Le mensonge a d’innombrables racines.
[The lie has numberless roots.]
—Edmond Jabès

The Scandal of Roots

Many detractors have dug up reasons for challenging the factuality of Alex Haley’s *Roots*. He has been accused of and sued twice for plagiarizing parts of the novel (Reuter; Boyd, H.; Nobile 32–33). The so-called griot who told Haley the story of Kunta Kinte not only was accused of being a fake but also had perhaps told him only what he had paid to hear (Nobile 34–35; Wright 208–12; Ottaway). Kinte’s village, Juffure, where he was supposedly kidnapped, was actually involved in selling neighboring peoples to white slavers, which makes it unlikely that anyone from there would have been enslaved (Rose 3; Ottaway). Historians have pointed out numerous anachronisms and questioned the existence of the slave ship that Haley claims brought Kinte to America (Rose 4; Nobile 35–36; Ottaway). American genealogical records contradict Haley’s account of the American portion of his family tree (Mills, “Roots” and “Genealogist’s Assessment”). And Haley’s editor at *Playboy* magazine made such drastic corrections that some have argued he might more appropriately be
considered the writer of *Roots* (Nobile 37–38; Haley, *Roots* 9). To these accusations, Philip Nobile added a sort of coup de grâce in his 1993 *Village Voice* article “Uncovering Roots,” proposing that Haley had perhaps even invented the oral history that supposedly retained the few Mandinka words that provided the bridge back to Africa (35). As David Chioni Moore writes, “[I]t had been concluded by many that *Roots* was, in some sense, a ‘lie’” (“Routes” 9). To those who sought to expose this lie, *Roots* was nothing short of scandalous.

Chief among *Roots*’ defenders has been Moore himself. To counter the lawsuits’ challenges to the novel’s integrity, he argues that “the distinction between originality and plagiarism, like that between fact and fiction, has been attacked as recent, historically variable, and theoretically untenable” (“Revisiting” 197–98; “Routes” 9). Others have also defended Haley against various specific charges. For example, when Mark Ottaway pointed out that Juffure’s collaboration with slavers made it highly unlikely that any of its villagers would have been enslaved, as Kunta Kinte is supposed to have been, “Most American historians, when contacted, said that regardless of errors, the historical essence of the book was truthful” (McFadden 29; see also Shenker 29). And in response to Ottaway’s accusation that Haley’s griot was a fake, Robin Law wrote:

> Implicit in Ottaway’s critique is the assumption that if Haley had consulted a genuine *griot* rather than a charlatan he would have been offered genuine traditions rather than being told what he wished to hear. Now, it may be that in this particular context this view is correct, but as a judgment of the historicity of the accounts of *griots* in general it would be absurd. . . . If a *parvenu* king needed respectable ancestors to legitimise his rule, his *griot* supplied them. Fofana of Juffure, though not a *griot* by heredity or training, was therefore true to the spirit of the *griot* calling when he obligingly provided Alex Haley with the ancestor he was seeking. His patron was a black American visitor rather than an African king, but that is a minor difference. The black American, like the African kings, wanted ancestors, and it was the business of the *griot* to give the rich and powerful what they want. (132–33)

It might be argued, then, that the challenges to *Roots*’ veracity could apply to even the most historically accurate, good-faith roots narrative that involves returning to a predominantly oral culture.

In contrast to the scandal that Haley’s novel set off and his denial of the
lies he was accused of, *Un mensonge* [A Lie], published in 1990 and written by the Jewish, Moroccan-born actress, singer, and writer Sapho, more explicitly examines the connection between lies and origins by narrating a quest for truth in origins, which turn out to be a fiction. In its very title, *Un mensonge* suggests an entirely different approach to the truth claims of roots narratives; by openly associating lies and roots, Sapho highlights the narrative paradox at the heart of all roots narratives. While most literary critics today would not consider fictitious genres to be composed of lies, the difference between the two was less clear and thus a source of anxiety in earlier periods of literary history. Sapho seems to confuse the two in a similar manner. Although some narrative genres (such as history and legal testimony) present their representations as factual and others (such as the novel) acknowledge that their representations are fictitious or at least other than factual (regardless of how plausible they might seem), using the term *fiction* to describe roots emphasizes that, in all of these discourses and in spite of their claims, truth is a narrative construct.

At first the actor/protagonist of *Un mensonge*, Alph Hade, lies about his Jewish Moroccan origins. The return to these roots that he carries out in an attempt to rectify his lies, however, ends not with the retrieval of a “true” or “authentic” Sephardic identity but rather with an assertion of the writtenness of this identity. For Alph also turns out to be the main “character” (or letter) in an allegory of Genesis read as an act of divine fiction making in Kabbalistic readings of the Creation story, which can then become the origin of a rabbinical tradition of exegesis as much as of humanity. Furthermore, *Un mensonge* follows up on the *Zohar*’s sexualization of the male scholar engaged in holy intercourse with his beloved Torah by exploring the paradox of its own sexualized allegory of Creation in Alph’s lovemaking with Bette, another of Sapho’s main characters/letters. By bringing Sapho into comparison with Haley, this chapter takes up the task of using the overlapping diasporas of Jewish North Africa to queer both the roots of diaspora and diaspora studies as a field. For the roots Alph returns to in his multiple trips to Morocco turn out to be always already deconstructed. And even the heterosexual sexual allegory of origins proposed by the *Zohar* and Sapho’s Kabbalistic rabbi come undone in her novel’s “climax.” When read as an allegory of reading roots narratives like Haley’s, Sapho’s novel also offers an allegory of deconstruction as a narrative about diasporic identity in the writings of other French-language Sephardic writers such as Jacques Derrida and Edmond Jabès.
In denying his own roots as the son of a Moroccan Jewish mother, Alph actually tells multiple lies, which are integrated into his very name. For he even attempted to officialize his fictional name by erasing the letter E from the beginning of his original name, Ehade, on his passport: “Il avait tenu à déformer légèrement [son nom] jusqu’à commettre cet acte fou, un jour, d’utiliser du correcteur sur son passeport, pour retirer une lettre à son nom qu’il trouvait imprononçable” (32) [He insisted on slightly deforming his name, even committing the insanity, one day, of using white-out to remove a letter from his name that he found unpronounceable]. Since the novel states that ehade means “one” in Hebrew (160–61), Alph’s passport not only denies his “true” origins, but also effaces his name as beginning in another kind of denial of origin. Alph first lied as a child in response to questions by Agnieska, a girl he was in love with, about why he never went to mass. Because “[o]n soupçonnait qu’il était juif[,] changeait de trottoir à sa vue [et] ne lui montrait plus les timbres rares et son dernier Meccano” (74) [he was suspected of being Jewish, and others crossed the street when they saw him coming and no longer showed him their rare stamps and their latest Meccano], he replied that he was Protestant and therefore went to the Protestant church.

Yet Alph begins to question the value of his lies after the event that sets off the novel’s plot: his seemingly unexplainable, near-fatal fall during the last performance of a run of Molière’s seventeenth-century play Le misanthrope, in which he plays the title role of Alceste, who refuses to submit to the social conventions of the time, which he openly condemns as hypocritical. Upon his recovery, he seeks to unravel the mystery of this incident. Was he pushed, and if so by whom, or did he want to die and therefore “pushed” himself? And in seeking to explain his fall, Alph turns to Albert Sarfate, a filmmaking, skirt-chasing, Kabbalistic rabbi who has a very interesting method of finding an explanation: the actors in Molière’s play have names that correspond to letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each of these names also has a meaning, according to the rabbi, who directs Alph to ask the actors and the director to make a sentence with the words to which their names correspond (see tables 3.1 and 3.2). As part of this elaborate interpretative ploy, the rabbi leads Alph to Bette, the actress who plays the flirtatious Célimène, with whom Alceste falls in love in spite of the fact that she epitomizes everything he despises. Bette confirms the rabbi’s interpretation of the sentences by describing how the play’s director arranged to make him fall as a gag for
the closing performance in order to ridicule Alph’s character, the ever so serious Alceste, who is marked by a radical refusal to lie even, and especially, for the purposes of social decorum. At the same time, Alph seduces and is seduced by Bette, and the novel ends as he ceases to lie and espouses “the truth.” When Alph is joined with Bette, this heterosexual union symbolizes the decoding of the novel’s mystery/crime and, as we shall see later in this chapter, it offers an allegory for reading all roots narratives as detective fiction. The heterosexual union of Alph and Bette thus serves as a metaphor for decoding the novel’s mystery/crime.

