

International Literary Journalism in Three Dimensions

by Norman Sims

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Abstract:

This paper will examine the concept of international literary journalism through a comparative analysis in three dimensions. One dimension of international literary journalism involves critical variations attributed to geographical borders, language borders, and cultural differences. A second dimension involves the non-geographical borderlands of gender, class and race. The third dimension is time. The nature of literary journalism varies as much across time as it does across international or group identity boundaries. In this presentation, I’m going to offer examples of each of the three dimensions of cross-borderland literary journalism, and briefly analyze each of them.

On Wednesday, I crossed the international border between the United States and Canada. Now I’m in an international zone and I can expect Canadian literary journalism to differ from U.S. journalism, right? Or not.

We’re at the Hyatt Hotel, which has facilities around the world—all may be nearly identical.

In thinking about the hotel and this presentation, I started to ask what it means to cross borders and what we mean by “international literary journalism.”

In the IALJS, we have talked about distinctive works representative of particular nations. From a reader’s

perspective, we find differences in literary journalism from nation to nation. So we might say Vasily Grossman's work was representative of Soviet journalism, or that George Orwell was representative of English literary journalists. But an American who goes to Europe to write is still an American.

I'd like to broaden that a bit to talk about it from the perspective of writers who cross borders. I'll call it **cross-borderland literary journalism** to distinguish from the national forms. The concept of national identity has come under stress recently. For me, the terms "international" or "transnational" suggest border crossings not so much by readers as by the journalists themselves.

I propose a three-dimensional perspective. In this paper, I will offer an example of each of the three dimensions of cross-borderland literary journalism. A couple of my examples cross two or three of the dimensions.

The first dimension of cross-borderland literary journalism involves what we expect from the term—critical differences encountered in crossing geographical and language borders, and to that I would add cultural differences that are often particular to places.

Geographical borders may not be the most important crossing. I want to suggest that international literary journalism may not require crossing geographical borders at all.

Cultural differences account for more distinctive forms of literary journalism than differences stemming from geography—say warm countries versus cold countries—or language—can some topics be more elaborately explored in French than English, for example?

Culture is not always the same distinction as different languages because people speaking the same language can be of different cultures, such as American Southerners and New Englanders.

Pardon a Japanese reference here. There's a theory in earthquake prediction that says quakes on the edges of a fault system feed energy into other nearby faults. In

international literary journalism, we can see the quakes in one place and aftershocks represented in other countries. A classic example was the influence of the New Journalism in the United States on literary journalism in Canada, a nearby fault system connected by language and culture.

Bill Reynolds has written about how the Canadian New Journalism of David Lewis Stein differed from the variety found in the United States, for example. I take it the differences can be assigned to the very real cultural differences between the two countries.

I would argue that we don't have "international" literary journalism unless a cultural border of some kind has been crossed. In North America, for example, before we label Canadian and U.S. literary journalism as cross-borderland or international, there should be cultural differences.

The question of the relationship of language and human thought goes back centuries. I don't need to repeat the argument that language shapes thought for an audience at ACLA.

Whether we agree or disagree with that, the whole point of studying "international" or "trans-national" literary journalism is to discover the kinds of differences that come from geographical, language, or cultural border crossings.

A **second dimension** of literary journalism involves the mental borderlands of gender, race, and class. Concepts of race, gender and class transcend cultural or geographical boundaries.

An example of writing across class and racial lines could be Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family*, about the wives and girl friends of drug dealers in the Bronx, New York. Adrian did not really cross gender lines, but the class lines are sharply drawn.

Examples of writing across racial lines also include William Finnegan, Jonny Steinberg and Rian Milan in South Africa. Or *A Turn in the South* by V.S. Naipaul (1989), where a British-educated native of Trinidad and

Tobago wrote about the South in the United States. (The examples of Finnegan and Naipaul also involved geographical border crossings, but Steinberg and Milan were writing within their nation.)

My chosen example for this second dimension is Jane Kramer's book *The Last Cowboy* (1977). It's one of my favorite pieces of literary journalism.

Jane Kramer went to Vassar College and received a master's degree in English at Columbia University. She has divided her time for 40 years between Europe and New York, where she writes the "Letter from Europe" features for *The New Yorker*. Her husband is a famous anthropologist named Vincent Crapanzano. Highly-educated, sophisticated, urbane, probably wealthy, and wonderfully articulate, Kramer has close connections with the literary, feminist, and social elites in both New York and Europe.

In *The Last Cowboy*, she crossed the borders of gender and class that are often hidden in American life. Her subject, whom she called Henry Blanton, was a ranch operator—a cowboy—in the Texas panhandle. Blanton was emotionally closed off, too embarrassed and uncomfortable to talk even with his wife about his difficulties in dealing with a landlord and other problems. The husband and wife were in a different class from Kramer, having lived for years in a cabin on the range that didn't have running water or electricity. They lived at a great distance from any neighbors and had none of the sophistication, education, wealth, or literary connections of Jane Kramer.

