Special Issue: Description

Doing things with description: practices, politics, and the art of attentiveness

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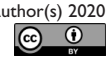

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Abstract

In a number of linked articles and monographs over the last decade (e.g. Love, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017), literary scholar and critic Heather Love has called for a descriptive (re)turn in the humanities, repeatedly taking up examples of descriptive methods in the social sciences as exemplifying what that (re)turn might look like and achieve. Those of us working as sociologists, anthropologists, science and technology studies scholars and researchers in allied social science fields thus find ourselves reflected back in Love's work, encountering our own research practices in an unfamiliar light through it. In a period where our established methods and analytical priorities are subject to challenges on many fronts from within our own disciplines, it is hard not be struck by Love's provocative invocation of the social sciences as interlocutors and see in it an invitation to contribute to the debate she has sought to initiate by revisiting our own approaches to the problem of description. Inspired by Love's intervention, the eight papers that form this Special Issue demonstrate that by re-engaging with description we stand to learn a great deal. While the articles themselves are topically distinct and geographically varied, they are all based on empirical research and written to facilitate a reorientation to the role of description in our research practices. What exactly is going on when we describe an ancient papyrus as present or missing, a machine as intelligent, noise as music, a disease as undiagnosable, a death as good or bad, deserved or undeserved, care as appropriate or inappropriate, policies as failing or effective? As the papers show, these are important questions to ask. By asking them, we find ourselves in positions to better understand what goes into 'indexing and making visible forms of material and social reality' (Love, 2013: 412) as well as what is involved, more troublingly, in erasing, making invisible and dematerialising those realities or even, indeed, in uncovering those erasures and the means by

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which they were effected. As this special issue underlines, thinking with Love by thinking with descriptions is a rewarding exercise precisely because it opens these matters up to view. We hope others take up Love's invitation to re-engage with description for that very reason.

Keywords
Description, methodology, sociology, anthropology, social science, science and technology studies, humanities, classics, cultural studies

In a number of linked articles and monographs over the last decade (e.g. Love, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017), literary scholar and critic Heather Love has called for a descriptive (re)turn in the humanities. Writing in a context in which the digital humanities and computational methods have rapidly come to the fore, precipitating challenges to previously dominant forms of humanities scholarship in the process, Love has repeatedly taken up examples of descriptive methods in the social sciences, specifically what she calls the *observational social sciences*, a category including an eclectic mix of qualitative, behavioural and experimental research from Bateson and Birdwhistell through to Becker, Goffman, Garfinkel, Geertz and Latour. In Love's work, these examples provide a means for humanities scholars to revisit the problem of description, a neglected one for Love, from very different methodological angles to those they are accustomed to. Things appear differently, however, when viewed from the other side. In reading Love, by contrast, those of us working as sociologists, anthropologists, science and technology studies scholars and researchers in allied social science fields, find ourselves reflected back through the engagements and prisms of her and others' thinking, encountering our own research practices in an unfamiliar light as they are made differently relevant and indeed urgent to the ways we have come to know them. Love draws our attention to a social science back catalogue, which can be easy to take for granted, and to methodological innovations whose terms and motivations we might do well to re-acquaint ourselves with instead of letting them recede into the status of 'the tradition', historical precursors to the state-of-the-art to be absorbed but moved beyond.

Going back to the work of mid-century sociologists, anthropologists, ethnomethodologists and deviance scholars, the practices of description Love finds in that work are celebrated for their capacity to link together and open up otherwise disparate and ignored features of the world. Love's re-historicisation of the post-war social sciences, as a result, holds considerable interest, particularly her contention that (re)turns to description have always been interventions that carried with them an explicit disciplinary politics. Re-historicising methods makes it possible to think with descriptive encounters within and across disciplines and their potential import for engaging with the problems that confront us in research today. In a period where our established methods and analytical priorities are also subject to challenges on many fronts from within our own disciplines (cf. Gane, 2020; Graeber, 2012; Marres et al., 2018; Savage, 2009, 2020; Savage and Burrows, 2007, 2009; Tsing, 2013), it is hard not be struck by Love's provocative invocation of the social sciences as interlocutors and see in it an invitation to contribute to the debate she has sought to initiate by revisiting our own approaches to the problem of description.

