

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

STUART B. SCHWARTZ

IN 1550 in Rouen, local merchants interested in securing royal support for the newly developing dyewood trade from Brazil staged a *fête brésilienne* for the visiting royal couple, Henry II and Catherine de Medici. Along the banks of the Seine, Brazilian flora and fauna were set out or imitated and a Tupinamba Indian village was recreated, inhabited by Brazilian natives brought for the occasion and, given the small numbers of Indians available to the local planners, by French mariners, who stripped appropriately naked, spoke the Indian language, hunted, and made war according to the custom of that land. The king and queen, it was said, were duly impressed at this representation of the New World, although royal aid was ultimately not forthcoming.¹ One wonders what the planners of this event had in mind as the essential elements of Tupinamba culture that needed to be selected and projected for their representation of Indian life to be convincing. Their choices contained an understood anthropology and their presentation revealed a kind of implicit ethnography. As such, it demonstrated that the contact between cultures always demands a selective understanding of self and other conditioned by context, goals, and perceptions.

First observers of another culture, the traveler to foreign lands, the historian, and the ethnographer all share the common problem of observing, understanding, and representing. In all these cases there are fundamental epistemological problems as well as a permeable barrier between observer and observed in which it is often difficult (some would say impossible) to separate the two. In practical terms, the study of these cultural encounters has generated a variety of approaches. Some scholars have seen the practice of representation itself as the essential act, to such an extent that the possible adequacy of representation to some reality, its truth or falsity, is, if possible at all, of little concern.² In this formulation, such portrayals of another cul-

¹ Ferdinand Denis, ed., *Une fête brésilienne célébrée à Rouen en 1550* (Paris, 1851).

² Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions* (Chicago, 1991), 119, argues that "European

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Stuart B. Schwartz

ture are important for what they tell us about the observer rather than the observed. Many other historians and anthropologists are less willing to abandon a belief in the ability of the observer to portray, record, or analyze another culture and the actions of its members, however imperfectly, in a manner that allows us to cross that barren but mysterious beach that separates cultures and peoples from each other. As anthropologist Sidney Mintz put it in a heated exchange with literary critics at a 1989 meeting in Erlangen, Germany, he for one was not willing to throw out seventy-five years of anthropological field work or see its residual value only in what it revealed about the discourse and assumptions of the observer. The tension between these alternate understandings of the both the project and the results of cultural observation constitutes an ongoing, unresolved scholarly debate.

It was Greg Dening in his study of the Marquesas Islands who employed the powerful metaphor of islands and beaches as a way of understanding cultural encounters, so that each culture forms an island that must be approached across a beach separating it from all others.

Beaches are beginnings and endings. They are frontiers and boundaries of islands. For some life forms the division between land and sea is not abrupt, but for human beings beaches divide the world between here and there, us and them, good and bad, familiar and strange . . . Crossing beaches is always dramatic. From land to sea and from sea to land is a long journey and either way the voyager is left a foreigner and an outsider. Look across the beach from the sea, there is what the mind's eye sees, romantic, classic, savage but always uncontrollable. The gestures, the signals, the codes which make the voyager's own world ordered no longer work. He does not see the islander's colors or trees or mountains. He sees his.³

In such meetings across cultures, an "implicit ethnography" existed on both sides of the encounter. Members of each society held ideas, often unstated, of themselves and "others" and the things that gave them such identities: language, color, ethnicity, kinship, gender, religion, and so on. These understandings were often implicit in the sense of being unstated or assumed, a kind of common knowledge or common sense that did not have to be articulated or codified but that

contact with the New World natives is continually mediated by representations; indeed contact itself, at least where it does not consist entirely of acts of wounding or killing, is very often contact between representatives bearing representations."

³ Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches. Discourse on a Silent Land: Marquesas 1774–1880* (2nd ed., Chicago, 1988), 33–34.

