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Facts into Truth:
Henry David Thoreau and the Role of Hard Facts in Creative Nonfiction

Allow me to take you back in time a bit, back to Massachusetts in the 1830s. Picture endless forests teaming with wild hare and muskrat, rivers and lakes bubbling with pickerel and minnow, the sky aflutter with robin and hawk, hearty soil waiting for the bright blade of a New England farmer's plow. What is the government of a fledgling democracy to do when faced with such abundance? Take inventory, of course.

In the early 1830s, The Massachusetts legislature commissioned four reports on the natural history of their state that would "promote the agricultural benefit of the commonwealth," and highlight "that which is practically useful . . . to persons whose honorable employment is the cultivation of the soil" (*Report* VI). The results were four book-length reports: *Fishes, Reptiles, and Birds of Massachusetts* (1839), *Herbaceous Plants and Quadrupeds of Massachusetts* (1840); *Insects of Massachusetts* (1841); and *Invertebrata of Massachusetts* (1841). Taken together, these reports constitute more than one thousand three hundred pages of facts and figures, data to marshal and catalogue the whole of the wild commonwealth, charts and indices to itemize and account for all the creeping things. There is an Old-Testament inclusiveness to it, an accounting that would have made Noah or Adam proud.

fig 1. 1841 Geological Map of Massachusetts, by Edward Hitchcock.
This map, completed around the same time as the Massachusetts reports, does visually for geology wonks what I imagine the reports did textually for the Commonwealth legislators who commissioned them—that is, it catalogues the natural resources of the state for quick, efficient reference. Handy in a policy meeting, to be sure, but knowing that the eastern hill country of Massachusetts is rich with quartz, granite, and limestone only gets you so far. No green streak on a geological map ever told anyone anything about the human condition. For that, you've got to put on your boots and go for walk. And preferably bring a notebook.

And while the word "Invertabrata" is enough alone to warrant the recollection of these reports, remember that this was Massachusetts in the mid-19th century, ground zero for American Transcendentalism. Such an unabashedly pragmatic, government-sanctioned demystification of the wilderness would have been enough to bring tears to Emerson's giant transparent eyeball, and the Transcendentalist reaction to these reports can be instructive to those of us interested in the value of facts in creative nonfiction.

fig 2. Caricature of Emerson's transparent eyeball, by Christopher Pearse Cranch, 1837-1840.
The notion that a writer can, even metaphorically, transform into a giant transparent eyeball is, on some level, absurd. And yet there is something to Emerson's assertion that our egos are too much in control, and that a little time in the woods goes along way toward granting humanity some much needed perspective: "In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon," Emerson writes, "man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature" (Emerson 13). And this may sum up nicely the transcendental beef with the Massachusetts reports—A cataloging of the natural world as if it were merchandise in a stockroom only reaffirms the false notion that our proper home is the marketplace, and our first language the arithmetic of commerce. It may not be a stretch to presume that Thoreau and his comrades felt a moral obligation to re-constitute the "facts" of these reports with a touch of the wildness that had been removed from them.

Enter Margaret Fuller, editor of *The Dial*, a fledgling literary magazine founded as a showcase for transcendentalist ideals. Imagine Fuller and the rest of *The Dial's* editorial board gathered in a smoky conference room to vent about the government's shameless attempt to reduce the wilderness to a warehouse inventory. "What do we do with all this?" someone might have said, holding up the stack of reports. And Fuller might have said, "Who knows? Let's give them to Thoreau and see what he comes up with."

In the July 1842 edition of *The Dial,* Fuller writes: "We were thinking how we might best celebrate the good deed which the State of Massachusetts has done in procuring the Scientific Survey of the

Commonwealth" ("Preliminary Note," 19). And perhaps I'm merely projecting, but I can hear in her voice a bit of understated exasperation, or perhaps a transcendental longing for someone to deconstruct the Commonwealth's "good deed" into something more organic that might actually capture some of the beauty and grandeur of Massachusetts. Certainly what she goes on to write backs up this conjecture:

> We found a near neighbor and friend of ours, dear also to the Muses, a native and an inhabitant of the town of Concord, who readily undertook to give us such comments as he had made on these books, and better still, notes of his own conversation with nature in the woods and waters of this town. (19)

However it happened, Thoreau was tapped to make some transcendental sense of the heaping pile of reports—Fuller called him a "neighbor and friend . . . dear also to the Muses," and it would be his charge to engage the facts in those reports and revision them into art.

fig. 3. Portrait of Margaret Fuller by John Plumbe, 1846. While Fuller here is likely striking what she hopes is a contemplative pose for the camera, I think it is perfectly reasonable to imagine that she's in pain, that she's not merely resting her head in her hands, but massaging her temple and closing her eyes in agony; and its not too much of a stretch to imagine that the cause of such pain could be one of these Massachusetts reports.

