MAT Medicine Anthropology Theory

INTERVENTIONS

Soap

Touching objects, feeling critique in critical global health studies

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Abstract

Anthropology has long grappled with the politics of critique. In critical global health studies, an emerging sub-field of medical anthropology with roots in histories and geographies of colonial and international health, ethnographers negotiate relations and transactions in the field that pivot around boundaries at the core of our disciplinary practice: inside/outside, critique/complicity, theoretical/applied. Yet, while critique is a primary endeavor of the anthropologist, few have explicitly analyzed or reflected on its meanings, valences, affects, and entailments, particularly amid the rise of global health and the NGOization of the global South that inflects much of our work. In this essay, I reflect on the state of critique in critical global health studies, sketching its gestures, rhetoric, and intentions. Then, I trace some of the journeys of the bar of soap pictured below, an object that touched me in many senses of the term by intersecting, facilitating, and holding my anthropological interest for over a decade. Finally, drawing on recent feminist science studies scholarship, I suggest that critique, as entangled and entangling practice, is a form of care that might productively reframe anthropologists' normative aspirations to 'usefulness' or 'relevance'.

Keywords

critical global health, ethnography, critique, data, care, soap

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> Did you know that Sunlight was the world's first packaged, branded laundry soap, originally produced by the Lever Brothers in 1884? . . . The tablet comes as a multi purpose soap for laundry, washing and bathing.[1]

In the image above, I cradle a rather unspectacular object in my hand: a tablet of Sunlight soap. Mundane as it is, soap has figured centrally in my ethnographic analysis of demographer-led household surveys that collect health data in Malawi. The soap, wrapped in bright yellow cellophane packaging, was one-half of an 'ethical gift' given to Malawian survey participants (the other half a bar of Lifebuoy soap) for their participation in a survey in 2008. Soap, as token of thanks, lubricated the collection of data, even as it figured in participants' critiques of research projects; some suggested soap was too small a gift and that they should be paid wages for answering questions. This and many other material things (hand-drawn maps, log forms, clipboards) are important boundary objects in global health research, a means of translating between and linking together intersecting social worlds (the village, the research project, the office, policy) (Star and Griesemer 1989). Soap's material characteristics enable it to fit into and streamline larger projects, even as its physical form is imbued with competing meanings by those who encounter it. Objects such as this bar of soap, when subjected to the ethnographer's gaze refracted through 'thing'-centered thinking, reveal something about the relations, transactions, and logics of global health research (Latour 1993; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2006; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). In tracking the life cycle of soap-gifts, we better understand how people at multiple scales of technoscientific worlds conceive of the same object and how soap orchestrates the intermingling of social relations that are central to conducting research.[2]

Yet, outside of its analytical and methodological utility – that is, its ability to reveal things global health itself may not see – this bar of soap also invites reflections on the meaning, intentions, and payoff of critique in critical global health studies. In this essay, I first briefly reflect on the state of critique in critical global health studies, sketching its gestures, rhetoric, and intentions. Then, I trace some of the journeys of the bar of soap pictured here, an object that has intersected, facilitated, and held my anthropological interest for over a decade.

1 'Sunlight'. Unilever East & West Africa, https://www.unilever-ewa.com/brands/our-brands/sunlight.html (link now defunct).

2 For researchers and ethics board members, a bar of soap is a standardized, fair, and ethical gift; for research participants, it is too small to compensate the labor they expend answering survey questions; for Malawian data collectors, it is a lightweight and convenient object to be carried in canvas bags into the field; for the anthropologist (me), it is simultaneously an object (gift) and a concept (the Gift), among other things, as elaborated in the ensuing pages.

Finally, drawing on perspectives from feminist science studies, I suggest that critique, as an entangled and entangling practice, is a form of care that might productively reframe anthropologists' normative aspirations to usefulness or relevance.

