

# How streaming media could change our minds on cultural differences

7 June 2019, by Charles Egert



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The influence of digital technology is most significant in how we experience culture and identity. Think about the use of streaming media.

An award-winning series streaming on Amazon, [The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel](#), is set in 1950s New York, and briefly in Paris. It features Rachel Brosnahan as the title character, Miriam "Midge" Maisel, a housewife who finds that she has a talent for stand-up comedy. When Miriam's mother moves to France at the beginning of season 2, released in December 2018, it provides a range of opportunities for characters from New York and France to engage and interact, touching on subjects of identity, language and cultural relativity.

In his latest book, [The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity](#), Kwame Anthony Appiah recounts growing up in Great Britain as the son of Ghanaian father and a British mother who came from a distinguished family. Now a cultural theorist and philosopher, Appiah tells of his amazement as a child when he learned about the existence of instruction guides on how to speak with an upper-class British accent. Appiah was growing up in the

1950s at the same time that three characters from *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* visit Paris, and a time when information would circulate predominately in newspapers, magazines and books.

That such printed instruction guides given to the young Appiah no longer have the final word has been shown by recent events in France, where there was an interesting juxtaposition of opposing views in mainstream and digital [media](#).

## Media, digitalisation and cultural relativity

In November 2018, the French-Moroccan novelist Leïla Slimani, winner of the Goncourt Prize for [Chanson Douce](#) ("The Perfect Nanny"), was designated [Francophone affairs minister](#) by President Emmanuel Macron. In her new post, Slimani has as her mission showing the "open face of Francophonie to a multicultural world." Interestingly, when she appeared on the BBC broadcast *Hardtalk* she readily [answered questions in English](#). While it is not unusual for French public figures to speak in English on *Hardtalk* – the French economics minister, Bruno Lemaire, did the same when he appeared days earlier—the way that BBC News is watched has changed since the [streaming technology IPTV](#) (Internet protocol television) became widely available in the 2000s.

Meanwhile, about one week before Slimani's appearance, the French senator André Villini [published an editorial](#) headlined "We must defend French language against English which threatens it... even in France!" In the article, Villini cited a number of English terms widely employed in France, from "fashion forward" to "urban week," and referred to newly created words—such as "Linky," a smart electrical meter—that are inspired by English.

Villini's opinion piece appeared in *Le Figaro*, an important representative of mainstream media. He bemoans that French language and culture haven't

managed to be an alternative to the current global "blandness—a perpetual refrain when discussing the need to enhance the French language's statute in the world. Concretely, Villani demands that public French business schools that now propose programs taught entirely in English reverse their course and require at least 50% be taught in French. He thus adheres to the cause-effect view taught in universities that a chronological series of events leading to linguistic unification was followed by the creation of a national identity.

Contrast this approach to Slimani's responses in ["By the Book"](#), a *New York Times* column that appeared on January 2019. Slimani, who is Moroccan and thus comes from a country that was colonised by France, was invited to name her favourite authors. She listed some national representatives of French prose, such as Maupassant, as well as authors from Africa and elsewhere in the world where French is spoken. This approach could well be one of the reasons she was named by the French president. "In the world we are living in today," she is quoted as saying in *Vanity Fair* on January 2019, "it's more and more difficult to defend diversity and sharing [across] different cultures."

### Elective affinities of places

Slimani's penchant to write about race and class fits well with Appiah's idea of a conception of identity that is less attached to the narrative history of a particular nation and more to a [cultural relativity](#). They powerfully suggest that that the issue emerging from this contrast in views presents the possibility that our minds no longer associate language with a national identity, but rather with a set of cultural ideals and beliefs.

In *Chanson Douce* and *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* ("In the Ogre's Garden," or "Adèle" published in 2014), Slimani picks out different details about life in Paris that play a prominent role in the characters' private lives. The novels are not the place for a dominant culture or singular role model. Sociologists tell us that cultures can be observed through symbolic interactions in public places, and their inherent instability highlights social behaviours that can ignore class lines and cross barriers.

Thanks to the streaming that has [changed media-consumption habits](#), several examples can be appreciated in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. As the latest season begins, Miriam Maisel's mother has left her husband to go live in Paris, nostalgic for her student days there. The husband and daughter follow, worried and anxious. Much like in the theory about the effects of place on behaviours, in Paris the daughter is seized by such an impulse at a nightclub, and with the help of a translator, engages the audience with a funny and sad list of grievances about her ex-husband.

Moreover, Midge is not the only one of the trio to take their cue from a new place. When the mother tells a waiter that neither her daughter nor husband has ever been to Paris before, the waiter replies by a Gallic shrug of the shoulders. The intellectual father, trying to adapt to Paris café life through passionate discussions with new friends, afterwards has to admit to his wife with a shrug that he didn't understand very much.

Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that one is ill-advised to define culture as an indivisible whole but rather it should be seen as coming to us in many parts, sometimes separate, sometimes joined by a common history. Before, only print media could provide us with these cultural parts in the form of insightful mediations. Now, streaming media is providing them as well.

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APA citation: How streaming media could change our minds on cultural differences (2019, June 7) retrieved 24 November 2020 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-06-streaming-media-minds-cultural-differences.html>

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