From Criminal to Rehabilitated Prison Reformer: Gradual Identity Transformation in Charles McGregor's Prison Autobiography *Up from the Walking Dead*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how social roles are narratively constructed in Charles McGregor's prison autobiography *Up from the Walking Dead* (1978) and investigates which significance the protagonist's prison experiences have for this process. The construction of a criminal role which is reinforced by the prison experience is analyzed, and it is argued that the transformation process the protagonist undergoes is constructed as occurring despite the institution of prison.

KEYWORDS: prison; autobiography; identity transformation; criminal role; Charles McGregor

Introduction

As long as societies have existed, there have been social rules which define what is assumed to be "normal" and what "deviant" behavior. Deviance can thereby be broadly defined as "nonconformity with social norms or expectations" (Fulcher and Scott 227). The American sociologist Howard Becker claims that "social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders" (9). Deviance, and as a consequence criminality, which is one form of deviant behavior, is thus a construct which varies according to the historical, social and cultural context. Taking sociological research on crime and deviance as a point of departure, I want to examine from the perspective of life writing how one individual, who was labeled as deviant by society, retrospectively constructs his "deviant" experiences and what significance they obtain for the construction of his identity.

Charles McGregor's autobiography *Up from the Walking Dead*[1] (1978), which is in the focus of this article, offers a unique opportunity to do so. Written by Sharon Sopher, but narrated by Charles McGregor[2], the prison autobiography reconstructs McGregor's life leading up to

[1] The title of the autobiography includes not only an intertextual reference to Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), but with "walking dead" it also alludes to the notion of the civil death of prisoners and their dehumanization in prison whereby they are transformed into "animate corpse[s]" (Smith "Detention" 244). For a detailed discussion on the civil death of prisoners, see Smith (2009).

[2] In a traditional autobiography, author, narrator, and protagonist are identical but fulfill different

incarceration, his prison experiences and how, in his forties, he was able to leave behind his criminal past and step out of the vicious cycle of incarceration. McGregor later worked as a prison reformer, counselor of ex-convicts, and public speaker and helped incarcerated and previously incarcerated people. His professional endeavors thus focus on preventing others from following in his footsteps and from being consequently labeled as "criminals," which can also be regarded as one of the primary underlying motivations for narrating his life story.

Approaching Autobiography and Identity

This paper reads autobiographies both as historical sources and as narrative texts. As historical sources, they provide information on individual and collective processes of meaning-making (Depkat "Doing Identity" 49). Hence, they are not seen as sources in the sense of granting access to an underlying historical reality, but of illustrating how autobiographers interpret their personal pasts. For this study, the interpretation of the prison experience in particular and its role in the narrative trajectory are of central concern. To understand how these processes of meaning-making are constructed, autobiographies are also read as narrative texts. Smith and Watson claim that an analysis of an autobiography needs to also take the narrative structure and the use of literary devices into account (13). Examining these narrative elements is thus a vital part of understanding autobiographies.

In accordance with Volker Depkat, autobiographies are regarded as acts of social communication between an autobiographer and an implied audience, which are situated in a particular context and which have at their core a specific communicative offer ("Plädoyer" 215). Autobiographies understood foremost as narrative constructions of identities (Depkat "Doing Identity" 47) reveal in these constructions the communicative offer of a text. Lejeune defines autobiography as a "[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of

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functions (cf. Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*). As this text is, however, an as-told-to autobiography, the author, Sharon Sopher, is not identical with the narrator and the protagonist. For this paper, only the levels of narrator and protagonist are of relevance, as I will not make claims about the 'real-life-figure' Charles McGregor but will only take the narrated text into the focus. When referring to 'Charles McGregor' in this paper, I refer to the protagonist of the autobiography. When wanting to refer to the narrator, I will use the respective terminology.

his personality" (*Autobiography* 4), thus emphasizing the development of the author's personality as one central aspect of this text form. Autobiographical texts construct this development and the formation and transformation of identities via the content, e.g., the selection of specific experiences, and also via form. Identity is thereby to be understood "as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 392).