Critique, relevance, care

In the collective disciplinary archive of our writing and reading practices, through our invention of culture, the field, and other concepts, and through our private and public anxieties, we witness the historical becoming of genres and affects of critique in anthropology. In critical global health studies, 'critical' signals both distance from and desired intimacy with an object. As Biehl (2016, 135) astutely puts it, 'instead of withdrawing to a dispassionate armchair position and easy cynical dismissal [of global health], [ethnography] inhabits the tension between a critique of and a critique in global health'. In its attentiveness to social processes, ethnography is a counterbalance to the quest for certainties and foreclosures that tend to characterize projects in global health (136). Ethnography as theory and method – in its invitation to come ever closer to, to touch, and to be touched by the objects we study – is a productive site from which to imagine critique beyond what others have identified as its normative negative and disavowing register (Sedgwick 2003; Fassin 2012, 243–57).

Many recent discussions in anthropology (those that counterpose the anthropology of suffering and the anthropology of the good in the wake of Robbins's [2013]) essay, or discussions of the Anthropocene, for example) hinge on the effort to discern what kind of critique we should be engaging in. How should we relate to things we wish to critique? What should be the payoff of critique? In my own corner of anthropology, such questions manifest in the register of relevance and utility, a legacy of the emergence of medical anthropology as bedfellow to colonial and international health projects and designs: how do medical anthropologists make our critiques useful or relevant (to global health)? Such queries resemble long-building anxieties around the affects and aesthetics associated with critique in literary studies. Building on Ricoeur's (1965, 26) reflections on scholarly attachment to a hermeneutics of suspicion, the reading style he frames as a 'battle against masks' or a 'reduction of illusion', scholars such as Sedgwick (2003) and Felski (2015) have aimed to think beyond a habituated 'negative' orientation to our objects of study, through which we seek to expose, diagnose, or unmask, and anxiously dread being taken off guard. This kind of hypervigilance, Latour (2004) suggests, leads to turgid, ready-made explanations and condemnations.

Critiques of critique have destabilized the figure of the critic as one who cuts through the 'noise' to see what is really going on. As anthropologists have long shown, critique is part

and parcel of everyday life, the motor of practices, styles of thought, and documentation efforts typically not assigned the moniker 'critical' by virtue, perhaps, of their mundaneness. Anthropologists have shown how 'everyday' people engage in the kinds of interpretive labor that the humanities (and social sciences) deem to be the purview of heroic and transcendent scholars who often take negative critique as a guarantee of oppositional (good) politics (Love 2017a, 367). As Love (2017b) points out, critique is a class habitus, evidenced by scholars' long history of 'discovering' things (power, ontology, 'thing-centered' thinking) that marginalized folks, in their effort to navigate worlds not made to accommodate them, have 'known and spoken about for so long' (Christian 1987, 54; Collins 2000; Todd 2016).

As an anthropologist among demographers, I noticed that a hermeneutics of suspicion was built into the whole of the survey research apparatus and infrastructure of data collection. Data themselves were presumed guilty by demographers, even as they cherished them. Data were proleptically dirty and tainted: keeping records, checking surveys, and training and surveilling data collectors in the field belie this strong suspicion (see Lowenkron and Ferreira 2014). While anthropologists – and their critical prose and metaphors – tend to cast these rational techniques of management and control as cold, calculating symptoms of obsessive objectivity, it was through handling quantitative data myself (as a fieldworker among Malawian fieldworkers who collected data for surveys) that I came to see the suspicions built into technologies and instruments of enumeration as somewhat akin to anthropological critique. Suspicion organizes perception and practice, and visualizes data, in the respective fields. For demographers, deviations from the standards of data collection – usually blamed on fieldworkers – were a threat to the quality of their quantitative data; for anthropologists, quantitative data are, even before being collected, inadequate representations of on-the-ground realities. Amid such suspicions, Malawian data collectors, American and European demographers, and this anthropologist – enacted their imperfect designs upon the world not through rote adherence to established standards for data handling or quality, but, rather, through careful engagement, negotiation, and intimacy.

Candea (2010, 255) suggests that anthropology's enthusiastic embrace of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion is rooted in our wariness of 'skeletons in our imperial cupboard'.[3]

3 The move to suspicion might likewise explain why certain topics in medical anthropology, such as therapeutic vernacularism, medical pluralism, and forms of care and healing outside the global health clinic, have fallen out of favor. It is likely that the turning away from these topics – and their exclusion from spaces where critical global health scholars gather – reflects a kind of anticulturalism that reveals our fear of becoming the straw man anthropology is depicted as by other disciplines (these insights very much informed by ongoing conversations with Ramah McKay and China Scherz; see also Neely and Nading [2017]).