In the resulting essay, "The Natural History of Massachusetts," Thoreau seasons information from those reports with personal observations, anecdotes, and meditations, adding literary weight to an otherwise impenetrable mass of facts. Thoreau's essay is a natural history of a quality well beyond the scope of bottom-line-minded legislators. It is a natural history written for those who love the

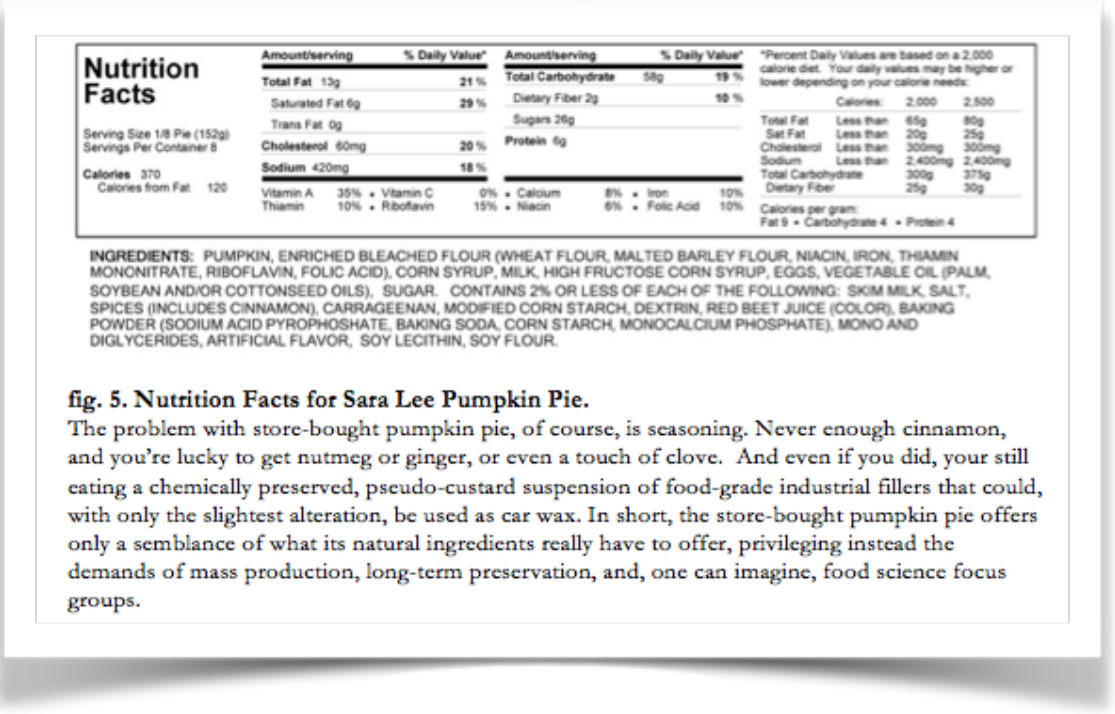
Commonwealth's resources not for their market value, but for their spiritual, psychological, and emotional value.

Thoreau doesn't begin by addressing the reports themselves head on, but he works his way toward them. "Books of natural history make the most cheerful winter reading," he writes. "I read in Audubon with a thrill of delight, when the snow covers the ground, of the magnolia, and the Florida keys, and their warm sea breezes; of the fence-rail, and the cotton-tree, and the migrations of the rice-bird; of the breaking up of winter in Labrador, and the melting of the snow on the forks of the Missouri"(19). Thoreau describes such writing as "reminiscences of luxuriant nature," and contrasts the lively writing of Audubon and other nature writers to the dry, government reports that "deal much in measurements and minute descriptions, not interesting to the general reader, with only here and there a colored sentence to allure him, like those plants growing in dark forests, which bear only leaves without blossoms" (39).

fig 4. "Rice Bird," Plate no. 54 from *Birds of America*, 1840.
Audubon's value resides, in part, in his timelessness. Because of Audubon I can, without having ever seen a rice bird in the feather, conjure in my mind the same image that Thoreau would have called to mind as he referenced the artist in "The Natural History of Massachusetts." And, interestingly, Audubon's *Birds of America* turns out to be another tension point between the world of science, preoccupied with catalogues and databases, and the world of art, eager for a more organic experience with nature. According to biographer Richard Rhodes, critics complained that *Birds of America* was not organized according to regular taxonomic standards, but rather according to Audubon's artistic whimsy. In response, Audubon wrote that just as actual wild animals "are not in the habit of following each other as if marching in regular procession to a funeral," neither would the birds in his book be subject to any scientific notions of organization. As Rhodes explains, "[Audubon] conceived *The Birds of America* as a visual tour through the *lives* of birds"(Rhodes 303) [emphasis mine]. Life is what mattered to Audubon, and to Thoreau—and the hard facts of science had value only in as much as they helped individuals understand and live their lives more fully.

To Thoreau these reports are, at best, sickly saplings starving for sunlight, all wood and no bud. And yet, he sees in these volumes of raw data, not a waste of time, but an opportunity. "Let us not underrate the value of a fact," he writes. "It will one day flower in a truth" (39). Thoreau knows that the truths we discover in writing blossom from our engagement with facts, from reflection on experience and observation: "Nature will bear the closest inspection," he tells us. "She invites us to lay our eye level with the smallest leaf, and take an insect view of its plain . . . every part is full of life" (22). And in his meandering essay he proves his point one animal, one leaf, one shell at a time. Throughout "The Natural History of Massachusetts," Thoreau treats the bland facts of those legislative reports as catalysts for anecdotes and meditations that lead to the discovery of a truth that really matters—a deeper understanding of our place in the natural world. A close reading of this essay serves as a master class in how writers can help facts blossom into truths.

Any writer who has stared at volumes of research or boxes of archival data know the challenge of processing hard facts into something worth reading. Thirteen hundred pages of diagrams and charts and catalogues would no more help a reader discover the natural world of Massachusetts than, say, a nutrition facts label would help a diner appreciate the subtle flavors in a slice of good pumpkin pie.



Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1/8 Pie (152g)
Servings Per Container 8

Calories 370
Calories from Fat 120

Amount/serving	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 13g	**21** %
Saturated Fat 6g	**29** %
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 60mg	**20** %
Sodium 420mg	**18** %
Vitamin A 35% • Vitamin C 0%	
Thiamin 10% • Riboflavin 15%	

Amount/serving	% Daily Value*
Total Carbohydrate 58g	**19** %
Dietary Fiber 2g	**10** %
Sugars 26g	
Protein 6g	
Calcium 8% • Iron 10%	
Niacin 6% • Folic Acid 10%	

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:

	Calories:	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Sat Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

Calories per gram:
Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4

INGREDIENTS: PUMPKIN, ENRICHED BLEACHED FLOUR (WHEAT FLOUR, MALTED BARLEY FLOUR, NIACIN, IRON, THIAMIN MONONITRATE, RIBOFLAVIN, FOLIC ACID), CORN SYRUP, MILK, HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP, EGGS, VEGETABLE OIL (PALM, SOYBEAN AND/OR COTTONSEED OILS), SUGAR. CONTAINS 2% OR LESS OF EACH OF THE FOLLOWING: SKIM MILK, SALT, SPICES (INCLUDES CINNAMON), CARRAGEENAN, MODIFIED CORN STARCH, DEXTRIN, RED BEET JUICE (COLOR), BAKING POWDER (SODIUM ACID PYROPHOSHATE, BAKING SODA, CORN STARCH, MONOCALCIUM PHOSPHATE), MONO AND DIGLYCERIDES, ARTIFICIAL FLAVOR, SOY LECITHIN, SOY FLOUR.

fig. 5. Nutrition Facts for Sara Lee Pumpkin Pie.
The problem with store-bought pumpkin pie, of course, is seasoning. Never enough cinnamon, and you're lucky to get nutmeg or ginger, or even a touch of clove. And even if you did, your still eating a chemically preserved, pseudo-custard suspension of food-grade industrial fillers that could, with only the slightest alteration, be used as car wax. In short, the store-bought pumpkin pie offers only a semblance of what its natural ingredients really have to offer, privileging instead the demands of mass production, long-term preservation, and, one can imagine, food science focus groups.

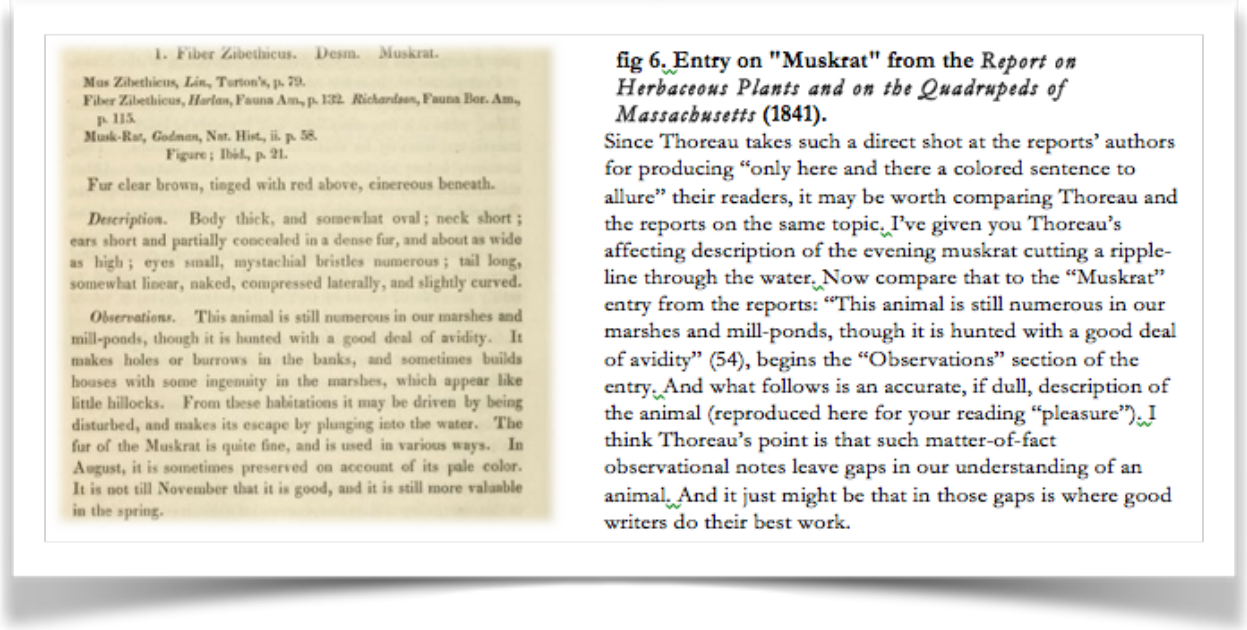
Thoreau references the data, but then invites us into the woods for a glimpse of what that data translates to in the actual wilderness. In a passage about birds, Thoreau begins: "About two hundred and eighty birds either reside permanently in the State, or spend the summer only, or make us a passing visit" (23). But then he proceeds to animate those two hundred eighty birds for the reader:

> Those which spend the winter with us have obtained our warmest sympathy. The nuthatch and chickadee flitting in company through the dells of the wood, the one harshly scolding at the intruder, the other with a faint lisping note enticing him on, the jay screaming in the orchard, the crow cawing in unison with the storm, the partridge, like a russet link extended over from autumn to spring, preserving unbroken the chain of summers, the hawk with warrior-like firmness abiding the blasts of winter, the robin. (23)

Thoreau allows us a kinship with the birds, and tracks the seasons by tracking their movements through Concord: Nuthatch and Chickadee in winter, Duck and Fishhawk in spring, Flicker and Phoebe in summer, and Oriole and Goldfinch in autumn. The birds listed by the report become, in Thoreau's essay, Father Time's feathered fleet, marking the cycle of the season. And the subtle anthropomorphism he applies to each bird lifts them off the page, builds a nest for them in our hearts and minds, and invites them in to roost.

