



Building a Better Description

Author(s): SHARON MARCUS, HEATHER LOVE and STEPHEN BEST

Source: *Representations*, No. 135, SPECIAL ISSUE: Description Across Disciplines (Summer 2016), pp. 1-21

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26420562>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26420562?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Representations*

JSTOR

Building a Better Description

ACADEMICS DON'T NECESSARILY KNOW WHAT description is, but they know they don't like it. "That talk was wonderfully descriptive; let's give him the job"—said no one ever. When scholars from multiple disciplines gather to evaluate grant proposals, they can usually agree on one thing: the wisdom of rejecting any project they consider "merely descriptive." And at least one university department's grading rubric formalizes its low judgment of work that "is correct but largely descriptive, lacking analysis" by assigning such papers a C.¹ Boring and static, rote rather than creative, reproductive rather than productive: description in such moments does not even rise to the status of a necessary evil. Instead, it is defined by failure or falling short: lacking a compelling argument or organizing perspective; insufficiently self-conscious of its own procedures; *basic* in the bad sense of naive and mechanical. Even the clearest accounts of description often contrast it to what it is *not*—not interpretation, not explanation, not prediction, not prescription.

Yet description is everywhere, a ubiquitous and necessary condition of scholarship, and in practice, if not in preaching, attitudes toward it vary across and within disciplines.² Although scientists aim at explaining causal mechanisms and identifying predictive laws, many consider description an activity sufficiently worthy in its own right that one can find highly cited articles whose titles identify them as "descriptions"—of forest geckos, road surface roughness, molecular excitations, or valence bonds.³ Social scientists express more overt ambivalence about description. In 1980, economist Amartya Sen wrote, "It is fair to say that description as an intellectual activity is typically not regarded as very challenging. To characterize a work in the social sciences as 'purely descriptive' would not normally be regarded as

ABSTRACT Universally practiced across the disciplines, description is also consistently devalued or overlooked. In this introduction to the special issue "Description Across Disciplines," Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best propose that description is a critical practice more complex (and less contradictory) than its detractors have taken it to be. They argue that turning critical attention toward description's nuances gives us access to the ways that scholars conventionally assign and withhold value and prestige. The authors set forth a number of principles (using their contributors' essays as a guide) toward the end of "building a better description." REPRESENTATIONS 135, Summer 2016 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 1–21. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2016.135.1.1.

high praise.”⁴ Three decades later, John Gerring similarly noted that in political science description “has come to be employed as a euphemism for a failed, or not yet proven, causal inference. Studies that do not engage causal or predictive questions, or do not do so successfully, are judged ‘merely’ descriptive.”⁵ But Sen and Gerring also contest this view by underscoring the fundamental importance of descriptions in social science and by foregrounding the skills needed to produce them. Nor are they alone. Many historians and ethnographers would say that without description, albeit of a highly interpretive kind, they could not produce historical narratives or field notes.⁶ Humanists often keep their engagement with description tacit and articulate their explicit discomfort with “mere description” by insisting (rightly) that description cannot be separated from interpretation. Even so, art historians, literary critics, and musicologists must learn to describe the paintings, sculptures, texts, and musical works that they study.⁷

We believe that description is a core, if unacknowledged, method in all scholarship and teaching. In order to proceed, interpretations, explanations, and prescriptions must give an account of—describe—what they interpret, explain, or evaluate. Description makes objects and phenomena available for analysis and synthesis, and is rarely as simple as its critics imply. An elusive object that travels by many names, and sometimes by no name at all, description’s dictionary definitions include representation, drawing, report, portrayal, and account. Description can take many forms, including lists, case studies, sequences, taxonomies, typologies, genealogies, and prevalence studies, and it involves many actions, including observing, measuring, comparing, particularizing, generalizing, and classifying, using words, images, and numbers.⁸

We write from the perspective of literary critics who became interested several years ago in questioning the dominance of interpretive methods in our discipline. In 2009, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus published a special issue of *Representations* called “The Way We Read Now.” The introduction to that volume gathered a set of recent developments in literary studies under the rubric “surface reading,” referring to methods trained on “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts.”⁹ In 2010, Heather Love published an essay called “Close but Not Deep” that proposed the observational social sciences as a model for descriptive readings of literary texts.¹⁰ It was in part the controversy generated by these essays that prompted us to take a closer look at description: to assess what were widely cited as its limitations, or even dangers, and to further explore what we still imagined to be its unacknowledged and even untapped potential.¹¹ What, we wondered, would it mean to acknowledge the ways that our critical and pedagogical practices make description central—to prosody, plot summary, histories of the book, even to allegorical and symptomatic interpretations? What would we learn if we

widened our purview to ask scholars and practitioners from disciplines beyond literary studies to reflect on their own practices of description?

We were also inspired by the example of a handful of scholars across several disciplines who have turned their attention to description.¹² Work in media archaeology, data mining, discourse analysis, and object-oriented ontology has assigned new value to the work of gathering and analyzing information. Legal theorist Anne Orford has recently championed description, citing Michel Foucault's claim that the role of philosophy is not "to reveal what is hidden, but rather to make us see what is seen."¹³ Anthropologist Anna Tsing, in her work on ecology and nonhuman sociality, advocates what she calls "critical description"—"critical, because it asks urgent questions; and description, because it extends and disciplines curiosity about life."¹⁴ By far the most vocal, provocative, and influential proponent of description as method in recent years has been sociologist of science Bruno Latour, who asks, in *Reassembling the Social* (2005), "What is so wrong with 'mere' descriptions?"¹⁵ Calling description "the highest and rarest achievement" (137), Latour encourages scholars to take "the *risk* of writing a *true and complete report* about the topic at hand" (127).

