

# Declensions: Conceptual Migrations across Empires

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## Abstract

*The goal of this essay is to propose a new model for comparative analysis, the ‘declension,’ and test its applicability on two figurations that have traveled across contingent and competing empires: the creole and the renegade. Within grammar, a declension is the “variation of the form of a noun, adjective, or pronoun, constituting its different cases” (OED) and evokes the way in which words mutate as their function in the logic of the sentence changes. If transferred to the realm of literary and cultural studies, the declension can be used to map the adjustments that key concepts in Atlantic history and literature undergo as they traverse space, time, and language systems. Although some terms have remained essentially the same or have varied only slightly across centuries – as in the case of renegado/renegade or criollo/crioulo/creole – the politics attached to them changed significantly. The declension offers a tool to trace and document migrations of concepts along transatlantic and interamerican lines, gesturing at the interconnectedness of imperial spaces.*

**Keywords:** Declension, creole, renegade, entangled American history, Atlantic history

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The study of Atlantic History is the study of contingent and interconnected experiences. Within Atlantic History, discussions of phenomena that span centuries and continents are indissoluble from micro-investigations of small places and the lives of single individuals. Theories of “entanglement” by scholars such as Trevor Burnard, Eliga H. Gould, and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra have advocated historiographies that underscore the transcultural origin of putatively ‘national’ narratives, unveil their multiple transfers, and switch between regional, national, and transoceanic registers. Our study hopes to contribute a tool for the writing of “microhistory ... in an Atlantic mode” (Burnard 35) by zooming in on what Ann Stoler calls “the tactical mobility of concepts” (837) across the Atlantic, as the multiple entanglements of Atlantic cultures did not result only in a transfer of people, goods, and narratives, but also key concepts. To best address the changing semantics and politics of these “travelling concepts” (Bal 29), we resort to the paradigm of *declensions*.

Within grammar, a declension is the “variation

of the form of a noun, adjective, or pronoun, constituting its different cases” (OED). By evoking the way in which a word mutates as its object of reference changes, I suggest that key concepts in Atlantic history such as ‘creole,’ as well as ‘renegade,’ ‘neophyte,’ and ‘pirate,’ undergo radical changes in meaning as they travel across oceans, centuries, and geographical contexts, although their form changes only slightly. From the 16th to the 19th century, the term ‘renegade,’ for instance, has crossed a variety of cultural contexts and undergone multiple shifts in meaning. In the 19th-century North American frontier context, a ‘renegade’ was an individual who relinquished white society and chose to live with the Natives. A century earlier, Cotton Mather used the term with reference to Christian captives in Barbary who embraced Islam to enjoy the privileges granted to converts or to avoid certain death. In 17th-century Europe, ‘renegadoes’ were Christians who joined the armies of corsairs in Barbary, which by then were known as the “renegade states” (Fuchs 50). The idea of a neophyte is

in many ways equal but opposite to that of a renegade, as both concepts reflect the same practice and conversion, from two antipodal viewpoints: that of conversion as apostasy (a turning away from a dominant culture or belief) or as revelation (an embracing of it). Before the end of the 19th century, the history of the term ‘creole’ was also one of oscillations. The term originates from the Spanish-Portuguese ‘criollo/crioulo’ and was applied to individuals born in the New World. Some sources claim that the term did not originally differentiate between races (Garraway 20; Hazaël Massieux 5-6), while others associate early understandings of creoleness with whiteness. Yet, sources underscore a progressive racialization of the term: by the end of the 19th century the term was refashioned as “exclusively Caucasian” (Kein 131) and decisively reflected European perspectives.

A declension differs from a chronological timeline in so far as it describes an oscillatory movement and not a linear one. Consider, for example, the first Latin declension:

aqua, -ae, F. water		
	SINGULAR	PLURAL
NOM	Aqua	Aquae
GEN	Aquae	aquārum
DAT	Aquae	Aquīs
ACC	Aquam	Aquās
ABL	Aqua	Aquīs

The first declension singular starts and ends with *-a*. The last part of the plural oscillates between *-is* and *-as*. *-Ae* appears in both in different positions and *-arum* represents an isolated termination. Consequently, in the logic of our declension model, a word can revert to its original meaning, go back and forth between two meanings, assume an anomalous meaning in a determinate context, or terminate its declension on a completely different, even reverse meaning, from the moment of coinage. Moreover, the goal of a declension is not to document a general linear evolution; the model is designed to follow the parallel evolutions of the word structure across time, space, and translation, as well as the meanings and politics attached to it.

A second, figurative meaning defines declension as “the action or state of declining ...; a declining or sinking into a lower position,” and,

secondly, as the “deviation or declining from a standard; falling away (from one’s allegiance), apostasy” (OED). The pejorative meaning of declension indicates the fall of an object from a condition of grace to one of abjection, and openly parallels this downward trajectory with the act of apostasy – a conversion judged from a point of view of abandonment and betrayal. Similarly, declensed concepts and the figures they define have left a state of recognizability (Settler or Native, European or Indigenous, Christian or Muslim) to enter a condition of ontological instability mirrored in literary and cultural texts by a series of textual ambiguities. Hence, our study will not only attempt to sketch declensions of terms, but also provide examples of the textual ambiguities that gesture at the semantic instability of these terms. Authors who grapple with declensed concepts and the categories of people they encompass almost invariably reflect on these shifts of meaning either by thickening the ambiguity[2] around them or by trying to dissipate it and settle for a univocal meaning. The first posture will be referred throughout this study as *ambiguation* and the second as *disambiguation*.