As we see it, that invitation is a welcome one. Once we start to think seriously with Love, we would argue, it becomes difficult to see the problem of description as any more permanently resolved or resolvable within the social sciences than it is in the humanities. As Love along with Marcus and Best note in their introduction to a co-edited special issue on the problem of description in the humanities' journal *Representations* (in many respects a mirror as well as spur to this one) (Marcus et al., 2016), description can often seem to be a settled matter. Yet for Love and colleagues this cannot be the case: 'description as a practice . . . attends not only to its objects but also to the collective, uncertain, and ongoing activity of trying to get a handle on the world' (Marcus et al., 2016: 4). As a practice we engage in and study, reading Love reminds us that descriptions do things and carry implications as a result. Alongside the 'possibilities for . . . interdisciplinary exchange' (2010: 374), heeding Love's call to come at the problem of description again can thus help us bring some of the major ways in which we and others work to 'get a handle on the world' into sharper focus by allowing us to reorient to the activities involved.

Reorientations of this kind, inspired by Love's intervention, drive the eight papers that form this special issue. As these papers show in their different ways, whether we carefully attend to the crafting of our own descriptions and their occasions, produce analyses of how, why and under what conditions those whose lives our work touches on have crafted theirs, or indeed do both together as we so often do, by re-engaging with description we stand to learn a great deal. We find ourselves in positions to better understand what goes into 'indexing and making visible forms of material and social reality' (Love, 2013: 412) as well as what is involved, more troublingly, in erasing, making invisible and dematerialising those realities or even, indeed, in uncovering those erasures and the means by which they were effected. Thinking with Love by thinking with descriptions, is, we would contend, a rewarding exercise for these very reasons.

Like Love, then, the aim of this special issue is to (re)turn to the problem of description. But we also want to revisit the sense in which *description is a problem*. In this context, we treat it not solely as a methodological problem, connected with the techniques in and through which we attempt to make sense of things, but as an empirical problem, connected with what we are attempting to make sense of. Because it is empirical as well as methodological, it is not a problem we can get out of the way once and for all, as doing so would clear away the things we are interested in as much as the difficulties we have in getting their measure. Instead, the specifics of the problems of understanding we encounter in the course of our research mean description is always something that has to be approached afresh in light of those specificities: the problem of description is always encountered in the thick of things and cannot be separated from it. Precisely because descriptions work in different ways depending on how they are pursued and put together in particular contexts of action, they can produce points of divergence, even exclusion, as much as convergence and inclusion and, from there, realignments of many kinds. Descriptive practices help produce that which they offer descriptions of and they lack neutrality precisely because of that.

The involved and implicative character of descriptions is not always straightforwardly visible, however: even though they are in plain sight, descriptive practices and their politics can be 'elusive' (Marcus et al., 2016: 1) going 'seen but unnoticed', in Garfinkel's

apt phrase (1967: 36). It is for that reason, when invited to revisit their research practices in light of Love's provocation, that the contributors to this special issue have been drawn to sites of controversy and contention where descriptions, their practices and attendant politics have been disputed and thus rendered visible and explicit. What does it mean to describe an ancient papyrus as present or missing, a machine as intelligent, noise as music, a disease as undiagnosable, a death as good or bad, deserved or undeserved, care as appropriate or inappropriate, policies as failing or effective? These struggles over description are the empirical concerns that animate the papers.

