Racial passing, a concept that derives from the context of Jim Crow America, initially refers to people who are legally black but visually identified as white, who choose to pass for white in spite of the one-drop rule. The anthropologist Marvin Harris coined the term for the taxonomical practice of the one-drop rule: hypodescent. Its logic stipulates that someone with both black and white ancestors will be assigned the “lowest” racial caste, no matter how infinitesimal his or her percentage of black blood. The reason behind the practice of hypodescent reaches back to slavery, when slaveholders sought to protect their interests by ensuring that their illegitimate black offspring would add to their growing slave capital and be deprived of genealogical and property rights. The segregated Jim Crow era cemented the legal and economic viability of the hypodescent rule by drawing a clear line between blacks and whites. In the 1960s, Harris somewhat bluntly explained, “The reason for this absurd bit of folk taxonomy is simply that the great blundering machinery of segregation cannot easily adjust itself to degrees of whiteness and darkness.”¹ As William Javier Nelson rightfully observes, the result of this racial definition has been a racial anomaly in its “inclusion in the African-American group of individuals of mostly European ancestry.”² Though of European descent, the oxymoronic “white blacks” are the result of an American idiosyncratic practice of looking at blackness as a “monolithic identity,”³ leaving no room for anything other than blackness. In other words, the role of the hypodescent rule is to indefinitely set the limits of racial dilution, thereby reaffirming the compulsion of drawing the “color line” (W.E.B. Du Bois) continuously.
Racial passing came as a response to the one-drop rule. In her memoir *One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life—A Story of Race and Family Secrets*, Bliss Broyard recounts the life of her French Creole father, Anatole Broyard, who was born in New Orleans and moved to New York with his family as a child. Anatole Broyard was also a renowned literary critic who, though legally black according to the one-drop rule, passed for white his entire adult life on the East Coast and was “outed” by black scholar Henry Louis Gates after his death. Though an act of defiance against the logic of hypodescent, racial passing is also often perceived as a betrayal of the black community, given that to jump over the racial fence is obviously a controversial choice for blacks. Although the passing subject is not necessarily Creole in the strict Spanish sense of *criollo* (of European or African descent but native of and raised in the Americas, including New Orleans), there is arguably something quintessentially and alluringly Creole about passing—namely, the noncommittal nature of the act. Like passing, Creole is a concept that stands on both sides of the fence, which is why the Creole subject holds the potential to come across as a misleading figure. This chapter proposes a theory of Creoleness in which discrepancies, shifts, and slippages, which are often misconceived as calculated expressions of betrayal, are in fact defining and natural components of the Creole identity. The passing paradigm contributes to a better understanding of Creole’s unreliability because, like passing, Creoleness results from racial and sexual (miscegenation) promiscuity and thus bears the signs of deviance and astray-ness (*deviare*). The passing story of Broyard is a platform that allows us to understand Creoleness as fundamentally unpredictable, seeing the Creole subject as always “in situation” and therefore permanently unfixed. Also, the story of Broyard—and here literally meaning “Broyard as a narrative”—can illustrate how both race and sexuality question the unreliable semantics of the word *Creole*. What if the Creole subject, as a natural-born noncommittal subject, were the quintessence of the renegade figure? What if Broyard, by passing, was only being true to his treacherous Creole self?

Anatole Broyard: A Creole Story

Anatole Broyard was a highly respected literary critic best known for his influential position at the *New York Times*. He was born in the New Orleans French Quarter to Paul Anatole Broyard and Edna Miller. His birth certificate identified his race as black, but when he died in 1990 from prostate cancer,
his death certificate identified him as white. After his death, Anatole Broyard became famous and infamous for passing for white during his entire adult life. While he was a child, his family moved from Louisiana to a mixed-raced neighborhood in Brooklyn; this early move was a turning point in the boy’s life. Obviously, in New York, the racial configuration was different from that in New Orleans, a city that was used to Creole-produced racial subtleties. To obtain employment, Broyard’s parents were forced to pass for white, but they would revert to their black identity when they returned home at the end of the workday. Anatole, however, was raised as a black boy, and on several occasions, he had to pay the violent price of looking too white for the taste of black bullies. As an adult, he capitalized on what was once a predicament. During the years he was a student at Brooklyn College, served in the navy in World War II (as a white officer overseeing a black crew), and worked as an intellectual bohemian and bookshop owner in Greenwich Village, Broyard never revealed his black racial status. Broyard married a Puerto Rican woman, and they had a daughter. After the war, Broyard left his wife and child for a life of physical and intellectual pleasures in Manhattan. Much later, at forty-one years old, he married a woman of Norwegian descent; they had a son and a daughter, who both looked white. After their birth, Broyard left his Village Bohemian life behind and brought his family to Connecticut, where his children attended an all-white private school, and the family enjoyed a country club lifestyle that was very different from his modest black origins in New Orleans. To complete the racial passing, Broyard had to make the ultimate sacrifice of cutting ties with his family, which he did to a great extent, especially with his sister Shirley, who was the most dark-skinned member of the family. Even though his wife, Sandy Nelson, was aware of his black ancestry (one of Anatole’s friends told her when she and Anatole got engaged), his children never knew. When he was on his deathbed, Sandy insisted that Anatole tell the children. The physically weakened father argued that he could not muster the physical strength to engage in the draining discussion that the shared secret would have entailed. Finally, Sandy broke the news to Todd and Bliss shortly before Anatole died. It seemed that his secret was always about to be revealed and yet forever postponed.

