

# Historiography and narration in transnational history\*

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## Abstract

*The ‘transnational turn’ has been one of the most widely debated historiographical directions in the past decade or so. This article explores one of its landmark publications: The Palgrave dictionary of transnational history (2009), which presents around 400 entries on transnational history written by around 350 authors from some 25 countries. Drawing on narrative theory and the sociology of knowledge, the article develops an extensive quantitative and qualitative analysis of the most prominent narrative structures that can be found across the Dictionary, thus piecing together a coherent historiographical portrait of the book’s many and multifarious entries. In doing so the article wishes to demonstrate a possible methodology for analysing the growing body of reference works – in the form of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and handbooks – that are currently mushrooming in expanding research areas across the social sciences and the humanities such as international relations, governance, and globalization studies.*

**Keywords** historiography, narrative theory, reference works, sociology of knowledge, transnational history

## Introduction

The ‘transnational turn’ has been one of the most widely debated historiographical directions in the past decade or so.<sup>1</sup> Unlike more established historical sub-fields such as diplomatic and international history, scholars of transnational history are still in the process

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\* We would like to thank Christoffer Kølvrå for intellectual inspiration for this article. The Oslo Contemporary International History Network has provided valuable support to our work process. The article has benefited from the comments of two anonymous referees and the editorial team of the *Journal of Global History*.

1 The term ‘transnational turn’ is frequently found, but see e.g. Pierre-Yves Saunier, ‘Learning by doing: notes about the making of *The Palgrave dictionary of transnational history*’, *Journal of Modern European History*, 6, 2, 2008, p. 160; Nils Arne Sørensen, ‘Den transnationale vending?’, *Historisk Tidsskrift* (Copenhagen), 109, 2, 2009, pp. 459–72. What the precise character and impact of this turn will be remains to be seen.

of building up institutional infrastructures such as university chairs and research centres.<sup>2</sup> No specific journal exists yet, but countless special issues of various journals have been made. A wide array of books and dissertations have been published that identify with transnational history, and research funders in many places have embraced this direction as one of the new modes of historical research. Such trends testify to a gradual maturing of transnational history as a distinct sub-field of history. The chief concern of this article is how we can analyse and take stock of transnational historiography at this particular moment.

One of the earliest and most remarkable contributions to transnational historiography has come from the publishing house Palgrave Macmillan, which launched its Transnational History Series in 2007, a series that has produced around four volumes of monographs and anthologies per year.<sup>3</sup> The crown jewel of the series is *The Palgrave dictionary of transnational history*.<sup>4</sup> Involving around 350 authors from some 25 countries, the *Dictionary* is a pioneering effort to explore the potentials of the transnational history perspective, and it stands out as a key publication in the emergence of this sub-field of history. Presenting us with around 400 relatively long entries, it can be seen as more than simply a reference tool that provides some form of objectified historical information. A reference tool of this calibre is also a landmark in the emergence of the sub-field, just as it is a key source on transnational historiography.

This article scrutinizes the *Dictionary* with two primary aims that draw on two different types of studies, namely narrative theory and the sociology of knowledge. First, drawing on narrative theory, the article develops an extensive quantitative and qualitative analysis of the most prominent narrative structures that can be found across the *Dictionary*. This analysis helps us to draw a coherent portrait of the predominant historiographical templates contained in the *Dictionary*. What emerges from this is also a critical reflection on the modes of narration practised in the volume. Second, we wish to demonstrate one possible way of analysing this genre of publication: the reference work. This is relevant because the *Dictionary* is part of a broader tendency among leading academic publishers to give preference to printing reference works such as handbooks, encyclopaedias, and dictionaries – no clear genre distinction among these seem to exist here – in which a wide range of authors is gathered from various national and disciplinary backgrounds. By being part of such a publication, the authors also position themselves authoritatively in the relevant English-language international public sphere of research. This tendency is particularly noticeable in expanding research areas with relevance across the social sciences and the humanities such as international relations, diplomacy, governance, globalization studies, or environmental history.<sup>5</sup>

2 The European University Institute in Florence remains one of the exceptions. On the lack of infrastructure, see e.g. Kiran Klaus Patel, ‘“Transnations” among “transnations”? The debate on transnational history in the United States and Germany’, Center for European Studies Working Paper Series, no. 159, Harvard, 2008.

3 See <http://us.macmillan.com/series/PalgraveMacmillanTransnationalHistory> (last consulted 19 July 2013).

4 Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, eds., *The Palgrave dictionary of transnational history: from the mid-19th century to the present day*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 (henceforth, the *Dictionary*).

5 See, for instance, the Oxford Handbook series published by Oxford University Press that covers themes such as international relations, climate change and society, war, modern diplomacy, and governance. Cambridge University Press, Polity Press, Routledge SAGE, and Wiley-Blackwell are other publishing houses producing handbooks and dictionaries on similar topics.

Researchers are often at loss as to how to approach these reference works analytically – that is, how to get beyond the use of them as objectified reference tools, or how to get beyond the more standard book review that tries to engage with the detail of editorial choices made.<sup>6</sup> This article presents a possible methodology for analysing reference works in a new way. In other words, it is not conceived as a standard book review that addresses academic rigour, achievements, and shortcomings, but rather as an original textual analysis of the narrative structure that carries the academic content of this reference work. As a consequence, our mode of analysis could be useful not merely to historians of the transnational but also to scholars in overlapping fields such as global and international history and studies.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first we consider how the *Dictionary* situates itself in the broader context of transnational research perspectives in history and its neighbouring disciplines. The second outlines the narrative and analytical approach adopted in this article. The third contains the main historiographical analysis, which maps and categorizes the narratives about transnational history that emerge from the *Dictionary*'s many entries. In the concluding section, we summarize the key findings generated by the narrative approach and discuss its implications for evaluating the broader landscape of reference works in areas such as transnationalism and international and global studies.

