirror performative adaptation. These perspectives frame Emily's journey as an embodied process of hybridity, where flexibility counters cultural rigidity.

Together, the framework posits identity as fluid, performative, and mediated. Anzaldúa (1987) and Zaytoun (2022) provide tools for understanding internal shifts, Sandoval (2000) for strategic enactments, and Appadurai (1996) for media influences. This synthesis reveals how transnational experiences generate strength through ongoing negotiation.

4. Analysis

4.1. Cultural Shocks and Initial Identity Rigidity

The first season episode of *Emily in Paris* depicts the experience of Emily Cooper in Paris as a serious shock of cultural dissimilarity that is full of language ambiguity, professionalism and social customs. This preliminary stage coincides with the explanation of Anzaldúa of the border crossings that cause psychological tension where the strict loyalty to the cultural system where one initially started causes a conflict (Anzaldudena, 1987). American identity of Emily with its open communication and passion towards innovation is incompatible with the French business world that is more conservative and demands respect. Her approaches are perceived as intrusive by her colleagues, and they emphasize the role of fixed identities in making isolation worse in transnational environments. Zaytoun (2022) adds to it and conceptualizes such rigidity as an obstacle to shapeshifting that is when the subject does not want to change and is fixed to single cultural allusions. The old reactions of Emily can be seen as evidence of this resistance in the series as she tries to forcefully convert Chicago-style marketing strategies without changing them.

In French, ringard is described as corny or cheesy. "But you referred to me as le ringard meaning I am the corny one" (Star, 2020, Season 1, Episode 1). This dialogue comes at a time when Emily is in a confrontation with her colleague Luc after he uses the word to show that she is a victim of misunderstanding and feels hurt by being called an outdated person in a new cultural environment.

This media representation of cultural shock at first glance is supported by scholarship. Szulc discusses transnational culture as a movement in which it is accompanied by both mobility and structural power imbalances where newcomers tend to face marginalization before the negotiation process starts (Szulc, 2023). In the same tone, Rabahi examines diasporic online communities, where initial experiences with the host cultures make one defensive, like in the case of Emily as she adopts a defensive position against French criticism of the American habits (Rabahi, 2025). These examinations indicate that media images such as the serial provide real expatriate predicaments, in which the inflexibility of identity is as a result of lack of familiarity with the local codes. Another

example is when micro-politics are examined by Dai and Hardy in transnational academic identities, where people who are cultural newcomers are subjected to subtle gatekeeping in the workplace (Dai and Hardy, 2023). The case of Emily and her boss Sylvie and how the latter rejects her ideas depicts such dynamics in her case.

The series also represents sensory and daily shock which highlights identity rigidity. Emily has difficulty in simple everyday socialization, like ordering coffee or apartment procedures, which Anzalddua links to the unease of the mestiza consciousness formation when the old ways of doing things conflict with the new (Anzalddua, 1987). Zaytoun considers this phase to be pre-shapeshifting, the subject holds on to what is familiar to escape the vulnerability of change (Zaytoun, 2022). Here Sandoval can be helpful in terms of performantics since the earliest performances of Emily are still not adapted and cannot stand in French power structures (Sandoval, 2000).

Everything is about work with you Americans. “In this case, we understand how to have fun in life” (Star, 2020, Season 1, Episode 2). This is explained by Sylvie when she has a confrontation with Emily concerning working hours and revealing the conflict between the American ideals of working hard and the French values of balance.

Modern criticisms point to the way such representations are representative of greater transnational experience. Poell and co-authors describe cultural production using platforms, in which identities mediated by platforms increase the original shocks due to social comparison (Poell et al., 2025). Cultural bridges in transnational film, which state that initial rigidity is often a source of narrative conflict followed by a hybrid solution (Chigbu et al., 2023). Digital glocalization is theorized by Roudometof, according to which, media such as the series perceive shocks as triggers of subsequent flexibility (Roudometof, 2023). The attitude towards these views is such that Emily is rigid not as an individual failure but as a structural reaction to cultural boundaries.

