With what execrations should the statesman be loaded who, permit-
ting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other,
transforms those into despot and these into enemies.

– Thomas Jefferson, 1782

I

It might not be immediately apparent that Hobbes’s *Leviathan* has some-
thing to contribute to our understanding of the panic generated by, and
the political philosophy implicit in, African American slave rebellion. But
by advancing this claim, I also want to suggest that attention to the his-
tory and literature of anti-slavery will help us to come to a better under-
standing of Hobbes’s theory of sovereignty. In particular, slave rebellion
clarifies Hobbes’s originality in relation to what is sometimes called the
de facto theory of sovereignty that was in circulation in the seventeenth
century. In a valuable recent study of Hobbes’s political philosophy, Kinch
Hoekstra identifies three broad scholarly approaches to Hobbes’s model of
sovereignty. According to Hoekstra, Hobbes’s various readers have painted
him as a “Royalist (because he asserts “that the king has sovereign author-
ity even while a usurper holds sway”); a “de facto” theorist of sovereignty
(“As he maintains that the possession of power gives rise to authority and
obligation”); and a “consent theorist” (because he claims that obligation
and authority depend on the agreement of the ruled”). The three theories,
Hoekstra adds, “appear to be inconsistent” (34). But as I hope to show,
and as Hoekstra also suggests, the inconsistency actually marks a radical
departure. “Hobbes attempts to undermine the Aristotelian bifurcations
between tyrant and king and between despotic and political rule,” writes
Hoekstra, just as he “strives to disable the distinction between *de facto* and
*de jure* rule that underlies these [oppositions]” (69). Once again, a vilified
Hobbesian absolutism works to conceal a crucial deconstruction.
Hobbes entered into the urgent contemporary debate over the implications of usurped power by refusing to completely oppose authority seized by force to authority legitimated by consent. In Chapter 20 of *Leviathan*, as we have seen, Hobbes retains a crucial place for the act of “submission” to the victor, and hence, in his “Review and Conclusion,” he defines “conquest” as “the Acquiring of the Right of Sovereignty by Victory. Which Right, is acquired, in the peoples Submission, by which they contract with the Victor, promising Obedience, for Life and Liberty” (486). The commingling of right and contract with victory and submission in such passages, scandalizes a liberal model of political legitimacy, but it is no less disturbing to defenders of Royalist prerogative. “Taken on its own,” writes Hoekstra, “this insistence on founding *de jure* authority on the consent of the people is more like the view of Milton than of Ascham, or Nedham, or a traditional royalist” (59). “Hobbes,” Hoekstra remarks, “forges a closer link between obedience and right” than any of his contemporaries, and he can be heard repeating this unorthodox link in the final chapter of *Leviathan*, when he suggests that his design has been “to set before men’s eyes the mutuall Relation between Protection and Obedience” (491). “For Hobbes,” writes Hoekstra, “political obligation and authority depend on popular consent, the traditional requirement of the revolutionary” (59). But, as Quentin Skinner has also recently acknowledged, Hobbes’s scene of founding consent, unlike that described by the dominant Republican tradition, could take place at the tip of a sword and could involve a life or death decision. The defeated individual who decides not to concede his or her life also exercises consent, Hobbes argues, and insofar as it founds a new political order, that consent is no less just or legitimate (although it may be more precarious) than the kind of consent idealized by the Republican tradition. “If we are to be justly abridged of our natural liberty,” writes Skinner, whether by a communally generated representative power or a victorious invader, “such an abridgment can take place only with our own consent; otherwise we shall be reduced to the condition not of a subject but a slave” (200). The effect of this reinterpretation is to open up the category of consent to an externality – a supplementary force – that what Skinner calls “Republican liberty” strenuously sought to exclude. “‘The vote of the people is the voice of God,’” said Edward Gee in 1649, articulating a familiar Presbyterian claim; and, as such, it founded a political community untainted by “‘injurious and forcible entrance’” (qtd. in Skinner, 199). For Hobbes, however, such formulations not only disavowed (shamefully) the revolutionary violence that brought down Charles I; they also had the peculiar effect of removing the decision to live, the decision taken at the
point of a sword, from the realm of consent and thus from the realm of any kind of meaningful political decision. This peculiar state of suspended agency, as we shall see, has particular significance for the history and theory of anti-slavery in the United States.

Before we proceed, however, I want to pick up on two key terms in Skinner’s gloss of Hobbes’s theory of consent. “If we are to be justly abridged of our natural liberty,” writes Skinner, “such an abridgment can take place only with our own consent; otherwise we shall be reduced to the condition not of a subject but a slave” (200). For Skinner, Hobbesian consent, no matter how uniquely expansive it may be, must not be at odds with a scene of natural liberty “justly abridged.” But the status of this abridgement, with respect to justice, is a difficult, yet crucial aspect of Hobbesian theory. Hobbes holds open a place in the structure of his commonwealth not just for consent given in the face of a lethal threat but also for a violence that is undecidable with respect to justice. In the scene Skinner describes, it is not simply in order for justice to be done that the defeated must consent to the new order. The only alternative to consent in this scene is death: consent produces a new sovereign community and justice, so to speak, has nothing to do with it. The inclusion of a passage through the undecidability of this justice is crucial to Hobbes’s theory and marks his importance both for counter-liberal political praxis and for deconstructive political philosophy. This suspense of undecidability with respect to justice cannot be reduced or wished away for any community – which is to say, for any attempt to live together peacefully and, yes, justly. Hence, this undecidability also defines Hobbesian sovereignty as a constitutive supplementarity. For Hobbes, the scene of consent given at the tip of a sword, far from constituting a nullified or enslaved consent, actually tells us something (albeit in hyperbolic form) about the supplementary structure of all consent.6

Skinner’s remarks also make an important reference to slavery as the precise name for a condition in which consent plays no part. Republican or liberal revolutionary discourse, as we know, privileges the figure of the subject reduced to slavery by one or another embodiment of monarchical tyranny.7 Central to this rhetoric is the claim that decisions made at the point of a sword (and, pre-eminently, decisions over whether or not to remain alive or accept death at the hands of another) are not really decisions at all: such scenes are already, for the liberal revolutionary, scenes of enslavement. But from the eighteenth century on, as we know all too well, the violent contradiction between republican cries of “slavery!” and the proliferating institution of African enslavement generated very little anxiety on the part of an expanding economy ever more dependent on the
free and stolen labour of others. And while most condemnations of this contradiction took (and continue to take) the form of a shaming gaze on the hypocritical white revolutionary, a Hobbesian perspective reminds us to look again at the enslaved and ask whether the liberal theory of freedom doesn’t also (and perhaps crucially) deprive slaves of a very particular form of political power. Determined to preserve founding consent from any interfering externality (proceeding as if, Hobbes would have said, an object could move itself by itself), and committed, above all, to the fantasy that its own sovereign authority was uncontaminated by violence, Republican liberty paradoxically abandoned the desire to live or die to a state of political limbo (the choice that is not really a choice) and thereby confined the slave to a “state of nature” condition in which his or her revolutionary will was made to coincide with a conceptual monstrosity. In other words, the refusal to recognize consent taking place upon pain of death marks the appearance of a political class that is convinced it has reached the end of history and realized the perfect alignment of might and right: “The vote of the people is the voice of God.”

