Cultural Mythologies and a Sense of Place:
Creating an Origins Narrative for Vermont in *The Thin Place*

The book jacket of Kathryn Davis' novel, *The Thin Place*, reads: "In a thin place, according to legend, the membrane separating this world from the spirit world is almost nonexistent. The small New England town of Varennes is such a place…" Though the book jacket promotes the novel to be about the "thin place" between earthly life and the spiritual world, it is just as much a story of the "thinness" and instability of place in contemporary small-town Vermont. Though place is often "thick" with associations of meaning, a "thin place" can offer a chance of renewal. The meaning of place for many characters in the novel is tenuous and shifting. Davis invokes a string of creation stories as she attempts to piece together an all-inclusive origins narrative for northern New England. Varennes is a town of old-timers, transients, urban dropouts, hippies, and tourists—people from a variety of class and ethnic backgrounds. Though Davis chooses to not give much attention to those living on the "margins," she pulls Vermont from the margins of New England and creates it as the mythical center, playing with the idea of imagined and regional borders. The various levels of insider/ outsider status have an effect on how characters define their sense of place. I will look at *The Thin Place* in comparison to Howard Frank Mosher's *Where the Rivers Flows North* and some aspects of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Hillsboro People*, two texts that portray representations of place in Vermont and bare significant similarities with the cultural work Davis is performing in *The Thin Place*.

Davis explores the idea of place on environmental, historic and mythological levels. She starts with the earth itself by noting the instability of place early in the novel:

"[The world] seems solid enough, though in fact it's a set of interlocking pieces, sometimes bound tightly together and sometimes drifting far apart…in the case of Varennes…Nothing's really pinned in place. Everything's moving, up and down and back and forth" (Davis, 34-35). Like the shifting plates of the earth, place shifts meaning. Davis emphasizes that it is not just our own culturally mediated connections to place that shift and change, but the physical place we imaginatively connect ourselves to likewise changes, albeit on a different geologic time scale. Mosher creates a similar instability of physical place in *Where the Rivers Flow North*. Noel's sense of place changes as the land changes; with no more trees to support his logging profession, Noel is forced to create a sense of place that is not connected to the land per se, but rather to his memories and their association with the land and his family history. As the physical environment shifts and changes, so does the imaginative connection to place.

Davis then narrows down her exploration of place as she focuses on natural and historic events of Varennes and its surrounding region. The presence of a bog outside of town is the result of a sinkhole that formed two hundred years earlier, causing the lake to disappear and the bog to rise in its place. No one would have any knowledge of this natural event, were it not signposted: "Now there was a stone marker, barely visible from Route 10 if you knew it was there, commemorating the event, which it referred to as 'cataclysmic'" (Davis, 177-178). When Henry Fine, Roy Diamond and Beau O'Brien set out to trap the beavers that are building a dam and causing Henry's brook to show no more than a "thin muddy trickle" the reader already knows from previous pages the history of beavers in Varennes and northern New England: "By 1850, when the Kipp's house was still a hat shop, and when hats and coats made from beaver pelts had become

the height of practical fashion, the beavers of the New World had been trapped to near extinction" (Davis, 91). Events like this are pondered and commented upon throughout the novel. Davis merges the natural and cultural past, attempting to create an inclusive historical narrative for northern Vermont.

Finally, Davis brings these ponderings to a mythological level. Just as Mosher creates a sort of northern New England origins narrative, with Noel being closely tied to the looming figure of Ethan Allen, Davis attempts to do the same. She notes in the beginning of the novel, "Everyone prefers to stick with the subject of people, but how shortsighted to leave out the question of how we got here and where we're going" (Davis, 12). The first place to start in creating an origins narrative is with creation stories. When creating an origins narrative for Varennes, Davis commingles natural, evolutionary and Biblical images: "In the Pleistocene, hands of ice gripped the ball top and bottom, the finger moving around for purchase, a thumb on Varennes. This was not long after Noah's flood" (Davis, 71). Davis notes later on, however, "In some stories the creator took Beaver from his right side and divided it into twelve pieces, which were men" (Davis, 235). Davis offers the opportunity for several different creation stories to present themselves, as to be inclusive of the multiple cultural histories in northern New England.