Insofar as this Special Issue is a response to Love's provocative invitation, then, it is a response of a particular kind, one in which description is approached from an empirical standpoint. Accordingly, the contributors all come at the problem of description by way of the specific problems their research has posed them with and seek to engage with them in their own terms. Like those their work focuses on, in this way the contributors are therefore also involved in 'the collective, uncertain, and ongoing activity of trying to get a handle on the world' that Marcus et al. (2016: 4) highlight. Rather than pushing those concerns into a methodological background, the contributors actively embrace and foreground them through their descriptive engagements. We hope these engagements are taken as an invitation for others to do the same. In tracing the issues that arise in and through the production and questioning of descriptions at various sites, the contributors collectively re-examine uninterrogated assumptions and genealogies underpinning forms of description in the social sciences, attending to their implications and highlighting for whom and why descriptions (of many kinds) matter, processes in which our own descriptive work is far from innocent. Organised as a series of empirical case studies, the papers consider the respective virtues of descriptive work via their corollaries of interpretation, explanation and evaluation to foster new kinds of engagements with what we describe through how we describe it. Forming a meeting between, and so a coming together of, literary criticism, cultural studies, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, ethnomethodology, history, and science and technology studies research, not to mention the specialist classics' field of papyrology, the papers together show how description becomes specifically disclosive of lives, worlds and their practical and political constitution.

Before introducing those papers and their subject matter in more depth, we want to situate these efforts in the round vis-a-vis Love's work. In Love's work, the difficult task of revisiting her discipline's own taken for granted practices of description and their concomitant methodological politics takes a particular form: she sets out to trouble the distinction between thin and thick descriptions, by remaining on the descriptive surface of things rather than interpretively penetrating their depths through close readings, one of the identifying methodological hallmarks of 20th-century literary inquiry. This leads her, among other things, to emphasise the often overlooked benefits of 'thin' description, particularly in her re-reading of Toni Morrison's writing (Love, 2010). This can easily be misread by social scientists coming at her work in the light of a very different set of disciplinary concerns and understandings where the advocacy of thin description might seem to suggest a commitment to positivism or reductionism of one form or another. However, Love has different concerns altogether. Descriptions that are thin or flat are all too easily treated as worse than those which are thick, rich or full. But, Love asks, better or worse for what and who gets to decide? Institutionalising a methodological preference

for one form of description over another can blind us to the point that both are features of the world and consequential in their own ways. Indeed, thin and flat descriptions, depending on the context and occasion, can be far more revealing than even the fullest, richest and most thickly described account. Which will provide the most insight, which carries the most weight, which is the most revealing are not matters we can or should attempt to decide in advance for ourselves; we should look instead to how they are decided in practice as and when they arise.

This takes us to perhaps the more important point. Love's target is less thick description than the 'figure of the privileged . . . interpreter' (2010: 373). In targeting the role of the interpreter as an authority, her point is not to establish new authoritative forms of description in their place but to undo the idea that authority should be our aim. This point is taken seriously in the papers that follow by emphasising a descriptive enterprise which is open, collaborative, contingent and occasioned. Love's emphasis on thin description and flat readings is thus designed to highlight the role they can play in unsettling the status (and privilege) of thick, deep or rich descriptions as taken for granted 'goods'. Thin descriptions, in Love's hands, are prophylactics against self-congratulation and self-aggrandisement and in championing them she draws attention to qualities we might otherwise ignore, suggesting the possibility of 'an alternative ethics' grounded in an art of attentiveness (2010: 375). By staying close to Morrison and reading the how of her thin descriptions, Love shows us that the stands we take get negotiated in dialogue with those whose descriptions we are engaging with. Staying close to those descriptions and letting go of arguments that assume a position of authority is, Love reminds us, a risky business but it can also be exciting, enabling us to follow others as they lead us into worlds and show us what is at stake in them, rather than vice versa. This is challenging, not just for the humanities, but for the social sciences and beyond. It is a challenge we feel is important to respond to, as this special issue testifies.

Doing with description

In thinking with descriptions as practices, our contributors return to Love's recuperation of description in post-war social science studies. Focusing on her re-descriptions of the work of Schutz, Becker, Garfinkel, Geertz and Latour, the papers that follow consider what is methodologically at stake in generating and working with practices of description, while exploring the problem of thinking with description. Following Love, we explore how we might foster new kinds of engagements through what we describe, in particular, to argue for forms of attentiveness that open up the contingent and occasioned basis upon which everyday lives are produced and acquire political and ethical valency.

