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# Uncivil Speech: Invective and the Rhetorics of Democracy in the Early Republic

Jeremy Engels

*Robert Owen's "Declaration of Mental Independence," declaimed on the Fourth of July, 1826, was one of the most ill-received speeches in the early Republic. The attendant controversy provides an opportunity to theorize invective's role in democratic culture. Invective was useful in the early Republic, and continues to be useful today, because it is both constitutive of national identity and a curative rhetoric for managing cultural anxiety. However, there are limits to what invective can achieve, and invective's place in democracy is consequently ambivalent. Rather than curing democratic anxiety, invective tends to perpetuate it, disrupting democracy's emphasis on controlled conflict and pushing it ever closer to violence.*

*Keywords: Invective; Democratic Culture; Epideictic; Robert Owen; Cultural Anxiety*

*Invective* (noun): A railing speech or expression; something uttered or written, intended to cast opprobrium, censure, or reproach on another; a harsh or reproachful accusation. It differs from *reproof*, as the latter may come from a friend, and be intended for the good of the person reproofed; but *invective* proceeds from an enemy, and is intended to give pain or to injure.

Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828

The Fourth of July “was by far the noisiest, most popular, and most important public ritual to emerge in the early American republic,” and the Jubilee celebration on July 4, 1826, was characterized by the bombast, pomp, and circumstance typical of such occasions.<sup>1</sup> According to the summary provided in the July 6, 1826, *Daily National Intelligencer*, the Jubilee was met with “great manifestations of public respect” in Washington. “The day was ushered in with salutes of artillery,” and then the city gathered for a parade along Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol headed by

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President John Quincy Adams, Vice President John Calhoun, and the various cabinet secretaries. There were morning services, and then the “Honorable Joseph Andersoy, a veteran, who honorably fought the battles of his country throughout the whole of the war of the Revolution, read the Declaration of Independence, accompanied by a few appropriate explanatory remarks.” Walter Jones was the “orator of the day,” and he gave a moving speech that reflected on the wonder of the United States, hearkened back to the sacrifices of the founders, praised freedom and liberty, and called on citizens to renew a contract of blood with previous generations by acting virtuously and stepping up to defend the nation from its enemies.

The fifty-year anniversary of America’s independence was a time for celebration and reflection, so Robert Owen immigrated to the United States at an exciting moment. A wealthy, well-educated English industrialist, Owen began a short-lived community at New Harmony, Indiana, in 1824. Owen was something of a curiosity in wealthy, educated American circles. During his time in the United States, he met with notables, addressed Congress twice, participated in a national lecture circuit, and publicly debated a prominent theologian in Cincinnati about the existence of God.<sup>2</sup> His most notorious rhetorical moment came on July 4, 1826, when he delivered an oration entitled the “Declaration of Mental Independence” on the steps of New Harmony’s town hall.<sup>3</sup>

According to historian Albert Post, Owen’s composition “fell somewhat flat.”<sup>4</sup> This statement was inaccurate, for far from falling flat, the speech produced outrage like few Fourth of July addresses before. In 1827, the *Massachusetts Spy* reminded its readers:

On the fourth of July, 1826, the pompous declaration of mental independence was delivered in the hall, to a large assembly. It was afterwards printed in the Gazette, and drew from editors of papers throughout the Union, showers of satire, ridicule and invective.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of its apparent hyperbole, this statement was accurate. I found only three newspaper articles that did not openly condemn the Declaration of Mental Independence: two denounced Owen’s speech but called on Americans to forestall judgment until history proved him right or wrong, and another denounced the oration but praised Owen’s philanthropy.<sup>6</sup> Most Americans did not wait to judge Robert Owen, and either failed to recognize, or chose to dismiss, his benevolence. How Americans reacted to this address was telling. Only one newspaper, New York’s *Gospel Herald*, on September 9, 1826, reprinted the speech in its entirety and attempted to offer a systematic, point-by-point rebuttal of its claims. As noted by the *Massachusetts Spy*, other papers reacted with satire, ridicule, and invective. Instead of dismantling the logic behind Owen’s address or rebutting his arguments about the causes of mental slavery, Americans called him names and attacked his character.

Owen was denounced as a foreigner and an atheist, charged with inexcusable pretentiousness, and condemned as a madman. And, although he purportedly denied the existence of God, he was reproached as an enthusiast who believed he could talk with the Almighty. Why attack this reformer living in a rural Indiana town with such

vehemence? What was the function of such attacks? In this essay, I investigate the controversy surrounding Robert Owen's Declaration of Mental Independence for two reasons. First, this episode helps us understand how Americans in 1826 learned to talk about democracy in the context of negotiating the key political anxieties of the time. Additionally, it provides an important case study for understanding the role of invective in democratic public culture more generally.

To demonstrate the functions of invective in the early Republic, I begin by describing the controversy, outlining the major themes in Owen's Declaration of Mental Independence and mapping its antagonistic reception. I then consider why Americans attacked Owen with such vehemence and the functions that their invective served. Invective, I argue, was both constitutive of national identity and a curative rhetoric through which Americans soothed their anxieties and expiated their sins. In this context, I maintain that the stubborn persistence of invective in democratic culture, from the formative 1820s to the postmodern, mediated, transnational democracy in which we live today, can be largely explained as a function of these constitutive and curative dimensions. In the final section of the essay, I apply the lessons learned from the Owen episode to the present, briefly discussing how invective functions in the contemporary Republican rhetoric of red and blue states, real and fake America. While invective was central to democratic public culture in 1826, and remains so today, ultimately I conclude that it is an imperfect coping mechanism for democratic anxieties. In fact, it is deeply ambivalent, for rather than easing anxiety it tends to bring anxiety to the surface. In short, while invective is central to democratic culture, it also always threatens to set in motion a devastating spiral that undermines the democratic emphasis on controlled conflict, as anxiety fuels anxiety and citizens are left grasping for even more extreme measures to expiate their demons.

### **Robert Owen's Declaration of Mental Independence**

By the time Americans celebrated their Jubilee, they had come a long way. The population of the United States had tripled to twelve million, and the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 had more than doubled the nation's territory. The number of states had grown from thirteen to twenty-four. In spite of the catastrophic market crash of 1819, capitalism was gaining force in the national imagination. The energies of the nation were being turned toward profit, proving to many observers that Mandeville was correct and that the aggressive pursuit of private interests could indeed promote the public good. Fortunes were made and lost. It was a dizzying time of opportunity and peril. "The Americans of 1826 were, overall, a robust breed, a people of longings," Andrew Burstein writes. "Certainly, they were attuned to the disruptive potential of issues like slavery to divide them. But, approaching this moment of national celebration, they were also eager to acknowledge their collective commonness."<sup>7</sup> Americans were a people of longings, but they were also anxious—about slavery, about national division, about democracy, about the crushing changes wrought by market capitalism, about the deaths of the founding fathers, and about an

uncertain future and the nation's place in it. These anxieties came to the surface in attacks on Owen, who touched a nerve.

Although it was customary to posit political freedom as the goal of the Revolutionary War, in his Declaration of Mental Independence, Owen argued that the Declaration of Independence “gave to a people advancing towards civilization, the first opportunity of establishing a government, which would, by degrees, permit them to acquire that greatest of blessings MENTAL LIBERTY.” The “real victory” of independence was mental liberty, and the signing of the Declaration deserved commemoration because while pockets of mental liberty had existed in the past, “until the Revolution of 1776, no people had acquired the *political power* to permit them” to be mentally free. The founders of the United States created the foundation for mental liberty, and Owen implored his audience to fulfill their project: “It is for YOU and YOUR successors now to press onward, with your utmost speed, in the course which, by so many sacrifices, for your benefit, they have opened for you.”

