Displaced Things in Museums and Beyond: Loss, Liminality and Hopeful Encounters

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Sandra H. Dudley's *Displaced Things in Museums and Beyond* is a work of significant ambition, offering a theoretically and methodologically distinctive contribution to the anthropology of material culture and museum studies. Drawing on three decades of fieldwork, most centrally with Karenni refugees living in camps on the Thai-Myanmar border, and in museums and heritage sites across Myanmar, India, and the United Kingdom, Dudley develops what she terms a 'displacement anthropology': a conceptual framework that places the displaced object at the centre of inquiry and asks what it might mean to understand the lives and effects of things from their own perspective. The result is a book that is theoretically innovative, empirically grounded, and, in its insistent optimism, moving.

The volume is organised in three parts that map onto the structural logic of displacement itself. Part I, 'Departures', opens with a chapter outlining the displacement anthropology framework and its theoretical debts to ritual theory, to object biography approaches pioneered by Igor Kopytoff and Nicholas Thomas, to non-representational theories of social and material worlds. A second chapter examines what it means, concretely, for an object to become displaced. Part II, 'Liminality', develops the concept of the displaced object as a liminal entity: suspended between prior and present contexts, neither fully belonging to the world it has left nor to the one in which it now finds itself. The two chapters in this section, 'Representational Things' and 'Subjunctive Things', are among the richest in the book, exploring the ways in which displaced objects operate simultaneously as representational devices and as vehicles of subjunctive possibility, capable of enacting transformations in the people who encounter them. Part III, 'Transformations', brings the argument to its hopeful conclusion in a final chapter, 'Hopeful Things', which asks whether and how displaced objects can become genuinely at home in their new worlds and, in doing so, open up emancipatory possibilities for human subjects.

The theoretical architecture of the book is its greatest strength. Dudley's displacement anthropology is distinguished from similar approaches, such as object

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diaspora frameworks developed by John Peffer and Paul Basu, exile studies, material culture biography, by its insistence on remaining thing-centred rather than context-centred, and on foregrounding the particular, arresting moments in a displaced object's trajectory rather than treating movement as continuous and undifferentiated. It is precisely in the gaps, pauses, and liminal interstices of displacement, Dudley argues, that transformative possibility resides. Here she draws productively on anthropological theories of ritual (particularly Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage and Victor Turner's elaboration of liminality) to conceptualise displacement as a structured process with distinct phases, each carrying its own implications.

The empirical range of the book is impressive. Dudley moves between very different kinds of displaced objects and institutional settings: the *ka-thow-bòw* poles of the Kayah State Museum in Loikaw, Myanmar, Thibaw Min's Lion Throne and its complex afterlives across Mandalay Palace, colonial records and the National Museum in Yangon, the frog drums of the Karenni, the Aztec turquoise serpent in the British Museum, and the tokens left by mothers at the Foundling Hospital in London. Each case is selected to illuminate a different facet of the displacement process, and the movement between contexts and cultures prevents the framework from becoming parochial. What emerges is a comparative anthropology of material displacement, attentive to both the specificities of individual objects and the structural patterns that recur across them.

Three of these cases deserve particular attention. The *ka-thow-bòw* pole, a ritual object of central importance to the Karenni of Myanmar's Kayah State, understood not merely to represent but to literally embody the community's relationship with the deity able to protect and sustain it, appears in the book both in its living ritual context, where new poles are erected each year while the old ones are left to decay as material markers of accumulated time and memory, and as a specimen on permanent display in the Kayah State Museum in Loikaw. The juxtaposition is revelatory: the same object type, in the museum's hands, is stripped of its cyclical temporality and frozen in a perpetual present, its liminal qualities both preserved and indefinitely suspended. Dudley's analysis of this case exemplifies the book's broader argument that the museum, far from being a neutral custodian of material culture, is itself a liminal space (not unlike a refugee camp) in which displaced things are disciplined into conformity with institutional norms while retaining, beneath the surface, an unrealised potentiality.

Thibaw Min's Lion Throne presents a different set of displacements, operating on a colonial and political register. Removed from the Hall of Audience in Mandalay Palace in 1885 following the British annexation of Upper Burma, the throne passed through a succession of institutional homes before eventually being reinstalled in the National Museum in Yangon, where it occupies a position of renewed symbolic authority. Dudley reads the throne not simply as a trophy of colonial dispossession but as an object whose potentiality continued to exceed and outlast each successive attempt to fix its meaning—first as evidence of conquest, then as a museum specimen, and finally as an emblem of national heritage. Alongside the throne, she traces the fate

of the smaller gilded wooden page-boy figure that once accompanied it, which was donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford in 1889 and has remained there ever since: two objects once inseparably connected, now separated by half the world, each incomplete without the other.

The tokens from the Foundling Hospital, by contrast, operate at an intimate, domestic scale. Left by mothers surrendering their infants to the Hospital in eighteenth-century London, these small objects (scraps of fabric, coins, hazelnut shells, fragments of ribbon) were intended as future means of identification, kept by the Hospital against the possibility that a mother might one day return to reclaim her child. Most never did. These objects are among the most intensely liminal in the book: suspended between a reunion that never came and a loss that was never formally acknowledged, they embody what Dudley calls the co-existence of presence and absence that is the defining condition of the displaced. Their inclusion in a study that also encompasses royal thrones and ritual poles is one of the book's most eloquent methodological choices, insisting that the displacement framework applies with equal force to the grandest imperial object and the most modest personal relic.

The book's engagement with the ethical and political dimensions of displacement is handled with particular intelligence. Dudley does not sidestep the violence that underlies many of the displacements she discusses (colonial dispossession, forced migration, the extraction of objects from living communities into metropolitan museums) but she refuses the reduction of displaced things to simple victims or symbols of loss. The concept of 'hopeful things' with which the book culminates is an attempt to think through the genuine, if often contradictory, transformative potentials that displacement generates. This is a difficult balance to maintain, and Dudley navigates it with considerable care, drawing on Edward Said's description of displacement as a potential 'form of freedom' without romanticising the conditions that produce it.

Particularly noteworthy is the prologue, which opens with Choman Hardi's poem *My Father's Books*: an account of a Kurdish poet's library scattered and destroyed during Saddam Hussein's genocidal campaign against the Iraqi Kurds in 1974. Dudley's reading of this poem as both literal and allegory for the displacement of persons and things sets the tone for everything that follows: rigorous but humane, theoretically alert but deeply attentive to the particularity of individual lives and objects. This combination of intellectual precision and empathic imagination is sustained throughout the book, and constitutes one of its most distinctive qualities.

There are points at which the apparent heterogeneity of 'things' and the density of the theoretical apparatus risks outpacing the empirical analysis, and readers unfamiliar with the literatures in ritual theory, non-representational theory, or material culture studies may find some passages demanding. But these are minor reservations in relation to a work of such breadth and conceptual sophistication. *Displaced Things in Museums and Beyond* makes a significant and lasting contribution to museum

anthropology, material culture studies, and the broader theoretical conversation about what it means for persons and things to be displaced, exiled, or out of place. It will be essential reading for scholars and students working across these fields, and its arguments resonate well beyond the academy at a moment when displacement (of persons and of things) has become one of the defining conditions of the contemporary world.