## Transnational turn(s) and the *Dictionary*

The 'transnational turn' arrived in history somewhat belatedly. As early as the 1970s, the term 'transnational' became part of theoretical and empirical studies across various academic disciplines. First adopted by American political scientists around 1970, it gained a footing in the study of international governmental and non-governmental organizations. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a second wave of transnationalism studies as part of the growing academic interest in globalization processes in disciplines such as cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology. Here it was applied particularly to studies of migration, communication, and the globalization of capital and production processes.<sup>7</sup> In history, too, a transnational outlook was proposed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, although when historians Akira Iriye and Ian Tyrrell made their case for this approach in the *American Historical Review* they did so without making any explicit or clear connections to developments in neighbouring disciplines.<sup>8</sup>

It is only over the last decade, however, that the transnational perspective has gained ground in historical research more broadly. During this time, history has been – and is still currently – producing what we could call a third wave of transnational scholarship. Characteristically, there has not been a clear conceptualization of what 'transnational' really

6 See, for instance, Michael Farquhar, 'The Palgrave dictionary of transnational history: from the mid-19th century to the present day', *Journal of Global History*, 6, 1, 2011, pp. 155–6.

7 Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, 'Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences', *Global Networks*, 2, 4, 2002, pp. 301–34. For an excellent overview of the use and development of the concept, see also Pierre-Yves Saunier's entry 'Transnational' in the *Dictionary*.

8 Akira Iriye, 'The internationalization of history', *American Historical Review*, 94, 1, 1989, pp. 1–10; Ian Tyrrell, 'American exceptionalism in an age of international history', *American Historical Review*, 96, 4, 1991, pp. 1031–55.

means in this context, and the debates have focused on the novelty and fruitfulness of various transnational perspectives in producing new forms of knowledge that break with the national container as the objective analytical framework for historical research.<sup>9</sup> When the *Dictionary* was initiated around 2004, the editors – the historians Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier – thus took the opportunity presented by a historiographical trend that was gathering momentum.

Although the editors of the *Dictionary* specifically state that they do not have the ambition ‘to establish a new field or a new sub-discipline’,<sup>10</sup> the volume can nevertheless be seen as a sign that transnational history has reached a certain level of maturity and legitimacy within the academic field of history – and to some extent outside it, as a number of scholars from neighbouring disciplines have also contributed to the volume. It is a landmark in the international institutionalization of this historical perspective, a point that is particularly relevant as there still are no specialized international journals dedicated to transnational history.<sup>11</sup>

Like other reference tools, the *Dictionary* can be seen as a way of mainstreaming and standardizing academic knowledge. Sociologists of knowledge point out that reference tools constitute a joint enterprise by various agents trying ‘to make competent contributions to collective intellectual goals and acquire prestigious reputations’.<sup>12</sup> The *Dictionary*, we presume, was the brainchild of Iriye and Saunier. It is at the same time the result of the support rendered by Palgrave Macmillan, the five associate editors, and several hundred authors who willingly contributed their time, expertise, and reputations when writing up the entries, as well as the resources of their employer institutions. Together they have produced a work that contains more than four hundred entries, nearly two thousand literature references, and takes up more than twelve hundred pages. At the cost of around £170 (US\$315/€200), it is a hardback primarily meant to furnish well-funded research libraries. It is 5.6 centimetres thick and weighs nearly two kilograms – dimensions that serve as a constant reminder to the reader of the weightiness of the topic at hand.

## Historiography and narration

Historiography is a varied genre that ranges from descriptive-empirical mappings of past understandings of history to critical-normative attempts at renewing and improving

9 This is evident when we look at some of the special journal issues on the topic. See in particular the special issue of *Contemporary European History*, 14, 4, 2005; and C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, ‘AHR conversation: on transnational history’, *American Historical Review*, 111, 5, 2006, pp. 1440–64. See also Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, ‘Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung: der Ansatz der *Histoire croisée* und die Herausforderung der Transnationalen’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28, 2002, pp. 607–36. The very first issue of the first French journal on global history, *Monde(s), Histoire, Espaces, Relations*, 1, 2012, focused on transnational history, but again there was no clear conceptual debate.

10 Iriye and Saunier, *Dictionary*, p. xx.

11 The situation is the reverse in global history where there still is no major reference work comparable to the *Dictionary*, but where there are specialized journals such as the *Journal of Global History*, *Journal of World History* and *Monde(s)*.

12 Ole Wæver, ‘The sociology of a not so international discipline: American and European developments in international relations’, *International Organization*, 52, 4, 1998, p. 716. A good outline of this approach is Fritz Ringer, ‘The intellectual field, intellectual history, and the sociology of knowledge’, *Theory and Society*, 19, 3, 1990, pp. 269–94.

historical research, and from confined textual analyses to broader explorations of the profession's sociology. In approaching the *Dictionary*, and analysing its contents systematically, our impulse was initially to map the different conceptualizations of the transnational used throughout the volume. It soon became clear that the conceptual route would not lead to any clear results, as the editorial policy in the *Dictionary* has been to take an open approach to what constitutes the transnational: 'We are interested in the links and flows, and want to track people, ideas, products, processes and patterns that operate over, across, through, beyond, above, under, or in-between politics'.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, throughout the volume, concepts such as 'global' and 'international' are used interchangeably with 'transnational'. It might be worth noting that there is a similar openness in much of the global(ization) literature.<sup>14</sup> However, contrary to one reviewer of the *Dictionary* who argued that the contents 'defies categorization' owing to the inclusive approach of the editors,<sup>15</sup> we show that, with the right analytical tools, such a categorization is possible. What we have done to achieve this is to make use of another set of analytical tools, namely the repertoire of discourse analysis, particularly narrative theory.

The primary organization of the *Dictionary* is the more than four hundred entries decided upon by the editorial team, and they appear in numerical and alphabetical order. The entries are long enough to contain stories – a characteristic shared by most reference tools dealing with historical, political, or social science issues, but which is unlike the tradition found in language dictionaries. This has allowed us to identify a number of narrative schematic templates that play out across the volume. A basic assumption in narration theory is that, in order to be credible, narratives draw upon a 'stock of stories' known across narrative genres.<sup>16</sup> The story's characters are cast with different properties and in different roles – hero, rival, helper, opponent, and so on – and, as the story progresses, the lead character either overcomes obstacles, or fails to do so, depending on the moral embedded in the story. Narratologists call the repertoire of stories 'schematic narrative templates', and we use these to identify the historiographical categories contained in the *Dictionary*. We consider three dimensions of narratives: chronology, plot, and characters.