This much of Owen's address was uncontroversial, for it was common in nineteenth-century Fourth of July addresses to update the Declaration of Independence and to call on patriots to complete the revolution of '76.<sup>8</sup> Owen was condemned for the type of revolution he desired, for he argued that the path to mental liberty entailed toppling three of the most cherished American institutions:

I NOW DECLARE, to you and to the world, *that Man, up to this hour, has been, in all parts of the earth, a slave to a TRINITY of the most monstrous evils that could be combined to inflict mental and physical evil upon his whole race.*

I refer to PRIVATE, OR INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY—ABSURD AND IRRATIONAL SYSTEMS OF RELIGION—AND MARRIAGE, FOUNDED ON INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY COMBINED WITH SOME ONE OF THESE IRRATIONAL SYSTEMS OF RELIGION.

Owen focused on this “formidable Trinity, compounded of Ignorance, Superstition and Hypocrisy,” because each obscured the underlying reality of social oppression. Private property fostered mental slavery, for it was part of a corrupt system that promised upward mobility and material wealth to those who behaved properly. Systems of private property prevented change by forcing citizens to cash in to a system that alienated and exploited them.

Religion, in turn, was an opiate that made this alienation and exploitation palatable. All religions were denounced as “superstition,” and Christianity, in particular, was singled out for its absurdity. To buttress his case, Owen paraphrased what the Enlightenment philosopher Leibnitz called the theodicy argument, pointing out the absurdity of belief in a benevolent god who tolerated so much worldly evil. From this perspective, religion masked oppression with doctrines of joyous poverty and promises of a glorious afterlife for those who suffered righteously. Religion, “by destroying the judgment, irrationalized all the mental faculties of man, and made him the most abject slave, through the fear of nonentities created solely by his own disordered imagination.”

Marriage was singled out because it allowed the rich “to retain their division of the public spoils, and create to themselves an aristocracy of wealth, of power, and of learning.” An early proponent of women's rights, Owen railed against loveless

marriages that “enslave[d]” women by making them the private property of men. Against prevailing sentiment, he went so far as to champion divorce as a solution to marital oppression.<sup>9</sup> Like private property and religion, marriage mystified unequal social relations, perpetuated the mechanisms of gendered domination, and allowed the rich to stay rich.

In this speech, mental liberty meant two things: the ability to see through the ideologies of oppression created by private property, religion, and marriage, and then the courage to overthrow these practices and institute more equal and just alternatives in their place. Owen’s goal was to instigate a revolution in 1826 that would complete the project begun in 1776 and thus throw off the shackles of mental slavery once and for all. “The revolution, then, to be now effected,” he announced:

is the DESTRUCTION of this HYDRA OF EVILS—in order that the many may be no longer poor, wretched beings,—dependent on the wealthy and powerful few; that Man may be no longer a superstitious idiot, continually dying from the futile fear of death; that he may no longer unite himself to the other sex from any mercenary or superstitious motives, nor promise and pretend to do that which it depends not on himself to perform.

This audacious plan was positioned as the logical outcome of the Revolutionary War, compelled by its authors and dictated by human nature itself.

Although the Declaration of Mental Independence was modeled after the Declaration of Independence, it was, unlike Jefferson’s document, mostly about its author. While the United States prepared the world for mental liberty, Owen boasted that without him, the world would remain forever enslaved: “For nearly forty years have I been employed, heart and soul, day by day, almost without ceasing,” he recounted:

arranging the circumstances, to enable me to give the death-blow to the tyranny and despotism, which, for unnumbered ages past, have held the human mind spell-bound, in chains and fetters, of such mysterious forms and shapes, that no mortal hand dared approach to set the suffering prisoner free.

By emphasizing his noble and suffering work, he thus elevated himself to the level of a prophet called forth to enlighten the “ignorant multitude” and to reveal the truth, which up to this point was “most speciously gilded and decorated with external trappings.”

Owen did not instigate a second revolution. He did, however, create quite a stir. In the weeks following the Jubilee Celebration, Americans read portions—generally only the juicy portions—of the Declaration of Mental Independence, which were originally reprinted in the August 3 issue of Washington DC’s *Daily National Intelligencer*, along with this paper’s editorial opinion that Owen’s “Discourse strikes at the root of all social institutions, as at present organized, and denounces, and proposes to rend asunder, some of the ties hitherto considered most sacred in civilized Christian communities.” Selections from Owen’s speech, along with the *Daily National Intelligencer’s* commentary, were reprinted mainly in New England but also as far south as Virginia, and in dailies, weeklies, and the newer religious periodicals that sprang up during the Second Great Awakening.<sup>10</sup>

The judgment that the Declaration of Mental Independence was a grave danger to the social fabric of the United States caused both Owen and his followers to cry foul. On October 10, 1826, the *New Harmony Gazette* criticized the *Daily National Intelligencer* for such hasty reporting, publishing the following appeal:

We would humbly, but respectfully and earnestly invite the attention of Editors occupying conspicuous stations, and whose journals have a circulation coextensive probably with the extreme borders of the Republic, and whose duty is equally to protect the rights of every citizen, whether conspicuous or obscure, to the propriety of publishing their judgments with some deliberation. . . . There are many persons in this part of the country, and doubtless all over the United States, who have yet to hear of Mr. Owen and his principles: and such an unfavorable sentiment emanating from such high authority as the *Intelligencer*, being the first lesson many an unlettered mind may receive, is calculated to impress an incorrigible prejudice against the man and his principles, however philanthropic the one, and true and valuable the other.

The Owenites understood that the press played an essential role in public culture by connecting citizens across large expanses of land and filling them in on distant happenings they did not directly experience themselves. Indeed, newspapers were a potent force in the early Republic, helping to “shape public opinion on a massive scale.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Owen’s supporters criticized the *Daily National Intelligencer* for biasing large numbers of Americans against their leader, and called for it and other papers to exercise “deliberation” and “propriety” instead. This passage exemplified the dominant rhetorical strategy that Owen and his followers deployed to defend the Declaration of Mental Independence from its attackers, responding with cool, even-handed, point-by-point counter-rebuttals, and thus practicing the deliberation and propriety they found so lacking in the public.

The Owenites were right to be angry, for the *Daily National Intelligencer* created a durable foundation for subsequent attacks on their leader and spokesman. Repeatedly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, America’s newspapers expressed an enmity to invective—rejecting articles because they were too abusive.<sup>12</sup> They complained about the politics of blaming in other periodicals.<sup>13</sup> They even suggested that invective was antithetical to reasoned argument as it should be practiced in public. “Where *invective* or *abuse* commences, there argument ends,” the *National Advocate* put it simply on January 6, 1817. And on March 10, 1831, the *Floridian & Advocate* of Tallahassee claimed that “by resorting to personal abuse and invective,” a rival editor “has tacitly confessed the weakness of the cause in which he is engaged, or his own inability to sustain it, by the legitimate means of reason and argument.” Much of this was just posturing. While the press liked to position itself as a vehicle for argument instead of abuse, in practice newspapers tended to be little more than profitable platforms for advertisements, partisan spin, and invective-laden diatribes against the opposition.<sup>14</sup>

Although Samuel Morse would not patent his telegraph until 1837, and the Associated Press was not founded until 1846, it was common for US newspapers in the early Republic to reprint dispatches and editorials from other papers—a process

of dissemination that created the foundations for a national consciousness, as Americans across the country read the same news.<sup>15</sup> While such newspapers were brazenly partisan, there was remarkable agreement that Owen's words deserved collective condemnation. Thus, Owen served an important function in this emerging democracy: he helped Americans in the public sphere achieve a momentary consensus as they rallied together against a perceived danger. As Americans denounced Owen as a foreigner, as an atheist, as pretentious, as an enthusiast, and as a madman, they also constituted, through antithesis, a national identity at a moment of socio-political transition.