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

permeated the way in which people thought and acted.⁴ In time, encounters might be described and inscribed, but the underlying ideas and understandings that governed the actual encounter were at a level of reflection that is rarely recorded. People represented or “wrote” these ideas in different ways and in genres that often seem to have little overtly to do with the study of other peoples. These concepts or categories, based on previous experience, ideology, and cosmology, could be applied to any new situation and provide a structure of understandings to make the strange into the familiar and the unintelligible into the understood. They dictated the ways in which interactions took place and determined how, for example, Columbus would view the Tainos, or how the Hawaiians might respond to Captain Cook. Each group’s sense of its own cultural identity shaped its perception of others, and this in turn was refracted back on self-understanding.

But the process was complicated and unstable. Whatever the previous understandings and expectations, however generalized the common understanding of “others,” the contacts themselves caused readjustments and rethinking as each side was forced to reformulate its ideas of self and other in the face of unexpected actions and unimagined possibilities. Thus a dynamic tension between previous understanding and expectations and new observations and experiences was set in motion with each encounter, and modified as the encounters changed over time. Both sides might be convinced that their interpretations of the situation were correct, and sometimes cultural similarities caused more confusion than did differences. But it was the process itself that was crucial. The interplay of these implicit ethnographies, these changing understandings, and their reshaping in the face of each other, over the three centuries of European contact with the rest of the world in the Early Modern era, form the subject of this book.

The theme of cultural encounters, or “implicit ethnographies,” raises some of the central questions in the fields of history, literature, and anthropology: perceptions of self and others, epistemology, and the dynamic nature of cross-cultural contact. All these disciplines (and others) have been concerned with the way in which the process of perceiving others reveals self-perception, and for some how what one says about another culture is more interesting as self-projection than

⁴ The essays in Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* (London, 1975) and Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York, 1983) both deal with the assumed and unstated aspects of cultural definition.

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

as a reliable description of the “other.”⁵ Differences will be noted in this book between those who focus on how the texts reveal the structure of European thought, those who seek to understand the categories of analysis used in the encounters, and those who are most interested in what the texts reveal about the observed and how interactions changed over time. The imposed insularity and tribalization of modern academic disciplines has sometimes led to a narrow conceptualization of problems that are in fact shared, but in the essays presented here the differences of focus do not overshadow the commonality of goal. Moreover, the variety of approach is to be welcomed, for we need not assume that there is an interdisciplinary perspective that is more valid than the insights that the several disciplines provide.

Clearly the problem of cultural encounters and implicit ethnographies could be studied in any number of locales and historical periods, and in no way need be limited to contacts involving Europeans. However, the peculiarities of the Early Modern Era merit special attention. The encounters discussed in these essays took place along with and as part of the expansion of Europe and the creation of its political and economic hegemony over much of the globe from the late fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. That long-term process provides a focus and a unity to the development of concepts of alterity among Europeans and other peoples and with the post-encounter processes of cultural adaptation and response.

In the years between the voyages of Columbus and Captain Cook, the peoples of the world, for better or worse, were brought into contact in a continuous way that lay the foundations for the modern world. The term “Early Modern Era” has usually been applied only to Europe between the Renaissance and the late eighteenth century, but it also seems useful for describing a stage of global history marked by the intensification of interactions that left few parts of the world and few peoples untouched.

Over the course of nearly three hundred years, the business of perceiving and judging other peoples and other customs went through many transformations in many parts of the world. And to some extent

⁵ The literature on this topic has been growing rapidly since the 1980s. See, for example, in the field of anthropology, James Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes: Symbolic Anthropology in the Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religions, and Texts* (Cambridge, 1982); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986); George Marcus and Michael Fisher, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago, 1986); and Vincent Crapanzano, *Hermes Dilemma and Hamlet's Desire* (Cambridge, 1992).