### A Declension of Creoleness

Every definition of the term ‘creole’ that confidently circumscribes a single category of people is to be distrusted. Ralph Bauer and Antonio Mazzotti urge not to underestimate the size and entity of the early modern debate around creolization; it was “a wider Atlantic phenomenon that not only spanned the three centuries of European colonial rule in the Americas but also cut across the boundaries of the various European empires” (Bauer and Mazzotti 2). Each European empire constructed a different discourse on creolization destined to gain complexity in post-empire aftermaths. In some regions, these debates continue to the present day. Hence, definitions that do justice to the history of the word ‘creole’ are fluid, mindful of contradictions, and open to incongruities. The reason is best explained via Virginia Domínguez’s words in *White by Definition*: “two types of Louisianans consequently identify themselves today as Creole. One is socially and legally

white; the other, socially and legally colored. The white side by definition cannot accept the existence of colored Creoles; the colored side, by definition, cannot accept the white conception of *Creole*" (149). The massive shifts in meaning of the word creole experienced over its history resulted in contrasting understandings of the creoleness rubric. Quite remarkably, the *Oxford Dictionaries* offer three contradictory definition of 'creole': 1) "A person of mixed European and black descent, especially in the Caribbean"; 2) "A descendant of Spanish or other European settlers in the Caribbean or Central or South America", 3) "A white descendant of French settlers in Louisiana and other parts of the southern US." The first definition anchors creoleness in mixed-race ancestry, the last one makes an argument for exclusive whiteness, and the second omits the racial component altogether. The different geographic indications (the Caribbean, the Caribbean and Central South America, Louisiana and the Southern U.S.) also suggest that the meaning of the word changes according to context.

Moving back to the colonial and early American history of the word 'creole,' many of the available definitions offered by scholars of creoleness – especially in the abundant literature of Louisiana creoles – emphasize the term's multiple trajectories. Although there is consensus on its Spanish/Portuguese origin and on its applicability to individuals born in the colonies, what follows are overviews of the shifts and oscillations that marked the history of the word 'creole' in the Americas, especially with regards to race. In her influential study on *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (1992) Gwendolin Midlo-Hall foreshadows the intricacies of defining creoleness: "*the most precise current definition of a creole is a person of non-American ancestry, whether African or European, who was born in the Americas*" (157; emphasis added). She subsequently explains that "the word creole has been redefined over time in response to changes in the social and racial climate. ... It came to mean people of exclusively European descent born in the Americas" (157). In her 2000 book on Louisiana creoles, Sybil Kein builds on Midlo-Hall's inclusive definition to create her own, partly ex negativo: "Creoles are the New

World's people, and, given the known historical data, the term *should not exclude* anyone based on color, caste, or pigmentation" (xv; emphasis added). Like Midlo-Hall, Kein is aware of the shifting racialization of the term, which, as she explains later, was appropriated in the 19th century by "a class of people who were pure, white, and unblemished by a dash of the tar brush" (131). Doris Garraway (2005) also lingers on the racial inclusivity of the term in its early usage: "the Hispano-Portuguese terms '*criollo/crioulo*' ... originally referred to both blacks and whites born in the colonial Americas" (20) and then proceeds to explain that later the word "developed a more restricted usage, referring only to whites" (20). Ira Berlin (1996) contradicts the assumption that the word 'creole,' in its early stages, was racially inclusive: "'Creole' derives from the Portuguese *crioulo*, meaning a person of African descent born in the New World" (253; emphasis added), but refers to Midlo-Hall for insights into "the complex and often contradictory usage in a single place" (253).

Our discussion of the creole declension can start from Midlo-Hall's statement that "the word creole has been redefined over time in response to changes in the social and racial climate" (157). In the course of its history, the word 'creole' has traversed not only different imperial contexts and different languages, but also various stages of racialization. One of the most prominent intellectuals of 19th-century Louisiana and advocate of creole white exclusiveness, Charles Gayarré, unintentionally embeds an ante-litteram definition of declension in his lecture "The Creoles of History and the Creoles of Romance," delivered at Tulane University, New Orleans, in 1885.

In every nation the human language has modified itself in the course of time. The spelling and pronunciation of words have changed. Their original meanings has frequently become obscured and misapplied. But few have met the striking transformation of the word *Criollo* in Spanish and *Créole* in French – at least in the United States – if not in any other part of the world, for it conveys to the immense majority of the Americans of Anglo-Saxon origin a meaning that is the very reverse of

its primitive signification. (Gayarré, qtd. in Dominguez 144)

Gayarré touches upon the linguistic micro-changes that affect a declensed word across time and translation, especially spelling and pronunciation: i.e. crioulo (P), criollo (ES), créole (FR), creole (EN). He also anticipates that declensions can result in a reversal of the original meaning. Above all, Gayarré's intervention indicates how incisively the linguistic and semantic shifts addressed by the declension model mark the history of the word 'creole.' The aim of this paper is, however, to suggest that the same model can be applied to a variety of terms, especially in the vast, entangled realm of Atlantic history. The following pages outline *one* declension that may trace the main oscillations of the term 'creole' and ground them on exemplary texts. It is important to clarify that the declension delineated in this study lays no claims to exhaustiveness. Several declensions can be traced in different geographical locations, as well as grounded on different selections of primary material. Since, as it has been established, declensions imply repeated shifts of meaning and thus generate textual ambiguities, the present analysis will anchor the declension of creoleness in literary and cultural texts to better emphasize, when possible, strategies of ambiguation and disambiguation.