The most popular response to Owen's Declaration of Mental Independence was to denounce it as atheistic. On September 9, 1826, the *New-York Mirror* charged Owen with pronouncing "atheistical and licentious opinions," and according to the August 30, 1826, edition of the *Western Luminary*:

Here then we have the language of an *Atheist*—a being, whose monstrous audacity and foolish inconsistency are necessarily such, that men have hesitated to believe in its existence. It is no longer problematical; he stands forth unblushingly avowed, to the derision of common sense and the pity of every humane heart.

These charges of atheism were not technically true, for Owen did not deny the existence of a god in this speech—instead, he labeled religion "superstition" and attempted to highlight the ways that religion contributed to oppressive social practices. Moreover, as the *New Harmony Gazette* pointed out on October 10, 1826, there were many similarities between Owen's philanthropy and New Testament Christianity. Thus, the Owenites asked, "[I]n what does Mr. Owen's religion differ practically from the Christian?"

True or not, charges of atheism were rhetorically potent. Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* listed nine permutations of the word, all of which indicated an impious disbelief in God, but to charge someone with atheism was to call forth a whole set of associated terms. Atheism was one of the strongest charges in the American lexicon because it was unthinkable. The Jubilee took place in the midst of the Second Great Awakening. During this widespread evangelical movement, James Turner argues:

Evangelicals strove to shape the minds of their fellow citizens—to "Christianize America," as they said. And through revivals, moral-reform organizations, juvenile literature, Sunday schools, tract societies, public schools, and sheer persistence, they succeeded to an impressive extent.<sup>16</sup>

Owen forwarded an attack on organized religion to an audience that simply could not buy it—and would not be able to until "the golden age of freethought" following the Civil War.<sup>17</sup> To be an atheist was to flaunt the laws of consistency and hence of the Enlightenment—to contradict common sense and the laws of truth that resided in every human heart.

Another recurring response was to mock Owen's hubris. On August 26, 1826, the *Gospel Herald* noted, "His arrogance is almost, if not quite without a parallel." "None

but real simpletons will now become the dupes of this *arrogant fool*,” this paper suggested. On August 30, 1826, the *Western Luminary* offered the following summary:

In this strange composition, he in fact, inculcates that there is no God, and that religion is of course unnecessary, marriage is also denounced, and in short, every thing has gone wrong till the present time, when he, the said Mr. Robert Owen, has arisen, the discoverer of the important fact and the rectifier of the general error.

This paper then pointed out “the vanity of Mr. Owen” and lampooned him as “a Daniel come to judgment!—the Deliverer of the West—the Emancipator of the world! Truly, master Owen, we of ‘America’ ought specifically to feel our obligations for your condescending instruction.”

The charge of pretentiousness worked similarly to the charge of atheism: as an othering trick that pushed Owen outside the demos and as a weapon that impugned his ethos. “Daniel,” “Deliverer,” “Emancipator”: Owen put himself on par with god; his pretences were a mark of blasphemy. To call him “Deliverer” was really to call him “Deceiver,” whose words should be shunned by the ears of the righteous. Americans imagined themselves to be humble, salt-of-the-earth, god-fearing folks. He was not one of us; his pretentiousness marked him as one of them.

Owen’s opponents also responded to his Declaration of Mental Independence by charging the author with enthusiasm. According to the August 11, 1826, *Richmond Enquirer*, Owen was a “wild Enthusiast” who presented a “strange paper.” Similarly, the August 23, 1826, *Zion’s Herald* lambasted Owen as a “hair-brained enthusiast, from Scotland.” In 1828, Webster defined an enthusiast as someone “who imagines he has special or supernatural converse with God, or special communications from him,” or someone whose “imagination is warmed.” To charge Owen with enthusiasm in the second sense was to imply that his truths were fictions conjured by an overheated imagination. This was the weaker sense of the word. The first was stronger, for it attributed Owen’s idea of mental liberty, and his hope to free the human race from oppression, to his belief that he could talk with God. This sense of the word sat uneasily with the charge that Owen was an atheist, for one could not be an enthusiast if one did not believe in God. Nevertheless, it was the stronger charge for slandering him—and there was no requirement that invective be consistent.

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke reported that enthusiasm was “founded neither on reason nor divine revelation” but was the product of “the conceits of a warmed or overweening brain.”<sup>18</sup> For both Locke and Webster, an enthusiast was someone whose brain was “warmed”; in other words, an enthusiast was delusional—and there was no obligation, they insisted, to take such people seriously. By marking Owen as an enthusiast, Americans in the early Republic performed a similarly dismissive maneuver. The point of such denunciations was summarized by the *Louisville Public Advertiser* on September 23, 1826, which labeled Owen’s declaration “a solemn sort of farce, which can have no influence in a country like this.” Having declared Owen’s discourse a farce, this paper continued, “[T]he opinions of such an enthusiast, are unworthy of serious refutation.” To impugn Owen with enthusiasm was doubly useful, for it slandered his credibility and

also reinforced the decision to engage in the politics of blame. If Owen was an enthusiast, there was no need to listen to him or engage him in conversation. He could be shunned as an idiot, and his words as prattle.

Finally, in the most extreme charge, Owen was denounced as a madman. By calling him “mad,” his critics marked his words as the feverish ramblings of someone who had lost touch with reality. “Success seems to have turned Mr. Owen’s brain,” the *Vermont Chronicle* observed on August 18, 1826, for “by rejecting the Bible, he has become, in a sad sense of the world, *mad*.” The modern definitions of civilization, enlightenment, and sanity/health were created by positing their opposites.<sup>19</sup> Accusations of madness placed Owen outside the bounds of democratic propriety while simultaneously slandering his credibility. Moreover, charges of insanity were especially potent, for in the eighteenth century, madness and crime were the two things most deserving of confinement.<sup>20</sup> To label someone as “mad” was to remove them from society and position them for treatment. While the charges of atheism and foreignness cast Owen in the role of the other, and the charges of pretentiousness and enthusiasm worked in tandem to compromise his ethos further, the imputation of madness suggested that he should be removed from the conversation altogether. To call Owen mad was to take away his podium, and deny him access to the public sphere. Symbolically, the rhetorics of blame locked Owen in a metaphorical madhouse.

### Anxious Democrats

The Owen episode was indicative of a crucial moment in the development of US democratic culture, for Americans at the time were on the cusp of entering a full-throated Jacksonian dogfight. The radical reform culture of this time relied heavily on invective, and in 1826, the fiery activist William Lloyd Garrison was a newspaper editor cutting his teeth on *ad hominem* attacks. The Protestant jeremiad, so central to the Second Great Awakening, was little more than damning invective directed against the congregation of sinners.<sup>21</sup> And invective was central to the presidential campaigns of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s.<sup>22</sup> According to Kenneth Cmiel, the earliest democratic discourses in the United States tended toward a middling style characterized by informality, bluntness, and inflated speech. As such, American democracy emerged from a prospering rhetorical culture of profanity, smear tactics, and *ad hominem* attacks.<sup>23</sup>

In the civic republican tradition of Cicero and in the more modern tradition of policy debate, blame has played a central role in the process of *controversia* as a rhetor identifies who or what was responsible for a particular problem that they seek to remedy. The response to Owen’s Declaration of Mental Independence illustrates how blame did something more. Celeste Condit has argued that invective in the Boston Massacre orations worked to constitute the borders of communal identity.<sup>24</sup> This function remained consistent into the nineteenth century. In the early democratic culture of the United States, invective worked to reaffirm, and to constitute, national identity.

