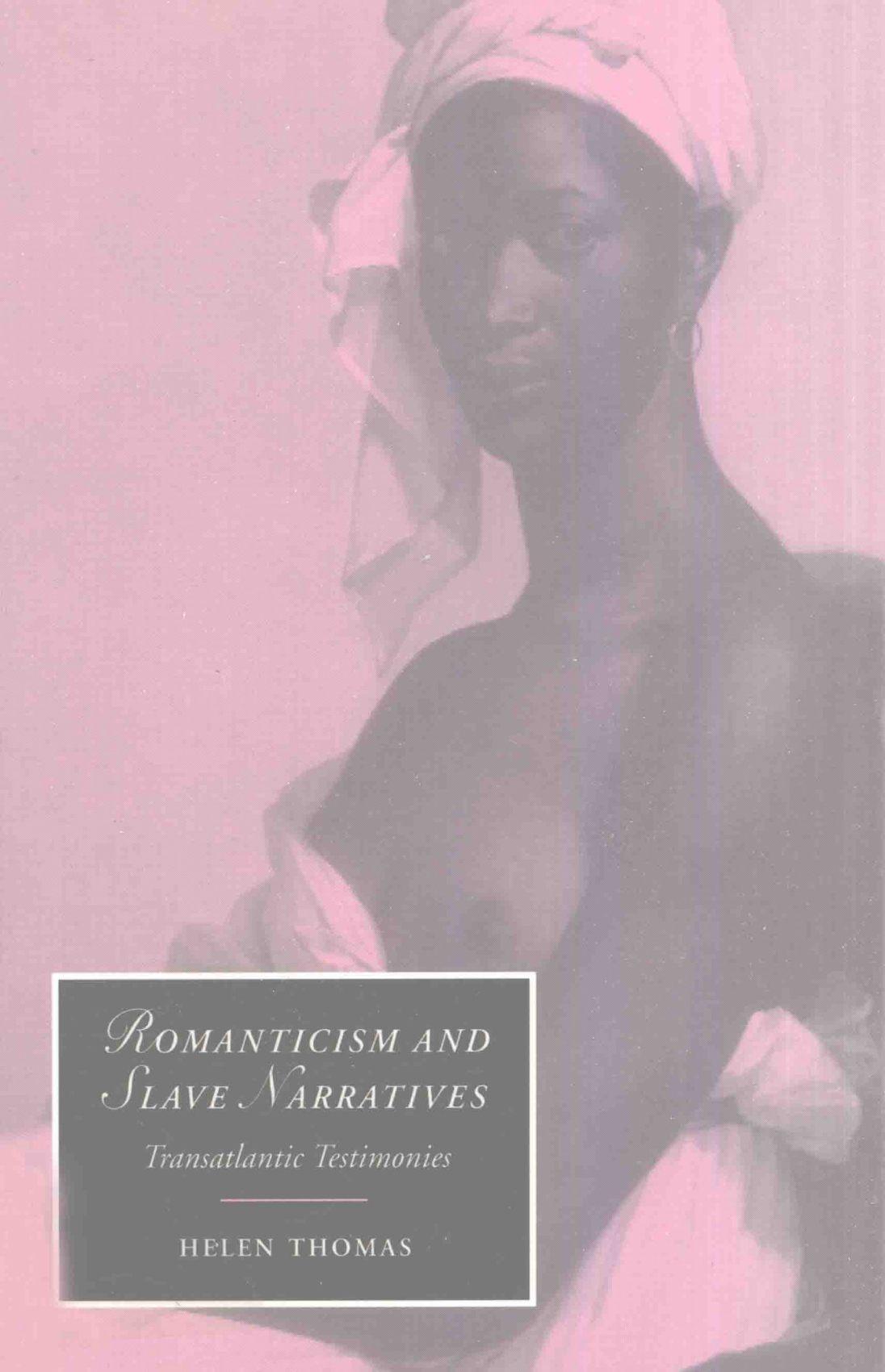

Romanticism and Slave Narratives

Transatlantic Testimonies

HELEN THOMAS

ROMANTICISM AND SLAVE NARRATIVES

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2000
Reprinted 2001
First paperback edition 2004