First, there is a chronological or episodic dimension that relates to the temporal order in the narrative and that 'characterises the story insofar as it is made up of events'.<sup>17</sup> A distinction can be made between 'basic events' that are episodic in nature and specific to the individual narrative, and 'mid-level' events that are of a nature expected to be well known to readers with a certain historical and political formation – such as those found in school textbooks pointing to major wars or radical breaks with political regimes – and thus that serve to create shared references for periodization.<sup>18</sup> For example, when the *Dictionary's*

13 Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, 'Introduction', in Iriye and Saunier, *Dictionary*, xviii.

14 See, for instance, Isaac Kamola, 'Why global? Diagnosing the globalization literature within a political economy of higher education', *International Political Sociology*, 7, 2013, pp. 41–58.

15 Michael Farquhar, 'Palgrave dictionary', p. 156.

16 James V. Wertsch, 'Specific narratives and schematic narrative templates', in Peter Seixas, ed., *Theorizing historical consciousness*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 50.

17 Hayden White, 'The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory', *History and Theory*, 23, 1, 1984, p. 27.

18 Wertsch, 'Specific narratives', p. 51.

entry on ‘Animal disease’ informs us that the *École Vétérinaire de Lyon* was established in 1762, it is a basic event in that particular context. What constitutes these mid-level events in a reference work about transnational history is, however, not immediately obvious; is it, for instance, wars, revolutions, economic crises, epidemics, or paradigms of art and music? This is nevertheless a crucial dimension of uncovering the historiographical positioning, and we therefore analyse the notion of mid-level events in the *Dictionary* in more detail below.

Second, narratives contain a non-chronological or configurational dimension called the plot. The function of the plot is to construe ‘significant wholes out of scattered events’.<sup>19</sup> The ordering of events into a given plot can, as Hayden White has observed,

be regarded as a performance, because any given set of events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given set or sequence of real events is *intrinsically* ‘tragic’, ‘comic’ or ‘farcical’, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story-type of the events, it is the choice of the story-type and its imposition upon the events which endow them with meaning.<sup>20</sup>

In relation to the *Dictionary*, it is entirely possible that the majority of basic and mid-level events provided in the entries could have been arranged differently to construe different plots. For instance, the entry on the League of Nations notes that: ‘The League, with its gravity, permanency and universality, served as a positive asset for further transnational development.’ The same events and actors could have been arranged or emplotted to show a different transnational history, one where states constrain transnational relations, or that points to the inherent weakness of international law and organization in the interwar period. The decision to open the door for a ‘positive’ future development is thus not one based on objective criteria for progression in the story, but rather is an example of how the narrator has decided to novelize the narrative. Such tools of narrativization are widely employed in academic historical analysis.

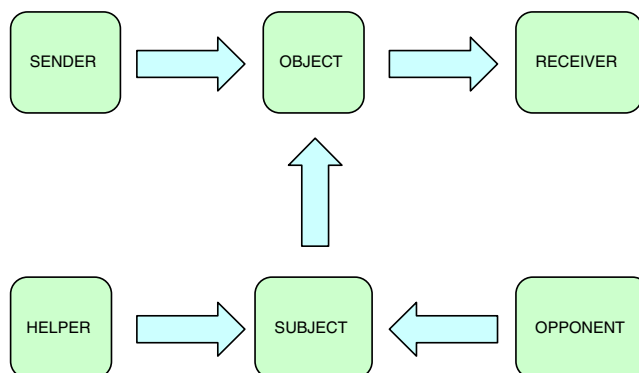
Third, in addition to events and plots, narratives contain a cast of characters. Usually, the subject – the ‘dramatis persona’ – embarks on a journey to obtain a certain objective, and along the way encounters helpers and receivers, rivals and opponents. The basic actantial model, originally developed by the semiotician A. J. Greimas, is often used in narrative analysis, and is illustrated in Figure 1.<sup>21</sup> The model allows us to break a *Dictionary* entry down into six facets, or actants, as exemplified here. For instance, the entry on Amnesty International contains all these elements: (1) the subject – in this case Amnesty International – is the one who in the story wants to achieve (2) an object: in this entry ‘the defense of human rights’; (3) the sender – in this instance the organization’s founder, Peter Benenson – is the one who instigates the action, while the (4) receiver – ‘political prisoners’ – is the one who

19 Paul Ricoeur, ‘Narrative time’, *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1, 1980, p. 178.

20 White, ‘Question of narrative’, p. 20, emphasis in original.

21 The actantial model is widely used in narrative analysis. An illustration can be found in Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of narratology*, 2nd edn, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, p. 2. For an elaborate development of the linguistic arguments behind the model, see A. J. Greimas and Catherine Porter, ‘Elements of a narrative grammar’, *Diacritics*, 7, 1, 1977, pp. 23–40. An exploration of its potentials is provided by Roland Barthes and Lionel Duisit, ‘An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative’, *New Literary History*, 6, 2, 1975, pp. 237–72.

Figure 1. The actantial model of narrative analysis.



benefits from this activity; Lastly, (5) a helper – ‘the growth of mass membership’ in the 1980s – helps to accomplish the action, while (6) an opponent – here a ‘new world order’ in the wake of the disintegration of the Cold War blocs as well as the ‘amicable rivalry’ from the US-based Human Rights Watch – hinders it. The actantial model has been applied throughout our analysis to tease out these various facets of the *Dictionary* entries below.

## Narratives of transnational history

### Characters and mid-level events

Across the *Dictionary*, the most constant subjects are not humans but rather international organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Not only does the volume contain two substantial entries presenting group portraits of IOs and NGOs respectively in a transnational light, but we identified an additional thirty-eight entries – close to 10% of the total – dedicated to portraits of individual organizations or groups of them. Moreover, well over half of all the remaining entries position IOs or NGOs, or both, so clearly in their stories that we have been able to identify them as subjects in the narrative analysis.<sup>22</sup> We have mapped and coded several dimensions of the entries, particularly with regard to the actor roles attributed to IOs and NGOs, and have used narrative analysis to identify distinctive narrative categories across the *Dictionary*.

In terms of entries covered, we have analysed approximately one-third of all entries from the start of the volume, beginning with the numerical entries (on the ‘events’ 1848, the 1960s, and 1989), and following through in alphabetical order. The alphabetical approach to sampling has ensured that entries have been selected randomly and without thematic and/or chronological biases. To ensure representativeness of our data – that is, the narrative structures that we were looking for – we have worked our way through the *Dictionary* until we found a steady and recurring pattern of narratives. In addition, we have analysed all entries throughout the volume that focus on the type of actants cast as the main subjects – IOs and NGOs – which, as mentioned above, amount to close to 10% of all entries.