From Aristotle to Hugh Blair to Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, rhetoricians have generally understood invective as a form of epideictic and ceremonial performance that calls forth and confirms communal values.<sup>25</sup> Thus, John Quincy Adams, the first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, instructed his students in the early nineteenth century that the “ultimate object” of epideictic was “the display of qualities good or bad. Her special function is to point the finger of admiration or of scorn; to deal out the mead of honor and of shame.”<sup>26</sup> An editorial by “Advocatus” published in the *Masonic Mirror: and Mechanics’ Intelligencer* on September 2, 1826, used similar language. This essayist charged Owen with plagiarizing Voltaire’s writings, “which exhibit an assemblage of all possible sins in embryo.” For being a liar, and for cribbing the work of a writer assumed to be an atheist and a “Fanatic,” Owen had to “be *marked* with the finger of scorn.” Owen was as dangerous as Voltaire—and this writer therefore put Americans on guard, lest they fall to his lies and deceptions. To point the finger was to blame someone for violating community norms, hence valorizing those norms as “appropriate,” “moral,” and “correct.” Here we might think of Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, branded with a scarlet “A” both to mark her as an outsider and to draw attention to her crime so that others would think twice before risking such public opprobrium. To blame Owen was to instruct Americans in who they were, and who they were not. The building up of a national identity occurred though the tearing down of invective.

To point the finger of blame was, in part, about confirming already shared beliefs and values. This was the function of charges of atheism, for the United States increasingly resembled a Christian nation in the 1820s. However, other attacks—in particular, condemnations of Owen’s pretentiousness, enthusiasm, and madness—called on Americans to act differently. Nations are imagined communities constituted through rhetoric and ritual; by attacking Owen, Americans articulated a national identity for Americans.<sup>27</sup> Invective was consequently a type of constitutive rhetoric. According to Maurice Charland, constitutive rhetoric occurs prior to persuasion; it is the process of constructing audiences so that they can be persuaded, and thus he compares it to a “rhetoric of socialization.”<sup>28</sup> Anti-Owen invective socialized Americans into the ways of citizenship by imagining them as a rational and consistent people who were not subject to the whims of enthusiasm or popular fancy. Moreover, it pictured Americans as a deferential people who would listen to the wisdom of moral leaders.

Invective is a leveling discourse that has the benefit of constituting roughly equal subject positions between the speaker or writer and the subject of attack. As such, it can take the shine off our heroes, bringing them down to the level of the people. Invective was central to the formative years of American democracy because it was potentially open to anyone and everyone—it represented the cornerstone of a democratic politics that could include as it excluded. In a democracy committed to free speech, invective was constantly testing the boundaries and proving the durability of the structure. However, we should not miss the chance to understand how invective acted as an instrument of authority. In democratic culture, persuasion

is power. To blame Owen might have established a relative equality between speaker and target, but it also elevated the speaker above the demos as a moral authority who should be in charge of constituting democratic identities. Although the 1820s are commonly pictured as an unruly age of democratic dissent, hierarchical ideals of deference and patronage were still deeply influential in American political thought and practice.<sup>29</sup> Those who blamed Owen hence positioned themselves atop the social hierarchy: analogous to the representatives that Americans elected to rule, these newspaper writers elected themselves leaders of the moral world.

However, those who blamed Owen protested too much. While Fourth of July speeches in the early Republic tended toward the ritual epideictic celebration of American greatness, Owen's address read more like a jeremiad chastising Americans for their sins, labeling them as slaves to money, desire, and religion.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Owen impugned the profound sense of divine "mission" central to American identity since the colonial period.<sup>31</sup> He announced that Americans were adrift, positioning himself as the leader who could put things right. Americans could have ignored his charges, but instead they deployed their full rhetorical arsenal in response. As they worked to establish a national identity, imagining the United States as "civilized" and "Christian" (to use the *Daily National Intelligencer's* words), the attacks on Owen revealed a deep cultural anxiety about how "civilized" Americans really were. Arguably, Americans in 1826 turned to invective because they were anxious about national division, about partisan strife, and about democracy itself.

Even as Owen delivered his declaration, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the great prophets of independence, the second and third presidents of the United States, died within five hours of each other. The timing of their deaths, fifty years to the day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, was beyond serendipity; it was providential. "No serious novelist would ever dare to make this up," Joseph Ellis suggests.<sup>32</sup> When Adams and Jefferson passed away, the ties with the Revolutionary generation were symbolically cut. Americans, therefore, read summaries of Owen's speech at the same time that they were pondering the meaning of the founders' deaths. Indeed, the *Daily National Intelligencer's* caustic appraisal of the Declaration of Mental Independence, published on page 3 of the August 3, 1826, edition, was printed adjacent to a description of memorial services for the dead presidents in Georgetown, and near a description of similar events in Pensacola, Florida. Americans found a similar juxtaposition of stories in other papers as well.

All over the United States, Americans mourned the deaths of Jefferson and Adams—and all over the United States, notable politicians, priests, and professors gave Americans comfort in speeches formal and informal. "We are not assembled," Daniel Webster instructed his audience of mourners in Boston's Faneuil Hall, "as men overwhelmed with calamity by the sudden disruption of the ties of friendship or affection, or as in despair for the Republic, by the untimely blighting of its hopes."<sup>33</sup> The founders' deaths were not a tragedy, Webster averred, for he likened the US to a "mariner" and the great patriots of the past to stars that could be used by citizen-sailors to navigate the difficult present.<sup>34</sup> Now, Adams and Jefferson joined Washington in "the clear upper sky," in "the American constellation," where "they

circle round their centre, and the heavens beam with new light.”<sup>35</sup> The tragedy was found not in America’s loss but in what this loss represented—for as Americans engaged in the hermeneutic act of reading the stars, they couldn’t help but view the founders’ example from their own historical position. And in the 1820s, the founders’ ideal of politics seemed increasingly antiquated.

Adams and Jefferson were real historical figures, but they were also symbols of a different political age that valued consensus and unity—an age of republicanism. The United States was born from a revolution waged against monarchy in the name of republican government.<sup>36</sup> Republicanism, in turn, positioned consensus as one of the highest political ideals.<sup>37</sup> At the time of the founding of the United States, there was no space for legitimate opposition. The founders assumed that virtue was self-evident so long as it was untainted by faction, which meant that dissent was functionally equivalent to disloyalty. The value of consensus was central to James Madison’s attack on factions in *Federalist* No. 10, and to Jefferson’s First Inaugural Address, which announced that “every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.”<sup>38</sup> Republicanism’s validation of consensus haunted Americans in the more divided, democratic age of the 1820s, pushing them to valorize consensus, to fear factions even as political parties were becoming the norm, and to elevate above the everyday scuffles of the logomachy.

“A candid posterity will disapprove the spirit of acrimonious recrimination, in which both parties were too ready to indulge,” Caleb Cushing maintained in one of the many eulogies to Adams and Jefferson, denouncing the party spirit that divided Federalists and Republicans for much of the early Republic. Dismissing the reality of political conflict, this eulogist instead drew inspiration from Jefferson and Adams’s writings about the possibility of a higher consensus found in the idea of the nation itself. Cushing concluded, “Let our attachments be confined to the cherished name of America. ‘Our country, our whole country, and nothing but our country’—be this the fundamental maxim of our public policy.”<sup>39</sup> However, while he and other authors praised unity, indications of disunity and strife were abundant. Consequently, Americans worried about the divisions over slavery as exposed by the Missouri controversy, and partisan divisions as revealed in the bitter presidential election of 1824.