Typeset in Baskerville 11/12.5pt [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Thomas, Helen, Dr.
Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies / [Helen Thomas]
p. cm. (Cambridge Studies in Romanticism: 38)
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 66234 6 (hardback)
1. English literature – 18th century History and criticism. 2. Slavery in literature.
3. American literature – Afro-American authors – History and criticism. 4. English literature – Black authors – History and criticism. 5. English literature – 19th century – History and criticism. 6. Slaves' writings, American – History and criticism. 7. Slaves' writings, English – History and criticism. 8. Antislavery movements – History. 9. Slave trade in literature. 10. Romanticism. I. Title. II. Series.
PR448.S55&48 2000
820.9'358 – dc21 00–23186 CIP

ISBN 0 521 66234 6 hardback
ISBN 0 521 60456 7 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

To Hugo, Felix and Claude

If not If not If
Not
If not in yours
In whose
In whose language
Am I

Marlene Nourbese Philip, 'Meditations on the Declensions of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying Cheek Bones'

Acknowledgements

Over the past few years I have become increasingly convinced that research, in so far as I am involved in it, functions as a kind of displaced autobiography in which the boundaries between the subject who does the researching (myself) and the subject of the narrative (this study) are in fact permeable. Since we may assume that the self has no meaning without the concept of others, then this displaced 'autobiographical' study is indebted to the continued support, enthusiasm and expertise of several 'others', although I take full responsibility for any mistakes or errors contained herein.

For their professional help and generosity, especially during the late stages of this book, I would like to thank all the staff at the British Library, both at Bloomsbury and St Pancras. I would also like to thank Cora Kaplan, Alan Richardson, Moira Ferguson, Lucy Newlyn, Robert Young and Paul Hamilton for their invaluable comments, advice and suggestions for this work during its various, sometimes digressive, stages; and for their patience and good-humour, Geoff Cox, Victoria de Rijke and the staff and students at the School of Humanities at Oxford Brookes University, most especially, Ron Hammond, Nigel Messenger, Paul O'Flinn, Helen Kidd and John Perkins. For his unhesitating support throughout the various drafts of this book I would especially like to thank Hugo de Rijke. And finally, for patiently waiting before making their entrance into the world, I must thank my sons: Felix and Claude.

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Introduction

> A plan having been laid before the King, for sending out of this Country a Number of Black Poor (many of whom have been discharged from His Majesty's Naval Service at the Conclusion of the Late War, and others after having been employed with the Army in North America) who have since their Arrival in England been reduced to the greatest distress, in order that a Settlement may be formed in or near the River Sierra Leona, in the Coast of Africa.[1]

In 1782, 350 British convicts were sent to the west coast of Africa and used as soldiers on the huge slave fortresses where African captives were detained before being shipped across the Atlantic. Four years later, in an effort to relieve its overcrowded prisons, the British government considered a plan to transport convicts to Sierra Leone. Following the investigations of the Parliamentary Committee on Convict Transportation, however, the plan was rejected, since given the advice of the botanist and naval officer Henry Smeathman, it was estimated that Sierra Leone's hostile climate would accelerate the number of convict mortalities to a rate of 100 per month.[2] Botany Bay was chosen in preference to Sierra Leone, thus establishing a route of involuntary transportation of criminals from England to the Australian continent at a crucial moment in Britain's colonial history.