In paying attention to the question of what might get done with description, we question taken for granted assumptions about description as dirty work upon which interpretation, analysis and critique depends. In recognising description as a contingent and occasioned practice, our focus lies not in policing or repairing the adjudication of descriptive methods in the context of disciplinary agendas and debates in the social sciences and humanities but in demonstrating the capacity of description to disrupt, unsettle and call into question our disciplinary practices. We are not treating description as a methodological engine for explicating phenomena; rather, for us, descriptions constitute

our phenomena. Doing things with description has implications for our participants as well our methodological practices. By attending to the descriptions of others, we show that we do not have the final say on how to orient the social sciences to the descriptive turn or how to build a better description in the humanities. Our goal is to move beyond these debates and think about the challenges of doing description in alignment with others. *Doing different things with description* is an invitation to open up the existence of multiple and disparate descriptions as objects of analysis and engage the merits, limits and problems of descriptive practices as a mode of critical inquiry (Tsing, 2013). In the hands of our contributors the descriptive work of explanation and everyday descriptions are not incompetent, compromised or complicit interpretations, nor are they an end product that can prove or resolve problems, but a way of making sense of phenomena in exemplary sites and settings.

The special issue is the product of a response from academics who took up an invitation to contribute to a panel we convened on the Politics and Practices of Description at the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (EASST, July 2018) followed by a dedicated symposium at the University of Liverpool (May 2019). Taking the challenge of Love's provocation seriously as a starting point to think about their own work allowed our participants to anchor descriptive problems in a range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. The papers are the result of the work they have done in documenting description.

So, what is description? The special issue highlights the diversity of descriptive practices and the way in which different researchers approach description to examine the world. It also highlights the challenges of such diversity in understanding description as a method of inquiry. The volume consists of eight articles each with a substantive methodological focus on the problem of description in contemporary research that connect with Love's work. The articles reflect the perspectives of scholars working across disciplines who link together descriptive practices as these practices emerge in their studies of everyday lives, worlds, objects and practices. The issues raised by this collection take up contemporary concerns in artificial intelligence (Mair, Brooker, Dutton and Somani); the significance of institutional and state failures (Goodwin); the entangled relations of human bodies, disease and unsafe environments (Kierans and Padilla-Altamira); the temporal and ontological status of ancient-things-today (Mazza); the methodological problem of describing drug use (Vitellone); recovery from drugs and alcohol (Theodoropoulou); noise music, mental illness and recognition (Hradcová and Synek); and the consequences of attending to neglected things as central to the politics of living and dying well (Lindén and Singleton). Together the articles explore the possibilities and the challenges posed by description to research practice and knowledge production. It is our hope that the special issue will contribute to ongoing methodological debates in the humanities and social sciences concerning the role, effects and consequences of descriptive methods in future research in a range of disciplines.

The special issue begins with Goodwin's attention to the descriptive problems inherent in serious untoward incidents. In the course of the article, Goodwin traces multiple descriptions and reports on their effects in contesting failures in healthcare. Reflecting on the use of inquiries as a particular governmental response to high-profile healthcare scandals, in particular their status as the ultimate arbiter of standards for patients and

politicians alike, Goodwin reveals the contests of knowledge that play out between patients, professionals and regulators. Much rests, she argues, on a descriptive archive: both written and spoken – medical records, letters of complaint, public and private hearings – and their circulations among regulatory bodies, inquests, the police and the media. Using the independent review of Gosport War Memorial Hospital, England, as a case study and drawing on scholarship on descriptive work from anthropology, ethnomethodology and science and technology studies, Goodwin considers the descriptive conditions under which inquiries are commissioned, how different sources of information are accessed, positioned and weighed, and how these factors allow for rival descriptive accounts to be assessed, selected between and acted upon. In so doing, the article highlights the importance of tracing multiple descriptions and why descriptions are necessary for establishing failures in healthcare.