This, in turn, has prompted the polarization of engagement and detachment, terms whose meanings are tied up in the respective affects of positive and negative, intimacy and coldness, or subjectivity and objectivity. The crude separation between high theory and applied anthropology, or between critique and usefulness, too, is informed by this polarization. Playfully, Latour (2005, cited in Puig de la Bellacasa 2011) suggests that we learn to care for science and technology, even in those forms we find pernicious; using the example of SUVs, he argues that if we really want to decrease their absurd overuse and gas-guzzling impropriety, we must engage with the concerns that animate those who love them. Amid the rise of an anthropology critical of global health, and, in particular, its ways of knowing the world through numbers, what does this kind of caring for numbers look like? Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 2017) argues that caring for things (numbers, SUVs) is not just about preventing their disintegration from caustic critique but about embodying an ethos of care: to engage with how things become what they are and come to matter without losing sight of what we, likewise, are becoming in the process.

Care, for Puig de la Bellacasa, is a technique, a practice, and a form of intimacy that reaches out to touch, but may not succeed in fixing, objects or problems; as McKay (2018) shows in her brilliant study of the coming and going of global health projects in Mozambique, care is an improvisatory and resilient technique that emerges 'in the meantime'. Inspired by this work, and held accountable weekly by my brilliant seminar students[4] who refuse to concede too much ground to caustic critique, I have become more attentive to the affective orientations I bring to my own projects (under the sign of critical global health) and to others' projects (such as the collection of quantitative health data). I have come to think of ethnography as a caring and co-constitutive process of becoming through and within relations with other people, places, and things who, in most cases, are not anthropologists.

For many years now, medical anthropologists – and, today, those of us who identify as critical global health scholars – have pondered how to make our findings more palatable and useful to global health's 'insiders' (see, for example, Foster 1952; Justice 1989; Trostle and Sommerfeld 1996; Pfieffer and Nichter 2008; Janes and Corbett 2009; Colvin 2015). Yet, relevance and utility in these discussions take on normative meanings rooted in the assumption that anthropologists must come to deeply understand one social context (a culture, the people) and then translate that information to another set of actors who might actually 'do' something with it (global health clinicians or practitioners, for example) (Pigg 2013). I have grown wary of the impulse to do something and, dogged by my own humility, have found myself befuddled by the questions I often get, from anthropologists and

4 Enrolled in the Anthropology of Good Intentions, Oberlin College, spring 2018.

demographers alike, when presenting my anthropological work: What can demographers [the people 'doing' global health] do better? What are my suggestions?

It is in reflecting on my time on the assembly line of quantitative data from afar (now ten years later!) that I have begun to tentatively claim, echoing Pigg (2013), that anthropological work may be useful precisely because it doesn't quite fit into the category 'doing something' as it is typically imagined. It was, after all, by virtue of being able to 'slow down' relative to the tempos of data collectors and survey fieldwork that I was able to look around me rather than look toward the goal of 'good' quantitative data (Pigg 2013; 133). Following Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 77), I resist the 'puzzle-making approach to critical knowledge', which aims to point out what 'they' lack. The 'slow(er) research' practice available to me was what allowed me to simultaneously check surveys, fill in log forms, supervise fieldworkers, and pack vans in the morning (the generalized labor of survey fieldworkers) *and* pay attention to and represent relations, labor, and transactions that typically fall outside demographers' definitions of data. The diverse tasks of everyday fieldwork, enacted by both the ethnographer and survey fieldworkers, are the invisibilized processes that literally bring global health worlds, past and present, into being (Adams, Burke, and Whitmarsh 2014). While both I and the Malawian data collectors I spent time with saw what '[was] sitting right in front of us', the temporalities of anthropological fieldwork and knowledge production allowed me – and not them – to 'shed light upon it' (Adams 2016, 191).