For Davis, establishing a sense of place is not simply about one's present connection to the land or local community, but where one sees oneself in the larger picture of human purpose. Mosher too sets up this "bigger picture" for Noel. Mosher calls upon Biblical and natural history imagery throughout the text, creating a mythological/ geologic origins narrative in his story. When Noel is about to drown, Mosher notes: "and then he was spinning in the pellucid, crystalline depths of a glacier,

which was melting as he spun, melting to a vast lake, filling the notch and covering the bog, the camp, and the ridge, inundating all of Kingdom County, entombing its past and present and future" (Mosher, 195). Noel merges with the physical landscape at the same time he becomes part of the myth of Kingdom County's "past and present and future."

In including these various mythologies and histories, Davis is subverting the dominant New England narrative of Puritans and Pilgrims. She is rewriting a new history that makes more sense for northern New England. Much like Puritans and Pilgrims did not have a place in *Where the Rivers Flow North*, neither do they for Davis as she explores sense of place in northern Vermont.

Why include all these ruminations on origins and mythology? How does it pertain to the character's lives in northern Vermont? Stories (particularly ones about "where we have been and where we are going") help to establish place and create a sense of meaning in ones' lives. As characters search for stability, safety and a sense of place in which to comfortably anchor their lives, a story, or mythology, of place is concomitantly created. These stories are extrapolated from the past and created in moments of crisis and doubt. It could be argued that had the trees still existed, had Noel still been doing his work as a logger, he would not have felt a familial connection with the land. For him, place would have been stable; there would have been no need to create stories about it. But Noels' livelihood no longer exists: he creates a story of place centered on his camp to give meaning, tradition and purpose to his life.

Through the characters in the novel, Davis explores different responses to place through her creation of a northern New England narrative. She complicates her story even further by including a myriad of characters with differing layers of "insider/

outsider" status. In focusing on three characters (Andrea Murdock, Daniel Murdock and Billie Carpenter), I will demonstrate the shifting boundaries and expectations of place that the characters experience.

Like Noel, Andrea Murdock creates her own mythology of place. Andrea is in her mid-fifties and lives in a large house on Black Lake with her husband, Daniel, who is an Arctic cultural anthropologist. She is self-employed as a bookbinder. In the novel, she is working on binding the diary of Inez Fair, a schoolteacher who lived in Varennes in the mid-nineteenth century. Inez had taken her class out on the lake in a boat that ended up capsizing, an event referred to in the novel as the Sunday School Outing Disaster. This event takes on mythic proportions as Andrea attempts to define her sense of place through Inez Fair and this "historic" event in the town's history.

Inez's great-niece, Ellen Fair, lives in Varennes, in the schoolteacher's old house. As Andrea walks to visit Ellen one day, she ruminates on passages from the diary: "Had Inez Fair been a good teacher? She gave a person so little to go on. *Taught school every day*, and each weekend *done housework*, with here and there the occasional *Bertie*. No doubt about it, Inez Fair liked men" (Davis, 51). Andrea notes the scene as she walks: "Huge sugar maples lined the road, banks of daffodils at their feet. A herd of cows with numbers stapled to their ears gravely watched Andrea pass. FAIR 1808 it said over the open door into the hayloft, where a little calico cat sat switching her tail" (Davis, 51). Andrea enmeshes this scene and the figure of Inez Fair with her own relationship with her husband: "Andrea and Daniel Murdock had been married for about thirty years; they no longer turned to each other like starving people for love, and when they fought…they tended to fight in the manner of declawed cats hissing on a fence" (Davis, 51). Andrea

identifies with Inez Fair through her troubles with men, creating an imagined link with the dead schoolteacher and an imagined sense of sharing similar troubles. Like she imagines Inez had done, she too has affairs with other men, though never finds the satisfaction for which she is looking.

Unlike in *Where the Rivers Flow North*, the mythology of place does not happen in an oral culture but through a diary of an obscure woman, a diary that happens to fall into the hands of Andrea. Andrea creates this imagined connection and sense of place at the moment (like Noel) of crisis and feeling disconnected: her relationship with her husband is unsatisfying and she has no real friends in town. As Davis notes, the Murdocks are caught up in the unreal struggle to maintain their livelihood: "It was as if the big questions no longer mattered to them, the more money they were forced to make in order to keep living the life they thought they wanted to live together in the beginning" (Davis, 51).

