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WHAT GROWS ON WHALE REMAINS?

Vincent Chevillon

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Figure 1. Vincent Chevillon, whale bones from Strasbourg Museum.

INTRODUCTION

Objects are landscapes.
As we walk through them, stories are told and inscribed.
Our eyes generally stop on asperities, singularities and accidents. These indicators become signposts for experts.
The articulation of these dis/orders produce tracks, their interpretation generates stories.
I started following the whale 13 years ago.

At the time, it seemed necessary to me to complete my practice using interdisciplinary fields of knowledge and non-linear practices foreign to the teaching that I had received at the Beaux Arts in Paris. I grew up overseas in Martinique, then on Réunion Island, in the Indian Ocean east of Madagascar. The island I grew up on was steeped in colonised histories. When I started following the whale of my story, my conscience was concerned with the Eurocentrism of the prevailing discourses, and I wanted to explore this in connection to the whale. I had an opportunity to be hosted in Paris within a research program, and this geographical, symbolic and historical situation was particularly precious to me. This led me to explore the way the West had looked at the rest of world from the objects it had brought back from the 'margins' and deposited in one of these world heritage 'centres.' Not knowing exactly where to start, I decided on an object to unravel, seeing where it would lead me. This object was waiting for me fortuitously on a friend's shelf in a Parisian apartment. It was *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. During the first part of this journey, Herman Melville was my guide. By following a new itinerary in the wake of whales, a whole complex and fascinating set of causalities and new relationships was revealed, as much through exhumed stories as through the current environmental awareness of industrialised societies.

I was led to explore archives and museum storerooms. Places where objects are waiting. In "The Sperm Whaler's Dream" project, I set out to deconstruct and explore the myths of modernity through observation and in-depth study of the stories and objects brought back from overseas to the industrial cities of the West during the colonial period of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The devices and discourses associated with public collections and their evolution since the eighteenth century fascinated me and led me to work in different institutions across France and Belgium. In this study of colonial collections, I have lingered in the archives and storerooms of institutions dedicated to natural history, places where objects and stories lay waiting. I have worked from travellers' accounts, including those of Captain Cook, Bougainville, Joseph Conrad and Charles Darwin, with objects from ethnographic collections in different Parisian institutions, from photographs of the colonial era and from maps.

From observing and questioning the histories of these encounters, I responded in my arts practice with objects, gestures, images and scenic devices in order to propose alternative dramaturgies. The "Sperm Whaler's Dream" project developed from this first phase. What would singular arrangements in a new synthesis tell us and tell each other?

The "Sperm Whaler's Dream" used an experimental methodology which allowed an interconnected approach exploring the co-existence of scholarly, sensitive and immersive approaches. My growing interest for the elaboration of the 'History' led me to develop new tools to think, to weigh and to develop our imagination influenced by the methodologies of: Aby Warburg through his atlas Mnemosyne and Georges Didi-Huberman, the reflections of Antonin Artaud on the theater, of Jean Luc Godard on the 'History', of Donna Haraway about sympoiesis, of Edouard Glissant on the hybridity and the survivals, of Frantz Fanon on the construction of the identities in dominated countries, writings of travellers, of the dreams carried by the subjects of an empire, of the construction of sequenced narratives through the comic strip, or still of the study of the divinatory systems by association of images such as in the divinatory tarot, or in the templum or the Greek haruspices. These all shaped a set of practices and influenced a complex entity I created that I have named Spermwhaler's dream (Spw'd). Spw'd an interactive notebook, initially inspired by the encyclopedic meanderings in the novel Moby Dick, is situated at the crossroads of multiple disciplines (iconography, sociology, psychoanalysis, history, natural sciences, applied sciences, visual arts, literature, cinema, programming). The project now sits in Archipels as an atlas of sorts where it gathers, organizes and presents.