For scholars to "risk" description sounds counterintuitive, even cheeky, since description is so often seen as plodding, but Latour is riffing on the disgrace that description suffered in the wake of the linguistic turn that began in the 1960s, when interpretation and self-consciousness about language as representation challenged the reign of observation, fact, and objectivity.¹⁶ In 1973, the animal ethologist Konrad Lorenz lamented the "fashionable fallacy of dispensing with description," relaying an anecdote about a granting board cautioning researchers not to "lapse into being merely descriptive." The cost of such "widespread contempt for description," Lorenz argued, was "that it discourages people from even trying to analyze really complicated systems."¹⁷ Recently, scholars interested in complex systems—from global climate change to the literary world system—have begun to experiment with what it might mean to describe, explain, and analyze rather than to theorize or critique. And across several disciplines, those interested in materialism and nonhuman forms of agency have taken heed of political theorist Jane Bennett's call, in *Vibrant Matter*, to "bear witness to the vital materialities that flow through and around us" by means of "a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness."¹⁸

These developments have encouraged us to try to offer a fuller account of description, to consider it on its own terms and not as a stepping-stone on the way to interpretation and critique. We do not come to description out of a desire to launch a new theory or discover the next new thing, but rather from a sense that an enduring *practice* may be a sign of an enduring *project*. The strange status of description—valued in practice, but often publicly

disavowed or dismissed—has made it hard to account for its full range of meanings, effects, techniques, and potentials. Attending to description's ubiquity within critical practice may be one way of gaining access to what is generative within (and generated by) the disciplines as such. We see the practice of description as well suited to emergent evidence that exceeds but might ultimately be essential to reformulating the frame of analysis, and as thus providing (at times) occasion for a writing that registers where objects push back against existing frames (see the Kathleen Stewart and Liza Johnson essays in the current volume). As such, the practice of description provides the material that gives future scholars (including the future self of the describer) the opportunity to engage differently with their objects, and serves as a building block for extending the collective and networked aspects of scholarly work across time. We see and want to encourage the essential generosity that can attach to description as a practice when it attends not only to its objects but also to the collective, uncertain, and ongoing activity of trying to get a handle on the world.¹⁹

All the same, in order to describe description, we need to account more fully for its bad reputation, which stems from the serious, if contradictory, charges that influential scholars in the humanities and social sciences have leveled against it for decades: that description is impossible, because all knowledge is situated; that it is ideological, because objectivity always masks interests; and that it is insufficiently critical or even tautological, because it simply repeats what anyone can see or hear.

The argument that description is impossible because it is only, always, and already interpretation is closely linked to the argument that it is ideological; both arguments have important antecedents in literary criticism, anthropology, marxist thought, science studies, feminist theory, and critical race studies. Authors such as Nancy Hartsock, Donna Haraway, Mary Louise Pratt, and Bruno Latour in his early work were among the first to expose the particularities and limits of objectivity, detachment, and distance.²⁰ They argued that the neutrality that many associate with description denies the embodiment, social position, and investments of the observer. No describers can isolate what they observe from their beliefs, opinions, and experience, but some are able to claim objectivity, performing the “god trick” that Donna Haraway criticizes in “Situated Knowledges.”²¹ Claiming a “view from nowhere,” the view of no particular observer or no observer at all, description masks its investments and obscures the real conditions of its existence and the existence of what it describes in ways that enable domination in both the academy and in the public sphere.²² As Jill Morawski observes in her essay for this volume, researchers and institutions seen as disinterested acquire power, credibility, and influence, while perspectives

and methods that do not claim objectivity are associated with bias, particularity, and special pleading.

Views of description as impossible and ideological tend to cast it as a slick con artist, passing itself off as objective in order to score illegitimate gains. But description is also seen as a dull accountant, mindlessly but persistently generating exhaustive inventories. In his influential 1936 essay “Narrate or Describe?” Georg Lukács presents descriptions in fiction and poetry as homogenizing and static, incapable of conveying the world’s vivacity, diversity, and flux. For Lukács, description merely interrupts narration, which advances plot, illuminates characters’ interior lives, and establishes relations of cause and effect. In this still dominant view, description qua description is aimless, pointless, even deadening. Aimless: without a thesis, a describer has no way to focus attention and guide observation. Pointless: on its own, description has no meaning; what matters are the larger forces, mechanisms, and values it serves to illustrate. Deadening: descriptions are just one damn thing after another. Even if we could overcome our biases and pay equal attention to everything, the result would be an overwhelming welter of details, the intellectual equivalent of boxes full of styrofoam peanuts. As Naomi Schor writes, “There is always the danger that to write *on* the detail is to become lost *in* it.”²³ Description is either too small, focused on minute details (the tiny pits and striations marking each styrofoam peanut), or too large, an exhaustive catalog of inconsequentiality (all those boxes overflowing with styrofoam peanuts). Instead of falling down descriptive rabbit holes, this critique goes, intellectuals must go beyond mere description to uncover meanings; identify underlying causes or laws; distinguish what matters from what doesn’t; and develop frames and filters that provide order, perspective, history, and context.²⁴

Damned as inaccurate and biased when it does not adequately represent the world, description is equally damned as tautological when it reflects the world too closely. Jorge Luis Borges points to the absurdity of literal description in his famous account of a map as big as the world, “On Exactitude in Science,” in which a “Cartographers’ Guild” makes “a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it.”²⁵ Borges’s postmodern parable combines the critique of description as tautological with the critique of description as inevitably inaccurate. By simply repeating the terrain feature by feature, the one-to-one scale map neither adds knowledge to the world nor gives us a usable image of it. At the same time, the map fails because it is not identical to the world, since, like any representation, it transforms what it describes by translating it into a different medium that lags behind its object. Drawn in order to satisfy the desire for total accuracy, the map is abandoned to ruin by the later generations who find it “useless” (325).

Taken together, these criticisms allow us to extrapolate a profile of what we might call “bad description” and “bad describers.” Bad describers observe, count, measure, copy, list, and catalog objects with either stultifying exhaustiveness or selective incompleteness that is often ideologically motivated. Bad describers aspire to detachment from their human limitations, or lack the insight, imagination, or intelligence needed to explain, predict, evaluate, or interpret. They sever what they describe from larger contexts or histories, seeking to pin things down and contain them rather than to capture their flux. They produce bad descriptions because they are pedants; because they seek institutional power and rewards through claims to objectivity; or because they naively believe that words, images, or numbers can adequately represent worlds.