Americans were also anxious about democracy. The fear of democracy, Benjamin Barber observes, is “as old as political thought itself,” and it was deeply engrained in the United States.<sup>40</sup> While radical pamphleteers including Thomas Paine argued for a more democratic government in the 1770s, democracy was unthinkable for much of the early Republic—and thus the founders did what they could to tame, discipline, and transform the democratic urges of the Revolutionary War into something more stable and hierarchical.<sup>41</sup> The French Revolution taught many Americans that democracy was synonymous with guillotines and blood running through the streets.<sup>42</sup> In 1814, Adams, who was profoundly skeptical about the possibilities of popular government, mused, “[D]emocracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.”<sup>43</sup>

Adams was not alone in this judgment, for he and many other elite politicians feared that weak-willed citizens were an easy mark for smooth-talking demagogues.<sup>44</sup> Complaining that citizens were overly susceptible to persuasion and, therefore, that would-be dictators could use powerful language to poison public politics, Madison summarized the antidemocratic bent of the post-war US in *Federalist* No. 58 with a historical allusion: “In the ancient republics, where the whole body of the people assembled in person, a single orator, or an artful statesmen, was generally seen to rule with as complete a sway, as if a sceptre had been placed in his single hands.”<sup>45</sup> Democracy had destroyed ancient Greece, it was said, and it would destroy the United States as well. Accordingly, the founders determined to arrange politics so that the people did not lead but followed.

Democracy gained legitimacy in the national imagination in the 1820s, but many politicians continued to fear that democracy made demagoguery possible in new and frightening ways.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, they were afraid that democracy would lead them down the path of conflict and disunion. As Owen spoke, Americans were in the midst of a monumental sea-change in how they conceptualized politics. Although many Americans reluctantly embraced party politics in the 1790s, the guiding ideal of republican rhetoric was still consensus. At that time, parties were equated with factions—and if Madison had taught Americans anything, it was to fear factions. However, in the 1820s, “the conflict of organized interests replaced the ideal of consensual politics” in the United States.<sup>47</sup> In a society that now valued controlled conflict in place of consensus, there was widespread unease about how democratic majorities would function in the absence of an identifiable, shared, common good. If majorities had different priorities to minorities, wouldn’t democracy inevitably result in what Tocqueville fearfully characterized as the “tyranny of the majority”?<sup>48</sup> In this new rhetorical world of partisan strife and mass-communicated conflict, the chief worry was that conflict would replace consensus and the foundations of the national community would be eroded.

The United States in 1826 was a place of big dreams and equally prominent anxieties. Some feared that their errand in the wilderness had gone astray, others fretted over rampant political and sectional division, and others still feared that democracy might be the death of them all. The anxieties Americans felt came to the surface in their invective. The charges leveled against Owen belied a deep and abiding fear about public rhetoric and stupid publics that acted as constitutive features of the American public sphere. Following their hesitant embrace of conflict in the 1820s, Americans struggled mightily to keep conflicts from exploding into violence and unraveling the social fabric. During the Second Great Awakening, many religious leaders hoped to disseminate Christianity throughout society, providing Americans with a moral foundation for making decisions and resolving conflicts. Owen’s purported “atheism” was a problem for Christians because it denied the truth of revelation, but it was also a democratic problem because it portended a public unmoored from ethical foundations. If Americans could believe anything they chose—say, that God did not exist—and if such beliefs could be legitimated through

majority rule, then the result would be nothing short of chaos. Without an ontological or epistemological grounding, democracy was a scary thing indeed.

Owen's hubris and his purported "enthusiasm" were problems because he positioned himself above the demos as a leader of the people—as someone, it was said, who could bend history to his wishes and even talk with God. It was just such a leader that elite Americans feared would exploit democratic weakness and lead the masses in revolution. Owen's supposed "madness" was perhaps the most serious charge. A shared Americanized English was at times, and in the absence of shared enemies, all Americans had to tie themselves together, and thus they desperately needed, and unwaveringly valued, communication.<sup>49</sup> As mad people jabbered nonsense, they threatened to destroy language itself. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of the greatest fears about insanity was babbling. Michel Foucault writes:

[T]he language of delirium can be answered only by an absence of language, for delirium is not a fragment of dialogue with reason, it is not language at all; it refers, in an ultimately silent awareness, only to transgression.<sup>50</sup>

The insane had to be removed from the public sphere because they demonstrated how fragile this sphere really was. Reason could easily be lost, conquered. And if public debate ceased to be rational, there was little hope for consensus or the nonviolent resolution of conflict between the various factions that dominated American democratic culture. Because Owen was seen as someone who violated the norms of public debate, he was denounced as a lunatic and a criminal.

Owen hoped to prompt a national debate about slavery, capitalism, oppression, marriage, gender, and the mental well-being of Americans. He told Americans that the founding cultural fiction of human equality, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence's timeless phrasing "all men are created equal," was a lie.<sup>51</sup> Workers, women, and slaves were exploited for the profit of others. To prevent the oppressed masses from rising up, they were duped by religion and promises of redemption in the afterlife. Christianity was nothing more than a sham designed to keep humans weak and in need of leadership. Because religion prevented humans from reaching their full potential, Owen advocated its banishment from the public sphere. Courageously, albeit pompously, he called on Americans to break free from their routines and question the many silent ways that power worked to shackle them. Instead of entering into a debate with Owen over mental independence, and instead of answering his charges about capitalism, religion, and gender oppression, America's newspapers attacked him as foreign, elite, and pretentious. By upbraiding him with harsh words, Americans did not have to take his claims seriously. Invective thus acted as a way of avoiding a public debate that many Americans did not want to have.

Americans in 1826 were not unconscious of the contradictions of their democratic culture. Brave reformers worked to abolish slavery, to improve the conditions of workers, and to put women on equal footing with men. However, change was slow, and Americans were anxious for the future—which was apparent in the literature of the period.<sup>52</sup> By displacing their anxieties over slavery, disunity, and capitalism onto

Owen, Americans avoided an undesirable conversation and, simultaneously, expiated the guilt they felt about oppression and inequality. From this perspective, invective can be seen as an example of what Kenneth Burke calls a “curative” rhetoric.<sup>53</sup> To blame is to displace anxiety and guilt onto the other who, when sacrificed, relieves the pain of anxiety and the weight of guilt—if only for a time. This is one of the most acute problems with invective in a democracy, for while it is a way of negotiating anxieties, nevertheless it has the tendency to escalate from scapegoating into violence and sacrifice, hence undermining the democratic emphasis on resolving conflict with words instead of blows or guns.

Of course, while the responses to Owen were symbolically violent, no physical violence was perpetrated against him. While many later targets of invective, including William Lloyd Garrison and Elijah Lovejoy, would also be the targets of reactionary mob violence, Owen was left alone. This does not mean that he was not sacrificed—for physical violence is not the only form of violence in democratic culture. In his *American Dictionary*, Webster argued that invective is how enemies hurt one another. Invective therefore plays a vital role in democratic discourse, where competing positions battle for legitimacy in the public sphere. Democratic power is voiced, and consequently those who cannot talk in a democracy are, in a manner of speaking, dead. Americans sacrificed Owen by ruining his credibility and taking away his rostrum. To ease their anxieties, Americans killed an enemy with their words.

### The Ambivalence of Invective

Building on Burke’s insights about the perpetual cycle of temptation, guilt, sacrifice, and redemption at the heart of symbolic life, I have argued that anti-Owen invective can be seen as a type of “curative” rhetoric. However, using this episode as a guide, I think we might conclude that invective is fundamentally ambivalent. In fact, to blame Owen was a deeply compromising act that perpetuated, rather than relieved, anxiety. It would have made little sense to attribute so much space in America’s papers to the Declaration of Mental Independence if Owen was not, at least on some rudimentary level, a threat. To get worked up enough about Owen’s position to attack him was, inadvertently, to suggest that he was a potential danger to the polity and hence to admit the weakness of the demos. To blame was to create boundaries, but it was also to suggest that those boundaries were weak. To blame was to defuse the persuasiveness of an enemy while acknowledging that he was persuasive. To blame was to constitute individual identities that were fragile and always already in danger of corruption.

