Caught between substantial domestic and local responsibilities requiring his attention in the south of France and serious national as well as international crises on the other, Michel de Montaigne sought in the accounts of the New World by Francisco López de Gómara, André Thevet, and Jean de Léry not only an escape from the political and religious unrest of his time, but an instructive view of how other cultures had dealt with internal and external threats to peace and well-being. In recasting the work of sixteenth-century chroniclers, he does so not only using the narrative techniques of his contemporary conteurs but also from the perspective of the increasing brutality and violence on the home front. Montaigne’s two essays, “Des cannibales”, and “Des coches” have been hailed as an early appeal to cultural relativism, that is, the examination of customs within the context of the culture to which they belong. More precisely, Montaigne understood the conflict between personal ethics and public action.

In this chapter, I propose taking a closer look at the basis of Montaigne’s interest in the other, the people of the New World who are variously recognized as human and wild, depending on whether the perspective is physical or behavioral. Yet my approach will focus primarily on how the essayist reads and reshapes the narrative of discovery and fall of these civilizations as he rewrites the passages he borrows from the chroniclers. Seated in his drafty tower and leafing through the fascinating pages of these New World chroniclers, was Montaigne driven by a desire to learn what was unique about the indigenous cultures of the New World, or did his interest spring from...
a desire to know more about himself? In the words of R. S. Khare, does the other appear “as a docile echo chamber, only too eager and ready to provide catharsis to the anthropologist’s [or in this case the writer’s] puzzled self?” Through a careful comparison of the accounts of the New World López de Gómara, André Thevet, and Jean de Léry with Montaigne’s reworking of these accounts, this chapter will examine Todorov’s assertion that Montaigne “uses the Indians to illustrate his theses concerning our own society rather than seeking to know [Indian culture].” Does the substance of the chroniclers’ account of the habits and actions of the Indian cultures drive Montaigne’s retelling of it or does the subject matter of the *Essais* (“Ainsi, lecteur, je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre”, ‘Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book,’ “Au lecteur”, I, 3A/2) lead Montaigne to selectively omit what does not suit the matter of (his) book? In short, to what extent does the quest—Montaigne’s self-portrait—limit the scope and detail of the information transmitted back from the voyage? Is it possible that the quest (self-knowledge) and the voyage (knowledge of the indigenous people of the New World) run at cross-purposes? Finally, does the topographer, for the purposes of creating a vivid, memorable account, ever embrace the brief narrative style?

A technique which Montaigne borrows from the chroniclers is the tendency to describe artifacts of indigenous ethnic groups in the Americas in terms of the familiar. European culture as the yardstick for measuring the culture of the “Other”, the “not-us”. Such a technique has the virtue of establishing a parallel between “us” and the “Other,” where neither culture is considered superior but each group shares a common nature. Indeed, James Clifford credits Montaigne, and later Montesquieu, with initiating “modern” ethnography, in which exotic cultures are studied not so much as the “other” but as a reflection of self. Montaigne’s observations on the inhabitants of the New World in “Des cannibales” rely heavily on the cosmographer André Thevet’s *Singularitez de la France antarctique*, published in 1558. The uniqueness of Indian cultures loses something to the cosmographer’s and the essayist’s need to provide a verbal analogy with similar objects in Europe. Thevet compares the bow of his “sauvage amerique” to the Turkish bow (“l’arc turquois”) and comments on the wooden swords (“grosses espées de bois”). Montaigne mentions the bow and goes on to add that the “espées de bois” are pointed at