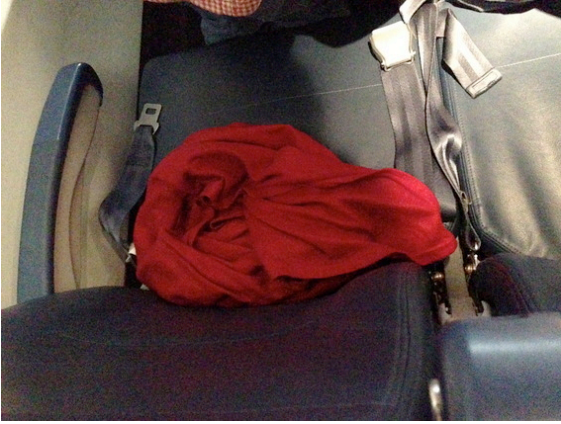




Blankets, the Original Viral Media

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Discarded airline blanket (Christopher Schaberg)

On April 28 1993, a crewmember on an American Airlines flight to Dallas-Ft. Worth from Washington D.C. radioed ahead to request a change of blankets; the ground crew receiving the message transcribed it as: "inbd crew req complete chg of all pillows blankets due gay rights activists group onbd." Some of the passengers on this flight had recently attended the March on Washington for [Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation](#).

Blankets cover things, like cold passengers during a long flight, or dead bodies after a tragedy. In this case, the airline blankets also *uncovered* something: ignorance about how a particular virus can be contracted -- or maybe just homophobia. Perhaps the American Airlines messenger also feared that *gay* itself would go viral, that it would be carried or communicated indiscriminately by the airline's blankets.



Overhead bin full of blankets (Flickr/[joyewan](#))

The airline blanket is an icon of modern flight. It is small (50" x 40"), usually made of blue or red mass-produced polyester fleece. It is seemingly innocuous and forgettable, discarded in the seats or tossed on the floor as passengers shuffle down the aisle and deplane. There are no industry standards for airline blankets. Darren Everson's 2007 [article](#) "Can Flying Make You Sick?" in *The Wall Street Journal* broke the news that ATA Airlines (now defunct) cleaned their blankets every 30 days or "as needed." Everson reported that US Airways washed blankets every five days, and American Airlines replaced its pillowcases and blankets every 24 hours.

These days, passengers often engage with pillows and blankets more intimately and privately: they buy one on the airplane or plan ahead and bring their own. American Airlines now charges \$8 for a travel pack, which includes a pillow and a blanket. JetBlue started charging for blankets in 2008 -- ostensibly motivated by germs, not revenue. As a [spokesperson](#) for the airline explained it, "the pillow and the blanket could be on that flight for four to six flights before being replaced." Nevertheless, JetBlue and others who followed suit were criticized for the blanket and pillow fees; the decision, critics alleged, seemed motivated by airlines' move to fee-based comfort, or privatization by the inch. No longer a simple fact of travel, airline blankets are now symptoms of microbes and emblems of micro-capital flows.

OBJECT LESSONS

a series about the hidden lives of ordinary things

Some of the very passengers on that 1993 American Airlines flight may have gazed at large-scale quilt panels from The Names Project AIDS Memorial that covered the National Mall during the March. 12' x 12' quilt blocks suture 3' x 6' handmade quilt panels -- each one a memorial to a life overcome by a virus. The panels are covered with names and hieroglyphics of friends, lovers, children, parents -- even philosophers. (Michel Foucault [appears](#) on blocks 00076, 00180, 01564, and 04233.) The blanket is a traveling act of mourning and memory. It covers parks but also *uncovers* AIDS, as I learned in 1995 when I visited portions of the quilt on display in my small hometown in South Dakota. HIV/AIDS was a distant problem (if a problem at all) to people in this town, but they knew the quilt and quilting intimately -- and thus the blanket uncovered an unspoken issue through its familiar form.



