Chapter One
Hobbes: Restraining Fictions

Nature it selfe cannot erre; and as men abound in copiousnesse of language; so they become more wise, or more mad than ordinary....

Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, 1968

I have argued thus far that all theorizing is a form of world-creation, and as such, is ineluctably fictive; but this does not mean that all modes of imagining tend toward creative possibility. This is the force of my claim that theories predicated upon epistemologies of the given (foundational modes of theorizing, or its epistemological “surrogates”) are always-already fictive, but fictive forms of thought that efface, negate, and forget their creative power in favor of their authoritative, and thus legislative and programmatic power. The “fictive” recognizes that foundational accounts are always and necessarily essentially narrational, imaginative, creative, and performative. The point of reading political theory with attention to its fictive groundings is to counter the negation that leads to a mode of theorizing that is legislative, characterized by authority and closure. One way of doing so is to find within that mode the representational sleight of hand that posits the given as such, as natural, or somehow necessary; and in so doing, to open that mode of theorizing to its own reflexive and creatively contingent moments.

This is why I begin my exploration of the possibility of a deconstructive and utopian mode of political theorizing by working through Thomas Hobbes. The story that Hobbes tells, as conventionally narrated, is bleak and, despite the over seven hundred pages of Leviathan, surprisingly brief: the fundamental equality that exists among humans can be surmised from the equal capacity, if necessary, to kill one another. Given a world of scare resources, given each individual’s presumed preference for him or herself; given each individual’s right to judge what justice means in the absence of a sovereign political authority, an anarchic pre-political state prevails. There is no alternative: in order to prevent a life that would be “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short,” such subjects (at heart, Hobbes tells us, each one of us) would consent to an absolute political sovereign against whom there is neither a right of resistance, nor a right to question.1 Hobbes’s central concern is the excision of ambiguity, plural and competing meanings from the world. In this, even God, as intimation of the infinite, a realm beyond conceptualization, constitutes a rival.

It is not simply that Hobbes’s Leviathan is a formidable exemplar of authority and closure in the practice of political theory; although it certainly is that. And I do not
begin here simply to oppose, by arguing against, this literally monstrous construction. Neither does Hobbes represent, in some curiously perverse way, the utopian writing of an ideal commonwealth (he is too dark, disturbing, and oppressive for that). But neither does Hobbes stand in this book as a representation of utopia’s inversion, a dystopian and totalitarian nightmare (even as the political logic of his Leviathan forbids any questioning of the sovereign authority, and thus forbids any possibility of questioning the edges of the political community). Rather, the force of my argument in this chapter is that Hobbes exemplifies a logic of anti-utopianism itself, at the levels of ontology and epistemology, and in terms of his substantive political implications; and this while working within a fictive mode.2 Much, then, hinges on the crucial nexus between epistemology, representation, and intelligibility. This is an eminently political nexus. Representations of the world delineate what we can know about the world, and in so doing, make intelligible our political possibilities. My focus, then, is on the status and the effects of Hobbes’s particular way of making an ostensible “given”—nature, in this case—meaningful. In Hobbes’s persistent attempt to forcibly secure the stability of representations inheres a political logic of reduction and coercion. I explore this logic at various levels in Leviathan. After a brief exploration of the function of the state of nature exercise in political theory, I turn, in “Reading Hobbes Reading,” to tracing the ways in which Hobbes aims to persuade his readers that his rendition of the natural condition of humanity is the only possible reading. I then explore, in “Somatic Fictions,” Hobbes’s substantive claims concerning the material nature of the universe itself, the self, and how that self can know the world, through exploration of Hobbes’s construed of time and language. Hobbes seeks to foreclose possibility itself, ontologically, epistemologically, and politically. Despite his best efforts, ghosts nevertheless remain to haunt Hobbesian materialism; dreams threaten to undo both consciousness and conscience; the self who can promise—secure the future—is a fragile, fissured construct. I then discuss Hobbes’s explorations of the nature of knowledge as representation more broadly, and argue that there is in Hobbes a lateral tension wherein knowledge is both a naming and an invention of the given; and finally, I trace this tension through to the social contract and the nature of political representation in Hobbes. In each instance, pivotal for holding Hobbes’s authoritative political prescriptions together, Hobbes’s fictions aim toward restraint; but in tracing the shift from Hobbes’s assumption of representational stability, to a delineation of processes of stabilization, I trace the shift wherein the “always-already fictive” nature of the given is revealed. This is an important stage for the explorations of later chapters of this book, which argue that representational modes are always somehow post-representational, and so is an important moment in opening epistemologies of the given to their reflexive and contingent moments.

However, that Hobbes exemplifies an anti-utopian logic while working within a fictive mode is perhaps less surprising than the conventional interpretive framework would assume. In many interpretations of Hobbes, particularly those that assume the “rational, self-interested individual” as the inescapable postulate and outcome of Hobbes’s work, there is a further reification involved, in the lack of attention given to the tensions that underlie such a reading.3 As Richard Kroll points out, “neoclassical texts […] habitually reveal and examine the terms under which they construct themselves […] their most distinctive device is to allude to and dramatize the reader’s