

# Complex Intermingling and the Co-Evolution of Species

By Corinna Ghaznavi, Guest Essayist

*To be one is always to become with many.*

—Donna Haraway

The earliest uses of the word “interloper,” which combined “inter” with “loper” in the 1500s, referred to a trader who trespassed on the rights and charters of others.<sup>i</sup> While the definition has expanded to include anyone who enters or invades without invitation to do so, the earlier description is apt in the context of Mary Anne Barkhouse’s exhibition, *The Interlopers*. The installation examines the complex configuration of human and non-human interconnections with the ecological and cultural environment that has resulted from a long history of human transgressions in the name of economic and cultural expansion.

A long dark table is covered with a rich green runner. Three large crows perch at one end examining a cornucopia of food containers that spill along the length of the table, like precious porcelain figurines. A wild canid stands at the edge of the table opposite the crows, head raised and ears erect. Along a wall, painted a rich blue, hang a series of ornately framed paper prints. In keeping with her sustained interest in the time of first contact between European, particularly French, colonizers and Indigenous people in Canada, Barkhouse’s works combine the aesthetics of the opulent Louis XIV style with iconic north American animals, and elements of the historical and the contemporary. The melding of all three forces speaks of complex hybridity and dynamic relationships.

The Cyanotype and Anthotype prints, both techniques created in the 1800s, show a combination of wolves, coydogs and wolf dogs. The last wolf was killed in Yellowstone in 1926; by the 1950s no wolves remained anywhere in the western United States. Similarly, wolves were eradicated in the Canadian southern Rockies in the 1950s resulting in two important developments: a radical impact on the landscape and the proliferation of the coywolf. Without wolves, both Yellowstone and Banff National Park experienced a ballooning of the elk population who, with no natural predators, became more stationary, overgrazing on willow and aspen groves such that the grasslands deteriorated, streams eroded, water tables in valleys dried up, and beavers vanished alongside much other wildlife reliant on deciduous habitats.<sup>ii</sup> In eastern Canada the only remaining eastern wolves resided in Algonquin Park where the eastern coyote (larger than the western coyote and smaller than wolves), usually an enemy of the wolf, found them and began to mate resulting in the coywolf. These hybrid wolves have experienced a rapid evolution and proven themselves to be highly intelligent and adaptable. The coywolf has longer legs and larger paws than its coyote relative, ensuring better speed, and larger jaws and shorter snouts, enabling them to take down larger prey.<sup>iii</sup> Most notably, coywolves (along with coyotes) thrive in densely populated urban and suburban areas like Toronto, Chicago, and even New York City. Studies in Chicago show that coyotes expand their population to the maximum that the landscape can sustain (estimates currently number them at 2000), live up to four times longer than their rural cousins, continue to increase in size, and that their population is on the rise.<sup>iv</sup>

Coyotes and coywolves excel in living alongside humans while remaining just outside of their sight; crows, however, are highly visible, and audible, in urban areas. Similar to the coyote, crows too thrive in urban and suburban areas; in fact, biologist John Marzluff maintains that crow populations rise in tandem with human and urban density. He discovered that the crow mortality rate is low in the suburbs and high in rural habitats, and, in what Marzluff refers to as the “co-evolution of crows and humans,” crow ecology, culture, and genetic composition evolve according to the human habitats they experience.<sup>v</sup> Crows and coywolves mate for life. Both live and evolve seamlessly alongside humans, they play and they feint. They problem solve and have demonstrated Theory of Mind, recognizing that others have a different mental life and assessing and acting accordingly.<sup>vi</sup>

Considered pests, crows, wolves, coyotes and coywolves have been relentlessly killed by humans for as long as there has been contact between them, and yet they continue to thrive. It is this fact, and the co-evolution of these species with humans, that Barkhouse is particularly interested in. Using animals as metaphors, she examines both the cycles of nature and the cycles of diplomacy and politics, and how they are intertwined. The eradication of wolves and the persecution and suppression of Indigenous people and values—respect for the land, maintaining balance, taking only what one needs—has landed us in a precarious world. The legacy of over-hunting, over-logging, and general exploitation of people, animals and land that came with early settlers continues today in the form of resource development and free markets. As Kevin Van Tighem points out, the physical and social landscape are no longer two separate things: first over-hunting and culling wolves, and now the oil and gas industry and massive logging operations have left us with shattered landscapes, eroding cutlines and stripped forests.<sup>vii</sup> The physical, the cultural, and the “wild” have merged as both humans

and animals have transformed environments and continue to adapt to new realities. Adaptation for humans still includes killing what we consider animal predators or pests but it also means fencing, building animal tunnels and bridges, and trying to create conservation areas wherein we try to establish and maintain healthy ecologies.