The Social Role of 'Criminal'

Borrowing from sociology, I will apply the notion of 'social roles' to the analysis of identity construction in *Up From the Walking Dead*. Every person embodies numerous roles at the same time but might only perform one role in a particular situation. These roles can either be given, such as 'son' or 'daughter,' or acquired, such as 'student,' 'doctor,' 'husband' or 'wife.' Some of the roles might stay constant throughout the course of life, whereas others are dropped, and new ones are acquired (Henecka 103-04). The norms and expectations linked with a social role vary according to the social, cultural and historical context. Additionally, the individual context is important to varying degrees for the interpretation of a social role.

An autobiography gives insight into how the performance of specific social roles is remembered, whereas some social roles will always be more central for the construction of self-identity than others. Charles McGregor's autobiography, while mentioning various social roles he performs, which all contribute to constructing a narrative identity, clearly puts the focus on a few particular ones, namely on the role of a 'criminal,' a 'prisoner,' and later an 'ex-convict.' All social roles are constructs and the results of social processes of meaning-making (Fulcher and Scott 123). The role of a 'criminal' is, however, different from other social roles, as it is a stigmatized one, deeming the person who is labeled as such "deviant."[3] Regarding these roles, a conscious choice is frequently not made, but it is instead the performance of individual acts which lead to a person slipping into this role. Simultaneously, social interaction plays a decisive part in the reinforcement of these (Lemert 80-81). In

[3] For further information on stigma and identity, see Goffman (1963).

McGregor's case, internalized racism by parts of society can also be a contributing factor in the acquisition of his role as a 'criminal.'[4]

Based on these theoretical sketches, I want to analyze in this paper how identity is narratively constructed in *Up from the Walking Dead* and which role the narrator ascribes to the prison experiences in the process of identity formation. I argue that by giving prominence to the prison experiences and to the experiences closely linked to these, such as his criminal activities and his activities as a prison reformer, the text constructs the above-mentioned social roles as being decisive for his life as it is retrospectively interpreted. More precisely, this study examines how the autobiography constructs the protagonist's socialization into the role of a 'criminal,' the solidification of this role through the prison experience[5], and finally his role exit[6] by acquiring other, more positively connoted identity roles. I thereby argue that the prison as an institution is constructed as hindering this role exit. The narrative nonetheless shows that despite of this, acquiring positive roles is possible and that a reinforced criminal role can be substituted albeit with difficulties and without noteworthy assistance of the institution. Acquiring the roles of 'prison reformer' and 'counselor,' amongst others, McGregor shows that change is possible but underlines at the same time that the prison system is in need of reform.

McGregor's Socialization into the Role of 'Criminal'

The first part of the text narratively constructs McGregor's socialization into a criminal role and thereby frames prison as an inevitable consequence of his personal history. In analyzing

[4] Although published thirty-two years before her seminal study, *Up from the Walking Dead* can be linked in this respect to Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012). In this work, Alexander examines, amongst other aspects, the criminalization of African Americans throughout American history. The narrative's construction of the criminal role, which is embraced in the beginning of the narrative, might seem at first as if it is reinforcing stereotypical patterns which link crime and skin color. Notwithstanding, the text actually counters this discourse by making the process of identity formation and transformation transparent.

[5] During his stays in prison, the protagonist additionally acquires the role of 'prisoner.' However, in this interpretation, this role is closely linked with the criminal role, which is more constant in the narrative trajectory and which will thus be used for the analysis.

[6] The discussion of his role exit is based on Helen Ebaugh's study *Becoming an EX: The Process of Role Exit* (1988), in which she defines role exit as "[t]he process of disengagement from a role that is central to one's self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role" (1).

his development towards a criminal role, I will focus on his early contact with violence, his experiences with juvenile institutions, and the influence of his parents and delinquent peers, which are constructed as being central elements in this development. McGregor grows up in a poor Jamaican family in Harlem and encounters violence early on in his own family. By intertwining the narratives of his own acts of violence and of his mother's violence towards him on the first few pages, the narrative suggests a link between the two and emphasizes the formation of a spiral of violence. This applies, for instance, to the first incident that is related in the text: at the age of eleven he shoots at another boy, Sam, using his "mother's .22" (1). The link between violence and his mother is drawn even more explicitly by narrating the occurrences which lead to him shooting. On the previous day, Sam punched him in the face, causing him to drop a bottle, which meant that he would be punished by his mother. As the fight with Sam followed by the physical punishment by his mother lead him to thoughts about revenge which result in him using a weapon, violence is constructed as a vicious cycle (2). This kind of aggression is an essential component in the construction of McGregor's acquisition of a criminal role, as his mother is linked to acts of violence that are later mirrored by the protagonist's own violent actions.