<sup>22</sup> 58%, based on a sample of approximately one-third of all entries in the *Dictionary*.



The source base that has been analysed systematically for writing this article thus amounts to approximately 40% of the totality of the *Dictionary's* entries.

IOs and NGOs are not only central to the volume owing to their capacity to act but also form important chronological reference points throughout the *Dictionary* as mid-level events marking epochs and indicating important steps in the development of transnational ties and exchanges.<sup>23</sup> Alongside the First and Second World Wars, for which no periodic precision is needed, the establishment of the League of Nations and the United Nations can in particular be seen as mid-level events throughout the volume. Thus, not only have these two major IOs been given a total of seven entries,<sup>24</sup> but they – and all their many sub-organizations – are mentioned in as many as 55% of all the general entries where IOs or NGOs appear as agents, and in 39% of the specific entries on (other) IOs and NGOs.

The creation of the League of Nations and the United Nations is almost always portrayed in a positive light, and these moments are narrated as sites for recognizing and negotiating transnational problems, and, ultimately, widening the transnational promise. This positive view can be seen in the quote provided above from the entry on the League of Nations. Moreover, the two organizations are often used to cast a strong positive political and moral light and to generalize about the role of IOs in general. The entry on 'Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs)' stresses that: 'IGOs such as the UN have a broad mandate to maintain peace, while other, technical or functional IGOs pursue peace, or at the very least, improved relations between member states through missions in particular fields'. In fact IOs and NGOs are cast as heroic actors in as many as 67% of all the entries where they appear; in 28% they are not ascribed any clear moral or value qualities, and in 5% of the entries they are portrayed as villains. We scrutinize these variations below.

We have four main observations to make about the consequences of the widespread casting of IOs and NGOs in mid-level event and actor positions. First, many topics that are not *a priori* political – such as Genetically Organised Mechanisms, or Diet and Nutrition – become politicized and are given a transnational direction when these narratives bring in IOs or NGOs. Second, it appears that, in the absence of the national as the sociopolitical centre towards which political historiography has typically oriented itself,<sup>25</sup> IOs have here been given the normative position of law-and-order-making mechanisms, and NGOs become centres where transnational communities gather. The consequence is that there is in the *Dictionary* a strong slant towards political history, although this is not explicated by the editors. Third, the specific positioning of the birth and life of the League of Nations and the United Nations as mid-level events in a transnational history perspective differs from the memory of war and destruction that are standard mid-level events in political historiography.

23 International organizations are positioned similarly in Akira Iriye, *Global community: the role of international organizations in the making of the contemporary world*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.

24 'League of Nations Economic and Financial Organization'; 'League of Nations Health Organization'; 'League of Nations system'; 'United Nations decades and years'; 'United Nations system'; 'United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) educational programmes'; 'United Nations Women's Conferences'.

25 Hayden White, 'The value of narrativity in the representation of reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1, 1980, p. 16; White, 'Question of narrative', p. 5; Kiran K. Patel, 'Überlegungen zu einer transnationale Geschichte', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 52, 2004, pp. 626–45.



Fourth, while we consider each entry in the *Dictionary* to be a narrative with events, characters, and a plot, we also detect a form of mid-level plot across all the entries, one that could be termed the ‘transnational history exists and is a legitimate research enterprise’ plot. It is certainly possible to think of alternative emplotments such as ‘national history prevails’ or ‘global history is superior’.

Evaluating the emplotment sequences and the ways in which the narrative tools of dramatization and novelization have been put to work has provided a mix of qualitative and quantitative data that has allowed us to identify four main narrative templates for transnational historiography based on casting IOs and NGOs as subjects of the analysis. These we have named the Whig, Wary, Wicked, and Wiggle-out-of. Additionally, we have identified a narrative template with a different type of subject that is also relevant to bring up in this context, namely the stories told about the scholar of transnational history. We call this the Wiz template.

### The Whig template

IOs and NGOs are cast in heroic roles in two-thirds of all the narratives. In a majority of 41% of all entries, they are positioned in a decidedly activist role as important drivers towards a more peaceful and stable world order. This template is particularly prevalent where the objective is to pursue political rights – for instance in relation to slavery, children’s rights, social injustice, racism, or disarmament.<sup>26</sup> It stands in contrast to less dramatic and more functional portraits of IOs and NGOs present in entries where the objective is to overcome structural problems and imbalances of a technological, economic, or environmental nature, which places these actors in more subdued heroic roles. In this section, we analyse the former, which we call the Whig template for transnational historiography – with reference to the traditional Whig history, which stresses the progressive development of democratic institutions and personal freedom and which tends to write prominent, heroic characters into its narratives.<sup>27</sup>

The casting as subjects of IOs or NGOs that work actively to assert and promote certain progressive and desirable norms, rules, and ideas in the international system is apparent, for instance, in the entry on ‘Decolonization’. This notes how ‘The United Nations, established after the Second World War, actively crystallized many of the ideals of the decolonization era into a vision for perpetual peace among the nations of the world, championing the right of national self-determination as well as the rights of the oppressed’. Here, the novelizing tools of narration are employed to imbue the United Nations with new significance, and dramatization takes place through the use of words such as ‘championing’ and ‘the oppressed’.<sup>28</sup>

A core characteristic of the Whig template is the general absence of an external giver to provide the objective for the organization. Instead, it plays on the familiar heroic narrative in which heroes obtain their objectives through an inner strength. When there is no external

26 See ‘Abolitionism’, ‘Children’s rights’, ‘Commission on International Labour Legislation’, and the other examples offered below.

27 A similar categorization is used in Mark Gilbert, ‘Narrating the process: questioning the progressive story of European integration’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 46, 3, 2008, pp. 641–62.

28 Cf. White, ‘Question of narrative’, pp. 20–1.

giver, things happen in the narrative because it is inherent in the subjects' constitutions that they are willing and able actively to define and create political objectives and visions for the international political agenda. This is demonstrated in the entry on the 'League of Nations system':

The creation of the Central Administrative Agency under the auspices of the League signified the birth of a key and core entity which was entitled to address issues on behalf of humanity as a whole and to identify itself as the sole international organization whose jurisdiction and scope of activities could likely surpass national concerns and help orient the energies of the community of nations instead towards more global and universal concerns.

