



“THE CONTACT ZONE” POWER RELATIONS IN VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF FOREIGN LANDS, PEOPLE, AND OBJECTS

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To cite this article:

Salvo, Bianca Tiziana. 2023. “The Contact Zone: Power relations in visual representation of foreign lands, people and objects”. ARCHIVO PAPERS 3 (1):84-99.
<http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7951261>

Published online: 18 May 2023.

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VISUAL ESSAY

"THE CONTACT ZONE": POWER RELATIONS IN VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF FOREIGN LANDS, PEOPLE AND OBJECTS

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Abstract

Since its origin, photography has had a close relationship with the manner discoveries have been displayed and understood by the Western world. Even if the accessibility to photographs is currently appreciated as a global phenomenon, the study of digital archives and photographic narratives of the other reveals a biased and defective gaze. Based on Marie Louise Pratt's proposals of the "Contact Zone", this essay reflects upon the complexities in the representation of foreign lands, people, and objects as a way to understand the historical power relationships embedded in photographic images and archives.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Photography, Western gaze, Archives, Contact zone.

This visual essay draws on previous research carried out since the beginning of 2019 and is based on a major artistic project titled *The Contact Zone*. The investigation focused on the role of the photographic documents and their interlinkages with the representation of the *other*, exploring the dialogues of power inscribed in those pictures, which circulated through Europe between the 19th and 20th centuries. Using photographs, manipulated digital archival sources, and moving image, the artwork presents a metaphorical journey that inquiries into the processes that led the West to produce differentiated conceptions of itself, in relation to what was defined as "the rest of the world"¹.

Because of its ability to produce specific, and allegedly objective registers, photography, has been considered the "apotheosis of Western civilization"². However, beyond its informative purpose, the proliferation of photographic images of "otherness" embodied an intimate desire for visibility and scrutiny³ of European societies. The new scrutinizing eye of the Empire found in the production and in the circulation of objects and images of the New World, a more persuasive method to justify its control over the acquired territories.

It is relevant to notice that before the photographic revolution, other *technologies of power* such as literature, travel diaries, and navigation tools, were also indispensable instruments for securing Western territorial ideology. In light of these reflections, the research into the processes that led the West to the fabrication of strategies to mediate with cultural diversity, together with the notion of the *voyage*, became central to my questions. In which ways have literature, history, and of course photography contributed to the romanticization of the contact with the foreign through their various yet homologous depictions?

The visual essay explores processes and mediums that, throughout history, had contributed to the construction of shared imageries and beliefs about remote objects, territories, and people. It experiments with the intersection of two dimensions: the *domestic* and the *exotic*; distant from each other, nevertheless, both born from the same desire for appropriation and control.

The series shows the correspondences between images, imagination, and texts, while thinking about the explorer as an inventor of the "rest of the world"⁴; this character finds himself in a constant duality between the man at the service of the "border expansionist ideologies"⁵ and the heroic protagonist who "moves towards the risk of the unknown and the formless."⁶ In addition, the explorer's presumption that by naming or writing about what he sees and discovers, he claims it as his own, allows us to reflect upon representations as an act of power.

The selected images reconstruct an imaginary contact with the *other* and perform the displacement from one point towards what has not been discovered or seen yet. They record the oscillation between the familiar and the unrevealed.

