

**A Deep Knowing or a Performative Textuality?—
Time, Language and Toni Morrison’s Literary Secrecy**

李秀娟 Hsiu-chuan Lee

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of the secret as illustrated by Toni Morrison’s literary writings. It starts with a reading of Morrison’s Nobel Lecture in Literature (1993), in which Morrison tells a story about the life-or-death secrecy of a bird-in-the-hand. Instead of constraining herself to deciphering the concealed truth of whether the bird held inside the hand of a child is alive or dead, the blind, griot-like woman in the story takes the secret as “a youthful prompt” for a conversation that does not simply communicate across the old and the young—hence across time, but also generates more time for the unfolding performativity of language. The secret here does not pose an epistemic obstacle or interpretive limit; rather, it evokes the Derridan “untimely”—the “non-self-contemporaneity”—embedded in each system and drives toward the future dimension of *avenir*.

Indeed, Jacques Derrida’s conception of the secret directs one’s attention from any veiled or coded message awaiting disclosure to the performative effects of secrecy in and through time. This paper elaborates on the idea that secrecy initiates literature, that a secret evokes not as much pre-existent hidden meanings as “literariness” that de-ontologizes historicity and de-contextualizes epistemology, and then seeks in this conception of secrecy a way to comprehend Morrison’s approach to human racial history in her three recent works: *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and *Desdemona* (2012). Morrison admits that “language can never ‘pin down’ slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so” (“The Nobel Lecture in Literature”). Not aiming at “a deep knowing” of the historical truth of racialization, Morrison instead rides on the force of performative textuality to play out imaginary structures. In *A Mercy*, what appears to be a probe into the historical origin of racism in the U.S. turns out a textual challenge to a unidirectional and progressive take of American history. In *Home*, the shell-shocked Korean War veteran’s journey leads not so much to dissolving the secrets of his home (or of his trauma) as to producing new signifiers to access the U.S. in the 1950s. In *Desdemona*, Morrison re-opens the secrecy of Othello’s tragedy to the imperative of textuality by conceiving an afterlife for the characters involved to think and live beyond a constraining Africanism.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, the secret, time, language, race, textuality