What if we embraced anthropology's supposed failure to be useful? Following Halberstam (2011, 24), I take failure to be about 'alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic … nor … mired in nihilistic critical dead ends', and ponder what it might mean to be a little less ambitious about being an informant to global health (a 'fixer' and a 'doer'). Following a single bar of soap across spaces ranging from field offices to lectures I delivered and times ranging over a decade, I rethink the practice and affects of critique through what came to be a touching object (in the literal and metaphorical senses) for all those who cared for and about it, especially the anthropologist. I treat soap as an object that enabled me to 'trap knowledge' and find ethnographic ground (Kelly and Lezaun 2017, 390). I hope you will indulge my playful ruminations on soap, in the spirit of moving beyond a single story in medical anthropology and of making new kinds of stories to think with (Haraway 2016; Mkhwanazi 2016). I invite you to mentally inventory your own archive of objects, to attend to how they fit into and connect with 'imaginative, ethical, cultural and sociopolitical lifeworlds' (Felski 2009, 32).

'Touching data'

In the corner of medical anthropology that I and my interlocutors occupy, one of our favored activities is critiquing numbers (indicators, metrics, data), amid the rise of global health's enumerative logics. We have shown how numbers get things wrong, reduce complexity to bullet points, or are tainted by the unacknowledged political machinations of those who count and measure. Drawing on fieldwork undertaken in clinical trials, nongovernmental organization offices, medical clinics, and labs, anthropologists have conjured a critical data studies that addresses how normality and health are reinvented by metrics and data that suffuse everyday practices and shift relations. My early fieldwork with demographers was motivated by my suspicion of numbers; over time, however, I realized the book I wanted to write was not one that simply showed how numbers mismeasure the world (even though they do). As I took up a station on demographers' assembly line of data, I saw firsthand that numbers do more than miscount: they assemble around themselves new social worlds, transactions, affects, and people.

In the course of my work as a fieldworker among fieldworkers, my 'straight-from-the-box critique' – that quantitative data get things wrong and that anthropologists are poised to show exactly how – was productively challenged (compare with Candea 2010, 246). It was through touching data – scrawling my initials on log forms, marking surveys with red pen, packing cars with clipboards and boxes of LifeBuoy and Sunlight soap – that I began to care about data. I felt pleasure, pride, satisfaction, even delight as we cared for and assembled the very object I was so ready to critique. Demography, the most 'matter-of-fact' discipline, has long carried associations of cold sterility (Desrosiéres 1998), and anthropology takes up a critical, negative orientation to its cherished numbers. Yet, in the field, and through my intimacy with numbers, I was able to rethink the typical relationship between anthropology and demography. As an anthropological cog in the global health wheel, I participated in and made possible the becomings of numerical data that, by anthropological standards, could never transcend their shortcomings. In the process, the line between ethnographic and demographic data was usefully blurred, confirming that all research is a process of mutual modification. The fieldworkers I spent time with practiced the kind of appropriate stranger-intimacy and detachment we anthropologists likewise do; they disaggregated flows of everyday life into units that fit into predetermined categories (in their case, boxes or codes; in my case, fieldnotes later organized into vignettes or chunks of speech) (see also Candea 2010, 250). It is useful to note here that in comparing 'ways of seeing' from disciplinary perspectives, we take our own position to be the norm or the base. The practice of making data deemed good, clean, or beautiful, for both demographers and anthropologists, relies on closely managing relationships with the people, things, and ideas in our midst. Data come about through the frames we use to capture them (Halpern 2015). All disciplines present

their knowledge in finished, shiny form, obscuring the metamorphoses of self, data, and others, upon which it relies.

Soap

In his reminiscences on fieldwork, Evans-Pritchard (1973, 2) suggests that although he had no particular interest in cows before his time among the Nuer, he soon became 'cattle-minded'; similarly, among the demographers, my attention was directed unexpectedly toward soap. I became 'soap-minded', even more so than my interlocutors. Soap figures prominently in my fieldnotes from 2007–2008, coming up dozens of times. I 'carried', 'smelled', 'purchased', 'gave', 'received', 'stacked', and 'forgot' soap, among other things. Even the cardboard boxes branded 'Sunlight' or 'Lifebuoy' that hold soaps bought in bulk figure in my fieldnotes; I devote an entire paragraph in one entry about how fieldwork supervisors improvised organizational tools for the many kinds of documents they managed each day in the field (blank or completed questionnaires, log forms, etc.) by tearing off the flaps of the boxes and using them as dividers between papers stored in boxes on the floors of fieldwork vehicles. I described the varieties of soap ('green', 'herbal scented', LUX) I purchased for my own use. Next to an entry where I had taken notes on my interview with a member of Malawi's ethics board, in which he said they encourage researchers to give soap-gifts to ensure information would continue to be 'freely given' and not 'paid for', I wrote in capital letters inside parentheses '(MARCEL MAUSS THE GIFT!)', even highlighting it in yellow in the later Word document, to ensure I would not miss such an obvious connection down the line. I took notes on conversations I initiated with people across all scales of the research project about soap: they were seemingly baffled by my interest in, even obsession with, this tiny object that was, for them, no more than a minor cog in everyday research practices and processes.