The Names Project

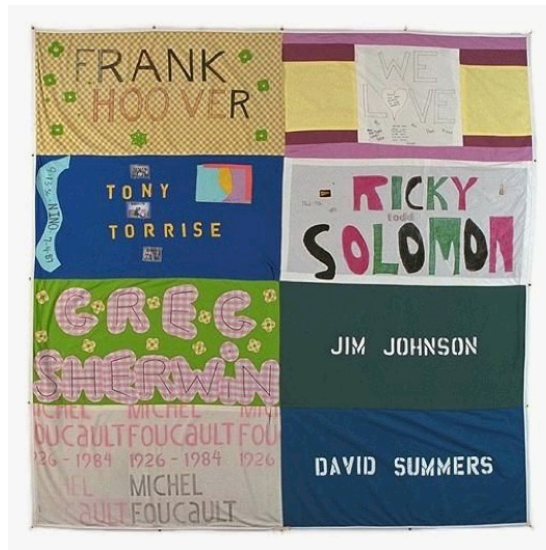
The quilt communicates a reality that, for many at the time, was incommunicable. [President Reagan](#) did not publicly utter the word "AIDS" until 1987, and then only to insinuate that it exacts punishment on those who have behaved immorally: "When it comes to preventing AIDS, don't medicine and morality teach the same lessons?" By the 1993 March on Washington, over 440,000 cases of AIDS had been reported; over 270,000 were already dead from AIDS or another HIV-related illness. By blanketing the National Mall, the Names Project uncovered the dead.

A blanket always acquires a life other than itself. We may take the blanket for granted as an object -- quiet and inert. But when it becomes soiled -- whether with food (American Airlines later explained that the blankets actually needed to be replaced because someone spilled tomato sauce), bodily fluids, or perhaps even a virus -- it takes on a kind of vitality. Yet the blanket presented as life-giving can in fact be deadly, too.

In 1763, the British disseminated smallpox in gift blankets to Indian insurgents led by Chief Pontiac (Ottawa) against British invasions of Indigenous homelands in the Great Lakes region. Trader and land speculator William Trent recorded in his journal that as two Delaware Indians left Fort Pitt (in present-day Pittsburgh) after meeting with British soldiers, they were given blankets infested with smallpox. "Out of regard for them" the soldiers gifted "two Blankets and an [sic] Handkerchief out of the Small Pox Hospital." Trent added, "I hope it will have the desired effect." *Out of regard for them* presents the British as caring and benevolent -- when in fact they had just gambled on the blankets infecting the Indians with smallpox. Their gamble paid off. A smallpox epidemic spread among the southeastern Ohio peoples from 1763-1764. The contagion affected the Ohio Iroquois and Shawnees and further south, the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Muskogeas. During the first four centuries of European colonization, 90% of Indigenous peoples in the Americas died from viruses like smallpox, measles, and influenza.

Variola virus (smallpox) infects most productively by way of the respiratory tract -- by prolonged face-to-face contact. The Indians who accepted blankets most likely inhaled the trace of skin and pustule remnants from the blanket's fibers. When they opened the blankets to wrap the warm fabric around their bodies, they inhaled at just the right (wrong) moment. Once a body was infected with smallpox, the illness could last over five weeks -- assuming the victim survived at all. In 1980, just one year before the CDC publicly named HIV and AIDS, the World Health Organization announced that smallpox had been eradicated; nevertheless, it lives on as a potentially vital [threat](#). Perhaps this historical precedent informed the American Airlines agent's ignorance.

The nature of HIV's communicability is that it cannot live outside the body. A protective barrier can stop it cold. And yet there's the practice of barebacking, or intentionally having sex without a condom. By way of a risky sexual practice, [Tim Dean](#) suggests that the dead might continue to live, albeit in the form of a virus: "What would it mean for a young gay man today to be able to trace his virus back to, say, Michel Foucault?" Foucault's presence might persist, not only on a memorial quilt, but also in a living body.