On the whole, in the present subsection, we can see how the series, through cultural shocks, creates a state of identity rigidity to prepare the frame of transformation. The tools to comprehend the inner struggle are offered by Anzalddua and Zaytoun, and the newest scholars put the issue in perspective of global media flows.

4.2. Performative Adaptation and Flexibility

Later in the series, Emily starts to implement strategic behavior and presentational changes, which demonstrates performative adaptation as the core of transnational survival. Sandoval explains this process under the concept of performantics in which subjects use the different form of consciousness to change tactics when being oppressed or differing (Sandoval, 2000). Emily engages in cultural competence by educating herself in a few phrases using French, dressing up in a trendy way and toning down her straight-forwardness during meetings. These performances help her to be accepted and she incorporates the American creativity and French classiness in promotional campaigns.

Zaytoun fills this gap by seeing such changes as shape shifting which is a relational practice and leads to empowerment as a result of ongoing restructuring (Zaytoun, 2022). Anzaldúa defines flexibility as critical to mestizo consciousness, which permits toleration of contradictions not to fragmentation (Anzaldúa, 1987).

“I also begin to believe that the French lifestyle is not so bad” (Star, 2020, Season 1, Episode 5). Emily demonstrates this when she speaks to Mindy where she feels good results of slower social life.

This is supported by scholarship that has been done on performative identities in media. According to Szulc, transnational culture requires performative mobility, in which people use code-switching to overcome divisions (Szulc, 2023). The diasporas of the South-South by Rabahi demonstrates that the heritage is maintained through the performance of reconversion and adjusted to follow the style of Emily, who retains the American optimism in the French grace (Rabahi, 2025). According to Dai and Hardy, performative micro-politics in professional transnationalism involves adaptation to guarantee inclusion (Dai and Hardy, 2023). Emily develops her performance in romantic and social world, which is evident in manoeuvring through open relationships and flirtations.

The series portrays flexibility into individual development whereby Emily wonders her preconceptions on work-life balance and romance. Sandoval interprets this as a move of resistance tactics that allow agency under the hostile surroundings (Sandoval, 2000). Zaytoun understands it as border arte, creative expressions as a result of shapeshifting (Zaytoun, 2022).

“Perhaps I have to be more French about this” (Star, 2020, Season 1, Episode 7). This is an intentional change to performativity as Emily tells Gabriel about restraint in relationships as an emotional aspect. Recent works underline flexibility in globalized media situations. Poell et al. (2025) discuss the availability of performative cultural production through platforms, which rewards adaptive identities. According to Chigbu et al. (2023), transnational cinema depicts flexibility as bridging mechanism, which leads to the hybrid results. Roudometof writes about glocalized performances in digital media where such subjects as Emily select selves to be cross-culturally attractive (Roudometof, 2023). The analyses make the series look like representations of adaptive strategies in the real world.

Performative adaptation is therefore found to be a source of resilience where initial hardness is changed to hybrid power. The theorists all shed light on the flexibility of Emily as being strategic and creative.

4.3. Mediascapes and Imagined Identities

The show *Emily in Paris* creates Paris as an extremely stylized place by visual and storytelling aspects and fits into the definition of mediascapes, in which the media streams

form imagined worlds that constitute views of culture and self-identity (Appadurai, 1996). Slick images of romance cafes, high fashion, and colorful nightlife give a dreamy picture of French life, which has been filtered through the social media prism of Emily. These images are not only self-presented by the character, but also by the aspiration of the viewer about successfulness, femininity and transnational adventure. Emily archives her experiences through Instagram posts, selfies, and branded content, which transform personal lives into a series of performance texts which affirm ideals in lifestyles. This mediation is blurred along reality and fantasy, the script that mediascapes offer desirable identities by excluding the complexities of encountering actual culture.