Scholars of creoleness agree that, in the 18th century, 'creole' meant born in the colonies and lacked racial connotations; it equally applied to white, black, or mixed-race individuals. Historian Charles Barthelemy Roussève offers a baptismal record of "a slave from Jamaica, referred to as a 'nègre créole'" (24) from 1779 as evidence that the word 'creole' could designate a black individual. In addition to archival documents such as baptismal records, testaments, court acts, and newspaper clippings, evidence that the term 'creole' until the 19th century equally applied to white Louisianans and Louisianans of color is found in cultural texts as well. Arguably the most prominent artistic expression in the Creole language before the 19th century, creole folk songs inaugurate our declension of creoleness in Louisiana, especially because they are concerned with phenomena of interclass and

interracial romance, racial intermingling, passing and visual confusion, and are particularly relevant to studies of textual ambiguities. Probably composed by slaves in the 18th century and further developed in the 19th (Kein 122), creole folk songs narrate of a dynamic society where the crossing of racial and social lines was not anomalous.[3] An illustrative example that the noun 'creole,' until the 19th century, applied to people of color is "Criole Candjo,"[4] a song of undetermined origin, but certainly popular in Louisiana as well. Its protagonist, a "Criole" lad, looks finer than any local white lad ("In zou' in zène Criole Candjo, / Belle passé blanc dan dan là yo," Krehbiel 118). By claiming that he was more handsome than any white lad, the lyrics racially connote the "Criole Candjo" as a person of color, or, to put it with Thompson, an "irresistible Afro-Creole seducer" (258).

The 19th century sets in motion the oscillations that will mark the history of the term, as well as its progressive politicization and racialization. In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase marked the ending of a society that contemplated three main racial categories: the white, European-descended population, the free people of color, and the African American slaves, but from 1803 on "the Creole had to choose a racial designation in the binary system enforced by Protestant Anglo-America" (Kein 282). As the Anglo-American social order relied on a rigid racial binary that split the population into white or black, the creoles of Louisiana – especially the free creoles of color – found themselves in a position of ambiguation, where they were urged to clearly mark their racial affiliation. In 19th-century Louisiana, free people of color pressed against the limits of the Anglo-American social and racial order. Many of them were wealthy and influential citizens, owned slaves, and, most importantly, they felt culturally French and showed little appreciation of the imported American culture (Kein 74).

The poetry anthology *Les Cenelles*, edited by Armand Lanousse in 1845, is illustrative of the predicament of free people of color in Louisiana. The famous anthology is a collection of works by Louisianan authors of color and is acknowledged to be the first collection of African American poetry in U.S. history,[5] but is often "excluded from major anthologies of African American

literature (see Haddox 757). This might be due to the absence of race-related issues: “in the poetic expressions of the contributors to *Les Cenelles*,” Latortue and Adams explain, “the tyranny of the color line and the burden of race were to find only rare and subtle acknowledgment” (ix). The elusive racial politics of the collection have made it hard for scholars of American literature invested in a militant concept of Black art [6] to place *Les Cenelles* within either the American or the African American literary canons. In Lanousse’s introduction to the volume – which promises to be “a brief, precise exposition of the reasons for the [volume’s] existence” (xxxvii) – the racial identity of the authors remains unacknowledged. This, in combination with the consistent adoption of French romantic aesthetics, can be read as a ‘whitening’ of these authors’ experiences. One must also consider, however, that in these years, the category of free people of color was being assimilated into Anglo-American styled blackness and Louisianan creoleness was being equalized with a European-styled whiteness. In this framework, *Les Cenelles* constitutes an ambiguating moment in so far as it resists this polarization by positing a European styled blackness as the basis for an emerging Louisianan literary canon.

The thinness of racial politics in *Les Cenelles* is also reflected in its use of the word ‘creole,’ which appears sporadically across the anthologized poems and almost consistently in connection with whiteness or no specific racial identity. The addressee of Dalcour’s “Lesaveux” (Declaration) is also a “créole” (48), but the speaker makes no reference to her outward appearance; the same is true for the “barde créole” (creole bard) in Armand Lanousse’s own “Le Songe: Á Mademoiselle C\*\*\*\*” (The Dream: To Ms C\*\*\*\*). In Pierre Dalcour’s “Un an d’absence” (One Year of Absence), the speaker never stops loving his “créole aux yeux bleus” (Dalcour in Latortue and Adams 34, blue-eyed creole), his “blonde créole” (Dalcour in Latortue and Adams 36). Camille Thierry’s “Ange aux yeux noirs, ange créole” (black-eyed angle, creole angel) has black eyes, but this detail is irrelevant to identify the addressee’s racial identity, as “the full black eye; the raven lustre and classic weight of hair” could have been a marker of the “French

physiognomy” and therefore, supposedly, of whiteness (Dominguez 133). It is important to note that the influential 1945 English translation of *Les Cenelles* edited by E. M. Coleman is titled *Creole Voices: Poems in French by Free Men of Color*. In Coleman’s understanding of the collection’s poetics and politics, the category of creoleness gains unequivocal prominence. Coleman’s title is antipodal to Lanousse’s and his poets’ cautious assignation of creoleness, which shows how the politics of the term have significantly shifted.

The ambiguity of creole identity reached its peak with the end of the Civil War and the Abolition of slavery. The category of *gens de couleur libres* was now legally undistinguishable from the former slaves and from the white population – the ambiguity became untenable. The introduction of Jim Crow laws and the segregation of public spaces urged the creoles to clarify their racial affiliation, and practices of disambiguation proliferated as a consequence. In books, pamphlet, articles, and public talks, white Louisianans insistently argued that unblemished white ancestry was a requirement to rightfully be called a ‘creole’; Louisianans of color who were not able to claim it were pronounced black and banned from creoleness. It is in Gayarré’s “The Creoles of History and the Creoles of Romance” (1885) that a vocabulary of disambiguation manifests itself with particular vigor. Gayarré’s lecture is driven by the urge to dispel suspicions that creoles are anything else but white, which he does with palpable frenzy. The concept that creoles are “native[s] of European extraction” (2), “native[s] of pure white blood” (3), and without “a particle of African blood in their veins” (3) is reiterated ad nauseam – much to the author’s delight, who, by his own admission, “cannot repeat it too often” (7).