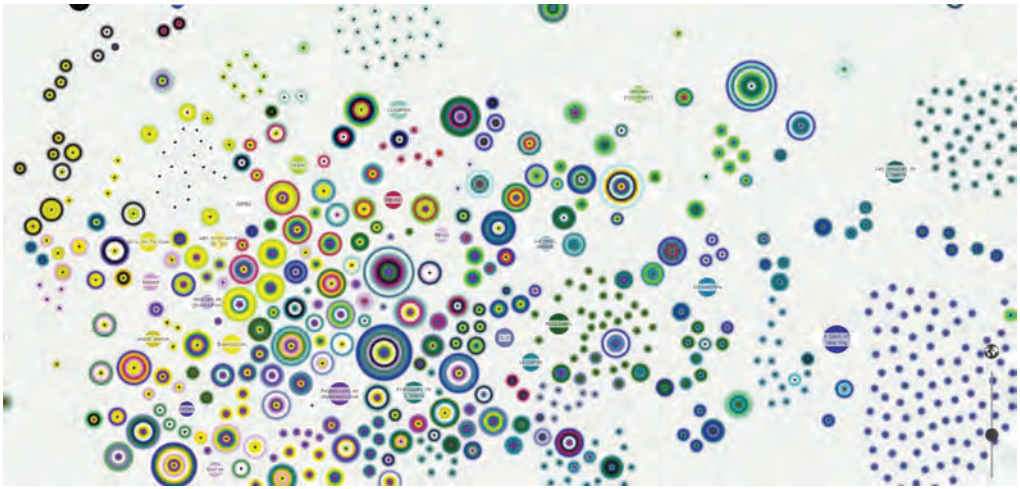

Figure 2. Atlas, Archipels front page.

Figure 3. Example page of Virtual Table, Edges (the shadow peoples).

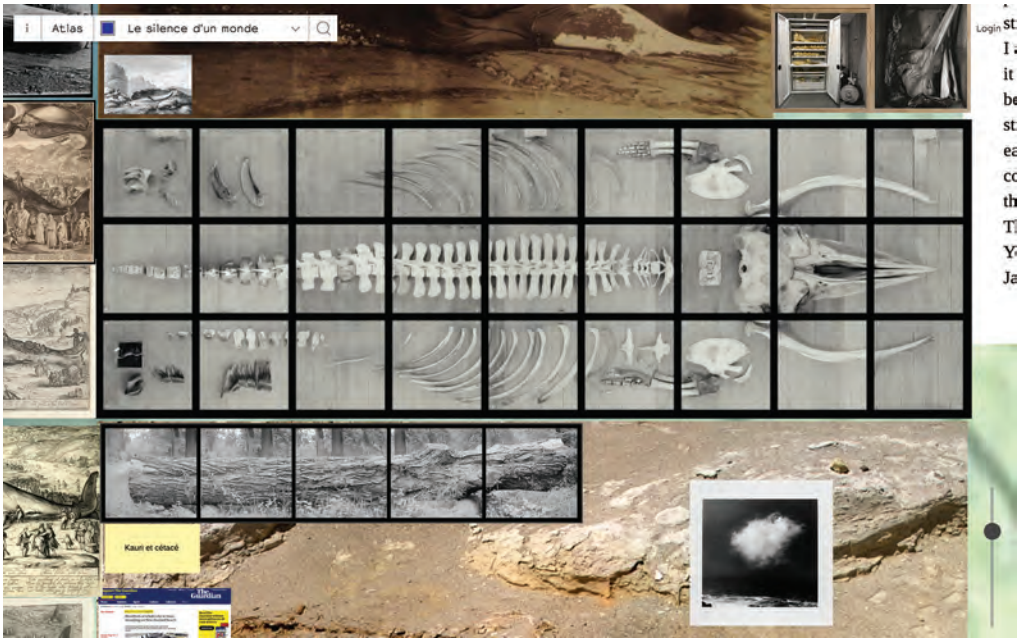

Figure 4. Whale skeleton laid out on the floor at Strasbourg Museum, 2019. Screen grab from Archipels.

THE STRASBOURG WHALES

In 2019, I was confronted with a fascinating situation: whales stranded on the attic floor of an Alsatian museum. Gigantic whale skeletons had been spread out by scientists to learn more about them. I was familiar with these bones because I had photographed some of them a few years earlier. They had been stored in old wooden cabinets in the attic hallway, and a small room filled with bones and other marine mammal remains.

