“Arm’d with thy sad last gift—the pow’r to die, / Thy shafts, stern fortune, now I can defy; / The dreadful mercy points at length the shore / Where all is peace, and men are slaves no more” (121). So begins one version of Thomas Day and John Bicknell’s fiercely antislavery poem, *The Dying Negro* (1773), a fictionalized retelling of the suicide of a West Indian fugitive confronted with the prospect of reenslavement and exile. Published on the eve of the Revolutionary War, *The Dying Negro* provides the chronological pivot upon which sits Terri L. Snyder’s new study of slave suicide in early America. The bulk of the book focuses, as its title implies, on the century prior to the imperial crisis (and thus prior to the era of organized antislavery activism that emerged in the United States in the wake of *The Dying Negro*) and offers an insightful survey of the methods and meanings attributed to slave suicide in British North America.

Following a prologue and introduction, three short but busy chapters track enslaved people’s desperate embrace of self-destruction during the Middle Passage, seasoning, and the decades of life and labor that followed thereafter on sugar, tobacco, and rice plantations in Barbados, Jamaica, Virginia, and South Carolina. Brutalized by abduction, forced migration, and backbreaking toil, enslaved people, Snyder writes, reluctantly embraced suicide as a “newly conceivable” (42) response to alienation. After examining Africans’ spiritual beliefs in the context of more immediate concerns about white cannibalism, epidemic disease, and the prospect of being literally worked to death, she asserts that these decisions to die—which sometimes coincided with moments of collective insurrection—were howling assertions of personhood, conscious choices made by men and women with precious few other options.

To demonstrate the ubiquity of self-destruction among the enslaved, Snyder places owners’ efforts at suicide prevention front and center. Readers of this journal will be familiar with the netting nailed to the sides of Atlantic slave ships to catch black men and women jumping overboard. Such provisions, Snyder writes, were part of an elaborate and ever-changing array of antisuicide strategies and technologies used by captains, crews, overseers, and masters to try to minimize the occurrence of self-destruction

1 [Thomas Day and John Bicknell], *The Dying Negro, a Poetical Epistle.* . . . (London, 1773).
at every stage in the commodification process. Indeed, enslavers frequently shared advice about how best to prevent slave suicide—for example, printed guides for ship surgeons provided tips on ways to break hunger strikes—and innovated constantly, attempting to deter suicidal ideation by instilling spiritual terror through spectacular postmortem corporal punishments and, more immediately, by torturing all those who refused to drink or eat.

None of this worked. To evade the nets surrounding ships, enslaved people “climbed out of portholes or gun gratings” (42). On shore, they had a broader variety of methods at their disposal: eating dirt, leaping from buildings, taking poison, stealing guns, or walking calmly into millponds, never to rise again. One West Indian planter, Snyder reports, “ranked suicide as one of the top six causes of slave mortality during seasoning” (47).

Wisely, Snyder refrains from more precise attempts at quantification. The majority of the sources for this study come, after all, from the hands of the enslavers themselves. As such, not only are accounts in diaries and letters by the likes of Jean Barbot, Thomas Thistlewood, and William Byrd II fragmentary and incomplete, they are also seamed with biases and insecurities that combine to dramatically (yet unevenly) suppress the reporting of suicides committed by the enslaved people in their custody. Snyder mines these evidentiary problems for all they are worth, persuasively arguing that enslavers were keenly aware that slave suicide compromised their power, “destabilized plantation order[,] and diminished owners’ capital investment in human labor” (59). Slave suicide was thus intrinsically political. Whether or not enslaved people intended it—and Snyder is careful not to impute motivation from the shards of evidence assembled here—their decisions to die could not help but puncture owners’ fantasies of paternal benevolence and expose the elemental paradox of a person with a price.

Two chapters in the book’s midsection place the instability of this chattel principle at the heart of the analysis, examining the treatment of slave suicide in the colonial legal system and in prerevolutionary literary culture. Colonial statutes were generally silent on the subject of self-destruction among enslaved people. Lawmakers typically considered its deterrence and punishment to be a matter for masters to handle privately and with discretion. However, Snyder has identified a few rare instances in which colonial legislatures were forced not only to acknowledge an enslaved person’s decision to die but also to bear the brunt of that decision’s impact. In several jurisdictions on the southern mainland, the state allowed masters to seek financial compensation in cases when a slave had been arrested or convicted of a felony but had then committed suicide. In a survey of slave owners’ petitions to the Virginia House of Burgesses, Snyder finds more than forty examples of this unhappy sequence of events. Their import, she argues, was that each black outlaw’s suicide in the shadow of the gallows not only strained these colonial governments’ coffers but also “deliberately or unintentionally denied the state its ritual of retribution and robbed it of
an opportunity to exemplify its authority through spectacles of execution” (97).