In *Les Six livres de la République* (1576), one of the most influential treatises on sovereignty, Jean Bodin suggested that a sovereign who has come to power by way of violence or usurpation would be well advised to kill those who had plotted against the old sovereign and facilitated his usurpation. “It is an even worse mistake,” writes Bodin, “to give rewards to those who killed a tyrant and thereby smoothed the successors’ path to sovereignty. For the lives of the successors will never be secure unless they punish the assassins as Emperor Severus very wisely did in putting to death all those who had a part in the murder of Emperor Pertinax” (124). Machiavelli comes close to such a position, too, when he says that a new prince might be well advised to distrust, if not simply do away with, those who helped him to oust the old prince: “it is much more easy for [the prince] to win to himself as friends those men who used to be content under the previous state than those who, because they were not content with it, became his friends and favored him in occupying it” (107). Bodinian and Machiavellian princes thus anticipate the liberal democratic state that, as Walter Benjamin suggested (in “Critique of Violence”), relates to violence not as that which it must work to reduce but as that which it constantly seeks to monopolize. The transition from one sovereign regime to another (via revolutionary or treasonous violence) must itself be erased or concealed in the Bodinian polity, and this imperative helps to explain why Bodin (anticipating English defenders of the divine right of kings) insists that the coronation ceremony itself does not confer sovereignty;
there must be no caesura in sovereignty: “For it is beyond doubt that
the king never dies, as they say, and that as soon as one is deceased the
nearest male of his stock is seized of the kingdom and in possession thereof
before he is crowned. It is not passed by right of succession from the
father but rather in virtue of the kingdom’s law” (44). Bodin’s theory of
sovereignty thus feeds into the Elizabethan conception of the king’s two
bodies insofar as it proposes a sovereignty that survives any and every act
of revolution or regicide. Bodin and Machiavelli’s princes augment their
power by literally burying the relationship between their new order and
the violence of founding.

By insisting on consent purified of any relation to external force (epito-
mized in the decision to exchange obedience for survival), liberal political
orthodoxy inherits the classical monarchic sovereign’s desire to monopo-
lize violence (and the U.S. Constitution’s invocation of a power to suspend
habeas corpus in the name of public safety, as we have seen, exemplifies
this gesture). The consistent reliance on one or another state of emergency
throughout the history of what we like to think of as our democratic
modernity, as Giorgio Agamben has effectively demonstrated, records a
Bodinian or Machiavellian sense that sovereign power has to protect itself
not only from its own domestic and international enemies, but also from its
own aporetic origins – from its constitutive and thus ongoing relationship
to the undecidable and supplementary violence of Hobbesian sovereignty.
Hobbesian sovereignty, to put this another way, refuses to immunize any
state from the revolutionary violence that marks its beginning and inscribes
the promise or chance of democracy in its future.

II

In August 1861, T. W. Higginson, Unitarian minister, abolitionist, literary
editor, and colonel of the First South Carolina Volunteers (the first black
regiment in the Union army), published an essay in the Atlantic Monthly on
“Nat Turner’s Insurrection.” His account documents the “terrible work”
of Turner and his men (“what agonies of terror must have taken place
within, shared alike by innocent and by guilty!” [251]), but it is unflinching
in its defense:

These negroes had been systematically brutalized from childhood; they had
been allowed no legalized or permanent marriage; they had beheld around
them an habitual licentiousness, such as can scarcely exist except in a Slave
State; some of them had seen their wives and sisters habitually polluted by
the husbands and the brothers of those fair white women who were now
absolutely in their power. Yet I have looked through the Virginia newspapers of that time in vain for one charge of an indecent outrage on a woman against these triumphant and terrible slaves. Wherever they went, there went death, and that was all. (251–52)

Higginson’s account follows Turner as the insurrection falters and collapses and its leader is forced to hide out alone in the woods: “What a watch he must have kept that night! To that excited imagination, which had always seen spirits in the sky and blood-drops on the corn and hieroglyphic marks on the dry leaves, how full the lonely forest must have been of signs and solemn warnings!” (254). While Turner survives alone in the woods for six weeks, terror spreads through the south: “Indeed, the most formidable weapon in the hands of slave insurgents is always this blind panic they create, and the wild exaggerations which follow. The worst being possible, every one takes the worst for granted” (255).

Higginson includes, in his essay on Nat Turner, what he calls a “touching story” which he received from a Rev. M. B. Cox, a Liberian missionary, then in Virginia. It tells of a “faithful slave” who had protected his master from Turner’s band and who accompanied his master into the woods during the search for Turner that followed the insurrection:

When they had reached a retired place in the forest, the man handed his gun to his master, informing him that he could not live a slave any longer, and requesting him either to free him or shoot him on the spot. The master took the gun, in some trepidation, leveled it at the faithful negro, and shot him through the heart. (260)

This minimal story powerfully recalls those moments in Hobbes’s theoretical account of dominion and servitude when a subject is said to be faced with a stark choice. “Dominion acquired by Conquest, or Victory in war,” writes Hobbes, “is that which some writers call DESPOTICALL.... And this Dominion is then acquired to the Victor, when the Vanquished, to avoid the present stroke of death, covenanteth either in express words, or by other sufficient signes of the Will, that so long as his life, and the liberty of his body is allowed him, the Victor shall have the use thereof, at his pleasure” (141). As we have seen, Hobbes scandalized many of his readers by suggesting that this scenario might describe the beginning of a political state in which sovereign power is still in some kind of relation of dependence with consent. By “choosing” not to forfeit his life, the subject of this new dominion by victory does acquire sovereign representation, Hobbes suggests, even if it is only the minimal representation of his own desire.
not to die. This conquered subject may recognize few of his or her particular interests in the new sovereign order, but he will at least recognize a co-incidental commitment to his or her own (mere) survival: the sovereign power and I become indistinguishable only at the point of an investment in my continued existence. Needless to say, this is a precarious sovereign relationship, but until the moment at which either the sovereign power loses all interest in that subject’s survival or the moment at which that subject finds mere life insufficiently rewarding, that sovereign structure of consent and of minimal representational relationality persists.