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

it was the process of encountering others that contributed to the intellectual change within cultures. In Europe, the Renaissance forms and tropes of observation and evaluation seen in Columbus's journal, or the report of Pero Vaz de Caminha on the first contact with the peoples of the Americas, mix marvel and wonder with negative evaluations of technology, carrying forward classical ideas of civility and barbarism that differ considerably from the universalizing concepts of the eighteenth century. The impact of the Reformation, with its plurality of interpretations raising questions about the authority of scripture, combined with the increasing dependence on observation and experience to bring about important changes in the way Europeans saw the world and its inhabitants after the sixteenth century.⁶

Enlightenment thinkers came to view human differences as stages in a universal story. As Denis Diderot formulated it, Tahitians were closer to nature and the world's origins, Europeans represented old age, but all civilized people had been savages and all savages could become civilized.⁷ The tension between such ideas of universality and the recognition of real human and cultural diversity troubled European observers in the past and continues to plague all peoples in the present as a formula is sought for a means of understanding and for action.

The problem is a universal one. While the 1980s and 1990s have produced a flood of literature about changing European concepts of alterity and an increased appreciation of their impact, it is important to recognize that such changes occurred in other cultures as well. Sinologists who agree that neo-Confucian concepts in the Sung and Ming periods were an attempt to confront the penetration of foreign Buddhist ideas debate whether neo-Confucian doctrines created a universalist ideology that made all peoples potentially acceptable or whether they reinforced Chinese ideas of distinctiveness. Certainly by the nineteenth century, the desire to acquire European technology led to changes in the perception of and interaction with Westerners. In Southeast Asia, a different pattern developed at a different pace. Longstanding regional diversity was challenged between 1400 and 1700 by the spread of universalist religions, Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, Confucianism in Vietnam, Theravada Buddhism from Burma to Cambodia, and Catholicism in the Philippines. The spread of these faiths created new opportunities and needs for contact and

⁶ Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World* (New Haven, 1993), 54–87.

⁷ Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova, eds., *The Enlightenment and its Shadows* (London, 1990), 1–16.

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

alliance with outside forces.⁸ Outsiders were often seen as allies in regional struggles. In the Middle East, the Muslim indifference to Europe, conditioned by a negative evaluation of Christianity as a superseded revelation and by the conviction that European culture had little to admire, began to change in the late eighteenth century as Europe became increasingly dangerous to the Islamic world.⁹ All these instances underline the fact that understandings and evaluations were changing on both sides of the equations of contact.

The very act of using concepts such as “European” and “other peoples” creates categories that determine the way in which we tend to approach the study of these topics. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) made a vigorous attempt to demonstrate that such categorizations in the West’s view of the Orient had been tied to political programs and attitudes of cultural superiority, and others have carried his argument from the specific case to general principles.¹⁰ That argument has been seriously questioned both specifically and generally, but in a variety of fields concern with the problems of definition and distinction and an awareness of the dangers of “essentializing” other cultures have shaped current practice in writing about and representing other cultures.¹¹

Many of the contacts between Europeans and other peoples were forged in a context of unequal power and subordination, but not all of them, as the essays in this book on China, Japan, and Southeast Asia make clear. If one views cultural encounters and evaluations as governed by a perspective of power and hegemony, as Said and others have done, there is the danger of falling into the reductionist argument in which ultimate goals determine cultural understandings in a somewhat simplistic fashion. Many of the essays here demonstrate that the process of cultural contact and reporting was often “messy” and undirected, that it changed over time, and that it was interactive in the sense that perceptions and actions influenced each other on both sides of the equation of a cultural encounter. None of this denies the

⁸ Anthony Reid, ed., “Introduction: A Time and Place,” in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era* (Ithaca, 1993), 5–6.

⁹ See Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York, 1982), 295–309.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); see also Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post Orientalist Histories of the Third World,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32:2 (April, 1990), 383–408, and the critique of that article by R. O’Hanlon and D. Washbrook, “After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34:1 (January, 1992), 141–67, and Prakash’s response, pp. 167–84. Said’s book was criticized on factual and ideological grounds by Bernard Lewis in *New York Review of Books*.

¹¹ Carlos Monsiváis, “Travelers in Mexico: A Brief Anthology of Selected Myths,” *Diogenes* 125 (Spring, 1984), 48–74.