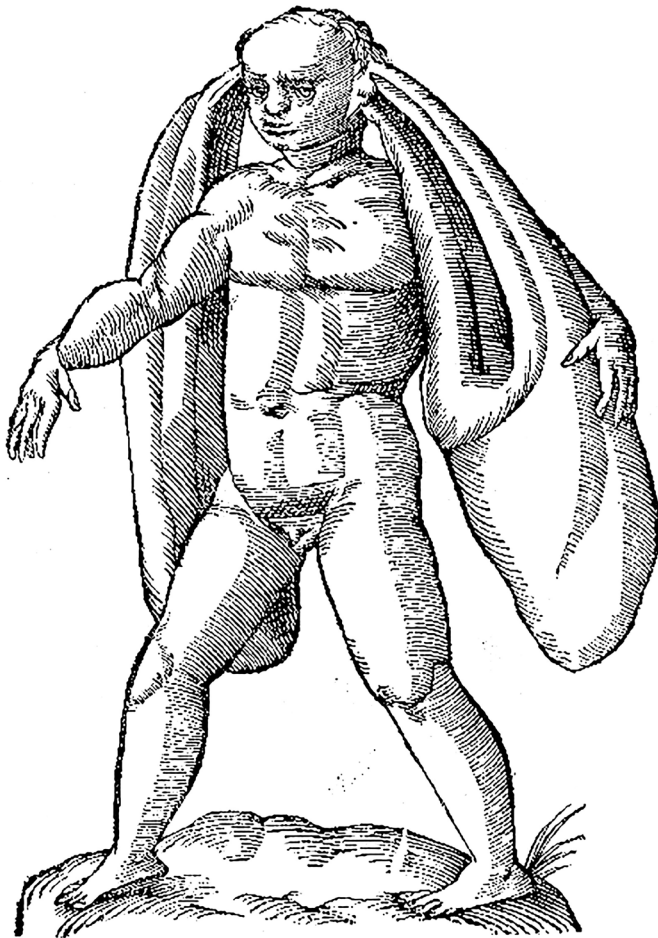
Likewise, the sequence inquires about the sea as an ambiguous scenario of exploration. On the one hand, it exists as a romantic landscape of adventures in the collective imagery. On the other, it is characterized by being a crude and

hostile context in which colonial violence has been and continues to be performed in contemporary days.

Eventually, the encounter with the concept of the "contact zones" formulated by the Canadian researcher Mary Louise Pratt was pivotal during my investigation. The term appears in 1991 in her article entitled "Arts of the Contact Zones" and has been used to define social spaces where different cultures meet and establish among themselves asymmetrical power relations based on coercion, conflict, and iniquity.⁷

Wondering about the literal meaning of the expression "contact zone", I developed the idea of embodying the invasion of the territory through photographic online archival sources depicting hands. I thought about these "white hands", disguised as seductive, redemptive, and civilizing, and how they managed to violently venture into the dimension of the *other*. Through hands, we delimit spaces, invade, leave unerasable marks, and appropriate without asking. Ultimately, we transform or destroy what we found.

According to Georges Didi-Huberman, images can be traces of anachronistic and heterogeneous times⁸. Images depict and clarify our understanding, as well as blur and obscure histories and geographies; they model our ideas and perceptions of the *other*; likewise, they define what we understand as "us". In other words, they are tools of power. As a result, the temporal and the physical resignification of archival images is not only essential to create new scenarios, that inquire about the contemporaries' reflections on alterity, but it is also crucial so that forgotten representations can come back to life.



40

FIRST VOYAGE

I did not, however, land.