After a car accident, Andrea is left in a coma, stuck in a "thin place" between life and death. In this state, she imagines she *is* Inez: "*At home*. Andrea Murdock was at home, sitting in the kitchen window of the Fair homestead, writing in her diary. *Snowing tonight. Cold. Oh how lonely*" (Davis, 169). She putters around the "clock room" in the Fair home; there are twenty-three clocks in total, "their ticking a constant immeasurable stream of sound, nor did their chimes sound in unison" (Davis, 174). Andrea imagines she is like Inez, never finding or fulfilling the love she needed. Davis notes, "Unrequited love is like the love of the soul for the body. The body never adequately returns the love, since the body thinks, being the container, it's more important than the soul and thus owes the soul very little, if anything" (Davis, 174). Andrea imagines herself and Inez as

"different" from others, both failing to find their place in the world. As Davis notes, "Naturally the Fairs, being no-nonsense Yankees, never would admit to it, but with the exception of Inez, they all found the clock room disturbing" (Davis, 174). The clock room symbolizes the ticking away of human time on earth, emphasizing for Inez (and now Andrea) that life on earth is short; that the body is just a "container" for the soul and that one's existence really begins after life on earth.

In a way, Inez embodies a version of the Puritan New England narrative, living her life as a schoolteacher, hindering her passions and accepting unrequited love. Though Andrea is married, she hinders her passions and desires just as much as Inez. Andrea imagines that Inez and her are looking for a kind of love that cannot be found on earth. In searching for a sense of place, Andrea attempts to read behind the lines of Inez's brief descriptions of her daily life and creates an imagined connection with the long dead schoolteacher, clinging to an old Puritan New England origins narrative.

Unlike Inez, Andrea does not leave behind a diary, nor does she become mythic like Noel; rather, she dies in a nursing home, "miles and miles away from Varennes…never to be seen again" (Davis, 274). Andrea, living in Varennes for close to thirty years, not having established any real connections with the people in town and always doubting herself and her relationship with her husband, needs to create a mythology of place just for herself. The Sunday School Outing Disaster only becomes History with a capital "H" for Andrea; for others, even Ellen Fair, it is simply a small event in local history, part of the past that does not hold any meaning for the present. Noel and Andrea create an interesting juxtaposition. Noel himself was part of myth before he even died: one gets a sense that Noel and his family will live on in the

collective memory of the Northeast Kingdom, as part of the mythology of Ethan Allen and Vermont. Andrea, however, was simply "never to be seen again." Andrea fails to incorporate herself into the new narrative of northern New England that Davis creates.

Through the character of Andrea's husband, Daniel, Davis plays with the idea of borders. This is something Mosher also does in *Where the Rivers Flow North*. In Mosher's text, Noel easily replaces Vermont with Oregon and in *Alabama Jones*, southern "hillbilly" culture carries over to Vermont. Mosher demonstrates that the boundaries we place on regions and regional identity are no more stable than the senses of place we likewise create. In *The Thin Place*, Davis extends the boundaries of Varennes and Vermont to Canada and all the way to the Arctic. As mentioned previously, Daniel works as an anthropologist in the Arctic. Davis invokes an origins narrative of "the north," pushing northern boundaries as she includes multiple cultural identities. She notes,

> In the far north, the world is shaped like a hill and floats upon the water…in the far north, animals have souls and their souls are reasonable. Treat the possessor of the soul with respect, and there will be more foxes in your future…[If you do not] you will be good as dead, and your own soul will go out like a spark, drifting black and lifeless across the tundra, perhaps as far as the distant land where the caribou live under the immense white tent made of their own hair (Davis, 150).

Davis pushes even farther when she asks, "But what does it mean, distant? It's still part of the same world, only farther off. It's a place where the caribou come from, mysterious, yet actual" (Davis, 150). Through Daniel, Davis furthers her creation of a northern New England narrative, but at the same time pushes the boundaries of New England as far north as physically possible. This speaks to the "idea" of things and regions; for example, people in Massachusetts know that caribou exist, even if they have never seen one. Caribou are at once an actuality and a mystery, a part of a more

"northern" landscape that is likewise known to exist, if never lived in or even visited. New England is imaginatively re-centered in the far north. Much like Robert Frost's *North of Boston*, Davis pushes the center of New England to Vermont and past its borders to as far north as one can physically go. This evidence of border questioning permeates Davis' text, with the presence of French-Canadian tourists, Jamaicans "with dreads who came north every summer to work the market gardens of Hebron," and cars with Quebec license plates (Davis, 117).

