While investigations of “the Other” have become a cottage industry in contemporary cultural studies, themes of alterity in early German literature have remained on the whole underexplored. The volume at hand joins other recent collections in giving some indication that that situation is changing. In 2002, the Division on German Literature to 1700 proposed the topic of “Foreign Encounters” for the 118th Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association in New York City, and the response by members was overwhelming, both in numbers and in enthusiasm. To meet the demand, the Division enlisted the aid of the Society for German and Renaissance Baroque Literature (SGRABL) as co-sponsor and doubled the scheduled panels on the topic from two to four. As session organizers for the two sponsoring groups, we found the collegial collaboration stimulating and are now pleased to present eleven essays that

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have grown from the intellectual exchange among the participants. That exchange has extended well beyond the confines of the original convention, and the post-conference dialogue between editors and authors has only heightened their appreciation of alterity as a central concept for cultural discourse, as primal and often as divisive as the phrase “us and them”. As the following essays demonstrate, the encounter with all things foreign has long served German authors in constructing commonalities among their audience, and the evidence of early German ethnocentrism confirms that there is no understanding of self or group identity without an understanding of the boundaries of that identity.

Of course, this thesis applies in equal measure to contemporary scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. For Germanists, even those dealing with pre-Enlightenment literature, the discussion of foreignness and especially of foreigners evokes distinct and, at times, more problematic associations than in English or American Studies. While the German discourse on alterity explores many themes familiar to Anglo-American colleagues — often based on their own theoretical models — there are also noteworthy distinctions. In presenting studies of German literature to an English-speaking audience, we wish to contextualize not only the essays themselves, but also the particular discourse on foreignness in which they participate. Some themes, such as colonialism and orientalism, have received a similar degree of attention on the continent. Others, however, are either conspicuously absent or unavoidably present, following the vagaries of history, both recent and remote. Above all, the following overview amply illustrates that older literature, itself often viewed as foreign, addresses many of the same issues of identity that both fascinate and unsettle postmodern consciousness.³

As attested by recent studies in anthropology, sociology, and the particularly German field of Mentalitätsgeschichte (history of mentality), the binary opposition of Self and Other is basic to all