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## In Memory of Andrew R.L. Cayton: A Historiographical Essay

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# HISTORIOGRAPHY

## In Memory of Andrew R. L. Cayton

### A Historiographical Essay

BARTON E. PRICE

Andrew Robert Lee “Drew” Cayton passed away on December 17, 2015. He was an accomplished and respected historian of America in the early national period. He was also known as a leading scholar of midwestern history, having devoted much of his research to the development of Indiana and Ohio through their territorial stages and their early statehood. Cayton, a native of Ohio, taught at a handful of universities, including Ball State University from 1982 to 1990, and Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where he taught for the subsequent twenty-five years, rising to the rank of University Distinguished Professor. He was an active member of many academic organizations, serving a term as president of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic.

Among Cayton’s many accolades was a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Book citation for his *Frontier Indiana*, an important text for any student of the Hoosier state. The book enjoyed widespread approval and spoke to the author’s contributions to American, midwestern, and Indiana history. Now, on this bicentennial anniversary of Indiana’s statehood, twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Frontier Indiana*, and first anniversary

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of Drew Cayton's passing, it is right that we pay tribute to Cayton's intellectual legacy.<sup>1</sup>

### THE RELEVANCE OF MIDWESTERN HISTORY

Cayton's chief contribution to American history and American studies was his identification of the Midwest as an important region for analysis. He called scholars' attention to the problems of defining the region and to the seemingly provincial nature of the enterprise itself, making his case most forcefully in the 2001 essay "The Anti-Region: Place and Identity in the History of the American Midwest."<sup>2</sup> I first encountered this essay during my initial year in doctoral studies at Florida State University. In Tallahassee, I confronted my own midwestern identity in contrast to the southern culture that surrounded me. I also met people I called "midwestern exiles," some of them pursuing their degrees at the university and others supervising our studies. I considered our shared traits—which seemed to reflect distinctly non-regional qualities—while reading Cayton's own analysis of the Midwest's nebulous regional identity. I found his views simultaneously comforting and frustrating. How could the region that I called home be so bland that it lacked any definition? And how could I write a history of the region that would call attention to its distinctiveness from larger national narratives?

Cayton struggled with similar questions. While much of his scholarly corpus veils those frustrations, Cayton revealed his disappointment with midwestern studies in "The Anti-Region." Our greatest challenge, he stated, was getting midwesterners to talk about their distinct qualities, rather than resorting to abstracted value systems that are written into our culture and reinforced in the banality and conformity of uneventful lives. Cayton also observed that the Midwest lacked the tectonic shifts in historical narrative that defined regions such as the South and the trans-Mississippi West. Furthermore, practitioners of midwestern studies seemed to be relegated to the category of "regionalist" in a way that other scholars of defined localities avoided. As Cayton exclaimed, "We are regionalists who have no memory of having desired to become regionalists."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew R. L. Cayton, *Frontier Indiana* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996). In 1997, the *Indiana Magazine of History* published a cautiously enthusiastic review of the book by R. David Edmunds, who described the volume as "ideally suited as a textbook for courses in Indiana history." "Review of *Frontier Indiana*," *Indiana Magazine of History* 93 (December 1997), 385-86.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew R. L. Cayton, "The Anti-Region: Place and Identity in the History of the American Midwest," in *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, eds. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray (Bloomington, Ind., 2001), 140-59.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 149.

And yet, Cayton was proud of being a midwesterner and a scholar of the region. He championed the Midwest and its importance within American history precisely by calling attention to its generic quality. He was most interested in the efforts of midwesterners—particularly its white, middle-class residents—to navigate the complex and changing world around them, to strive for public civility, and to “render themselves inconspicuous.”<sup>4</sup>