The information we had about these bones was very poor. A significant amount of material had been lost, especially during the two world wars. Most of these collections were acquired in the late nineteenth century when Strasbourg was German. The museum had opened in 1893 as part of an ambitious plan to transform Strasbourg into one of the most modern universities in the world, at least in the young German Empire. After World War I, Strasbourg became French, and these bones retreated into the dark forgotten spaces of the attic.

The largest of the skeletons was that of a baleen whale, nearly 10 metres long. On each bone, a small letter, a capital B, had made it possible to gather the bones together and to arrange them on the ground, in order to reconstitute the individual. Among the bones, a box containing dewlap was labeled in German: "Walbarten zum Skelet B, auf dem Boden, *Balaenoptera sulfurea*, Neu-Seeland.\," which indicated that the box contained "baleen hairs corresponding to skeleton 'B' on the ground, *Balaenoptera sulfurea*, from New Zealand." At the bottom of the box, wrapped in a newspaper, we found two bones, tympanic bullae, each the size of a large lemon, also with the inscription 'B.' The newspaper was *The New Chivalry* from Nelson, New Zealand, and was dated 15 October 1905.

Using this information, Marie Meister, one of the curators, managed to find a small envelope in the archives containing letters addressed to the then director, Ludwig Döderlein. These letters, written by a certain James Dall, proposed items of interest for sale to the Strasbourg Museum, including cetacean bones from a whale stranding near Collingwood in Golden Bay (New Zealand).[1] Two of the specimens in the Strasbourg collections corroborated

Figure 5. Tympanic bullae found wrapped in an old newspaper from New Zealand. Screengrab from Archipels.

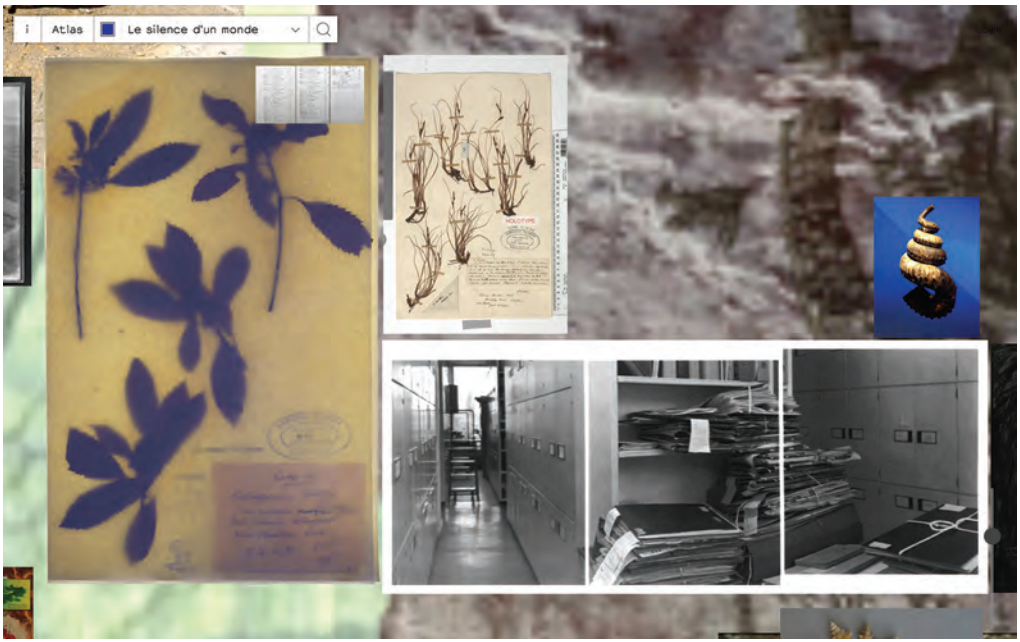

Figure 6. Botanical specimens collected by James Dall, now in Te Papa Collections, Wellington. Screengrab from notebook.

the information contained in this letter. James Dall was also a collector of botanical specimens and the archival material also held letters offering "herbariums of new and remarkable compositions of dried plants," plus associated comments, names of people and places and chemicals such as mercury chloride, a poison used as a preservative. About a hundred plants collected by Dall are now preserved in the collections of Te Papa Tongarewa.[2] The places of conservation are paradoxical universes, aseptic, cold, hostile to life and yet dedicated to its study. A certain number of these collections have passed in less than a century from the domain of biology to that of archaeology, and our museums and their reserves accumulate successive layers of shelves and boxes where are stored the productions of the beings that have populated our worlds. These successive layers are not unlike the sedimentary layers where fossil remains are sometimes exhumed to land in these same shelves.