The next major incident that is narrated at the beginning of the book offers, in the process of retrospective meaning-making, an explanation for this first violent incident. It is told in the form of a flashback to gradually reveal the impact his mother had on his violent lifestyle. McGregor is repeatedly whipped by his mother, not only for dropping bottles or similar incidents but also when he wets the bed. One of his worst whippings, occurring at age nine, is depicted in great detail, in the course of which he is tied to the radiator the whole day and repeatedly hit with a belt:

> That angry Jamaican woman got up on her toes so she could come down with all her weight when she hit me. […] The house smelled of burning flesh. My brain burned with hatred. Each time my momma raised her arm to strike me, I pictured in my mind how one day I would kill her by pushing her down a flight of stairs. (3-4)

The hatred that surges in him due to his being beaten by his mother can be read as an indicator of the fact that the violence he personally experiences in his family leads to hatred and himself becoming violent. This link is drawn quite explicitly by paralleling "burning flesh" with burning hatred. The text thus constructs a very straightforward cause-and-effect

relationship by arguing that the physical abuse induces feelings which lead to violence. Being bound to a radiator the entire day "like some sort of animal" (4) and being repeatedly whipped deprives him of his power and the only way he can regain it is by depriving someone else of his feeling of security. The above-mentioned shooting incident is claimed to be "the first time [he] gave hell to someone else, even though [he] had been catching some kind of hell from the very day [he] was born" (2). Hence, the first pages of the autobiography, which relate these violent occurrences, set the tone for the first part of the text, already indicating the importance and dominance of violence in McGregor's autobiography.

The text consequently offers a very simplistic rationale for McGregor's violence by indirectly giving his mother the fault for it. His mother's violence is interpreted in a similar simplistic fashion by referring to McGregor's darker skin color as the trigger for it. The narrator comments that his brother, who has lighter skin than himself, was never beaten. Furthermore, he includes incidents which show how much his mother "wanted [him] to look white," by, for instance, putting a clothespin on his nose so that it would become flatter or greasing his hair so that it might look more like a white person's hair (2-3). These incidents, which constitute violence in themselves, also illustrate his mother's internalization of a racial discourse which constructs whiteness as superior and blackness as flawed. It is not only the voice of the experiencing-I offering rather straightforward explanations, but it is also the narrating-I who, in hindsight, tries to explain to himself why it came to these violent incidents. By making use of this simple rationale, the narrator perpetuates dominant discourses which seek to find simplistic solutions to complex issues such as violence and criminality.

The juvenile institutions McGregor stays at also play a considerable role for his path to crime and for the development of a criminal role. Three such institutions are explicitly mentioned in the text: Mrs. Young's Boarding School (5), Bordentown Military Academy (7), and the Warwick Training School for Boys (9). A foreshadowing of prison can already be detected in the depiction of the latter two. Bordentown Military Academy is compared to one of the most notorious prisons claiming that it "was as secure as Sing Sing" (7), thereby explicitly indicating that juvenile institutions are in some respects similar to prisons and can be seen as

precursors of these. Furthermore, the unofficial social hierarchy at Warwick Training School resembles the power structures in prison, as the ones with the toughest reputation are the ones in control. Not yet belonging to the toughest ones, McGregor can only narrowly escape sexual assault because "the baddest dude" helps him (10). These institutions prepared him to some extent already for prison in the sense that the power structures the protagonist later encounters in prison are already familiar to him. The stays at these institutions heighten the probability of incarceration as is emphasized by his claim that "at that juvenile jungle" he learned more "in six weeks than [he] could have learned on the streets of Harlem" (9).

His socialization into a criminal role is also greatly influenced by delinquent peers one of whom he meets at the Warwick Training School for Boys. "Fast Eddie," who is described as a pimp in the narrative, is someone in whom McGregor finds a role model (10-11). Fast Eddie introduces him to a life of crime: together they trick white men out of their money and McGregor begins "hustling for Fast Eddie" (13). The appeal of Fast Eddie lies in him leading a luxurious lifestyle and always having money at his disposal (11), something that is unfamiliar to the protagonist. McGregor's development towards a criminal role is thus constructed as being influenced by a combination of this introduction into a criminal subculture and the lure this way of living has for him due to the deprivation he experienced as a child.