The quote demonstrates that, in defining and pursuing these politically correct objectives, the IO is seen as acting in accordance with and on behalf of a perceived common international interest. This is also the case in the entry on 'Ecology', in which the author noticed that 'The world responded to these crises [various ecological crises of the 1960s] through efforts embodied in international conferences and organizations.'

In the Whig template identified in the *Dictionary*, IOs and NGOs are typically not seen as very different organizations. They are cast as representing fairly similar political and moral principles and performing related political functions in the promotion of new transnational issues and agendas. In most of these narratives, there is a synergic relationship between IOs and NGOs, and the entries rarely point out that these organizations in fact reflect markedly different power relations and organizational principles and capacities. We detect a difference between the ways in which these organizations are narrated, however, in the arrangement of basic events, which casts the IO or NGO in slightly different roles. In entries in which the NGOs are cast as the primary subject, they are often positioned as agents that precede the IOs and serve as agenda-setters and campaigners for a better world, availing themselves of the infrastructures subsequently established by the IOs.<sup>29</sup> In this way, IOs are sometimes cast as helpers or even receivers of NGO activities. This role of the NGOs as the primary drivers of political change is often linked to an observation that they were closer and more directly linked to civil society than IOs. As the entry on 'African liberation' points out when portraying the various NGOs working to support African independence movements: 'The range of civil society solidarity ties was even greater than that of state involvement, featuring not only specific characteristics in each country but also multiple transnational networks.' In the instances where NGOs and IOs are presented as representatives of an international community, the causal links and processes through which organized NGO activities get transformed and civil society concerns become activated usually remain undeveloped in the narratives. By contrast, when IOs appear as subjects in the narratives, what is emphasized is mainly their capacities to serve as forums and mediators, allowing NGOs and state representatives to interact and forge political alliances and agreements in a formal and non-conflictual setting.<sup>30</sup>

Inherent in the Whig tradition is a marked Western bias that is also present in the *Dictionary*. What we find in the Whig template of transnational history is a largely

29 For instance 'Africa', 'Abolitionism', 'Children's rights', 'Consumer cooperation', and 'Criminology'.

30 'Children's rights', 'Commission on International Labour Legislation', and 'United Nations' Women's Conferences'.

unidirectional narrative in which new political ideas and modes of organization emerge in the US, Britain, or western Europe and spread to the rest of the world, with the result of establishing new forms of cooperation and interaction. The entry on 'Freemasonry' may serve as an example. After having informed us that Freemasonry originated in the British Isles, the entry demonstrates how the movement spread across the world, bringing with it an ideology 'of fraternal cosmopolitanism characterized by toleration and inclusiveness, belief in the universal family of man, a sense of global citizenship, affection and sociability, and benevolence'. This in turn led to activities to 'encourage a sense of global fraternity and facilitate members' movements around the world' and 'to extend to all members of the human family the bonds of fraternity, which unite Freemasons the world over'. It is fairly evident even to the non-expert reader that this narrative downplays antagonisms, conflicts of interests, and power differentials for the sake of emphasizing coherence, coexistence, and transnational progression. A similar example is the entry on 'Decolonization', which draws the following portrait of the Commonwealth:

One notable voluntary transnational formation that emerged from decolonization was the association of sovereign independent states known as the Commonwealth under the British Crown .... The Commonwealth has been regarded as a remarkably successful way of dealing with the colonial legacy in an egalitarian way, so much so that at least one state, Mozambique, with no British colonial connections, has joined it.

Another defining feature of the Whig template for transnational history is the way in which the nation-states are cast to provide resistance in the story. While IOs or NGOs as subjects generally encounter remarkably few opponents, resistance is most likely to come from states pursuing their national interests or safeguarding national sovereignty. One state is positioned repeatedly as the main opponent: the United States of America. Thus, while the US – along with the UK and sometimes western Europe – often figures as the place of origin of the ideas, norms, and principles circulated by IOs and NGOs, it is at the same time cast as the opponent state that lacks the willingness to accept international authority and comply with international norms and rules.<sup>31</sup> This ambiguity is clear in the entry on America, where we are assured that 'US President Woodrow Wilson's idea "to make the world safe for democracy" formally lifted the American democratic mission to a global level by supporting internationalism and, at least initially, the creation of supranational governmental bodies such as the League of Nations, although American support for these efforts faltered soon thereafter'. Likewise, the entry on 'Inter-governmental organizations (IGOs)' notes Wilson's 'failure to bring his own country into the organization he helped to conceive'. The resistance found in these entries thus points to the US, and is emphasized through emotional and dramatizing words such as 'faltered', 'failure', 'conceive', pitching that country against the world that could have been 'safe'. Wilson had a 'democratic mission' and is thus at the same time the hero and anti-hero in the narrative when he acts for 'his own country', and conceives the League but then fails in its upbringing. In spite of the frequent occurrence of the League of Nation in the entries, no similar examples can easily be found of the strained relationships of Japan, Nazi Germany, Italy, or the Soviet Union with the organization.

31 See, for instance, 'Children's rights', 'Commission on International Labour Legislation', 'United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)'.

The entry on ‘Birth control’ provides another example of US resistance. In relation to the efforts to distribute contraceptive aids to developing world countries taken up by, among others, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), the narration takes the line that the ‘Republican administrations of Reagan and the Bushes have taken up this resistance, limiting funding to family planning agencies and to the UNFPA, which had to look to the European Union for necessary resources’. While the US – in the guise of Republicans – provides resistance, the European Union – a well-developed form of IO – comes in to rescue the UNFPA.

The thrust of the Whig template for transnational history is to remain optimistic and provide a progressive account – there is almost always a way forward for the ideas and principles embraced by the IOs and NGOs. Thus, we see in this template a set of narrative strategies that resemble Whig history, stressing the progressive development of democratic institutions and personal freedom and casting IOs and NGOs as the heroic figures in this quest. On the one hand, this Whig template for transnational historiography stands out as a consequent and significant challenge to the traditional nation-state-based account of international history. On the other, its insistence on casting the IOs and NGOs as the embodiment of the good power of human reason to reshape society for the better and push forward the inevitable progress of mankind, combined with an inherent notion of Western moral and political leadership, means that it shares some common features with national political history in its most classical form. In characterizing this template, it is tempting to quote one of the editors, who, in a well-crafted entry on ‘International non-governmental organizations (INGOs)’, paradoxically notes about the historiography in this field that ‘there is still a long way to go, beyond a narrative of moral righteousness, linear development, splendid isolation and millenarist accomplishment that limits our understanding of the operation and role of INGOs’. This is certainly correct.