The common view of description as ideological, impossible, and uncritical means that few standards exist that would distinguish good descriptions from bad ones; indeed, the common view suggests that all descriptions are bad, or at best a devalued preliminary to truly productive or original work. The proliferation of binary oppositions in which description appears as the less valued term situate it as the kind of grunt work that people overlook or belittle but without which they could not function. Humanists, for example, are often reluctant to acknowledge anthologies, descriptive catalogs, bibliographies, and finding aids as scholarship, yet their more interpretive work often could not proceed without these compendia, lists, accounts, and classifications.²⁶

One response to catching ourselves out in the contradiction of practicing description while preaching against it might be to expunge it more thoroughly, so that our actual methods would align better with our beliefs, but that would be difficult to achieve. Another might be to accept description as a necessary but lesser activity, which would engage us in the dubious ethics of affirming a division of scholarly labor in which the least skilled, least imaginative, or least intelligent do the work of describing.

A third response, the one we propose, would be to stop taking the lesser status of description for granted, and to turn a critical eye on the ways we conventionally assign and withhold value and prestige. At the conference that led to this special issue, held in April 2015 at Columbia University and sponsored by its Heyman Center for the Humanities, we asked people from a range of disciplines to weigh in on description. How have practices of description—from ethnography to ekphrasis—shifted in light of changing views of the role of the observer, scholarly ethics, and epistemology? What protocols are involved in describing people, texts, images, musical scores, natural phenomena, and material artifacts? We invited scholars and practitioners from the arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences.

Not everyone accepted the invitation to participate, and not all participants were able to contribute to the volume, but the essays here offer a cross-section of the event, with representation from a historian of science, a psychologist, an art historian, two literary critics, an anthropologist, a filmmaker, and a memoirist.

The essays gathered in this special issue attempt to describe description, as well as to interpret, explain, and evaluate it. Our contributors are not united in their attitudes: several essays are critical of description, calling attention to its ongoing role in the consolidation of traditional forms of authority, and even questioning the utility of an analytic separation of description from interpretation. But the sustained attention to description in a range of contexts yields a portrait of an already existing practice that is more complex than its critics have taken it to be and offers some visions of how a better description might operate.

All of the contributors, to different ends, undo the binary oppositions that have relegated description to a secondary role, questioning any simple distinction between describer and described, description and narration, description and interpretation, science and literature, part and whole, original and copy. Some reaffirm elements of the classic critiques of description (Jill Morawski, Michael Fried, Georgina Kleege), while in very different ways engaging in description themselves. Psychologist Jill Morawski's "Description in the Psychological Sciences" revisits a notorious experiment in scientific psychology, the Stanley Milgram study of obedience. By delving into Milgram's archives and "redescribing" them, Morawski contrasts the traditional image of objective description to the complexity of actual practice, demonstrating the reductions that take place when scientists aspire to translate research results for widespread public circulation. Morawski suggests that "thickening" psychological descriptions would represent human behavior in ways too complex to spawn truisms and directives. In "No Problem," art historian Michael Fried challenges the idea that works of visual art pose special challenges to description because of the intrinsic differences between linguistic and pictorial artifacts. He also questions whether observation and description can take place in an interpretive void; to the extent that any description of a painting has persuasive force, it must and does serve an argument. Memoirist and disability studies scholar Georgina Kleege, in "Audio Description Described," surveys the current standards and practices for audio description, a mechanism for making visual media accessible to blind people. For Kleege, descriptions that attain perfect objectivity by completely eliminating evaluation and interpretation are neither possible nor desirable. Using as her example the film *The Sessions* (2012), which itself foregrounds its characters' many acts of description, Kleege refuses objectivity and interpretive neutrality as goals. Instead, she finds a less

pure but richer and more useful audio description in crowdsourced forms of the practice that provide multiple and avowedly subjective accounts of single works.

Other contributors offer accounts of what we might call “better description,” which address some of the classic objections to description. In “Interpret or Describe?” literary critic Cannon Schmitt revisits Georg Lukács’s influential essay “Narrate or Describe?” and demonstrates the continued bias among literary critics against description. Schmitt argues that interpretation and description are mutually interdependent, and that critical fears about the “view from nowhere” must be balanced against the dangers of the “view of nothing.” Through readings of drawings in Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* (2012) and technical language in Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* (2006), Schmitt shows how the referential and practical elements of representations can be useful, meaningful, even beautiful and moving.

Other contributors share Schmitt’s view of description as more affective than detached. In “The Point of Precision,” anthropologist Kathleen Stewart performs descriptive writing conceived as simultaneous with an unfolding reality rather than belatedly reproducing a fixed one. Stewart’s ethnography homes in on moments of disorientation and heightened sense perception that erupt when a category or concept lags behind its ability to take hold of a phenomenon. For Stewart, such points of precision, or threshold phenomena, trigger a descriptive machinery that calls on us to make a report not only of what we encounter but also of ourselves encountering it.²⁷ In “Observable Behavior 1–10,” filmmaker Liza Johnson addresses visible behavior as the raw material of film performance. Actors convey character and “pulses of affect” through microscopic changes in facial expression and bodily comportment, and film directors and editors elicit, observe, and interpret these components of visible behavior. In contrast to the idea of description as a flattening, static practice that relies on a strict separation between the describing subject and the objects described, Stewart and Johnson see descriptions as responsive to the liveliness of material relationships and realities and as taking on forms that embody or mimic what they describe.

Other contributors offer historical accounts that expand our sense of description by pointing to the varied ways it has been practiced and valued. In “Cloud Physiognomy,” historian of science Lorraine Daston offers a view of description as anything but encyclopedic and tautological. She shows how nineteenth-century scientists interested in developing a Linnaean system of cloud classification had to abandon the natural historian’s comprehensive attention to detail in order to find a way to fix objects that were in constant motion and looked different to different viewers in different locations. In the place of description as endless enumeration, Linnaeans practiced

description by subtraction or omission: only by ignoring “siren details” could observers identify patterns and types and learn to recognize clouds as they would faces. In “Description and the Nonhuman View of Nature,” literary critic Joanna Stalnaker considers eighteenth-century French descriptive poetry alongside natural history in order to challenge the associations of science with objectivity and literature with the imagination. Like Daston and Kleege, Stalnaker sees description as a collective, networked social practice rather than an isolated and isolating one. For all three, describers move between the scientific and the poetic, the professional and the colloquial, and description is neither the view from nowhere, nor simply the view from somewhere, but many views from many places, over time.