Fast Eddie is more of a role model for McGregor than his father can be, who left the family when McGregor was ten years old. The absence of the father is a common trope not only in literature but also in cultural and political debates, in which problematic behavior of young African American men is often blamed on them lacking a father (Coley 743).[7] This trope figures in the narrative in so far as his mother places the responsibility of caring for the family on his shoulders as he is the oldest male member of the family left. The narrative constructs the protagonist as having no other option than stealing food and money to support the family (13). His father's absence and his mother's deeds are accordingly depicted as playing a central role in defining his life trajectory.

[7] This trope, however, ignores the complexity of the situation in African American communities. For further information on this issue, see Connor and White (2007).

It is striking that throughout the narrative his family, and especially his mother, is not only constructed as not being supportive of him but of actually hindering McGregor from changing his life for the better. His mother is not the sole factor in his criminalization and of him re-committing crimes, as the above-mentioned aspects show, but she is constructed as a vital element of it. Most studies on re-entry into society after incarceration come to the conclusion that family support is of immense importance for successful reintegration (Bahr 75)[8]. The narrative emphasizes in various instances that his mother rejects him, by not visiting him in prison or not welcoming him back home after incarceration, underlining that the protagonist does not feel loved and cared about. By indirectly linking this with his failure, the narrator puts part of the blame on her and to some extent foreshadows what these later studies prove, namely that family is a crucial factor in desistance.

Solidifying the Role of 'Criminal' in the Prison Environment

His childhood and youth encounters with violence and crime eventually lead McGregor, at the age of seventeen, to his first prison sentence in 1940. All of his four prison stays in total[9] indicate that the prison experience does not constitute a rupture in the narrative construction of his life trajectory but can be seen as a continuation of it. Other texts, in which the protagonist has not adopted the criminal role as an essential part of his identity before incarceration, construct the prison experience as a break with previous experiences and as altering the protagonist's life trajectory.[10] That this is not the case in McGregor's autobiography is an effect of the criminal role he assumes, as the norms and expectations connected with this role are not altered in prison but are reinforced. The following analysis will concentrate on two aspects to exemplify this: the protagonist's familiarity with the prison environment and his performance of toughness.

[8] For further information on prisoner re-entry, see Maruna (2001), Maruna and Immarigeon (2011), and Martinez (2009).

[9] His four prison stays cover the following time spans respectively: 1940-1945, 1946-1948, 1949-1965, and 1966.

[10] This is especially the case for white-collar criminals who cannot consolidate the prison experience with any experiences they have had so far in their lives. See William Laite's autobiography *The United States vs. William Laite* (1972) as one example of this.

Familiarity with the Prison Environment

Due to his socialization into the role of a criminal many aspects of the prison environment are familiar to him, even some of the inmates he encounters there. By mainly being surrounded by members of the same social group, i.e., by people with the same norms, the protagonist does not question his standards as he sees them reinforced through social interaction with other inmates. One could assume that at least the first prison sentence would be alien to the protagonist. However, when he first enters the prison courtyard, the foreignness one might expect is immediately replaced by familiarity: "When we were finally let out into the yard with the rest of the population, I got the surprise of my life. There was a sea of familiar faces. At least eight dudes called out my name. 'Wee, I heard you were on your way.' / 'My main man from 138th,' someone else yelled out. […] I felt like I was back home again" (48). Although the "sea of familiar faces" might indicate otherwise, there are only eight black prisoners in Sing Sing at that time (51), but they all seem to recognize him.[11] Being not alone in prison but in the midst of friends eliminates any initial shock of being incarcerated.

