

Reflections on “Rodney McMillian: Historically Hostile,” Blaffer Art Museum

It is fitting that specters of the Ku Klux Klan are the first images to confront viewers in Rodney McMillian’s exhibit at the Blaffer Art Museum. The video for *Untitled (neighbors)* is mostly silent, but while watching it one overhears snatches of the audio from another video *Preacher Man*, drawn from a 1966 interview with the legendary Sun Ra. As hooded figures gyrate against white Doric columns, one hears “in the United States ... peace is death,” a fitting caption for the screen’s symbolic representation of the orgiastic violence white terrorists have unleashed all too often to thwart black advancement in this country. (UH’s own Michael Ray Charles also explores the association between columns and white violence in his *(Forever Free) Untitled*, 2009). At the same time, one hears glimpses of an indistinct murmuring coming from a third exhibit on the first floor, providing a sort of underground soundtrack to the more prominent visual and aural sensations of the first two exhibits. The source of this sound, operating at a lower frequency as it were, is a recording of an interview with conservative political strategist Lee Atwater, in which he describes the “Southern Strategy” that has delivered the White House to Republicans in seven of the last twelve elections.

While it might be tempting to take the exhibit’s title, *Dummies on a Porch Swing (Lee Atwater Interview, 1981)*, as a literal suggestion that Atwater was just another in a long line of racist dummies that would be a huge mistake. The strategy Atwater articulates has been the key ingredient in how those Kurt Anderson has recently qualified as [Evil Geniuses](#) achieved the political power to “unmake America” over the last forty years. Atwater only appeared on my radar very recently, in the last couple of months, when I was watching C-SPAN [interview](#) from last year with Carol Anderson, author of [One Person, No Vote](#). Her mention sent me digging and seemingly every page I have turned since I have come across a mention of Atwater, haunting me much like those specters in *Untitled (neighbors)*. Following Atwater’s blueprint, the radical right cemented its grip on power, despite the wide unpopularity of its economic policies, and made the United States the most unequal society in terms of wealth distribution among highly industrialized nations. Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson in their recent work, [Let Them Eat Tweets](#), identifies Atwater as the strategist most associated with the party’s exploitation of white identity to advance its unpopular plutocratic agenda. The depth of this cynicism was put on full display when, as George W. H. Bush’s campaign manager, he devised the infamous Willie Horton ad that help Bush win the presidency in 1988, after being far behind in the summer polls. Bush’s victory offers a “[glimmer of hope](#)” for Trump’s campaign, which similarly finds itself behind in the polls.

McMillian’s “Dummies on a Porch” therefore represent a key to understanding the Republican party’s power to shape American political, economic, and social life over the past four decades, as political strategist Stuart Stevens reveals in his latest work, [It Was All a Lie](#). McMillian’s oratory video *Untitled (The Great Society)*, in which he recites a 1964 address by Lyndon Johnson, makes painfully concrete the target of all the abstract talk of “states’ rights” and “tax cuts.” Given our crumbling infrastructure and dismal public education system, to say nothing of our present public health crisis, one is unnerved by the extent of the damage wrought. “Historically Hostile” helps unearth the key to the “Southern Strategy’s” success over the past fifty years: its ability to tap into the deep recesses of the damaged white psyche, where

apparently any seeming concession to black equality conjures up nightmarish visions of Nat Turner's ghost.

Cedric Tolliver is Associate Professor of English at the University of Houston, where he primarily teaches African American literature. He is the author of [*Of Vagabonds and Fellow Travelers: African Diaspora Literary Culture and the Cultural Cold War*](#), published by the University of Michigan Press (2019).