For several of our contributors, the describer is as much a part of the description as the object described. This means that description appears more like the active complexity of a networked field of actors than like a temporally and spatially frozen practice of distanced observers who incorporate description into their models as a “low” practice that precedes and must be transcended by analysis and interpretation. We see our contributors’ invitation to rethink and revalue description as responding to critical habits and assumptions acquired during the years when poststructuralism dominated thinking in the humanities and encouraged scholars to distance themselves from the claim that critics themselves could produce positive knowledge. What is noteworthy about these essays is that they go about their descriptive work without being in any particular rush to make a broader claim. At times, this feels not like a return to objectivity but like the latest development in the general critique of objectivity that rippled through the humanities and social sciences in the final decades of the twentieth century. If, as Haraway argues in “Situated Knowledges,” “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (583), these essays move toward such a vision through attention to the liveliness of objects, to description’s collective and networked aspect, and to the robust connection between describing subject and object described. In something of a prodigal return, our contributors’ call for a “better description” does not try to reverse the linguistic turn’s critique of positivism but to incorporate it.

Extrapolating from these essays, what might a better description look like?

1. Not so much description itself as our opinion of it might be improved by *adjusting our attitude toward literalism and tautology*. Does knowledge have to be different from its object to *be* knowledge? In the paper she presented at the “Description Across the Disciplines” conference, Bechdel affirmed Schmitt’s intuition about her work by noting, “I have always been a literalist.” Bechdel’s attempts to get the details right in her graphic fiction depend

on extensive archival research, copying from photographs, and reenactment.²⁸ Critics of tautology would say that knowledge should differ from its object; critics of literalism, realism, and mimesis, that knowledge can't help but do so. For advocates of description, however, literalism can serve a useful purpose with respect to knowledge. Not all of our contributors would agree. Stewart advocates deliteralizing descriptions, and Kleege prefers nonliteral audio descriptions. Johnson, however, accepts the tautological literalism of acting as both innocuous and generative: actors observe behavior, not always knowingly, then reproduce it as behavior. There is no intention or causation beneath or behind the behaviors on display in her strips of film. Practical knowledge might present another worthy form of descriptive tautology, as when Schmitt reflects cautiously on exhaustive technical descriptions as sanctioning a kind of "long-form tautology." In praise of literalism, he cites Bechdel's account of a friend who figured out how to light a charcoal grill using a chimney starter from reading her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*—a practical knowledge that Bechdel arguably did not understand herself to be depositing in her text, but that was nonetheless there from the start, as the offshoot of her observational precision as an artist.²⁹

2. Far from taking such literalism for granted, however, a better description would also *reconceive the relation between world and word* by shifting from the assumption that describers readily apply words to worlds to an awareness of just how difficult it can be to do so. It is frequently asserted that description strives to achieve a "deadened realism of finished forms and social facts" ("Point of Precision"). Poets and meteorologists might claim the opposite: that description exists only because language, images, and numbers can never fully capture the world. *The Art of Description*, a short book that poet Mark Doty calls a "work of advocacy" on description's behalf, notes that "our knowledge of the sensory world is nothing fixed, but a continuing reappraisal, a set of processes that figure and refigure the world."³⁰ In his view, description embraces rather than denies the problems of reference and incommensurability that have long preoccupied scholars and thinkers, but with an important difference. Incommensurability can motivate description not as something to be overcome but as a way to build the uncertainty of any attempt to describe into descriptions themselves. In an extended reading of how description works in Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Fish," Doty notes that description affords shifts in perspective that result in "an intoxicating *uncertainty*" (30, emphasis added). Stalnaker reminds us that for Enlightenment writers like Denis Diderot, descriptions were never perfectly adequate to their objects, but that Diderot did not believe that their inevitable incompleteness therefore made descriptions useless (*The Unfinished Enlightenment*, 107). Rather, he and other Enlightenment thinkers took description

as an occasion “to wrestle with the incommensurability between language and nature, or to experiment with new approaches to writing in order to communicate the messy empirical data of firsthand observation” (9).³¹

Grappling in a slightly different way with the incommensurability problem, Stewart notes that “reality itself is incommensurate with any attempt to grasp it” but suggests that this is precisely why and how description “must become weirdly, robustly realist.” In *The Art of Description*, Doty similarly asserts that “poetic description wants to do anything but reinscribe the already known” (63); it does not presume a preexisting reality that it seeks to capture with perfect accuracy; rather, poetic description’s task is “to make the world real” (137). As we have seen, we ordinarily think of bad description as an exhaustive catalog that asserts a deadening power over what it describes, and of description as redeemed only when it serves a preexisting interpretive framework. Stewart disagrees, arguing that description at its best does not emerge from or confirm an unavowed interpretive schema; instead, better describers attend to what eludes easy categorization and understanding. A better description would faithfully capture—this is its robust realism—the world’s messy profusion of stray details that cannot be assimilated to an already existing theory and that sometimes might not even precipitate a new one.

3. It would then follow that a better description would *embrace stray details*. Bad description is often associated with an overvaluation of the detail, either attending to too many details at once, or to details that serve no apparent purpose because they cannot be integrated into any extant frame or schema.³² Not all our contributors would disagree. For Kleege, “less is more,” and Daston notes how Linnaean cloud classifiers had to curb “the temptation to remark, register, and . . . name an enticing detail that eluded the standard descriptive template,” unlike natural historians, who reveled in “the infinitely graduated continuum of clouds.” By contrast, Stewart’s describer is positively “overwhelmed by an excess of surfaces, aspects, and remainders”; her world is enlivened by this proliferation of details. Johnson begins by noting that we are often impressed by observers who are able to see minute shifts in facial expression as “legible pulses of affect”: notice these details, and “you seem psychic.” These small units of observable behavior are anything but insignificant; they are seemingly thin details whose thickness is all on their surface, observable on actor’s faces, in their gestures, and in the repeated frames that constitute a GIF (graphics interchange format) image. Stalnaker similarly notes how such excessive details were essential to Enlightenment describers. In Jacques Delille’s scientific poem *Les Trois Règnes* (1808), for example, vivid details become the hinge for a massive shift in scale that decenters human perspectives. Viewing a mite under a microscope, each of its minute details enlarged, allows the

poetic speaker to imagine even smaller beings for whom the mite could appear as an entire cosmos: “This insect is himself an Atlas.”