Additionally, the protagonist's comparison of prison with home is a re-occurring theme which shows the significance the prison environment acquires for his identity. This motif of familiarity can be found when he is incarcerated for the third time:

> I recognized most of the dudes who worked in the receiving room of the Administration Building, and they recognized me. There was no looking me over and crap like that. […] It's a terrible thing to say but my brother inmates greeted me with more love and enthusiasm than my mother and sister had when I returned home from prison in 1948. Prison was more like home than home. (153)

Whereas leaving prison is depicted as challenging as he has to leave behind friends and an environment he is used to (232), coming back to prison is narratively framed as having at least to some extent positive connotations as the direct comparison between prison and home illustrates. Juxtaposing "brother inmates" with "mother and sister" not only elevates

[11] Later in the autobiography, the narrator comments in a side remark on the increase of the black prisoner population indicating that in the late 1960s the majority of inmates were black (190). This illustrates the systematic targeting of minority communities which lead to an unprecedented rise of incarceration and an immense racial disparity, as Michelle Alexander argues in her work (60).

the inmates to the status of family but even claims that they are more his family than his biological one. An increasing familiarity with the prison can furthermore be detected in smaller incidents, such as, knowing the warden from a previous prison stay (284), reencountering old friends (286), but also on the level of narrative construction when, on entering prison, the environment as such is no longer depicted as it was in the beginning, i.e., the prison cells and the meals are no longer commented on, but these are assumed to be known by then and no longer need detailed elaboration.

Performance of Toughness

The criminal role is further reinforced in prison due to the fact that this is an environment in which the performance of toughness is vital for survival. The text does not only depict this performance of toughness but also stresses that it actually only is an outward demonstration of it. McGregor does not only behave tough when entering prison but has already established this behavior as part of his criminal role in the streets of Harlem. Before being sentenced to prison, there are, however, still a few places where he can let his guard down and does not "have to be tough every minute of the day," such as in school (14). Whereas McGregor did not have to act tough in school, it is impossible to stop acting this way in front of others in prison. This performance of toughness becomes vital for the protagonist's self-identity in prison so that his criminal role is reinforced and stabilized in this environment.

The narrative suggests that in order to survive prison without being sexually or physically assaulted one has to be tough and has to attain a certain reputation. Gresham M. Sykes supports this claim in his seminal study *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison* (1958), a study published during McGregor's third prison term, by explaining that prisoners are deprived of their feeling of security because

> the inmate is acutely aware that sooner or later he will be 'tested' – that someone will 'push' him to see how far they can go and that he must be prepared to fight for the safety of his person and his possessions. If he should fail, he will thereafter be an object of contempt, constantly in danger of being attacked by other inmates who view him as an obvious victim, as a man who cannot or will not defend his rights. (77-78)

Already in the early stages of the first prison term, McGregor is tested and has the chance to prove his toughness: another inmate, Goldie, tries to sexually assault him, but he can successfully defend himself with a baseball bat: "The Goldie incident was the beginning of

my 'tough guy' image in prison. Inmates who had thought of me as an easy target when they first saw me because of my age and size, now thought of me as dangerous" (50). This testing does not necessarily have to be connected to sexual abuse, but can also manifest itself in other ways, as further examples will illustrate. Only because McGregor can defend himself in this incident and can thus establish a certain reputation is he not victimized again as the others take his performance of toughness seriously.

The narrator claims that a mentality of "kill or be killed" was central to the protagonist's experience of being a prison inmate (175). This can be seen in the fact that he has "no regrets" when seriously injuring another inmate as he "got the dude before he got [him]" (158). In the context of the prison, violence becomes normalized which is illustrated in the parallels that are drawn between being a particularly tough and violent man and being a sports celebrity: "When I got out, I was treated like a celebrity. […] Tittlemouse slapped me on the rump, the way a coach does to his star player. 'Thanks,' I said. I felt like the guy who made the winning basket in the final second of play" (201-02). Drawing this comparison between injuring somebody and winning a basketball game underlines the extent to which the prison environment influences prisoners and trivializes violence.[12] Another example which shows this is the narration of the rape of one inmate in which the narrating-I reflects on why he did not intervene in the rape commenting that, "maybe [he] felt Tracy was getting what he deserved because he didn't fight back" (164). Even in retrospect, no regrets are uttered which stresses the idea that this expression of violence is not unusual in the prison context. It is striking that in this representation of male prisoner-on-prisoner rape the masculinity of the perpetrator is not questioned but rather enforced. The victim is, however, stigmatized and will likely become a victim of sexual abuse again (Human Rights Watch 7).[13]

These expressions of violence are part of the construction of toughness in prison. The text very explicitly comments on the way that this image of toughness is constructed as the protagonist wonders whether "he ha[s] to pipe [him] some more dudes just to prove that [he] wasn't to be fucked with?" (171). During a following prison term, when entering a new

[12] For further information on violence in prisons, see Bottoms (1999).

