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Introduction: Perspectives on Museums and Historical Consciousness in Canada

Viviane Gosselin and Phaedra Livingstone

Museums are public spaces dedicated to the interpretation of the past and are a most trusted source of information. This makes them prime locations for the study of historical consciousness, and it is surprising how little has been published to date on the subject. Therefore, this volume examines ways that museums create and share knowledge about the past and operate as locations where historical consciousness is activated and constructed. In this chapter, we summarize the contents of the book, situate our application of the terms “museum” and “historical consciousness,” and suggest how various readers might best take advantage of this volume. Its chapters are organized in three parts, using the overarching themes of *programming* for historical consciousness, *measuring* historical consciousness in relation to museum interventions, and *instrumentalizing* historical consciousness through policy and programming. Synopses of the chapters appear in the latter part of this introduction (see p. 10).

Museum and history education are specialized fields, and thus we anticipate that readers across the two will have somewhat different interests in their use of this book. Graduate students and scholars in museum and heritage studies, for example, will be familiar with the definition of museums and with the current issues of museological discourse but perhaps not with the discussion of historical consciousness that constitutes much of this chapter. Readers with less background in museum practice and theory are invited to read Chapter 14 as a continuation of this Introduction to provide further context for the other chapters. Those who are interested in the literature on historical consciousness and historical thinking might like to consult the review in Chapter 9. A brief history of contemporary Canadian museum management issues is given in Chapter 10, and readers who are unfamiliar with the topic may find that it provides useful context for the other chapters. For those who are interested in case studies, chapters in Parts 1 and 2 of the book analyze planning and evaluation for specific pedagogical programs (broadly defined); those in Part 2
are especially concerned with facilitating historical thinking. The chapters in Part 3 situate their analyses at a policy or institutional level.

Defining Museums
Although the stereotype of museums as warehouses of treasure or irrelevant ephemera may persist among certain segments of the public, museum professionals are continually expanding their definition of the institution. The 2010 International Council of Museums (ICOM) publication *Key Concepts in Museology* includes an annotated definition that is four pages long.¹ According to the current ICOM Statutes, “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”² We focus here on publicly operated and non-profit organizations, not exclusively on history museums or historical sites per se but on the heritage significance and historical interpretation of collections of all types.

The public museum is an institution, signifying a cultural desire to house, organize, and make sense of the past; its processes of constructing and performing contemporary civic identities fulfill a need felt by imagined communities for tangible expressions and symbols of their existence in time and space. Such a general understanding of the museum is common in the critical literature but tends to overemphasize the work of the largest and national museums, ignoring that of most smaller institutions and the more ephemeral online, collaborative, or temporary projects. This collection of essays gestures at the greater diversity of projects, institutions, disciplinary perspectives, and social and geographic locations that constitute museological activity and thought in Canada. Our purpose is to offer a collection of Canadian perspectives on the field at large rather than a narrow focus on Canadian settings.

Historical Consciousness: Key Conversations
Historical consciousness is a relatively recent but well-established area of inquiry in Europe, now gaining ground in North America. Contributors to this book were invited to lend their perspectives on the current Canadian museum context and to draw connections to the concept of historical consciousness. As our intention was to map perspectives in the field, we did not insist on a singular definition for the term, and thus the contributors use it variously in their chapters. So that readers may situate each chapter in a broader intellectual context in reference to historical consciousness, in this section we introduce current critical conversations in history education literature that define the term and
link these ideas with current museum discourses. In doing so, we hope to better connect two theoretical discussions that have largely evolved in parallel.

Across history education literature, the meaning of historical consciousness is commonly assumed, but its polysemic nature has resulted in ambiguous uses of the term. It is often employed interchangeably with “memory,” “historical thinking,” and “a sense of the past,” to name a few, and when definitions are offered, they tend to be broad in scope. The authors in this volume have embraced this ambiguity in their museological inquiries on historical consciousness.3