Department of Conservation (New Zealand), which has been recording cetacean stranding data for the past 50 years, specifies the location, date, space and number of individuals affected. The Strasbourg whales most likely stranded on Farewell Spit, a sand strip that curves around Golden Bay at the northern end of Te Waipounamu (the South Island, New Zealand). For centuries, cetaceans have been stranding en masse or individually on this particular landscape feature, which creates a natural trap. Of note, very recently in 2017 there were strandings of more than 600 *Globicephala melas* (blackfish or pilot whales); in one instance 400 individuals were stranded in a single event.[3]

It is difficult to see long distances underwater, and cetaceans have developed singular sensory apparatus to enable them to imagine and navigate the worlds that surround them. Hearing plays an essential role here. The bones wrapped in the Nelson newspaper of 1905 were the tympanic bullae of the rorqual whale (genus *Balaenoptera*). The tympanic bullae are an essential part of the eco-sensory organ that allows whales to visualise their underwater surroundings in three dimensions. One of the hypotheses about the strandings of cetaceans at Farewell Spit is poor visualisation of space, due to the shallowness of the sea here caused by the parabolic curve of the bay. The eco-location sounds are absorbed by the sand and, with no return of signal, the cetaceans would perceive the bay as open space as they travel toward the Tasman Sea. They then sometimes tragically strand on the sandbanks.

Another curious resonance for the whale project came from the masthead of the newspaper, *The New Chivalry*, that enveloped the tympanic bullae: "Reform often fails not for lack of merit *but for lack of a hearing* [emphasis added]."[4] If an absence of conscience can be linked to the shortcomings of audiences, it can also derive from a lack of listening. The presence of these "hearing" organs in a political prospectus addressed to the working classes brings together universes with a priori distinctiveness, including the civilised and the wild, culture and the nature, and addresses us from the past as a curious message that echoes our present societal and climatic crisis.

A LACK OF HEARING

It is particularly this synchronicity found in the *The New Chivalry*'s masthead that led me to follow the wake of these whales across the world to the coasts of Aotearoa. With the support of the French Institute and Massey University, I was received in residence at Te Whare Hera. This stay in Wellington has allowed me to collaborate with experts, to visit collections, to explore archives and to cross-reference a significant number of documents and discourses, places and objects. Unlike a scientific practice, my inquiry does not consist of exploring in one direction or one area. It is the elements, their in situ arrangement and the reading of their interactions that guide me and lead me onwards. By exploring different elements or resources in the same space, links are made. Analogies, connections, contrasts and synergies are created by putting them in the presence of each other, allowing for the discovery of casual and causal links.

Archipels is my notebook and working area to display and visualise documents of different natures on the same (virtual) surface. Archipels creates a vast composition which in turn creates new pathways which enables me to rethink and see the interplay between elements. The platform helps to reorient me and to build collages and montages which in turn become the basis for future installations, objects, editions and images.

Figure 7. Vincent Chevillon, Time lapses us, 2021,
installation view, solo exhibition from the "Edges" series, former sacristy of the Collège des Bernardins, Paris.

Figure 8. Vincent Chevillon, *The Pit,* 2021,
Vidéo projection, installation view, Nuit Blanche, Grande nef du collège des Bernardins, Paris.

On one virtual table, "A lack of hearing, the silence of a world," presents a selection of documents involved in the current investigation initiated by the cetacean bones preserved in Strasbourg. It includes research carried out prior to my visit to Aotearoa, including a selection of reported accounts and encounters of cetacean strandings. The most recent images are my photographs taken at the sites of these strandings. I am interested in comparing these representations and situating them within the attitudes of people of the time and their ideas about the leviathans of the sea.