Thoreau does something similar in a passage about quadrupeds. First he gives a nod to the government data: "It appears from the Report that there are about forty quadrupeds belonging to the State," but he immediately ushers us back outside again, recalling for readers the annual flooding that occurs in the spring and how "the wind from the meadows is laden with a strong scent of musk, and by its freshness advertises me of an unexplored wildness" (28). And now that we are in the musky-scented wilderness, Thoreau offers us another wild image to consider: "Frequently, in the morning or evening, a long ripple is seen in the still water, where a musk-rat is crossing the stream, with only its nose above the

surface, and sometimes a green bough in its mouth to build its house with" (29). He describes the industry of the muskrat, how it 'survey[s] its neighborhood' at any sign of danger, how it 'erect[s] cabins of mud and grass," to be used as "hunting lodges" (29), and as with his comments on the migratory habits of birds, Thoreau uses the details born of his own observations to recreate for the reader a sense of the vibrant ecology of the muskrat. The author's personal experience blends with the facts of the reports and in so doing humanizes an otherwise unremarkable rodent.



1. Fiber Zibethicus. Desm. Muskrat.

Mus Zibethicus, *Lin.*, Turton's, p. 79.
Fiber Zibethicus, *Harlan*, Fauna Am., p. 132. *Richardson*, Fauna Bor. Am., p. 115.
Musk-Rat, *Godman*, Nat. Hist., ii. p. 58.
Figure; Ibid., p. 21.

Fur clear brown, tinged with red above, cinereous beneath.

Description. Body thick, and somewhat oval; neck short; ears short and partially concealed in a dense fur, and about as wide as high; eyes small, mystachial bristles numerous; tail long, somewhat linear, naked, compressed laterally, and slightly curved.

Observations. This animal is still numerous in our marshes and mill-ponds, though it is hunted with a good deal of avidity. It makes holes or burrows in the banks, and sometimes builds houses with some ingenuity in the marshes, which appear like little hillocks. From these habitations it may be driven by being disturbed, and makes its escape by plunging into the water. The fur of the Muskrat is quite fine, and is used in various ways. In August, it is sometimes preserved on account of its pale color. It is not till November that it is good, and it is still more valuable in the spring.

fig 6. Entry on "Muskrat" from the *Report on Herbaceous Plants and on the Quadrupeds of Massachusetts* (1841).
Since Thoreau takes such a direct shot at the reports' authors for producing "only here and there a colored sentence to allure" their readers, it may be worth comparing Thoreau and the reports on the same topic. I've given you Thoreau's affecting description of the evening muskrat cutting a ripple-line through the water. Now compare that to the "Muskrat" entry from the reports: "This animal is still numerous in our marshes and mill-ponds, though it is hunted with a good deal of avidity" (54), begins the "Observations" section of the entry. And what follows is an accurate, if dull, description of the animal (reproduced here for your reading "pleasure"). I think Thoreau's point is that such matter-of-fact observational notes leave gaps in our understanding of an animal. And it just might be that in those gaps is where good writers do their best work.

Throughout the essay, Thoreau brings the animal kingdom under close scrutiny and reveals their many seemingly human habits and traits, and in so doing invites readers to broaden their perceptions of the animal kingdom—an invitation the legislative reports are constitutionally incapable of making. But perhaps the most telling observation in Thoreau's essay comes when he lays human beings under that same close scrutiny. In a passage about the various fishes found in the rivers and streams of Massachusetts, Thoreau paraphrases from the reports: "Of fishes, seventy-five genera and one hundred and seven species are described in the Report" (30), but then he paddles us out in a boat on the Concord River to relive a memory with him:

> I stay my boat in mid current, and look down in the sunny water to see the civil meshes of [the fishermen's] nets, and wonder how the blustering people of the town could have done this elvish work. The twine looks like a new river weed, and is to the river as a beautiful memento of man's presence in nature, discovered as silently and delicately as a foot-print in the sand (31).

Whereas the Massachusetts reports by their catalogue structure of lists and subdivisions draw a harsh distinction between a human curator and the natural world he oversees, Thoreau's essay challenges us to break down those artificial barriers between man and nature. He revisions man not as a mere observer or accountant of the natural world, and not as an intruder in some foreign wilderness, but as an essential element of that world. He renders civilized man as wild as the fishes themselves, their fishing line as natural as river weed, "no more an intrusion than the cobweb in the sun" (31).

In "The Natural History of Massachusetts," Thoreau takes the government's effort to catalogue the world and transforms it into an opportunity to reconsider man's place in that world. This is the hard work of the observant writer—to take information and filter it through personal experience and observation, to cultivate a fact into a truth.