Paris can appear to be a large metropolis, yet it is actually a miniature town with all people being aware of your affair (Star, 2020, Season 1, Episode 3). Mindy makes the same observation when she goes out with Emily and points out that social networks that are heightened by the media increase scrutiny in imaginary communities.

Current literature explores the use of transnational identities in popular culture generated through the media. Kianpour and colleagues examine the social media accounts in the context of the diaspora, where shared memory and sense of belonging are created through the use of images that are carefully curated, and the same happens with the online persona of Emily (Kianpour et al., 2025). Likewise, Szulc examines transnational queer cultures in digital media, in that visual flows generate hybrid visibilities to challenge and support national stereotypes (Szulc, 2023). Dovchin and Izadi explore the language practices on social media by migrants of the Global South and find out how daily posts negotiate identity under the influence of the global world (Dovchin and Izadi, 2023). The posts of Emily about Paris romanticize the city and shape the opinions of her followers as well as her own adaptation process in the series.

The mediascapes by Appadurai are focused on the importance of image flows in constructing imagined worlds that people access in order to negotiate their reality (Appadurai, 1996). The aesthetics of the show, the Instagram-like filters on the shots of the Eiffel tower views and the restaurants foods she visits, invites the viewers to dream of the edited lifestyle that Emily lives. This is spread to notions of femininity, in which fashion and flirtation are personalities of empowerment. This is where the mestiza consciousness of Anzaldue intersects where the hybrid awareness is created with the difference in the cultural images (Anzaldue, 1987). Zaytoun notes that shapeshifting is a relational process and it is often mediated by visual cultures that cause transformation (Zaytoun, 2022).

Posting is the activity I do so I am (Star, 2020, Season 1, Episode 4). Emily jokes about this to her colleagues when she is justifying her social media strategy, and it highlights the fact that identity in a mediated space is determined by digital presence.

The effects of such representations are being emphasized by modern research on the audiences across the world. Watson et al. chart the networks of transnational media corporations, demonstrating the influence of content distribution on cultural power and imagined geographies (Watson et al., 2023). Lunau and Andreassen speak about the issue of queer migration in the digital realm, referring to the surveillance of the aspirational media flows (Lunau and Andreassen, 2023). Khubchandani studies the topic of transnational queer performance and observes how media such as television series export idealized life in urban areas, which affect the process of forming an identity (Khubchandani, 2023). The show is therefore a mediascape and it exports a romanticized Paris, which the viewers internalize.

The mediascapes of the show have also been used to construct and reproduce stereotypes, where the online branding conducted by Emily makes the French culture appear reachable and exotic. The performantics of Sandoval can be put into practice since Emily performs strategically to earn professional advantages through performing to digital audiences (Sandoval, 2000). The performative layer is an expression of how media determines transnational flexibility.

In general, this subsection shows that mediascapes advance the perceived identities, an amalgamation of aspiration and adaptation. The framework presented by Appadurai and confirmed by recent studies sheds light on the role of the series in the circulation of cultures in the world.

4.4. Personal Growth and Embodied Transnationalism

The physical expression of Emily in *Emily in Paris* is through the adaptation of Emily, where style, habits, and interactions are changed and this captures the spirit of transnationalism where identity changes are experienced. This is a process that utilizes embodied practices that bring about aspects of culture that promote personal development across borders. Anzaldue explains that the mestiza consciousness is characterized by corporeal toleration of ambiguity in which the body is a negotiating location (Anzaldue, 1987). The subjects of embodied transformation are prioritized by Zaytoun (2022) in their shapeshifting as creative and relational, and have generated power through the hybrid experiences. Emily embraces the French fashion and still carries the American characteristics whereby her body plays a facilitating role in everyday situations. Probably, I am getting a bit more Indigenous” (Star, 2020, Season 1, Episode 8). This is mirrored to Gabriel by Emily who is now more relaxed in the pace of eating and the expression of romance.