The second article builds on Love's invitation to think reflexively about descriptive research methods including ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. Staying with descriptions in situ, Mair et al. take up the politics of artificial intelligence (AI) and trace that through descriptive work. Turning to Harvey Sacks' 'commentator machine' as a methodological heuristic, they seek to disentangle what it could mean to describe activities we do not normally see as the domain of machines but humans. These problems only get more pronounced in situations where the machines are said to be able to outperform humans at those activities. Focusing on Google DeepMind's AlphaGo programme, which beat the world champion human Go player in a challenge match in 2016, Mair et al. argue a great deal hinges on who is doing the description and the terms in which it is cast. Authoritative descriptions they suggest, such as those offered by Google DeepMind's researchers in relation to what AplhaGo was doing, need to be seen as carrying their own methodological politics. The issues and questions raised in their account enable a more nuanced understanding of the problem of description in the social sciences, arts and humanities as they increasingly encounter hybrid worlds.

In their article, Kierans and Padilla-Altamira acknowledge Love's commitment to destabilising the binary of thick and thin disciplinary practices. Focusing on Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown origin (CKDu), the authors consider Love's interrogations of the status of both thin and thick description as a promiscuous, double-sided concern. In Mexico, CKDu is an unexplained form of kidney failure, emerging at the entangled intersections of poverty, precarity and environmental harm. Kierans and Padilla-Altamira treat this ambiguous condition as a residual category following Parsons (1949) – a darkness in our systems of understanding. Residual categories raise problems of and for description, and by extension for social action. Rather than focus inwards on the complex physiological constituents of CKDu, Kierans and Padilla-Altamira follow the category as it travels outwards. They do this by staying close to the descriptive work of others (citizens, activists, epidemiologists, doctors, journalists, anthropologists and so on). They look at how CKDu is being elaborated and given content, and how different descriptions come to count and under what conditions. Through efforts to foster an anthropology of alignment, Kierans and Padilla-Altamira refuse to arbitrate between thin or thick descriptions; these are not problems to be repaired but phenomena in their own right, routes into the lives, worlds and political struggles of others. CKDu is thereby located within the fragmentary character or affordances of the descriptions woven around

it. The incoherence of CKDu speaks out to the entangled world it is situated within and thus provides insights into that world.

Working with texts, the article by Mazza considers the insights that a papyrologist can bring to understanding the description of texts by demonstrating the pay-offs in working with thick and thin descriptions. Focusing explicitly on the papyrus, Mazza calls to mind Geertz, who in his discussion of thick description, equates ethnographic fieldwork *with the work of reading texts*, in particular the importance of attending to ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries. Mazza focuses on these fragmentary concerns as a material and methodological imperative in working with papyrus to rethink invocations of thin and thick descriptions as they charge the descriptive meeting points between academics (papyrologists), the objects they study (ancient manuscripts) and their owners (institutions or private collectors), making visible the various social and temporal relations that link them. By attending to the various kinds of descriptive work that accompany manuscripts as they travel and are exchanged, Mazza contemplates the material corruptions and fragmentations that result: the philological corruption generated by the scribes but also the financially and academically corrupting force manuscripts exert on those who seeks to possess them. By drawing out descriptions that foreground the corrupting work of papyrology, Mazza's re-descriptions of thin materials interrogate the politics and ethics in cultural heritage preservation as well as academic practice. The distinctive problem raised by the papyrus broadens our understandings of text, rematerialising it, and what it means to describe it.

The concept of 'social problems' remains an important one for many social scientists involved in the practice of qualitative research. The article by Vitellone considers the effects of problems in social research practice. Taking seriously the problem of description as methodological troubles internal to sociological inquiry, Vitellone provides an alternative starting point for thinking about the legacy of Howard Becker's sociological studies of deviance celebrated by Love in her appraisal of descriptive methods. Focusing on the politics and practices of Becker's social science of drug use, Vitellone draws attention to the descriptive troubles that inform Becker's empirical practice and the controversies surrounding Becker's sociological description. What concerns Vitellone is the interpretation of problems in social research on drug use and the uses of descriptive methods in sociological practice. Returning to Becker's research practices Vitellone takes up Becker's challenge of composing methods that interrupt expert knowledge of drug use and engages the problem of description empirically. In so doing, Vitellone shifts the focus of inquiry from the social problem of drug use to demonstrating how problems can be understood sociologically within the context of research practice.