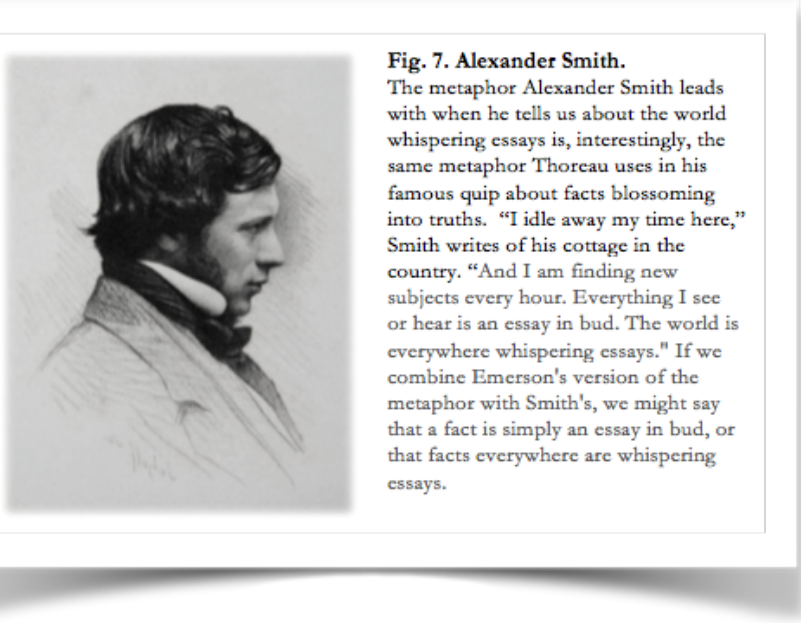
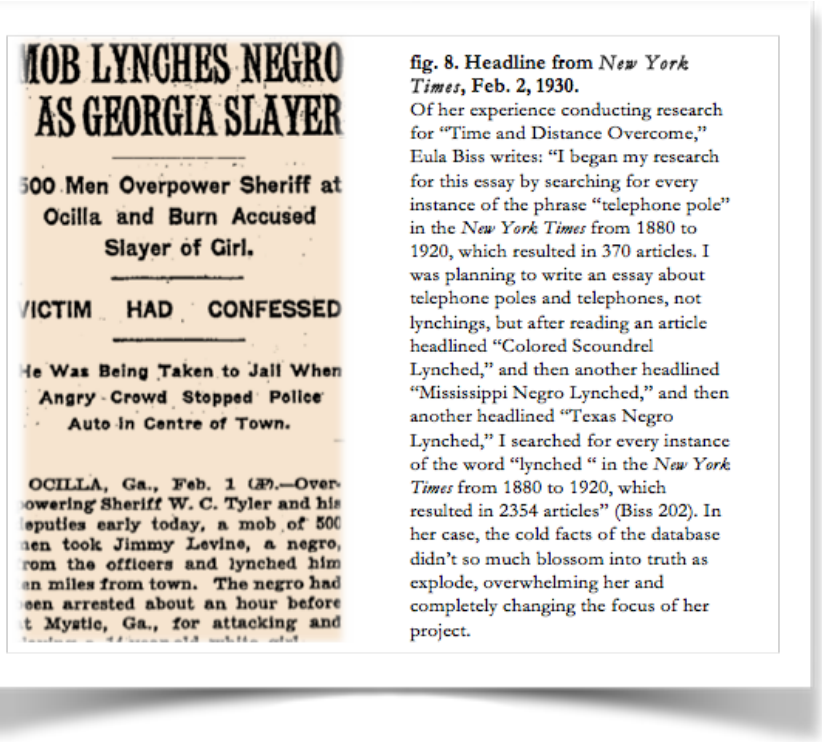


Fig. 7. Alexander Smith. The metaphor Alexander Smith leads with when he tells us about the world whispering essays is, interestingly, the same metaphor Thoreau uses in his famous quip about facts blossoming into truths. "I idle away my time here," Smith writes of his cottage in the country. "And I am finding new subjects every hour. Everything I see or hear is an essay in bud. The world is everywhere whispering essays." If we combine Emerson's version of the metaphor with Smith's, we might say that a fact is simply an essay in bud, or that facts everywhere are whispering essays.

And this is why writers engage with the facts of the archive, the detritus of the database. Alexander Smith writes "the world is everywhere whispering essays" (Smith), and I believe this is true, but, as Thoreau demonstrates, sometimes those whispers are muffled inside the thick, dense binding of a thirteen-hundred page, four-volume

set of natural history reports. Sometimes the world whispers from the deep corners of our ancestry, from the dusty archives of newspapers, or from the raw elements of an interview.

The research-minded nonfiction writer is the "near neighbor or friend," who, like Thoreau, is "dear also to the muses"—someone capable of the labor required to refine the world of information into story, sifting through the raw materials of fact and uncovering a new world for themselves and the reader. So many of the essays that move me—where would they be without research? Elena Passarello's "Hey Big Spender," a quirky essay on the erotic history of castrates, Eula Biss's marvelous, heartbreaking essay on lynching, "Time and Distance Overcome," which started out as a *New York Times* archival search on telephones; Brian Doyle's "Joyas Voladoras," a lyric meditation on the heart; the meandering allusions to mythology, the Bible, art, and literature that humanizes Scott Russell Sanders' alcoholic father in "Under the Influence;" the steady, intimate eye of Lia Purpura as she examines one corpse after another in "Autopsy Report;" Anne Fadiman's "A Piece of Cotton," in which she carefully reconsiders patriotism and flag etiquette in a post-9/11 world. These writers have all found their voice by getting beyond themselves and getting into the research.


MOB LYNCHES NEGRO AS GEORGIA SLAYER

500 Men Overpower Sheriff at Ocilla and Burn Accused Slayer of Girl.

VICTIM HAD CONFESSED

He Was Being Taken to Jail When Angry Crowd Stopped Police Auto in Centre of Town.

