

## Retracing the songlines

### Engaging with local histories on The Magdalen Islands

**Written By Becka Viau**

It is known within Australian Aboriginal mythology and culture that the land and all living creatures were sung into existence by the creators. This, united with the concept that the land and the human are one, drives the myth of the 'songlines,' paths across the land and sky that were once followed by the creator beings as they created. These paths continue to be traced and interpreted by generations. They are connected to nomadic travel, and are recorded in traditional songs, stories, dance, and painting.

All worldly knowledge is accumulated within the resonance of the 'songlines,' passing through generations of ancestors who walked in the paths of the creators. It is essential that the ancient 'songline' songs are sung in order to keep the land alive. Even better, if the songs are sung while walking through the landscape, they can reveal the knowledge of the creators and lessons learned by the Aboriginal ancestors. In a sense this way of knowing describes landscape, and the transference of worldly knowledge, as a traveling musical score.

The intimate relationships between the land, the human, walking and song play an important role in the approach to and theme of the event-residency, *Songlines*, visioned by curator Caroline Loncol Daigneault, and hosted by the Artist Run Centre AdMare on the Magdalen Islands. The project takes cue from the interpretation and fictional representation of the Australian Aboriginal ways of knowing that include 'dreamtime' and 'songlines,' as told through a 1987 book of the same title, *The Songlines*, written by English travel writer and Moleskin infamous, Bruce Chatwin.

The connection between the project and the book revealed itself to Caroline during her 'prospection residency' last year, as she hitchhiked across the archipelago, engaging with the locals to find her way: "... the history of the place is alive, shared over and over. People know where they come from and have a story for every little bit of land," she recalls. "I would get to know my way around by listening to those stories, which somehow functioned in a similar way as 'songlines,' always bringing up to present tense the myth of some potential origins (may it be social or geological), bringing practical information alongside."

From this point she felt that working from Chatwin's book had the potential to illuminate potentially hidden aspects of place in eloquent ways. She notes, the "Magdalen Islands is also very much concerned and focused on its tradition, on local news, local radio, etc. So I was interested in bringing a dimension that at first sight seemed off, coming from the very opposite side of the earth, but could shed light on meaningful aspects of the Islands."

Although Caroline describes the event-residency's connection to Chatwin's book as indirect, it is impossible to ignore the inclusion of the book as a key element in the overall approach to the *Songlines* project. The selection of this famous, romantic, ethnographic neo-colonial literary work as the title muse of this project is challenging. It would seem to be a problematic choice on the part of the curator, but it could also present the kind of problems that are in need of being addressed by artists and their institutions in the age of reconciliation and decolonization.

Is it possible for contemporary artists and curators in residence to constructively reflect upon the realities of the vast and unseen colonial structures that underlie many of our practices and institutions? Can artists, and curators, who travel to engage in a residency about place, a residency that includes 'community collaboration', escape the trope of aesthete traveller, or the cosmopolitan savant?

The structure of this event-residency could be considered an attempt to challenge the potentially controversial theme. Some elements of the project work to expose the conventional residency architecture to new hierarchies of knowledge. Artists questioned and utilized notions of fluidity between art and the everyday, public spaces and authorship throughout all of the residency projects.

Even though the conventional hierarchy is at play, leading from institution, to curator to artist, authorship remains at the forefront of *Songlines*. A key example being the inclusion of four local artists, described as 'collaborators,' who were tasked to engage with content created by the eleven resident artists and retell their experiences to their community. The outcomes of these collaborations were intimately woven into the everyday lives of the local audience via newspaper columns and radio shows, social media and performances. From this point of contact the artists' actions were written anew into locally authored stories.

The artists' included in the residency all have a tendency to utilize and interrogate public interactions and inclusion in their work. Public spaces and collective gestures were also common ground for research and engagement. At moments it seemed as though the artists

were there to complicate the expected results of a residency event. They were to be led and conducted by local knowings and everyday routine rather than bear witness to or illuminate aspects of place that were potentially hidden in the vibrations between the land and the people. Halifax's Michael Fernandes and Bay of Fundy Artist Lindsay Dobbin's works were the highlights of these moments for me.

Fernandes' piece, *Stick N' Stones*, worked to approach social intelligence from the other way around, from the absurdity of a potentially free imagination mixed with the vernacular. The work was completely ephemeral, captured in discussion and perhaps in the expressions of 'the collaborators.' Lindsay's work operated similarly, as a passive subversion of the conventional structure of the artist as an actor in a project. Focused on transient and ephemeral encounters, Dobbin's approach to her project, *Invisible Pathways*, sought to confirm the value of the "living process" of the artist. These approaches are, with great relief, in contrast to the object and presentation-fettered conventions of the event-bound residency.

But with a slight change in the wind the conventional structure of institutionally led, 'event based' residency reveals itself once again, colonizing the attempts of the project to subvert the discussion. The tightly knit schedule of public events and presentations highlighted the reliance of the institution on the safely packaged "gift to the audience." Although an alternative approach was sought through the curator's intent, it seemed impossible to escape the format imposed by the conventional system of the event based residency. I am not intending to de-value artist residencies in the context of the Canadian Art environment. I actually feel they are some of the most experimental and innovative spaces in the current Canadian Art landscape. Rather, I feel it is important to note that even within some of our more experimental institutions, like artist run centres, challenging conventional structures continues to be a difficult task.