Table 3.1. Characters in Sapho’s *Un mensonge*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character in Sapho’s Novel</th>
<th>Role in Molière’s Play</th>
<th>Corresponding Hebrew Letter</th>
<th>Meanings of Names</th>
<th>Sentence Constructed from Words in the Previous Column</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alph Hade/Ehade</td>
<td>Alceste</td>
<td>aleph</td>
<td>A, le chercheur</td>
<td>L’instrument existe; le mur entre le faussaire et le chercheur c’est l’arme dans la maison. La porte c’est le voyage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bette/Betty Duclos</td>
<td>Célimène</td>
<td>bet</td>
<td>maison</td>
<td>Le voyageur existe. L’instrument du faussaire c’est l’arme qui porte A loin de la maison par-dessus le mur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iseult Guimmel</td>
<td>Arsinoé</td>
<td>guimel</td>
<td>chameau, voyage</td>
<td>La porte de la maison est l’instrument ou l’arme du chercheur voyageant dans les murs du faussaire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippe Dalette</td>
<td>Clitandre</td>
<td>daleth</td>
<td>porte</td>
<td>Armé jusqu’aux dents il cherche aux murs de la maison, l’instrument, porte, voyage de son existence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacques de la Haye</td>
<td>Philinte</td>
<td>hé</td>
<td>être, exister</td>
<td>Existe dans la maison un mur avec une porte, instrument du faussaire, c’est ce qui arme le chercheur pour le voyage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vava Carton Éliante</td>
<td>vav</td>
<td>any conjunction, clou, instrument</td>
<td>Le faussaire est un chercheur dont l’arme est l’instrument du voyage hors de la maison après le mur.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Féodor Zaïne Acaste</td>
<td>zaïn</td>
<td>arme</td>
<td>Son instrument entre les dents près d’une maison sans porte A le voyageur et son arme sont murs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Hette Oronte</td>
<td>het</td>
<td>mur</td>
<td>Sur la porte du mur, dans la maison du chercheur est une dent de chameau, une fausse arme.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* As spelled in *Un mensonge.*

*b* These meanings are given by Albert (*Un mensonge* 194).

*c* The sentences of Alph through Christian Hette are in *Un mensonge*, 242–43.

*d* Hubert’s sentence is in *Un mensonge*, 263.
As part of seeking the truth about his fall, to a certain extent Alph recovers his identity through a return to his Moroccan roots. “Cette chute le ramenait à son origine” (61) [This fall led him back to his origins], writes Sapho, and these roots are found in memories—stimulated by his fall—memories of both his Moroccan childhood and a journey to Morocco that occurred just prior to the beginning of rehearsals for Le misanthrope, a journey narrated retroactively in the appropriately entitled chapter “Alph et l’Afrique” [Alph and Africa]. Alph also makes a second journey to Morocco as part of his efforts to explain the fall. His return to origins is quite literally a return to himself because Alph’s first name is derived from the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (alef). And, like Adam and Abraham (with whom the novel explicitly compares him), his name begins with the very letter it signifies. Taken as a whole, the name Alph Hade is itself a paradox. It both signifies origins (in the first name) and denies them (in the faked last name). The protagonist is named, therefore, with both an affirmation and a denial of origins. So, in contrast with his falsified last name, his first name marks him as the personification of beginnings and origins. One could say, then, that the “lie” is foundational to his identity; it is not just about his origins, it is his origins. His name tells the truth about his identity by naming him as the product of a lie and thereby exemplifies the narrative paradox of roots narratives.

Table 3.2. English Translations of the Meanings of Names in Sapho’s Un mensonge

| A, the seeker | The instrument exists: the wall between the forger and the seeker is the arm in the house. The door/gate is the journey. |
| House/home | The traveler exists. The forger’s instrument is the arm that carries A far from the house over the wall. |
| Camel, journey | The door of the house is the instrument or arm of the seeker traveling within the forger’s walls. |
| Door/gate | Armed to the teeth, he looked—on the walls of the house—for the instrument, door/gate, journey of his existence. |
| To be/exist | In the house, there exists a wall with a door, the forger’s instrument, which is what arms the seeker for the journey. |
| Nail, instrument | The forger is a seeker whose arm is the instrument of the journey out of the house, beyond the wall. |
| Arm/weapon | Near a house without doors, with his instrument between this teeth, A the traveler and his arm are ripe. |
| Wall | On the door in the wall, in the seeker’s house, there is a camel’s tooth, a false arm. |
| Tooth, falsifier | The forger, armed with a nail, carries A towards the house for a journey beyond the wall of being. |

“Here Zaïne uses mur as its adjectival homophone, mûr(e), which means “ripe.” It is written in his sentence, however, without its circumflex. Albert appreciates this play on words (260).”
In a further paradox, the origins of the character who personifies origins are themselves occulted not only by the lie he has been living by denying his own roots as the son of a Moroccan Jewish mother but also by his mother’s lies about his origins: “Elle avait tout accepté, que l’enfant soit baptisé, de considérer ses origines comme une honte” (47) [She gave in to everything, that her child be baptized, that he think of his origins as a source of shame]. And she told these lies in spite of having named him (or “baptized” him, as one could say in French) as origin, in spite of being his origin; she is thus also denying her self in an act of colonial alienation. Yet, when Alph ceases to lie about his origins and his name, he thereby returns to himself by reconciling his first name and his “true” last name, both of which signify a beginning. Telling the truth, in this reading, would constitute a remedy for colonial alienation. It would also be possible, therefore, to articulate a reading of Un mensonge, à la Haley’s Roots, as a roots narrative that reconnects Alph with his “true” identity by correcting or repairing “the lie” and setting the story “straight,” so to speak.

In the Beginning

Yet the first indication that such an organic reattachment to his roots might be problematic can be found in Alph’s obsession with the beginning words of Genesis, which he repeats on several occasions in the novel: “‘Au commencement étaient le tohu-bohu, le vide et le vague, disait la Genèse, et la lumière fut,’ et le mensonge commença” (19) [“In the beginning were tohu-bohu, emptiness, and formlessness,” said Genesis, “and then there was light,” and the lie began]. The notion of a foundational lie (the serpent’s lie to Eve, who then lies to her husband) recurs in the novel as Alph again quotes the beginning of Genesis:

Il écoutait parler en lui son “tohu-bohu,” il aimait ces mots hébreux qui voulaient dire le vide et le vague. N’était-ce pas vertigineux ? Le tohu-bohu, pas le chaos comme traduisent certaines Bibles françaises, “Au commencement étaient le tohu-bohu” et la lumière fut et le mensonge commença. (49)

[He listened to his tohu-bohu speaking within him, he loved these Hebrew words which meant emptiness and formlessness. Wasn’t it dizzying? The tohu-bohu, not chaos as certain French Bibles trans-
lated it, “In the beginning was tohu-bohu” and then there was light and the lie began.]

On one level, Alph’s take on Genesis might be read as reiterating the biblical myth of the origins of humanity in sin. The lie would then be the serpent’s lie to Eve, Eve’s lie to Adam, and all the lies human beings have been telling (as a part of their sinfulness) ever since (lies reproduced heterosexually). In this sense, Alph’s fall could be read as an allegory for the Fall of “Man,” Bette would represent his heterosexual redemption, and his sexual union with her would be a return to a literally heterosexual paradise.

But again, as suggested by the unusual twist that the rabbi adds to Alph’s association of Genesis and lies in his rather unorthodox take on the biblical myth of origins, the lies associated with the original heterosexual couple are more fundamental:

Savez-vous que la Création commence par deux mensonges de Dieu lui-même ? Dans la Genèse, il prévient Adam et Ève : “Si vous mangez de l’arbre de vie, vous mourrez.” Le serpent, lui, dit à Ève : “Si vous mangez (vous saurez), vous serez comme Dieu.” (248)

[Did you know that the Creation begins with two lies on the part of God himself? In Genesis, he warns Adam and Eve, “If you eat of the tree of life, you shall die.” As for the serpent, he tells Eve, “If you eat (you shall know), you shall be like God.”]

The foundational lie is thus not just the lie told by serpent to woman, who reproduces it by retelling it to man. Rather, by pointing out that the first lie was told not by the serpent but by God himself, the rabbi suggests that the original lie was not the original sin but the doctrine of original sin. For, since the rabbi’s assertion presupposes a slippage between God and Satan—if God told two lies, God and the serpent must be one and the same—the lies told by the creator precede the ones told by the original humans he created. In other words, this originating lie (the one told by “God”), this original, originary, or primal lie, founds not only humanity but also Alph’s Moroccan roots. In fact, we could also say that it founds roots in general. For Alph finds his roots in a doubled diaspora, uprooted as he is (in part through his own lies) from his Moroccan homeland, itself the place of a Jewish identity already in diaspora. Furthermore, Sapho doubles even this original diaspora, for in Un mensonge,
humanity begins as such with a still prior dispersal, that of Adam and Eve from paradise.