Among the most instructive images I have discovered is a series of Dutch engravings from the early seventeenth century. Here, I can observe a whole series of common customs, ranging from investigation (sampling and measuring) to entertainment and spectacle, with depictions of various people from across different social classes. While the various engravings represent different events, the formal qualities of the prints suggest that one particular engraving served as an exemplar in relation to those that followed. To follow the trace of these images is to explore along an edge. While weaving between different time periods and placing signposts on Archipels, my tracks are drawn, past and current tragedies are outlined.

> It is a question of edges, that is to say etymologically of ruts and borders. These margins are not yet borders, in the contemporary sense of lines that separate, but rather an inbetween that links heterogeneous elements. Our representation of the world is built here by the periphery, from where these forgotten and badly identified objects, these places impossible to name and to locate. It is not the delimitation that makes the territory but the game of tracks. It is not the resolution of the enigma that interests him but rather his ability to catch other threads, other narratives, other places and to install a generative process without limits, an archipelago of points connected to each other by networks hitherto unseen. Between these different clues, between these arrangements and their representation, another space is created, a new imaginary which explains the feeling of strangeness that one feels. The production of images that sharpen knowledge rather than a production of knowledge about images.[5]
>
> "Grégory Quenet"

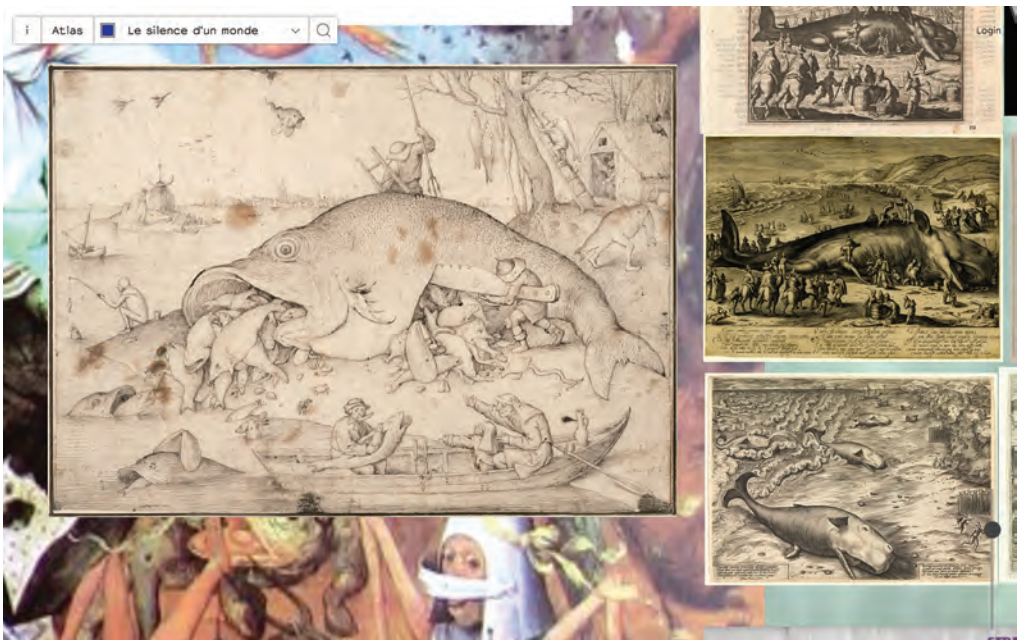

Figure 9. Series of Dutch engravings and a drawing by Pieter Bruegel. Screengrab from Archipels.

In regard to this purpose, I would like to share with you a story about the whale and the kauri tree, told to me by Shaquille Shortland, director of Tūāpapa Māori Language Academy. He begins by telling of the familial, physical and loving bonds between Kauri and Tohorā (the whale), but also the iwi's lust for them. Aspiring to live in different environments and under pressure from the iwi, these two giants will be separated and will maintain contact by any means possible through their relationship with their environment (sap tears, whale breath). After a number of troubles and exchanges, a peace will be concluded to unite the iwi with these two giants in salutary interdependence.

We all need such stories to imagine alternatives and possibilities of living together in order to face the ecological disaster of which we are the witnesses and the actors. This story skillfully responds to this need, but also to the one-sided economic dynamics induced by the exploitation of the two species by industrial societies. On Archipels, I find and display further images in light of this story. The proximity between the images of felled trunks and beached cetaceans reveals other surprisingly explicit details, such as human figures walking on top of the collapsed bodies of these giants.