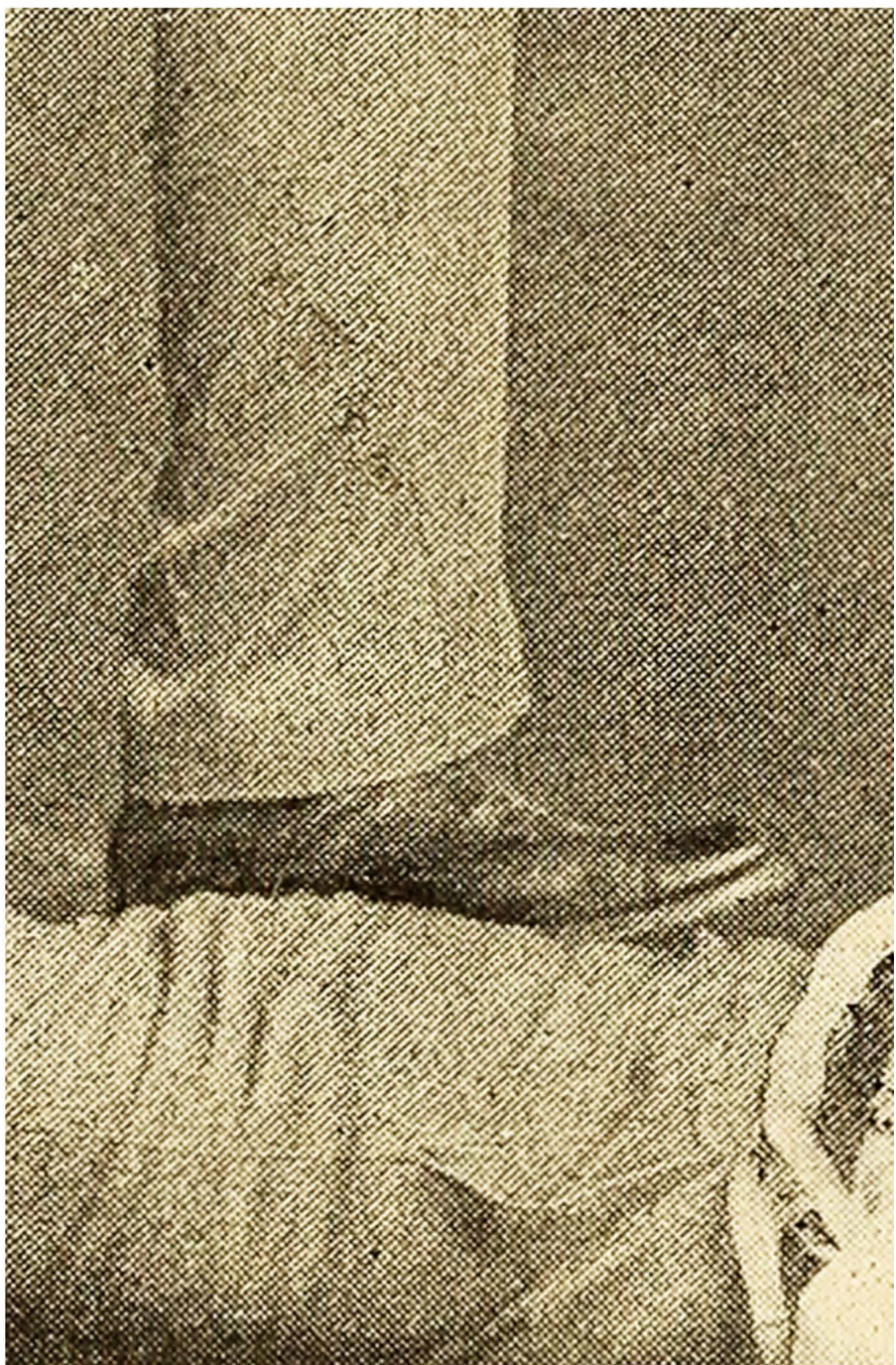
Friday, Oct. 19th.

here, a sand

This island is the most beautiful that I have yet seen,

* This appears to be the island now called *Inagua grande*.
† Fair Cape.





Saturday, 6th of October.

He saw that if an error was made the land would not be reached so quickly, and that consequently it would be better to go at once to the continent and afterwards to the islands.

