Chapter 1 Giving Back to the More-than-Human



Fred Dervin

Abstract This chapter serves as the introduction to the book. Fred Dervin starts by explaining why a book on the more-than-human is needed in the broad field of intercultural communication education. He also reminds the reader that things are omnipresent and do influence constantly the way we interact with others interculturally. Dervin shows that things have been completely ignored in intercultural scholarship and education while other fields of research have already focused on the more-than-human for some decades. The aim of the book is then presented: to give a 'voice' to things in discussions of interculturality. The introduction ends with a presentation of the chapters composing the book.

Keywords Omnipresence \cdot Interaction \cdot Intercultural scholarship \cdot Voice \cdot Giving back

1.1 Prelude

The idea for this book was inspired by one experience from the COVID-19 pandemic time. As I was quarantined for 10 days, I realized that I had all these 'non-beings' around me as my only partners and interactants for the duration of the quarantine. Some of them were familiar to me, others somewhat 'strange' (e.g. the shower tap in the bathroom; the intercom). Although I did see and interacted with human beings via technology constantly, I did not engage with them physically. A meal was brought to my door by a 'robot' three times a day. Only the more-than-human, the things around me, could 'communicate' directly with me (and me back to them)—sending out messages, providing some comfort and help, adding to my frustration, pleasing my eyes and taste, etc. We were intimate and exclusive partners for many days. I had brought a few things with me: my Kindle, my two computers, my favourite pens, my notebooks, my blue silk sleeping bag, a comb, a bottle of Avene water, coffee, a plastic coffee filter, three backpacks, my sleeping eye mask (and some COVID masks), my vitamins, etc. Some of the things 'belonged' to the quarantine room: a bed, a side table, a thermometer, a chair, a desk, a remote control, a TV screen, a kettle, an electric plug extension cord, three daily meals, an empty cupboard, a bucket, tissue, a wifi router, etc. For the duration of my quarantine, I used some of F. Dervin

them almost all the time and ignored others, to find myself making use of them and abandoning others at a later stage. I also used some of them in special and different ways (e.g. the bucket served as an extra computer stand when I gave a lecture). I also (re-)organized their positions in the room, mixing 'my' things and the things from the room. I showed some of these things to friends online, taking pictures of them and even funny selfies with them. For my quarantine time, they were there; they supported me; they were part of me; they facilitated and took part in my interactions with others. Without (some of) these things, my experience and interactions with the room and my contacts outside this room (sometimes thousands of kilometers away from me), would have been very different.

I asked myself these questions during the quarantine time: How different would my experience be with other things? How could people survive without these things in such a (grueling) situation? Should I be grateful for their presence? Why did it take this quarantine to realise that the more-than-human is somewhat precious in our lives and that, although these were very special circumstances, things are always there for, with and between us? Should I consider what we 'had' together to be some kind of intercultural interactions? As someone who has worked on interculturality for over 20 years I realized that this important part of who we are as individuals and as members of different communities had been lacking in my research.

Interculturalists must give back to the more-than-human.

This book aims to introduce and/or strengthen the position of the more-thanhuman in the broad field of intercultural communication education with subbranches in linguistics, education, business studies, nursing, amongst others. The more-thanhuman refers here to elements other than people and the institutions and structures that they have created and includes e.g. artefacts, objects, technologies, flora and fauna, animals. In the book we use the word 'things', in a non-pejorative manner, to refer to the non-human.

Let me start with three vignettes to introduce the topic of 'things for interculturality'.

[1]

After another visit to the British Museum in London in 1906, painter André Derain (1880–1954) wrote to Henri Matisse:

I have blackened four sheets of paper which I refuse to send you. It's such a mess of ideas, it's such a chaos of sensations, of reasoning, that you really would think I had gone mad. [...] I was for the fifth time at the British Museum. There are piled up pell-mell, so to speak, so to speak, the Chinese, the Negroes (sic), the Egyptians, the Etruscans, Phidias, the Romans, the Indies. I had to leave the museum because I had such confused ideas about all this. [...] I have insinuated myself into environments, into lives foreign to mine. So, I expanded my consciousness by something other than words. Sensations alone, defined with and by shapes, colors. [...] It is no longer an idea but an absolute idea, the consciousness of being. (quoted by Savoy, 2017: 13).