An additional part of the novel’s recognition of its own fictionality is related to the way it points to itself as a novelistic version of the *Zohar*, or Book of Splendor. Written mostly in Aramaic toward the end of the thirteenth century in Spain, this founding Kabbalistic text becomes a key point of reference for Sapho’s rabbi:

Dans le *Zohar*, le livre des lumières, on peut lire : “. . . Quand il [God] se décida à créer le monde, toutes les lettres se présentèrent à lui de la dernière à la première . . .” Bett [sic] a été choisie sans discussion : “C’est par toi (Bet) que je créerai le monde, tu seras l’inauguration de la création du monde.” (*Mensonge* 166; second ellipsis Sapho’s)

[In the *Zohar*, the Book of Light, one reads: “. . . When God had resolved to create the world, all the letters presented themselves to him from the last to the first.” *Bet* was chosen without discussion: “It’s through you (*bet*) that I shall create the world: you shall be the inauguration of the creation of the world.”]

The notion that “Bet was chosen without discussion” is somewhat misleading, however, since in the *Zohar* one finds a much more elaborate reading of the first four words of Genesis—*Bereshit bara Elohim et* (In the beginning God created)—and the account of Creation this reading is based on:

Rav Hamnuna Sava said, “We find the letters backward: *Bet* first, followed by *bet*: *Bereshit*, In the beginning, followed by *bara*, created. Then *alef* first, followed by *alef*: *Elohim*, followed by *et*.

“The reason is: When the blessed Holy One wished to fashion the world, all the letters were hidden away. For two thousand years before creating the world, the Blessed Holy One contemplated them and played with them. As He verged on creating the world, all the letters presented themselves before Him, from last to first.

“The letter *tav* entered first of all. She said, ‘Master of the worlds, may it please You to create the world by me, for I complete Your seal: *emet*, truth—and You are called Truth. It is fitting for the King of Truth to begin with a letter of truth and to create the world by me.’

“The Blessed Holy One replied, ‘You are seemly and worthy, but do not deserve to initiate Creation, since you are destined to be
marked on the foreheads of the faithful who fulfilled the Torah from \textit{alef} to \textit{tav}, and by your mark they will die. Furthermore you are the seal of \textit{mavet}, death. So you do not deserve to serve as the instrument of Creation.’ She immediately departed.” (\textit{The Zohar} 11–12)\footnote{7}

And this is just the discussion with the first letter to present herself (the letters are gendered feminine in the \textit{Zohar})—the Hebrew alphabet’s last letter, \textit{tav}. Each of the other letters likewise presents herself and offers a reason why Creation should begin with her; each then receives an explanation as to why she is unsuitable for this role.

Both the justifications and counterjustifications correspond to meanings produced by or through the letter itself—its shape, a word it is a part of, or a word similar to its own name. It is, in fact, its association of meaning with the various letters of the Hebrew alphabet (see tables 3.1 and 3.2) that allows the \textit{Zohar} to provide the key for deciphering the mystery of Alph’s fall. In this parade of letters, only to \textit{bet} does God not have a retort, so He decides to begin Creation with her only to realize that one remaining letter was overlooked:

The letter \textit{alef} stood and did not enter. The Blessed Holy One said to her, “\textit{Alef, alef}, why do you not enter My presence like all the other letters?”

She replied, “Master of the world! Because I saw all letters leaving Your presence fruitlessly. What could I do there? Furthermore, look, You have given this enormous gift to the letter \textit{bet}, and it is not fitting for the exalted King to take back a gift He has given to His servant and give it to another.”

The Blessed Holy One said, “\textit{Alef, alef}! Although I will create the world with the letter \textit{bet}, you will be the first of all the letters. Only through you do I become one. With you all counting begins and every deed in the world. No union is actualized except by \textit{alef.”} (16)

Genesis as read in the \textit{Zohar} is thus quite literally conceived as an ordering of letters. Before the beginning, “\textit{The earth was tohu va-bohu, chaos and void} (Gen. 1.2)—dregs of an inkwell in seepage” (\textit{Zohar} 181), and out of this ink will come the Creation, written as if all of the world and human-kind were a kind of fiction.

Since in the beginning God put \textit{bet} and \textit{alef} together as the initial letters of the first four words, when Alph and Bette have sex toward the end of Sapho’s novel, this alpha-bet-ical union not only marks a return
to Genesis but also reenacts its writing and recalls God’s placing of the two together in the first words of Genesis (the beginning of the beginning). Unlike Eve, because *bet* begins Creation and precedes the Fall, when Alph (as Adam) returns to her he repairs not only his fall from the stage but also the Fall of Man. This heterosexualization of Genesis corresponds to the rabbi Albert’s own vocal embrace of heterosexuality (though one that, at times, also embraces his sexual others). It also corresponds to the sexualized reading of Genesis articulated in Albert’s most important textual reference, the *Zohar*. Furthermore, this instance of heterosexual intercourse parallels the *Zohar’s* description of Creation as a sexual act:

> When the world above was filled and impregnated, like a female impregnated by a male, it generated two children as one, male and female, who are *heaven* and *earth*, as above. *Earth* is nourished by the waters of *heaven*, released into her, though the upper are male and the lower female, the lower nourished by the male. The lower waters call to the upper, like a female opening to the male, pouring out water toward the water of the male to form seed. (177)

And the commentary of the Stanford translation, or Pritzker edition, describes heterosexual copulation as a reenactment of Creation: “When a human couple unites, they stimulate the union of *Shekinah* and Her partner, *Tif’eret*, thereby strengthening the entirety of the sefirot, the realm of faith” (*Zohar 275n1290*). Likewise, even in its epigraph, *Un mensonge* gives sexual meaning to its Kabbalistic allusions:

> “Dès qu’une parole de la Torah est renouvelée par la bouche d’un homme . . . le Saint bêni soit-il . . . recueille cette parole, lui donne un baiser et la pare de soixante-dix couronnes ornées et ciselées . . .”

> “La comprehension et le bien sont deux portes qui sont comme une. . . .”

> *Le Zohar, le livre de la Splendeur* (7; Sapho’s ellipses)

[As soon the word of the Torah is renewed by a man’s mouth, the Holy One, blessed be he, receives this word, kisses it, and adorns it with seventy ornate, finely-crafted crowns.

Understanding and the good are two gates that are as one.

*The Zohar, Book of Splendor*]
Un mensonge thus retells Genesis to a certain extent, and reading the Torah is similarly a sexual act: “The moment a new word of Torah originates from the mouth of a human being, that word ascends and presents herself before the blessed Holy One, who lifts that word, kisses her, and adorns her with seventy crowns” (Zohar 25). Reading about origins in Genesis is thus to participate in the sexual act of Creation.

As a reading of the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy), therefore, the Zohar not only suggests that divine Creation was an act of writing, but it also suggests a parallel between the narrative act of creation and the tradition of exegesis and rabbinic commentary (including, e.g., the Talmud, the Midrash, and the Kabbalistic tradition) that expands on the Book—both the Torah and divinely authored Creation. In the Zohar, therefore, Genesis recognizes itself as an act of fiction. In short, divine Creation might also be read as a founding moment for the mystical cryptography that the Zohar exemplifies and Sapho’s novel picks up as a method of detection or crime solving. In fact, the meanings of the letters (and therefore the actors’ names that correspond to them) in tables 3.1 and 3.2 are taken directly from the more ancient (and mystical) Sefer Yetsirah or Book of Formation (see Kaplan 8; Ben Joseph 19), “that ancient and prekabbalistic source from which the term sefirah itself is taken” (Green 54), part of

the speculative-magical tradition that reached medieval Jewry through the little book called Sefer Yetsirah and various other small texts, mostly magical in content, that are associated with it. Sefer Yetsirah has been shown to be a very ancient work, close in spirit to aspects of Greek esotericism that flourished in the late Hellenistic era. While the practice associated with this school of thought is magical-theurgic, even including the attempt to make a golem, its chief text contains the most abstract worldview to be found within the legacy of ancient Judaism. (13–14)

The magical practice of fashioning a golem resonates with the passages from the Zohar quoted above and with the intertextual relationship between Sapho’s novel and the Zohar. One of the most renowned experts of the Kabbalistic tradition, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), describes the fashioning and unfashioning of a golem as follows: “According to other legends, the word emet (‘truth’; ‘the seal of the Holy One’ . . .) was written on his forehead, and when the letter alef was erased there remained the word met (‘dead’)” (352).
On several occasions, Sapho’s rabbi uses the same words, *emet* and *met*, to decode the mystery of Alph’s fall:

Il y a dans votre présentation, dit Albert, un parallèle entre faussaire et chercheur, même si on les oppose (on les sépare d’un mur, *het*, qui veut dire aussi péché), ils sont sur le même plan, *het*, le péché qui les sépare, est apparu lorsque Adam et Ève ont mangé le fruit de l’arbre de vie, cette pomme, première transgression, et avec le péché est survenu le peu de connaissance dont nous disposions, une connaissance imparfaite de douleur et de frustration. Entre le faussaire et le chercheur, il y a ce savoir imparfait, ce péché. Du mensonge à la vérité, il y a “mort,” “met,” mais Adam a mangé de l’arbre de la connaissance, a commis le péché d’entrevoir et il n’est pas mort. Entre Chine et Aleph, il y a le péché qui est aussi l’arme dans la maison, cet instrument de mort. (251–52)

[In your account, said Albert, there is a parallel between the falsifier and the seeker; even if they are separated (separated by a wall, *het*, which also means sin), they are on the same plane; *het*, the sin that separates them, appeared when Adam and Eve ate fruit from the tree of life (the apple or first transgression), and with this sin came the bit of knowledge that we have at our disposal, an imperfect knowledge of pain and frustration. Between the falsifier and the seeker, there is this imperfect knowledge, this sin. From lie to truth, there is death (*met*), but Adam ate from the tree of knowledge, committed the sin of perception, and he did not die. Between *shin* and *alef*, there is sin, which is also the weapon in the house, that instrument of death.]

Another passage in *Un mensonge* more explicitly points out that *met* is *emet* without its initial *alef*:

*Emet, Aleph est mort.*

    Je vais vers Ité. La répétition.
    Vé ver ité
    La vérité, ce qui peut se répéter ? (271–72)

[*Emet, Aleph is dead.*

    I go toward Ité. Repetition.
    I go toward/worm ité
    Truth, that which repeats itself?]
Truth contains the *alef* and the *tav* (the alpha and the omega), the beginning and the end as death. Beginnings thus contain and depend on their endings. Truth (*emet*) consists of repeating letters and is destroyed by the removal of its beginning letter (*alef*), which turns *emet* into an ending (death or *met*).

Furthermore, the novel figures Alph as the personification of this narrative ordering of letters: “En hébreu, *Emet*, vérité, peut se décomposer en deux, *E/Met*, Aleph est mort, en araméen : je suis mort. Vous voyez bien que la vérité ne nous appartient pas” (248) [In Hebrew, *emet* (or truth) can be broken in half, *E/Met* (or *alef* is dead); in Aramaic, it means “I am dead.” As you can very well see, truth does not belong to us]. Alph, as the personification of the first letter, *alef*, also separates truth (as founded in origins or roots) from the death of truth, or lies. He is the removable letter on which the creation of Adam depends: “Adam is called *golem*, meaning body without soul, in a Talmudic legend concerning the first 12 hours of his existence” (Scholem 351). Alph is thus Sapho’s *golem* to a certain extent, for he is likewise fashioned out of letters, in particular the first one. And as such he is an iteration of Adam, with whom the novel has already explicitly compared him. The *golem*, that human perversion of divine Creation (except for the fact that divine Creation also begins with a *golem*), is thus described in Sapho (as in what Green calls the magical-theurgic school of thought) as an ordering of letters. Finally, as *golem*, Sapho’s Alph is also a personification of the roots narrative *as an allegory of reading*, that is, as a narrative that offers its own way of reading origins and therefore has the potential to undo them.

**Lying by the Book**

After all, by partaking of both myths of origin (Genesis) and roots narratives (like *Roots*), *Un mensonge* opens up the possibility that all roots narratives might be read as reenactments of a kind of Genesis. The Hebrew title of the first book of the Torah, in fact, is the same as its first word—*Bereshit*—naming the book as beginning, not origin, which therefore reinforces my assertion in the introduction that Said’s opposition between beginnings and origins in *Beginnings* is ripe for deconstruction. Furthermore, because narrative beginnings are, for Said, what authorize the story that follows but are ultimately arbitrary, they inevitably involve a falsehood: “The second special condition for generating narrative fiction
is that the truth—whatever that may be—can only be approached indirectly, by means of a mediation that, paradoxically, because of its falseness makes the truth truer” (90). Put differently, we might understand the beginning’s self-naming as a false naming, or at least an act of fiction making. In fact, the truth-generating effects of repetition described by Sapho might be seen as the mode of production by means of which fictions become truths and narratives become myth and identity. What Said adds to such an understanding of identity as fiction making is an analysis of the role of beginnings (and therefore, in my reading of Said, origins) in such a narrative production of identity:

In this space [of the mind] certain fiction and certain reality come together as identity. Yet we can never be certain what part of identity is true, what part fictional. This will be true as long as part of the beginning eludes us, so long as we have language to help us and hinder us in finding it, and so long as language provides us with a word whose meaning must be made certain if it is not to be wholly obscure. (78)

For Said, then, beginnings mark the beginning of a hunch that identity is (only in part, in Said’s formulation) an effect of narrative acts of identity rather than (again, only, for Said) being its cause. If identity is a fiction, then, Said begins the task of describing, understanding, and theorizing its narrative structure.

Another writer who can help us elaborate on such a narratology of identity is, paradoxically, a poet, the Jewish Egyptian Edmond Jabès, who has also explicitly explored the fictionality of origins and roots narratives by labeling them as lies. Consider the following passage from Jabès’s *Le soupçon: Le désert* [Intimations of the Desert], vol. 2 of *Le livre des ressemblances* [The Book of Resemblances], which contains a section/poem entitled “Le mensonge des origines” [The Lie of Origins], whose first line reads, “L’origine ne serait, peut-être, que la brûlure de son effacement” (28) [Origins are perhaps only the burn of their erasure (Book of Resemblances II, 20)]. A few pages later, we read:

*Commencement*: comment se ment ? Comment va mentir à soi-même le commencement afin de pouvoir s’imposer comme commencement ? Comment, se mentant, il va nous mentir, il va installer son mensonge au point de nous faire accroire que nous commençons avec lui ? (30)
Commencement, “beginning”: comment se ment? How does the beginning lie to itself in order to compel recognition as beginning? How does it, in lying to itself, lie to us and establish its lie so firmly it makes us believe we begin with it? (22)

Since beginnings are only beginnings in the sense that by presenting themselves as such they come to be read as such, they are a kind of lie (asserting “I am a beginning”) that tells the truth (because, therefore, its iteration—as in the passage from Sapho cited above—constitutes a self-fulfilling prophecy and, therefore, the truth). Like Sapho, Jabès understands truth claims as being fabricated from lies: “Il y a, parfois, une telle conviction dans le mensonge, que la vérité en est confondue” (LQ II, 194) [Sometimes there is such conviction in lies that truth is confounded (LQ III, 137)]. This lie is also a central part of the quest for truth: “Aucune quête de la vérité n’est possible hors de soi. / Le mensonge abrite une vérité que ses propres tourments dévorent” (LQ II, 159) [No quest [for] truth is possible outside yourself. / The lie shelters a truth [devoured] by its own torment (III, 110)]. And what are roots narratives if not a quest for truth? The end result, a narrative of identity, likewise depends on lies:

Le mensonge est relié à la vérité, comme la corolle à la graine. L’image de soi qu’il exhibe inspire les interprétations les plus diverses que l’évidence entérine.

Le mensonge nous souffle le moyen de nous réaliser, nous place dans la situation de nous contester, qui est la seule valable. (LQ II, 228)

[Lies are bound to truth like the corolla to the seed. The self-image they show causes the most varied interpretations which evidence confirms.

Lies prompt us, suggesting means of self-realization. They place us in the only valid position, that of challenging ourselves. (III, 160)]

And, like Sapho’s rabbi, Jabès considers this lie as having originated with God himself: “Le mensonge de Dieu” (LQ II, 23) [The lie of God (III, 12)].