While researching cetacean remains at Otago Museum, Dunedin, New Zealand, I was confronted at the entrance to the museum with a curious artifact, a gigantic section of a kauri tree. To the rings of this tree had been added in gold letters dates captioned according to a chronology that culminated in the founding of Otago.

On the right side:
1492: Columbus discovers America 1588: Armada defeated
1665: Great Plague
1759: Wolfe takes Quebec
1805: Trafalgar
1815: Waterloo

On the left side:
1642: Tasman sights Westland 1770: Cook sights Molyneux
1792: *Britannia* lands sealers at Dusky Sound
1817: Kelly burns Murdering Beach village
1848: Otago founded

In what other ways could we name our past? The way we name our roots will determine the fruits that will grow there. The same holds true for naming plants and shells. They are named as cultural markers, names of gods, kings, scholars, fathers or mothers, and thus inscribe a human heritage in the components of a world.

This reminded me of another story related to trees, for which I must return to our beached whales in Golden Bay. The name that Pākehā gave to this bay is also related to exploitation. Why Golden Bay? Because gold was found there in 1857. But 15 years earlier, it was called Coal Bay because coal was found there. And before that, Massacre Bay by the Frenchman Dumont d'Urville, Blind Bay by Captain Cook and Murderers' Bay by the Dutchman Abel Tasman after a confrontation with Māori. These different names show a lack of communication, a lack of listening, as an older name also refers to its history. I have heard that the Māori name for this bay is Mohua. It is also the name of a bird that was quite common before the nineteenth century on this part of the island. It was probably the song of these birds that Joseph Banks described in his journal on 17 January 1770, in a moving passage written during the ship's stay not far from there at Tōtaranui, Queen Charlotte Sound:

> This morn I was awakd by the singing of the birds ashore from whence we are distant not a quarter of a mile, the numbers of them were certainly very great who seemd to strain their throats with emulation perhaps; their voices were certainly the most melodious wild musick I have ever heard, almost imitating small bells but with the most tuneable silver sound imaginable to which maybe the distance was no small addition.[6]

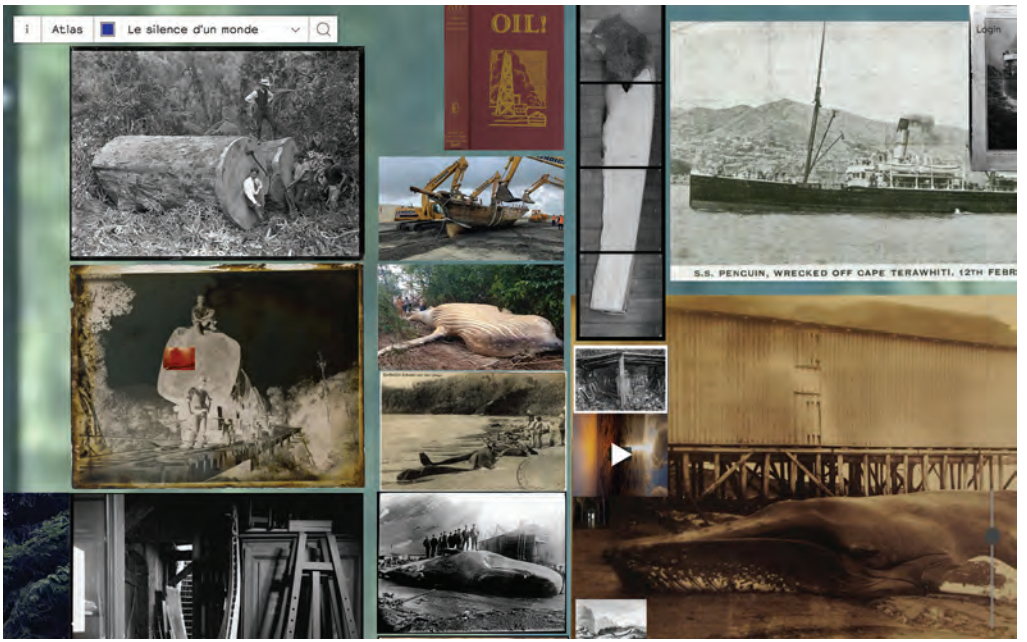

Figure 10. Screengrab from notebook. Correspondence between Kauris and whales exploitation and ships, 2023.