The Names Project

The Names Project evokes tears and mourning; it relies on a certain cultural nostalgia that not only binds the mourner to the dead, but the mourner and the dead to a history of quilting, to black Southern traditions, like [Gee's Bend](#), the [Underground Railroad's quilting code](#) and the [Freedom Quilting Bee](#). Quilting is an inherited cultural practice, the quilt an inherited object.



"Deep Down, I Don't Believe in Hymns," Dario Robleto (by permission of the artist)

In his 2001 installation "Deep Down, I Don't Believe in Hymns" conceptual artist Dario Robleto turns a blanket back on itself. He infests a military-issued blanket from 1862 with vinyl record dust, specifically the particles of two songs: Neil Young and Crazy Horse's "Cortez the Killer," and Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" (which was originally recorded and performed by Gloria Jones in 1965 -- Soft Cell, a UK band, covered it in 1981). Neil Young and Crazy Horse's "Cortez the Killer" imagines the colonizer with galleons and guns, "dancing across the water" looking for the new world, while Montezuma basks on shore, surrounded by abundance: cocoa leaves, pearls, gold, beautiful women, strong men, and secrets. While the title itself critiques discovery (so-called) and conquest, Neil Young and Crazy Horse cannot resist falling back on the very colonial tropes they wish to

send up. In the song "Cortez [was] the killer" -- but there are also the beautiful Natives, and a beautiful Native woman, specifically, "who still loves me to this day." The song is infected with tainted love.

This military-issued blanket is likely from the [U.S.-Dakota War of 1862](#), an intense six weeks of Dakota resistance against settler encroachment and the U.S. nation's broken treaties. At the end of those six weeks, a military commission tried nearly 400 Dakota men accused of participating in the war. 303 of those were sentenced to death and 16 were given prison terms. [President Lincoln](#) (who was deeply embroiled in the Civil War) reviewed the trial transcripts and "anxious to not act with so much clemency as to encourage another outbreak on one hand, nor with so much severity as to be real cruelty on the other" he decided to execute those who had "been proved guilty of violating females." But since only two men were found guilty of rape, he expanded his charge to include those who had participated in "massacres." On December 26, 1862, 38 Dakota men were hanged in present-day Mankato, Minnesota -- this remains the largest government-sanctioned execution in U.S. history.

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, the Dakota people were removed to reservations where many of them starved because of scarce game, drought, and unsuitable soil. Others died of disease or exposure because, despite its promises, the U.S. government failed to supply clothing -- and blankets. Blankets were a matter of life and death on the Plains. The blanket meant survival, but also communicated a sense of dependency on the U.S. People died without blankets. And then blankets retroactively covered the dead.

Robleto places the historic military blanket before us -- infested not with a virus, but with vinyl record dust. Robleto makes the infestation visible: up close, one can see that the blanket is covered in something like ash, or tiny black specs. The blanket is soiled. The conceptual joke of it all, that a blanket which has been a matter of life and a gift of death is itself now infected with a "tainted love," depends upon the history and reputation of the smallpox blanket, or the airline blanket. "Deep Down, I Don't Believe in Hymns" riffs on the blanket's viral capacities, or the ways that the cover mutates, remixes, and finds another host.



Vintage United Airlines blanket (Etsy/[vintagepickins](#))

The blanket goes viral when it threatens the security or sentiments of a flight crew, when it is gifted to spread smallpox, or when it uncovers the subject of HIV/AIDS in a small Midwestern town. It also has the potential to communicate homophobia, or tactics of colonization. The blanket covers, but it cannot conceal -- even a blanket covering a body conceals one surface only to expose another, the blanket itself. In the act of covering up, the blanket betrays itself as an agent of communicable disease, a conveyor of rumor and fear, or just a new surface that draws attention to what's underneath.

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<http://m.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/07/blankets-the-original-viral-media/277512/>