Outstanding books can have long gestations. Anticipating the quincentenary celebrations of Columbus’s 1492 voyage, in 1988 the Center for Early Modern History at the University of Minnesota began identifying the broader issues that framed that voyage. Two years later it convened a conference of twenty scholars to discuss the various images of “self” and “other” that arose in the early modern era, that is, the age of Europe’s worldwide expansion between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Limiting themselves to European contacts with non-Europeans, contributors contend that both sides of these intercultural encounters held “implicit ethnographies” of “self” and “other”—defined by language, ethnicity, gender, religion, race, etc.—and that these understandings so permeated systems of thought that they seldom found explicit articulation. The present volume, which grew out of the 1990 conference, aims therefore to recover these ethnographies and to trace how they came into being and changed over time.

The volume’s opening chapters explore the evolution of European mental images of “self” and “other” before the early modern era commenced, tracing the various redefinitions of “barbarian” from the ancient Greek to the early Christian and medieval periods. Essays by Seymour Phillips and Peter Hulme discuss the extraordinary degree to which inherited myth or theory persisted in face of the empirical knowledge accumulated from the fifteenth century on. For example, by the opening of that century, peoples of Africa, Asia, and Europe were comfortably fitted into medieval Europe’s mapping of the earth, the cosmos, and humanity. Yet for centuries, persons informed by this cosmography...
continued to question whether peoples inhabiting regions beyond these three continents—in particular, America—were fully human. In 1436, the king of Portugal had justified colonizing Europe’s outermost periphery, the Canary Islands, on the grounds that their inhabitants were “nearly wild men” who lived “like animals.” These were the very words by which Columbus, just over fifty years later, would characterize natives of the Caribbean. Their humanity in doubt, they too, like the Canarians, would soon be colonized.

Other ideas inherited from the Crusades-to-Reformation period lingered on through the early modern era, structuring what Europeans would look for and informing them of what they found. For centuries, rumors of the fabled “Strait of Anian” drew a string of navigators—Cabot, Verrazzano, Drake, Hudson, Cook—in search of a “northwest passage” to Asia. An equally compelling myth, that of the fabled Christian kingdom of “Prester John,” lying somewhere beyond Europe’s frontier with Islam, drew other navigators eastward into Africa and Asia. Perhaps the longest-held obsession was Europe’s quest for China’s “Great Khan,” which dated from Marco Polo’s writings on the Mongol empire in the thirteenth century. Not only did Columbus himself famously mistake the western hemisphere for “India” (i.e., Asia) and Amerindian’s references to “cannibals” for “soldiers of the Can,” that is, the Great Khan of China, but as late as 1634, fully three-and-a-half centuries after Marco Polo’s journey to Peking, and two-and-a-half centuries after the demise of Mongol rule in China, the French explorer Jean Nicolet stood on Lake Michigan’s western shores dressed in Chinese robes, hoping to meet the Great Khan’s representatives.

The volume’s second part focuses on non-European images of Europeans. In East and Southeast Asia, initial images were informed both by indigenous values and by centuries of experience with Indians, Arabs, and other visitors coming from the western Indian Ocean. Hence the first Portuguese to visit Melaka, in 1509, were locally understood as “white Bengalis.” And around 1540, a Sinhalese chronicle described the first Portuguese sailors arriving in Sri Lanka as jāti, or a “caste” of people “very white in colour and of great beauty,” noting that “they wear jackets and hats of iron and pace up and down without resting” (311). The Japanese responded quite differently to Portuguese visitors, encountered for the first time in 1543. Although they remarked upon the strangers’ long noses (“like a wartless conch-shell”) and big eyes, the Japanese initially greeted the Portuguese as “men of India” on the grounds that they had come from the direction of the Buddha’s native