The abbreviated definition of historical consciousness adopted by the journal History and Memory reads, “Historical consciousness is the area in which collective memory, the writing of history and other modes of shaping images of the past in the public mind merge.”4 Peter Seixas offers the following definition: “Individual and collective understandings of the past, the cognitive and cultural factors that shape those understandings, as well as the relations of historical understanding to those of the present and the future.”5 According to Catherine Duquette, historical consciousness involves the interrelation of three dimensions. The temporal dimension is the fundamental element from which the two other derive. It consists of the way in which the “remembered past” is used in daily life as a reservoir of stories that can help explain the present, establish identity, and orient actions. The identity-building dimension situates an individual within a social group and its temporal continuum – before, now, and after – thereby engendering a sense of belonging to the group, based on the sharing of historical narratives. The moral dimension involves a validation of moral values employed by members of the group.6

The interplay between memory and history is central to studying the workings of historical consciousness. History suggests notions of objectivity and intellectual rigour (the study of the past, based on evidence), whereas memory evokes subjectivity and emotions (the uncritical consumption of knowledge transmitted from one generation to another). Rather than seeing memory and history as competing concepts, many scholars suggest that they are dynamically related and thus both implicated when making sense of the past.7 In his influential essay “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” Hans-Georg Gadamer focuses on this dialectical relationship between memory, or tradition (knowledge we inherit), and interpretation (new knowledge produced through hermeneutic acts). He elaborates on the role of tradition in historical meaning making: “It is true that prejudices that dominate us often impair true recognition of the historical past. But without prior self-understanding, which is prejudice in this sense, and without readiness for self-criticism – which is also grounded in our self-understanding – historical understanding would be neither

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possible nor meaningful.” 8 Jörn Rüsen, on the other hand, insists that the nature of people’s engagement with memory – and whether this engagement is critical or not – will be determined by their epistemological understanding of history, which in turn will dramatically affect their course of action. 9 The interrelation between structural supports of memory (through acts of remembrance), critical engagement with historical knowledge, and the actual contribution or function of historical consciousness is particularly well captured by Paul Zanazanian: “In encapsulating the many forms of commemoration as well as the different dimensions of historical thinking, the contribution of historical consciousness accordingly lies on how group members historicize temporal change for moral orientation in time.” 10

Many concur that the simple transmission of compelling stories of origin and heroes does not help students in making sense of an increasingly multicultural, transnational, and globalizing world. 11 At the juncture of several perspectives proposing a framework for a different kind of history education is one pedagogical approach promoting “historical thinking.” Historical thinking requires consideration of history as a series of accounts that must be constructed, interpreted, and assessed, based on the use of evidence. Historical thinking helps connect the past with the present – putting in relation how things used to be with why things are the way they are to ultimately contextualize the present and guide future actions. To achieve this, learners must become familiar not only with the facts of history but with its organizing principles and mode of inquiry. This particular form of historical understanding is based on the activation of two types of interdependent knowledge: substantive and procedural history. Substantive history refers to historical data, events, actors, and places – “the facts of history.” Procedural history, also called “metahistory,” refers to the processes involved in constructing historical interpretations. 12 This type of knowledge allows learners to understand the constructed nature of historical accounts, the distinction between the past and history, the foreignness of the past, the use of evidence, and the relationships between objectivity, interpretation, and criteria to determine the validity of historical interpretations. The pedagogical premise is that the more these concepts of historical thinking are developed and used while engaging with historical content, the more critical and reflective historical consciousness becomes. The underpinning idea behind this pedagogical approach is straightforward: students who know how the historical claims are crafted, through the fostering of historical thinking skills, will probably take a more critical approach to diverse and at times competing interpretations of the past, both in and outside the classroom. 13 Critical engagement with historical claims is viewed from this pedagogical perspective as an
effective way to help make educated decisions about current affairs – social issues and problems being inevitably rooted in the past.

Developing historical thinking, however, is challenging. Even if we could time travel to experience historical contexts first-hand, the past, as David Lowenthal declares, is “a foreign country,” one in which we do not speak the language or know the customs but that nonetheless shapes our current heritage landscape.\textsuperscript{14} Thinking historically requires attempting to adopt the viewpoint of historical individuals and groups to better understand the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional contexts that shaped their lives and actions.\textsuperscript{15} If we cannot understand how people in the past saw themselves, we are limited to a simplistic viewing of historical agents and their experiences, and fall into \textit{presentism}, a view of the past that is skewed by present-day attitudes and experiences. This lapse often occurs in heritage tourism productions when producers are primarily concerned with making the past more familiar and accessible to their audience.\textsuperscript{16} On the other hand, those who are largely unfamiliar with the past can conclude that it is so foreign as to be irrelevant to the circumstances, concerns, and needs of the present.\textsuperscript{17} To identify with the past requires that we negotiate this tension between its familiar and unfamiliar aspects, to appreciate the striking differences between the historical frame of mind while acknowledging a shared humanity that transcends time, space, and culture.