In the story recounted by Higginson, such a moment of sovereign collapse seems to take place. The slave refuses, any longer, to choose even bare existence under slavery. For Higginson, this is not simply a moment of despair. The *Richmond Enquirer*, in a sickening display of Southern “chivalry,” relates the story of the “faithful” slave who is shot by the master he had protected and remarks: “If this be true... great will be the desert of these noble-minded Africans” (qtd. in Higginson, 260). But Higginson is indignant: “This ‘noble-minded African,’ at least, estimated his own desert at a high standard: he demanded freedom, – and obtained it” (260). Standing in the Virginia woods (perhaps only feet away from Turner’s hiding place?) this enslaved African reached a border crossing. He deposed the minimal sovereignty he recognized in his master’s power of life and death over him and forced the white man to effect his exit from this political space. What is striking about Higginson’s remark is that this Unitarian minister should so pointedly redirect attention away from the afterlife invoked by the *Enquirer* (“great will be the desert...”) to rewrite the African’s last act as a demand, here and now, made upon the white man – a demand that is it’s own reward. In the absence of the slave’s desire to live under the current regime, the white man loses power and becomes, himself, subject to an order he cannot refuse. Higginson refers to this event as a successful demand for freedom, and by doing so he breaks with that liberal political philosophy which, as we have seen, rejected the possibility that “death” could ever function as an option within a scene of consent. Freedom (or revolution), for the slave in the woods, coincides with the possibility of choosing one’s own dissolution, which is to say, registering an opening onto an absolute alterity as something other than disaster. The slave’s death, moreover, functions, in this instance not only as the sovereign supplement of a new state of freedom for the African; the white slavemaster is forced into this state, too. The sovereign “life” of the slave that had hitherto bound the white man and the African in their horrifically minimal community is dissolved by the black man and replaced by...
a sovereign power (the African’s death) that the white man has to submit to Liberalism’s refusal to identify freedom with any exposure to alterity (epitomized in the self’s willed self-annihilation) looks, from this perspective, like a discourse designed to invalidate in advance what must have been one of pro-slavery’s greatest fears: politically mobilized slave suicide (or what Officers in Guantanamo notoriously referred to as the “asymmetrical warfare” of the prisoners who were “found” hanging in their cells in June of 2006).10

The slave’s demand – kill me or set me free – makes a poignant political and philosophical point by suggesting that even the slaveholding white man requires, and is beholden to, a sovereign other. Even slavery, in other words, requires a point where the interests of the slaveholder and the slave coincide (the point, for example, of a shared desire for the “life” of the African). This shared desire, as long as it lasts, marks a precarious sovereign identification of “white” and “black” in nineteenth-century America that cannot be wholly identified with or appropriated by either.11 As the scene in the woods demonstrates with such pathos, this bare sovereignty exceeds them both. The sovereign “life” that here binds the enslaved and the white slaver in what we no doubt think of as an extremely frail and horrific “community” cannot be reduced either to a metaphysically or humanistically imagined full “humanity” or to a merely commodified objectification. The white man is forced to acknowledge the life of his slave either by freeing him (which is to say, effectively renouncing slavery) or by “killing” his “property.” If this scene can be read as something other than one of failed revolt, in other words, it is because the slave has put his “master” in a position from which the latter cannot but acknowledge and perform the shared “life” of the two – their cohabitation of a community bound together by the supplementary and “artificial” sovereignty of a “life” that cannot be reduced to either “mere” materiality or metaphysical ideal.

Higginson is able to identify this slave’s death as a successful act of resistance because he implicitly recognizes the idea that, in the case of slavery, choosing one’s own death marks the point at which an economic violence (the exploitation of the life and humanity of Africans) crosses paths with an ideological mantra (liberalism’s insistence on the purity of a self-contained and deathless consent). One way or another, this scene in the woods gathers its political and emotive force from its activation of a correspondence between slave revolt and the introduction of a sovereign supplement of consent such as is described by Hobbes in his *Leviathan*. If the black man’s death here carries such emotive weight, it is in part because we can read a certain sovereign power at work in this death. And while
the tendency, not surprisingly, would be to allegorize that sovereignty in religious terms (“great will be the desert of these noble-minded Africans”), Higginson insists on giving it a decidedly earthly and immediate reading (“he demanded freedom, and he got it”). From the perspective of liberal orthodoxy, this sovereignty names a bastard or monstrous form of, or interruption of, “freedom.” But, as such, this strange new sovereignty also anticipates another America, an America in which black and white lives would matter equally. The unnamed African man in the forest scene forces this new sovereign invention, this new (“black” and “white”) humanity, onto his “master.” But he does so via a relation to death that reminds us that the sovereignty at work here, as in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, can no longer simply be reduced to or equated with a living, intentional presence. Revolutionary (Hobbesian) sovereignty is necessarily “deterritorialized” and is ontologically as well as logically ambiguous. Hobbesian sovereignty binds persons only insofar as it resists being bound itself by the living.

The slave described in Higginson’s secondhand story, the slave who presents his master with an ultimatum, might be said to have made his intervention passively, and at the cost of his life; but his action also exercised a kind of force and the analysis that we have just brought to bear on his death accords well with numerous other scenes of slave suicide and with the analysis of “death as agency” in the work of Orlando Patterson, Paul Gilroy, Ronald Takaki, and others. Slaveowning culture, I have been arguing, is propped on and continuously dependent on an implicit disavowal of a model of sovereignty and community that was central to Hobbesian political philosophy. The slave in the woods, by forcing his master to free or kill him, implicitly acknowledges and deploys the structural place of a Hobbesian, rather than a contractually based, liberal sovereignty in the relationship between his master and himself. This sovereignty, I would contend, needs to be recognized as crucially distinct from, and indeed antagonistic toward, the model of sovereignty that orchestrates colonial, capitalist (and thoroughly racialized) exploitation. “Both the project of modernity,” writes Achille Mbembe, “and . . . the topos of sovereignty” can be traced back to a privileging of reason as the defining feature of “men and women . . . posited as full subjects capable of self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation” and to a politics conceived of as “a project of autonomy and the achieving of agreement among a collectivity through communication and recognition” (13). Mbembe’s vocabulary here is critical. The closed economy of “self-representation” that he argues, is central to a modernity from which we are still trying to escape is not a Hobbesian political economy. Precisely at the point at which it
interrupts a logic of “communication” and “agreement” via the language of representation (not “self-representation”) and arbitrariness, Hobbesian sovereignty challenges the privileging of “reason” and “autonomy” in the “modern” Western tradition. “The romance of sovereignty,” Mbembe continues, “rests on the belief that the subject is the master and the controlling author of his or her own meaning. Sovereignty is therefore defined as a twofold process of self-institution and self-limitation (fixing one’s own limits for oneself)” (14). But what Mbembe is describing and critiquing here is precisely that version of Lockean, liberal sovereignty that came to displace and wholly discredit the scandal of Hobbes.