Colonial literary depictions of enslaved people’s suicides reveled in such scenes and also featured a host of other spectacular set pieces “based on allegedly true events” (102). Indeed, in chapter 5, Snyder introduces readers to a parade of enslaved characters contemplating suicide in a host of prerevolutionary novels, plays, essays, and memoirs that run the gamut from *Oroonoko* (1688) to *The Royal African* (1749). Often focusing on royal or aristocratic characters enslaved in particularly egregious circumstances, the Anglo-American authors of these “literary fusions” (102) freighted their narratives with “an increasingly moral valence” (104) that came to emphasize the virtue, nobility, and honor of all those who made the decision to die rather than endure their bondage a moment longer. While Snyder does not adequately explain the reasons behind the rise of such stereotypes, she makes clear that it was in this rapidly politicizing literary landscape that a stridently antislavery literature would subsequently take root.

Day and Bicknell’s *The Dying Negro* was one of several Anglo-American texts featuring slave suicide to emerge in this dynamic context. In fact, the poem’s publication heralded the beginning of “a radically new era in antislavery politics” (121). Between the Revolution and the Civil War, Snyder argues, the image of an American slave driven to contemplate or complete an act of self-annihilation would quickly come to saturate a variety of antislavery print genres, including poetry, mass-market fiction, and, of course, a great many memoirs authored by survivors of slavery including Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. The pervasiveness of self-inflicted deaths in these accounts, Snyder explains, derived from contemporaries’ ever more acute understanding that slave suicide was a profoundly political, perhaps even revolutionary, indictment of racial bondage.

The central theme that cuts across each of this slim volume’s six chapters is the battle over causation. From the very beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade, “Europeans divorced slave suicide from the processes of enslavement” (12). Refusing to countenance capture and commodification as the impetus behind so many acts of self-destruction, travelers, captains, and ship surgeons meditated on the predisposition to self-slaughter they perceived among different African ethnic groups such as the Igbo and Ashanti, effectively dissociating these deaths from their immediate contexts. The same magical thinking filled plantation owners’ heads each time they explained away the suicides of their slaves as the products of temperament or superstition. According to Edward Littleton, a seventeenth-century Barbadian planter, “no creature knows why” (62) enslaved people on that island hanged themselves in such great numbers. Through such self-serving pantomimes of ignorance and displacement, masters such as Littleton attempted to “disarticulate self-killing from the exigencies of enslavement” (80) and thereby reinforced their own conceptions of blacks’ inferiority.
Only with considerable effort, then, were antislavery activists of the revolutionary generation—some of them survivors of slavery such as Olaudah Equiano—able to forge a connection in the public imagination between suicide and enslavement. This was slow going, and it was not until the militant abolitionism of the 1840s and 1850s that activists finally began to win significant numbers of converts to the idea that “slaves had a natural right and religious dispensation to kill themselves in response to the arbitrary power and capricious cruelty that they suffered as bondpeople” (155).

Though often revelatory, *The Power to Die* can at times make for frustrating reading. Its arguments about change over time emerge only belatedly, and the book’s final chapter—which does most of this work—is also its least original, hewing closely to the turning points limned and conclusions reached in other recent accounts of the specter of black suicide in early national and antebellum antislavery writing. In addition, while Snyder repeatedly articulates a sensitivity to regional variation, the book itself elides any consideration of slave suicide in the northern colonies. It also inexplicably limits its postrevolutionary source base to texts authored by antislavery activists, missing an opportunity to compare and contrast them to those produced by nineteenth-century slave traders and slave owners.

*The Power to Die* may not be the last word on slave suicide in early America. However, as the first monograph devoted to this important subject, it serves a valuable, foundational role. It builds upon many shorter, less comprehensive studies; it constructs bridges between several discrete academic subfields; and it imposes its own analytic architecture on a diverse body of difficult sources to conclusively demonstrate that “suicide was central to the history and culture of slavery and antislavery efforts in early British America and the United States” (12).