In his introduction to *The American Midwest* (2001), Cayton sought to make those midwesterners and their ancestors conspicuous by calling attention to the region’s lush history. He first diagnosed the lack of a regional discourse that defined the place and its people; at the same time, he unraveled a narrative that understood the national story set within the Old Northwest and eastern Plains. Cayton and Susan Gray showed that midwesterners’ version of history was one of the United States expanding westward, embracing industry and free labor, revising industry through organized labor, negotiating between ruralism and urbanization, enacting municipal reforms in line with Progressive-Era machinations, adapting to racial and ethnic pluralism, coalescing through forces of mass culture, and redefining itself as a result of global economics.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps no other historian did more to advance the idea that the Midwest merited scholars’ time and effort to interrogate and investigate. To look at the authors included in *The American Midwest* is to see a group of historians who owe gratitude to Cayton for establishing a platform from which they could present their own interpretations of the region and its history. Speaking for myself, I consider Cayton and cultural geographer James R. Shortridge as the two most influential sources of a historical understanding of the Midwest’s distinct regional identity. As I continued to explore Cayton’s other works, I found other frameworks that informed how I approached the study of the Midwest.

## THE FRONTIER

Cayton’s discussion of the frontier theme in history was the most sophisticated that I had read. In his introductory essay to *Contact Points* (1998)—co-authored with Fredrika Teute—Cayton outlined how the word’s etymological origin, from the French *frontière*, gave rise to the idea of the frontier as “border” or “boundary.” In the early history of European colonization, the frontier was a physical, spatial boundary between the

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 159.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, “The Story of the Midwest: An Introduction,” in *The American Midwest*, eds. Cayton and Gray, 1-26.

colonies and Indian country. For pre-Revolutionary Anglo-Americans, the western lands beyond the frontier were the "backcountry," a territory located behind them as they faced eastward toward the Atlantic and its all-important trade. The backcountry remained a space of limited importance until after the revolution, when the West became the space onto which settlers could move and conquer. Here the progressive ideals of the frontier and of Anglo-American civilization's inevitable westward progress became the pervading national historical narrative. For historians, the frontier as a space has held a prominent role in narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup>

This idea of frontier as boundary was key to Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis, and it was a defining feature in Cayton's research. Cayton's frequent discussions of George Rogers Clark's military campaigns and his later gubernatorial administration of the Northwest Territory recognized the prevailing historiographical trope of Anglo-American civilization's westward march across the Ohio Valley. Cayton, in fact, used Rogers as the subject of one of his vignettes in *Frontier Indiana*.<sup>7</sup> Cayton was also preoccupied with the workings of federal governance of the Northwest Territory and the economic opportunism of the Ohio Company of Associates.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars have also understood the frontier as a sociological condition. Turner's essay was a response to the Census Bureau's 1890 declaration that increasing population density in western states and territories had, in effect, "closed" the frontier. According to this proclamation, the frontier was not so much a space as it was a relationship between space and the human presence. A similar assumption has informed the practice of some more recent historians and social scientists to define the frontier using the sex ratio in a given locality. If, by this assessment, a location's male-female ratio was higher than the national average, then that place could be considered a frontier. This definition has been especially useful to historians and sociologists of religion, who have sought to understand gender as a

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<sup>6</sup>Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute, "Introduction: On the Connection of Frontiers," in *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750-1830*, eds. Cayton and Teute (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1998), 1-15.

<sup>7</sup>Cayton, *Frontier Indiana*, 70-97.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 98-137; Cayton, "'Separate Interests' and the Nation-State: The Washington Administration and the Origins of Regionalism in the Trans-Appalachian West," *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992), 39-67; Cayton, "The Northwest Ordinance from the Perspective of the Frontier," in *The Northwest Ordinance, 1787: A Bicentennial Handbook*, ed. Robert M. Taylor Jr. (Indianapolis, Ind., 1987), 1-23; Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825* (Kent, Ohio, 1986), 1-50.