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett argues that receptiveness to stray details is necessary in order to see the world outside of received categories: “One needs, at least for a while, to suspend suspicion and to adopt a more open-ended comportment. If we think we already know what is out there, we will almost surely miss much of it” (xv). Other thinkers have argued that descriptions that make room for stray details can upend rather than reinforce ideology and received ideas. Attending to details, far from inducing stasis, can make available imaginative shifts in perspective and scale that might produce a “dramatic decentering of the human perspective” (“Description and the Nonhuman View of Nature”). Critic Michel Beaujour notes that surrealist André Breton preferred scientific to literary texts because “the unpredictable strangeness of the truth could then intrude explosively into the universe of stereotyped verisimilitude.”³³ Iris Marion Young makes a similar point in an essay on phenomenology and the pregnant body in which she uses the description of a pregnant body (her own) to take to task phenomenologists who focus on concrete experience but ignore sexed being: “Description of the pregnant body . . . challenges the generalizations often made by phenomenologists of the body” and “is subversive to the social structure.”³⁴

4. A better description might respond to the objectivity problem by *attending to the describers as much as to the described*. If we understand description as enhanced attention, we can direct that attention inward and outward, to how we describe as well as to what we describe. Attentiveness to the consciousness of the viewer can unseat or displace description’s claims to objectivity by undoing the presumption of a strict separation between the object described and the subject describing. As Stewart puts it, “The object of the description is also its agent.” Indeed, for several of our contributors, description is a multiparty affair that depends on relations between describers (Kleege, Daston); takes relations rather than discrete objects as the thing to be described (Stalnaker); or emerges from pulses of affect exchanged between actors and directors who stand in for the audience (Johnson).

5. To avoid the pitfalls of objectivity, better describers might *foreground and attend to the protean nature of what we describe*. Often the very instability of things is what calls out for a descriptive vocabulary. Where Daston’s cloud taxonomists respond to the volatile multifariousness of clouds by establishing strict protocols that seek to stabilize ideal cloud types, Stewart suggests that attempts to describe the “shaken profusion of things” can be a bid to “capture existence in the very act of its constitution.” Social interactions that morph even as they take form, events without clear beginnings or endings: Johnson pursues a related track in her focus on elements of film grammar

that seem more descriptive than narrative, more lingering than action-oriented. Long takes and wide shots make room for the unexpected and the metamorphic by taking more time than strictly necessary to tell a story and by taking in a lot rather than tightly framing what we see. In her book-length study of description, Stalnaker similarly shows how Louis Mercier, in his account of Paris in the decade following the French Revolution, strove to capture a describer in constant motion and a city in constant flux by devising a labile descriptive practice that itself took place in time.³⁵

Morawski similarly calls on scholars to craft descriptions that take seriously the protean qualities of what we describe as well as the uncertainty of any descriptive procedure. Schmitt notes that the arguments inhering in descriptions change every time we add a new item to them; as he puts it, the parataxis of listing one thing after another becomes the hypotaxis of logical relationships that shift with each new element added to the list. Kleege's account of audio description underscores the delicate timing required to layer commentary over a film's soundtrack, whether the commentator is trying to concisely signal changes in camera angles or to insert descriptions of action between pauses in the dialogue. To describe under such conditions—under time pressure, in response to a multifarious and fleeting representation—is to invite opportunities for language to fail and for felicitous surprises. In this sense, the will to describe can engage and even overcome the limitations of description by becoming a form of responsive wandering during which “subjects and objects are at once taken aback and literally transformed by their own self-surprised acts and effects” (“Point of Precision”).

6. Finally, we might *rethink objectivity itself*. One way to build a better description is to accept the basic critique of objectivity as impossible and undesirable. In response, we might practice forms of description that embrace subjectivity, uncertainty, incompleteness, and partiality. But why not also try out different ways of thinking about objectivity? Responsible scholarship is often understood as respecting the distinction between a phenomenon and the critical methods used to understand it; the task of the critic is to transform the phenomenon under consideration into a distinct category of analysis, and to make it an occasion for transformative thought. Mimetic description, by contrast, values fidelity to the object; in the case of descriptions that aim for accuracy, objectivity would not be about crushing the object, or putting it in perspective, or playing god, but about honoring what you describe. Stewart evokes how people who see something a little bit off are moved to make a report “out of a strange . . . faithfulness to the spirit of the unnamed thing they witnessed”; Doty frames description as “*allegiance to the sensible, things as they are, the given, the incompletely knowable*” (137, emphasis added). In this sense, objectivity would not mean generating a universal account but would mean trying to get something right by attending to it

closely and accurately describing how you see it—you in particular, you as a member of a class or group, you as a person with a particular kind of knowledge, training, or values.

Honoring what one describes can involve reenactment, translation, memorizing, and copying—practices and forms that tend to be more highly valued in times and places that do not emphasize individuality, originality, and novelty. Engaging in tautological description instead of anxiously doing all we can to avoid it would also allow us to pose the almost taboo question of whether knowledge must always produce something new. If we free ourselves from the demand that everything be related to a grand theory or yield surplus knowledge, we might come to see even tautological description in a better light. Description might become a noninstrumental accumulation of particulars with no immediately clear purpose. Or, like the shifts in scale that “decenter the human perspective” (“Description and the Nonhuman View of Nature”), description conceived of as honoring the object described might occasion a kind of ecstatic dispossession or pleasure in identifying with an object, being, or world. Such acts of mimetic description are unlikely to generate institutionally familiar genres of scholarship, but they can be creative, illuminating practices that produce forms, data, and insights keyed to the liveliness of worlds and works.