Although (intercultural) things are not mentioned directly by Derain, his (positive) confusion after seeing the 'environments' and 'lives' of different peoples derived

directly from his engagement with the more-than-human at the museum. *Other people's things*.

Interculturality through things is here admired.

[2]

In a letter to Captain Butler in 1861, after the looting and destruction of the Old Summer Palace in Beijing, French writer Victor Hugo (1802–1885) wrote:

- (...) Imagine some inexpressible construction, something like a lunar building, and you will have the Summer Palace. Build a dream with marble, jade, bronze and porcelain, frame it with cedar wood, cover it with precious stones, drape it with silk, make it here a sanctuary, there a harem, elsewhere a citadel, put gods there, and monsters, varnish it, enamel it, gild it, paint it, have architects who are poets build the thousand and one dreams of the thousand and one nights, add gardens, basins, gushing water and foam, swans, ibis, peacocks, suppose in a word a sort of dazzling cavern of human fantasy with the face of a temple and palace, such was this building.
 - (...) This wonder has disappeared.
- (...) All the treasures of all our cathedrals put together could not equal this formidable and splendid museum of the Orient. It contained not only masterpieces of art, but masses of jewelry. What a great exploit, what a windfall!
- (...) We Europeans are the civilized ones, and for us the Chinese are the barbarians. This is what civilization has done to barbarism.

I hope that a day will come when France, delivered and cleansed, will return this booty to despoiled China. Meanwhile, there is a theft and two thieves. I take note. (cited in Peyreffite, 1993: 530)

This second vignette is directly linked to things and interculturality—things that were looted by two European forces in China. For Hugo, the looting and destruction of these things (jade, bronze, silk) made him question the dubious dichotomy established by the 'West' since the eighteenth century: *the barbarian versus the civilized*.

Interculturality through things is here violated.

[3]

In 2018 the Italian fashion brand Dolce and Gabbana released a short video on Chinese social media that created a lot of (enduring) tensions between the luxury house and Chinese customers. In order to promote their Shanghai fashion show, Dolce and Gabbana created a video showing an Asian woman (wearing one of their pieces) attempting to eat pizza. Using chopsticks to do so, the woman is made to look ridiculous in her failed attempt. Chinese netizens reacted strongly to what they considered to be a stereotypical and racist depiction of 'China'. They also commented extensively on the way chopsticks were ridiculed in the video, constructing them as 'sacred' Chinese-invented tools not to be laughed at. As a consequence, the brand was boycotted by Chinese customers, although it apologised and removed the video. The combination of an Asian-looking woman together with the misuse of chopsticks was too much for the Chinese market. *Interculturality of things led to anger.*

When one starts considering the way we 'do' interculturality together, one notices, like in the three vignettes, that things always influence the way we communicate and

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are with others interculturally. And since most communication is now mediated by technology, the presence of a phone or a computer is becoming a common inclusion of the more-than-human in interculturality. Anecdoctically (or is it?), the fact that we have been wearing surgical masks for more than two years during the COVID-19 pandemic has also an impact on intercultural communication.

1.2 The Absent-Present

In a radio programme from 1968 about the future of objects in daily life, one audience member puts the following question to sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007): "Will there still be things in the future?" (Baudrillard, 1968). For intercultural communication education, I would be tempted to ask ironically: *has there ever been things?*

The more-than-human—things—is a ghost in research and education for interculturality, which is dominated by human exclusivism. Or to be more precise: *they are present-absent*—they are here but we don't see them, we don't notice them. They act and perform with us but we do not pay attention to them. They are mostly absent from the concepts, theories, methodologies, analyses, but also ideologies and 'orders' given to interculturalists as to how the notion should be understood and 'done'. As such, how often do you hear calls for praising, respecting, being tolerant of, non-essentialising the more-than-human?

[Only the human matters.]

The literature on intercultural communication education is mostly silent about the more-than-human in English. Most of the 'big' names seem to ignore them to focus on just the 'human'. To paraphrase Bruno Latour about his cosmopolitics (2004): we only witness *just humans talking to humans about humans*.