[13] This rape incident raises further issues of, for instance, homosexuality and homophobia, but also of negotiations of masculinity in prison, which, however, cannot be discussed in detail here. For further information, see Bonnycastle (2012).

cell, he "hoped [his] reputation had preceded [him] into the cell so [he] wouldn't have to hurt one or both of [his] sour-faced cellmates" (328-29). These examples indicate the awareness of having to be violent to survive prison. However, in the latter instance, a reluctance to be violent can be detected as well as the necessity and the willingness to be so as part of "'jail survival'" (329).

Furthermore, the performance of toughness is, besides being illustrated as a necessity, also revealed as a performance and not as an inherent personal trait. Including instances in the narrative in which McGregor cries highlights the wish to make this performance explicit, as crying stands in stark contrast to the tough guy image he develops for himself. Only in the absence of other inmates or guards, does he cry. He thus cries in his cell "as soon as the cell doors closed on [him]" (153), he puts his "hands in front of [his] face to hide [his] emotion from the other inmates," when sitting in the bus to another prison (159), and he "buried [his] head in the pillow on [his] bunk and tried to muffle [his] sobs," as "[his] reputation over the years had been built on violence and toughness, not tears, and that's how [he] wanted it to stay" (307). The text also illustrates that his toughness is a show he puts on when commenting that "everybody at Great Meadow thought I was a bad dude" (59). They did not *know* that he was bad, but only *thought* so. Hence, the text constructs violence and toughness as essential for survival in prison – yet it is something that the protagonist understands as a 'necessary evil' – thereby revealing violence and toughness as something performative and as part of the role he assumes which can stand in contrast to the protagonist's other values, which he does not display in public.

McGregor's Gradual Exit from the Role of 'Criminal'

The criminal role sketched above, which is marked by violence and toughness, is the departure point for McGregor's identity transformation process, i.e., his exit from the role of a 'criminal' and his resocialization into the role of, for instance, 'prison reformer.' According to Helen Ebaugh, role exit is a process, which may extend over a longer period of time (23). This can be seen in the case of McGregor, as the process is of a gradual nature, and as the change does not occur immediately but is characterized by various smaller successes and also by setbacks. This process is furthermore marked by, what Ebaugh terms, disengagement and disidentification, i.e., the withdrawal from the social norms of the role and the stopping

of identifying with this role (3-4), which might not be entirely unproblematic, as the analysis of McGregor's role exit will show. The protagonist's prison experience as such did not alter his narrative identity profoundly, or more specifically allow for exit from his criminal role, as the same pattern of release, followed sooner or later by criminal activity, arrest and re-incarceration is reiterated in the narrative with McGregor seemingly not changing. The process of change is thus not initiated by the prison experience as such and connected with that also not by the institution of prison but by a combination of various other factors, such as his self-education and an outside therapy program.

Initiation of Change in Prison

The initiation of change is narratively constructed as a conscious decision process as McGregor claims that "[r]ight then and there [he] decided [he] had to stop hitting men in the head with sticks and pipes or the parole board would never give [him his] freedom" (191). Besides portraying his behavioral change as a conscious decision, he also states the initial reason for this change, namely wanting to be set free by the parole board. This is also why he starts participating in a self-improvement course and goes to church (191-93). In addition, he joins the prison's school program without the intention of wanting to learn something but in the course of his studies he develops into an ambitious student, as he realizes that an education can help him "mov[e] on" (205). One result of this beginning transformation process is illustrated at one of his next appearances at court, as he is for the first time able to "say exactly what [he] meant" due to his education and thus even "expected a round of congratulatory applause" after his testimony, which emphasizes the achievement this represents for him (352). Education is thus a first outlet for him to acquire a more positive image of himself. A study from 2009 by Emma Hughes on British prisoner's experience of distance learning underlines the positive effect education can have on the development of new identity roles and the importance this can have for desistance.

The narrator does not leave it to chance whether the reader realizes that what is depicted is a transformation process but makes this explicit by reconstructing a conversation with another inmate. Joe Gallo offers to "set [him] up in dope," which would bestow a great amount of money upon him, but McGregor tells him that he is "in the middle of a total transformation away from all that" (217). To stress the significance of turning down this deal

Gallo answers him: "You're goin' to be a big somebody someday […] Very few people can refuse the kind of bucks you just turned down. That takes a whole lotta heart" (218). By not only claiming to be in the process of a transformation himself but by letting somebody else voice the extraordinariness of this situation, the narrator places particular emphasis on the idea that a transformation in prison is not commonplace.