“Once in an age, perhaps, a bold blasphemer, like the deistical author of the age of reason, is suffered to spread his odious opinions, and to deride even the sacred volume,” the *Christian Watchman* warned its readers on August 18, 1826. It continued:

His worthless lampoons and obscene sarcasms circulate for a while, and seem as if they would overturn the foundations of all morality; they appear to extend

desolation and destruction amongst all, who have no fixed rule of action; and the young, especially, are in the most imminent danger.

Although this paper did not name this “bold blasphemer” for several lines, it is soon revealed that “an adventurer, a foreigner, a certain ROBERT OWEN” was the guilty party—equivalent in his danger to Christian society to Thomas Paine, “the deistical author of the age of reason.” Aghast at Owen’s declaration, it warned its readers that he threatened “to break asunder all the ties, which bind us in friendly intercourse.” The *Christian Watchman* was afraid that Owen would destroy the fragile bonds of communication that united Americans with his crazy ideas, his enthusiasm, and his mad talk. Papers like it made Owen out to be a danger to Americans and Christians everywhere, especially young Americans, who were gullible like the demos itself.

However, to make Owen into too serious a threat was to say too much—namely, that the nation was weak and its people corruptible, which was precisely the fear that haunted prominent Americans in the early Republic, and that continues to haunt them today. “The United States is a violent nation motivated by a tragic sense of fear,” Robert L. Ivie writes, “a country tyrannized by an exaggerated image of the danger endemic to domestic politics and international affairs.”<sup>54</sup> If democracies were inherently instable (as the founders of the United States believed), and the people were so weak that they were susceptible to the persuasive appeals of orators like Owen, there was little that could be done to protect them from “invasion,” which was the term the *Christian Watchman* used to describe the foreigner Owen’s doctrines.

Who was the real enemy in 1826? Was it Robert Owen? Or was it democracy itself? Ivie has persuasively argued that the leaders of the United States, from the founding period forward, have been tormented by fear of democratic instability. Imperialism, war, and the rhetorics associated with such violence are defense mechanisms for coping with domestic anxiety. This is a provocative observation: Americans go to war in order to contain democracy at home. The rhetorics of blame in 1826 and the formative years of American democracy were similarly invested in constraining democratic instability. Americans feared what Owen had to say, but even more than that, they feared that he was a demagogue who would capitalize on democratic instability, ideological division, and the lack of a clear national mission to destroy them all. So, Americans denounced the enemy in order to hurt him, but also to construct a more desirable identity for themselves. Just as war rhetoric is at bottom two-faced, so, too, is invective: a discourse practice that simultaneously addresses and attempts to transform dual audiences, us and them. Invective threatens and attempts to hurt *them*; it addresses and attempts to constitute *us*.

As a form of constitutive rhetoric, invective is deeply flawed. At bottom, the problem with invective in democratic culture is its intimacy. Invective is a deeply intimate rhetorical form. Although we can shoot rhetorical volleys from a great distance, to really hurt our enemies, we must know them; we must hit them point blank where it hurts the most. And to do this, to really wound our enemies, is to invite a proportional response from the target that elevates conflict toward calamity. Some respond to invective as Jefferson did when he shrugged off the character attacks

of William Cunningham Jr. and Timothy Pickering in the early 1820s. However, not everyone responds to invective calmly. Others respond to insults as the punctilious Henry Clay did: with a challenge to duel.<sup>55</sup> Although dueling was a generally accepted part of southern culture in the early Republic, the last thing Americans needed was the escalation of conflicts from words to blows. As invective was met by invective, reprisal by reprisal, democracy threatened to spin out of control. When Americans denounced their enemies in order to ease democratic anxiety, ultimately they fueled those very anxieties by pushing democracy toward violence.

The Owen episode suggests that invective is useful to democratic culture as a tool for constituting identities and managing anxieties. I believe this remains true today, when we are still anxious about who we are, about division, about the future, and about democratic instability. In *The Good Citizen*, a history of democracy in the United States, Michael Schudson cautions against nostalgia for the past. He writes, “We can gain inspiration from the past, but we cannot import it.”<sup>56</sup> Of course, Schudson is correct; George Santayana’s admonition that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it is naïve and does not recognize the dynamism and unintended consequences of historical development. However, more than simply drawing inspiration from it, we can import the rhetorics of the past and adapt them to fit present exigencies. While Schudson emphasizes the profound temporal gulf separating the present from the early Republic, nevertheless, the 1820s laid down certain rhetorical traditions that continue to persist. Blaming the other side was then, and continues to be today, one of the core rituals of American politics. To underscore the centrality of invective to American democratic culture, I conclude with a contemporary parallel to the Owen controversy—moving from July 4, 1826, the Jubilee of American independence, to another moment characterized by invective and the politics of attack: the 2008 presidential election.

Americans in the 1820s worried about division; today, we accept partisan division as a fact of life. However, some things haven’t changed. Americans are still attacking others for being pretentious, elite, and out of touch. Today, however, it is not newspaper writers attacking a foreign philanthropist but political parties attacking each other.<sup>57</sup> Of course, both Democrats and Republicans are guilty of slinging mud, and both parties have taken advantage of the purported divide between Red States and Blue States to win votes. However, what is most interesting here is how Republicans have employed many of the same rhetorical strategies used to castigate Robert Owen’s otherness in order to do the same to Democratic politicians, including John Kerry in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2008. Republican rhetoric, heard every day on talk radio and practiced to perfection during President George W. Bush’s 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns, blames liberals for America’s problems, stokes resentment of snobby elites, and cultivates a kind of populist disdain for privilege.<sup>58</sup> Having proved successful in the past, such rhetoric continued to be central in the presidential campaign of 2008, and especially so in the rhetoric of Governor Sarah Palin.

When she was chosen as a vice presidential candidate, Palin appeared to be someone who could rally President Bush’s lukewarm “base,” the evangelical Right, to Senator John McCain’s side. The goal was to position Palin as a walking, talking

synecdoche for “Real America,” and, through the principle of dialectical opposition, to make Barack Obama seem effete and un-American. When Obama stood next to an American flag, it would be perspective by incongruity. Having positioned Palin as an everyday American, “Mrs. Joe Six Pack,” the McCain campaign proceeded to attack Obama as strange, foreign, and dangerous.

After introducing herself and relating her biography, Palin spent the majority of her Republican National Convention Address of September 3, 2008, attacking Obama as a mere community organizer—painting him as a mere rhetorician, a charlatan interested more in advancing his career than in helping Americans.<sup>59</sup> She amplified her attacks on the campaign trail, telling crowds that Obama is “not one of us.” In Colorado, she accused Obama of “palling around with terrorists.” “This is not a man who sees America as you see it, and how I see America,” she announced.<sup>60</sup> The response to such comments was predictably toxic. Followers chanted, “Barack Hussein Obama”; someone held a sign (also a popular bumper sticker) that said, “[T]he only difference between Obama and Osama is a little bs.” Crowds yelled, “Kill him,” “Traitor,” “Terrorist,” “Treason,” “Liar,” and “Off with his head.” The *New York Times* complained that the campaign’s tone veered “into the dark territory of race-baiting and xenophobia.”<sup>61</sup> The Secret Service was called in to investigate.