Yet Henry Blanton opened up to Jane Kramer. He told her stories that his wife hadn't heard, and spoke of the troubles with his landlord that became the dramatic climax of the book. *The Last Cowboy* is one of the most remarkable pieces of cross-borderland literary journalism I have ever seen—precisely because Kramer crosses gender and class borders. And yet she never left the United States.

When Jane Kramer writes from Europe, she is in no less of an international zone than she found in the Texas panhandle.

The **third dimension** involves a border that none of us can cross, no matter how much we want to. That border is **time**. We can cross the geographical and cultural boundaries, as well as the gender, racial or class borders. But none of us can move backward in time, no matter how real it seems to us. We are influenced by previous generations, but we cannot talk with them in many circumstances.

Within the United States, enormous differences appear in literary journalism written in, say, the 1890s, the Depression Era, and the New Journalism Era. The concept of literary journalism varies as much across time as it does across cultural or identity boundaries.

Marking the changes in literary journalism across time can be seen by comparing Mark Twain in the nineteenth century, John Reed in the teens, James Agee in the thirties, John Hersey in the forties, Joseph Mitchell and A. J. Liebling in the fifties and sixties, the New Journalists, and contemporary writers such as Susan Orlean and Adrian LeBlanc.

One example here is the book *And Their Children After Them* by Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson as a direct time-connected follow-up book to James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Another example that stretches across time is the way the London slums in the 1800s were treated, and the way writers like Jacob Riis and the Chicago School sociologists looked at the tenement residents in New York or Chicago in the 1890s and Progressive Era, and then at how the underclass is covered today.

The third dimension of border-crossing literary journalism that I've been studying lately is historical writing done by literary journalists.

Two examples.

Michael and Elizabeth Norman's *Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath*. (2009) This book told the story—and it was a story—of the first big campaign of WWII for Americans, and their biggest defeat. The central character, Ben Steele, was a Wyoming cowboy who was captured in the Philippines, kept under horrible conditions as a prisoner of war, forced to work slave labor and sleep outside. Then he was put on ships for transport to Japan. Twice his ships were bombed by American aircraft and sunk. He survived and eventually reached Japan, where he was forced to work in a mine. From that location, he was within sight of Hiroshima when the Bomb was dropped. He became a major source and central figure in the story.

In writing that book, Beth and Michael Norman crossed the border of time. Like a lot of literary journalists who cross that border, they were uneasy and had some issues with another group camped in this dimension: traditional historians. Michael told me, “I’m not sure what defines the word history. I do know that the classic historians abhor dealing with live bodies. They’re really messy. They consider them incredibly unreliable. Our instincts as journalists are the exact opposite....Our first instincts are to head for those warm bodies because we know that’s where the passion is and where the literature will come from.”

Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land* (1991) is another example. Nick is the dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism and a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

He began *The Promised Land* at a moment that would amplify the twentieth century Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North: the invention in 1944 of the mechanical cotton picker. The device effectively ended the sharecropper system that kept black farmers in a feudal arrangement. Many migrated north by routes such as the Illinois Central railroad out of Louisiana and Mississippi and arrived in northern urban centers such as Chicago. The migration peaked in the fifties and then declined after five or six million people

had made the move. Lemann follows his central characters from the Mississippi Delta town of Clarksdale to Chicago. Into the story of their families and lives, he blends an analytical narrative of the poverty and race legislation enacted by the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson and its impact on such notorious Chicago ghetto projects as the Robert Taylor Homes and the Cabrini-Green complex. At the end of the story, some of the migrants return to Clarksdale, which had been transformed in the intervening years.

In crossing the border of time, Lemann told me in a recent interview that he encountered special problems that most literary journalists do not see, and some things that historians avoid. In the last sentence of the book, Lemann wrote:

“Perhaps I’m displaying a reporter’s bias here, but it seemed to me that as rich in information about the black migration and its consequences as the archives and published sources were, the memories of the people involved were even richer.”

Most academic historians, he said, are uncomfortable doing interviews, even when rich source material is available there. And they have “little interest or no interest in narrative as a form of professional practice.”

Having criticized academic historians, Lemann also made some comments about traditional journalists who do history. He said:

“...many journalists who write history would benefit from a little dose of understanding the academic critique of them, as being something other than pure jealousy or lack of interest in writing. In particular, most journalists who do this kind of presidential biography or military history, they are so into the “great man” theory of history that they don’t even know there is

one and there's been an argument about it for two hundred years. It is assumed that there are these towering figures and history moves because they move it. They tend to be not very good at context. Academic historians are maybe too much the other way.”

Lemann said one of the things that literary journalists do that is different involves narrative, and it helps them to cross the border with time:

“What was very important to me and continues to be—it's the great cause of my career—is in a craft sense, how do you combine narrative and analysis? And not have them separated. It was very important to me to find a way to deal with those themes without breaking out of the construct that this was a big, sweeping narrative history.”

That note of big narrative forms a good stopping point. All three dimensions of border-crossing literary journalism—geography, language, and culture...gender, race, and class... and time—have something in common. Since they are forms of literary journalism, they depend on narrative, and on a well-told story.

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