The fascination with identity as a narrative trajectory that Jabès shares with Sapho becomes less surprising when one considers that he shares,
to a certain extent, her overlapping diasporas. Born in Cairo in 1912, he received an education entirely in French, one that culminated at the Lycée Français of Cairo. Although he maintained a long relationship with Max Jacob, met Paul Eluard early in his career, and has been loosely associated with the surrealists, he always kept a certain distance from them as a group. In 1957, due to increasing anti-Semitism in conjunction with Gamal Abdel Nasser’s rise to power in Egypt, Jabès immigrated to France (Jabès, Du désert 187–90). In spite of a career spent mostly in exile there, Jabès’s particularly Egyptian homeland remains at the center of his thematics. And in the figure of the desert Jabès makes of exile a specifically Jewish thematic concern. By focusing on the desert, in fact, he displaces the site of Jewish identity from Israel to Egypt in an implicit reworking of the biblical narrative of Egypt as a place of enslavement and therefore of an uprooted identity. Jabès is perhaps best known for a seven-volume collection of poems (or work in verse, since it is not always clear where one poem ends and another begins): Le livre des questions [The Book of Questions].

This work not only assembles a great number of questions, often in the form of rabbinic dialogues, but also questions the Book and all that comes with it, including God, who, having exiled himself after Creation, also authored Creation like a book as in the Kabbalistic tradition.

Jabès’s God is thus a textual phenomenon similar to the author function, for like the author in literary studies, Jabès’s God is dead. In fact, God’s post-Creation exile or death (they seem to be quasi equivalents) is linked to his lies as in the understanding of the Creation story on the part of Sapho’s rabbi:

Dieu S’exila, laissant à l’homme le soin de décacheter l’univers. Je serai tous les mensonges de Dieu pour mourir de Sa mort ;

   car Dieu est mort de mentir. Tout ce qui est ment. Être dans la vérité, c’est aspirer au Non-être. Dieu est Vérité. Ainsi Dieu est Conjonction, Dieu est Convergence. (II, 129–30)

[God went into exile and left it to man to unseal the world. I shall be all the lies of God in order to die of His death.

For God died of lying. All that exists lies. To be in the truth means wanting Not-To-Be. God is Truth. Thus God is Union, God is Convergence. (III, 91)]

And God’s exile not only humanizes and textualizes him but also associates him with Jewishness understood as an exilic condition:
In fact, the textualization of God is partly what makes him the God of the Jews, who are “une race issue du livre” (LQ I, 30) [a race born of the book (I, 25)], hence Jabès’s diasporist understanding of the expression “people of the Book,” by means of which “the Book” becomes both the homeland of the diaspora and the promised land to which return narratives can make “territorial” claims: “Je suis dans le livre. Le livre est mon univers, mon pays, mon toit et mon énigme. Le livre est ma respiration et mon repos” (LQI, 36) [I am in the book. The book is my world, my country, my roof, and my riddle. The book is my breath and my rest (I, 31)].

Because a return to roots is a return to the Book (cf. the title of the third volume of the *Book of Questions, Le retour au livre*), it becomes a purely textual phenomenon for Jabès, an act of narration. Indeed, for Jabès, *all* writing is inextricably linked to the question of roots:

Écrire, c’est avoir la passion de l’origine ; c’est essayer d’atteindre le fond. Le fond est toujours le commencement. Dans la mort, sans doute aussi, une multitude de fonds constitue le tréfonds ; de sorte qu’écrire ne signifie pas s’arrêter au but, mais le dépasser sans cesse. (LQ I, 360)

[Writing means having a passion for origins. It means trying to go down to the roots. The roots are always the beginning. Even in death, no doubt, a host of roots form the deepest root bottom. So writing does not mean stopping at the goal, but always going beyond. (II, 159)]

Given that the thematics just described resonates with many of the concerns found within Derridean deconstruction, it should not come as a
surprise that in two essays in *Writing and Difference*—“Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book” and “Ellipsis”—Derrida would use Jabès as a pre-text for theorizing the deconstruction of origins. Indeed, Jabès’s *Book of Questions* preceded Derrida in articulating what I have called the narrative paradox of roots narratives by questioning rootedness as signified by a site of origins and revealing the writtenness of roots. In fact, Jabès would even explicitly come to embrace the term *deconstruction*:

Le livre ne se construit pas, mais se déconstruit. Dieu est mort par le livre.
Livre, tombe abyssale de Dieu ?
Cette déconstruction est retour à la parole initiale (*LQ* II, 312).

[The book is not [constructed], but [deconstructed]. God dies of the book.
The book, bottomless tomb of God?
This [deconstruction] means a return to the initial word. (III, 218)]

Critics have often associated Jabès with deconstruction, not only, no doubt, because of Derrida’s discussion of his work in *Writing and Difference* but also because of the recurrence of certain terms or themes in his work—*écriture*, traces, origins, *différance*, margins, absence/presence—as well as a certain undecidability regarding exactly what these terms mean, mark him as a sort of poet of deconstruction (cf. Kronick 968). Derrida would take up Jabès’s passion for roots as well as his acknowledgment of their writtenness: “Writing, passion of the origin. . . . It is the origin itself which is impassioned, passive, and past, in that it is written. Which means inscribed. The inscription of the origin is doubtless its Being-as-writing, but it is also its Being-as-inscribed in a system in which it is only a function and a locus” (295–96). For Jabès, the figure of God fulfills some of the functions of a deconstructionist understanding of origins in the following verses: “Dans le livre, . . . l’écriture est absence et la page blanche, presence. / Ainsi Dieu qui est absence est présent dans le livre” (*LQ* II, 305) [“In the book,” he said, “writing means absence, and the empty page, presence. / Thus God, who is absence, is present in the book” (III, 213)]. Indeed, Jabès characterizes the deconstruction of origins as a quintessentially Jewish relation to identity and in so doing provides a key for understanding Sapho’s deconstruction of not only origins but also Jewish identity.

Derrida would echo Jabès’s understanding of the absence/presence
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binary in defining the aporia that is roots, as the following passage, already quoted in the introduction, attests:

The writing of the origin, the writing that retraces the origin, tracking down the signs of its disappearance, the lost writing of the origin. . . . But what disposes it in this way, we now know, is not the origin, but that which takes its place; which is not, moreover, the opposite of an origin. It is not absence instead of presence, but a trace which replaces a presence which has never been present, an origin by means of which nothing has begun. (Writing 295)

And here the trace—often understood as the trace of the Other within the dominant term of a binary pair whose self-definition thereby relies on the other that it others or as a manifestation of différence through which traces of difference contaminate essence—comes also to define roots.

Tracing Roots

Mensonge de Dieu, je te suis à la trace.  
[Lie of God’s, I am on your trail.]
—Edmond Jabès

In another passage quoted in my introduction, this one from Of Grammatology, Derrida reinforces the association between traces and origins, as well as the characterization of origins as the trace left behind by their disappearance: “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin . . . it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (61). At first this Derridean concept of trace might seem to have nothing in common with the specifically Caribbean meaning of the word trace as “path” that we saw in chapter 1, especially the trace in which Francis Sancher is discovered dead in Condé’s Traversée de la mangrove. In the more recent theoretical work of Édouard Glissant, however, these two meanings come together in a specifically Caribbean understanding of the trace as a concept for theorizing both diaspora and deconstruction as an allegory for diasporic identity. In Introduction à une poétique du divers (1996) [Introduction to a Poetics of the Diverse] and Traité du tout-monde (1997) [Treatise
Glissant develops what he calls a “pensée de la trace” [trace-thinking] as a way of thinking about the notion of origins or roots in relation to identities in the present. In a “pensée de la trace,” the “roots” of Caribbean identity are accessible only as traces; one cannot “return” to these roots as Haley returns to Africa in *Roots*, although Glissant may very well offer a rereading of Haley that demonstrates how seemingly straightforward roots can be about traces as well. Whereas Glissant does not often acknowledge the similarities between his notion of the trace and Derrida’s, the former prompts a rereading of the latter, one that teases out the relation between Glissantian traces and a deconstructionist conception of origins.

In *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Glissant introduces the notion of a “pensée de la trace” in a three-paragraph passage that contrasts the trace with an essentialist understanding of identity and uses the trace to define a kind of identity-in-movement: “The trace assumes and carries not being-thought but the ramblings of the existent” (69). He then links the “pensée de la trace” with his conceptualization of the rhizome from earlier writings (in spite of the differences one might point out between Deleuze and Guattari on the one hand and Derrida on the other): “Remember that the single root has the pretention of depth and that the rhizomatic root extends into the expanse” (69). Like the rhizome, therefore, the trace is one particular manifestation of a “poetics of relation” that defines identity in relation—to others, to the Other—and values this relation with other cultures and peoples over an internal essence, a point Glissant clarifies in *Traité du tout-monde*, published a year later: “Let trace-thinking posit itself, in opposition to system-thinking, as a wandering that orients. We understand that the trace is what puts us, all of us, regardless of our origins, in Relation” (18).

