

Relocating a Plantation, And Reconnecting A Divided Racial Past

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Godfrey Cheshire, a Manhattan film-critic-turned-director, and Robert Hinton, a professor of Africana studies at New York University, bonded immediately when they met 4 1/2 years ago. Both men had grown up in Raleigh, N.C., though with radically different perspectives.

Cheshire, who is white, speaks of wide lawns and country clubs; Hinton, who is black, recalls public housing projects and segregated schools. But both men trace their ancestry to Midway, a onetime tobacco plantation where Cheshire's great-great-grandfather owned Hinton's grandfather, a slave.

"I wish I didn't like Godfrey," says Hinton, 67, in an interview at his Brooklyn apartment. "But I do."

The push and pull of their freighted relationship fuels "Moving Midway," Cheshire's first film, which played at the New Directors/New Films festival in New York last year and was being released on DVD last month.

The documentary was already underway when the pair met. Midway's Greek revival-style plantation house, built in 1848 on land that has remained in one family since 1739, was being relocated a few miles to escape the encroaching sprawl of interstates and super-stores. Cheshire was filming the journey -- with the added ambition of mapping the complex cultural legacies of Southern plantation life.

In a coincidence that Cheshire calls "miraculous," he spotted a letter by Hinton in the New York Times Book Review. Cheshire knew the surname -- it was the same as Midway's original owner, one of Cheshire's forebears. A phone call revealed their shared heritage.

"I knew I had to include the African American experience in the film, but I didn't exactly know how," says Cheshire, 57, whose relatives still use euphemisms such as "our faithful retainers" to describe the family's slaves of bygone years.

Cheshire and Hinton began an intense, ongoing conversation about history and race. As far as they can determine, they are not kin -- a fact they seem to regret -- although, as Hinton notes, "my people were slaves of his people for 150 years, and it's hard to imagine that the line was not crossed at some point."

Hinton, who has a doctorate in history from Yale, joined the documentary's team off-screen as an associate producer and historian, and on-screen as a sharp and sympathetic foil to Cheshire's dispassionate narrator.

The resulting film is a scrupulous mix of memoir, engineering primer and historical analysis. Mostly tough-minded, sometimes funny and occasionally tender, the documentary also parses the ways in which Americans embrace or dodge the specter of slavery. Cheshire's original impulse -- to deconstruct the Southern plantation -- yields a complete re-imagining of his family: With Hinton's help, he eventually discovers a hundred or so African American cousins he never knew he had.

Through archival footage and interviews with Hinton and other scholars, Cheshire begins by tracing the evolution of the Southern plantation from its birth as the cornerstone of the Southern economy to its transformation into a celluloid icon. Myths are debunked: Tara in "Gone With the Wind" was, for the most part, the creation of a scenic painter; the Ku Klux Klan appropriated the white supremacists' costumes from D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" -- not the other way around.

Modern footage then reveals the Southern plantation's legacy of racism within the director's own family. Cheshire's cousin Winston "Winkie" Silver, who grew up at Midway Plantation, casually uses an ugly epithet to

describe the African American companions of his childhood, yet insists "they were family."

"The planter class needed slaves for economic reasons, so they constructed the notion that people with black skin were inferior," Hinton says. "Once that idea gets deep into your culture, it takes a long time to get out."

Cheshire, who still considers himself a Southerner despite having lived in Greenwich Village for 17 years, captures other relatives epitomizing post-slavery North Carolina attitudes, from quirky (will moving the house antagonize a resident plate-tossing ghost?) to quixotic.

The director's mother, Elizabeth Cheshire, who says her ancestors treated their slaves kindly, attends a Civil War reenactment. On a field of costumed soldiers, she describes the primary crux of the conflict to Hinton as "the idea of states' rights to govern themselves" -- not slavery. To which Hinton replies, "I'm perfectly happy to keep watching them fight the war as long as they keep losing."

Why doesn't Hinton confront her directly? "A Southerner would never disagree with his elders," he says later in an interview at his apartment.

Make that a "Southerner-in-exile," because Hinton says that, as a black man, he feels most at home in New York City, where he has lived for 7 1/2 years with his wife, Annie Sailer, an artist and choreographer, who is white.

On-screen, Hinton, who worked briefly as a reporter at The Washington Post in the late 1960s, mentions the lingering ramifications of North Carolina's Jim Crow era. Off-screen, he elaborates: The severity of his degenerative medical condition, spinal stenosis, might have been lessened had he had routine medical care as a child, he says; instead, the first doctor he saw was in the Army. "I can barely walk now," he adds. His condition has worsened since the film was made.

Cheshire says that the biggest challenge of his life lay in the editing room, where he wrangled 200 hours of raw footage. In one suspenseful sequence, Midway's plantation house is moved in one piece over open fields and a rock quarry to a wooded 50-acre site -- a Herculean effort to preserve the past.

Up north, though, the past is being plumbed in a new way as Cheshire discovers, through Hinton, his family's biracial side. Word comes of a 96-year-old man living nearby in Manhattan. His name is Abraham Lincoln Hinton, and he is the great-grandson of one of Cheshire's white ancestors and a Midway Plantation slave.

Camera in tow, Cheshire relishes the opportunity to meet his family's black patriarch and dozens of cousins previously unknown to him.

Abraham Hinton (no relation to Robert) still considers himself a Southerner, too, despite having lived for half a century in a public housing project in Harlem. In a recent interview at his apartment, Hinton, now 99, described passing Midway Plantation house regularly as a child, accompanied by the knowledge that although its white owner was his relative, he was implicitly barred from visiting. "That's just the way it was," he says with a good-natured shrug.

A reporter points out that a white relative, Charlie Silver, now owns the valuable house that in a fairer world might have been bequeathed to black family members. "Well, that's good," says Abraham Lincoln Hinton. When pressed, he smiles and adds: "That's good -- for Charlie."

Al Hinton, Abraham's son and a Brooklyn schoolteacher, shares his father's passion for family history. He sees the descendants of Midway as "more alike than different," and has fostered efforts to keep his white and black cousins in touch. The film clips of Winkie Silver, whom Al Hinton has never met, do not upset him: "Frankly, I'm surprised when a white person in their 50s or 60s from the South isn't a racist," he says.

Near the end of the film, Midway owner Charlie Silver has the Hintons -- Abraham, Al and Robert -- and Cheshire, along with about 20 other white relatives, over for a celebration at the house's bucolic new location.

For Cheshire, Midway Plantation has moved far from its ugly past, though he suggests that his family -- like his country -- still has a long road ahead if racial reconciliation is the destination.

One of film's strongest scenes is captured here by the director's fly-on-the-wall camera, as the two arms of the family gather awkwardly at the entrance to the meticulously restored mansion.

Abraham Lincoln Hinton, the Harlem resident, is invited inside the house that was built for his slave-owning ancestors by his slave ancestors.

Glancing at the front door, he considers the invitation with a mixture of disbelief and anticipation.

"Come in?" he asks, repeatedly. "I can come in?"

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