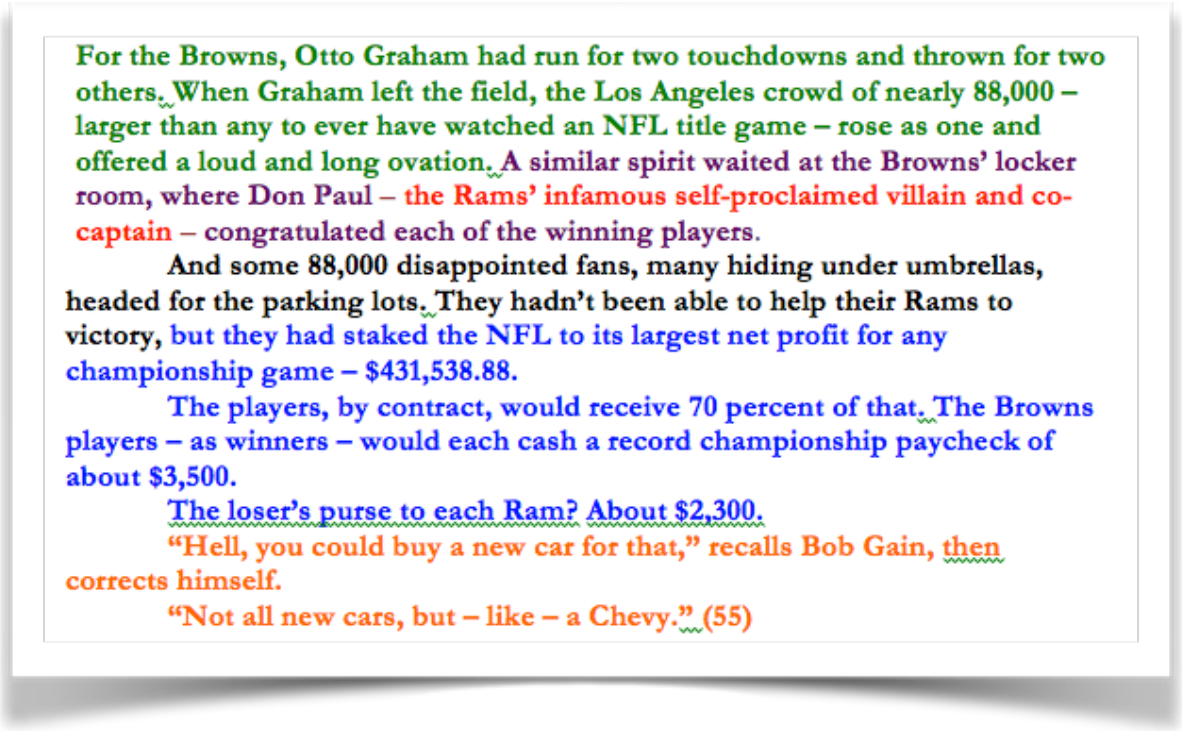
OCILLA, Ga., Feb. 1 (AP).—Overpowering Sheriff W. C. Tyler and his deputies early today, a mob of 500 men took Jimmy Levine, a negro, from the officers and lynched him ten miles from town. The negro had been arrested about an hour before at Mystic, Ga., for attacking and

fig. 8. Headline from *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 1930.

Of her experience conducting research for "Time and Distance Overcome," Eula Biss writes: "I began my research for this essay by searching for every instance of the phrase "telephone pole" in the *New York Times* from 1880 to 1920, which resulted in 370 articles. I was planning to write an essay about telephone poles and telephones, not lynchings, but after reading an article headlined "Colored Scoundrel Lynched," and then another headlined "Mississippi Negro Lynched," and then another headlined "Texas Negro Lynched," I searched for every instance of the word "lynched " in the *New York Times* from 1880 to 1920, which resulted in 2354 articles" (Biss 202). In her case, the cold facts of the database didn't so much blossom into truth as explode, overwhelming her and completely changing the focus of her project.

Consider a few fresh examples in greater detail: in the following passage from *Hollywood's Team: Grit, Glamour and the 1950s Los Angeles Rams,* authors Jim Hock and Michael Downs combines information from several different sources, including the *LA Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Baltimore Sun*, ProFootballArchives.com, and

personal interviews to create a vivid description of the post-game atmosphere that attended the Cleveland Browns' victory over the LA Rams in the NFL's 1955 championship game (I've formatted the passage below to offer a visual indication of the work the writers have done to integrate their several sources. Colors change as sources change):



For the Browns, Otto Graham had run for two touchdowns and thrown for two others. When Graham left the field, the Los Angeles crowd of nearly 88,000 – larger than any to ever have watched an NFL title game – rose as one and offered a loud and long ovation. A similar spirit waited at the Browns' locker room, where Don Paul – the Rams' infamous self-proclaimed villain and co-captain – congratulated each of the winning players.

And some 88,000 disappointed fans, many hiding under umbrellas, headed for the parking lots. They hadn't been able to help their Rams to victory, but they had staked the NFL to its largest net profit for any championship game – $431,538.88.

The players, by contract, would receive 70 percent of that. The Browns players – as winners – would each cash a record championship paycheck of about $3,500.

The loser's purse to each Ram? About $2,300.

"Hell, you could buy a new car for that," recalls Bob Gain, then corrects himself.

