

# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

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*Reflections* is proud to feature a special section on American Indians in its Fall 2000 issue. The narrative is deeply embedded in American Indian culture as a means of preserving family and cultural history, conveying ethical and social codes of behavior, and teaching a philosophical world view to future generations. Similarly, African-American culture, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, created narratives to burnish cultural and family pride, transmit oral history of families in the United States and Africa, teach moral lessons, and resist oppression from European Americans. Outsiders sometimes call these uses of narratives "folk tales," as if they were stripped of their relevance by modern industrial societies. In this way narratives become marginalized and seem a less rational means of communicating and persuading.

However, in looking at the mainstream culture of the contemporary United States, we find the narrative also assuming a central role. The importance of the narrative emerges in our political process as we confront again the national choice for the Presidency. The candidates have tried out several versions of their own narratives, folding in their childhood and adolescent experiences with the dreams they conceived as adult political actors. Each candidate has a

Whiggish view of his own history, inviting us to see his life as prologue for the political positions and personalities he is now forging. Growing up in a hotel in Washington D.C. is not nearly as compelling a story as growing up on a farm in Tennessee, so Al Gore seeks to underline his homespun roots at the expense of his long-standing immersion in the political culture. Attending elite prep schools and Yale University as the son of a wealthy family is not a particularly useful life history for a man who seeks office as a wrangler and outsider from Texas. The Eastern elite narrative fits awkwardly with the down to earth, anti-big government approach of George W. Bush. Both men want to tell a new story about themselves, shearing away much of their remote as well as recent past: Bill Clinton's eight years does not fit into the teleology of the "new man" that Gore has decided he wants to be, thus Clinton is not part of Gore's narrative. This, of course, flies in the face of the ineluctable fact that without Clinton's decision in 1992 to select him as Vice-President, Gore would not likely be in the position to command a national stage for his narrative. Bush does not want the most important influence in his life, his father, a former President, to be a character in his narrative either, choosing instead to present himself as apolitical and fresh to the national political scene.

All of us in all cultures fashion and refashion our life narratives. Most of us have several, depending on the place and audience we are exhorting, instructing, or mollifying. Narratives are central to political life (think of the quintessential Abraham Lincoln and George Washington stories about library books and cherry trees). Our narratives can recreate our protean selves. Narratives can also convey profound truths, both fictional ones, and, as in the case of *Reflections*, real ones. □

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