component of the religious environment of a region or place.<sup>9</sup> Cayton was likewise concerned with the social history of the midwestern frontier, often citing the work of social historians, such as John Mack Faragher's *Sugar Creek* (1986). Cayton was interested in the role that the development of the Northwest Territory had on the federal government, but he was equally concerned with the issues that influenced the territory's inhabitants. His essay on the development of the Northwest Territory during Washington's administration, for example, addresses the divergent economic and social developments west of the Appalachian Mountains.<sup>10</sup> For Cayton, the frontier status of the Northwest Territory—and of the states culled from that territory, particularly Ohio and Indiana—derived from the composite of racial and ethnic groups that comprised its population. He devoted three chapters of *Frontier Indiana* to the lives of the Miami, Delaware, and Shawnee people.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, an essay on the Indiana Territory focused on the interplay between Anglo-American settlers, their native neighbors, and the shifting status of African Americans within the territory.<sup>12</sup> And Cayton's narrative set the conclusion of Indiana's frontier history with the end of conflicts between white settlers and Native Americans. For Cayton, the frontier was more a process of social transactions than it was a movement of European institutions into Indian country.

This point gets at the crux of Cayton's definition of the frontier, which rests upon a relationship between society and space. The frontier was not only a physical space within the North American landscape. It was an abstract social and cultural space between various peoples. Even historians who follow the narrative of progress must acknowledge—as did Turner himself—that Anglo-Americans came into contact with other peoples, especially Native Americans. The frontier was not just topological; neither was it just a site of progress. Rather, the frontier was the social space in which cultures fashioned identities of self and the other in an ongoing exchange. Instead of being a line that dissected people, the frontier was a zone of intercultural contact where groups of people converged. For this

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<sup>9</sup>See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churaching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1992), 33-35; Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, *Religion and Society in Frontier California* (New Haven, Conn., 1994), 150-51.

<sup>10</sup>Cayton, "Separate Interests' and the Nation-State."

<sup>11</sup>Cayton, *Frontier Indiana*, 1-25, 138-66, 196-225.

<sup>12</sup>Andrew R. L. Cayton, "Race, Democracy, and the Multiple Meanings of the Indiana Frontier" in *The Indiana Territory, 1800-2000: A Bicentennial Perspective*, ed. Darrel E. Bigham (Indianapolis, Ind., 2001), 47-70.

reason, Cayton and Teute chose to refer to frontiers as “contact points.” Cayton was also interested in the points of contact between sectional groups in the early republic. He wrote about the Ohio Valley as a borderland between North and South in which the two sections frequently interacted and repeatedly clashed over economics, labor, and social values.<sup>13</sup> This last point was especially salient for me as I was looking for a way to narrate the interactions of northerners and southerners in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys during the middle of the nineteenth century.

### CENTERS AND PERIPHERIES

Throughout his intellectual career, Cayton also studied the relationship between centers of trans-local power and the local dimensions of larger social, cultural, political, and economic phenomena. Cayton's interpretation of the frontier evolved to include discussions of centers and peripheries. The relatively recent turn to studying frontiers as zones of cultural exchange owes much to the phenomena of the global age. At unprecedented rates and on an unprecedented scale, human beings are encountering one another through forces of mass transit, mass markets, and mass media. World-systems theory posits a relationship between center and periphery, suggesting, for example, that in a global capitalist system the capital-holding core gains at the expense of the labor-intensive periphery. The theory explains the global division of labor and the increasing wealth of the West and suggests that such a system is all-inclusive, an economic vortex into which various geographic nodes become incorporated. Such a centripetal model is also helpful in understanding social and cultural power structures, especially the formation of national and international mass society and mass culture. At the core of such a society or culture is a symbolic representation of a central value system. This value core may be associated with a social class or geographic region, and the center becomes authoritative because of the density of core values within the center.

The relationship between center and periphery is another useful way of understanding frontiers and the development of regionalism. Frontiers can lie at the farthest reaches of a society's value system, economic structures, and political influence. Such distance from the center produces an effect of isolation or alienation, which helps give rise to local and regional sensibilities. “Alienation from the center,” according to

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<sup>13</sup>Andrew R. L. Cayton, “Artery and Border: The Ambiguous Development of the Ohio Valley in the Early Republic,” *Ohio Valley History* 1 (Winter 2001), 19-26.