"Not all new cars, but – like – a Chevy." (55)

A cursory glance at this excerpt makes clear the work that has been done to abridge so many sources into a few paragraphs of text, but a close read suggests that the authors have not only summarized and paraphrased well; they have arranged the passage in an artful way suggestive of the vivid texture of fiction, helping the reader feel present on the night of the Brown's victory. Consider the placement of raw data about payouts to players on the winning and losing team. This is the kind of wonky information a sports nut might find interesting, but what humanizes the selection is the choice to follow up that data with the quote from Bob Gain. The quip from Gain about the payout being enough to "buy a car… Not all new cars, but–like–a Chevy," captures the players' pleasure in getting paid to play football while underscoring the relatively small amount of money these players were making when compared to today's multi-million-

dollar expectations. The passage illuminates a bygone era in American Sports and offers an everyman impression of professional athletes. Readers feel more familiar with and more empathetic toward Gain and the other players precisely because the authors have given them voice in this particular way.

Inara Verzemnieks takes a similar approach in *Among the Living and the Dead: A Tale of Exile and Homecoming on the War Roads of Europe*, a forthcoming memoir that retraces the lives of Verzemnieks' Latvian ancestors. Below is a passage in which she offers a short social history of Latvians:

> The land which they call home has always belonged to someone else. There is no concept of Latvians as a people, except in relation to what they can do for others. To be Latvian is to be a peasant. Put another way, to be born within Latvia's borders prior to the 20th century is more than likely to be born a serf, bound under hereditary contract to provide a lifetime of labor to the wealthy friends of whatever empire happens to be ruling Latvia at the time. (Verzemnieks 75)

fig. 9. Italian novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa.
An important part of Verzemnieks' research process includes following lines of inquiry that relate only tangentially to her main subject—a process she calls "rabbit-hole research." For a section of the book referring to the lifestyles of 18th-century aristocratic German landholders in Latvia, Verzemnieks conducted rabbit-hole research that included reading the novels of Italian writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, digging up his records in in the national archives, and hunting for recordings of the opera Singer Maria Teresa Alice Laura Barbi. Such research can provide important context for a writer, and even if most of the research never becomes part of the final manuscript, it can give an author essential confidence about her subject. In the case of Verzemnieks' Lampedusa rabbit hole, hundreds of pages of reading and research translated to just a few passing words. See if you notice the references in this passage on German landholders: "They raise Neo-Gothic manors and Neo-Romanesque manors, Baroque manors, manors with Corinthian columns that support carved pediments of birds and flowers and family crests through which they usher their opera singer-brides, their Italian novelist lovers" (75).

Verzemnieks uses this short passage to contextualize the life of her own great-great grandfather who, in 1882, became "the first of his family to own the land where every ancestor before him has lived and worked and died" (75). And though no sources are hinted at in this passage, the density of information

implies an ethos that only comes from rigorous research. Indeed, Verzemnieks herself describes this passage as, "the distillation of several books," amounting to hundreds of pages of reading in order to produce this 87-word description. And by placing her family's 19th-century real estate deal in a broader Latvian context, she elevates the significance of her grandfather's land purchase to the level of a historical moment. And likewise, the intimate portrait of her family's historical record renders the broader history of Latvia in a more personal, humanizing light.

Artful distillations of research and information are an important hallmark of quality creative nonfiction, but it is often the liberties that authors take that give new life to that information. Consider Elena Passarello's essay "The Ceremony of the Interview of Princes," which was published in the anthology *After Montaigne: Contemporary Essayists Cover the Essays*. The anthology presents contemporary essayists riffing on Montaigne's classic essays, and Passarello's contribution is based on Montaigne's short essay on the custom of excessive attention to courtly ritual among the European aristocracy. With Montaigne's title as inspiration, Passarello writes a lyric commentary on the musician Prince, and the eccentric demands he made regarding media interviews. She began work on her essay by reviewing upwards of 100 different interviews and media appearances with Prince between 1980 to 2014, and then culling out every odd detail, quirky demand, and eccentric prohibition made by the pop icon in the course of those interviews (Passarello). And then, with her own trademark idiosyncrasy, Passarello mashed up that information into an imagined narrative documenting a hypothetical interview with Prince that takes place in the musician's private estate, Paisley Park. The essay, in part, reads as a laundry list of dos and don'ts:

> Do not call him weird.
>
> Do not grab the heel of his disco-ball boot, even if he propped the boot up on your armrest.
>
> He would prefer no questions between 1985 and 1990.

> You will be permitted to ask about his hair, but only if you are a former supermodel. You will be permitted to say you've never heard of him, but only if you are a Muppet. (217)

This mock set of instructions is no realist's labor to revisit some past event, but rather an artful attempt to create a mosaic of Prince's eccentricities. And yet, as satisfying as it is to imagine that the wealthiest and most powerful among us are also the weirdest, in enumerating the oddities of celebrity behavior, the essay simultaneously reveals and critiques our own cultural preoccupations. If Prince is a screwball genius with a penchant for inconveniencing reporters, then we, the insatiably nosey viewing public, are at least partially to blame for that screwball genius. The application of research in this essay ultimately reveals as much about us as readers as it does about the celebrity it attempts to examine.