Although the poetics of this relationality often seems to consist of relationality with other contemporary cultures, it also suggests a relation with the past in historical terms, for already in *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Glissant was providing more concrete historical examples of what he means by traces:

Africans traded in the Americas brought with them from beyond the Great Waters the trace of their gods, their customs, and their languages. Confronted with the colonizer’s harsh disorder, they had the genius, linked to the suffering they endured, to nourish these traces, thereby creating, even better than syntheses, results whose secret they held. These Creole languages are the traces/pathways cleared through the waters of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. (70)
The syncretic religions and Creole languages of the Caribbean, as cultural artifacts often said to have African roots, are thus specific manifestations of traces of African roots, or, better, of African roots as traces. Furthermore, if Caribbean culture results from the ability to “fertilize these traces in order to create resulting ones” as Glissant specified in a lecture delivered in 2000, traces are not a residue left by the past but an act of creation (Keynote). In other words, roots as traces are not discovered but created by narratives of identity. As an alternative to rootedness, the trace thus offers connectedness with the past and the possibility of movement along the lines of the *errance enracinée* discussed in chapter 1.

In addition, the trace becomes a way of thinking about the *rewriting* of history as relation: “The white spaces on planetary maps are now woven with opacity, which has broken forever with the absolute of History, which initially was project and projection. Hereafter, History is undone as a concept at the same time as it dwells on these returns of the identitarian, the national, the fundamental, all the more sectarian since they have become obsolete” (69). In a reference to pathways, then, Glissant brings the abstract theoretical concept of the trace back to its concrete Caribbean specificity: “The trace does not repeat the uncompleted path where one stumbles, nor the carefully tended path that closes on a territory or a large estate” (70). Furthermore, in addition to resulting from a creative relation with history, the trace keeps the celebration of identity implied by roots: “The trace is to the route as revolt is to injunction and jubilation to the garrote” (69). In other words, the trace is both a revolt and a jubilation and is capable of accounting for the coexistence of contradictions. It is “a wandering that orients” as in one of the passages quoted above, or origins that are not origins, as discussed in my introduction. The trace, a revolt against the forced migrations of the past, also recognizes that those migrations are constitutive of identity in ways that are not determined by that oppression (i.e., there is an element of agency in the creative act that is identity).

In addition, here is also the place where we can see how Glissant differs slightly from Gilroy in his double emphasis on roots and routes; for Glissant routes are too restrictive, too mapped out; they leave too little room for detours, ramblings. Like the *trame*, or narrative pathways, in Condé’s novel, these *traces* are just as likely to lead us away from our roots as toward them (think again of Haley as an example of a roots narrative that follows a straight path that leads unequivocally to its point, the point being “roots”). Traces offer another, different way of thinking about identity, a model of identity woven (*trame*) with opacity. In French,
trame means “weft” (as opposed to “warp,” the set of threads attached to the loom); it is the thread carried by the shuttle as it passes between the threads of the warp. Though often translated as “framework” in addition to “weft,” trame is also a word used when speaking of plot, which has no exact equivalent in French. We might say, therefore, that this trame is at once a plotting through narrative and the weaving (tissage) at the heart of métissage (see Lionnet 29). This métissage of the origins of Caribbean identity is visualized through the tangled roots of Glissant’s rhizomes or Condé’s mangrove (whose scientific name, again, is rhizophora). So, while one finds in Derrida’s earlier work a notion of the trace that Glissant does not really contradict, the latter offers a more concrete understanding of how the trace relates to identity, particularly the diasporic identities that obtain in the Caribbean. In addition to the routes that, Paul Gilroy argues, are just as important as roots in the constitution of identity, Glissantian traces encompass more than grand historical narratives and great voyages across the seas; traces are also day-to-day walks on a more modest and local scale, walks that crisscross individual islands in a kind of topography of identity.

Lie Detectors

Furthermore, Glissant writes in Traité du tout-monde, “Cette trace, de l’Être à l’étant, aux miséricordieux étants ! Nous la suivons sans la défigurer” (239) [This trace/path from Being to beings, to merciful beings! We follow it without disfiguring it]. Suivre à la trace is to be hot on the trail of someone or something, like a detective in pursuit of a criminal. Although Jabès claims, “[L]es methods d’investigation des policiers me sont inconnues (LQ II, 98) [I am unfamiliar with the detective’s investigative methods (my trans.)], in other passages he suggests the opposite, that diasporic identity is pieced together like clues in a detective novel: “J’ai relu les pages rédigées après le crime. . . . Machinalement, en les rangeant, je les ai posées au-dessus du récit de mon crime et de mon Journal” (LQII, 164) [I have reread the pages written after my crime. . . . Mechanically I put them in order on top of the story of my crime and of my journal (III, 114)]. In the passage quoted as the epigraph to the previous section, Jabès is also always hot on the trail of God’s lies (“Mensonge de Dieu, je te suis à la trace” [LQ II, 89]).

At several points in this study, I have compared the search for roots to the work of the detective and roots narratives to detective fiction. Con-
dé’s reader must piece together Francis Sancher’s story from contradictory fragments. *Un mensonge* is also structured like a detective novel; its alpha character—Alph, the very personification of origins—reconnects with his roots upon solving the crime of his having been pushed off a theater stage. Furthermore, in Sapho’s novel, searching for clues requires producing a text (the set of sentences produced by the actors in *Le misanthrope*), which must then be interpreted in an act of literary criticism (which here more closely resembles mystical cryptography). *Un mensonge* might also lead us back to reread Haley as a detective novel. In such a reading, the crime would be Kunta Kinte’s kidnapping, enslavement, and transport to the New World for sale to the highest bidder, that is, his uprooting and the family tree that sprouts out of it; the search for clues in *Roots* would then be Haley’s metanarrative return to Africa, as well as the reading of his uprooting as crime. In rerooting his identity, Haley not only “solves the crime” to a certain extent, but he also obtains a certain kind of justice and even reparation.13 If as John G. Cawelti writes, “In the detective story, when we arrive at the detective’s solution, we have arrived at the truth, the single right perspective and ordering of events” (89), solving the “crime” in a roots narrative, that is, finding roots, involves arriving at the truth of identity.

In fact, it is in relation to detective fiction that, in “Philosophy of the *Série Noire*” (1996), Deleuze takes up Nietzsche’s notion of “powers of the false” to describe precisely the kind of production of truth-value that I have attributed to Sapho’s *Un mensonge*, that is, the very fabrication that produces the truth as true. Describing “Sophocles’ *Oedipus* [a]s a detective story” (7), he goes on to argue that “the detective novel has remained Oedipal” (6–7). Regarding the French detective novel series that inspired the essay, he maintains that “the power of the false became the detective-story element par excellence” (8).

By now a large body of work critical work has been produced on detective fiction, even after the 1970s as many of the phenomena that inspired it recede into the past: Borges and the Latin American Boom, the French New Novel, Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, and structuralism in general. In “The Adaptation of Detective Story Techniques in the French New Novel,” Erica Mendelson Eisenger describes the narrative structure of detective fiction in a way that might enhance our understanding of the structure of the roots narrative as articulated in this study up to now: “Time is a forward moving line which culminates in death—a murder. Time in a detective novel, however, is retrospective. The detective story begins with the crime and works backwards from
consequence to cause. ‘Le travail policier consiste à combler à rebours le temps fascinant et insupportable qui sépare l’événement de sa cause’” (53). In Michel Butor’s L’emploi du temps (1956) [Passing Time], the narrator, Jacques Revel, goes into even greater detail regarding the detective novel’s narrative structure and the French New Novel’s interest in detective fiction as defined by this structure:

[I]n detective fiction the story goes against the stream, beginning with the crime, the climax of all the dramatic events which the detective has to rediscover gradually, and that this is in many respects more natural than the narrative proceeding without a backward look, where the first day of the story is followed by the second and then by subsequent days in their calendar order, as I myself at that time had been describing my October experiences; in detective fiction the narrative gradually explores events anterior to the event with which it begins. . . . [D]etective fiction . . . superimposes two temporal sequences, the days of the inquiry which start at the crime, and the days of the drama which lead up to it, and . . . this is quite natural, since in real life one’s mental analysis of past events takes place while other events are accumulating. (178–79)

Butor himself uses the tracing of origins here to describe the work of both the reader and the detective, for the end of the detective novel is in fact a return to its beginning, which is only explained (in the sense that its cause is “discovered” upon solving the crime) at the end of the story. In other words, the detective novel shares the bidirectional narrative structure that I attribute to Haley’s Roots since the roots narrative works by “retrospectively” (to use Eisenger’s term) positing its own beginning (as a story) as the origin of identity. In short, the roots in roots narratives are thus first and foremost the beginning of a story, a narrative beginning.