Arie Wilschut synthesized discussions by a number of history educationalists and came up with what he offers as six key characteristics of a historical consciousness of time. These are chronology (understanding how events are recorded via instruments such as calendars and dating systems); periodization (knowing how historians define eras); anachronism (avoiding presentism in our interpretation of a time period); generations (recognizing as problematic the potential to over-empathize and emphasize similarities with actors of one’s own nationality, ethnicity, and gender in the past); relics (being conscious of the materiality of the past in the present, or in other words, the presence of deep layers of past objects, ideas, and conditions that have evolved into present conditions); and contingency (avoiding the fallacy of conflating the prior intentions of historical actors with subsequent developments).\textsuperscript{18}

Other ways of thinking about the historical past, adopted by archaeologists and museum curators, have been dubbed the “historical imagination” and the “archaeological imagination.” The former considers evidence and probes: what we know; what we do not know but can infer, based on what we know; and what is now unknowable because related evidence has been lost.\textsuperscript{19} The archaeological imagination applies the same reasoning but adds the dimension of materiality to all considerations.\textsuperscript{20} Museums and curators of all types are
concerned with materiality; although objects survive over time and connect us to the past, they are not necessarily recognizable and are never fully representative of its cultural richness. All of these approaches highlight understanding temporal process rather than specific ideological interpretations of facts and are directly relevant to history pedagogy in museums.

Several references to history education research in this book attest to the renewed interest of museum thinkers in establishing links between the process of making sense of the past and the politics of disseminating historical knowledge. Like public schools, museums are cultural institutions where particular knowledge about the past is disseminated, largely as part of a collective identity formation program. Education practitioners and scholars have become acutely aware that the teaching of history, though fostering a sense of belonging, can affect regional and national attitudes by hindering understanding between diverse cultural or national entities; that is, the process of defining the historical “us” exacerbates the “Otherness” of other communities.

The practical concerns for ethical history education, as suggested by Wilschut’s characterization of historical consciousness, will be readily recognizable to scholars and practitioners of museum interpretation. In an effort to understand the role of museums as technologies of power, many museum scholars who adopt postmodern frameworks of analysis focus their critique on the institutional and policy functions of museums in civil society. The acts of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting material culture and of educating the public have been scrutinized to understand the unique participation of the museum as a project of modernity, instrumental in the nation-building, colonialist, and capitalist endeavours of Western nations since the eighteenth century. Much of the literature in North America consists of case studies on current practice and applied research; some of this is quite rigorous and it adopts a critical perspective. A useful example, pertinent to our concern for public history practice, is the edited collection of case studies titled Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World.

The work of museums has also been historicized to understand their role in perpetuating particular power relations between ethnicities, genders, and classes. Several museum critiques have established how powerful/dominant groups have imposed their views of what counts as significant knowledge. Marxist, feminist, and poststructuralist analyses of museum work have demonstrated that, until recently, museums exclusively favoured a Eurocentric, wealthy, white, male, and heterosexual perspective. These critiques, and public demand, gradually prompted museums to revise how they acquired, studied, and displayed their collections, and to develop practices that are more inclusive, explicit, and self-conscious. These reorientations of contemporary museum
mandates can be viewed, in part, as ethical responses inspired by an awareness of the museum's historical role.

**Situating Historical Consciousness in Canadian Museums**

Having cited just a few museum scholars, we can already see the outlines of shared concern with school-based history educationalists: making the construction of museum knowledge more explicit; articulating the polysemic nature of artifacts; and revealing the presence of gaps in historical interpretations. To generate new insights into the performance of contemporary museums as sites where historical consciousness is activated and constructed, we assembled a group of museum scholars and practitioners from across Canada. As stated earlier, one editorial goal for this book was to solicit multiple perspectives, and thus we involved as diverse a range of voices as possible, representing different regions, disciplinary backgrounds, institutional or project types, and social identities. Contributors employed a variety of theoretical frameworks and rhetorical strategies drawn from anthropology, cultural studies, history education, historiography, and museology.

