

## *Cubanness and Americanness: Identity Negotiations in Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy* by Carlos Eire

MAŁGORZATA MARTYNUSKA

**Abstract.** This article explores emerging identities in the memoir *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy* by Carlos Eire. The narrator experiences multiple exiles during his voyage into the diverse cultural landscapes of the USA and treats those transitions as symbolic deaths leading to cultural renewal. The character interprets everything through his selective recollections from Cuba, and the constant critique of his antiquated roots diminishes the value of past experiences. The process of Eire's Americanisation is inevitably linked with his anti-nostalgia. The essay emphasises the moments when the narrator reproduces himself through transformation, and his reminiscences of Cuba tend to be more positive. Although this journey takes place within the American environment, Eire experiences the "nearness" of Cubanness, which lessens his attachment to Americanness. Ethnic foodways and ties of kinship are the primary elements bridging Carlos with Cubanidad. Negotiating the narrator's identity is a fluid process of cultural renewal when he struggles with "in-betweenness" and attempts rejection of his Cuban self. However, life experiences change his approach, giving him a greater appreciation for his ethnic roots.

**Keywords:** Cuban American, identity, memoir, exile, anti-nostalgia

### Introduction

Several Cuban-American authors write about staying in exile and not returning to the island, e.g., Heriberto Padilla's *La mala memoria* (1989), Reinaldo Arenas's *Antes que anochezca* (1992), Gustavo Pérez Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba* (1995), Húber Matos's *Cómo llegó la noche* (2004). This article examines Carlos Eire's memoir *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy* (2010) which chronologically continues *Waiting for Snow in Havana* (2003). Eire has authored several highly-acclaimed scholarly books on early modern European religious history, including *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship From Erasmus to Calvin* (1986); *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of*

*Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (1995); *A Very Brief History of Eternity* (2010); *Reformations: The Early Modern World* (2016); and *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila: A Biography* (2019).<sup>1</sup> The memoir of the Cuban Revolution *Waiting for Snow in Havana* (2003) focuses on Eire's first eleven years of life spent in Cuba. His second memoir, *Learning to Die in Miami* (2010), explores the exile experience of Carlos and his older brother Tony after they arrive in Florida as refugees participating in the operation known as the Pedro Pan<sup>2</sup> airlift, which enabled the exodus of fourteen thousand Cuban children.

This article explores the formation of Eire's identity and accentuates the moments he moves between Cubanness and Americanness. The analysis is constructed according to the methodology of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, defined in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in which he claims that cultural identities have both a future and a past, which means that they undergo constant transformation (1990: 225–226). The notion of identity has been a topic of frequent academic analysis. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur formulates the concept of narrative identity in the 3rd volume of *Time and Narrative* (1988), in which he emphasises the configuration of identity that persists over time. According to his theory, narrative identity responds to how identity can bespeak both change and permanence. Ricoeur divides identity into two categories: the former based on sameness, the latter incorporating change within a recognisable identity. Narrative identity mediates the contradictions of change and permanence through contact, resulting in a transformative understanding of one's self. Literary critic Edward Said challenges the concept of national identity and the dogmatism of 'us' and 'them' prevalent in the political discourse of the Western and non-Western worlds in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). Said places literary works in a political context and claims that the global problems of population transfer and forced migration stem from nationalism and imperialism. Said opposes nationalist narratives and emphasises novel alignments made across borders with the development of new global consciousness.

Hall's view of the process of identity formation is shared by the cultural scholar Sean Scanlan, who writes in "Introduction: Nostalgia": "Identity is continually changed, not replaced" (2004: 7). Furthermore, Scanlan's article refers to the concept of nostalgia and interprets the narrator's experiences by

<sup>1</sup> The details on Carlos Eire's publications come from [history.yale.edu/people/carlos-eire](http://history.yale.edu/people/carlos-eire) and [themartellagency.com/authors/carlos-eire/](http://themartellagency.com/authors/carlos-eire/).