## The Wary template

The Wary template for transnational historiography covers around a quarter (we noted 26%) of the entries that contain IOs and NGOs. Such organizations as main agents in these narratives are still cast as heroic and share some of the moral assumptions underlying the Whig template. But, while they may be heroic, they are not cast in the same idealist or activist roles as in the Whig template. Rather, they are generally pitched as being on guard, or wary, reacting to global problems facing humanity such as climate change, animal diseases, agricultural productivity, and migratory flows. In the Wary template, NGOs and IOs emerge when needed; the entry on ‘Debt crisis’, for example, notes about international economic and financial organizations that: ‘They occur chiefly in times of global economic slowdown after a period of strong capital exports, or during or immediately after a war’. They do so, as the same entry points out, because ‘Analysis shows that sovereign debt crises are in fact systemic and essentially transnational’.

In contrast to the Whig template, in which political visions and visionaries played a key role, the Wary template focuses primarily on the experts who identify and document pressing structural problems, produce and disseminate knowledge about these challenges, and work towards solutions on a regional, international, or global scale. Thus the UN Panel on Climate Change is portrayed as an important agent in the fight against climate change

because its ‘critical review and assessment of climate change influenced governments to negotiate and adopt the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change’.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the entry on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) points out that it provided technical assistance for creating ‘a central banking system in the Balkans in 2000 that worked to overcome the exclusionary banks of Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and Serbs. In this way, IMF economists provided professional assistance, yet another way that the Fund became a transnational force’. To narrate the stories of the guarded efforts and achievements of the IOs, fewer dramatizing narrative tools are employed in the Wary template than in the Whig. As in the previous quotation, the organizations under scrutiny ‘provide professional assistance’ or – as in the entry on ‘Displaced persons’ – ‘take control’ in a crisis situation.

Whereas the subject in the Whig template typically had an inner strength to act alone, in the Wary template there is an expectation that transnational groups will eventually form around structural problems, and that, somehow, collective action provides the giver. Advocacy-type coalitions are created in this way in the entry on ‘Genetically modified organisms’: ‘In response to developments in the science, business and ownership of GMOs, concerned scientists, activists, farmers, indigenous peoples, and others have created a transnational social movement to try to stop the global spread of GMOs and the related expansion of property rights.’ Likewise, in the entry on ‘Animal diseases’, ‘the control of border-crossing diseases motivated the foundation of NGOs, international governmental cooperation, and came along with standardization of information transfer, with the extension of health administration and trade policy’.

The Wary template is less optimistic than the Whig, and the subjects have to fight harder because they are up against structural resistance. Whereas IO and NGO efforts in areas such as human rights, social equality, and child welfare are narrated in terms of improvements to the human condition, transnational political activities relating to ecology, human mobility, and the economy are widely seen as having more defensive, limited chances of stabilizing problematic developments. As stated in the entry on Biodiversity: ‘Can the international community – however that be defined – devise the means by which to protect “what’s left” of the world’s biodiversity?’; and later in the same entry: ‘Conservationists will likely continue to win individual victories in the quest for conservation, but for the most part they simply will have neither sufficient capacity nor adequate knowledge to counter these unfortunate trends on the global scale’.

As in the Whig template, subjects in the Wary template can also meet opponents in the embodiment of states. Again, the US is cast as the incarnation of opposition: for example, the entry on ‘Biodiversity’ notes that ‘one of the major impediments to progress has been and remains the intransigence on the part of the United States of America’. However, and interestingly, the demonization of the US that we observed in the Whig template is much less pronounced here. The entry on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), for instance, notes that ‘the Truman administration never submitted ITO [the original attempt to create an International Trade Organization] to Congress for approval’, but the main resistance to GATT’s work over time comes from ‘national legislatures’ more generally; in this way, the focus moves away from assigning blame to any one state.

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32 Climate Change. Also: Biodiversity, Greenpeace, Diet and Nutrition, Genetically Modified Organisms.

## The Wicked template

Seen together, the two first templates stand out as versions of the heroic narratives that portray IOs and NGOs as providing a stable system for the managing of the world's economic and natural resources and providing political progress. Meanwhile, in a small group of entries – 5% in all – IOs and NGOs are portrayed in a decidedly negative light. This narration of demonization is what we call the Wicked template. Interestingly, the demonization is present in the general thematic entries but not in any of the specific entries on these IOs. Across the general entries, the demonization is centred around three IOs: the World Bank, the IMF, and the GATT/World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>33</sup> The entry on 'Democracy', for example, notes that civil servants who

command posts in international institutions, such as the IMF, the World Bank and so on, and in powerful states such as the United States, are occupied by a transnational elite, whose members take decisions which work to shape the increasingly neoliberal, global structures within which groups and individuals are forced to operate in their attempts to make meaningful choices. Military force, client states, and since 2001, the language of an endless 'war on terror' play important roles in enforcing this profoundly undemocratic transnational order.

Evil takes evil in this story. Technocratic and corrupt elites acting on behalf of the IOs and states are involved in a collective act of suppression and the neoliberal agenda and these IOs or the US are often used as a marker for negative forces. Yet, in accordance with the overall thrust of the *Dictionary*, the narrator in the 'Democracy' entry ends the story on an optimistic note, suggesting that transnational capacities to change the world for the better do exist and that 'popular struggles in the name of democracy will continue'. However by staging the IOs as the villains who work against such positive transnational transformations, this and related entries present themselves as narrative antidotes to the majority of entries in the volume, flagging concerns about the darker sides of transnationalism.