Furthermore, if the roots narrative (including Haley’s) can be understood as detective fiction, solving the crime is also an allegory for interpretation (reading for clues). In no other genre, perhaps, is the reader more encouraged to enter into a competition with the detective/protagonist in a race to solve the crime and be the first to reach the finish line (the beginning of the novel). In detective fiction, therefore, the reader reads the narrative being written. We might say, therefore, that since all roots narratives resemble detective fiction, reading them involves the same impulse to return to a beginning, a return that the
story itself recounts. And if the work of the detective parallels that of interpreting the detective novel, the parallel of the reader as detective for roots narratives consists of the reader’s returning to roots through the search for meaning in origins. In other words, roots narratives are allegories of their own reading, and interpretations of them, such as the ones this study proposes, become their own narratives of origin and of the deconstruction of origins.

Indeed, the eponymous lie of Sapho’s title has its own connection to the detective genre, for in Eisenger’s description of the genre, lies also play a central role in detective fiction: “The detective exists because people lie. False testimony is assumed, not only on the part of the murderer, but from all the suspects. Everyone has something to hide in a detective story—the author most of all. For he must willfully deceive his readers by withholding essential information from them, or by confusing them with ‘unreliable narrators’” (96). By acknowledging similar lies at the heart of roots narratives as detective fiction, then, Sapho allows us to reread Haley in order to complicate our understanding of roots narratives and uncover the ways in which *Roots* embraces its lies even as it simultaneously denies them. For it is not just the case that Sapho’s protagonist lies about his roots; Alph’s role of staging fiction as an actor is marked as being a lie by profession: “[I]l exerçait là non seulement son métier de comédien, mais encore son métier de menteur . . .” (30; Sapho’s ellipsis) [He practiced not only the trade of an actor, but furthermore that of a liar]. Yet only by being a professional liar is Alph able to tell the truth:

Il était un extraordinaire comédien, long à s’épanouir. Peu de gens savaient jusqu’où. Jusqu’où il pouvait porter la vérité d’un rôle. La vérité était sa passion. Il lui avait fallu s’exiler dans le mensonge pour cela. (18–19)

[He was an extraordinary actor who took a long time to mature. Few people knew just how far. How far he could take the truth of a role. Truth was his passion. For that he had to exile himself in lies.]

Likewise, one of the tasks that Sapho undertakes in *Un mensonge* is the deconstruction of the binary that distinguishes truth from lies:

Bien sûr la vérité fuit, insaisissable, et s’il n’y a pas de vérité comment peut-il y avoir mensonge, le mensonge n’est-il pas lui-même matière à vérité, matériau précieux du regard ? Quel faux débat il y avait
là. Un homme coupable, voilà tout. Fermé dans des axes inventés mensonge-vérité. (122)

[Of course truth, evasive, eludes us, and if there were no truth, how could there be lies; are lies not the very stuff truth is made of, the precious matter of the gaze? What a false debate it was. A guilty man, that’s all. Closed up in the made-up axes of lies and truth.]

For Sapho, then, lies tell the truth:

Tout y est vrai, même le mensonge. Et chaque mensonge n’est-il pas si marqué de celui qui l’énonce qu’il ne raconte que des vérités indispensables, plus troublantes encore, plus dignes d’intérêt, plus informatives que la “vérité” ? (178)

[Everything is true, even lies. And is each lie not so marked by the person who enunciates it that it tells only essential truths, more troubling ones, ones more worthy of interest, more informative than the “truth”?

Truth and lies thus constitute a couple in the way Alph and Bette and Adam and Eve do.

If Sapho deconstructs roots as fictions of origins, Haley offers the clearest example of how all roots narratives are allegories of their own deconstruction in the de Manian sense. While on one level, the novel presents the return to origins as a quest for truth, its bidirectional structure can be read as drawing attention to the narrativity and fictionality of this return. If Haley’s detractors accused him of lying about his family history and history tout court, the structure of his novel reveals “lies” to be just as much at the heart of his roots narrative as of Sapho’s. The lie of Sapho’s title, then, is not merely the one (or ones) set “straight” by the end of the novel; it is also the fabrication at the heart of any roots narrative, the lie that tells the truth about roots, so to speak, by acknowledging itself as such, by acknowledging that, to a certain extent, roots are always inventions or fictions. If Judith Roof writes in Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative (1996), “As a site of mastery, origins are a product of narrative rather than narrative’s source; explaining narrative via its oedipal ‘origin’ is to try to account for narrative via narrative” (67), the slippage between lies and fiction in Un mensonge suggests that fictions (such as roots narratives) that deny their fictionality are also telling a lie. Truth
may be a fiction, but a lie occurs when it claims that it is not. In revealing the roots narrative to be a lie that tells the truth about roots as the fiction of identity, Sapho reveals the narrativity of roots.

A Lie That Tells the Truth; or, The Queer Truth about Heterosexuality

*Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth* is the title Philip Core gives to his book-length description of one particular manifestation of gay sensibility. If we take Core at his word, telling the truth by lying is one way many queer people give expression to their identities. A lie that tells the truth would thus be a queer sort of lie indeed. Likewise, the lie of Sapho’s title involves an acknowledgment of not only the narrative paradox but, as we shall also see, the sexual one as well. Indeed, the lie that tells the truth also turns out to be the assertion of truth as heterosexual union at the end of *Un mensonge*, where Sapho at first seems to set the story “straight” by rooting Alph’s identity in a heterosexual foundation. In a “straight”-forward, teleological reading of *Un mensonge*, in other words, Alph’s roots narrative reaches its ending by establishing that ends are not only divine but also heterosexual. Such a reading, however, would fail to take into account the ways in which the novel itself destabilizes this very reading by treating its heterosexual ending as a lie and destabilizing the truth of roots as based in a heterosexual family tree. If, on a basic level, *Un mensonge* seems to confirm the heterosexuality of roots as evidenced by Haley’s reliance on the patrilineal family tree and asserted by “The family tree stops with me” t-shirt mentioned in the introduction, when Alph and Bette come together as alphabet in an act of writing the truth of origins, the very writtenness of this conjoining is acknowledged to be fictional. Acknowledging the assertion of heterosexuality as the truth of roots to be a lie, then, also constitutes a queering of the genealogical structure of the roots narrative.

At the most basic level, the first suggestion that *Un mensonge* denies a heterosexual monopoly on roots consists of the inclusion of a gay character, Philippe, “[u]n homosexuel pas du tout féminin qui . . . se travestissait parfois et chantait avec une voix d’homme des chansons néoréalistes” (25) [a homosexual who wasn’t the least bit feminine and who occasionally dressed in drag and sang neorealist songs in a man’s voice]. This drag queen is a great source of consternation because he/she is simultaneously quite masculine:
[When he was dressed as a man, he was a stout fellow of 35 years who, in a tank top, scared off many a bum or horny guy who was liable to hang around after the show, or, with wine-smelling breath, to go on and on about Célimène’s low-cut dress.]

However, any alternative Philippe might represent to the heterosexual myth of origins reenacted by Alph and Bette seems to be harnessed to heterosexual ends because the rabbi “a trouvé dans ce voyage transsexuel une connaissance profonde des choses inexplorées en l’homme-femme qui apparu–Dieu créa Adam homme-femme” (172) [discovered in this transsexual journey a profound knowledge of the unexplored regions of the man-woman who appeared. God created Adam man-woman]. While it might seem odd to refer to Adam as an androgyne, which is often considered to be a figure of gender nonconformity, Albert’s take is actually quite faithful to the biblical text; to quote the King James version, “Male and female created he them . . . and called their name Adam” (Gen. 5.2).

As we remember from Aristophanes’s creation myth in Plato’s Symposium, the androgyne is a figure that stands for the origins of sexual desire for the opposite sex. Philippe is thus explained away through transformation into an androgyne. While many cultural critics have attempted to carve out a subversive space for androgyny, they all too often fail to return to the origins of the figure, so to speak, and account for its heterosexual roots. Privileging the androgyne may thus be a way of effacing the parallel homosexual creation myths of the man-man and the woman-woman that accompany the androgyne in Aristophanes’s myth and are conspicuously absent from Genesis. Yet, by turning the Adam-Eve couple into a similar androgyne, the rabbi gives Aristophanes’s androgyne a further Judeo-Christian twist. The novel’s only gay character thus leads back to decidedly heterosexual origins, back to the androgynous Adam Alph becomes by rejoining with Bette.