One of the rare publications on the topic of this book is a paper published by Roth (2001). The paper is entitled 'Material culture and intercultural communication' and was published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. The author argues (2001: 563) that "Artifacts, i.e., the material side of culture, and their relevance for intercultural interactions rarely caught the attention of interculturalists". He adds that 'material culture' has an influence on both the macro- and micro-levels of intercultural interactions (Roth, 2001: 564). In the paper, Roth (2001) claims that artefacts intertwine with intercultural communication in seven different ways—which will be explored in this book:

- Things as themes
- Things as contexts of interactions
- Things support interactions e.g. technologically
- Things support international transmission
- The use and meanings of things can differ interculturally
- Things can be turned into signs
- It is necessary to decode the messages built into things.

Taking into account things in interculturality is saying no to Eurocentric anthropocentrism—placing the human (and only the human!) at the centre of the notion. Many indigenous peoples and e.g. Asian societies do not necessarily divide the human and the non-human (e.g. Descola, 2013). For TallBear (2015) the ideology of separating the human and more-than-human (e.g. nature) has to with a mentality of 'settler colonial binary'—humans feel they *must dominate* the more-than-human.

Of course, intercultural communication education is not the only field to ignore things. But reading through the literature again to prepare for this book, and noticing the presence-absence of this 'ghost', I kept wondering why all this objectophobia? Does the omnipresence of the 'quiet' and 'mysterious' character of culture (which is never defined, circumscribed, clarified) hint at the absence-presence of things? I also wondered if current discussions of e.g. essentialism and reification, the potential solidification of people and groups through stereotypes and the like, had anything to do with objectophobia? [The same fear of crystallising as we imagine things to be static in their durability and inscrutability]. A thing appears to be 'cold', 'inanimate', 'feeling-less', etc.—although it lives with and through us and provides us with energy, identity, a potential sense of belonging, etc. *They are things and should remain as such*.

1.3 Giving Things the Voice They Deserve

Looking into the etymologies of the word thing in three languages (English, French and Chinese), one gets a sense of the complexities of a word that one brushes aside too easily as 'useless'. In English the word comes from Old English *bing* for *meeting*, assembly, council and discussion but also a subject of deliberation in an assembly. A similar word, sharing the same origin is still in use in German today to refer to a thing, while in Icelandic the Albingi corresponds to the country's Parliament. The meaning of meeting and assembly was dropped in English in the thirteenth century to start referring to personal possessions. In French, une chose comes from Latin causa for judicial process, lawsuit, case but also cause, reason. The verb choser (which is not in existence anymore today) used to signify to scold, rumble. What the etymologies of a thing in these two 'European' languages seem to hint at is that the word used to gather, assemble people to do something together, to make decisions or to judge someone. It was about bonds, relations, interactions and groups. In Chinese (a language to which we will make ample references in the book), the equivalent to the word thing is 东西 (dōngxi), which translates literally as a thing/an object (concrete and abstract people, things and objects), but also as east and west, from east to west and even near and beside. As such, each character of the word refers to opposite (but interrelated) directions: 东 (East) and 西 (West). There are many explanations as to why the two directions are used to refer to things, one of them being that the sun, the moon and stars, which influence all things, rise in the East and go down in the West. Directions in Chinese can also refer to the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire and earth. The word thing could then also have to do with a discussion between Confucian Zhu Xi and Sheng Wenru around buying things from a street, with Wenru asking why Xi was not buying 'north' (water) and/or 'south' (fire). Xi responded that only East (metal) and West (wood) (东西, dōngxi, thing) could be placed in his basket. The story behind this Chinese character also adds an interesting element to what is discussed in this book: a thing can be multidirectional; it is torn apart between directions; it is not static and it relates to the cosmos, to the same universe as human beings, becoming thus itself a being in its own right.

In European philosophy and sociology, things are omnipresent: Heidegger (1889–1976), Simondon (1924–1989), Baudrillard (1929–2007) (amongst others) have all discussed them in their work. Baudrillard (2020) has even created a semiological system of objects. Roland Barthes (1915–1980) has also discussed things extensively in his work, reminding us that things are not only meant to be useful but they also have specific meanings and create e.g. collective beliefs, they have aesthetic qualities and have an influence on our own identities (Barthes, 1993). Things can say something about us un-/intentionally.