Among the absolutisms that punctuate Gayarré’s talk, the metaphorical materiality of his divisive language is particularly striking. He conceives a “line of demarcation – I may say an impassable one – ... between what may be called these two halves of the population, and not the slightest cause of pretext was ever given for confounding the one with the other” (2). Later in the text, this ‘color line’ takes the form of a mountain range: “It raised Alpine heights, nay, it

threw the Andes as a wall between the blacks, or colored, and the natives of France, as well as the natives of Louisiana, or Creoles” (6), and eventually becomes a “barrier of adamant” (10). Gayarré’s metaphors are reminiscent of Zygmunt Bauman’s more recent image of the barricade in “Modernity and Ambivalence” (1991), which he employs to denote the situations of those social groups that, within the processes of nation-making, “defy classification and explode the tidiness of the grid” (15).

They are the disallowed mixture of categories that must not mix. They earned their death-sentence by resisting separation. The fact that they would not sit across the barricade had not the barricade been built in the first place would not be considered ... a valid defence. (15)

Gayarré’s language is one of the forces that contributed to the building of a barricade between whiteness and blackness in a society that under French and Spanish domination had welcomed a certain measure of race and class fluidity, as illustrated by the folk songs and the European-styled blackness of *Les Cenelles*.

What is perhaps most relevant for our study of the ambiguation caused by declensions is the *casus belli* that animates Gayarré’s lecture: a retaliation against the fiction of George W. Cable, especially his novel *The Grandissimes* (1880), for its allegedly unfair depiction of Louisiana creoles. *The Grandissimes* roots the most prominent creole families of Louisiana in a history of interracial marriages, imagining that the head of a prominent creole family of New Orleans, Honoré Grandissime, has a half-brother of color by the same name. What in Gayarré’s eyes discredits Cable’s novel is his use of textual ambiguities, which many critics identify as a distinctive feature of his writing. [7] Gayarré resents that a fictional creole lady may be “the intimate friend of the colored queen of the Voudous, and a Voudou herself – a Christian and a Voudou – a worshiper of Christ and of the serpent at the same time. Mr. Cable is fond of mixtures” (31-32). The excerpt displays the conflict between ambiguing and disambiguating vocabularies, used by Cable and

Gayarré respectively. Gayarré does not waste time investigating the complexity and poignancy of Cable’s character, who combines Christianity with Voodoo; quite the opposite, he dismisses it as evidence of the author’s fraudulence.

The racial binary imposed on Louisiana after 1803 eventually prevailed. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* court case in 1896 “legally dismantled” the category of free people of color (Kein 131), who were condemned to function, for the most part of the 20th century, “within a legally segregated and unequal environment designed to keep them in degradation and servitude” (Davis 235). The end of the 19th century marks therefore a complete oscillation within the declension, crystallizing the equation between creoleness and whiteness.

The 20th century ushers a new oscillation of the term ‘creole’ and a new shift in the declension that awards the term different politics and a renewed inclusivity in terms of race. In *The Negro in Louisiana*, a seminal study dated 1937, historian Charles Barthelemy Roussève disproves the claim of “certain southern writers” (Roussève 22) that only whites of pure French and Spanish ancestry could call themselves creoles (see Midlo-Hall 158). Roussève notes that “‘free people of color’ and their descendants, persons of mixed French, Spanish, negro, and Indian ancestry ... have always referred to themselves, when born in Louisiana, as ‘Créoles de couleur’” (24). He then calls upon a significant “body of evidence” to justify his own use of the compound “colored Creole” in his own work, which he has every intention to use “freely” (24). Another text that contributed to the redefinition of the term ‘creole’ is Joseph G. Tregle’s “Early New Orleans Society: A Reappraisal” (1952) (followed by “On That Word ‘Creole’ Again: A Note” in 1982). In a belligerent register not unlike Gayarré’s, Tregle exposes “the creole myth” (21) of aristocratic whiteness as mere fiction, arguing that the association of creoleness with white Europeaness “does demonstrable violence to historical truth” (Tregle 20), while

it is abundantly clear that in the 1820’s and 1830’s “Creole” was generally used in Louisiana to designate any person native to the state, be he white, black, or colored,

French, Spanish, or Anglo-American. (23)

After Roussève and Tregle reestablished racial inclusivity, the term shifted again towards yet another connotation that exalted, instead of the 'native' element (in the 20th century this was long past being a marker of difference), the heterogeneity of ancestry. Consequently, for Afro-New Orleanians in the 1970s, Midlo-Hall notes, "the designations 'black' and 'creole' were irreconcilable" (158). A text, among others, that crystallized a meaning based on heterogeneity is "Éloge de la Créolité," by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, which defines creoleness as "mixed culture" (894),<sup>[8]</sup> "polyphonic harmony" (902), and the "interactional or transactional aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history" (891). "Éloge" deracializes the category of creoleness in favor of a paradigm that assumes mixed-race ancestry but does not require its mapping: "In multiracial societies, such as ours, it seems urgent to quit using the traditional raciological distinctions and to start again designating the people of our countries, regardless of their complexion, by the only suitable word: Creole" (893).