Although our aim was to focus on Canadian practices and perspectives, we invited two senior international scholars in museum and heritage studies (Simon Knell from the United Kingdom and Laurajane Smith from Australia) to test for contrasts across museological contexts. Knell’s impressive historiographic work on museums and his perceptive readings of emergent trends in the field worldwide made him an ideal contributor for this project. We anticipated that Smith’s view of heritage as a process rather than an accretion of “things” would find strong resonance with the work of Canadian scholars. Heritage, she explains, is not a site or a museum artifact but rather a process designed to legitimize specific cultural values as well as historical and social narratives of the present. Her perspective on the agency of visitors as knowledge-makers deeply involved in *making* heritage is a compelling one. The chapters of Knell and Smith, we assert, provide some contrast in museological perspectives, and that contrast helps define the topography of discourses on historical consciousness in the Canadian museum field.

Postmodern epistemologies have generated new understandings of the past and of the potential roles and functions of museums: in short, the modern museum project is seen as having supported nation-state building as well as colonialist and capitalist endeavours, whereas its postmodern counterpart is increasingly oriented to serving the “public good” through community building and the adoption of social justice perspectives in practice. This shift has created a heightened state of institutional and professional self-consciousness whereby much greater attention is paid to the processes of making and presenting
histories. The chapters of this book share this postmodern interest in the process and conditions of production and public reception.

**Programming Historical Consciousness**

Part 1 of this book focuses on the analysis of museum programs of one sort or another, and the knowledge production processes informing them. Its chapters unpack the collaborative and at times conflict-laden realities of staging history in the museum. They discuss the work of team members and departments within institutions and in moments of co-creation with community partners. These chapters are concerned with the production and framing of historical knowledge for intended audiences, with the actors who are invested in the interpretive work, and with the relationship between institutional mandate and individual museum projects.

Public engagement has become a central theme in the mission statements of many museums and in the scholarly research on museums and public history. In Chapter 2, Susan Ashley discusses the problematic use of the term “public engagement,” which she describes as “the go-to word for generating, improving, or repairing relations between institutions of public history and society at large” (p. 22). She offers an analysis of how unexamined and conflicting definitions of the term can coexist in different departments of the same institution, and how these definitions are enacted while the departments work on the same exhibition project. She also examines the ethics and implications of the misleading uses of “public engagement” in relation to critical public understandings of historical narratives and mistaken dealings with emergent and conflict-freighted questions about the past.

In Chapter 3, Jill Baird and Damara Jacobs-Morris share their process of creating an educational program informed by both Indigenous knowledge and historical thinking, beginning with the establishment of rapport among the communities involved. To create an interactive website aimed at school-aged children, the project worked with cultural historians; Haida, Coast Salish, and Pacific Islander canoe families; schoolteachers; and museum educators. The website presents a range of historical documents, oral histories, and contemporary interviews to assist educators in teaching the history of three Indigenous canoe-making traditions. The authors emphasize and enact the need for reflexivity in museum practice by sharing the concerns, doubts, and questions that arose while the framework for the educational program was being created. Showing process is viewed here both as a methodological approach and an ethical response to restoring relationships – damaged by a colonial past – based on respect for differences.
In Chapter 4, Lianne McTavish offers an ethnographic sketch of the Torrington Gopher Hole Museum, suggesting it as a model for other small municipal museums (which are by far the most common type) to emulate. The Torrington museum is full of miniature dioramas featuring anthropomorphically staged gopher taxidermy. Early on, the taxidermy prompted a protest by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and the notoriety it created subsequently drew many tourists to visit the museum. Intentionally or not, the museum also critiques the history of museums, using the conventions of nineteenth-century natural history displays to explore the ways in which Albertans have interacted with local animals, reshaping the environment to build a distinctive provincial identity. This case study eloquently illustrates the nature of the everyday struggles in which most Canadian history museums engage as they develop their history programs.

