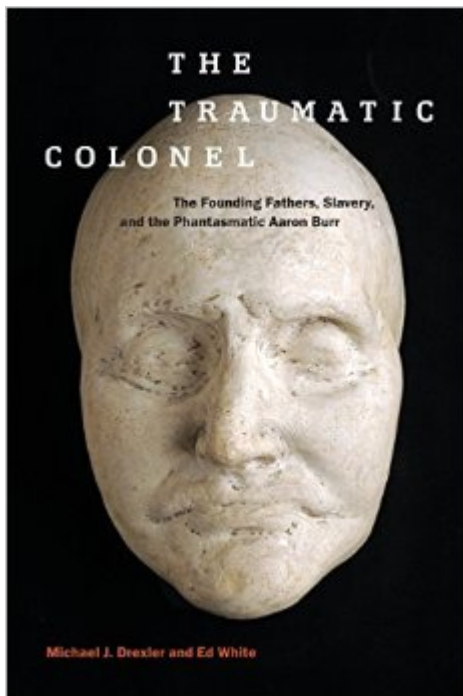


# Aaron Burr and the United States Racial Imagination



The title of Michael Drexler and Ed White's recent collaboration, *The Traumatic Colonel: The Founding Fathers, Slavery, and the Phantasmatic Aaron Burr*, begins with a brilliant pun on psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan's concept of the traumatic kernel of the real—an irreducible presence that initiates desire and continually eludes all our efforts to understand or symbolize it. According to Lacan's *Seminar XI*, the goal of psychoanalysis is to bring out or draw awareness to the irreducible kernels to which subjects are subjected. For Drexler and White, Burr functions as a traumatic kernel, an enigmatic placeholder whose representational history "in relation to the [Founding Fathers] clarifies the complex processing of the great crime of slavery" (9). Theirs is a complex argument incorporating a semiotic reading of the symbolic functions of various Founding Fathers, especially the racial dimensions of the founders; interpretations of racial fantasy structures in Charles Brockden Brown's novel *Ormond* (1799) and Tabitha Tenney's novel *Female Quixotism* (1801); and two chapters drawing on nonfiction accounts of Aaron Burr's rise to the vice presidency, duel with Alexander Hamilton, and subsequent fall in the aftermath of treason allegations that situate Burr in relation to the history of United States and Caribbean slavery.



Michael Drexler and Ed White, *The Traumatic Colonel: The Founding Fathers, Slavery, and the Phantasmatic Aaron Burr*. New York: New York University Press,

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Drexler and White's innovative methodology blurs established disciplinary boundaries between early American historiography and literary studies. Taking aim at the Founding Fathers, especially fallen founder Aaron Burr, they argue: "Rather than treating the Founders as actual agents who need to be more aggressively historicized with empirical data . . . our starting point is that they are *primarily* imaginative, phantasmatic phenomena best explored from a broadly literary perspective—as a broad characterological drama whose plot often remains obscure" (6). In this way, *The Traumatic Colonel* outlines a new method of reading both the discourse surrounding the founders and the discourse structures of literary texts as intersecting parts of a larger and continuously evolving early U.S. political fantasy structure.

Overall, this study focuses less on the biographical life of Burr or on the historical contexts of novels and more on the similarity of desires and structuring principles undergirding typically discrete sets of representational discourse. Although historical and literary primary sources are usually read through distinct methodological lenses, Drexler and White glean significant insights by applying the literary method of characterological study to fiction as well as a wider range of nonliterary texts such as contemporary biographies, private letters, and periodical accounts of the founders.

The compilation makes apparent how impossible it is to create a seamless, coherent character of Burr from the mass of contemporary and recent writings about him.

Based on critical theorist Slavoj Žižek's formulation of the "parallax"—a "gap in perceptions of the same thing from different vantage points"—their "parallactic" methodology is made concrete in a series of extracts about Burr that precede the book's introduction entitled "Burrology" (a move echoing Melville's "Etymology" that opens *Moby Dick*). Spanning fourteen pages, the compilation makes apparent how impossible it is to create a seamless, coherent character of Burr from the mass of contemporary and recent writings about him. Arranged chronologically, these extracts show Burr as an enigma for those who knew him and for those who attempt to know him now. However, Drexler and White are not primarily interested in Burr himself, but in the fantasy structures of early United States republicanism winding through the "thing" called Burr. Rather than separate out or disregard the mythos surrounding Burr and the founders, Drexler and White engage the mythic structure built up around them as worthy of study in and of itself. Thus, a parallactic reading does not discount the factual details of historical figures or early national sociopolitical life, but juxtaposes them with and against the discursively constructed mythos readily available in compilations of quotes such as "Burrology."

Chapter one uses Algirdas Greimas's structure of the semiotic square to describe how "a given cultural situation" such as the mythic building up of the

founders' reputations "will be structured around a fundamental opposition that expresses a logical understanding of that moment" (22). According to Drexler and White, attending to the formal mechanics, that is, the literary and symbolic structuring of the founders, shows how historical figures such as Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin assumed discrete symbolic positions in the public imagination as well as how those positions evolved over time and in relation to one another. They concentrate especially on the various forms and oppositions of racial desire and fantasy in the post-revolutionary United States. For instance, Drexler and White argue that George Washington initially occupies an imaginary position as "the benevolent slaveholder" against Benjamin Franklin, "the abolitionist"; later discourse surrounding Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton combines and refigures Washington and Franklin's previously established positions. Jefferson is the "Slave owner who ... knows slavery is evil, but sleeps with slaves," and Hamilton is the "Creole, who pursues an alternative to slavery" (38). The payoff of this line of thinking is not only a clearer understanding of the formation of the "founders constellation," but also how and why a dynamic figure such as Burr is excluded.

Chapters two and three offer significant and exciting new interpretations of the racial underpinnings of republican fantasy in Brown's *Ormond* and Tenney's *Female Quixotism* respectively. While this pairing might seem unexpected, Drexler and White convincingly argue that both Brown and Tenney "propose an Africanist presence" (43) as their unspeakable traumatic kernel. In Brown's novel, a "secret witness" motif culminates in Ormond's posturing as a black chimney sweep, whereas in Tenney's, the failed match between the northern heroine Dorcasina and her southern suitor symbolizes unresolvable regional tensions that are finally suppressed as comedy, when Dorcasina ends her days under the care of her black servant, Scipio. These readings push beyond the "familiar mode of analysis focusing on cultural discourses mapped through ostensibly realist plot development" (70) by carefully drawing out these novels' formal structuring of racial fantasy alongside the previously established patterns located in representations of the founders. Drexler and White observe a similarity of racial fantasy in both nonfiction accounts of the founders and in period fiction where both genres reveal how "black slavery is the fundamentally repressed problem of republicanism" (70).

This insight carries into chapters four and five by taking up the significance of the Haitian Revolution and Burr's complicated political legacy, exploring contemporary discursive accounts of his rise to prominence in the presidential election tie of 1800 as well as accusations of conspiracy and treason that symbolically mark him as a racially coded fallen founder located permanently outside the founders constellation.

Whether or not readers are ultimately convinced by Drexler and White's interpretation of the symbolic functioning of "the Burr," the exciting possibilities of their innovative parallax method should make *The Traumatic Colonel* required reading for advanced students and practitioners of both literary and historical studies. Their intervention promises a stimulating,

expanded purview for those working within early American studies.

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