Bringing his master into the woods, the slave recalled in Higginson’s story, also brings his master, so to speak, into the presence of a sovereignty that “modernity” (to use Mbembe’s word) had refused to recognize. Slavery had depended all along, and in numerous ways, on the shared “humanity” of whites and blacks; but it also depended on the disavowal of that sovereign identification. The fleeting reference to the master’s “trepidation” in the account Higginson relays hints at a sublime revelation that took place in the woods but that also took place all over the South, time and time again both before and after Nat Turner’s insurrection.14

III

It is a commonplace to assert that the hero of Frederick Douglass’s 1845 autobiography was both a writer and a fighter. But readers tend to prefer the idea that “literacy” showed Douglass the way to freedom: “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty,” writes Douglass with reference to Mr. Auld’s comments on teaching a slave to read”: “– to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement. . . . From that moment I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (Autobiographies, 37–38). But we needn’t forget Douglass’s other “achievement” – his two-hour battle with the man who “rented” him from his owner in 1834: “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave . . . it recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free” (65).

And although he did not ultimately join John Brown on his raid into Virginia, Douglass was far from being a pacifist. A slyly ambiguous force also creeps into his advocacy of black enlistment during the Civil War: “Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S.,” wrote Douglass, “let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on the earth or under the
Earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States” (“Address,” 536). Without a doubt, Douglass is eager to promote the image of black men pointing their guns at the enemies of the Union; but he was surely also reminding his black readers that achieving full citizenship meant accession to the force that is structured into all sovereign community. “A ballot is like a bullet,” wrote one of Douglass’s twentieth-century readers. “You don’t throw your ballots until you see a target, and if that target is not within your reach, keep your ballot in your pocket.”15

Douglass rejected the simple opposition between physical violence and written attempts to effect political change, because he had a powerful sense of rhetoric as force. The “scorching irony” he called for in his 1852 Independence Day speech was meant to introduce the smell of burning flesh into the room: “At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument is needed . . . it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake” (“The Meaning of July Fourth,” 196). It’s worth emphasizing this blurring of the distinction between rhetorical and what we might call “actual” violence in Douglass’s activism, because a simple opposition between the two is part of what lies behind a failure to gauge the political philosophy of slave insurrection.16 In his remarks on slavery in 1782, Thomas Jefferson fears God’s vengeance but consoles himself with the kind of hope to which a deist might be expected to turn:

The Almighty has no attributes which can take side with us in such a contest. But it is impossible to be temperate and to pursue this subject through the various considerations of policy, of morals, of history natural and civil. We must be contented to hope they will force their way into every one’s mind. (Notes, 84, emphasis mine)

Jefferson prays that antislavery sentiment will force its way into American minds before God or his lieutenants start drawing blood or taking prisoners. One way or another, he seems to suggest, white Americans had better prepare to be subjected to a force they cannot master; only “force” can save (white) America from itself. Nevertheless, his words also register a desire to distinguish the force of ideas from material violence according to a logic that slavery and antislavery agitation prompts us to question. What I have been trying to read as a profoundly anti-Hobbesian strain in the dominant discourse of liberal, Protestant modernity not only provoked and facilitated the phenomenon of Atlantic slavery; it did so, in part, by disavowing the relationship between sovereignty and force that
Hobbes so carefully attempted to understand. Jefferson’s implicit distinction between bloody revolution and ideational transformation gives us one version of this disavowal; the hysterical demonization of the figure of the violent African slave provides another. The Hobbesian insistence on noncontractual sovereignty as irreducible for any community is systematically and desperately repudiated by the very discourse that made chattel slavery possible; and the phantasmatic discourse of the monstrous black rebel participated in that repudiation in the nineteenth-century United States. Hobbesian sovereignty, as we have seen, has a necessarily excessive relationship to the community it represents and invents. That excess, which bears a crucial relationship to the mediatory force of language and to the irreducibility of a violence that is “neither just nor unjust,” opens up a space for politics and for the social. In the revolutionary or founding moment, such as that moment opened up by anti-slavery advocates in the nineteenth century, the conceptual site of this sovereign excess becomes barely distinguishable from the site of a specific historical demand. The “awe” associated with Hobbesian sovereignty becomes synchronized with the “terror” of revolutionary violence. One of the names that came to be most powerfully associated in American minds with a terrifying version of abolitionist force (and, thus, with a disavowed recognition of Hobbesian sovereignty) was that of Nat Turner.

Higginson’s design in his Atlantic Monthly essay on Turner is not simply to tell the story of the rebellion and its subjugation. He draws our attention, for example, to the “Richmond Enquirer” for September 6, 1831, in which “indignant descriptions of Russian atrocities in Lithuania, where the Poles were engaged in active insurrection,” are presented “amid profuse sympathy from Virginia.” These very accounts are printed, Higginson notes, in parallel columns with denunciations of Turner’s insurrection taken from an official document by General Eppes, in which Turner’s “acts of barbarity and cruelty...inhuman and not to be justified” are condemned as unworthy of any response short of immediate execution; any kind of legal proceeding whatsoever, the General complains, “dignifies the rebel and the assassin with the sanctity of martyrdom” (qtd. in Higginson, 256). Higginson then proceeds to document what he calls the true “Reign of Terror” that follows the rebellion. An “indiscriminate slaughter of the blacks who were suspected” could not be prevented, testified General Brodnax before the House of Delegates (257). Higginson is determined to shock his readers. “Men were tortured to death, burned, maimed, and subjected to nameless atrocities” (257). He then thanks Lydia Maria Child for passing on the direct testimony of Charity Bowery, an
“old colored woman” from New York, who had told her about life “at the time of the old Prophet Nat”:

The brightest and best was killed in Nat’s time. The whites always suspect such ones. They killed a great many at a place called Duplon. They killed Antonio, a slave of Mr. J. Stanley, whom they shot; then they pointed their guns at him, and told him to confess about the insurrection. He told ‘em he didn’t know anything about the insurrection. They shot several balls through him, quartered him, and put his head on a pole at the fork of the road leading to the court. (qtd. in Higginson, 258)