"Éloge" is a disambiguating as well as an ambiguating gesture. It is disambiguating, as it retains the defining gestures of manifestos. It is ambiguating in so far as it resists the "requirement for transparency," to use Eduard Glissant's phrasing (*Poetics of Relation* 190), that had been essential to the advocates of white creoleness, and aims for a strategic opacity in Glissant's sense: a refusal to be judged according to an alien scale and its intrinsic hierarchies, a "subsistence within an irreducible singularity," where "irreducible" quite literally means the impossibility of being reduced (190). The authors of "Éloge" also integrate ambiguity in their understanding of creoleness, which is – to return with circular motion to the beginning of this section – mindful of contradictions and open to incongruities. Creoleness, according to "Éloge," bears the marks of colonial displacement and "its negation," it springs from both "acceptance and denial," and remains therefore "permanently questioning, always familiar with the most

complex ambiguities." The answer to the creole question is thus one that interpellates "immense unknown vastitudes" (892).

### **"Damned for both Worlds": The Renegade**

The previous section suggested that the declension model may help tracing the evolution of the term 'creole' across contingent imperial projects and their post-Empire configurations. Gayarré's ante-litteram conceptualization of what I here term 'declension' confirms the viability of this paradigm for the category of creoleness, and important studies<sup>[9]</sup> have exhaustively addressed the ambivalence of the creole experience over the centuries. The next step will be to hypothesize declensions for different key terms in Atlantic history to test the viability of this model on a larger scale. The term 'renegade,' for example, lends itself to a similar classification.

The three definitions of 'renegade' provided by the *Oxford Dictionaries* shed light on some important dissonances. The first entry defines 'renegade' as "a person who deserts and betrays an organization, country, or set of principles"; the second shifts the emphasis from the secular to the spiritual, "a person who abandons religion; an apostate," but adds that this meaning is "archaic." The characterization of the renegade as an individual who betrays either country or religion is important to introduce the first shift in the declension, which transfers the term from the religious to the cultural sphere, from apostasy to desertion – although the two categories remain, to a certain degree, enmeshed. The third definition – "A person who behaves in a rebelliously unconventional manner" – gestures at the last part of the 'renegade' declension, where the term indicates a subversive individual existing beyond the law and on the margins, but also, on a more positive note, a revolutionary.

"Rebelliously unconventional" behavior evokes a mixture of criminality and heroism, and it is the oscillation between these two poles that marks the 'renegade' declension. The following pages will highlight salient moments in the evolution of the word from 'renegado' to 'renegade,'<sup>[10]</sup> from the 17th century until today, with special emphasis

on the shift that allowed “the vilest word in the English language” (“Exploits of Daniel Boone #2”) to designate some amongst the “heroes of the American Revolution” (Russell 3). The tension between villainy and heroism generates much of the ambiguity that characterizes this declensed term. It also prompts questions such as when did the term shed its stigma and become associated with anarchic heroism? What historical events enabled this shift? Our example[11] of ‘renegade’ declension begins with Cotton Mather’s anathema against Christian ‘renegades’ in Barbary and ends with present-day texts where ‘renegade’ is synonymous with the underbelly of society, counterculture (see Russell 20), or rebels and dissidents (see Hamilton 1). As the analysis of Mather’s text will show, the second instance of ambiguity embedded in the notion of ‘renegade,’ in addition to the tension between villainy and heroism, is connected to the identitarian instability implied in this condition. Renegades, Colin Calloway explains “rarely, if ever, completed the transfer of allegiance from one society to another. ... The term implies incomplete acculturation. Confusion, not conversion, typified the renegade experience” (44).

Puritan minister Cotton Mather vehemently pronounced himself against renegades in two sermons: *Letter to the English Captives, in Africa: From New England* (1698) and *The Glory of Goodness* (1703). In these two sermons, Mather’s main concern are the American Christians experiencing captivity in North Africa after their ships had fallen prey to Barbary pirates. The sermons express condolence for their situation in a mostly sympathetic tone, but also contain strikingly severe warnings against “stretch[ing] out their hands unto the Impostor Mahomet, and his accursed Alcoran” (Mather, *Glory* 40), and thus becoming “wretched renegades” (Mather, *Letter* 4-5). Mather acknowledges little value in apostasy. The actions of renegades are despicable, cowardly, and weak beyond comprehension. “One would have thought,” he muses, “that if any thing should have made them turn Infidels, it would have been their Adversity,” but “the Renegades ... were those who suffered the least share of Adversity” (Mather, *Glory* 42) and lived in “Gentlemen’s Houses” in “Idleness,

and Luxury, and Liberty” (43), while those “who toiled” were immune to apostasy (43). These lines indicate that the act of renegation involves culture as much as religion: they imply that, to become a renegado, one first has to breach the Puritan dedication to hard work and frugality. The “total and final backsliding” (43) into apostasy is merely the consequence of a gradual disengagement from Puritan social and communitarian tenets: in other words, the product of a *declension* in its pejorative sense of descent into abjection.

As anticipated, a key concept in Mather’s understanding of the renegade experience is confusion. The term occurs twice in *A Pastoral Letter to the English Captives in Africa*, when Mather claims that God has “filled [the renegade] with confusion” (4) and condemned him/her to “Eternal Confusions in another World” (Mather, *Letter* 11). The confusion inherent to the act of renegation is best expressed in the following passage:

How Forlorn, how Undone, how Damned for both Worlds had you been, if you had been given over to become such vile Deserters? You saw the strange Hand of God, upon Them: You saw them Hated, Loathed, Scorned, both by the Baptised and the Circumcised: You saw they got nothing, but were Temporally more abject than they were before, & Eternally siezed by Chains of Darkness impossible ever to be taken off. (Mather, *Glory* 43)

In this passage, the tone softens and veers towards compassion. Mather does not Other renegades; he does not resort to the less-than-human epithets he reserves for North Africans, such as “dragons” or “monsters” (Mather, *Letter* 10-11). Rather he *ambiguates* them, and casts them in an in-between condition marked by “eternal confusions” (Mather, *Letter* 11), where they are “Damned for both Worlds” and abhorred “both by the Baptized and the Circumcised.” Hence, the renegado’s is an indecipherable fate, and a less intelligible kind of damnation was reserved to those who, to put it like Calloway, did not complete the transfer of allegiance.

