

## *The Moral University*

Perhaps the most difficult task facing the university today is fulfilling its obligation “to advance, transmit, and invigorate moral knowledge,” says W. Robert Connor, director of the National Humanities Center, writing in *Ideas* (1999: No. 1).

*If moral knowledge exists, then surely it is subject to rational evaluation and, like any other knowledge, can be transmitted from one person, or one generation, to another. If moral action in some degree depends on moral knowledge, then it is indeed a pearl of great price and universities should honor it and hold it up for all to admire.*

*If, on the other hand, all actions are genetically determined, socially conditioned, or the result of whim or random choice or divine inspiration—as we say in the academy, they are epiphenomena—moral knowledge is irrelevant. Claims to have such knowledge would be best left to anthropologists or historians of culture, who can illuminate why people sometimes believe in and value such knowledge. Under these circumstances, it becomes a mere curiosity, and in such a case certainly no university should waste its resources attempting to transmit some body of alleged “moral knowledge” from generation to generation.*

*Unfortunately, many of our colleagues would, I suspect, take precisely that position. In doing so, however, they depart from a long tradition of Anglo-American higher education and leave students and the rest of us adrift in a time of deep perplexity.*

## *Race and Remembrance*

“Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story” by James Oliver Horton, in *The Public Historian* (Fall 1999), Dept. of History, Univ. of California, Santa Barbara, Calif. 93106–9410.

Educating the public about slavery is no easy matter, writes Horton, a professor of American studies and history at George Washington University. Not only do most Americans know little about the history of the institution, but, as interpreters and guides at historic parks, houses, and other such sites have discovered, the subject makes many, both white and black, very uncomfortable.

“Traditionally, northern public schools taught almost nothing about slavery, and southern schools taught even less,” Horton notes. “When slavery was discussed, it was generally only as a problem that surfaced during the sectional struggle just prior to the Civil War.” Not surprisingly, Americans today, he says, generally “believe that slavery was a southern phenomenon, date it from the antebellum period, and do not think of it as central to the American story.” They don’t realize that slavery in British North America was a century and a half old at the time of the American Revolution, and “a significant economic and social institution in every one of the 13 colonies.” And [as recent debates about the Confederate flag have shown]

“many Americans do not wish to discuss slavery at all,” particularly in connection with the Confederacy and the Civil War.

Nevertheless, the subject comes up. At Arlington House, the pre-Civil War home of the Lee-Custis family, now a National Park Service historic site near Washington, D.C., “white visitors often bristle at the mention of [Robert E.] Lee as the owner of slaves,” Horton says, while “black visitors expected to be told about the atrocities of slavery.” Yet many black visitors found the subject too painful after it was introduced a few years ago, and visitors generally were uneasy discussing it, especially in interracial groups.

At Colonial Williamsburg, the restored capital of colonial Virginia, a mock slave auction was held in 1994 to reenact an event that was part of the annual commemoration of King George III’s ascension to the English throne. “At the end of the extremely moving reenactment of a family being broken apart through the sale, the crowd of visitors grew silent, and many wept,” Horton reports. Some visitors objected to the “‘racist show.’” Civil rights groups charged that the reenact-

ment “glorif[ied] the horrors and humiliation of the evil of slavery.” Yet some critics were won over, Horton reports, and academic historians generally approved of the careful reenactment, at least so long as it did not turn into “entertainment.”

“Slavery is so uncomfortable a subject, both for interpreters and visitors,” Horton

writes, “that some have understandably asked, ‘why confront it at all?’” Why not, as a black woman demanded at a recent lecture he gave, “‘put slavery behind us’”? Because, Horton answers, Americans cannot address present-day concerns about race “while ignoring the institution that has been so central to American race relations.”

## Message to the Future

“Capsule History” by Lester A. Reingold, in *American Heritage* (Nov. 1999), Forbes Building, 60 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10011.

For centuries, humans have carefully stashed artifacts in cornerstones and other secure spots. In the seventh century B.C., for example, King Esarhaddon of Assyria deposited relics and inscriptions of baked clay in the foundations of his monuments. But the time capsule is a distinctly modern and distinctly American invention, explains Reingold, a writer in Washington, D.C.

One key characteristic of the time capsule is a set opening date. The first capsule with this stipulation was an attraction at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. The “Century Safe” contained photographs, autographs of dignitaries, and a book on temperance. Instructions were left that it be unearthed for the bicentennial celebration of 1976. Three years after the centennial, fol-

the ambitious mission of “preserving the record of an entire civilization.” The Westinghouse capsule was a sleek seven-and-a-half-foot torpedo that held, among other things, a slide rule, a Lilly Daché woman’s hat, a Bible, and various messages to the “Futurians.” Albert Einstein concluded his decidedly mixed overview of the world’s condition in the mid-20th century by saying, “I trust that posterity will read these statements with a feeling of proud and justified superiority.” If anybody is around to open the capsule on the appointed day, a little less than 5,000 years from now, they probably will.

Science writer Dava Sobel speculates that in America, a world power with a relatively short history, there is a special taste for time capsules. “After all, when you encapsulate the essence of



Among the Westinghouse time capsule’s treasures: a Bible and a Lilly Daché woman’s hat.

lowing a reunion of Civil War veterans, General John J. McNulta filled a glass bottle with mementos of the event, including a cigar donated by Ulysses S. Grant; following his request a century later, three of McNulta’s great-grandsons smoked it.

The time capsule was truly born when public relations executive G. Edward Pendray, the overseer of the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company exhibit at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, coined the term that year. Capsule enthusiasts of the 1930s, says Reingold, added the final element of the modern time capsule:

an era and declare that the container can’t be opened for millenniums—you’ve made instant history out of your present.” The newest innovations in time capsules come in the form of interstellar NASA probes filled with plaques and phonograph records, and capsules that are to be seeded under the surface of Antarctica and the moon.

Many time capsules fail in their mission, falling victim to natural elements, tampering, and misplacement. But in a sense, says Reingold, they still fulfill their most important purpose. Time capsules act as an engine for self-awareness and the imagination.