I have a soap collection, a hodgepodge of bars of soap of all different shapes, colors, and sizes, stored in a cardboard box. Some of the soaps are gifts that others have brought me – at my request – from places all over the globe; others are soaps I've tucked into my bag on my travels after staying at various inns, hotels, and lodges. The box emits a powerful smell: carbolic, powder, fresh, and rose notes meld together. I take the box out now and then, and remove some of the soaps, admiring them and drawn to them, but unsure why I keep them. Following Stewart's (1993, 136–37) study of the relations of narrative to its objects, this box of soap (and the bar depicted above) bridges past and present, acting now as an anchor for a nostalgic narrative not of the object but of the possessor.

My attraction to, affinity for, and attentiveness to soap have been a gift to me, enabling an easy connection with a classic theoretical concept in anthropology. Last semester, I assigned

to my students one of my publications on soap (Biruk 2017) alongside Mauss's (1922) classic essay. The student giving a presentation on the readings that day arrived to class with a Ziploc baggie full of African black soap he brought back from his semester abroad in Ghana, sliced into twenty-five tiny slivers, one for each of us. I beamed, thrilled that my article had conjured this tiny soap-gift and produced social relations in real life.

The soap I first encountered in 'the field' in 2005 has chased me (or have I chased it?) ever since I found it working alongside and with survey projects. The bar pictured here is one that I kept as a kind of souvenir, a trace of authentic experience, an object that recalls past events. Its weathered cellophane, turning white around the edges ten years later, has protected it on many journeys: a kind of talisman, it has accompanied me through the end of graduate school in Philadelphia, PA, to Providence, RI, and to Oberlin, OH. It has traveled in my bag to many of the talks I've given. I've brought it to the podium as a tangible prop to enliven my words.

Yet, I have been wary of this object, aware of the imperial legacies this brightly wrapped commodity carries. As I show elsewhere, soap smooths extractive research logics; its centrality to present-day global health projects recalls the 'gift' of soap brought to Africa via imperial projects that envisioned modern, hygienic, consumerist subjects (McClintock 1995; Burke 1996; Hunt 1999). Sunlight soap is one of the personal care products listed on Unilever East and West Africa's website, from which the epigraph to this essay is taken. Unilever's brands appear as a parade of colorful logos that cheerfully signpost its markets from Argentina to Zimbabwe, circuits through which these domestic products chased and chase Marx's bourgeoisie across the globe. Nonetheless, as de Laet and Mol (2000) observe in their engagement with the Zimbabwe Bush Pump, we may come to 'love' our objects of critique much as we aim to maintain a suspicious stance toward them. As Redfield (2016, 177) astutely puts it, in reflecting on his engagement with the 'seductive device' of the LifeStraw, uncertainty and ambivalence impel us to pause and consider our objects of study, to dwell with them. Dwelling with soap reveals to me 'how easy it is to slip between metaphor and material object, between infrastructure and imagery, between remnants of matter and mind' (Stoler 2016, 367–68).

As I write this essay, I worry that it is self-indulgent: Am I navel gazing (that epithet that keeps our wagons ever hitched to the North Star of relevance)? What does this old bar of soap – and the anthropologist whom it has compelled for so long – reveal about how critique matters (or not)?