But there soon occurred an unprecedented historical development in the relations between England and Africa. The racial ideology which had underpinned the capture, transportation and enslavement of generations of Africans by British slavers was compounded by a government plan to relocate Africans to the British colony of Sierra Leone. Within a year of his contact with the Parliamentary Committee on Convict Transportation, Smeathman wrote to the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor in February 1786, offering to

take responsibility for their charges and transport them at a cost of £14 per head to a settlement in Sierra Leone. At this time there were approximately 20,000 blacks in London, including a number of black loyalists (mainly runaway slaves) who had recently fought for Britain during the American War of Independence. Smeathman described the proposed Sierra Leone settlement, called the 'Province of Freedom', as 'fit and proper for their Establishment' within the 'pleasant and fertile' land of Sierra Leone.[3] What had been rejected as a fatal location for white convicts was, according to Smeathman, an excellent situation for those blacks presently residing in England. Emphasising the commercial viabilities of his scheme, Smeathman's *Plan of a Settlement to Be Made Near the Sierra Leona, on the Grain Coast of Africa* (1786) suggested that any initial financial outlay would be easily recompensed by the initiation of new channels of trade with Africa. Granville Sharp, founder of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor and also the Committee for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, approved the scheme. He went on to stipulate the advantages of the resettlement plan and its colonial implications in two of his publications: *Regulations for the New Settlement in Sierra Leone* (1786) and *Free English Territory in Africa* (1790). The Treasury, keen to cultivate colonialist commercial ventures that would yield the riches of Africa, duly agreed to the plan and accepted financial responsibility.

Sierra Leone was not entirely new territory to the British government. It had been 'mapped' over two centuries earlier in 1562 when Sir John Hawkins, the entrepreneur sponsored by Queen Elizabeth I, sailed to Sierra Leone and returned with 300 'borrowed' Africans. In subsequent years, more Africans were brought to England, where they became fashionable household accessories, servants, prostitutes and entertainers. A century later, in 1663, Charles II chartered the Royal Adventurers, who built forts in the Sherbo and on Tasso Island of Sierra Leone. In 1753, the slave trader John Newton (who later testified against the slave trade), passed a year of misery on the Plantain Islands, south-east of Sierra Leone. Henry Smeathman himself visited Sierra Leone in 1771 to gather botanical specimens for his collectors in London.

Despite the concerted efforts of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor to attract black settlers to the scheme, few signed up. Firmer action was decided upon and in October 1786 the Com-

mittee declared that it would only give financial aid to those 'volunteering' to resettle in Sierra Leone.[4] Eventually, orders were given by the Committee and the City authorities to round up black beggars and 'reconcile them to the plan proposed by the Government' by sending them to the new African colony where they would have the 'protection' of the British government.[5] As Moira Ferguson notes, this large-scale effort to remove Africans illustrated Britain's refusal to deal with the wider issues of blacks' right to freedom and other basic human rights recognised by the Court of the King's Bench in the landmark Somerset case of 1772, which held that the escaped slave, James Somerset, could not be forcibly returned by his master to the plantations in Jamaica.[6]

By the end of October 1786 the transport ships *Atlantic*, *Belisarius* and *Vernon* (escorted by HMS *Nautilus*) were commissioned by the Navy Board and were docked at Deptford in South London, ready to take the prospective settlers to Sierra Leone. Each settler had been given a document granting him/her free citizenship of the 'Colony of Sierra Leone or the Land of Freedom'. Yet of the 700 settlers who originally agreed to the scheme, only 259 were on board by the end of November. Seventy of these were white female prostitutes from London, who, it was claimed, had been intoxicated and tricked onto the ships. After an outbreak of fever in February 1787, the convoy of ships eventually set sail but a storm in the channel disabled two of the ships and forced the others to return to port. Those who continued their journey, including fifty-nine white and forty-one black women, eventually arrived at Frenchman's Bay in Sierra Leone in May 1787.[7]

Within three months of their arrival, a third of the party had died. By March 1788, only 130 were alive. The promises of abundant land and the prospects of lawful trade were replaced by the stark realities of disease, death, infertile soils and hostile attacks from native rulers who challenged the settlers' claims of land ownership. Determined to make the scheme a public success, Granville Sharp (who advised the defence counsel in the Somerset case) arranged to send out another party to Sierra Leone in 1791, two of whom were English doctors. 'Granville Town', named in honour of Sharp's pioneering work, was burnt down by the local ruler, Jimmy, in retaliation against the Sierra Leone Company's violations on his territory. In March 1792, assisted by Sharp and his replacement Henry Thornton (of the Sierra Leone Company) and funded by the British

government at a cost of £9,000, over 1000 former American slaves sailed to Sierra Leone from Nova Scotia. These ex-slaves had been moved to temporary homes in Nova Scotia, after having fought for Britain in the American War of Independence, and were thereafter lured to Sierra Leone by the promise of land.[8]