<sup>2</sup> Operation Peter Pan (*Operación Pedro Pan*) was a covert program that helped unaccompanied Cuban minor refugees escape from the island to the USA between 1960 and 1962. The program was designed to protect Cuban children whose parents were being targeted by Fidel Castro's regime (Blakemore 2019).

contrasting selected images of his Cuban past with those from the American present. The notion of nostalgia, primarily expressing a sentimental longing for the past, demonstrates the sentimentality and selectivity of reflection (Lowenthal 2015: 50; Wilson 2005: 3; Su 2005: 2). Exiles usually produce a nostalgic vision idealising their mother countries, which the political scholar William Safran calls “a myth about their original homeland” (1991: 83). In contrast, Eire’s memoir emphasises his experiences in Cuba through the prism of anti-nostalgia<sup>3</sup> with negative impressions applied to the homeland and positive images of the host country. The analysis emphasises the moments when the narrator reproduces himself through transformation, and his reminiscences of Cuba tend to be more positive. Hall describes this image-oriented approach towards studies of identity formation in “The Question of Cultural Identity”, in which he argues that literature and popular culture provide stories and images representing the nation, whose people are becoming an “imagined community” (1992: 293). The literary scholar Andrea Herrera O’Reilly uses the term “voyaging” to describe the emergence of cultural identity from experiences and imaginations (2007: 179). This essay focuses on selected images of Eire’s “voyage” full of “deaths and rebirths”, shaping the narrator’s self.

## Deaths and rebirths

The memoir begins with the words “Having just died” (1), which symbolise the protagonist’s wish to ‘kill’ his ethnic self and become someone else. Thus, the character experiences his first ‘death’ upon arrival in the USA and begins his ‘afterlife’ in Miami with a symbolic sandwich called *Pan Americano*. The author makes this sandwich a metaphor for the refugees’ journey as *Pan Americano* also denotes an airline linking Cuba with the USA. From the first day of his exile, Carlos takes on the perspective of the ‘other’, uprooted from his island home and coping with all the newness he encounters. In her study *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), literary critic and philosopher Julia Kristeva explores the themes of otherness, alienation, being a foreigner and a stranger. Her book recognises the double identity of the foreigner: as an immigrant, and as the universal stranger in the sense that we are all strangers to ourselves. Kristeva claims that we can better understand strangers in our world by accepting strangeness in ourselves.

<sup>3</sup> Anti-nostalgic revisionist accounts have been analysed by the professor of comparative literature at Yonsei University, John M. Frankl, in “Distance as Anti-Nostalgia: Memory, Identity, and Rural Korea in Yi Sang’s *Ennui* (2012). Feelings of anti-nostalgia are also expressed in poetry, for example by novelist, poet, and playwright of Polish Jewish ancestry, Henryk Grynberg, the author of *Antynostalgia* (1971).

Thus, she confronts strangeness by rejecting it and identifying with it. Eire identifies with the American South, especially the Miami area, which becomes associated with Hispanic imagery denoting Cubanidad. Not only is the landscape of Florida transformed by Latin “abroadness”, but Hispanic identities also invariably become “southernized” as well (Milian 2013: 35).

Eire uses the metaphor of lizards to present metamorphosis and the child’s capacity to adjust to social change. The metaphorical deaths of the narrator signal his transformations (López 2015: 140). His first location is the Florida City camp, from where Carlos begins a journey and, at the same time, a cycle of transitions to become someone else. In the house of his Jewish foster family, Eire is assigned some household responsibilities and taught the values of the American work ethic. At this stage of his voyage, the narrator takes his first step toward acculturation by changing his Cuban name *Carlos* to the American *Charles*. “I wanted to fit in, not stand out in any way. I was hell-bent on becoming an American.” (33). Professor Iraida H. López, who specialises in Caribbean literature, interprets the narrator’s attempts to ‘kill’ the Cuban self to speed up acculturation as a “defense mechanism against his feelings of despair” (2015: 147). The narrator is a child in a foreign land, experiencing dynamic changes which shape his identity.