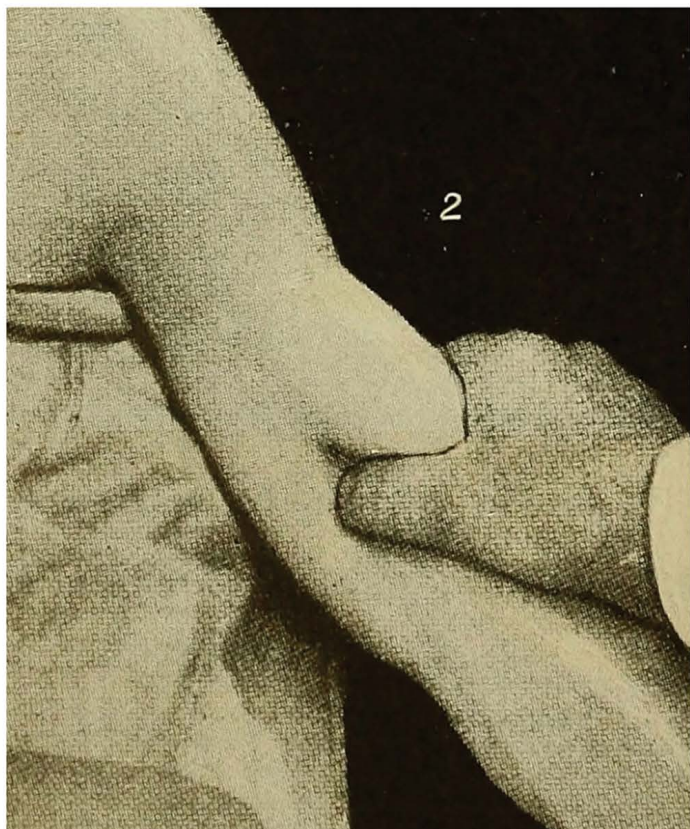
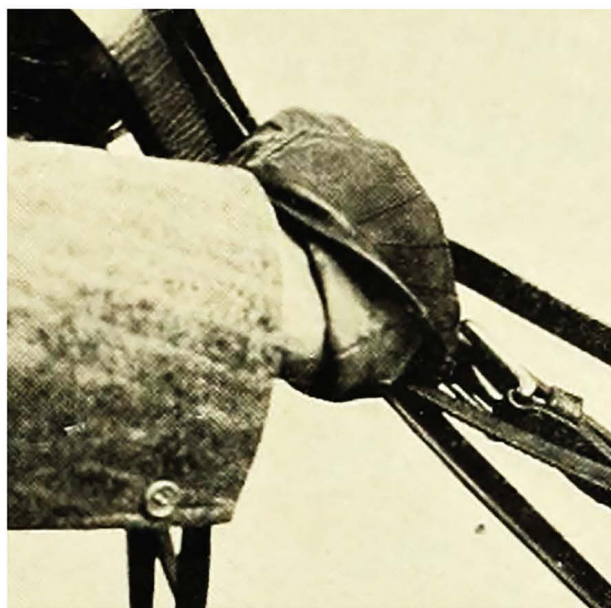
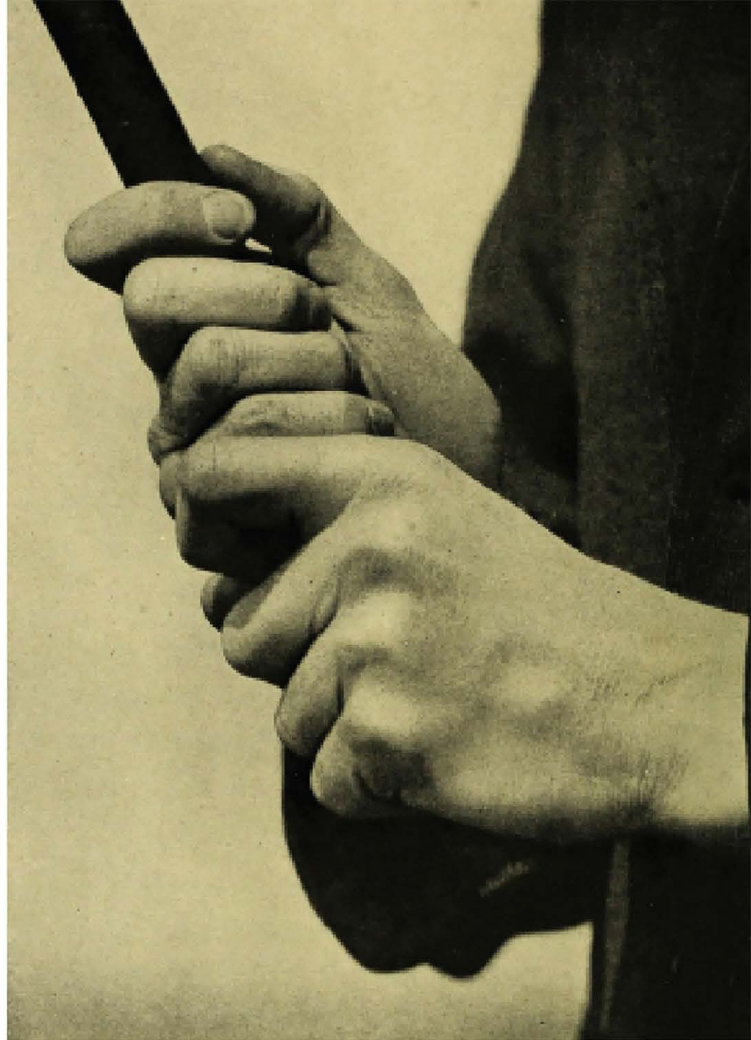
Sunday, 7th of October.