In literature things have also been at the centre of creativity. For Balzac (1799–1850) things correspond to "the material representation that humans give to their thought" (my translation of "la représentation matérielle que les humains donnent à leur pensée", Balzac, 1842: 12). The poet Francis Ponge (1899–1989) tells us that "Things do not accept being seen but not heard" (my translation of "Les choses n'acceptent pas de rester sages comme des images", cited in Collot, 1991: 131). And more recently in a book about grieving for her parents Lydia Flem explains that when she cleaned and emptied her parents' home, "every object spoke of their absence" (my translation of "chaque object parlait de leur absence", Flem, 2005: 10). [See Caraion's (2020) book entitled *Comment la littérature pense les objets*—trans. how literature thinks of objects].

Many plays have also given importance to things. In *The Object Conference* (La Conférence des Objets) (2019), for example, Christine Montalbetti wishes to illustrate what she calls "the exciting materiality of the world" (my translation of "l'enthousiasmante matérialité du monde"; Montalbetti, 2019: 42). In the play she explores how we relate to things and urges the audience to look at things around them in a different way, arguing that objects are "evidence of moments of our existence" (my translation of "des preuves de moments de notre existence"; Montalbetti, 2019: 25). Written for five actors, the play introduces for example an apple peeler who tells the audience: "We are objects and tonight a few of us are going to break out of our silence. We have some things to tell you" (Comédie Française, 2019). One also finds a sewing box, an umbrella, an amulet and a lamp amongst the cast. In their monologues or dialogues the objects share their desire for revolt, their dissatisfactions, the violence they have experienced, etc. (Montalbetti, 2019: 25). In the play synopsis, we are told that "[the] challenge, a various serious one at that, is to renew our perception of what surrounds us, to re-enchant our relationship with the material world" (Comédie Française, 2019). This, again, is what this book aims to do for intercultural communication education.

Finally, let me make a reference to the arts. Artist Myriam Mihindou (2021), whose heritage is from Gambia, makes an important remark about visiting the Musée du

Quai Branly in Paris, a museum that conserves and documents works from Africa, Asia. Oceania and the Americas:

When I go to the Quai Branly museum and see these mute instruments at the entrance, it chills my bones. I would like to hear them, I would like them to tell me. Seems like obvious nonsense to me (my translation of "Quand je vais au musée du quai Branly et que je vois ces instruments muets à l'entrée, ça me glace les os. J'aimerais les entendre, j'aimerais qu'ils me racontent. Ça me semble être un non-sens manifeste", Mihindou, 2021: n.p.).

She also comments on the masks that are exhibited at the museum, which she finds 'depressing'. When she lived in Gabon, she explains, the only masks that she saw being used were 'alive', they were 'dancing', they were always found to be in active positions—not like these museum pieces. She maintains that she would like to give these things 'a voice' so that they can teach us new ideas. For Mihindou (2021), this would also be a democratic move. In order to make things present, beyond absence, in intercultural research and education we should also consider these principles.

Another artist, Tatiana Trouvé (2018) argues that things are like recorders and explains that for every exhibition that she organizes, she keeps the bar of soap that her team and herself use in the bathroom for the entire duration of the show and makes a mould out of it to record what they *constructed* together.

All these examples, from outside research and education, inspire us to include the more-than-human for interculturality. We must learn to see the more-than-human in the human, to train our eyes, ears and other senses to do so. And more importantly, we must overcome the (ideological) tensions between subject-object.

1.4 How to Work With the Book

This book has benefited from cooperation with Mei Yuan from Minzu University of China. While I have provided the conceptual, theoretical and pedagogical aspects of this book (Chaps. 2 and 3), Mei has fed in knowledge about the things that are used to reflect on the links between the more-than-human and interculturality in Chap. 4.

Through its post-anthropocentric outlook, the book argues that things can act like mirrors to reflect on self and other interculturally and on the way we think, rethink and unthink the notion. The book trains our eyes to experience *pareidolia*—perceiving images in a random or ambiguous visual pattern. *I must see shapes and pictures out of the invisibility of things in interculturality.* The book teaches us 'thing lessons' (Datson, 2007): to listen to arguments made about the world around us through things, as sites of meaning animated by their materiality; to listen to what they tell us about what there is and help us interpret and explain what there is. These lessons should be embedded in the personal, the individual, the biographical, the ideological, the political, the economic—*like interculturality*.