In 1787, the same year in which the first black 'British' party of settlers arrived in Sierra Leone, two of a number of politically visible Africans in London, Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano, published vehement criticisms of the scheme. Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain* (1787) highlighted the fact that the prospect of setting up a free colony for Great Britain had 'neither altogether met with the credulous approbation of the Africans here, nor yet been sought after with any prudent and right plan by the promoters of it'.[9] Even more critically, in a letter to Cugoano which was published in the *Public Advertiser* of 4 April 1787, Equiano denounced the credibility of members of the Committee who had replaced Smeathman after his death: 'I am sure Irwin, and Fraser the Parson, are great villains, and Dr Currie. I am exceeding much grieved at the conduct of those who call themselves gentlemen. They now mean to serve (or use) the blacks the same as they do in the West Indies'.[10] Likewise, two former Nova Scotian black settlers, Cato Perkins and Isaac Anderson, made the journey to Sierra Leone and later departed for London, where they criticised John Clarkson over the false promises 'you [Clarkson] made us in Nova Scotia' and bitterly complained about the pernicious mismanagement of the Sierra Leone Company.[11]

By the late 1780s, therefore, local and parliamentary debates concerning slavery, colonialist projects, land disputes and negotiations, repatriation schemes, enforced transportations (of blacks, whites, convicts and prostitutes) and programmes concerning racial eradication, emancipation and resettlement, were high on the agenda. Blacks themselves were contributing to these and to fundamental discourses over civil rights and liberties during the most productive period of Romantic literature (1770–1830). By the late 1780s the migrations of peoples between Africa, the Americas and Britain had been firmly established and texts produced by black and dissenting authors had begun to penetrate the literary sphere. This book attempts to open new vistas for Romantic studies by indicating the ways in which it can be brought into contact with transatlantic

and black Atlantic studies. In this way, Mary Louise Pratt's sense of Romanticism as growing out of the 'contact zone' between Europe and the colonial frontier may be extended to include the space in which black Atlantic subjects and their texts met, 'clashed and grappled' with the worlds of Europe and the Americas.[12] Accordingly, this book endeavours to disclose a hitherto obscured dialogue of exchange and negotiation: that is, between the discourse of Romanticism as it emerged out of eighteenth-century dissent and enthusiasm, and the narratives of displaced subjects, the slaves from the African diaspora. As a consequence, it manifests a significant challenge to concepts of Romanticism which continue to hold the revolutions in France and America at their centre and endeavours instead to prioritise the slaves' rebellions, both literary and actual, upon the emerging autobiographical genre. By foregrounding the ways in which marginalised slaves and alienated radical dissenters contributed to transatlantic debates over civil and religious liberties, Romantic writing is recontextualised against a broader canvas of cultural exchanges, geographical migrations and displaced identities.

This book therefore investigates Romanticism in the context of transatlantic western culture and African culture in eighteenth-century Britain. Its predominant theme resides in the intersection, intervention and interaction between these two diverse, yet equally rich, cultural spheres and their corresponding systems of thought, epistemology and articulation: the transcultural, restless mutations and clashes of African and western philosophies, ideologies and practices which distinguished the late eighteenth century.[13] It investigates the ways in which such movements were negotiated, compromised and actualised by asking a series of linked questions. In what ways did Romanticism reflect or challenge Britain's participation in the slave trade? In what ways did the strategies employed by eighteenth-century radicals, misfits and/or the sociopolitically marginalised resemble those used by Africans upon their entry into the west? How did Africans articulate difference, dissidence or conformity in the years prior to and following the abolition of the slave trade? And finally, what is the connection between the seemingly disparate discourses of 'Romanticism' and the narratives published in England between 1770 and 1830 by ex-slaves from Africa and the colonies?[14]