The figure of the renegade gains momentum

on the North American Frontier, where fears of cultural contamination and anxieties regarding territorial hegemony become all the more relevant. In this context, the renegade retains the negative markers one sees in Mather, yet, s/he leaves the margins to occupy an important place in the American mythopoesis. In this context, the renegade “evolved into an embodiment of American paranoia, fear, and guilt” (Barr 1). In the 19th-century United States, the word renegade has veered decisively towards the secular sphere; its main meaning is no longer apostasy or spiritual defection, but cultural transfer. It is mostly applied to individuals who have abandoned white civilization and joined Native American tribes.[12] Figures of “indianized white men” (FitzGerald *passim*) occupy a significant position in the national mythology. An example of that is the iconic Daniel Boone, who, having fought on the side of the Americans, is not remembered as a renegade. The opposite is true for his infamous “antithesis,” Simon Girty (Slotkin, *qtd. in* Barr 3), who caused significant losses to the American army while fighting for antagonistic Natives tribes. This section will document the next step of the renegade declension – the American Frontier – and its ambiguities through the two 19th-century renegades Edward Rose and Simon Girty, with special emphasis on the oscillation between heroism and villainy.

Popular texts dealing with Frontier renegades such as E. G. Cattermole’s *Famous Frontiersmen, Pioneers and Scouts* (1883) and Washington Irving’s *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (1837) reproduce some of the stereotypes associated with Mather’s religious renegades. To begin with, renegades are caught in between worlds. Cattermole explains that Girty fought for the Natives as well as for the Americans with equal fierceness (92). Similarly, in spite of Rose’s rapid ascension in the Crows’ power ranks, Irving points out that he remains to them “a stranger, an intruder, a white man” (228). Irving views Rose’s involvement in tribal politics as detrimental to the tribe itself, which he allegedly pushes to the edge of an intestine war. Both Girty and Rose are remembered for their dissolute morals: the former being a heavy drinker (Cattermole 97), the latter possibly killed by a disease “brought on by his licentious life” (230).

Most importantly, both characters are ultimately negative examples or Frontier “antitypes” to use Slotkin’s term (291). However, while Mather was categorical in the condemnation of the renegades’ deeds, Cattermole’s and Irving’s final judgments on their atypical ‘heroes’ show significant margins for ambiguity.

According to Daniel Barr, literature from the 19th century conducted a systematic vilification of Girty that eventually allowed him to reach a mythical status comparable to Daniel Boone’s (see 1). Yet, he claims that these texts “labored to expunge all traces of humanity from his myth” and “portra[y] a man who is at best a remorseless killer and at worst an emissary of Satan sent to destroy God’s chosen people” (6). Consistently with Barr’s reading, *Famous Frontiersmen* frames “the renegade” (Cattermole *passim*) Simon Girty as a monstrously cruel individual. The chapter begins on an ominous note: “The name of Simon Girty was a synonym for terror. ... Savage cruelty gloated over its prominence” (89) and ends on a similar one. Other passages in the text, however, present a different assessment of Girty’s life and career, one that challenges the reputation of Girty literature as exclusively vilifying. Cattermole allows that “no champion of savage cruelty ever held such indomitable sway over his barbarous associates” (94). Terms such as “champion” and “indomitable” betray a measure of awe. This posture is not limited to Cattermole but returns in other texts that narrated Girty’s life. In *Simon Girty the Outlaw*, Uriah Jones speaks of “the genius of Simon Girty” (*qtd. in* Barr 7) and James T. Morehead calls him “an incendiary” in his speech “An Address in Commemoration of the First Settlement in Kentucky” (*qtd. in* Barr 7). Cattermole is even more explicit in pointing out Girty’s merits by embedding different voices, like that of one Simon Kenton who never “fail[ed] to think or speak of the renegade, except in the most affectionate manner” and as “fearless, skillful, and heroic” (92). Cattermole also introduces a second chronicler who remembers Girty as “a man of extraordinary strength, power of endurance, courage and sagacity” (98).

The oscillation between villainy and heroism is even more pronounced in Washington Irving’s account of the “renegade” (Irving 228) Edward

Rose in *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*. The narrator often reproduces narratives that construct renegades as a threat: for instance, Rose makes “exceedingly generous” (229) gifts of American goods to his adoptive tribe, a gesture that brings to mind what was known to be “the most infamous of the ... renegadoes’ achievements,” the transfer of technology to the enemy (Fuchs 51). While Girty is known for having inflamed conflict between settlers and Natives, “inciting them to take up arms against the Americans” (Cattermole 93), Irving’s account on Rose is surprisingly celebrative of the renegade’s talent for diplomacy. Rose “is said ... to have opened [the Blackfeet’s] eyes to the policy of cultivating the friendship with the white man” (230). The Eurocentric quality of this statement is evident, as Rose is attributed with introducing the Natives to the notion of amicable negotiation, but the narrator doubtlessly speaks of Rose’s mediation skills with admiration. [13] The term “hero” appears repeatedly both in Cattermole (92, 96) and Irving (230) with reference to renegades. Irving’s “vagabond hero” is particularly worth noting, as it underscores the renegade’s “incomplete acculturation” (Calloway 44) and ultimate lack of belonging.