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

importance of power, or the fact that Europeans were peculiarly prone to using cultural observation of others as a means of self-knowledge and self-congratulation or as an element of imperial strategy. But power by itself is too crude an instrument for measuring all the subtleties that make up cultural interaction.¹²

A somewhat extreme formulation of the representational argument has sometimes emphasized language and representation as the equivalent of power and possession.¹³ The ability to name, describe, and portray are in some ways an appropriation that constitutes an essential step toward control and exploitation. But I remain unconvinced that Columbus's naming an island Española had a great impact on the inhabitants, who called it Quisqueya. At the least, it had far less impact than the firearms, steel, missionaries, and microbes Columbus brought with him. Here the deconstructionists and the empiricists might part company altogether, but perhaps unnecessarily. We may, if we wish, see an unbridgeable chasm here between those who would "deconstruct" the apparent content of an encounter narrative and those who would treat the text as a transparent filter for reliable empirical observations. But the temptation to think in either/or terms should be resisted. Stephen Greenblatt has urged us to abandon the dream of "linguistic omnipotence, the fantasy that to understand the discourse is to understand the event." But at the same time he exhorts us not to abandon words and meanings. Events, weapons, and even sickness are always set in cultural contexts and are intimately bound up with discourse – "the stories that a culture tells itself."

It is the intersection between the objective or culturally created realities and their perception and representation that constitutes the underlying theme of this book. The authors here disagree on where the emphasis should be placed, and some may even doubt whether there is any epistemological grounds for such an idea as events unconditioned by perception, but the project itself is common. The fact that the issue is unresolved in this book reflects the present state of scholarly debate about the study of cultures and how we see ourselves and the world around us.

Another theme that emerges in these essays is the gradations of "otherness" recognized by many cultures. Diane Bell notes that Australian aborigines could certainly distinguish between outsiders from

¹² See Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World. From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven, 1993), 183–189. On the political dimensions of anthropology, see Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (New York, 1973).

¹³ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1984).

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

other aboriginal groups and those people who came from beyond the sea and who constituted a quite different category of alterity. James Lockhart argues that for the Nahuas of central Mexico, those kind of distinctions were not so important, and that the Nahuas already had a well-developed system for dealing with the new and strange that could be applied to the arrival of the Spanish. Europeans certainly recognized degrees of "otherness," as Seymour Phillips's essay makes clear, but Europeans, a relatively homogeneous lot, already had long experience with two Asian peoples, Jews and Gypsies, who, as "internal others," influenced the gradations and distinctions that Europeans would develop in their ethnographic observations.

Also characteristic of the Early Modern era was the increasing presence in Europe and its colonies of another internal other, the African slave. While in Antiquity and during the Middle Ages assessments of the character of Africans had varied and had not been entirely negative, from the fifteenth century on, with the increasing enslavement of Africans, that situation had changed. The blackness of the "Ethiope" became synonymous with slavery and a metaphor for their moral and spiritual benightedness and savagery.¹⁴ Race and a perceived lower level of cultural attainments became a justification for enslavement, which survived the ideas of the Humanists, the arguments of the seventeenth-century rationalists, and the program of the Enlightenment. In fact, the freeing of European thought from theology in the eighteenth century in some ways opened the door to evaluations based on physical or mental attributes that contributed to a newly invigorated argument for enslavement. This added dimension of color or race used in making cultural evaluations became particularly acute in Europe, although it was not entirely absent in other parts of the world such as Asia. For Europeans both at home and in the American colonies, however, the presence of the African other cast a shadow over cultural assessments and other encounters and made up some portion of the European implicit ethnographies of other peoples.¹⁵ Columbus used his African experience and Africans as a comparative reference point, and many Europeans later did the same. The

¹⁴ See Winthrop Jordan, *The White Man's Burden. Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (Oxford, 1974) for a good summary. Cf. A.J.R. Russell-Wood, "Iberian Expansion and the Issue of Black Slavery: Changing Portuguese Attitudes, 1440-1770," *American Historical Review* 83:1 (February, 1978), 16-42.

¹⁵ The most thorough discussion of this problem and the transformation of European attitudes is found in David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966). On the Enlightenment, see especially pp. 391-421.

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

African in Africa, but also as a bondsman or woman in Europe or its colonies, became Europe's "Banquo's ghost" of cultural encounters.