These birds are also called Te Tini o te Hākuturi, "The Myriad Hākuturi," guardian spirits of the forest. A story from Ngāti Mahuta tells how these birds prevented Rata from cutting down a tree until the latter expressed remorse. Once remorse was expressed, they built the canoe themselves. In Murdoch Riley's *Māori Bird Lore: An Introduction*, we read that the pōpokotea (whitehead) was one of the small birds chosen by Māui to accompany him on his (ultimately unsuccessful and fatal) quest to abolish death by killing Hine-nui-te-pō, the goddess of night and death.[7]

CONCLUSION

I began this article with a question:
What grows on whale remains?

This title came to me from a collage I made by juxtaposing different images of botanical specimens from the collections made by James Dall with a photograph of Dall in the background of the remains of a whale, *Berardius arnuxii*, which is now conserved in Strasbourg. On top of the whale are arranged photographic reproductions of the herbaria collected by Dall and conserved by Te Papa Tongarewa. There is something moving about these herbaria, in the position of the dried plant delicately composed to fit the surface of the leaf. A frozen time that it seemed appropriate to me to reanimate by a simple and direct collage.[8]

Through many books, the modern history of Aotearoa has been told to me of the encounters between Westerners and Māori. Many stories recall that it was whales that brought these peoples to these islands. Māori were carried by whales and the Western whalers followed the whales to fill their ships with their blubber. The French and American whalers were the first Westerners to settle down and to engage in exchange with certain Māori collectives. From these overlapping worlds, hybridities and new images are born. In English, a whale that is dying is said to be "in her flurry." The French whalers would say that a whale in its death throes "blooms." Rather than considering these vestiges as remains to be preserved from the ravages of time, could we not consider them as seeds, potential worlds

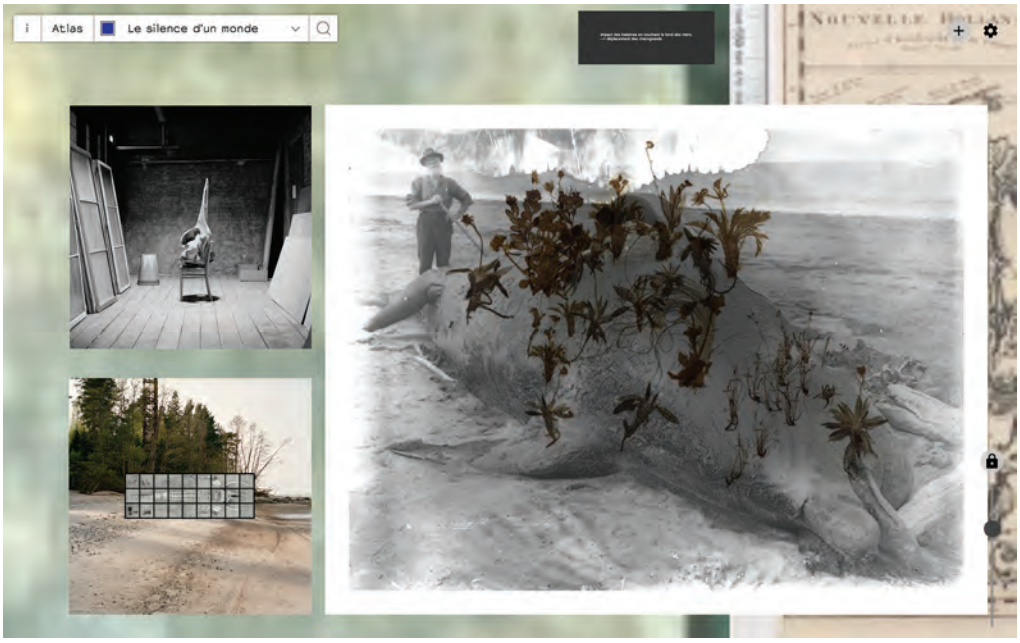

Figure 11. Synthesis of images and collage of James Dall's whale for sale, plus his "herbarium." Screengrab from Archipels.