The character experiences multiple exiles during his voyage into the diverse cultural landscapes of the USA and treats those transitions as symbolic deaths leading to cultural renewal. His second death is acknowledged when Carlos and Tony are transferred to a new home in the Coral Way area of Miami, run by an abusive Cuban couple, Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, where the boys experience humiliation and neglect. This unwelcoming place triggers nostalgic recollections of past Christmases celebrated in Havana, acknowledging that Cubanness is still an inevitable part of Eire’s identity. Although Charles replaces Carlos, his Cuban self does not fade away, and the protagonist starts to uncover his split identity.

The narrator’s feeling of ‘otherness’ refers to his self-ascription as an immigrant, a refugee, and primarily a Cubano exile with a Hispanic accent. Eire’s determination to become an American and speak English fluently becomes his primary target, strongly supported by his Russian teacher. It is striking that a representative of already acculturated immigrants, rather than Anglo-Americans, is mentioned in the author’s memoir as the one who helped the newly-arrived Hispanic student. Neither the teacher nor Carlos believe in bilingual education, and instead of constructing the refugee’s identity in a hybrid way, they opt for Americanisation. Eire openly expresses his firm views on the linguistic aspect of Latinx presence in the USA by saying, “There’s no better way of keeping Hispanics down in the United States than to tell them

that they don't have to learn English." (53). He talks about his plan to 'kill' his Cuban self with some linguistic creativity: *selficide*, *Cubanicide*, *Carloscide* (163). Inventing new terminology proves that the narrator feels more comfortable about his English skills.<sup>4</sup> Hispanic immigrants usually go through a stage of code-switching when they go back and forth from the Spanish grammatical system to the English one creating a linguistic entity known as Spanglish. Using this dialect may denote that they do not know the particular English words, and out of necessity substitute the missing phrases with familiar Spanish vocabulary (Waltermire 2014: 1–4; Rodríguez-González and Parafito-Couto 2012: 461; Prieto 2014: 360). Scholars also emphasise that speakers with a certain degree of fluency continue using Spanglish to express their hybrid identity (Cortés 2013: 1986; Neuliep 2015: 107; Alvarez 1997: B4). However, this is not the case for the narrator, who does not speak Spanglish, and instead starts exploring the linguistic potential of English.

After moving with his brother to join their uncle in Bloomington in the Midwest, the narrator embraces a new self again. Their voyage takes them northward, far away from the Cuban island, to an area within the snow zone, which Carlos strongly associates with the characteristics of "superior" countries. The author demonstrates a certain degree of idealisation in considering the climate a positive differential between the American mainland and the Cuban island. He distances himself geographically from the island of Cuba, the American South, and his vernacular communities. The environment of the Midwest offers a renewed perception of the US ethnic make-up. Carlos encounters German immigrants who run an Americanisation program introducing foreigners to the English language and the American political system. For the second time Carlos emphatically mentions immigrants, rather than Anglo-Americans, as those who facilitate the acculturation of Hispanic refugees. The character begins to feel that his 'otherness' has disappeared and, already deprived of his mother's surname, assumes the name Chuck Nieto. The narrator openly expresses his anti-nostalgic feelings when idealising the new home by calling it metaphorically the Promised Land and "the Corn Belt Jerusalem" (242). It is not in Miami or the American South in general, but the Midwest, far away from the Cuban community, where Carlos realises his American Dream.