Why describe? Because describing and descriptions can produce pleasure—granular, slow, compressed, attentive, appreciative—as when Roland Barthes reproduces, codes, and interprets every sentence of a Balzac novella in *S/Z*, then reproduces the text again in its entirety. Because description can make us more attentive, as when we produce an audio description, copy a painting, analyze or perform a piece of music, and annotate or memorize a text. Because description can allow us both to see more and to look more attentively, more fully, *and* more selectively. Because description can take us out of ourselves, as when we try to see a mite or to see like a mite. Because description connects us to others—to those described, to the makers of what we describe, to other describers.

Bad description, better description: we conclude with two smiles. In her criticism of the objectivity imperative in audio description, Kleege explains that professional audio describers are instructed to avoid all personal interpretation and commentary. The premise is that if users are provided with an unbiased, unadorned description, they will be able to interpret and judge a film for themselves. Kleege writes, “In extreme instances, this imperative about absolute objectivity means that a character will be described as turning up the corners of her mouth rather than smiling.” For Kleege, reducing the familiar act of smiling to turning up the corners of one’s mouth is both absurd and condescending. The effort to produce an objective, literal account only

leads to misunderstandings, awkwardness, and bathos. This zero-degree description is the paradoxical result of taking the critique of description, with its mistrust of interpretation and subjectivity, to one logical extreme. Tellingly, the professional audio describer's "voice from nowhere" is not only weirdly particular; it also fails to be genuinely descriptive, since its "calm, controlled, but also cheerful" tone remains the same no matter what is being described. In place of the pretense of objectivity, Kleege suggests that the best audio descriptions do not sedulously avoid all interpretation, but instead combine observation with interpretation, understood variously as emotional reactions; inferences about cause and effect; or conventional, shared, and tacit knowledge.

A second smile: discussing her practice as a film director, Johnson recounts a scene in her film *Hateship Loveship* (2013) in which actor Kristin Wiig performs a "microsmile"—in Johnson's words, "the smallest smile I have ever seen." This gesture is an example, in Richard Schechner's words, of "restored" or twice-performed behavior.³⁶ Although the smile is Wiig's and expresses "her work, her choices," it comes from outside, because it is derived from her observations of untraceable others and "from what is around her in that moment"—including Johnson herself, smiling outside the frame. For the actor, as for the film director and editor, concrete physical behavior is not a quantum of data to be interpreted; it is her material, and she describes this behavior not to explain or interpret it, but to make it visible. Johnson thus helps us see that mere description need not be a bad thing.

Given that scholarship, aesthetic practices, and behaviors all involve description, we might consider suspending our conventional skepticism about it.

The worst that might happen? To see a world in a styrofoam peanut.

Notes

1. The phrase appears in a sample syllabus on the departmental website for Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/rlb18/MCC_UE_1013_SampleSyllabus.pdf. This example is hardly isolated. In "Contemporary Sociology and the Challenge of Descriptive Assemblage," *European Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 1 (February 2009): 157, Mike Savage notes, "The claim that a piece of writing—whether a student essay or a journal article—is 'rather descriptive' is an enduring rhetorical criticism."
2. See, for instance, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's remarks about the relation between strong and weak theory in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC, 2003), 134, in which she claims that the pleasures of critical texts are often not found in their

- overarching arguments but in their style and local readings. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz identifies a gap between official and unofficial recognition in anthropology that is keyed to competencies that might be understood as descriptive. According to Geertz, in backstage settings such as “cocktail parties, department corridors, appointments proceedings, and . . . professional meetings,” scholars gossip about what makes great fieldworkers—patience, observational acumen, and intense focus. Clifford Geertz, “On Paying Attention,” in *Fine Description: Ethnographic and Linguistic Essays by Harold C. Conklin*, ed. Joel Kuipers and Ray McDermott (New Haven, 2007), 27–28.
3. On explanation in science, see Jill Morawski, “Description in the Psychological Sciences” (in this volume). A Google Scholar search for “description” in article titles produces the highest number of results for the natural sciences, medical sciences, linguistics, and computer science (especially artificial intelligence). A small field within philosophy tackles descriptive logics, and description is also central to archaeology. David A. Grimaldi and Michael S. Engel, in a brief “Viewpoint” essay, “Why Descriptive Science Still Matters,” note that “‘descriptive’ in science is a pejorative term, almost always preceded by ‘merely,’” but then go on to explain its scientific significance; *BioScience* 57, no. 8 (September 2007): 646–47. See also David A. Grimes and Kenneth F. Schulz, “Descriptive Studies: What They Can and Cannot Do,” which focuses on epidemiology, in *Lancet* 359 (2002): 145–49. Linguists often publish and cite articles that identify themselves as descriptions of, for example, phonologies and grammars.
 4. Amartya Sen, “Description as Choice,” *Oxford Economic Papers*, n.s., 32, no. 3 (November 1980): 353.
 5. John Gerring, “Mere Description,” *British Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 4 (October 2012): 721. Gerring proves his point by analyzing works published in journals of political science. JSTOR and Google Scholar searches for the terms “merely descriptive” and “mere description” turn up particularly robust results across the social sciences.
 6. In ethnography, “descriptive fieldnotes,” according to a recently reissued guidebook, “are products of active processes of interpretation and sense-making that frame or structure not only what is written but also how it is written.” The authors affirm that writing fieldnotes “is not a matter of passively copying down ‘facts’ about ‘what happened’”; Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 2011), 9.

Natalie Zemon Davis is one of many leading historians who use vivid description to bring the past to life. Even so, historians do not always explicitly flag description as central to their craft, even when stressing the importance of storytelling. In his 2012 presidential address to the American Historical Association, for example, William Cronon focuses on narration and character development, but not description, as crucial skills for any historian—although his lecture both performs and recounts virtuosic description. William Cronon, “Storytelling,” *American Historical Review* 118, no. 1 (2013), <http://ahr.oxfordjournals.org/content/118/1/1.full.pdf>.