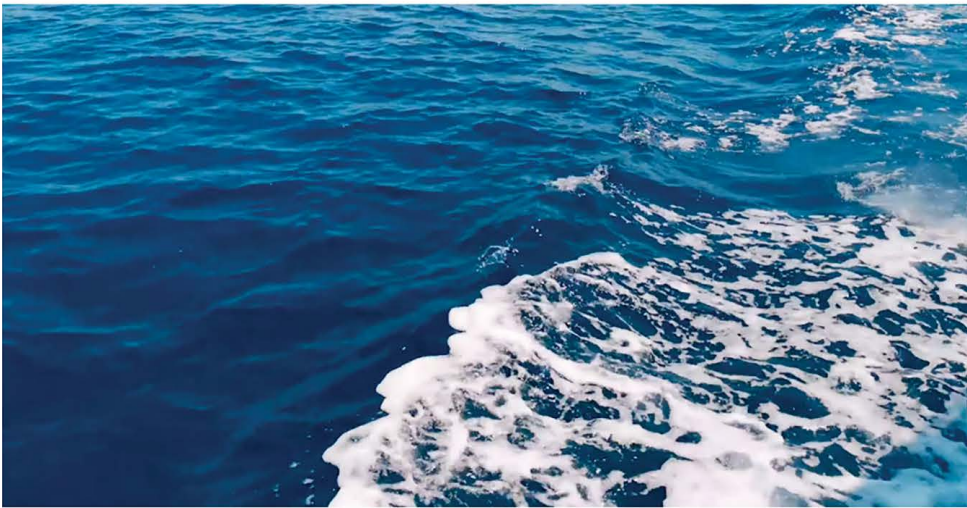
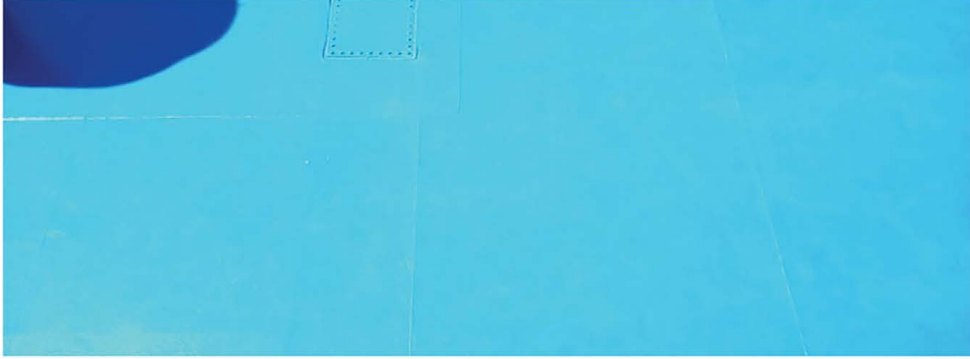
The west course was continued ;