Staying with the broad theme of substance use, Theodoropoulou's article demonstrates the consequences of deploying descriptive methods alongside traditional techniques of observation in research and policy analysis related to recovery from drugs and alcohol. Describing policies and practices of recovery through assemblage thinking is central to her methodological imagination. What is sociologically distinctive about Theodoropoulou's descriptive approach to drug policy is the way the problem of description is addressed not in the terms of the interpretative practices of the social researcher, social theorist or policy maker but the mundane practices and ordinary methods of service users and service providers. Using thin and thick description as a tool for thinking sociologically,

Theodoropoulou's research highlights the politics of observational and visual methods to address the problem of describing recovery. By observing participants and asking them to describe their experience of recovery photographically, Theodoropoulou engages with what counts as care in practical settings. The strength of description as the article shows is its capacity to pay attention to service users practices within the recovery assemblage in ways that challenge dominant methods, epistemologies and policies of recovery.

Lindén and Singleton's article considers one of the central problematics of any description: the foregrounding of some matters at the expense of others. Mobilising a concern for neglected things in the context of cancer care and palliative care, Lindén and Singleton trouble their own (and their participants') selective modes of attention. They do this by drawing into analytical dialogue their respective studies on the Gynae Cancer Group (GCG) in Sweden, and a Hospice supporting end-of-life care in the United Kingdom in order to re-purpose/re-focus attention on the GCG. During the course of their collaborative description, Lindén and Singleton address the overlooked aspects of their own studies, paying particular attention to things at the periphery of their attention: affects, atmospheres and fleeting moments. Engaging Love's orientation to close but not deep accounts of surfaces and operations, Latour's orientations to tracing and assembling relations, and Puig de la Bellacasa's 'ethico-political' commitment to matters of care, the article provides insights into the uses of descriptive methods for feminist technoscience. In doing so, the authors ask what an ethico-political commitment to things that are both neglected and deemed potentially undermining of care might mean for the politics and practices of describing care practices. Their efforts to *unsettle descriptions* both trouble and remake cancer care arrangements in ways that might hold the potential of better, more liveable care for women living.

The selection of articles concludes with 'The rest is silence: on describing cognitive multiplicity' by Hradcová and Synek, which speaks directly to Love's interest in descriptive practices that take place outside of formal institutional settings. Drawing on their ethnographic work in a residential care unit, the authors set up a textual laboratory that enables them to experiment with description in ways that tests its limits, and explores the ethical issues arising from this research. Beginning with descriptions of attending a gig by the Roman Radkovič Collective, an avant-garde noise band, the authors sketch the problems they encounter in coming to terms with it as an event and the challenges of producing a jointly negotiated description that allows for their participants to inform the analysis. Their description of noise as a specific style of doing music re-frames analyses of what can and cannot, will and will not, be understood as a relevant form of artistic activity. Yet, fragile enough as that descriptive work is, it is always in danger of being over-ridden as the RRC's members are all classified as cognitively disabled and under institutional care – which they were temporarily released from for this gig. Juxtaposing the account of the performance with that of a band meeting in which the band's members discussed what they wanted to be included in a documentary being made about RRC enables Hradcová and Synek to highlight the challenges but also the benefits of describing cognitive multiplicity with others in ways that can change the parameters within which notions of rationality as much as music are framed. For them, such experiments in description might enable a 'better understanding of the ways by which we think, enact reason and live meaningful lives together'.

As a collection, these papers point towards the possibilities, limits and imperatives of description and offer a reflexive and critical examination of its practices and politics from the vantage point of social science in direct conversation with humanities scholarship. While the articles themselves are topically distinct, and geographically varied, they are all based on empirical research and written to facilitate a reorientation to the role of description in our research practices. All creatively promote new ways of thinking, writing and researching and open up conversations between and across related disciplines in the social sciences and humanities as well as beyond. In re-examining description as a point of departure in and for research, all contributions are committed to an ethos of methodological reflection and debate, continuing to ensure our efforts remain adequate to contemporary problems and concerns. In so doing, all contributions stand in conversation with each other and in response to Love's provocations, provocations we would urge others to engage with too.

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