This transformation is depicted highly explicitly as occurring despite the institution of prison. After relating his first steps in this transformation process he claims that:

> Publicly, prison officials support cell courses and self-improvement programs, but the truth is that they hate them. Most officials and guards feel inmates are the scum of the earth and don't deserve to be educated. They also believe that it's easier to control inmates if they're ignorant and illiterate. That's why the administration made very few books available to us. (193)

To be able to educate himself via reading books that are not available in the prison library, he is forced to blackmail a guard into providing him with the necessary books. Education is represented as a central way of promoting oneself, and by depicting the institution as hindering this, the narrator utters explicit criticism of this way of managing prisons. Although the entire narrative can be regarded as a criticism of the system, the construction of his identity transformation process further highlights the system's shortcomings concerning rehabilitation – which should be one of the goals of the institution. This criticism can also be seen in the description of the warden as a "gestapo-thinking dude" and as a "sadistic" person who enjoys degrading inmates (203-04). By then asking "[h]ow [he] could get help in a place run by a man who was sicker than [him]" (205), he further denounces the institution.

Transformation after Incarceration

In the long run, McGregor changes his behavior by participating in an outside program, Reality House. By depicting in detail some of the therapy sessions both in and out of prison, the text stresses the idea that change is a continual process which requires an immense effort and willingness, and which might be marked by setbacks. In these therapy sessions the difficulty of dropping the tough guy image becomes obvious, which points towards long-term effects of the prison experience, as the necessity of being tough is deeply ingrained in his behavior so that it is difficult for him to withdraw from these social norms: "I felt like crying, but my poisoned insides wouldn't let the tears that were there come out. Tough cats

ain't supposed to do that" (387). This illuminates that the unwritten prison rule of not being allowed to cry and to thus show weakness haunts him even after prison. Although his fierce behavior was already a part of his role identity before incarceration, the experience of prison consolidates it as an integral part of it.

To leave behind his criminal role is represented as an extreme hardship by comparing it to giving birth:

> The pain of change is enormous. It must be similar to what a woman feels when the seed of life is sprouting inside of her. When I became pregnant with new life, the new me took root in my belly and sucked up everything that was nutritious inside of me. Just like a woman with child, when the new man growing inside of me was ready to come out, I went into labor and gave birth to him so my pain would be over. (394)

By depicting his transformation as a (re-)birth, the narrator stays within traditional means of describing such a phenomenon, as, for instance, religious conversion narratives also make use of the rhetoric of rebirth (Riley 15), although the details of the image might deviate. His new identity is linked with life thus representing a stark contrast to his old identity which was instead linked to violence and thus also to death. However, the linkage is not only between birth and life, but also between birth and pain illustrating that the process of identity transformation is not to be done without agony and, just like a pregnancy, this birth of a new identity needs time.

Steps in this process of transformation are indicated in a renaming by others who thereby either want to initiate change or respond to change happened. Naming as a central element of identity is not something peculiar to prison autobiographies, but can, for instance, also be detected in slave narratives, in which freed slaves adopt a new name to leave behind their slave identity and "to symbolize the act of liberation" (Smith 21). Naming as "[a] [r]ite of [r]ebirth" (18), as Smith's subchapter heading indicates, is not only part of the slave's transformation but also of the prisoner's, in this case, of McGregor's, whose renaming can also be considered an act of liberation from the former criminal role. The slave narrative as a first form of African American autobiography can be seen as an influencing factor on later autobiographies, such as prison narratives. These, in turn, can be considered as points of reference for *Up from the Walking Dead.* As a prominent example, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) also includes this phenomenon of renaming. One of these renaming