waiting to bloom? As a whale sinks through the ocean column to the sea floor when it dies, a process known as whale fall, it becomes host to an entire ecosystem for maintaining life.[9]

The itinerary that I have presented here is far from being completed, and perhaps it will never be. As I write this story, my visa allows me to continue in New Zealand for another three months, and certainly new intrigues and encounters will be added. To follow the wake of these whales constitutes for me dynamic encounters. I meet with people, go up the course of a river to understand its tributaries and skirt by the shores of the worlds, to testify to the exchanges which are played out there. The bones may have been picked clean, but their presence is an embodiment of the search for the story of the whale which continues in the vestiges of the archival holdings that remain.

I would like to finish with the words of Quebec filmmaker Pierre Perrault. He "proposes to those who care / the least / to question, before it is too late, / this silence of the coves, heavy with incomparable words, / in order to put it in the world of language / which is indeed the only serious way / to build a country / for those who will follow."[10]

Initially trained in earth sciences, **Vincent Chevillon** went on to study art and in 2010 joined the post-diploma class of the Beaux-arts de Paris, La Seine. Since 2014, he has taught space and volume at the Haute Ecole des Arts du Rhin (HEAR) in Strasbourg, bringing together different fields of study, including anthropology, geophysics and iconology.

Vincent Chevillon has exhibited in France and abroad. His first show ("The Sperm Whaler's Dream") was exhibited in 2011 at the Pierre Bergé – Yves Saint Laurent Foundation at the Palais de Tokyo. In 2013, he spent seven months aboard a sailboat ranging widely across the Atlantic. This investigation, SEMES, received the support of the FNAGP and the DRAC Alsace and was exhibited in spring 2016 at the Espace Khiasma. Since 2013, he has been developing a participatory encyclopedic platform called Archipels with the support of several organisations (FNAGP, SCAM, Espace Khiasma, Dicream, Medialab SciencePO Paris).

His work is in several public collections. See further www.vincentchevillon.com

1 For photographs and transcriptions of the original letters, see Correspondance entre Dr. Döderlein et James Dale [sic], Transcription Marie Meister, Collection du musée zoologique de Strasbourg, Rockville New Zealand, Oct 8/05; To Dr L Döderlein, Zoologischen Institute Strassburg, at https://archipels.org/atlas/lettres-oderlin. For transcription of a letter about skeletons of marine mammals, see Correspondance de James Dall au Dr Döderlein, 8 octobre 1905, and for the transcription of a postcard on the same subject, see https://archipels.org/atlas/skeletons-of-marine-animals and https://archipels.org/atlas/dolphin-one-gentleman.

2 Examples include holotypes now in the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongawera, Registration Number: SP002022/A. See https://archipels.org/atlas/carex-dallii-kirk and https://archipels.org/atlas/kahurangi-pittosporum.

3 Rachel Becker, "New Zealand Just Experienced its Largest Whale Stranding in Decades/The Cause is Still a Mystery," *The Verge,* 12 February 2017, https://www.theverge.com/2017/2/11/14587770/pilot-whales-mass-stranding-beach-new-zealand-farewell-spit.

4 *The New Chivalry,* 15 October 1905. See photograph in archipels.org (Figure 2); full pages at https://archipels.org/atlas/the-new-chivalry.

5 Grégory Quenet, Introduction Text Of The Exhibition Lisières, *Stimultania,* 2021

6 *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768–1771 [Volume One],* January 1770, https://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Bea01Bank-t1-body-d7-d6.html.

7 See Murdoch Riley, *Māori Bird Lore: An Introduction* (Paraparaumu: Viking Sevenseas, 2001) and https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Whitehead_(bird).

8 See conceptual work in progress, bottom left, Figure 6. Synthesis of images and collage of James Dall's whale for sale, plus his "herbarium." Screengrab from archipels.org. "Lack of Hearing" on Atlas.

9 Leo Richards, "The Stages of Whale-Fall Ecosystems," *Natural World of Facts,* https://www.naturalworldfacts.com/whale-fall-ecosystems.

10 Pierre Perrault, *Le visage humain d'un fleuve sans estuaire* (Trois-Rivières, QC: Les Écrits des Forges, 1999).