A heterogeneous selection of canonical and marginalised untraditional works by white 'British', black 'British' and Anglo-American

authors are analysed in terms of their distinct and often challenging efforts to construct and advance diverse formulations of identity. Methodism's early transatlantic connections are set up alongside the 'black Atlantic', an entity which has been defined as the 'hybrid sphere of black culture within Africa, America, the Caribbean and Europe'.[15] Using a synthesis of archival material and theoretical application, these works are presented as articulate expressions of self/cultural-consciousness and located within the context of eighteenth-century religious and political dissent. It is hoped that this examination of the slave narratives within the context of Romanticism will acknowledge the emergence of a culturally hybrid black diaspora. Within the context of this book, the term 'diaspora' is used to describe the common historical processes of dispersal, fragmentation, displacement, enslavement and transportation experienced by African peoples and their descendants, experiences which unified such peoples at the same time as cutting them off from direct access to their past.[16] In this sense therefore, 'diaspora' as Jim Clifford has argued, functions not simply as a signifier of historically spatial fluidity and intentionality of identity but also of the endeavours to define a 'distinctive community' within historical contexts of displacement.[17] This book accordingly investigates the literary relationship between the black diaspora and its host community. It revisits and extends definitions proposed by postcolonialist critics and cultural theorists which suggest that all forms of culture are in some way related to one another as 'symbol-forming' and 'subject-constituting, interpellative practices'.[18] The liberating connotations of cultural 'hybridities' here reciprocate the complex mechanisms of 'translation' and correlate with the interdependent processes of 'displacement' within the linguistic sign and the necessarily pluralistic concepts of subjectivity:

> If . . . the act of cultural translation (both as representation and as reproduction) denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture, then we see all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity . . . Hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge.[19]

In other words, this study extends the concept of cultural hybridity to the concept of cultural intertextuality. It is concerned with texts which witness a process of movement and negotiation between cultures. But in order for cultural intertextualities to succeed (that is,

in order that the works of ex-slaves were read) particular forms of discourse were adopted so as to advance not only a 'sign' of assimilation with the host culture but also transformation of it. For poststructuralist critics such as Michel Foucault and Paul de Man, the concept of 'discourse' registers an ordering, or transposition of 'reality' onto convenient constructions or representations that are not necessarily dependent upon that reality; the production of systems of language in which utterances and texts, regardless of their factual status, differ according to the social and cultural context from which they emerge.[20] In its provision of a free signifier, the protean quality of what I have termed the 'discourse of the spirit' initiated by radical dissenting Protestantism facilitated the slaves' entry into the dominant literary order, an entry otherwise obstructed by restrictive legal and socioeconomic conditions. Establishing a process by which the slave's identity was liberated from the conditions imposed upon it by others, the discourse of the spirit identified the role of the slave in the black diaspora as sanctioned by a spiritual entity whose power was considered both impregnable and absolute. This discourse not only denied the possibility of a straightforward literal use of language but also enabled a form of cultural exchange between Christian and African belief systems: whilst the slave-narratives were obliged to present an acceptable form of 'x' (evidence of the workings of the holy spirit as maintained by radical dissenting Protestantism), they simultaneously revealed 'y' (a raw but coherent form of self-conciousness in the diaspora). This process of literal 'displacement' thus presents a lucid manifestation of the predicament of eighteenth-century African/slave identity within the diaspora. Alongside the dynamics of 'cultural' migration and 'hybridisation', such anti-essentialist conceptions of identity redetermined configurations of history, language and culture as processes of becoming rather than being.[21]

Drawing from Freudian analysis, the linguist Emile Benveniste has argued that it is language which provides the possibility of subjectivity; it is through language that people constitute themselves as subjects: 'Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast . . . Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse'.[22] Since there is no other testimony to the identity of the subject other than via language, there is no other form of authentication other than whatever the subject articulates about him/herself. Yet the

speaking subject can only become such by 'conforming' his/her speech to a system of linguistic prescriptions. Identity, therefore, constitutes a complex matrix of sometimes contradictory subject positions.[23]