This demonizing portrait is somewhat ironic given that the same three IOs in the specific entries about them are cast in a heroic light in Whig and Wary templates. For instance, in stark contrast to the bleak portrait above, the World Bank in its own entry is presented positively as a central vehicle 'for the "haves" to help the "have nots" through the promotion of human development, environmental protection and good governance'. Using similar dramatizing effects as other Whig narrations across the *Dictionary*, this entry details examples of how the World Bank granted microloans, for example to a poor Yemeni woman and mother of nine, enabling her to buy a billiard table which she then rented out to local children 'who flocked to her front yard to play'. This tendency to narrate IOs, as well as NGOs, in a positive light when they could also be cast as obstacles to political and social progress is found in other entries throughout the *Dictionary*. Thus, the contribution on Christianity focuses on liberation theology in the developing world and on Christian humanitarian organizations and their role in the development sector, but leaves out the darker side of that religion's transnational past that even non-experts would surely know about.

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33 In particular, 'Consumer society', 'Democracy', 'Development', and 'Growth'.

These examples illustrate a further point central to this analysis, namely that different tools of narration can be used in historiographical positioning and that understanding the employment and relative weight of these tools is central to gauging the general epistemological and moral tenor of a composite volume such as the *Dictionary*. Whereas the Wicked template does suggest that there is an alternative, darker, and even conspiratorial transnational plot that involves elites and political institutions that may be seen to lack democratic legitimacy and create economic inequality, there is an overemphasis on the positive contributions and characteristics of almost any IO or NGO that is cast in a transnational light, as represented here in the Whig and Wary templates. By contrasting these three templates, we may get the texture of a moral and normative undertone to the book's mid-level plot.

### The Wiggle-out-of template

In around one-quarter of the entries dealing with IOs and NGOs, the narrative tools employed are much more subdued and objectivized, and less dramatized and novelized than in the previous three templates. Metaphorically speaking, the narrators in this fourth category 'wiggle out' of adopting the narrative tools that often characterize transnational and political historiography. We hesitate to call it a narrative schematic template at all because it does not draw on the folkloristic 'stock of stories'; it is rather aligned with a more general scientific/academic genre. The objects pursued by the subjects in these entries are not gauged in moral terms, and their activities are not evaluated in an instrumental way by alluding to successes or failures. Narrators generally objectivize stylistic markers about the organizations' purposes and the transnational implications of their activities, as is the case in the entry on 'Capitalism', which matter-of-factly observes that: 'With the consolidation of the European Union and the issuance of a unified Euro currency in 2002, European national borders have practically vanished, at least in economic terms'.<sup>34</sup> The range of themes and organizations that are treated in this manner is also broad, ranging from religious movements and political ideologies to cultural and technological phenomena,<sup>35</sup> and there is a diverse cast of characters such as OPEC, Comintern/Cominform, the European Union, and Save the Children International Union.

Nevertheless, the narrative style in the Wiggle-out-of category has another important function in the *Dictionary*'s mid-level plot because it documents the ever-expansive nature of transnational connections. The entry on 'Electricity infrastructures' illustrates this point:

During the 20th century, the supply of electricity became a transnational force in several ways. First, in the realm of ideas, the planning of transnational electricity systems intertwined with broader ideas of regional integration. Since the 1920s electrical integration has been ideologically linked to the creation of interdependency, joint prosperity and peace, especially in Europe. Second, international organizations promoting infrastructure were among the earlier and most successful experiments in

34 It should be noted that a few entries discuss the political and moral problems related to various forms of international cooperation (see e.g. 'Bibliographical classification', 'Books and bibliographical exchange', and 'Developmental assistance').

35 See, for instance, 'Antisemitism', 'Birth control', 'Capitalism', 'Cricket', 'Drink', 'Electricity', 'Philanthropic foundations'.



global community building. The electricity supply sector produced its own international organizations after 1920, hosting structural interactions between individuals and organizations from across the world. Finally, on a purely material level, economies and societies were electrically interconnected.<sup>36</sup>

Many of the entries in the *Dictionary* that we have not analysed in a systematic manner, because they have not cast IOs and NGOs in clear actor roles, can also be seen as drawing from a more ‘scientific’ template of narration. For example, the plots of the entries on ‘Engineering’ and ‘Architecture’ are narrated as the transnational development and circulation of these professions. The former specifically notes ‘The transnational perspective on the community of engineers’, and the latter that ‘In modern times, architecture has always been regarded as a discipline fundamentally transnational’ and continues to stress this perspective of the history. This type of entry similarly serves to document the widening of the transnational connections by using the Wiggle-out-of, or ‘scientific’, template.

## The Wiz of transnational history

In many entries, the ‘scientific’ template has been invoked to provide an overview of specific historiographical traditions and sometimes also other literatures such as cultural studies or the social sciences relevant to the topic of the entry. This dimension of narration creates a new layer of heroes in transnational historiographical narration, who can be cast as subjects in the narrative, namely the historian or scholar who pioneers and practises transnational history – we might call it the Wiz template. This story typically begins with the state-centric paradigm, as in the entry on the European Union (EU), which points out that the earliest scholars ‘have discussed the evolution of the EU from an often implicitly realist perspective: as an intergovernmental organization dominated by the member states’. At some point there comes along a ‘new generation of contemporary historians of the EU conceptualizing European integration as the closely linked trends of the evolution of a complex political system and of transnational societal integration and “Europeanization”’. In other words, scholars with a transnational perspective have a more adequate understanding of this intricate matter. Likewise, the entry on the ‘League of Nations system’ points out how ‘an alternative review of the League’s history – especially one taking into account the League’s influence on the development of transnational activities and relations – affords a fresh outlook on the role of the international organization in shaping world order’.<sup>37</sup>

There is nothing unusual about this genre of narration in the academic world, but, in the context of the *Dictionary*, two observations should be made. First, it serves to strengthen the broader story of the *Dictionary* that casts transnational history as a pioneering approach within academic history. Just as the transnational forces and agents identified in the above templates actively had to fight and overcome national barriers, so writers of transnational history have had to challenge and overcome existing research paradigms to establish this qualitatively new research agenda. Second, it appears that the Wiz template casts the historian with the right vision of history as the true hero(ine), and underlines the mid-level

36 See also ‘Absolutionism’, ‘Dollar’.

37 See also ‘Air pollution’, ‘Transnational’.

plot that we identified for the book above: ‘transnational history exists and is a legitimate research enterprise’.