In Chapter 5, Brenda Trofanenko’s comparative analysis of two concurrent exhibitions at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 (CMIP 21) points to differing ways of imagining a sense of belonging and identifying within the context of a national, pluralist society. The permanent exhibition she studies employs the vocabulary of traditional museum displays to celebrate the “hospitality” of the host nation and the cultural contributions of immigrants. On the other hand, the temporary travelling show, curated by an American independent curator and adapted for CMIP 21, uses language inspired by art installations to discuss the singularity of immigrant experience and the agency involved in the process of self-definition. Trofanenko contends that the exhibitions have a combined pedagogical effect: they make explicit to visitors that multiple ways of historicizing and making sense of immigration histories may inform the historical consciousness of national collectives.

**Measuring Historical Consciousness**

During recent decades, large-scale studies conducted around the world have consistently demonstrated that Western museumgoers and non-visitors alike see the museum as the most trustworthy source of historical knowledge. The chapters in Part 2 of the book underline the importance of capturing the thoughts of individuals as a way to better understand the impact of museums on both individuals and populations. They report on visitor studies and audience research related to the reception and perception of historical knowledge in museum productions. These studies examine visitor experiences as identity work and describe how the historical consciousness of the public is solicited when visitors engage with the museum. They also demonstrate how collective identity that relies on shared histories is shaped one mind at a time.
In Chapter 6, Laurajane Smith discusses findings drawn from an international survey of over three thousand visitors to museums and heritage sites in Australia, England, and the United States. Most respondents reported relatively low levels of engagement and stated that their existing beliefs and knowledge had been reinforced during their visit. However, a few (6 percent) noted that the visit had changed their views about either the past or the present. This chapter focuses on the responses of that 6 percent and explores the emotional and cognitive resources and skills that visitors used to engage with the historical narratives communicated by museums. Smith is particularly interested in the agency of visitors in negotiating official narratives of the past; she exposes how interpreting the collective past is used to construct a visitor identity that may oppose, correspond to, or simply remain outside the terms of sanctioned histories. Although Smith does not deal with the Canadian context, she draws multiple connections with the chapters of Canadian contributors, demonstrating the presence of cultural affinities between Commonwealth institutions and the public as well as a complementarity of thoughts between authors. Indeed, her understanding of museum visiting as a process of heritage making illuminates the work of other contributors who are concerned with visitor meaning making and agency.

In Chapter 7, Marie-Claude Larouche presents findings from a formative evaluation on an educational mobile application prototype. The prototype was designed as a bridge between physical and virtual resources, for use before, during, and after a gallery visit by Montreal high school students who were exploring Québécois history and heritage resources at the McCord Museum. The evaluation was conducted to identify how the prototype could be improved and to determine the potential of these resources, tools, and scenarios in applying historical thinking to the interpretation of collections by teenaged visitors. This case study demonstrates the sort of applied research that is regularly conducted by museums during their program development, but which is relatively rarely shared publicly.

In Chapter 8, Lon Dubinsky and Del Muise suggest that given the trust placed in them as sources of historical knowledge, museums could make ideal “in-between institutions” – spaces for historical experiences that are capable of engendering empathy among the public as a collective. Such institutions express, reinforce, and sometimes critically address cultural values. The authors employ the findings from their large-scale study Canadians and Their Pasts, which suggest that public trust in museums derives as much from what museums embody as institutions as from what they contain and display.

In Chapter 9, Pierre-Luc Collin, Claire Cousson, and Lucie Daignault present their study of how a permanent exhibition at the Musée de la civilisation in
Quebec City influenced the historical consciousness of visitors. The exhibition was intended to enhance their understanding of Quebec, both yesteryear and today. Given that the prior experiences of visitors lead them to interpret the past in their own way, the authors wondered whether the museum’s interpretive approach helped overwrite their previous knowledge and bring their historical consciousness in line with its view of Quebec history. The authors consider key elements of historical consciousness – time and identity – in the historical narratives presented in the exhibition and demonstrate how visitors constructed or reconstructed their understanding of national history as they went through the show.

**Instrumentalizing Historical Consciousness**

The chapters in Part 3 of the book examine museum production processes and the functioning of museums as social institutions. The authors consider the museum as facilitator or advocate in the development of historical consciousness and examine the need for museums to frame historical narratives as ways to mobilize social change and achieve social justice. They propose new readings of museum productions and examine new pedagogical opportunities emerging through recent museological practice.