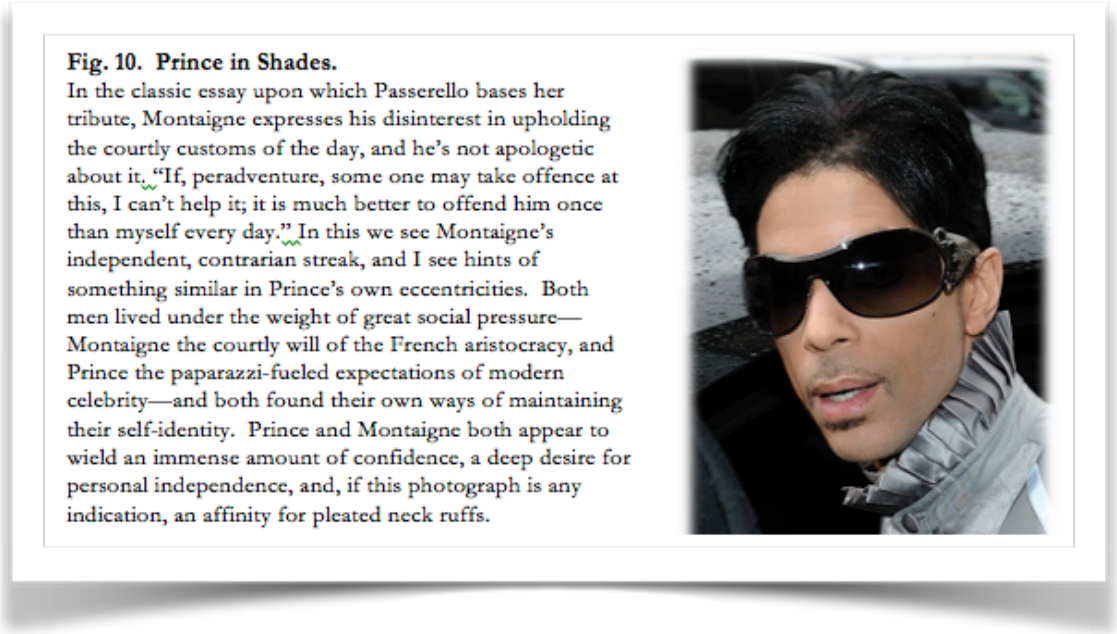


Fig. 10. Prince in Shades.
In the classic essay upon which Passerello bases her tribute, Montaigne expresses his disinterest in upholding the courtly customs of the day, and he's not apologetic about it. "If, peradventure, some one may take offence at this, I can't help it; it is much better to offend him once than myself every day." In this we see Montaigne's independent, contrarian streak, and I see hints of something similar in Prince's own eccentricities. Both men lived under the weight of great social pressure—Montaigne the courtly will of the French aristocracy, and Prince the paparazzi-fueled expectations of modern celebrity—and both found their own ways of maintaining their self-identity. Prince and Montaigne both appear to wield an immense amount of confidence, a deep desire for personal independence, and, if this photograph is any indication, an affinity for pleated neck ruffs.

Ander Monson, an essayist with his own eccentric affinity for research, writes that because "we perceive the self through its contrast with the world . . . the world quickly must become an essential subject in any essay worth its salt" (Talbot 112). It is research that gives us access to the world, research that gives a jolt of verisimilitude to our stories, that deepens our meditations, foments personal discovery,

complicates received notions, and helps keep us honest. I appreciate the famous Ron Carlson advice that a writer must keep his butt in the chair if he ever wants to get anything done; however, unless we occasionally get out of our chairs, and engage with the hard facts of the world, there's no telling what we may miss out on.

Certainly had Thoreau stayed behind his desk, he could not have given us his lively, unconventional, heartening "Natural History of Massachusetts." And perhaps if the Commonwealth legislature had not commissioned those soulless reports at all, Thoreau might have had one less reason to go floating with the muskrat. Writing feeds research as often as research feeds writing, and experienced practitioners of nonfiction know that splitting time between these two endeavors is essential.

Near the end of "A Natural History of Massachusetts," Thoreau draws a metaphorical comparison between the growth of crystalline frost and the way "vegetable juices swell gradually into the perfect leaf." He sees a familiar structural complexity in hoar frost, in the plumage of birds, the architecture of coral, and ultimately in the complexity of art itself: "What in short is all art at length but a kind of vegetation or crystallization, the production of nature manured and quickened with mind?" (Thoreau 38). If one can forgive Thoreau his slightly scatological metaphor, I think the image is apt—experience and research puts writers in touch with "the production of nature," the world is "manured and quickened" in the mind of the writer. Cold dead facts blossom into truth and the world that we must live in transforms into stories we cannot live without.

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Figures

fig 1. 1841 Geological Map of Massachusetts, by Edward Hitchcock. Digitalamherst.org. http://www.digitalamherst.org/items/show/919

fig 2. Caricature of Emerson's transparent eyeball, by Christopher Pearse Cranch, 1837-1840. Wikipedia.org. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transparent_eyeball

fig. 3. Portrait of Margaret Fuller by John Plumbe, 1846. Wikipedia.org. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Fuller

fig 4. "Rice Bird," Plate no. 54 from *Birds of America,* 1840. Wikimedia.org. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rice_Bird_(Audubon).jpg

fig. 5. Nutrition Facts for Sara Lee Pumpkin Pie. Tysonfoodservices.com. http://www.tysonfoodservice.com/products/sl07166

fig 6. Entry on "Muskrat" from the *Report on Herbaceous Plants and on the Quadrupeds of Massachusetts* (1841). Archive.org.

fig. 7. Alexander Smith. Essays.quotidiana.org

fig. 8. Headline from New York Times, Feb. 2, 1930. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.* Proquest.com.

fig. 9. Italian novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. Wikipedia.org.https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuseppe_Tomasi_di_Lampedusa

fig. 10. Prince in Shades. Wikimedia.org. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prince.jpg