This correlates with what sociologists of knowledge have observed about the production of reference works, as noted above, namely that they are based on a collectivity with similar intellectual goals and beliefs. Indeed, the *Dictionary*’s website mentions that there is a shared ‘belief’ among scholars who practise transnational history.<sup>38</sup> Along similar lines, one of the editors, reflecting on the making of the *Dictionary* in a subsequent article, characterized transnational history as a ‘common mental landscape’ or even a ‘strange individual and collective syndrome’.<sup>39</sup> This shared belief is open and flexible, however. Not only does it emerge in the various diverging and partially conflicting narratives mapped out above, but it can also be found in the inclusion of contributors with hugely varying research profiles and expertise.

To get beyond the solely textual analysis of the *Dictionary* we have looked at the websites of the whole population of contributors, and have found the profiles and publications of most of them. This has allowed us to get a sense of their expertise profiles. Roughly speaking, five main types of contributors can be discerned. One group has worked extensively with developing the transnational history perspective, just as the editors have. The second group has a specialization in international history and the history of international organizations, and may or may not have studied these from a transnational perspective before contributing to the volume. A third group has been recruited by virtue of their specialization as historians in a particular subject such as environmental problems, railways, or animal rights; their résumés do not necessarily give evidence of a specialization in transnational or international history. A fourth group are specialists in a different discipline altogether, and have been recruited on the basis of that expertise, for instance in economics. A fifth group of authors have worked with the transnational perspective in academic fields other than history, for instance in gender or area studies. It appears that the precondition for these many different researchers to be allowed to speak with the authoritative voice of the *Dictionary* is that they accept the transnational belief and have the capacity to speak the ‘transnational lingua franca’.<sup>40</sup> This resonates with what sociologists of other emerging ‘transnational’ arenas of scholarship have observed, namely that the threshold for access to such a field can rely on capitals other than the standard disciplinary credentials that are applied in a settled national disciplinary context.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to take stock of transnational historiography through narrative analysis, an approach that is particularly useful for identifying narrative structures

38 ‘About the *Dictionary*’ on its official website: <http://www.transnationalhistory.com/about.aspx> (consulted 7 May 2013).

39 Saunier, ‘Learning by doing’, pp. 163, 160.

40 Terminology used in the *Dictionary* entries on the 1960s and America.

41 Antoine Vauchez, ‘Interstitial power in fields of limited statehood: introducing a “weak field” approach to the study of transnational settings’, *International Political Sociology*, 5,3, 2011, pp. 340–5; Johan Heilbron, Nicolas Guilhot, and Laurent Jeanpierre, ‘Towards a transnational history of the social sciences’, *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences*, 44, 2, 2008, pp. 146–60.

in large bodies of text such as the *Dictionary*. In this concluding section, we summarize the key findings and discuss the implications of this method for evaluating the broader landscape of reference works to which publishers have recently given priority, particularly in areas such as transnationalism and international and global studies.

Inspired by the sociology of knowledge and theories of narration, the article has posited that multi-authored reference works such as the *Dictionary* can be fruitfully deconstructed. Given the allure of transnational history as it has been taken up by academic journals, publishers, and researchers, our analysis has rendered some surprising results. First, the analysis of the entries has revealed a strong tendency for the narratives to be emplotted along fairly traditional lines known from political historiography. Topics that are not *a priori* political become politicized and given a transnational direction by bringing in IOs or NGOs in the majority of entries. In the absence of the nation as the sociopolitical centre, these main characters are given the normative position of law-and-order-making mechanisms in the emerging transnational society. There is a clearly detectable influence from liberal political theory and narration in the two most common narrative schematic templates – here termed the Whig and the Wary – that at the same time presents a strong Western bias in the narration of transnational processes as progressive practices that originate in western Europe and North America. In that way, the *Dictionary* presents a historiography that does not quite live up to the stated ambition – one that is often shared, at least on paper, with global history – of presenting a break with the Eurocentric perspective on history and developing a more balanced and multifarious history.

Meanwhile, we have also detected an alternative, if less prominent, narrative template – here termed the Wicked. Fitting in with Marxist perspectives on recent global developments, the Wicked narrative focuses on the notionally darker side of transnationalism and casts actors such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as villains promoting a global neoliberal agenda to the detriment of poor and politically marginalized people, particularly in the developing world, but nevertheless does not get away from delivering an ideological and moralizing message. The Wicked template conflicts with the thrust of the Whig and the Wary. Hence, these are internally contradictory readings of the subject matter that the student is not necessarily alerted to if he or she uses the *Dictionary* as it was intended, namely as a reference work.

These three narratives are supplemented by a group of more ‘scientific’ narrations of transnational processes that avoid gauging them in moral terms. Instead, the Wiggle-out-of template documents the existence of the transnational, and confirms the meta-plot of the *Dictionary*: that ‘transnational history exists and is a legitimate research enterprise’. In this story, the practitioner of transnational history emerges as the hero(ine), and another form of narrative emerges, namely that of the Wiz. The emerging subfield of transnational history is apparently held together by a collectivity of a wide range of scholars who believe in the transnational, as both the publisher’s marketing materials and the editors suggest in several places – something that is echoed by other scholars of transnational history.

The *Dictionary* is in itself an authoritative and non-negotiable form. It contains a mix of dictionaric, encyclopaedic, and handbook-like features and as such it is fairly typical of the English-cum-international academic reference works that have been mushrooming in the broader fields of international and global studies in recent years. It is therefore also relevant to see the *Dictionary* in that context. The reference works published by major international

presses potentially play a significant role in the international institutionalization of subfields of history and the social sciences as well as area studies. This potential role appears greater in emerging and as yet unestablished research fields where there are no specialized international journals and a weak institutional infrastructure in terms of university chairs and dedicated programmes. This is the case with the *Dictionary*, where the editors and publisher have made a significant mark with the book series in which it is placed.

Conceptualizing, commissioning, and collecting so many contributions from scratch, from a wide spread of authors from different continents, countries, and disciplines, all in around four years, is a remarkable job. In that sense, the *Dictionary* is testimony to the age of global knowledge production made possible by new technologies and transnational and interdisciplinary connections. While the more-or-less virtual and collaborative work-form behind this kind of reference work will, no doubt, set the path for future knowledge production in history and related disciplines, we have in this case seen that the final product, in terms of the narrative strategies employed in transnational historiography, has stayed within easily recognisable boundaries of storytelling.

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