The ties of kinship metaphorically symbolise Eire's forgotten Cubanidad and cause new transformations in his life. Relocation to Chicago to reunite with

<sup>4</sup> In his work *On the Way to Language* (1959), the German philosopher Martin Heidegger relates to language as a living human phenomenon. The author elaborates on the strange relationship between humans and language and claims that language speaks by performing a monologue. Then, human beings respond to language as they hear it spoken to them.

his mother makes him realise the uncertainty of his status: "Once a refugee, always a refugee." (210). The narrator does not welcome this family reunion as it strengthens his link with Cubanness and distances him from Americanness. Moving to Chicago uproots him from the 'Promised Land' in Bloomington and causes another metaphorical death. Instead of reconstructing his identity in the cultural "in-betweenness", Eire emphasises Cubanidad. He recollects that Chuck Nieto 'died' when he left Bloomington, similar to Charles and Charlie, which creates a cycle of "nameicides" (301). Finally, he is reborn by taking on his Cuban name, Carlos, to become Carlos M. N. Eire and, finally, Carlos Eire.

### Cubanness and Americanness

The memoir emphasises polarisation between the image of the USA, which the narrator considers a genuine country, and post-revolution Cuba, depicted as an imperfect imitation of the original. In his home country, Carlos was longing for American "movies, television shows, comic books, and a thousand and one products, from baseball cards to model trains and soft drinks" (8). All those expressions of US popular culture provide imagery that he confronts with the reality of exile in Miami. Having some knowledge of American commercial products facilitates Eire's acculturation into the new environment. This view is shared by López, who claims that familiarity with American culture softens the impact of the transition into life in the USA (2015: 141–142). The narrator perceives commercialisation as an original feature of contemporary society and claims that his home country only offers an imperfect copy of the US lifestyle. The distinct differences between American and Cuban cultures highlight the world he considers genuine. The literary scholar Natalie Friedman describes this anti-nostalgic way of viewing the homeland and praising the host country for its commercial artefacts with the words: "The consumer comforts of a capitalist state serve to distance the characters from their old countries." (2004: 78).

Carlos constantly contemplates his contemporary situation in the context of his Cuban past and produces multiple reflections stressing the differences between life on the island and in the USA. He frequently refers to his homeland with the negative connotation of Castrolandia, suggesting that Cuba is no longer an independent country but occupied by Castro and his supporters. Past recollections begin with the precise explanation of the Cuban way of reckoning time: "Before Fidel or, in shorthand, B.F." and "After Fidel (A.F.)" (35). This emphasis on sharp contrasts differentiating the USA and post-revolution Cuba makes the narration exemplify nostalgic features, described by Scanlan in the following words: "place of residence and place of origin are polarized" (2004: 7). The author uses metaphors and openly associates Cuba with hell and the

USA with marvellous vending machines. Eire writes about his native country in biblical terms, signifying the importance of religiosity in Cuba, and at the same time identifies the American lifestyle with popular culture and commodity. Although this repeated pattern of comparisons highlights the benefits of American capitalism, it seems that life in the USA is idealised. The difference in affluence between the author's birthplace and his host country is undoubtedly the key factor that triggers his anti-nostalgia. Cuban culture is no longer vibrant and colourful but monotonous and disappointing. Even at the early stages of his exile, the protagonist does not intend to return to his homeland, which becomes just the object of critical recollection. Neither does he consider the option of accepting a hybrid identity. Instead, Eire decides to erase his past and acculturate into the American mainstream.

The process of Eire's Americanisation is inevitably linked with his anti-nostalgia. The character interprets everything through his selective recollections from Cuba, and the constant critique of his antiquated roots diminishes the value of past experiences. The fascination with the USA also applies to American daily routines. When the narrator realises that his middle-class foster parents do not have servants, which would not happen in the case of a family of the same social status in pre-revolution Cuba, Carlos praises the superiority of the USA where "Everyone must do their own work" (52). From his new perspective, Cuba becomes "a parallel universe" and "some other dimension", while the USA is "the real world" where he is "alive" (9). The narrator explicitly manifests his identification with the American lifestyle.