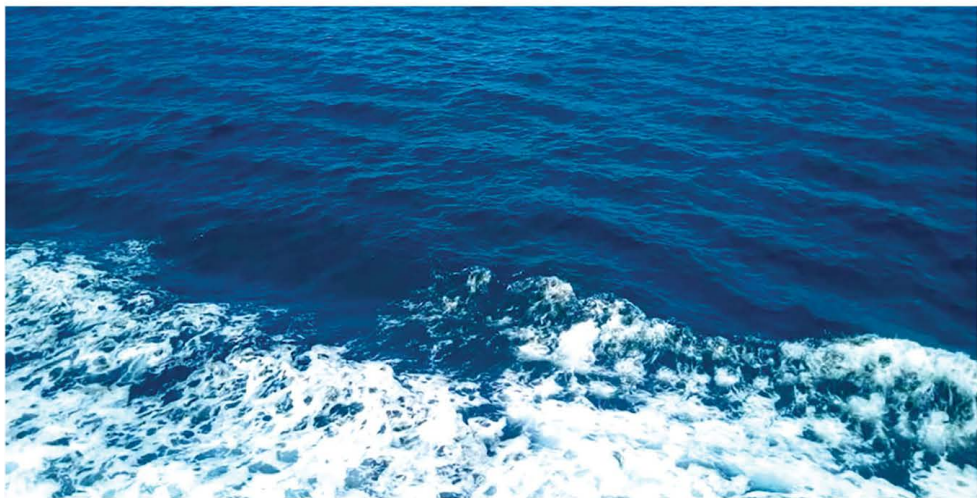
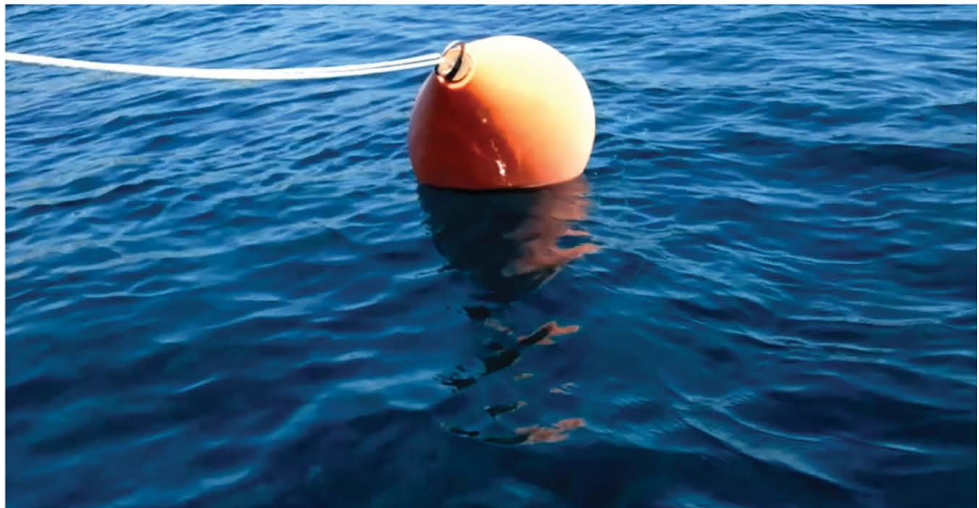
had promised to whoever should see it first, hoisted a flag at the mast-head and fired a gun, as a signal that she had sighted land,

No land was seen during the afternoon,

the birds were either going to sleep on land, or were flying from the winter which might be supposed to be near in the land whence they were coming.











