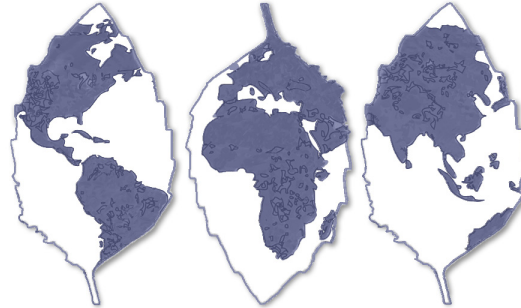


THE SOVEREIGNTY OF VULNERABILITY



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In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, the late Jacques Derrida asked a remarkable question: What if sovereignty and vulnerability went hand in hand? What if the other others – the ones beyond the pale of citizenship and even humanity – were actually the rulers of the realm? Authority is only authority to the extent it demands recognition, as Derrida saw, a dynamic that undermines every claim to supreme and absolute power. This dynamic can place the vulnerable in an unexpected position of power. In this paper, I explore two very different episodes in which sovereignty of vulnerability becomes evident. One comes from the archives of Dutch colonialism and the weapons demonstrations through which Dutch officials sought to extend the reach of the colonial state. Instead of performances of potency, these demonstrations devolved into performances of vulnerability, with the most benighted inhabitants of the colonial Indies, the so-called Stone Age Papuans, appearing in the guise of sovereign power. The other comes from my new ethnographic work on speech therapy and the communities of sign use that emerge around non-verbal people. Here as well, I consider scenes where the indicators of recognition are idiosyncratic and fleeting and the participants who seem to have the most power and authority turn out to have the least control over their signs. The violence associated with claims to sovereignty may stem from the sovereignty of vulnerability – a possibility that could well leave us wondering whether sovereignty is ever what it seems.

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