instances in the text occurs when Malcolm Little replaces his last name with an X to shed the white slave master's name. Although renaming in *Up from the Walking Dead* is not directly linked to slavery, the adoption of a new name does play a central part in constructing the acquisition of a new identity. Charles McGregor is called for the larger part "Peewee" by his friends in Harlem and by other inmates in prison, a nickname which is already introduced on the first page of the text and which refers to his size (1). When his teacher in the prison's school program suddenly calls him by his "real name, Charles," he becomes infuriated and wants to be called "Peewee" because, as he admits, this name "meant more to [him] than anything in the world because [he] didn't have anything else" and it is so closely connected to the reputation he established (207; 208). Giving this name up thus implies giving up part of what has become a component of his identity. In the course of his transformation process, naming becomes an issue again. Others, recognizing his change, start calling him "Positive Charlie" (396). In contrast to his negative reaction when first being called something other than "Peewee," this time, he embraces his new nickname claiming that "this is who [he is] now" and that he is "gonna carry the banner of 'Positive Charlie' everywhere [he] go[es]" (396). The transformation McGregor underwent is thus not only reflected in his new name, but also in his acceptance of it and consequently also in his acceptance of his new self.

Yet, one central experience shows how fragile the border is between the new roles he acquires and the old ones and how fast the transformation process can be undone when not being attentive: McGregor's girlfriend is jealous of his (female) friends at Reality House and threatens to accuse him of raping her daughter so that he would have to go back to prison. As a reaction, McGregor almost pushes his girlfriend in front of a train to kill her but can be held back by bystanders (416). By using a paratactic structure, i.e., by juxtaposing short, if not one-word sentences, the text creates breath-taking moments of suspense, raising the awareness of the decisiveness of this experience. Furthermore, phrases, such as "the train's killer wheels," add to the gravity of the situation. The inclusion of this admittedly terrible incident in the narrative stresses that transformation is a process that is never-ending. This

incident could have raised doubt about his rehabilitation, as one act can be enough to reverse the positive image one built up.[14]

The final part of the narrative invests much into showing McGregor as a rehabilitated citizen who has not only changed but who now tries to help others in various ways, too. This underlines one of the messages the protagonist wants to convey to others and which can be interpreted as also being one of the messages of the autobiography. He and, as I claim, his story are "gonna be livin' proof that anybody can change no matter how bad they've been or how old they are" (396). By becoming a therapist, he tries to support others in bringing about this change in their lives (405). He, however, does not only want to change people, but also the system as such. As a prison reformer, working for Fortune Society, a still active organization aiming at enhancing prison conditions and helping ex-convicts, he talks, for example, in front of the Delaware State Legislature to make them aware of the inhumane prison conditions (422). That this work has a positive influence on McGregor is in line with a study conducted by Thomas P. LeBel on the effects of activism on the reintegration process, which provides preliminary evidence on the merit for ex-convicts to be involved in advocacy efforts via organizations such as Fortune Society, which was also part of the study. Despite these successes and advances, the text nonetheless also depicts the problems and difficulties McGregor has, for instance, when treating others. This alludes to the idea that identity is never complete, but always in process.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of McGregor's autobiography shows how, in retrospect, the narrator offers interpretations for his development towards a criminal role and for the influence the prison experiences had on his life trajectory as remembered in the narrative. The text thereby constructs prison as a space which fosters the solidification of a criminal role instead of rehabilitation. This is done by illustrating the extent to which his identity role is marked by violence and toughness which although existent prior to the prison terms is reinforced through the prison experiences. The narrator goes on to describe his identity

[14] This phenomenon is termed 'negativity bias' (Maruna et al. 31). For further information on this issue, see Skowronski and Carlston (1989).

transformation, or more specifically his role exit from the criminal role, as an achievement that occurs despite the institution of prison. The telling of his haunting prison experiences consolidates the notion of prison as a detrimental institution. As this transformation process is one of the focal points of McGregor's autobiography, the text stresses that prisoners are capable of change and of stepping out of the vicious cycle of incarceration. This emphasizes that prisoners are human beings, too, who will re-enter society sooner or later. This message is in tune with social developments of the time in which the autobiography was published, as the Prisoners' Rights Movement of the 1970s and 1980s was, according to the sociologist James B. Jacobs, "a broadscale effort to redefine the status […] of prisoners in a democratic society" (431) and wanted to improve conditions in prison by "remind[ing] the public of prisoners' humanity and their constitutional rights" (Chase 75). Considering the results of the analysis, which show that the prison system hinders what it wants to achieve, namely rehabilitation, McGregor's autobiography can be read as a part of this "broadscale effort."

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