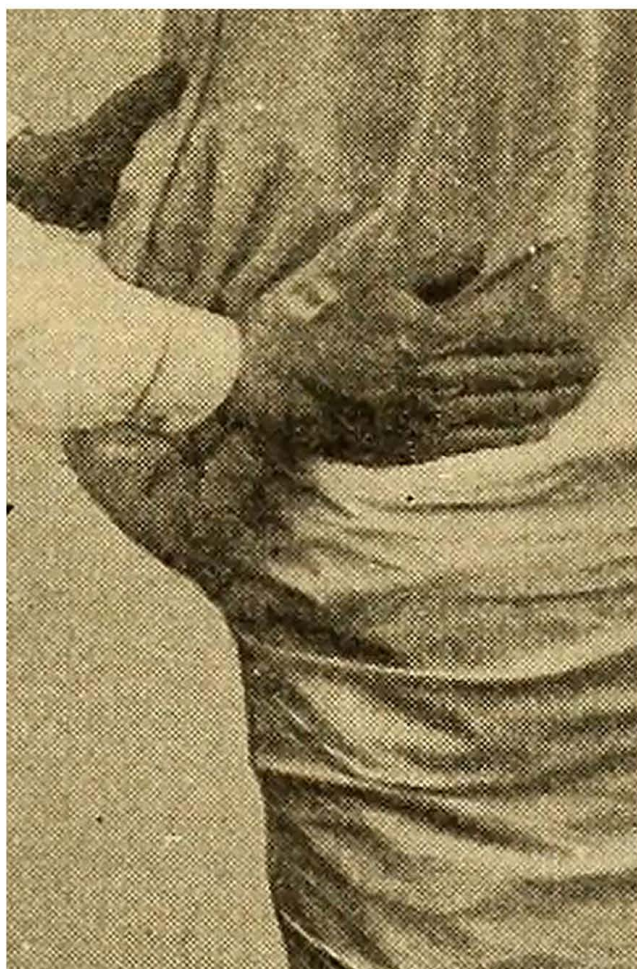
Sunday, 16th of September.