Accounts of the events in Virginia in 1831, whether given by pro- or anti-slavery historians, might be read to suggest that a prototypical Hobbesian “state of nature,” a condition of “war of all against all” had broken out and threatened to engulf the South. But this would be to misunderstand the full import of Hobbes’s conceptual device. In fact, the phenomenon of chattel slavery and the violence it effected and provoked demands a more nuanced understanding of the deconstructibility of Hobbes’s hypothetical opposition between the “state of nature” and the “commonwealth.” We ought to be hesitant, in other words, before declaring with certainty that we know the geographical or temporal borders of such a state. Recall Hobbes’s brief but crucial reference to the difference between a slave and a servant in Chapter 20 of Leviathan:

for by the word Servant (whether it be derived from Servire, to Serve, or from Servare, to Save . . .) is not meant a Captive, which is kept in prison, or bonds, till the owner of him that took him, or bought him, of one that did, shall consider what to do with him: (for such men, (commonly called Slaves,) have no obligation at all; but may break their bonds, or the prison; and kill, or carry away captive their Master, justly:) but one, that being taken, hath corporall liberty allowed him; and upon promise not to run away, nor to do violence to his Master, is trusted by him. (141)

Hobbes’s prose bears the traces of an uncharacteristic conceptual struggle here, because, I would suggest, he has only just begun to discern the contours of a historically novel and theoretically crucial politico-legal condition: modern chattel slavery. The “slave” is distinguished, for the purposes of Hobbes’s political philosophy, by this key fact: the slave can “kill, or carry away captive their Master, justly.” The vocabulary here is pointed. Hobbes uses the word “Master” under erasure (so to speak): he whom one can kill “justly” is not, by the terms of Hobbes’s own analysis, one whom one encounters in anything but a state of nature condition. A slave “Master,” in other words, is not a Hobbesian “sovereign.” But slavery,
as even Hobbes would have known, was a rapidly developing phenomenon within the sovereign command of major European powers. Backed by the full force of the law, slave masters in the Atlantic world often acted as proxy sovereigns. What is happening, then, when Hobbes, the so-called defender of statist absolutism, describes the killing of slave masters as an example of “just” violence? Slavery, we would have to conclude, names an institution of modernity that cannot be understood in terms of any strict distinction between the state of nature and the commonwealth. And slave violence, as just violence, inscribes revolution in Hobbes’s political philosophy precisely at the point where such a distinction deconstructs (the point at which it becomes difficult to distinguish “just” violence from that “state of nature” violence that is “neither just nor unjust”). To put this another way, *Leviathan* has no place within its schema for slavery except as the name for a state of permanent revolution – a state that activates the border between the state of nature and the commonwealth. The repudiation of Hobbesian political philosophy in the eighteenth century was generated, in part, by a more or less explicit registration of that philosophy’s incompatibility with the chattel slavery that became increasingly intertwined with capitalist expansion and liberal hegemony.\(^18\)

The abomination of slavery, from a Hobbesian perspective, coincides with the conceptual impossibility of the slave’s politico-legal subjectivity. The slave is not simply located outside the law or, indeed, on the outside of humanity. The slave finds herself both inside and outside a sovereign commonwealth, subject to a law before which she has no standing, and on both sides of a putative distinction between the human and the subhuman. Higginson captures a particularly grotesque instance of this duplicity in his essay on Nat Turner. Scrutinizing the newspaper accounts of Turner’s trial and execution, Higginson notes a reference to the hanging that became part of Turner lore: “Not a limb nor a muscle was observed to move” (266).\(^19\) But the newspaper account continues: “His body, after his death, was given over to the surgeons for dissection” (266).\(^20\) Higginson dwells on this detail and on the rumor that had circulated, after Turner’s death, to the effect that the prisoner had been “compelled to sell his body in advance, for purposes of dissection, in exchange for food” (266). Higginson is suspicious, and his voracious reading feeds his doubt:

> In the circular of the South Carolina Medical School for that very year I find this remarkable suggestion: – “Some advantages of a peculiar character are connected with this institution. No place in the United States affords
so great opportunities for the acquisition of medical knowledge, subjects being obtained among the colored population in sufficient number for every purpose, and proper dissections carried on without offending any individual.”

“What a convenience,” writes Higginson, with perfectly calibrated scorn, “to possess for scientific purposes a class of population sufficiently human to be dissected, but not human enough to be supposed to take offence at it!” (266). Turner would hardly have needed to go through “the formality of selling his body,” Higginson concludes, “to those who claimed its control at any rate” (266).

Higginson’s example signals a broader phenomenon whereby the very categorical absurdity – the undecidability – of the African in America serves a range of (white) socioeconomic desires. White America depended on the incoherent category of the “human and not-human,” which is also to say the category of the subject represented by and within a legal regime that simultaneously allows him no representational status whatsoever. But there are at least two ways of thinking about this dependence, both of which return us to a Hobbesian analysis. On one hand, we might think of the conceptual position into which the enslaved African in America is forced as a logical and legal absurdity and hence as a position of absolute subjection to the violent demands of an enemy. This would be the position from which, as Hobbes suggests, a corresponding violence of resistance would be “just.” At the same time, a Hobbesian analysis also allows us to appreciate the extent to which the institution of slavery operates to isolate and confine aspects of politico-legal subjectivity that liberal political philosophy needs to disavow. The possibility of the slave, a conceptually new form of human exploitation, has everything to do with the liberal capitalist disavowal and displacement of Hobbesian sovereignty. The “artificial” soul of Hobbesian sovereignty that signals the supplementary structure of citizenship in a representational democracy (a Hobbesian commonwealth) morphs, under the pressure of a liberal investment in the self-sufficient individual subject of consent, into the undecidable humanity of the African American. The black slave is like us and not like us; he or she is an “imitation human,” an “animal” masquerading as a full human being. And so long as this state of not-quite-humanity can be compared and subordinated to a phantasmatically full humanity, it can also be exploited and disenfranchised. But Hobbesian political philosophy suggests that if we have any hope at all, it is insofar as we recognize our common reliance on a supplementary, artificial
“life” that Hobbes calls sovereignty (and that I insist on calling democratic sovereignty). Hobbesian sovereignty thus appears as a threat to any ideology committed to associating quasi-humanity with a demarcated and degraded subset of the social; simultaneously, any such victimized group always carries within it the threat and promise of Hobbesian sovereign power. Which is also to say that democratic sovereignty, if there is any, always threatens to appear wherever something like a sub-, quasi- or artificial humanity juts into view. The “monstrous” violence, or even the irrational, “anti-social” behavior, of a de-humanized class of victims confronts liberal capitalist power as the ghost of Hobbesian sovereignty coming back from the future. The historically specific politico-legal invention called the “chattel slave” is not simply the scandal of an emergent democracy (“how could the same nation that pursued revolution in the name of certain inalienable rights also perpetuate the horror of slavery?” is the ritually repeated liberal question); it also identifies a living point of resistance to a particular form of counter-democratic hegemony. The resistance offered by the enslaved African American takes place at the site of, and, indeed, produces the possibility of, a Hobbesian alternative to liberal capitalist sovereignty.