Cayton, “engendered regionality.”<sup>14</sup> In his essay “‘Separate Interests’ and the Nation-State,” Cayton acknowledged that the federal government’s dealings with the Northwest Territory contributed to a sense of alienation among western residents south of the Ohio River. In turn, this sense of alienation led to a developing upland southern culture among many of those who would become residents of the future states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Throughout his work, Cayton kept a keen eye on the local experiences of midwesterners and on how those experiences fostered ideologies.<sup>15</sup> This approach to regional history is evident in his use of a microhistorical approach to Indiana’s frontier history, structuring each chapter around a character whose life was shaped by external forces and whose decisions were based on the options available.

While Cayton readily acknowledged that frontier history focused on the periphery of the American system, he inverted that framework when he reconceptualized the importance of the Midwest within the American story. Cayton asserted that midwesterners’ self-fashioned narrative was one of “total identification” with both the political and market trajectories of the nation, during the Jacksonian era and beyond.<sup>16</sup> As such, the geographic periphery became the narrative center. Citing Congregational minister and land speculator Manasseh Cutler, Cayton referred to Ohio as the “centre of a great Empire” and used that phrase as the title for a collection of essays on Ohio history which he co-edited with Stuart D. Hobbs.<sup>17</sup>

It was this reframing of the Midwest’s place within American historiography that I found illuminating in my own work. I struggled to make sense of characters who claimed that they were alienated from the East while simultaneously insisting that they represented the quintessentially non-regional American region. Cayton’s framework helped me to understand that the Midwest lay at the center of American history precisely because it was a region repeatedly influenced by the systems making America into a continental, republican empire.

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<sup>14</sup>Cayton and Gray, “The Story of the Midwest,” 8.

<sup>15</sup>This theme was evident in Cayton’s appraisal of David Waldstreicher’s *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1997). See Andrew R. L. Cayton, “We Are All Nationalists, We Are All Localists,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (Fall 1998), 521-28.

<sup>16</sup>Cayton and Gray, “The Story of the Midwest,” 10.

<sup>17</sup>Andrew R. L. Cayton and Stuart D. Hobbs, eds., *The Center of a Great Empire: The Ohio Country in the Early Republic* (Athens, Ohio, 2005). See especially pages 1-10 for Cayton’s introduction, “The Significance of Ohio in the Early American Republic.”

I had one opportunity to meet Drew Cayton at a meeting of the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic in 2011. I had admired his scholarship for years, but I found his personality even more admirable. He took time to listen to me talk about my research, and he offered to read my manuscript—a courtesy that both he and his wife, Mary Kupiec Cayton, extended. Despite his intellectual accomplishments and his esteem within the profession, Drew was as modest as the Ohio town where he grew up. A son of the Buckeye State, he had invested his intellectual energies in making sense of his own upbringing, of the cultural values that undergirded him, and of the lasting importance of his home state within the American story. Unlike Frederick Jackson Turner, a midwesterner who celebrated the region's frontier legacy as a story of progress, Cayton sought to explain the Midwest's complicated relationship with America's westward expansion. He reflected a regional consciousness that placed the Midwest as a keystone within American history but also reflected on the humbler midwestern self-consciousness and the seemingly nebulous characteristics of the region and its residents.

Like George Willard in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Cayton left home. Unlike Willard, Cayton returned with a goal of telling the Midwest's story in a way that was neither romantic nor deprecating. In so doing, he earned the respect of his colleagues, the adoration of his students, and the admiration of this historian. He cannot and will not be forgotten. Near the end of his essay on the Midwest as the "Anti-Region," Cayton recounted sharing a breakfast with a group of people in South Dakota. The conversation turned to loved ones who would likely die before Christmas that year, and as Cayton recalled: "No one cried; no one complained; no one touched. The conversation remained exceedingly proper and matter-of-fact."<sup>18</sup> Cayton's own death last December, however, is not just a matter for propriety and sober acknowledgement. Our loss is great; our minds are inspired; our hearts are full. I hope that this essay has done justice to his legacy and will stand as a lasting note of gratitude for what Andrew Cayton has done for our profession.



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<sup>18</sup>Cayton, "The Anti-Region," 158.