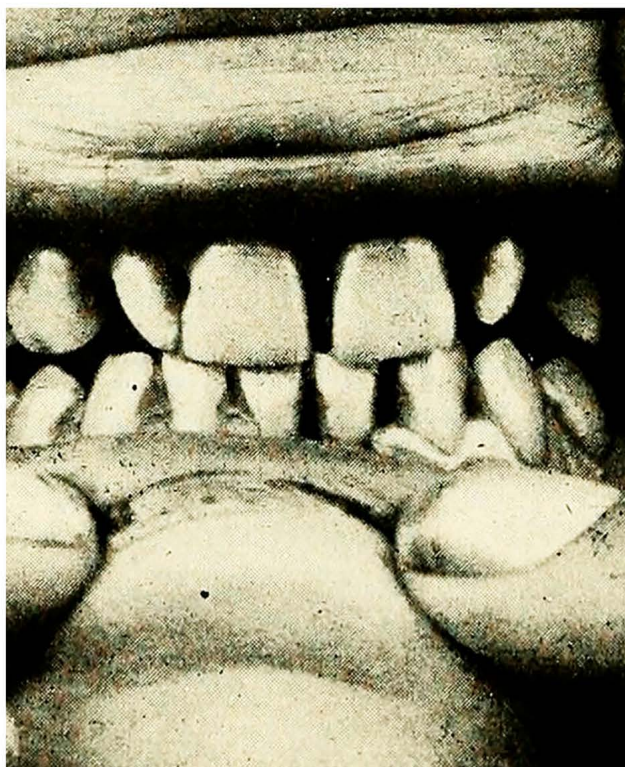
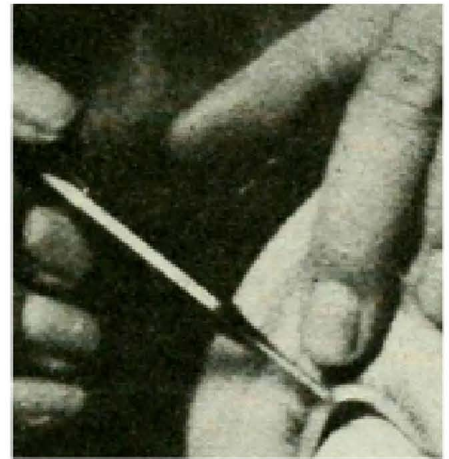
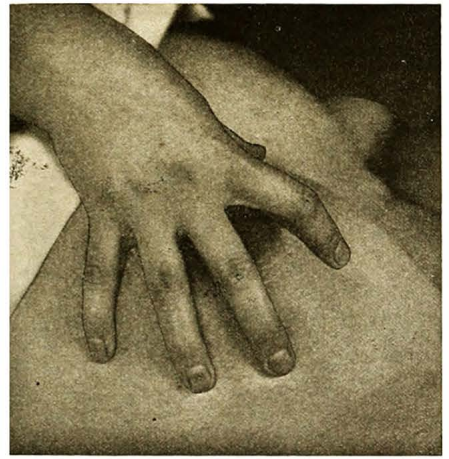
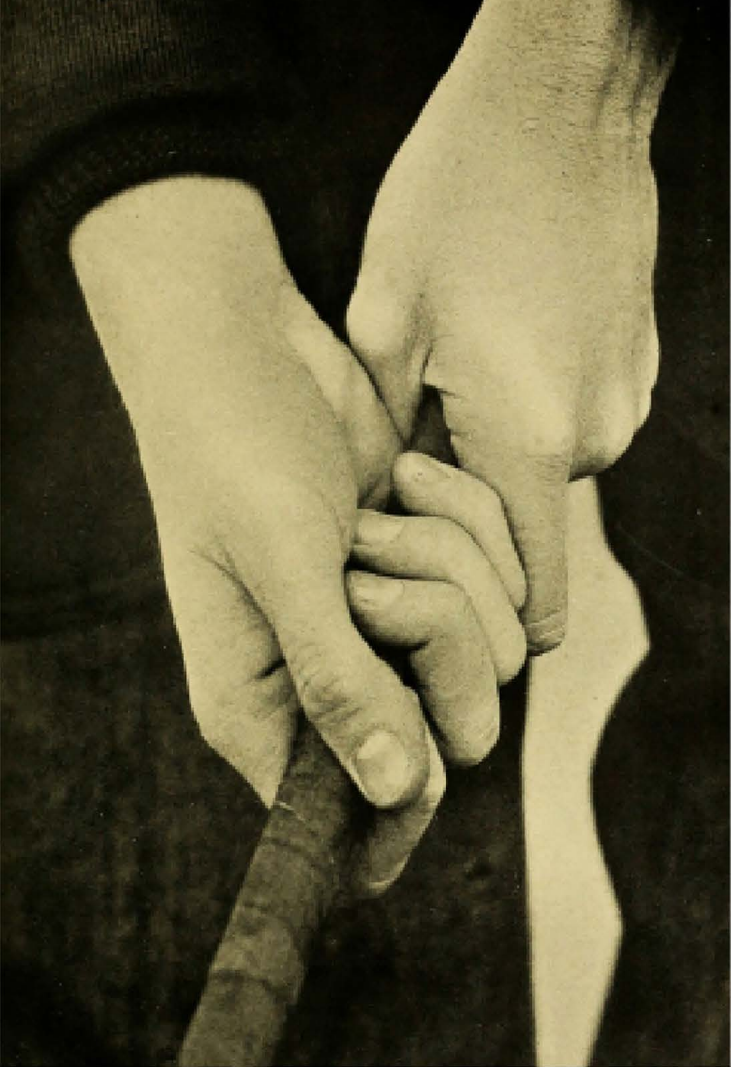
they were near some island, but not the main land,
 "I make the
 main land to be more distant".

Monday, 17th of September.

They, therefore, considered that they
 were near land.

the north should be again observed at dawn.
 They then found that the needles were true.







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- 1 Mary Louise Pratt, *Ojos Imperiales: Literatura de viajes y transculturación*, 23.
 - 2 Pinney, *The Parallel History of Anthropology and Photography*, 74-97.
 - 3 Ibidem.
 - 4 Pratt, *Ojos Imperiales*, 23.
 - 5 Harlan, *Ajuste de enfoque para una presencia indígena*, 231.
 - 6 "Notes on Travel and Theory, James Clifford", 2019.
 - 7 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone.", 1991.
 - 8 Didi-Huberman, "Cuando las imágenes tocan lo real", 2007.

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