From a Hobbesian perspective, Nat Turner (and all those resistant slaves whose histories he has come to represent) takes up arms against an aberrant political philosophy as well as against a socioeconomic injustice. But how are we to read those aspects of Turner’s violence that still seem most abhorrent (the execution of all white men, women, and children within his reach)? The execution of children, for example, seems to stretch sympathy and demands the invocation of categories of “justice” or “evil” that exceed the demands of any particular project of political emancipation or even vengeance. Turner’s insurrection, some might be tempted to conclude, like Brown’s Kansas activities, exceeded some kind of limit and included acts of “injustice” that could never be forgiven. Judgments of this kind can be heard, for example, in the now-repudiated scholarly approach to Melville’s story of slave revolt, “Benito Cereno,” in the mid-twentieth century. If Hobbes’s definition of a state of nature as a state in which not only law but even justice has no meaning, then surely the slaughtering of infants would announce a descent into such a state? And this is indeed, I would suggest, how we ought to understand such violence. The murdering of children is surely one of the signs, in the story of Turner’s insurrection, that sovereign order has collapsed. But a Hobbesian approach reminds us that sovereignty had already dissolved in the slaveholding United States. Kyle Baker makes this point, visually, in his graphic retelling of Turner’s rebellion: reminded that an infant still remains in the house they have just left behind, swathed in its owners’ blood, Turner hesitates and a
picture is superimposed on his head – a flashback of slavers ripping a child from its mother’s arms – before Turner heads back into the house. The “terror” associated with Turner’s rebellion, in other words, is the terror of a Hobbesian state of nature, but it is also the terror that had been nurtured, sustained, and exploited by a slaveowning culture determined to profit from the maintenance and control of that very terror. Slaveowning ideology emerged out of a simultaneous disavowal of the Hobbesian state of nature (with its insistence on the possibility of a deconstructed justice – violence that would be neither just nor unjust) and a vicious exploitation of that very possibility in the form of the enslaved African whose humanity could be suspended or activated at the discretion of his or her “owners” and who was subject to a violence that was taken to have no relationship to justice. Nat Turner was not revolting against a form of Hobbesian sovereignty: his was the revolt of a Hobbesian model of sovereignty against at least two hundred years of counter-Hobbesian terror. There is a distinct and crucial line of association that links the demonization of African American resistance with the revolutionary demonization of the monstrous monarch and the hegemonic dismissal of Hobbes and Hobbesianism as, in Bishop Warburton’s words, “the terror of the last age” upon whose “steel cap” “every young Churchman militant would needs try his arms” (qtd. in Fiering, 256).

What I am calling Hobbesian sovereignty and thereby distinguishing from the theory of sovereignty that underwrote the liberal, Protestant, slaveholding Anglo-American world can be registered in a wide range of scenarios and structures, from moments of revolutionary violence to features of textual innovation. Take, for example, David Kazanjian’s recent discussion of abolitionist rhetorical intervention and, in particular, the significance of appositive grammatical structures in certain key texts in the African American anticolonization tradition, including David Walker’s famous Appeal. Kazanjian credits Fred Moten with alerting us to what he calls a “black radical tradition” that functions in “apposition to enlightenment” and is “remixed, expanded, distilled and radically faithful to the forces its encounters carry, break and constitute” (136). This approach, which informs Kazanjian’s own emphasis on “articulus” in the introduction to The Colonizing Trick, begins with a definition:

An apposition is a grammatical construction in which two words, phrases or clauses referring to the same person or thing and holding the same syntactical relationship to the words around them are set next to one another, without a coordinating conjunction. . . . As a figure for an equivalence that is neither strictly factual . . . nor mechanistic . . . the appositive maintains a certain tension between the two terms it silently links as well as a potential
difference alongside the equivalence it implicitly asserts. . . . The appositive’s lack of a coordinating conjunction creates a potential break or rupture between the linked terms, an uncoordinated gap that makes room for the very remixing, expanding and distilling to which [Fred] Moten refers. (136–37)

Kazanjian goes on to provide effective examples from Walker (“our greatest earthly friends and benefactors – the English”; “our brethren, the Haytians”) that emphasize what we might elsewhere refer to as a performative linguistic potentiality. “In Walker’s passage,” explains Kazanjian, “the very meaning of the good work of the English and the kinship of the Haytians remains open, subject to modulation and resignification” (137). Kazanjian, via Moten, claims this inscribed and historically charged “openness” for a different kind of enlightenment, a black “appositional enlightenment” that, I would suggest, picks up on a disavowed Hobbesian theory of sovereignty and community precisely by reinscribing a noncontractual, supplementary, and performative sovereignty for a democracy to come. The “lack,” the “potential break or rupture” that Moten and Kazanjian recognize as central to this black resistance, is precisely the break with contract that belongs to the Hobbesian sovereign and that has repeatedly been repudiated as a kind of counterrational “arbitrariness” or “absolutist” force. The “open-ness” that is central to “appositional” abolitionist rhetoric cannot be reclaimed for a liberal economy of self-sufficient, reciprocating subjectivity. As Paul Gilroy has written of slavery’s “expressive cultures” of resistance, “subjectivity is here connected with rationality in a contingent manner. It may be grounded in communication, but this form of interaction is not an equivalent and idealized exchange between equal citizens who reciprocate their regard for each other in grammatically unified speech” (57).22

The illogic of the appositive’s open or empty coordinating conjunction thus opens a place for the future as the absolutely unwritten (and hence the absolutely dangerous) in the interventionist and transformative rhetoric of antislavery agitation. (However modern they may appear,” writes Gilroy, “the artistic practices of the slaves and their descendants are also grounded outside modernity” [57].) Kazanjian, referring to similar formulations in the abolitionist writing of Maria W. Stewart, puts it this way:

Walker and Stewart invoke silences that, like the silence between appositives, allow a certain play of meaning. This play of meaning breaks the calculable and codifiable character of formal equality. Walker’s and Stewart’s texts return again and again to this break, I suggest, because it offers a certain freedom to rearticulate the terms of the Enlightenment, a freedom to imagine an equality that does not calculate and codify difference. (137–38)23
Hobbesian political philosophy also complicates invocations of a universal “humanity” around which a new equality might be formed. It does so, not because it resists such community, but because it insists that any community must be thought in relation to a sovereignty that cannot simply be included within the circle it helps to define. Discussing the concept of equality in *Versions of Antihumanism*, Stanley Fish makes a forceful case, in his own distinctive terms, for this aspect of Hobbes’s originality:

Equality in [Hobbes’s] account is not, as it is in the Enlightenment tradition following Milton and Locke, a reason for denying one person the right to rule over another. Rather, it is the reverse. Instead of subscribing to the proposition that everyone is created equal and therefore absolute authority is against nature, Hobbes says that everyone is created equal and therefore absolute authority is absolutely necessary. (341)

But there is another way of registering this point, one that reads *Leviathan* less as a proto-pragmatist treatise (less as *Fish* avant la lettre) than as a deconstructive meditation on the political supplement. Equality, after all, is a form of relation: it is only insofar as we share something in common (equally) that we can relate to one another at all. Some language, no matter how minimal, must be shared for two people to enjoy anything that might be called equality. Equality, that is to say, is always structured around a supplementary point of shared externality. What Fish here calls “absolute authority” is also what Hobbes calls “sovereignty,” and democratic sovereignty can be thought of as the necessarily supplemental structure of egalitarian social belonging. The enlightenment tradition that Fish associates with Milton and Locke is not merely mistaken about the relation between equality and absolute authority; its determination to purge Hobbesian sovereignty from its political model exposes its refusal (no matter how disavowed) to embrace a radically democratic egalitarianism. Hobbesian absolutism, to reiterate, needs to be recognized as a powerful early articulation of the concept of a social surplus – a performative surplus of egalitarian, co-operative democracy over the constative will, desire and consent of any of the individuals who make up that political community.

The sovereign as supplement functions within Hobbesian thought as the means for inscribing a resistant historicity, or materiality, into any theory or model of political organization. But this enigmatic sovereignty cannot be entirely dissociated from the idea of community that it helps to effect. Hobbesian sovereignty is irreducibly enigmatic and indeterminable – it hesitates on the edge of our thought, disrupting categorization, blurring borders, and refusing temporal or spatial closure. To metaphorize
this sovereignty theologically (by, for example, identifying the sovereign position with God or God’s will) is, for all its sublimity, to attempt to domesticate and contain the force of this sovereign enigma. That which Jefferson refers to as “God” in his famous expression of a vengeful justice to come (“Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice can not sleep forever” [Notes, 83]) can thus be read as its own form of disavowal, a way of resisting, by translating, a concept of sovereignty that would belong to a community of black and white Americans (an America) to come. Jefferson tried to put the face of God – a familiar face, even at its most vengefully furious – on a sovereign force that had always been there to be read in the faces of those who had been enslaved. Higginson, for his part, read that sovereign force in the figure of Nat Turner:

Was it the fear of Nat Turner, and his deluded, drunken handful of followers, which produced such [terror]? . . . No, Sir, it was the suspicion eternally attached to the slave himself, – the suspicion that a Nat Turner might be in every family, – that the same bloody deed might be acted over at any time and in any place, – that the materials for it were spread through the land, and were always ready for a like explosion. Nothing but the force of this withering apprehension. (Higginson, 269)

Contemporary critics of Hobbes sometimes suggest, as we have seen, that his state of nature contributes to the discourse of dehumanization that helped justify colonial and slave exploitation. But in fact, Hobbes demonstrated no interest, in Leviathan, in dividing people up into degrees of humanity. Rather, his notion of artificial sovereignty advanced the difficult idea that what we might think of as a humanity we could live with (a non-self-destructive humanity) might depend upon and come into itself, so to speak, only via the sovereignty of the other. This way of philosophizing human being effects a subtle transformation in the way we think about the relationship between, for example, literacy and humanity in the discourse of antislavery. Access to literacy, from this Hobbesian perspective, would not simply name access to a mode of expressing a humanity that the black American already enjoyed. Rather, access to literacy threatened racist ideology because it exposed the irredudcibly supplementary relationship between “humanity” and the technics and techniques of writing, or representation. Literacy, which is also to say, language, plays a sovereign role (in the Hobbesian sense) with respect to what we call humanity. It does not reciprocate a being in the manner of a contractual relationship but introduces into the being it “represents” an arbitrariness (a chance and a chance for another future) without which the language, and hence the
speaker, would fail to function. This sovereign arbitrariness of language, so crucially emphasized in Saussure’s linguistics, is anticipated in the language of Hobbesian sovereignty as well as, we might hazard, in antislavery revolutionary invocations of God’s sovereign intervention on behalf of black emancipation. But this “prophetic” sovereignty is also registered, in pro-slavery imagination, as the paralyzing terror of slave rebellion. This is what it means to suggest that the enslaved African in America also served to contain the threatening idea of Hobbesian sovereignty and Hobbesian political philosophy. The slave is he or she whose humanity is repudiated as supplementary and who can therefore function as a border figure for any community that organizes itself around a counter-Hobbesian notion of a contractual equality purged of any sovereign supplement. If we were to ask, once again, where sovereignty migrates to in the avowedly post-monarchic United States, we would have to add to our list of possible sites the body of the enslaved African. White, liberal-capitalist sovereign power thus operates via the body of the enslaved, because that body is both the immediate source of economic (and political) power and the ideologically effective form in which that power can hide sovereign force per se from itself and from its would-be detractors. Hobbesian sovereignty is abjected in the quasi-humanity of the racialized other.

Which is also to say that the profound uncertainty and promise of a democracy to come are also figured in “prophet Nat” and in the force of antislavery violence. Antislavery violence is founding violence for America and for democracy, as is all resistance to the “state of nature” generated by the absence of a shared relationship to the sovereign supplement. Revolutionary violence recalls Hobbes’s scandalous suggestion that there can be a violence that is “neither just nor unjust” (“To this warre of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust” [90]) as well as his further implication that this interruption or suspension of justice, figured by the sovereignty’s noncontractual excess, cannot be exorcised from any commonwealth that attempts to put an end to this perpetual warfare. Hobbes insists on the “mutuall” relation between democratic consent and a sovereignty that will always occupy an undecidable temporal and logical position with respect to the community it founds and preserves. If there is something impossible, monstrous, or even terrifying about this sovereignty, it is not because it comes back to us from a monarchical or absolutist past that we are sure we have left behind but because it comes from (and announces the possibility of) a future whose sovereign alterity also defines a chance for democracy and community. “There is scarce a Common-wealth in the world,” writes Hobbes at the end of his Leviathan, “whose beginnings can in conscience be justified” (486). But
what might sound like a damning indictment of history’s unconscionable violence is simultaneously Hobbes’s attempt to remind his readers that no community can be sealed or redeemed by a justice that would precede (and remain to protect) its borders. Insofar as any community imagines it could “in conscience” be justified, it will do so at the expense of all those for whom the community represents a democratic failure, all those for whom those unjustifiable beginnings also name the possibility of another “unjustifiable” revolution to come. Community, like any relation, interrupts the circuit of justification that would preserve the sanctity and purity of a “good conscience,” and in Hobbes’s <i>Leviathan</i>, this interruption also goes by the name of sovereignty or the “artificial soul.” Hobbesian sovereignty threatens all those who would claim, in one way or another, to have reached and occupied the “end of history,” and as such Hobbesian sovereignty, as I have all along been trying to suggest, is indissociable from democracy’s peculiarly constitutive incompletion, its precarious exposure to more and other forms of democracy and community to come.