In 2007, seventeen years after Broyard’s death, Bliss, who had become a literary critic and writer, released the story of her father’s passing in *One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life—A Story of Race and Family Secrets*. In addition to retracing the life of her father and his ancestors, Bliss described her painstaking journey to racial and Creole consciousness as she slowly came to terms
with her newfound heritage. In the book, she describes the moment when her mother revealed the family secret outside the hospital where her father lay dying. She explains that her mother used the word Creole, a word that Broyard did not fully grasp at the time. Her mother said that her father “had ‘mixed-blood,’ and his parents were both light-skinned Creoles from New Orleans, where race-mixing had been common.”5 Creole is also the word that Anatole had used as a young man to describe himself to Harold Chenven, a white classmate at Brooklyn High School. Years later, when Bliss was working on her book, Chenven told her that when Anatole had used the word Creole, he was “worldy enough” to understand that it meant “of mixed race,” even though he “thought to himself that Bud Broyard didn’t look like a Negro. His skin was as pale as, or even paler than, his own.”6 Like Bliss’s mother, Chenven automatically associated Creole with mixed race. But Bliss, who by then had spent years researching Louisiana Creoles, was well acquainted with Creole’s elusive and ambiguous nature. For her, Anatole chose that word precisely for the sake of its double-edged connotation: “By describing himself that way, my father could avoid the black/white question and let people draw their own conclusions.”7

Broyard was, according to Henry Louis Gates’s 1996 New Yorker article “The Passing of Anatole Broyard,” some kind of a trickster. The word Creole requires rigorous semantic handling. Just as New Orleans became the home of French, Arcadian, and Haitian refugees, the very word Creole carries an underlying sense of evasion, a connotation of which Broyard clearly took advantage. Broyard’s Creole was an evasion in the same way that “he’d mostly evaded [my italics] the question, saying something vague about ‘island influences’”8 when Bliss’s mother had once asked her husband about his racial background. The word Creole could have indeed meant “mixed race” for a worldly person like Cheven, but the mixed-race connotation in Creole carries an added value: the mixing of races is not necessarily in a given person, but it can also occur in a given environment between blacks and whites living in the same space and sharing a common history and culture. In other words, Creole can be either black or white, and not necessarily black and white.

After her mother used the word, Bliss Broyard looked up the meaning in a dictionary and included the full definition in her book. The dictionary is a recurrent preliminary step in texts dealing with Creole, given that the meaning of the word needs constant semantic reassurance. Nevertheless, because the word Creole is of a chameleonic nature, the dictionary fails to provide a clear, unequivocal, and—as usually expected from a dictionary—fixed definition.
The *American Heritage Dictionary* that Bliss used gave the following definition—which consists of two categories divided into the first two (white) and the last two (black and mixed race):

- Any person of European descent born in the West Indies or Spanish Harlem.
- Any person descended from or culturally related to the original French settlers of the southern United States, especially Louisiana.
- Any person of Negro descent born in the Western Hemisphere, as a Negro brought from Africa.
- Any person of mixed European and Negro ancestry who speaks with a Creole dialect.

The organization of the list may be reflective of the hypodescent taxonomical logic: hierarchically, white is superior to black, so it comes first in the listing. Alternatively, it could point to the dictionary’s inclination to see *Creole* as a label that first applied to whites, which is incorrect because historically the word did not originally carry a distinct racial orientation. The extensiveness of the list gives an obvious clue as to the confusion surrounding the word *Creole*.

Quite understandably, the spectrum of possibilities, based on either/or both, offers a freedom of choice that can easily lead to misunderstandings. As the Martinicans Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant point out in their essay *Eloge de la Créolité*, the word *Creole* has not always carried the official connotation of mixed race:

> Le mot “créole” viendrait de l’espagnol “criollo” lui-même découlant du verbe latin “criare,” qui signifie “élever, éduquer.” Le Créole est celui qui est né et a été élevé aux Amériques sans en être originaire, comme les Amérindiens. Assez vite, ce terme a désigné toutes les races humaines, tous les animaux et toutes les plantes qui ont été transportés en Amérique à partir de 1492. Il s’est donc glissé une erreur dans les dictionnaires français à compter du début du dix-neuvième siècle, lesquels ont réservé le terme “ Créole” aux seuls blancs créoles (ou Békés).

(The word *Creole* would come from *criollo*, which itself derives from the Latin verb *criare*, meaning “to raise, to educate.” The Creole, born and raised in the Americas, is not a native, unlike the native Indians. Soon enough, the term came to designate all the races, as well as all the animals and the plants shipped to America after 1492. An error therefore