7. When questions of description surface in art history, the debate often centers on whether to locate description in the art historian’s initial attempt to turn the nonverbal into the verbal, or in the painting itself. Most art historians consider description inextricable from interpretation, although they do not all define interpretation in the same way. Jaś Elsner identifies art history with ekphrasis, “a method founded on and inextricable from the description of objects,” and calls

this descriptive act “a bedrock of verbal *interpretation*” (emphasis added). “Without interpretative description,” he claims, “there would be no art history”; Jaś Elsner, “Art History as Ekphrasis,” *Art History* 3, no. 1 (February 2010): 11, 12, 13, 16. Elsner also notes the ambivalence about description in art history when he observes that in practice, “the need to elide ekphrasis and object is essential to the [art-historical] method, if it is to carry the conviction of some empirical validity.” T. J. Clark maintains a similar position on the inextricability of description from interpretation, writing that “describing is interpreting”; T. J. Clark, “Poussin’s *Sacrament of Marriage*. An Interpretation,” *New Literary History* 45 (2014): 223. Clark defines his art history as consisting of “observations that I expect the reader to test against the *plain facts* of the image . . . but observations that constantly open onto nonobvious implications and networks of *argument*” (emphasis added). Svetlana Alpers famously argued that seventeenth-century Dutch painting was an “art of describing,” in contrast to an Italian Renaissance tradition more focused on narrative action and allegorical representations. See Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983).

The debate about description in musicology, insofar as it was explicit, took place a quarter-century ago, and tended to focus on what to describe, not how: the written musical score, the musical performance, or the context, understood as distinct from “the music itself,” although there seems to be little agreement as to what “the music itself” is. Joseph Kerman argued in favor of the interpretation of musical works (i.e., written scores), seeing hermeneutical criticism as a way of getting “out of analysis” and into the historical, biographical, and cultural contexts of musical works. See Joseph Kerman, “How We Got into Analysis and How to Get Out,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 311–31; and Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 113–54. Carolyn Abbate, by contrast, defends performance as the proper object of musicology. See Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 505–36. See also Gary Tomlinson, who writes that the study of music could only be made a scholarly endeavor given the “positivistic description of historical data around the music and analytic description of the workings of the notes themselves.” See Gary Tomlinson, “Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer,” *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 18–24. Tomlinson is responding to Lawrence Kramer, “The Musicology of the Future,” *Repercussions* 1 (1992): 5–18.

In literary fields, where the object of study is distinctly verbal and often itself descriptive, surprisingly few theorists or critics explicitly acknowledge description as a practice central to the discipline. The new philologists currently reclaiming a field traditionally seen as the most descriptive branch of literary studies foreground the importance of accurate and insightful descriptions of texts and manuscripts, but they are also careful to stress philology’s interpretive dimensions. For example, in “Philology and Freedom,” Sheldon Pollock underscores that philology’s “distinctive theoretical concept is interpretation”; *Philological Encounters* 1 (2016): 4. While philological interpretation is grounded in description (16), Pollock emphasizes that philological description goes well beyond positivist or universalist accounts of truth (14, 24–25).

Even as a feature of literary works, description has received less explicit attention than plot, point of view, and character, although in practice literary critics of novels often focus far more on descriptive passages than on dialogue. In their introduction to *Description in Literature and Other Media* (Amsterdam,

- 2007), Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart remark on “the scholarly neglect of description” as a feature of literary and other artistic works and aim to fill “this conspicuous research lacuna and to generally rekindle critical attention to description as a major phenomenon which is in fact relevant not only to novels and short stories but also, for instance, to lyric poetry, film, the visual arts, and arguably even to music” (xvii). Some literary critics have recently been filling this lacuna. See Dora Zhang, “Naming the Indescribable: Woolf, Russell, James, and the Limits of Description,” *New Literary History* 45 (2014): 51–70; David Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton, 2016); Pearl Brilmyer, ms. in progress, “Character Density: Late Victorian Realism and the Science of Description.” For a recent essay that links literature as description to description of literature, see Patrick Fessenbecker, “In Defense of Paraphrase,” *New Literary History* 44 (2013): 117–39.
8. See Gerring, “Mere Description,” and Grimes and Schultz, “Descriptive Studies.” An interesting example of how mere description can improve perception is an article by Spike Bucklow entitled “The Description of Craquelure Patterns,” which uses an effort to index more than 20,000 images of ceramics in a slide library to develop a typology of craquelure (the networks of cracks that appear on the surface of many fine ceramics). Until being told that craquelure patterns differ depending on whether cracks are smooth or jagged, square or curved, thick or thin, separated by large or small blank spaces, all craquelure might look alike or be visually overwhelming. The act of describing the various patterns almost immediately reorganizes perception so that, for example, ceramics whose surface cracks form large square islands of space start to look significantly different from those whose cracks result in small curved islands.
 9. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 9.
 10. Heather Love, “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 371–91.
 11. We are not the first critics to link description to questions of surface; see the interesting lecture by noted geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, “Surface Phenomena and Aesthetic Experience,” which notes the common apologies for description made by geographers and connects the devaluation of description to routine suspicion of surface appearances. Like some of our contributors, Tuan sees attentiveness to sensory appearances as having the capacity to generate aesthetic and cognitive surprises that can disrupt routine and ideology and also remind us of the priority of objects over subjects; *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 79, no. 2 (June 1989): 233, 239.
 12. Love pointed to a “descriptive turn” in the humanities and social sciences in “Close but Not Deep.” The phrase originates with the sociologist Louis Queré, and was taken up by the French intellectual historian François Dosse in his work *Empire of Meaning*. Dosse describes a turn toward pragmatic questions and the problematization of the real world in recent sociology. See Love, “Close but Not Deep,” 376, 389n16.
 13. Anne Orford, “In Praise of Description,” *Leiden Journal of International Law* 25, no. 3 (2012): 609.
 14. Anna Tsing, “More-than-Human Sociality: A Call for Critical Description,” in Kirsten Hastrup, ed., *Anthropology and Nature* (New York, 2014), 28. See also J. K. Gibson-Graham, “Rethinking the Economy with Thick Description and Weak Theory,” *Current Anthropology* 55, supplement 9 (August 2014): S147–53. One could cite many additional examples. Robert B. Ray makes a particularly