This book deals with today's central and yet often misunderstood and misconstrued notion of interculturality. As a highly complex and ideologically flavoured notion globally, interculturality deserves to be deconstructed and reconstructed ad

infinitum, especially when the world is confronted with multiple crises as has been the case since early 2020—crises that had, obviously, started well before that. For us, the prefix *inter*- and the suffix *-ality*, both suggesting perpetual change and reciprocity, are the analytical foci of 'doing' interculturality (see Dervin, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2022; Holliday, 2010, 2021; Piller, 2010; Dervin & Jacobsson, 2022; R'boul, 2021, 2022). Most importantly, the presence of others is the central key in both making sense and 'doing' interculturality. It is in this constant and overlapping interstice, approximating to and converging, that interculturality *becomes*.

This originality of this book is in its specific focus on one aspect of intercultural awareness that, to my knowledge, has been ignored in research and education: the presence and influence of *things* on the way we experience, do and reflect on interculturality. Using the word *things* in English may not appear to be positive—especially in a book title. For example, when one learns to write in English (and many other Indo-European languages) one is told not to use the word since it is deemed too informal, too vague and too unsophisticated. As a potentially imprecise and polysemic term, it may cause readers to interpret it in different ways. However, we insist on using this 'crude' word here, following in the footsteps of materiality research (e.g. Latour, 2005).

Beside this first introductory chapter, the book is composed of four other chapters. Chap. 2 introduces the polysemous notion of interculturality and argues that, as a 'Western-centric' notion, it needs to be constantly unthought and rethought to allow research and education discourses to evolve constantly, including e.g. more marginalised voices in the process. A fluid, adaptable and renegotiable approach to the notion is suggested and illustrated by the authors' own take on the notion at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 3 focuses directly on the more-than-human and provides useful reviews of research on the more-than-human in the human and social sciences as well as reviews of research on interculturality that has considered things. We take this opportunity to summarize what things *are/not*, *can/not* 'do' to us and with us and discuss how they could go hand in hand with interculturality. The more 'concrete' part of the book, five 'Chinese' things for interculturality, is presented at the end of the chapter.

In Chap. 4, we go deeper into our exploration of the more-than-human and interculturality by presenting and reviewing five 'Chinese' things for interculturality: calligraphy, chopsticks, jade, mahjong, Resident Identity Card. We wrote this chapter as support for reader reflexivity about the topic and e.g. questions are asked to reflect further on what the more-than-human can teach us about the ways we engage with interculturality as both as a phenomenon and a subject of research and education. We conclude this central chapter with a useful framework for examing things for interculturality.

The final chapter which serves as a conclusion argues that the more-than-human can definitely offer unparalleled insights into interculturality. Summarizing the main observations made throughout the book and especially in the previous chapter, the multiple positions that things can offer for intercultural work are reviewed. What things can 'do' for us in terms of research and education is also problematized and

proposed as guidelines for future work on the more-than-human in intercultural communication education.

I hope that you will enjoy reading this book, which will be different from many books that you have read on intercultural issues. I do encourage you, dear reader, to be as critical and reflexive as possible while engaging with our ideas, arguments and examples in what follows. The topic of the book is unique and, as a first entry into it, we all need to keep our eyes and ears open. Interculturality is often mistreated in research and education and by being vigilant about what we read, we cannot but enrich it. May the more-than-human now become part of (y)our future engagements with interculturality!

[Quid pro quo¹]

Before you start reading the next chapter, take some time to reflect on these questions:

- Where do you situate yourself in current intercultural scholarship and education?
 How do you understand the notion of interculturality? Why are you interested in the notion? What are your scholarly and educational ambitions in relation to interculturality?
- How much thought have you given to the place of the more-than-human in relation to intercultural communication education? What do you expect to discover in this book?
- We use 'Chinese' things in the book as examples. Try to picture for yourself some 'Chinese' things that you have come across. What do they look like? How did they feel like when you held them in your hands? What is 'special' about them from your own perspectives? Have you ever learnt anything 'intercultural' from 'Chinese' things?
- Finally, take some time to look at the things around you as you are reading this book and consider the following questions: Why are they here next to you? What is their (real) purpose? What do these things 'do' to you? Do they relate to your identity? Are they replacable and/or disposable? What memories are attached to them? Apart from you, who 'benefits' from these things? How much do these things remind you of the world/other places?

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¹ Latin for *something for something*, indicating here that we wish to open up reciprocal dialogues with our readers in this book.

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