Despite his plan of speedy acculturation, Carlos experiences moments of hesitation about whether he should get rid of his Cuban self. The power of the "food voice"<sup>5</sup> explicitly reminds him about his ethnic roots. Cuban cuisine is a source of anxiety as, on the one hand, he admires the range of culinary options available in the USA, while on the other hand, food brings nostalgic memories from his homeland (89). Occasionally Carlos and Tony spend weekends with a Cuban couple, the Becquers, who, apart from preparing tasty Cuban food, act as kin helping with the boys' fostering during their parents' absence. French scholar Claude Lévi-Strauss analysed the subject of kinship in cultural anthropology. He claimed that culture has the capacity to generate a finite number of coherent family relations.<sup>6</sup> According to the British historian Mary Chamberlain 'kinship' has become a metaphor for social behaviour indicating

<sup>5</sup> The term "food voice" has been coined by Annie Hauck-Lawson as "the dynamic, creative, symbolic, and highly individualized ways that food serves as a channel of communication" (1992: 6).

<sup>6</sup> In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), Claude Lévi-Strauss describes the passage from nature to culture and reveals the foundations of human society.

a network of support during the early stages of migration (Chamberlain 2009: 236). While staying with the Becquers, Eire begins to feel his split personality as he understands that he is both “Charles *and* Carlos” (71), which makes him realise that “maybe there’s a level of comfort among your own that can’t be duplicated among foreigners” (75). The ethnic cuisine and the idea of kinship evoke reminiscence of his home country and nostalgia. The “food voice” connects the narrator with Cubanidad and facilitates the further reconstruction of his identity. The Food Studies scholars Donna R. Gabaccia (1998: 9) and Zilkia Janer (2008: 102) claim that changes in cultural identity can be analysed through the prism of foodways. The narrator experiences cultural renewal after consuming ethnic dishes, but his identification with Cubanidad lessens when he moves to Bloomington, where tropical are foods less readily available. Carlos feels that he has been “redeemed from bondage, and from tropical existence” (222), but some nostalgia in his words suggests he has not entirely forgotten his ethnic heritage.

The narrator’s voyage through the “geographical matrix”<sup>7</sup> starts on a Caribbean island (Havana), and then proceeds to the American South (Miami), from where he relocates to the Midwest (Bloomington). The surroundings Carlos encounters trigger a series of further contrasts between the new places in the USA and his Cuban hometown; however, his recollections are repeatedly selective and mainly concern his imaginary representations of the city. Eire contrasts the architectural features of Havana, Miami and Bloomington, and concludes that the last town, situated in the Midwest, provides a distinct difference in comparison to the previous two. Carlos expresses his identity through popular culture by emphasising that he particularly misses American landmarks and icons such as skyscrapers, cowboys, and Marilyn Monroe.

Childhood images of Havana haunt Carlos at different locations throughout his life as he refuses to let go of the past. The exile turns into a voyage through American spaces, during which Carlos produces contrastive visualisations, such as when he sees the courthouse in Bloomington, which “looks like a small version of the Capitol in Havana, which, in turn, is a small version of the Capitol in Washington, D.C.” (226). When the narrator sees that no part of the school building in Bloomington opens outdoors to ensure protection against cold weather, he immediately compares it with the architectural standards of tropical regions. Even in Chicago, Eire continues with his nostalgic contrasts between this American city and his Cuban home and finds that the lakeshore area of

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<sup>7</sup> The term “geographical matrix” has been coined by Professor of Social and Cultural Geography Tim Edensor to denote the distinct geographical and cultural landscape of places (2002: 68).



Chicago resembles the Malecón, a roadway along the shore of Havana. The constant reference to places from the past and the nostalgic way of perceiving the present influence the author's identity formation. Sociology professor Janelle L. Wilson affirms that "Nostalgia may be a means of facilitating the continuity of identity – looking back to our past around us; we have a sense of who we were, who we are, and who we are becoming." (1999: 303).

Moving to the new American spaces plays a vital role in the construction of the narrator's identity. Uprooted from his native land, Carlos seeks deeper attachments both in an emotional and geographic sense. He tries to adapt to the American environment in general and the particular places he settles in. Then, the narrator repeats the pattern of contrasting the new spaces he encounters with those familiar from his childhood. Cubanidad still influences the transformations of Eire's identity; the past shapes the present.