Such closure through the consolidation of a heterosexual relationship is certainly not unique to Sapho’s ending. Many a comedy of manners ends with the announcement of a marriage. Interestingly, Le misanthrope does not have such an ending; Alceste is unable to enter
into a relationship with Célimène precisely because he refuses to lie or accept her lies. In contrast, *Un mensonge* at first seems to canonize the heterosexuality of origins through its ending. Like the multiple narratives Roof describes in *Come As You Are*, Sapho’s novel is a “coming story” (3). Ends come for Roof; narrative creates ending and a sense of fulfillment of meaning through closure as a male orgasm in a heterosexual relationship; they are related to what Paul Morrison calls “the teleology of ‘discharge,’ which Freud calls ‘end-pleasure.’ . . . Like the well-made narrative, normative sexual activity issues in climax, from which comes, as it were, quiescence” (55). This teleology is a key concept in his argument that “traditional narrative is at once heterosexual and heterosexu-alizing” (68).

This orgasm is quite literal in Sapho’s novel, as can be discerned from the passage that describes Alph and Bette’s first lovemaking:

Son bustier part, la gloire de ses seins paraît. . . . Alph arrache sa chemise, se défait, entre avec elle, lui tire le bout de dentelle qui lui tient lieu de juste-aux-fesses, il embrasse ses seins, son ventre, la mord, lui lèche les cuisses, elle le prend, lui baise les reins et le creux de l’aîne, elle le fait frissonner, elle le labourer et le frôler et le tempêter, il lui prend les cheveux et l’embrasse et la mord et sa langue s’attendrit, et ils sont moitié évanouis l’un dans l’autre, mon amour, il est en elle sans y penser, et ils oublient les murs, il ne peut pas croire qu’il s’est oublié. Il ne sait pas si elle a joui. Oui, elle a joui. Pardon, il ne s’en est même pas assuré. Lui, une technique imparable, il a vu plus haut que lui, plus loin de lui, plus antique que lui. (240)

[Her bra flies off, the glory of her breasts appears. . . . Alph rips off her shirt, undoes his pants, goes in with her, pulls her by the bit of lace that serves as her thong, he kisses her breasts, her abdomen, bites her, licks her thighs, she takes him, kisses his loins and the hollow of his groin, she makes him shiver, she works him over, brushes against him, works him into a tempest, he takes her hair, kisses her and bites her, and his tongue becomes tender, and they are practically swooning in each other, my love, he is inside her without even knowing it, and they forget the walls, he can’t believe that he has abandoned himself. He doesn’t know whether she came. Yes, she came. Excuse me, he didn’t think to ask. He, with his unequaled technique, he saw higher than himself, farther than himself, more ancient than himself.]
When Alph ejaculates inside Bette, he has ceased to lie and has espoused “the truth.” The passage mystifies (hetero)sexual union as the communion not only of kindred spirits but also with a higher being and meaning (“plus haut que lui,” in this passage, “higher than himself”). Pronouns become instable, thereby marking self-shattering bliss. In addition, the joining of man and woman, here, returns Alph to a prelapsarian entity (“plus antique que lui” or “more ancient than himself”). The full implications of this heterosexual return become more explicit when one recalls Sapho’s previous description of Alph with his former fiancée Elisabeth: “il était entre les bras de sa Genèse” (147) [he was in the arms of his Genesis]. So in addition to bringing the narrative to its end, therefore, heterosexual intercourse in Sapho’s novel is described as a return to a kind of beginning or origins. For in *Un mensonge* Bette becomes the archetypal Woman, a sort of Eve if you will: “Bette, dans cette configuration, c’est la femme” (166) [In this configuration, Bette is Woman]. By uniting with Bette in sex, Alph not only repeats the Creation myth as told in Genesis, but he also returns to paradise.

Against such a reading, however, I argue that in *Un mensonge* queer roots lie less with its only gay character than within its simultaneous participation in and challenge to the genre of the roots narrative. This is also where the novel begins to queer Alph’s Moroccan origins, Genesis, and origins in general. Although the union of Alph and Bette seems to suggest that truth is produced through heterosexual intercourse, the novel’s final sentence hints that this heterosexual, divinely ordained “truth” is also a lie. Sapho writes in the novel’s final sentence, “Comme vous le savez, ô lecteur, tout cela est un tissu de mensonges, mais dans tout mensonge, il y a de la vérité” (273) [As you know, reader, all of this is a fabric of lies, but in every lie, there is truth]. While a story that joins Alph and Bette and in which there is so much ado about the letters of the alphabet might seem overly gimmicky, the representation of their budding romance is no less so; the novel ultimately suggests that there is no heteroromance that is not just as corny. The Harlequin-Romance-like dialogues that accompany Alph and Bette’s sexual communion suggest that their relationship is no less a “lie” than the illusion they are paid to produce onstage. If their first sex scene is composed of clichés, right after Alph admits his love to Bette she responds in a similarly clichéd manner:

Par pitié, restez, restez mais taisez-vous. Trois secondes. Je ne comprends rien à tout cela. Non, c’est faux. Trop d’informations me vien-
It is a cliché that men lie to women: I’m not married, I really love you, You can trust me. Alph told just this sort of lie when he changed the age on his passport to make it easier to seduce the older women who are his “type.” And in the realm of such clichés, men do not hold a monopoly on lies: Yes, honey, it was good for me, too.

In Un mensonge, the first time Alph mentions Albert to Bette, she asks, “Mais qui est Albert, un . . . ami ?” [But who is this Albert, a . . . (boy) friend?]. Alph replies, “Mais non, pas un amant ! Je préfère les filles . . . les femmes” [Of course not, not a lover! I prefer girls . . . women]. When Bette replies in turn, “Ah ! Je me suis demandé” [Oh! I was wondering], she confirms his suspicion of her suspicion that he might be gay (230). As Paul Morrison writes about such questions, And as with the class that would not, so too with the love that need not, speak its name. I mean, of course, heterosexuality, which both goes without saying and is the privilege of never having to say; the privilege, in fact, rarely emerges unscathed from the saying. “I am straight”: to be forced or feel compelled to articulate one’s heterosexual credentials is already to protest too much; the performative belies the declarative. If, then, heterosexuality need not, it also dare not, speak its name, which is why a straight coming-out narrative, no less than a good man, is hard to find. (68–69)

Alph’s response to Bette’s question about his sexual orientation, then, is a lie, not because he is “really” gay but because he repeats the fiction that heterosexuality is not its Other. The “truth” about his sexuality is a fiction, the fiction created when lies are repeated to such an extent that they become truth: “La vérité, ce qui peut se répéter ?” (272) [Truth, that which can be repeated?]. Truth would be the fiction created when lies are repeated to such an extent that they are taken as truth. Narratives
of origin come to constitute the truth about identity when their ritualized reiteration turns them into myth (or, we could also say, history). We might also say that the founding lie of heterosexuality is the reproduction of the fiction that heterosexuality is immune to queerness, that it can be separated from homosexuality.

If, therefore, a return to Genesis marks a return to heterosexual roots in the novel, because Creation begins with an originating lie on the part of God, the heterosexuality many see as founded in Genesis is also founded on this lie. The lie of Sapho’s title, therefore, is not only the lie Alph told about his origins, the one that is corrected by the end of the novel; it is also the origins themselves, the “authentic” (read “true”) origins he finds and validates through heterosexuality. The lie could also be that Genesis has anything at all to do with heterosexuality to begin with. If we think of the fundamentalist cliché “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” it is easy to understand how Genesis is currently used as a roots narrative that confuses the origins of humanity with those of heterosexuality. Perhaps the eponymous lie of Sapho’s novel is thus the myth that humanity originated from a heterosexual couple, one that now serves to justify the institutionalization of heterosexuality in religious discourse. When read in this light, actually, theories of evolution that rely on heterosexual reproduction—and produce any other sexual activity as superfluous (e.g., how many high school biology texts propose an evolutionary justification for same-sex masturbation among dolphins?)—begin to resemble Genesis quite a bit.

This is the reason why queer roots, if they are not to be lies, must acknowledge their fictionality. In contrast, if the duplicity of compulsory heterosexuality were widely acknowledged, the institution would lose its authority. If Alph’s lies can be said to come back to haunt him, how might other such ghosts be conjured up? Can these ghosts queer straight roots in addition to haunting them? Coming to queer roots at the end of a roots narrative would thus, indeed, result in “perverse end pleasure, pleasure taken the wrong end round, fucking or getting fucked in the ass” (Morrison, P. 61). Queering the concept of roots, therefore, cannot stop at deconstructing the truth claims of narratives of queer origins; they must deconstruct the truth claims of straight narratives of origins and narratives of straight origins as well.