In conservative attacks on liberals and Democrats, we can again see the characteristics of invective I have identified: it is constitutive, curative, and ambivalent. During a deeply revealing moment in the 2008 election, North Carolina Representative Robin Hayes conjured up images of atheists and terrorists, telling supporters that liberals “hate real Americans that work and accomplish and achieve and believe in God.”<sup>62</sup> Here, Hayes attempted to constitute a “Real America” by bashing liberals as alien, just as newspaper writers bashed Owen as foreign in 1826 to constitute a “civilized” and “Christian” national identity. While these are strong words, I read them simultaneously as an expression of weakness. Like Palin’s use of invective, this example is deeply revealing of many of the same anxieties disclosed in anti-Owen invective: fear of atheists, fear that the demos is weak and irrational, fear of corruption, and fear that the nation has gone off track. Perhaps the anxieties Americans feel, like their rhetorical strategies for coping with them, are somehow endemic to democratic culture itself and are, therefore, persistent across historical moments.

While Republicans were (and continue to be) interested in constituting a Real America by assailing and ultimately defeating Obama, such attacks made (and continue to make) Real America out to be weak and corruptible, a pawn of the evil designs of Blue States. Moreover, such invective has perpetuated democratic anxiety by bringing out the worst in crowd behavior, turning the people into a chanting, raving, angry mass, rather than a civil and deliberate public. Lawrence W. Rosenfeld has compared the desired outcome of epideictic rhetoric to a religious experience that creates new subjectivities in the space shared by speaker and audience.<sup>63</sup> It could very well be that the rhetorics of blame are constitutive of the community itself—that an imagined community is made real, if only for a moment, by the collective act of denunciation. One goal of invective is a momentary feeling of unity found in the joy

of collective denunciation—seen in the Palin crowds that shouted murderous phrases. Invective, therefore, has the potential to undermine the democratic emphasis on controlled conflict by making that conflict personal and vicious.

As invective works to inflame angry emotions and shut down substantive debate about policy issues, it is inclined towards an anti-democratic sensibility. At the same time, however, America's history suggests that invective is deeply democratic, for invective is a useful rhetorical technique for managing anxieties, constituting identities, and hurting one's enemies—even if it tends to perpetuate anxieties about boundaries, identities, and enemies rather than curing them or addressing their more systemic causes. The most useful feature of invective might well be what it allows rhetors to avoid. Invective encourages forms of individuation that make it difficult for people to focus their rage on systemic ills—such as the failure of speculative capitalism in the early nineteenth century or the “structural evils” of privatization, neo-liberalism, and finance capitalism that plague citizens today.<sup>64</sup>

The early years of America's democratic public culture suggest that whatever it might be, and whatever fictions it might cling to, democracy as manifest discursively in epideictic performance is not a model of perfect harmony but instead an engine of vicious personal attacks on outsiders in order to nurture communal definition and stability. Therefore, I believe that rhetorical scholars should exhibit a renewed commitment to the study of the rhetorics of blame and other forms of the politics of attack. Moreover, what Condit calls the “dark side” of epideictic deserves sustained attention as central to democratic culture, for as much as democracy is about consensus and harmony, it is also about division and hierarchy.<sup>65</sup> Invective has been central to democratic culture from the beginning.

## Notes

- [1] Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 3.
- [2] Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers 1815–1860* (1978; New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 65.
- [3] Robert Owen, “Oration, Containing a Declaration of Mental Independence, Delivered in the Public Hall, at New-Harmony, Ind., by Robert Owen, at the Celebration of the Fourth of July, 1826,” *New Harmony Gazette*, July 12, 1826.
- [4] Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 179.
- [5] Reprinted in “Robert Owen's Community,” *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* (Portsmouth, NH), July 14, 1827.
- [6] Here, I refer to Franklin, “To the Editors,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), September 20, 1826; Candidus, “Mr. Owen and New-Harmony,” *New York Telescope*, September 30, 1826; and *Daily National Intelligencer*, August 12, 1826.
- [7] Andrew Burstein, *America's Jubilee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 6; for a sweeping history of this period, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- [8] Philip S. Foner, ed., *We, the Other People: Alternative Declarations of Independence by Labor Groups, Farmers, Woman's Rights Advocates, Socialists, and Blacks, 1829–1975* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

- [9] See Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 403–78, for divorce laws in the United States during the 1820s; for background on how divorce was perceived in the United States in the early Republic, see Lynne Carol Halem, *Divorce Reform: Changing Legal and Social Perspectives* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 9–26.
- [10] *National Gazette and Literary Register* (Philadelphia), August 4, 1826; *Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), August 11, 1826; *Richmond Inquirer* (Richmond, VA), August 11, 1826; *Pittsfield Sun* (Pittsfield, MA), August 17, 1826; *New-Hampshire Sentinel* (Keene, NH), August 18, 1826; *Farmers' Cabinet* (Amherst, MA), August 17, 1826; *Saturday Evening Post* (Philadelphia), August 19, 1826; *Watch-Tower* (Cooperstown, NY), August 21, 1826; *American Mercury* (Hartford, CT), August 22, 1826; *Vermont Gazette* (Bennington, VT), August 22, 1826.
- [11] Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 147. On the newspaper politics of the early Republic, see Jeffrey L. Pasley, *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); Eric Burns, *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006).
- [12] On June 8, 1732, the *American Weekly Mercury* of Philadelphia rejected a submission on the grounds that it was "too full of personal Invectives to claim with any decency a Place in our *News-Paper*." Thus began a long history in the American press of censoring nastiness as the first generations of Americans went after invective with the same fury with which they deployed it. On February 29, 1748, the editor of the *New-York Gazette* claimed that because "[t]he Press is look'd on as the grand Bulwark of *Liberty, Light, Truth, and Religion* . . . [i]t has indeed been much against my Will to print any Thing that favour'd of Forgery, Invective or Partyism; but being too dependent, can't always avoid it." Refusing to "patronize invectives," the editor of the *New-York Journal, and State Gazette* similarly turned back a submission on September 23, 1784. Attempting to delineate the boundaries of civilized conversation and set forth a standard for acceptable public argumentation, these editors invoked doctrines associated with the eighteenth-century "public sphere" as described by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. These papers positioned the press as a vehicle for "rational-critical" debate between equals outside of the immediate influence of government and not a platform for emotional appeals, character assassination, and abusive language. On the public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (1962; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); on America's newspapers in the early Republic, see Mel Laracey, "The Presidential Newspaper as an Engine of Early American Political Development: The Case of Thomas Jefferson and the Election of 1800," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 11 (2008): 7–46.
- [13] When American papers were not rejecting articles for their employment of invective, they were complaining about the politics of blaming in other periodicals. On November 13, 1797, the *Time Piece* of New York City attacked invective with a little jab of its own, asking, "When a printer is notorious for calumny, invective and abuse, may it not properly be said that his types have been filled with something more dirty than the contents of an hogstye?" The *Daily National Journal* of Washington, DC, complained on August 10, 1826, that a rival paper had "degenerated" its former "dignity and temperance, into violence and invective." This same paper derided the "system of personal invective and political proscription which the leaders and Editors of the Opposition party have so undeviatingly pursued" on December 8, 1827, noting that such rhetorical politics have "excited a general feeling of disgust, not only among those who differ from them in opinion, but even in that circle of their own friends in which reason and patriotism are yet allowed to remain." Invective was here positioned as the antithesis of reason and patriotism; no properly educated American, the *Daily National Journal* implied, would indulge in the base rhetorical politics of blame.