The implications of the term have significantly changed from the previous century and Mather’s sermons. In both cases, it remains dense with ambiguity: in Mather the renegado is suspended in a vacuum between two religions, thus, his/her condition and motives remain illegible. The perception of the Frontier renegade oscillates between villainy and heroism, and the figure already gleams with the positive streak that would become dominant in later stages of the declension. Although Mather’s text foreshadows the identification of a community of believers with a national community, his renegadoes are primarily religious apostates. In the 19th century, with the burgeoning of an American national conscience, renegades are those who revert the template of the Frontier by choosing ‘the wilderness’ over ‘civilization.’ Religious betrayal, however, does not fully cease to be part of the renegade’s character. When Cattermole lyrically refers to Girty as “a host of evil spirits” (99), he points at an outcast and a man possessed. But the simile also defines Girty through a vague

non-Christian spirituality, suggesting he has left his faith as well as culture.

Positive connotations become dominant in 20th- and 21st-century uses of the term, which identify the figure of the renegade with cultures of resistance. The following paragraphs will center on recent works of non-fiction that carry the word ‘renegade’ in their title. As a direct follow-up to Frontier renegades, it is worth taking a look at Steven Rinella’s article “The Renegade,” published on *American Heritage* in 2001, where the conservative white author specifically addresses the thin membrane between heroism and villainy and aims for a re-evaluation of the figure of 17th-century French explorer Etienne Brulé, who lived with the Hurons and was possibly killed by his adoptive tribe. Rinella laments the wave of revisionism that allegedly vilified old pioneers in the 90s and asks whether “maybe the old pioneering villains should be re-examined for heroic attributes.” Rinella lingers on Brulé’s attempt to boycott his countrymen’s imperialist project as an admirable endeavor, but at the same time celebrates Brulé through an exceptionalist vocabulary of Frontier heroism and pioneering, branding these practices as anti-imperial. “It’s odd,” Rinella notes, “that no one ever discusses Brulé as an early force against globalization, a person defending an indigenous way of life that was fading.” In Rinella’s evaluation, Brulé becomes an instrument of “anti-imperial imperialism,” to use Frank Kelleter’s formulation (31): As the author strives to disentangle Brulé from European imperialism, he entangles him in discourses of American exceptionalism. Rinella’s renegade is a hero in disguise, “pointed at with scorn on all sides,” called a “lunatic” and “a total pagan” (Rinella) by his imperialist countrymen, through his defection to Indian life Brulé becomes enmeshed in practices of American nation-building.

Although it would be necessary to trace a declension of ‘renegade’ that is exclusive to African American culture, for the moment our analysis will linger on lamentably few instances. The concept of the renegade slave, or the slave who escaped, has been used with reference to Maroon communities in the 17th century.[14] In her book *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American*

*Poetry* (2011), poet and critic Evie Shockley uses the word renegade to describe “the rebellious, nonconformist approaches the poets in [her] study have taken in their aesthetics” (15). She also draws attention to Harryette Mullen’s use of the word ‘renegade’ in her poem “Denigration,” which Mullen intersperses with words containing the morpheme ‘neg’ or ‘nig’ but with remote or no etymological connection with Blackness, such as “denigration” itself, “enigma,” “neglect,” “negligible,” “negate,” and others, among which “renegade.” Mullen draws an arch between Maroons and Spanish renegades, reflecting, as a matter of fact, on the term’s declension from the Spanish to the English context: “Though Maroons, who were unruly Africans, not loose horses or lazy sailors, were called renegades in Spanish, will I turn any blacker if I renege on this deal?” (Mullen 19). In the logics of “Denigration,” none of these words, including renegade, “can escape the racial connotation” (Shockley 15).

An empowering use of the term ‘renegade’ in *Poetics* can be found not only in the book’s corpus, but in its paratext as well. Shockley dedicates the book to a list of names, and then adds “Renegades, All.” Through this gesture, Shockley reclaims and repossesses the term ‘renegade,’ divesting it of its derogatory value and infusing it not only with subversive power, but also with love. The author’s emotional commitment to the “renegades” she dedicates her book to adds up to her reclaiming of the word in her title and argument. Shockley not only repossesses the word intellectually to indicate a subversive aesthetic, but also emotionally to honor the character and work of a community of individuals dear to her. The act of reclamation is therefore both public and private.

A similar repossession through emotional investment involves Maroon descendant David Williams. In an interview with BBC, Williams defines Maroons as “marauders, renegades who would live in the hills and come down to try to free the other slaves, steal livestock and fight the white landowners.” Williams equates renegades with “marauders” but also with agents of resistance who sabotaged slave owners – “a thorn in the side of the English planters” (“The Rebel Slave”) – in solidarity with fellow slaves. “I feel quite proud to be honest,” Williams continues,

“I wouldn’t say I’m a renegade, and I don’t resent authority but I think there’s a bit of that in me now today.” In this last comment, Williams, too, equates renegades with individuals who “resent authority,” but, most importantly, he admits that this label makes him “proud.” William’s standpoint is reminiscent of bell hooks, when in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), she explains that her pseudonym is a tribute to a distant relative who ‘talked back’: “I claimed this legacy of defiance, of will, of courage, affirming my link to female ancestors who were bold and daring in their speech” (hooks 210). Both William and Shockley proudly participate in a community defined by the act of renegation as subversion.

This shows that renegades currently occupy a desirable position in the American imagination, as contemporary authors – albeit from opposite sides of the political and race spectrum – show a generalized investment in establishing a continuity, be it familial, ideological, or emotional, between renegades of the early Americas and of today. Rinella urges his readers to reconsider Etienne Brulé’s exploits; Williams, Shockley, and Mullen highlight the continuity between Maroon communities and present-day forms of Black activism. While Cattermole dismisses Girty’s personality as “unenviable” (92), current assessments of the renegade experience show otherwise. It might be helpful at this point to remember Gayarré’s ante-litteram definition of declension, according to which a word could assume “a meaning that is the very reverse of its primitive signification” (Gayarré, qtd. in Dominguez 144). Gayarré claims this is the case for ‘creole,’ but the same can be said about ‘renegade.’

