“Examining Textbook Representations and Teacher Understandings of Political Violence in National Histories: The Trail of Tears”
AME Panel (12/9/16)

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Two Research Questions

• How is the violence associated with the forced migrations of Native American peoples represented in the dominant narratives of textbook accounts?

• How do American high school teachers accept, resist, and/or interrogate these narratives when teaching this chapter of American history?
Three Findings from the Textbook Analysis of Representations of Violence Associated with the Forced Migrations

1. The understating of violence inherent to the process and experience of the forced migration of Indigenous peoples
2. The silencing of widespread non-violent resistance to these policies
3. The marginalization of forced migrations within the dominant narratives of Westward Expansion, The Growth of Democracy, and Nation Building
Suffering and Death Attributed to Nature over Human Agency (Textbook Finding 1)

- “One out of every four Cherokees died of cold or disease” (PTP, 2009, p. 124).
- “Freezing weather and inadequate food supplies led to unspeakable suffering” (TAP, 2009, p. 257).
- “Nearly one quarter of them died of disease and exhaustion” (APAN, 2011, p. 256).
Resistance to “Indian Removal Act”
Framed as Congressional Debate
(Textbook Finding 2)

• “In 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, providing for the transplanting of all Indian tribes then resident east of the Mississippi (TAP, 2009, p.258).

• “In 1830, after extensive debate and a narrow vote in both houses, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, authorizing the President to negotiate treaties of removal with all tribes east of the Mississippi” (APAN, 2012, p.255).
Chapter Headings with a Section on Forced Migrations (Finding 3)

- “An Emerging New Nation (1783-1861)” (PTP).
Three Finddings from the High School History Teacher Individual Interviews

1. Teachers believed the teaching of history should have a social purpose in order to help their students make informed choices in their lives today.

2. Teachers had varied approaches to teaching this historical episode, but they all noted heightened emotional responses by students to the forced migrations of Native peoples.

3. Teachers exhibited strong negative responses to the textbook representations of the forced migrations and discussed what they would need to teach differently.
Teaching History Should Empower Students
(Finding 1: Teacher Individual Interviews)

• T1: “I want them to be good citizens so they can know enough about their past that they have opinions about the present and the future.”

• T3: “I stress that to be a well functioning member of society you need to think critically and analytically about the past and today.”

• T6: “I want them to get a sense that people in history were regular humans with their own flaws. I want to get across to them they were making choices just like we do today.”
Varied Responses to Teaching *Trail of Tears*
(Finding 2: Teacher Individual Interviews)

- **T1:** “I teach *The Indian Removal* in the context of the Jackson presidency. I call it the Jackson paradox. I feel that it is a better way to teach history, not portraying them as heroes or villains but seeing them as complicated people because I want kids to know enough to be good citizens and look at our next President in a complicated way.”

- **T4:** “The goal of the unit is to say that the removal that Jackson initiates is not new... I ask them if is this new and justified? This leads to a very emotional discussion; there is no doubt about it.”

- **T5:** “The kids have a really emotional reaction, especially when I read a primary source about what it was like for Native Americans to be forced to leave their homes. The kids would get angry. That is really awesome because often there is so much apathy toward history.”
Teachers’ Strong Negative Responses to Textbook Findings (Teacher Finding 3)

- **T1**: “About all four textbooks understating violence, yeah, I think in general, our textbooks do that... We talk a lot about the horrors of the Holocaust, but I feel we Americans in general have a certain sense of patriotism that sometimes cloud our historical memory.”

- **T4**: “Well, I think the more we sit here and talk the more I am thinking about how we deal with violence in our own history. We teach about Stalin, we have no problem talking about violence and the gulags, but when we talk about violence in our own country it’s padded, it’s protected.”

- **T6**: “I loved when you used the word flatten to describe how the textbooks neutralize violence in *The Trail of Tears*. I felt nothing in reading the textbook excerpts. It is really cold and there is no input from the people being murdered or moved.”
Focus Group Findings

• **Northeast Teacher Group:** When asked what was important for them in teaching a topic such as *The Trail of Tears* the conversation focused on how students’ conception of patriotism often inhibited a deeper ethical reflection around issues of violence.

• **Midwest Teacher Group:** A focal point in this group of teachers’ discussion was how the racial and class realities of their students’ lives today shape the way they understand issues of violence in the past.
Northeast Teachers’ Focus Group Voices

- **T3:** “The problem of teaching about war in history is that kids like winners; they go to strength; they come into class knowing winners and losers.”

- **T1:** “Yes, patriotism can get in the way, especially around war. Patriotism clouds certain kids’ ability to think critically about war.”

- **T2:** “I deal with the same thing. When asked about Nazi actions in WW II, all the students agree these were war crimes without much thought. When asked about our country’s dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan, they say of course that not a crime. When asked why, many just say, ‘Well this is America.’”
Midwest Teachers’ Focus Group Voices

• **T5:** “There are a lot of times where something happens that is terrible in history or the news and it often rolls off them. I think a lot of that has to do with their proximity to violence. They are really good at putting up protective armor.”

• **T4:** “That is really interesting. I have those moments as well.”

• **T5:** “Sometimes the kids tune out, yet I remember using an excerpt from a diary in *The Trail of Tears.* I remember a girl in class actually crying when I read it aloud. I asked her why that meant something to her; she said because these people were forced to leave their homes. Then, I realized her family had been forced to leave her own homeland.”
Northeast and Midwest Teachers Final Comments in the Focus Group Sessions

• **T1:** “We get so locked into our curriculum. It is not until you are engaged in something like this with others outside of your own school that I realize I could be doing something different.”

• **T4:** “The conversations we are having now about ways to approach the violent past of American history and the glorification of it are conversations I never had with others or even myself. I would love to have a community with other teachers around the country about their perspective on this topic.”

• **T6:** “There is an importance to leaving the building. I love my colleagues, but there is something about talking with other teachers and scholars nationally or internationally that would be really valuable.”