“From his early childhood until his execution by the state of Virginia,” writes Kenneth S. Greenberg, “[Nat] Turner had found in his life and in the natural world a series of signs to be interpreted. The comments that he would become a prophet or that he was unfit for slavery, the marks on his head and chest, his ability to read without being taught, and finally the revelation instructing him to seek the kingdom of heaven – these signs seemed to point in a single direction: God commanded him to lead his people in a great battle against slavery” (2). Nat Turner, Greenberg concludes, “was a ‘semitic’ rebel – a man moved to action by reading and interpreting the signs of heaven and earth” (2). As in the case of Frederick Douglass, a striking combination of literary proclivity and violent resistance defines Nat Turner and marks him as a figure of charismatic revolutionary violence. Turner didn’t just know how to read, he read the world and everything in it as if such reading was a kind of revolutionary action in and of itself. The possibility of another way of living together, another America, was promised not just by the specific messages conveyed to Turner but by the very idea of the readability of nature (blood on the cornstalks). Something in the very structure of the prophetic sign, the enigmatic hieroglyph, announced the possibility of another sovereign order, and aligned Turner’s revolutionary violence with an investment in the political power of language decoupled from intention. That the matter of the world might form the letters of a call to action or the promise of another order and thus mediate between one moment and the next or between one historically bound African slave and another suggests that
sovereign power, as prophetic or semiotic power, always proceeds from one or another instance of Hobbes's artificial soul, which is also to say, from the stuff and detritus of a finite world. If Nat Turner read God's will in these mundane signifiers then, it is perhaps because “God” (and “God's kingdom”) is also one of the names we conjur to figure the possibility of a democratic sovereignty. And in his own way, Frederick Douglass channelled prophet Nat when he broke with the Garrisonians not only by refusing to endorse their pacifism but, taking even more of a chance, by insisting on reading the democratic letter of the U.S. Constitution rather than the intentional spirit of pro-slavery invoked by Chief Justice Taney in the notorious Dred Scott decision. Whatever Taney may have claimed about the racist inclinations of the framers, “The Constitution,” Douglass insisted, “knows all the human inhabitants of this country as ‘the people’” (“Dred Scott,” 357). And it “knows” them, first of all, by writing them into existence out of its artificial, ink and paper soul. Claiming America, for Douglass, meant claiming the Constitution and, specifically, asserting the co-implication of its radically democratic power and its sovereign detachment from any governing intentionality. If this thoroughly textual and even deconstructive move corresponded with a refusal to give up on revolutionary violence, it was because Douglass knew better than most that literacy was bound up with the imposition and appropriation of power. “It was a new and special revelation” he wrote in his Narrative, “explaining dark and mysterious things” ([37]). Dark and mysterious things such as the possibility that, with a wink of an eye, a written text, and not simply an overflow of justice or good conscience, can be read to speak the citizenship of the African American into retroactive and indelible being.

In the final chapter of Slavery and Social Death, Orlando Patterson cites Maurice Cranston’s definition of freedom as “the absence of impediments in the way of doing [something]” and suggests that slavery brought this new understanding of freedom into our modernity. “Slaves,” he maintains, “were the first persons to find themselves in a situation where it was vital to refer to what they wanted in this way” (340). But, as we have seen, this definition of freedom is also the one that Quentin Skinner claims for Hobbes’s strikingly original and controversial version of counter-republican political philosophy. In Leviathan, Hobbes repeatedly makes the case for an understanding of freedom that lays great stress on what Skinner calls “the distinction between external and intrinsic impediments”: “Freedom is now said to be taken away only by external impediments, and fear is clearly not an example of an external impediment” (Skinner, Hobbes 135).27 “When a man throweth his goods into the Sea for feare the ship should sink,” says
Hobbes, rewriting a famous Aristotelian example, he not only acts willingly but, “very willingly” (*Leviathan*, Ch. 21, 146). By advancing this original definition of freedom over the idealizing, Aristotelian model advanced by Puritan Republicanism, Hobbes was able to identify the revolutionary power concealed even in the bare decision to live on. And reduced as they were, in an exemplary fashion, to the condition of bare survival, enslaved African Americans had to believe that this power remained available to them, too. “The condition of slavery did not absolve or erase the prospect of death,” Patterson explains, “Slavery was not a pardon; it was, peculiarly, a conditional commutation. The execution was suspended only as long as the slave acquiesced in his powerlessness” (5). Hobbesian political philosophy refuses to allow us to dismiss the latent power hidden in that “acquiescence,” and Patterson’s book, as well as the immense body of African American literature and resistance, testifies to the work of that power. But it is the “ghost” of this same Hobbesian political originality, this Hobbesian sovereignty, that, I think, also haunts Patterson in the final lines of his great book. “Throughout this work,” he writes, “the ghost of another concept has haunted my analysis, and in this final chapter I have tried to exorcise it. That is the problem of freedom. Beyond the socio-historical findings is the unsettling discovery that an ideal cherished in the West beyond all others emerged as a necessary consequence of the degradation of slavery and the effort to negate it” (341–42). This poignant intimation of a ghostly and irreducible relationship between freedom and slavery hesitates on the border of a Hobbesian insight into the supplementary structure of democratic sovereignty. What haunts Patterson, I would suggest, is not the impossibility of freedom or democracy without violence, but the intimation of a freedom that could only be realized in being shared with the other. The force and play, what Patterson here registers as the ghost, of an irreducible alterity in the structure of democracy or “freedom” marks the co-incidence of a Hobbesian commonwealth and an egalitarian, co-operative form of social belonging. This is the ghost of a democratic sovereignty that liberal capitalism perpetually seeks to dispell and that it is almost, but not yet, impossible to read in the pages of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. 