### Spirituality

A vital aspect of Eire's identity formation concerns spirituality, repeatedly depicted in the context of his Cuban background. The narrator presents a flexible attitude towards practicing Christianity, partly from his upbringing in Cuba, where syncretic fusions of African traditions and Catholicism are made in religious rituals, such as the practice of Santería. Additionally, Eire's liberal attitude towards religiosity results from his family's unique observance, originating in the beliefs of the Theosophical Society, whose adherents accepted alternative spiritual movements such as New Age.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, being Roman Catholic was not an obstacle to his family's acceptance of reincarnation or voodoo curses. The narrator's ethnic heritage and the distinctive beliefs of his family enhance his understanding of the multiple religions he encounters in the USA.

Exile exposes Carlos to various religious denominations and creates an opportunity to contrast spiritual practices among Jews, Cuban Catholics, and American Protestants. The character refers to the core of the Christian experience, namely, the notion of death and Resurrection. He combines the idea of dying from the Christian perspective with the metaphorical death that any new immigrant might endure after giving up his or her former life in the mother country and being reborn in the new home (López 2015: 144). Eire repeatedly expresses his fascination with the American way of practicing Christianity,

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<sup>8</sup> Members of the Theosophical Society in America are not required to have any specific beliefs. They are supposed to investigate unexplained laws of nature and encourage the comparative study of religion, philosophy, and science. <https://www.theosophical.org/about>

emphasising Protestant worship, further contrasting it with Catholic observance. He instinctively perceives the canon of Protestant values as the core of Americanness. This attitude resembles the American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits' claim expressed in *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) that conversion to Protestant Christianity required acculturation (Murphy 1993: 111).

The memoir reflects the narrator's multicultural experiences and difficulties in distinguishing between ethnic characteristics and typically American traits. After arriving in Florida, Carlos and other Cuban refugee children are sent to different American states. Eire immediately compares their situation to the plight of the Jews, whom he calls the "most widely and continuously dispersed race of exiles in human history" (24). When both Carlos and Tony stay with Jewish families, the protagonist notices the parallels between Christianity and Judaism, as both Jesus and the Virgin Mary are Hebrew. His boyish observations lead him to conclude that he must become Jewish first to become a real American, so he needs to go through the Bar Mitzvah ritual of entering manhood (106). Eire's childish assumptions prove that he certainly needs guidance in the US spiritual landscape; however, the lack of religious indoctrination makes his mind open to the spiritual options available in his new country.

Carlos emphasises the ritualisation of the Cuban Catholic practices: "a lethal combination of self-denial, ritual excess, and superstition" (42). This presumption is supported by professor of theology Joseph M. Murphy<sup>9</sup> who claims that the idea of Catholicism has always emphasised ritualised observance rather than spiritual experience (1993: 111). Eire realises that some forms of Christian practice include superstition rather than belief. He also declares that religiosity combined with superstition applies both to Cuban Catholics and American Protestants. The narrator brings a book selected by his parents, *The Imitation of Christ*, written by Thomas á Kempis in the fifteenth century and translated into Spanish by Juan Eusebio Nieremberg. The book is supposed to provide spiritual guidance by teaching how to accept suffering and letting go of the idea that one has control over one's life. Eire explains this in an interview for National Public Radio "(T)here's a Catholic superstition where if you have a question and open that book at random, the answer will be on that page."<sup>10</sup> Carlos considers the potential power of the book to be an old Spanish superstition similar to English Protestants' reverence for the Bible. *The Imitation*

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph M. Murphy is a professional academic at Georgetown University in Washington DC and a participant in the Santeria community of the Bronx.