- [14] In 1826, America's newspapers stood on the precipice of a sensational revolution: the invention of the penny press and the daily reporting of everyday events. However, this invention of the modern newspaper—and the rise of an emphasis on objectivity—was still a few years off. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 12–60.
- [15] The role that the press played in the development of nationalism is emphasized in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London: Verso, 1991), 37–46.
- [16] James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 79.
- [17] Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 149–85.
- [18] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (1690; New York: Dover Publications, 1959), 2: 432.
- [19] In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault described the eighteenth-century transformation of medicine through professionalization, nosology, and the birth of the clinic, setting “the sick” against the healthy. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault described how the “enlightened” constructed insanity in a manner that set “the insane” against the civilized. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (1963; New York: Vintage, 1994); Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (1961; New York: Vintage Books, 1988).
- [20] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 226–29.
- [21] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). On the Second Great Awakening, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).
- [22] Russell L. Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America: Conversations with Our Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 92–154. On the campaigns, see Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 293–311, 493–507.
- [23] Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1990), 62–64.
- [24] Celeste Michelle Condit, “The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar,” *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 291.
- [25] Aristotle, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans. Lane Cooper (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1932), 1358b; Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Dublin: Whitestone, Colles, etc., 1783), 2: 224; Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (1959; South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 51.
- [26] John Quincy Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory, Delivered to the Classes of Senior and Junior Sophisters in Harvard University* (Cambridge: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1810), 1: 238.
- [27] The key work, here, is Anderson's *Imagined Communities*—but this point is also made and extended by other scholars. See, for example, Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (1988; London: Verso, 1991); Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (1990; London: Routledge, 2000); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Tom Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (London: Verso, 1997); and David A.

Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

- [28] Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 138.
- [29] See Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14–15, 39.
- [30] According to historian Merle Curti:

The typical oration began with a recital of American history in the colonial era and traced the hand of God at every point, emphasized the love of liberty of the early Americans, described the events leading up to the Revolution with considerable animus against the British, glorified the heroism of the struggle for independence, expressed reverence for the Revolutionary leaders, urged the importance of attacking existing problems in their spirit, took pride in the amazing material and social progress of the country, and expressed loyalty to the nation and faith in its future.

Merle Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty* (1946; New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 140. For discussions of the rhetorical strategies common to early American Fourth of July Addresses, see Cedric Larson, “Patriotism in Carmine: 162 Years of July 4th Oratory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 26 (1940): 12–25.

- [31] On the rhetoric of mission, see Ronald F. Reid, “New England Rhetoric and the French War, 1754–1760: A Case Study in the Rhetoric of War,” *Communication Monographs* 43 (1976): 281–82; for historical explorations of America’s guiding sense of mission, see Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984); and Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- [32] Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 225.
- [33] Daniel Webster, *A Discourse in Commemoration of the Lives and Services of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Delivered in Faneuil Hall, Boston, August 2, 1826* (Boston, MA: Cummings, Hilliard and Co., 1826), 10.
- [34] Webster, *Discourse in Commemoration*, 7.
- [35] Webster, *Discourse in Commemoration*, 62.
- [36] Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776–1787* (1969; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 46–90.
- [37] Consensus is a primary tension in the republican style: see Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 114–15.
- [38] “First Inaugural Address,” in Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, Library of America Series (New York: Literary Classics of the U.S., 1984), 493. The strategy of appealing to timeless, unobjectionable principles is what Stephen Howard Browne calls “the Jeffersonian style”:

[I]n appealing to that which all would agree, the speaker appealed to that which was now beyond debate and dissent, to the “creed of our political faith.” Jefferson sought accordingly to speak to a citizenry for whom these verities were no longer at issue, no longer subject to dispute. His was an argument that presumed argument no longer necessary.

This Jeffersonian style was just one manifestation of the republican style in the United States—a style that characterized the politics of the period that historians label the Era of Good Feelings. Stephen Howard Browne, *Jefferson’s Call for Nationhood: The First Inaugural Address* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 90, 110.

- [39] Caleb Cushing, *A Eulogy on John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Pronounced in Newburyport, July 15, 1826, at the Request of the Municipal Authorities of the Town* (Cambridge: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1826), 46–47. Similarly, William Alexander Duer advised Americans to take the following lesson from the founders' lives:

Should the institutions of our country be assailed by intestine violence, or their existence threatened by local jealousies and geographical distinctions, let us revert to the national principles and catholic feelings of the two great chieftains of the North and South.

William Alexander Duer, *An Eulogy on John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson; Pronounced by Request of the Common Council of Albany, at the Public Commemoration of their Deaths, Held in that City, on Monday the 31st of July, 1826* (Albany: Office of the National Observer, 1826), 19.

- [40] Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (1984; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 94.
- [41] See Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000), 211–47; Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); and Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- [42] On American attitudes toward the French Revolution, see Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 303–73.
- [43] John Adams to John Taylor, April 15, 1814, in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, ed. George W. Carey (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2000), 406.
- [44] See James Arnt Aune, "Tales of the Text: Originalism, Theism, and the History of the U.S. Constitution," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1 (1998): 267; Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 237. On fears of rhetorical abuse and stupid people in the early Republic more generally, see Joseph M. Bessette, *The Mild Voice of Reason: Deliberative Democracy and American National Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- [45] James Madison, "Federalist No. 58," in *The Federalist*, intro. and notes by Robert A. Ferguson (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2006), 326.
- [46] On the continued democratic fears of the early Republic, see Kimberly K. Smith, *The Dominion of Voice: Riot, Reason, and Romance in Antebellum Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 118–61; Altschuler and Blumin, *Rude Republic*.
- [47] Hanson, *Democratic Imagination in America*, 122.
- [48] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (1835; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 244–46.
- [49] Kenneth Cmiel, "'A Broad Fluid Language of Democracy': Discovering the American Idiom," *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 913–36; and on the value placed on communication, see James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1–9.
- [50] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 262.
- [51] I take the idea of "cultural fictions" from Stephen John Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).
- [52] This anxiety is prevalent in the fiction of the period—see David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

- [53] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 202.
- [54] Robert L. Ivie, *Democracy and America's War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 10.
- [55] On the Cunningham and Pickering controversies, as well as Clay's penchant for dueling, see Burstein, *America's Jubilee*, 255–57, 181–204. Dueling was, of course, part of the larger culture of honor. See Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 159–98.
- [56] Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.
- [57] This is, we should note, just the latest moment in the politics of negative self-definition—see David Green, *The Language of Politics in America: Shaping Political Consciousness from McKinley to Reagan* (1987; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 249–70.
- [58] On the rhetorical strategies of talk radio, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For helpful discussions of contemporary Republican rhetorical strategies, see Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); Geoffrey Nunberg, *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left-Wing Freak Show* (2006; New York: PublicAffairs, 2007).
- [59] Sarah Palin, “Republican Vice Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speech” (Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN, September 3, 2008), <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2008/sarahpalin2008rc.htm/>.
- [60] Sarah Palin quoted in Michael Cooper, “Palin, On Offensive, Attacks Obama's Ties to '60s Radical,” *New York Times*, October 4, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/us/politics/05palin.html?scp=2&sq=palling%20around%20with%20terrorists&st=cse/>.
- [61] Editorial, “Politics of Attack,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/08/opinion/08wed1.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin/](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/08/opinion/08wed1.html?_r=1&oref=slogin/).
- [62] Robin Hayes, quoted in Lyndsey Layton, “Palin Apologizes for ‘Real America’ Comments,” *Washington Post*, October 22, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/21/AR2008102102449.html/>.
- [63] Lawrence W. Rosenfeld, “The Practical Celebration of Epideictic,” in *Rhetoric in Transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric*, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), 131–55.
- [64] The idea of “structural evil” is developed in Robert Hariman, “Speaking of Evil,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 515.
- [65] Condit, “Functions of Epideictic,” 289.