The first part of this study is largely concerned with political and autobiographical tracts published in Britain by abolitionists, millenarianist prophets, Romantic poets and evangelical revivalists. The second part is concerned with works by slaves of African descent published in England during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Part I identifies the transatlantic discourse of the spirit which emerged under the influence of eighteenth-century radical dissenting Protestantism. It traces the development of spiritual autobiography as an heterogeneous medium of liberationist and abolitionist ideology, and conversely, elucidates its appropriation by advocates of territorial expansion and colonial ideology. Chapter 1 looks at the historical development of Britain's slave-trading and colonial practice, the tensions arising from this and the emergence of radical dissenting Protestantism on both sides of the Atlantic. Chapters 2 and 3 present critical examinations of English traditions of confessional writing by a selection of (white) literary predecessors to the Romantics, 'tangential' Romantic writers and 'canonical' poets. Within Chapter 2, relations are drawn between the narratives of the former slave trader, John Newton, the writings of the Devonshire visionary, Joanna Southcott, and the poetry of William Cowper, an important precursor to the Romantic poets. Their writings chart the rise of a self-conscious paradigm of counter-hegemonic discourse which operates both within and without the sociopolitical sphere. The writings of Joanna Southcott are examined in terms of the explicit challenges they pose to both patriarchal and non-conforming dissenting circles, via their strident demands for self-authorisation and female emancipation. The poems of William Cowper are seen to involve a complex fusion of spiritual discourse, personal psychosis and abolitionist ideology, which is neither unproblematic nor unambiguous. Likewise, the analysis of the writings of Cowper's mentor, John Newton, highlights the ways in which the liberationist model of spiritual salvation was strategically employed in order to denounce the slave trade, yet remained isolated from overt demands for black emancipation. Chapter 3 deals with the writings of first generation Romantics in terms of their responses to the slave trade. The popularised discourse of radical dissenting

Protestantism and abolitionist ideology is seen to provoke a conflicting range of responses in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth and William Blake. At times, such writings urged the British public to challenge the colonial policies of empire-building; at other times, such writings, paradoxically framed by the discourse of liberation and individual autonomy, revealed a pronounced detachment from demands for black civil and political rights. The discussion of John Stedman's text in Chapter 4 identifies a significant departure in its synthesis of principal tenets of salvation/liberation with the dynamics of cross-cultural contact. Set against the author's expedition to Surinam to quell insurrectionist blacks, Stedman's text explodes cultural divisions in its exposure of interracial sexual relations and 'miscegenations', which confuse the boundaries between coloniser and colonised, enslaved and free. From this perspective, Stedman's narrative provides a fitting precursor to the discussion of the 'mutant' or 'creolised' strategies contained within the autobiographical narratives by slaves discussed in Part II.

At this point the book leaves the discussion of Romantic and non-conformist writings to examine a number of works by slaves of African descent. Here the materials are from texts published in England during the late eighteenth century, works which represent the emergence of the black diaspora amidst the crisscrossing of the Atlantic Ocean, from West Africa to the West Indies, from the Americas to the British Isles. The term 'slave narrative' as it is used in the context of this book, encompasses the important disclosures, poetical and prosaic, of the slaves' experience of cultural fragmentation and their emergence into the social and linguistic orders of the west. Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate the ways in which the works by the ex-slaves John Marrant, Jupiter Hammon and James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw prioritised the landscape of radical dissenting Protestantism and reinscribed the 'self' within a revised cultural/textual narrative. Chapter 7 charts the ambivalent appropriation of the evangelical redemptive model by the accomplished poet and slave, Phillis Wheatley. The continuation of African cultural beliefs and practices in Wheatley's work problematises the 'redemptive' Christian missionary ideology of the west and proffers an important paradigm of intermediate cultural and literary negotiation which destabilises the foundations of eighteenth-century racist/colonial ideology. The discussion of the works by Olaudah Equiano and