<sup>10</sup> Carlos Eire: A Cuban-American Searches For Roots *National Public Radio (NPR). Author Interviews*. 22 November 2010.

of *Christ*, valued so much by Eire's parents, does not serve its purpose at first, and instead of offering comfort, scares him to death: "It's the most depressing book ever written by any human being, in all of human history." (74). Nonetheless, Carlos later realises that life experience is necessary to understand its teachings, specifically that an individual attitude towards belief offers consolation but at the price of effort.

Another area in which the narrator's "take on religious differences" (38) was shaped is church aesthetics and sacral art. In his memoir, Eire confesses that he has never liked churches because the symbolism connected with Jesus, the cross, and the crown of thorns has always scared him: "Frankenstein and Dracula had never haunted my dreams, but Jesus certainly had." (38). The figure of Dracula, associated with the Christian cultural background, in popular folklore embodies magic and darkness. The similarities between Dracula and Jesus have been the theme of numerous academic analyses focused on the symbolism of blood and crucifixion, but primarily on the Christlike power of Dracula's immortality.<sup>11</sup> The narrator juxtaposes images of Dracula with the perception of Jesus Christ, suggesting a critique of organised religion, especially the institution of the Catholic Church. A similar interpretation applies to the symbolism of Frankenstein and the similarity with Christian imagery of being raised from the dead, which challenges religious authority (Peters 2018).

Carlos changes his perception of Christian iconography after seeing the statue of Jesus at the Church of St Brendan in Miami. He is surprised that the depiction of Christ is "totally free of frightening images and bad vibes" (43). A similar situation occurs when he moves to Bloomington, and in his uncle's house sees a copy of Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*,<sup>12</sup> the image of Jesus recognisable by Americans of all races and religions. This particular depiction is supposed to offer comfort and security (Prothero 2003: 117; Blum and Harvey 2012: 211), as it did in the case of the narrator, whose religious anxiety and distress lessened. Eire comments on the various ways American Christians and Cuban Catholics present the saints: "Jesus H. Midwestern Christ, what a contrast with every tormented, bloody, pain-inducing, terrifying Catholic image of Our Savior! No doubt about it: Even the son of God looks better up here in the Corn Belt." (220). In his spiritual reflections, Eire depicts the positive portrayal of American

<sup>11</sup> Exemplary publications include Jesus Munoz 2013 *Holy Dracula...The Christian Knight*. Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse; D. Bruno Starrs 2004 *Keeping the faith: Catholicism in "Dracula" and its adaptations* *Journal of Dracula Studies* 6.

<sup>12</sup> Salman's *Head of Christ* has been reproduced widely for devotional use: by 1990 more than 500 million copies had been made (Blum 2013). The image has become the basis for visualisations of Jesus (Lippy 1994:185) and has achieved global iconic status (Blum and Harvey 2012: 211).

religiosity and criticises the scary images of the Catholic saints in Cuba. The frightening representations most certainly result from the syncretism of Cuban Catholicism, and mainly from its infusion with Santerian practices (Canizares 1999: 43; Murphy 1993: 111).

The narrator continues his contemplation of cultural differences in the aspect of religiosity by juxtaposing his Easter recollections from Cuba with American practices: “It was all about death and suffering, never about the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.” (42). At St Brendan’s, Eire learns that Good Friday holds “the promise of a resurrection” (45); thus, he concludes, “Catholicism was not exactly the same everywhere.” (42). Eire is astonished when Americans listen to jazz music in the car on Good Friday, while in Cuba, on that particular day, people are not supposed to engage in any form of entertainment, only fasting and praying the whole day. Jazz changes Carlos’ attitude towards faith, which he calls “a crucial step towards enlightenment” (43). Entertainment and religiosity have not been seen as mutually exclusive in the USA, and it is not a coincidence that jazz is mentioned in the spiritual context. This musical genre has acquired some spiritual meaning that is considered exceptionally American. The jazz scholar Josian Boornazian even considers jazz an egalitarian form comparable to an ideal democracy “Like democracy, jazz is about balancing tradition and innovation, individualism and collectivism.” (Boornazian 2017). The professor of religious studies David W. Stowe, in turn, considers jazz as “representing the carnal pleasures of Saturday night in contrast to Sunday worship” (2010: 312). Eire distances himself from the religious practices of Cuban Catholics and identifies with the worshipping style of American Christians.