Whereas the content of controversial exhibitions garners the most scholarly and critical attention, the operational structures of the institution and its administrative practices delimit the historical content that is deemed fit for public presentation and that shape museum knowledge production. In Chapter 10, Phaedra Livingstone looks at changes in the cultural administration landscape informing exhibition development in the national context since the 1960s. She asserts that the major exhibition controversies of the last twenty-five years have been catalysts for changes in the ways that Canadian museums engage the public in historical thinking. She also contends that current museum interest in participatory engagement took root, in part, as a risk management strategy to mitigate or avoid future controversies. From this viewpoint, she asserts, the professional perception of the public has influenced the shaping of historical narratives in the museum, probably more so than museum audiences themselves.

In Chapter 11, Simon Knell reflects on the relationship between museum and audiences. Focusing on the city of Vancouver and its museums, he employs the metaphor of gift giving to explain how museums have traditionally been involved in the production and distribution of “gifts” to the public. When members of the public contentedly accept these gifts, the cultural values embedded in them are internalized and perpetuated. This transaction functions only if
museum makers and audiences belong to the same privileged cultural group. To create a more democratic approach, Knell proposes a radical alternative that he calls “post-institutional museology.” This rejects the museum’s key characteristics and conventions to permit “the exterior world to be analyzed museologically, in terms of objects, categories, and acts of curation” (p. 219). Such a displacement of museum authority and apparatus would allow community self-representation and empowerment, reinvesting the museum with relevancy and a transformed historical consciousness.

In Chapter 12, Robert R. Janes adopts a manifesto-like tone to denounce how much of the world, including museums, is now held captive by neoclassical economics and marketplace ideology – the idea that economic growth and consumption are the keys to societal well-being and prosperity. He argues that business and political leaders seem oblivious to several profound realities, such as the depletion of natural resources and the inability of governments and banks to deal with enormous public and private debts. Museums of all kinds, he suggests, are underutilized sources of ideas, knowledge, and information. He insists that because of both their collections and their role as civil society actors, they are ideally placed to foster a critical historical consciousness and individual and community participation in the quest for workable solutions to global problems. His argument reminds us that all museum institutions have a historical dimension embedded in their interpretive program, whether their aim is to enhance the environmental, ecological, or artistic literacy of their audience. Further, they have an ethical obligation to work toward the “social good,” which Janes contends clearly means dealing frankly with issues such as global warming. He proposes a framework to enact this paradigmatic change, in the form of six responsibilities that museums must take on to ensure their social relevance in addressing global issues.

In Chapter 13, Jennifer Carter notes that the work of museums is fundamentally changing, as increasing numbers are taking up issues of social justice in their exhibition, education, and programming initiatives. In this context, historical narratives are presented from a human rights perspective and sensibility. This museographic shift has been precipitated by calls for greater social accountability and agency from within and beyond the museum sector, and from a growing recognition of the range of public responsibilities entailed in museum work. Carter discusses how a new attentiveness by museum professionals considers not only how the museum’s narratives are constructed and how audiences experience them, but even more critically, how these experiences are taken forward and make a difference in society. To that end, her chapter proposes an inquiry into the pedagogical frameworks of a museological practice dedicated to social justice.
Finally, in Chapter 14 – an epilogue that continues this essay – we synthesize trends in the current understanding of museums and historical consciousness, as found throughout this book. We also acknowledge a number of other museological projects in Canada that we believe will contribute to the nascent understanding of museums as sites of historical consciousness.

Explicit connections between historical consciousness scholarship and museology are arising in North America. This book represents the ways in which the concept is being mobilized across regions and projects in Canadian museology. By further defining the relationship between historical consciousness and the work of museum practitioners and researchers, it proposes productive juxtapositions between theoretical perspectives concerned with historical meaning making and current museological practice in Canada.

Notes
1 André Desvallées and François Mairesse, eds., Key Concepts in Museology (Mayenne, FR: Armand Colin, 2010), 56–60.
3 The editors cited the THEN/HiER website’s definition of historical consciousness as one example that authors might choose to adopt.
4 History and Memory, http://www.indiana.edu/~rcapub/v17n1/17sb.html.