The ellipsis, three dots in a row, connotes a trailing off; it points toward an omission, something that has been left out, not unlike critique. Anthropology's greatest strength, I think, lies in its embrace of trailing off. Anthropological critique is unsettling and matters in the same ways that care matters: It is not necessarily reassuring and need not deign to fix, to cure, or even to diagnose. It does not always bring comfort or solve a problem. Ngai's (2008) reclamation of the mundane aesthetic judgment 'interesting' might be a lesson for ethnographers, given the ways that ethnographic evidence is deemed 'merely interesting' by global health actors. Not unlike the declaration that something (a piece of art, a student's earnest but mistaken response to a question in class, a novel) is interesting, critical ethnography (in and of global health) is an invitation to pay attention to, to take an interest in, something; it insists on being out of step with the tempos that swirl around us, it insists on taking pause (Ngai 2008, 789). Ethnography is a mode of thought and a form of knowledge that moves beyond the idea that criticism must produce verdicts (Ngai 2008, 815), a tool that tracks how we – critics – are worlded alongside the objects we care for. It is in exposing our intimacies to our objects, making ourselves vulnerable in the spirit of connection, that we might call into being a more capacious, more caring version of critique. Tracing soap as souvenir brings critique closer, enabling me to make explicit how data and objects, theirs or our own, generate attachments, inspire, absorb, enchant, and surprise us.

As Barad (2003, 829) suggests, 'knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part. … We are part of the world in its differential becoming'. Soap is a 'smallest material unit' that comes to matter through materializing practices (Barad 2003, 822). What I learned from touching data and being habituated otherwise (as a pseudo-data collector) was that forms of engagement and detachment (the stances associated with being useful and being critical, or doing and sitting, respectively) are co-constitutive. The weathered soap I hold lovingly in my hand conjures an ethos of care that destabilizes tired partitionings of critique and relevance; it draws attention to critique as not only intellectual but sentimental education (Felski 2009, 30), and as a robust technology that challenges the presumption that it is only if things 'work' that they matter (Haraway 2016, 4).

Ethnography makes especially clear that those who study things participate inevitably in their becomings. Having spent a lot of time with the gift (both soap and concept), I remind myself of what I am always reminding my students who, upon first reading *The Gift*, defensively think up examples of altruistic gifts to counter what they see as Mauss's indictment of their selfish and 'interested' giving. (Critique, perhaps because many of us find it pleasurable, is often deemed similarly selfish.) 'It's always productive', I tell them, 'to sit with our first reactions to a text and read them as critically as we do the text. What does your frustration with Mauss mean? Why are you invested in being an altruist?' These questions help unearth for them their affinity for the 'gift' as a tool that enables fashioning a self that is immune to critique, closed off from relations other than those we are most certain about.

With closer reading of *The Gift*, some students realize that Mauss was not indicting but celebrating the interested gift as instrumental to mutuality, solidarity, trust, meaning making, and care. A gift's (and critique's) power lies in its ability to make all parties to its transaction vulnerable, in its invitation to care for another, to dwell in the uncertainty of return or payoff, and the queer temporalities that refuse to unfold into a singular, predictable future.

Ethnography is, I suggest, mostly a matter of caring about how and why things come to matter. Its ability to lend empirical detail to the registers and practices of critique, to trace social worlds in-the-making, makes ethnography a fitting site for revitalizing discussions about the 'point of critique' across disciplines. The value of ethnography in and of global health, I suggest, is not in the fact that anthropologists have 'clean hands' or might do things better or know more than global health, but that they relish, rather than obscure, the small things like soap through which global health (and anthropology) become what they are, in a specific time and place.[5]

About the author

Cal Biruk teaches anthropology at Oberlin College. She is the author of *Cooking Data: Culture and Politics in an African Research World* (Duke University Press, 2018). She is working on a second book, informed by perspectives in science and technology studies and queer African studies, that theorizes global health metrics, indicators, and paperwork as counterfeiting technologies from the perspective of a decade of ethnographic work within an LGBT-rights NGO in Malawi. Her work also appears in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, *Medical Anthropology*, *Critical Public Health*, and the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, among others.

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5 Shotwell's (2016) *Against Purity* encouraged me to consider how complicities with 'global health' have brought my generation of critical medical anthropologists into being and, often, provided them institutional homes and resources at home and in the field. Shotwell, incidentally, uses her experience washing her hands with a bar of fancy soap in a gas-guzzling airplane's bathroom as an opening gambit for troubling theoretical purity, embracing complicity and compromise as starting points for action.

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