## Conclusion

The memoir depicts the American ethnoscape, defined by Appadurai as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, migrants, refugees, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals” (1996: 33). The narrative features characters representing various ethnic and national groups: Cubans, Jews, Germans, Spaniards, Anglo-Americans. At the beginning of his voyage, the author does not aim to distinguish himself in the ethnoscape that he enters but remains committed to reconstructing his identity through integration within the Anglo-American mainstream. Eire openly supports Americanisation programs and appreciates that acculturated members of ethnic minorities help him reduce his feeling of ‘otherness’.

Immigrants usually idealise selected images of their mother countries in their nostalgic reflections, as Scanlan claims: “Nostalgia keeps on returning”

(2004: 3). However, at the beginning of the narrative, Eire openly demonstrates an anti-nostalgic approach. The primary reason for reconsidering his rejection of his ethnic roots is Cuban food, which Carlos regards as superior to American cuisine. While contrasting Cuba with the USA, he idealises the host country and repeatedly recalls negative memories of his homeland. These selective recollections of Cuba trigger his anti-nostalgia, which Carlos considers the best way of acculturating into American society. This presumption confirms Friedman's statement: "Indulging in nostalgia was, therefore, a barrier to acculturation" (2004: 79). Nonetheless, this aspect of Cubanidad weakens when Carlos leaves Miami and distances himself from Floribbean cuisine. The geographic remoteness from the island of Cuba, and the tropical area of Florida, strengthens his identification with US culture. The second element that makes the protagonist reconstruct his Cuban self is kinship. The family reunion involving relocation to Chicago causes the narrator to be uprooted again. Although this journey takes place within the American environment, he experiences the 'nearness' of Cubanness, which lessens his attachment to Americanness. Ethnic foodways and ties of kinship are the primary elements bridging Carlos with Cubanidad.

Eire acknowledges his multiple exiles with the metaphorical deaths and rebirths that he experiences, signifying that some part of his Cuban self 'dies', and he continually reconstructs his self. The cycle of symbolic deaths denotes Eire's attempts to reject Cubanidad; instead, each 'suicide' he commits brings him closer to accepting his dual identity. These conflicting identities haunt Carlos through his narrative. In its last chapter, the author's split self is recalled with "we": "If all we are is memory, and memory contains one death after another, rebirth upon rebirth, how can we ever hope to speak of 'I,' 'me,' or 'myself'? Shouldn't we speak of 'we,' 'us,' or 'ourselves?'" (302) As Eire has had more 'deaths' and 'rebirths' behind him, so he finally understands the teachings of *The Imitation of Christ* as it saves him from "The blessed pain of learning how to die." (84) In the interview for NPR, Eire explains how the book he got from his parents guided his life:

The book allowed me to let go of my past. It allowed me not to fix my gaze on what I had lost but rather to be happy that I had lost. ... To take my exile as a gift – to not focus on how I could reclaim my place in the social hierarchy, but rather just to devote myself to reading about my religion, learning how to live it, and then, once I got this idea in my head that my profession was going to be teaching, that's what I considered my vocation.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Carlos Eire: A Cuban-American Searches For Roots *National Public Radio (NPR). Author Interviews*. 22 November 2010.

Negotiating the narrator's identity is a fluid process of cultural renewal when he struggles with in-betweenness and attempts rejection of his Cuban self. However, the life experiences change his approach, giving him a greater appreciation for his ethnic roots. Finally, Carlos gains a new sense of perspective and finds a balance between his Cubanness and Americanness by adopting a bicultural identity.

**Małgorzata Martynuska**

*mmartynuska@ur.edu.pl*

University of Rzeszów

POLAND

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