The literature on embodied transnationalism emphasizes embodied aspects of cultural navigation. Kianpour and colleagues discuss the reach of social media to the community of diasporic bodies that uphold their connections and identity of memory through practice (Kianpour et al. 2025). Szulc develops the topic of transnational queer

embodiments in media and emphasizes corporeal expressions that are transnational (Szulc, 2023). The work by Dovchin and Izabi captured language changes on the internet, in which migrants literally act out hybridity in cyberspace and physical space (Dovchin and Izabi, 2023). The appearance and growth of Emily are marked by her sense experiences, whether it is the taste of new foods or walking with her in Parisian streets.

The performativity of Sandoval understands the embodiment as strategic where bodies act as roles to resist or to adapt in the power relations (Sandoval 2000). Appadurai adds to this observation by assuring that the mediascapes shape embodied aspirations because images create physical imitations (Appadurai, 1996). Emily develops her posture and gestures in a romantic and professional life, which is a hybrid consciousness. “He feels like he is finally coming to call this place a home” (Star, 2020, Season 1, Episode 10). Emily does this in an instance of contemplation with friends, which is an indication of embodied integration.

New literature is dealing with the embodiment in globalization. Watson and others trace the nature of media networks in terms of impacts on our body experiences in transnational cities (Watson et al. 2023). Lunau and Andreassen examine the embodied migration in the digital surveillance environment and demonstrate tensions in the physical adjustment (Lunau and Andreassen, 2023). Khubchandani pays attention to performative bodies of queer transnational cultures, which are empowered by movement and style (Khubchandani, 2023). The series describes the gradual maturation of Emily as a corporeal, as she is uncomfortable with her early on to the no longer hesitant hybridity. Lived transnationalism is the ultimate goal because Emily has become strong by mixing with cultures at a physical level. It is in line with the mestiza power in which ambiguity brings forth fresh insights (Anzaldoua, 1987). Zaytoun (2022) considers it border arte, which consists of embodiment creations that cross worlds.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of *Emily in Paris* in terms of combined theoretical perspectives proves that identity in transnational spaces is a process and not a feature. The transition of Emily Cooper who aims at cultural conflicts to hybrid integration is a good example of Anzaldudas mestiza consciousness in which toleration to ambiguity leads to resiliency (Anzalduda, 1987). This is further explained by Zaytoun in terms of shapeshifting subjects as creative relational practice and empowerment due to continuous transformation (Zaytoun, 2022). The performativity of Sandoval unveils the power negotiations of strategy in both work and life (Sandoval, 2000). The mediascapes of Appadurai explain the glamorous images and curation of social media which builds aspirational identities and affects the character perception and that of the audience (Appadurai, 1996). Together, these frameworks exhibit flexibility as a key to surviving in different cultures.

These insights are supported by studies in greater media contexts. Yoon and Lee (2025) discuss the process of as adaptation of genres by transnational platforms without losing cultural details and reflecting the American-French fusion in the series. The article by Wayne and Castro (2025) discusses the concept of authenticity in streaming originals and how the platform strikes a balance on the local specificity and global popularity. Szulc (2023) highlights the transnational culture of mobility that would be in line with the fluid nature of negotiations of Emily. These contributions emphasize the use of television as a component of mirroring and constructing hybrid experiences in the context of globalization.

The show, though a fun one, provides a perspective on the actual predicaments of the move, including language and cultural norms, in the context of romanticized depictions. It highlights the possibility of using media as a source of cross-cultural awareness, but there are still criticisms about stereotypical representations. The flexibility becomes a strength and the borders become a place of growth.

This paper contributes to the discussion of identity in popular culture, considering that future analyses can be made based on characteristics of comparable stories or by picking up the reactions of the audience. Finally, *Emily in Paris* depicts the richness of cross-cultural living as the changing selves help build stronger ties in the interconnected world.

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