- impassioned case on behalf of description as a form of heightened attention in an essay on Stanley Cavell's film criticism: "If we want to see what's there in front of us, if we don't want to miss our own lives, we will need a method to make us pay attention. The key to that method is description"; *Stanley Cavell, Literature, and Film: The Idea of America*, ed. Andrew Taylor and Áine Kelly (New York, 2013), 177.
15. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005), 136.
 16. The linguistic turn is associated with the turn to the philosophy of language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Gottlob Frege, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell). For an account of this tradition, see Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago, 1992). But the movement is also associated with the critique of positivism and of transparent meaning in the humanities and the social sciences beginning in the late 1960s. In this tradition, the influence of rhetorical criticism (Friedrich Nietzsche) and structural linguistics (Ferdinand de Saussure) is decisive; key exemplars of the linguistic turn include Clifford Geertz (anthropology), Hayden White (history), and Jacques Derrida (philosophy and literature).
 17. Konrad Lorenz, "The Fashionable Fallacy of Dispensing with Description," *Die Naturwissenschaften* 60 (1973): 5. Thanks to Pearl Brilmyer for this citation.
 18. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, 2010), x, xiv.
 19. We thank Caitlin Zaloom for comments on a draft of this introduction that helped us to formulate this point about description's temporality.
 20. Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, 1983); Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 575–99; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, 1992); Bruno Latour and Steven Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, 1979). Fessenbecker, "In Defense of Paraphrase," also cites Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979), and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), as influential contributions to these debates. Another crucial contribution to this perspective, which also had a strong influence on those scholars interested in producing a more positive account of description, was Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's book *Objectivity* (New York, 2007), 17, which begins, "Scientific objectivity has a history." By attending to scientific practices they demonstrate the "specificity—and . . . strangeness" of objectivity, rather than its hegemonic status.
 21. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 582. In *Objectivity*, Daston and Galison draw attention to the relatively recent rise of scientific objectivity, arguing that it only began to dominate the sciences "circa 1860" (27). In an approach allied to our own, they suggest that both conceptual arguments about objectivity as "a mirage" and ethical arguments about its "monstrous indifference to human values and emotions" are inadequate. For them, understanding objectivity depends on seeing it in terms of historical practices—"gestures, techniques, habits, and temperament ingrained by training and daily repetition" (51–52). We find their focus on practice instructive, although our focus is on the present.
 22. See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, 1989). Edward Said also makes this point at length in *Orientalism*, critiquing the "liberal consensus that

- ‘true’ knowledge is fundamentally non-political,” which “obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced.” Said therefore contravenes the notion that description could ever be neutral, and also underscores the point that Orientalist descriptions were not accurate. At the same time, however, he insists on his ability as a critic to describe the inaccuracy and political interestedness of Orientalist descriptions. He writes that his concern is not with “what lies hidden in the Orientalist text, but analysis rather of the text’s surface. . . . My analysis of the Orientalist text therefore places emphasis on the evidence, which is by no means invisible, for such representations as representations, not as ‘natural’ depictions of the Orient”; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London, 1978), 10, 20–21.
23. Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (1987; reprint, New York, 2007), xlv.
 24. See Michael Fried in this volume for a representative statement that description lacks an organizing perspective. In her valuable history of Enlightenment writing about description, Joanna Stalnaker shows that Georges Cuvier similarly defined description in contrast to perspective, but her book also shows that Denis Diderot defined description *as* perspective, even as multiple perspectives. See Joanna Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* (Ithaca, 2010), 23, 104.
 25. Discussions of description as the problematic attempt to copy the world often invoke images of the map and the territory. Jorge Luis Borges, “On Exactitude in Science,” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York, 1998), 325.
 26. For a critical take on the low regard in which literature professors hold the anthologies they use, and its relation to the disdain the same scholars have for the descriptive act of paraphrase, see Jeffrey J. Williams, “Anthology Disdain,” *College English*, symposium: “Editing a Norton Anthology,” 66, no. 2 (November 2003): 197. Williams notes that professors often dismiss anthologies for being reductive (202), without considering the positive aspects of reduction (selection and concentration). Anthologies, like description, are thus seen as having what we have been calling an incommensurability problem (196–205).
 27. Kathleen Stewart’s tactic of describing description recalls a long tradition within anthropology of self-reflexivity and including the researcher in the frame, but she extends it through a minute account of moment-by-moment impressions of live scenes. Key texts for the reflexive turn include Jay Ruby, ed., *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology* (Philadelphia, 1982), Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983), and James Clifford and George E. Marcus, ed., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986).
 28. Alison Bechdel discusses her process in “Creating *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cumLU3UpcGY>.
 29. Similarly, Philippe Hamon (citing Hugh Blair) writes that “descriptions by great poets ‘are such that a painter or sculptor could use them and work with them as models’”; Philippe Hamon, “Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive,” trans. Patricia Baudoin, in “Towards a Theory of Description,” special issue, *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 5.
 30. Mark Doty, *The Art of Description: World into Word* (Minneapolis, 2010), 137, 94.
 31. In this passage, Stalnaker is articulating what Michel Foucault fails to see about Enlightenment practices of description in *Les mots et les choses*.

32. Naomi Schor suggests a gendered reason for the denigration of the detail. In her account of the aesthetic category of the detail, she writes that it is “bounded on one side by the ornamental, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women”; Schor, *Reading in Detail*, xlii.
33. Michel Beaujour, “Some Paradoxes of Description,” in “Towards a Theory of Description,” special issue, *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 56.
34. Iris Marion Young, “Pregnant Subjectivity,” in *Descriptions*, ed. Don Ihde and Hugh J. Silverman (Albany, 1985): 33.
35. Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment*, 169.
36. Richard Schechner, “Restoration of Behavior,” in *Between Theater and Anthropology*, ed. Richard Schechner (Philadelphia, 1985).