The book is organized into four parts. Part I examines the way in which European experiences and European visions of history and cosmology influenced concepts of self and other. Seymour Phillips demonstrates that the contact between Europeans and other peoples, particularly Asians and Arabs, during the Middle Ages set the stage for the more extensive contacts after 1492. This was especially true after the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century reopened Asia as an area of interest for European merchants, missionaries, and politics. Europe was not closed within itself, but Phillips demonstrates that European images of the physical world and of other peoples who inhabited it were based only to some extent on experience and observation. European understandings, dreams, and fantasies in the form of wild men, monstrous races, or Christian princes in Asia also drew on classical authorities, myth and misunderstanding, and on religious beliefs, which included an apocalyptic vision of history moving from East to West. Wildness could represent either the goodness of natural man or the dangers of animal nature, and both images were reinforced by European experiences in the late Middle Ages.¹⁶ Phillips presents a sweeping survey of the geographical, climatic, and ethnographic ideas that formed the basis of European visions of the world beyond their frontiers. Among these ideas were the attitudes of superiority that accompanied distinctions between Christians and "infidels" (Jews and Moslems), or between civilized English and Germans and "barbarians" on the periphery such as the Irish, Welsh, and Baltic peoples. Phillips notes that after the thirteenth century, European attitudes hardened toward the outside world with the exception of Asia, which continued to provide an image of wonder. In this sense he provides a historical background to the development of asymmetrical concepts that marked off Europeans from other peoples in ways that helped to determine subsequent interaction.¹⁷

John Friedman reinforces many of these observations by examining

¹⁶ For comparison, see Hayden White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," in his *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 150–182. See also Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1964), 17–78.

¹⁷ Reinhardt Koselleck, "The Historical-Political Semantics of Assymetric Counterconcepts," in his *Future Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 159–198.

Cambridge University Press

0521458803 - *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*

Edited by Stuart B. Schwartz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the use of images in the European portrayal of the world, in this case cartographic images of the physical world contained in medieval world maps. For those of us who grew up in schoolrooms dominated by world maps in which North America was always in the center and the Soviet Union invariably divided and placed on both sides of the map, his observations that medieval maps were ethnocentric in their conception will come as no surprise. He demonstrates that these maps are texts that in their form and execution indicate ideas about the centrality of Christianity and of Europeans and often reflect the nationality of the mapmaker as well as an evaluation of other places or other peoples. The changing form of these maps indicated changes in the concept of the world.

From these general statements, we move to the specific case of Spain presented in the next three chapters. Iberia, with its long history of ethnic and religious contact, conviviality, and conflict between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and then its impulse toward overseas expansion in the fifteenth century, presents a precocious example of the forces that moved European expansion in the Early Modern Era. At the same time, Iberian peculiarities in the creation of strong centralized monarchies, the early development of state bureaucracies, experience from the reconquest in the control and integration of conquered peoples, and the fusion of crusading zeal, missionary impulse, and economic motivation prepared Spain and Portugal in peculiar ways for their role as initiators of the new maritime expansion.

These themes form the spine of Miguel Angel Ladero Quesada's succinct and penetrating survey of Spain in 1492. His own previous research on the incorporation of Muslim Granada into the crown of Castile and on Spanish medieval history in general gives him a solid footing for his overview of Spanish society, polity, and economy on the eve of Columbus's voyage.¹⁸ His view of an expansive, urbanizing Castile, in the process of political integration and mercantile accumulation accompanied by the last stages of a "prophetic millenarianism," suggests a direct background and continuity to the development of colonial Latin America. But Ladero is also careful to point out that seeming precedents for the conquest of America in the reconquest of Granada, the Castilian forays into North Africa, and in the conquest of the Canaries are sometimes more apparent than real. To some extent, the differences were due to the actions and reactions of the peoples encountered. As Ladero points out, the conquistadores

¹⁸ For example, his *Castilla y la conquista del reino de Granada* (Granada, 1988); *Granada después de la conquista. Repobladores y mudéjares* (Granada, 1988).