In “Tense and Tender Ties,” Ann Stoler invites us to use comparisons as windows onto interactions across borders, with an eye on universal principles and the ways in which they are applied in different imperial spaces (see 847). Moving away from universal principles in favor of a more limited focus on the microhistory of single concepts and figurations, this analysis tests the declension as a practice of comparison. By observing the reorganization of racial, moral, and religious constellations around the life span of a word, declensions reverse the act of translation, which is at the

basis of the comparative endeavor. While translation seeks different words to express (almost) identical meanings across languages and cultures, declension traces the different meanings articulated by (almost) identical words. They bring to light what Glissant in *Le discours antillais* calls “equivalences that do not unify” (466), mapping the drastic semantic oscillations of words that remain substantially unvaried across centuries and empires.

## Endnotes

[1] The research work that led to these result was carried out in collaboration with Barbara Buchenau. This article builds on a argument developed in Buchenau, “‘Neophytes’, ‘renegados’, ‘creoles’: Dynamiken der (Dis) Ambiguierung in nordamerikanischen Diskussionen des Wandels vom Kolonialismus zur Nationalstaatlichkeit.” The argument was part of an application for a Research Group (Forschergruppe) titled “Ambiguität und Unterscheidung: Historisch-kulturelle Dynamiken,” which Barbara Buchenau, along with other Principal Investigators, submitted to the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) in 2018. The funding for the Research Group proposal, coordinated by Benjamin Scheller and based at the University of Duisburg-Essen (Historisches Institut), was approved in September 2018. For more information see the Research Group’s description at <https://www.mercur-research.de/projekte/ambiguitaet-und-gesellschaftliche-ordnung/>

[2] My understanding of ambiguity derives from Scheller et al. 2018. See also Hoffarth and Scheller, *Ambiguität und die Ordnungen des Sozialen im Mittelalter* (2018): esp. the introduction to the volume: “Ambiguität und die Ordnungen des Sozialen im Mittelalter: Zur Einführung.”

[3] One example among many others of these multiple crossings is the song “Vous t’è in Morico!” (“You are a Blackamoor!” Monroe 37), inspired by the true story of a woman who sued a neighbor who insinuated that she was of mixed-race descent. The speaker begins the song by revealing Toucouyoute’s attempt to pass as white, depicting a liminal figure that dwells at the intersection of class and race. “Toucouyoute, mo connain vous, vous t’è in morico!” (“Toocooyute, too well I know, a Blackamoor are you!” Monroe, 37). It is only after the speaker’s revelation that Toocooyute’s blackness may obstacle the addressee’s social ascendance, as before, one assumes, Toocooyute passed as white: one has to know her “too well” to know she is not. See Thompson, “‘Ah Toucouyou, ye conin vous’: History and Memory in Creole New Orleans.”

[4] M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry describes the Candio as “un africain ou nègre créol, occupé de plaisir, et chérissant sur-tout la danse” (Moreau de Saint-Méry in Jenson, 254).

[5] See Langer Cohen and Stein 253; Jaynes 506; and the entry on “Les Cenelles” in *Oxford References*, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095558100>.

[6] For a discussion of Black Aesthetics see Shockley 2011. Especially 2-3, where Shockley questions a vision of Black art as necessarily “associated with militant, revolutionary politics and angry, incisive criticism of white supremacy and racial oppression” (2-3).

[7] Aylin Turner speaks of a poetics of “mild incongruity” (14), Ekstrom notes that Cable’s editors believed that the author’s “greatest fault” was “confusion” (Gilder, qtd. in Ekstrom 88). Finally, the English newspaper *Saturday Review* wrote that “a certain dimness of style” gave Cable’s writing a “hazy effect” (qtd. in Ekstrom 154).

[8] Translations by Mohamed B. Taleb Khyar, published in *Callaloo* in 1990.

[9] In addition to those mentioned in the former section, see the seminal texts by Bauer and Mazzotti (eds.) 2009 and Goudie 2006.

[10] For information on the comparable figure of the *Dönme*, the Jewish convert to Islam in Turkey, refer to the work of Kader Konuk, especially “Eternal Guests, Mimics, and Dönme: The Place of German and Turkish Jews in Modern Turkey” (2007).

[11] It is important to reiterate that multiple declensions are possible.

[12] See also Barbara Buchenau’s work on cultural conversion in Early America, especially “The Captive’s Crucible: Haudenosaunee Violence in Early North American Narratives of Christian and Cultural Conversion” (2013); “Ethnic Performance and the Self-Representation of Frederick Philip Grove” (2012); “The Goods of Bad Mobility: Pierre-Esprit Radisson’s Relation of my Voyage, being in Bondage in the Lands of the Iroquois, 1669/1885” (2012); and “Alternate Identities and Creolities in Canadian Literary Discourse” (2008).

[13] The narrator also tributes Rose with the resolution of another “tumult” (230) between Natives and settlers. The episode is similarly Eurocentric and the narration is confusing as to who originates the conflict, but eventually the narrator blames the Natives, who “became insolent” (230).

[14] Maroon’ was “the name given by English speakers to black people who ran away from slavery to live in isolated, hidden communities in the hills of Jamaica or the South Carolina swamps” (Shockley 15). For more information on the connection between renegade and Maroons, see also Lokken 2014, and Vaughan 2012.

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### Author's Biography

Elena Furlanetto earned her doctorate in Transnational/Transatlantic American Studies from the Technical University of Dortmund in

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