However, every intervention has a consequence, and this too is embedded in Barkhouse's work. The gap that wolves left was filled by a more resilient and adaptive species, the coywolf, and the Northwestern Crow and the American Crow have interbred to create a larger and more mobile bird, so the trick is perhaps less intervention and more patience. As Van Tighem suggests, it is counterproductive to create ideal habitats for deer and moose that wolves eat and then to have to control the wolf numbers. He calls instead for restraint, humility, and thrift.<sup>viii</sup> And this is the biggest challenge we face: can humans, after the 20th century propelled us ever faster into the future through technology, communication and mobility, learn to slow down, or even do nothing and let things evolve in a quieter way? We do not and never have lived in isolation. Eradication has either not worked or forced nature to alter its course; as urban life for humans becomes ever more connected and hectic, the animals around us adapt to reflect this: urban blackbirds start their work days earlier, move at a faster pace, work longer hours, and sleep less. Dianne Ackerman reports that, to cope with urban life, some animals have begun to redesign their bodies at a pace fast enough for biologists to track.<sup>ix</sup>

The call to slow down is reflected in the very photographic processes that Barkhouse utilizes: digital and pinhole images are combined in her deep blue Cyanotypes and Anthotypes, printed with dyes she creates from leafy vegetables, crushed flower petals, and wine. The process requires time, creating dyes, using sunlight to dry and expose the images. The images show animals but, juxtaposed with these, plants and architecture. The plants are those brought from France by the artist as well as some found in her own environment in Haliburton. These include common, even "invasive" and pesky plants like dandelions, buttercups, plantains and grasses; plants so common they often define the landscape and so are less valued, even weeded out, yet also plants that are beneficial to a myriad of wildlife, human and non-human alike. The architecture in the prints are images taken in France of medieval fortresses, buildings erected to ward off the other, to guard against invaders. They are earlier marks on the landscape as cultural and physical environments were formed in reciprocity, built structures in the country that some centuries later would send its people to take control of a new continent.

Porcelain was introduced to Europeans through trade with the Chinese, who developed the technique during the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 BC). Imported to Europe, porcelain was highly prized and considered an expensive and desired luxury. It was not until 1712 that the elaborate Chinese porcelain manufacturing secrets were revealed to Europeans by the French Jesuit Father Francois Xavier d'Entrecolles. The porcelain sculptures Barkhouse has made and arranged on green silk are beautiful white objects that, upon closer examination, reveal themselves to be the ubiquitous disposables that we produce daily: Tim Horton's coffee cups, take-away trays, canned fish tins and plastic bottles. Whereas Louis XIV, renown patron of the arts, commissioned and collected artworks that would reflect his power and splendour, the objects Barkhouse has made reflect the culture of the 21st Century: mass produced non-renewable disposable waste. While we have long been aware of The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an island made up of 79,000 tonnes of waste that covers 1.6 million square kilometres—an area three times the size of France—scientists have newly discovered plastic waste on the very bottom of the earth's deepest ocean trench, more than 10 km beneath the surface. Ninety percent of the waste revealed itself to be single use items.<sup>x</sup> The news is filled with images of waste mountains, plastic islands, and even beaches where melting plastic fused with rock fragments, sand and shell debris have created a new material referred to as 'plastiglomerates.'<sup>xi</sup> While we are extracting oil and logging trees on the surface we are filling land and sea with single-use plastics that may never break down but rather attach themselves to other mineral stuffs to become a new geological form.

By displaying these objects alongside hybrid wolves and crows, and introducing flora and architectural fragments into the mix, Barkhouse addresses issues of contact, adaptation and exploitation. She demonstrates the dynamic relationship between ecologies and environments, the natural and the cultural landscape. Plastics, like people, flora and fauna, have moved globally, becoming invasive or extinct, adapting and evolving. Barkhouse places all the elements on a lateral plain, without dismissing the clear issue of power, in order to think about transplantation, adaptation, and the interlacing relationship of the human, non-human, ecology, and matter. She does not offer us answers but calls for attention and restraint. And while animals are metaphors in her work, Barkhouse also brings us face to face with real animals, evoking a revolution by referencing the French call for *liberté, fraternité, égalité*, for all players. Face-to-face, and wide awake is the only way towards restraint, humility and thrift; and, as Donna Haraway maintains, ultimately respect in order to survive:

Once again we are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down. Response and respect are possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each

other, sticky with all their muddled histories... It is a question of cosmopolitics, of learning to be “polite” in responsible relation to always asymmetrical living and dying, and nurturing and killing.<sup>xii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interloper>

<sup>ii</sup> Kevin Van Tighem, *The Homeward Wolf* (Rocky Mountain Books, 2013), 34f.

<sup>iii</sup> David Suzuki, *Meet the Coywolf: The Nature of Things*. CBC Television. August 31, 2014.

<sup>iv</sup> Suzuki

<sup>v</sup> John M. Marzluff and Tony Angell. *In The Company of Crows and Ravens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 283.

<sup>vi</sup> David Suzuki, *A Murder of Crows: The Nature of Things*. CBC Television, June 12, 2011.

<sup>vii</sup> Van Tighem, 50f.

<sup>viii</sup> Van Tighem, 59

<sup>ix</sup> Dianne Ackerman, *The Human Age: The World Shaped by Us* (New York and London: W.W.W. Norton & Co., 2014), 114f.

<sup>x</sup> Brandie Weikle, “Plastics, other garbage found in ocean trench nearly 11 kilometres below surface.” May 21, 2018.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/plastic-deep-sea-debris-ocean-trench-1.4667038>

<sup>xi</sup> Angus Chen, “Rocks Made of Plastic Found on Hawaiian Beach.” June 4, 2014. <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2014/06/rocks-made-plastic-found-hawaiian-beach>

<sup>xii</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 42

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