There is something powerful and alluring about the north: "The north was dangerous…The Arctic Sea made that famous Caribbean turquoise appear tawdry and meretricious by comparison. Cold heaven, Daniel said. The Arctic Sea was the color of cold heaven" (Davis, 41-42). Despite the "idea" of the north, the actuality of it makes the north a powerful presence for Daniel. Again invoking the presence of nature, Davis foreshadows Andrea's car accident when Daniel fails to listen to the Arctic lichen: "He didn't know the lichen was explaining how a recent storm had abandoned Labrador for Varennes, exchanging north for south, husband for wife" (Davis, 123). Daniel subscribes to an entirely different sense of place than the one his wife creates for herself. The storm that leaves Daniel safe in the "north" is the one that causes Andrea's car accident in the "south." In the Arctic, there is an iceberg, "sunlight turning it to a world that seemed not only possible but also irresistible to enter, a shade of aquamarine verging on no color at all, crystal clear, like heaven" (Davis, 226). Because neither Andrea nor Daniel finds stability or happiness in their relationship or in town, they each imaginatively shift their senses of place, inventing zones of comfort and stability. In a sense, Daniel and Andrea exist on polar opposites of the spectrum of New England narratives: Daniel pushes his

sense of place as far north as possible, while Andrea clings to the Puritan-Yankee narrative of "southern" New England.

Like the competing creation stories, Davis presents us with competing narratives of New England and place. With Andrea and Daniel situated at polar opposites of place, Davis then turns to the character of Billie Carpenter, who is not as caught up in the "mythology" of place like the Murdocks. Billie has been living in Varennes for little over one year, in a makeshift house on the lake. It was "like a camp, not a home. Like a place you might visit from time to time to get away from home, and if you actually lived there it meant you didn't *have* a home, which also mean you didn't have a life, a condition which until recently Billie had found desirable" (Davis, 37). For Billie, Varennes is a place of escape, a place to temporarily "be" without obligations to others. Much as Andrea and Daniel Murdock were attempting to imaginatively escape Varennes, Billie attempts to immerse herself in the town. Much like Noel's "camp," though, Billie does not feel at home in Varennes, or anywhere for that matter. She is searching for meaning, but is not quite sure how to do it. She floats on the surface of things, as Davis notes: "Billie Carpenter was a strange creature. She'd chosen a profession [journalism] in which it was essential to get to the bottom of things, and yet she believed in her heart of hearts that no such place existed" (Davis, 39). Billie has been so used to going through routine without giving it much thought, that now when she is confronted with her existence, she does not know what to connect to.

Like Andrea, Billie does not feel very accepted in town; she does, however, make the effort that Andrea fails to do. Like the narrator in Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Flint and Fire*, she has a complex insider/ outsider status and works hard to connect with the

people in her community. She volunteers at the local nursing home, is an usher at the Episcopal Church (though "in her heart of hearts" does not believe in God) and attends church meetings. When she shows hesitancy about "banning" a young girl from the church who shows the dangerous signs of nonconformity, Glenda Banner calms everyone's indignation by stating, "It's all right, Florence…Billie hasn't lived in Varennes for as long as the rest of us, but she's a member of the St. Luke's flock just the same" (Davis, 130). The "insider's" sense of place means maintaining the status quo of the community, the presence of outsiders not always particularly welcome. At the same church meeting, Bille's fellow usher, James Trumbell, notes: "As much as I hate to say it, this is a different world from the one we grew up in. There are things abroad in the land, dangerous things, things that don't even bear thinking about" (131). In such a pull and tug atmosphere of what one must be and do to be "accepted," it is hard for Billie to be herself, let alone establish a sense of place in Varennes.

Yet she has moments where she creates her own stories, her own idealized connection to place. Pondering the rumor that Mees had brought Sunny's dog back to life, she reflects: "Maybe we all died ages and ages ago. We all died and continue dying, this being the hell we're too stupid to recognize we've fallen into or too filled with wistful thinking to acknowledge. Such a sweet-smelling hell, though! Coffee and cut grass and the sumpy aroma of the river" (Davis, 69-70). In a kind of "Our Town-ish" meditation, Billie chooses to slow down and appreciate the small details of life and what she does have and can hold on to.

Though Billie and Noel both live in temporary "camps," Noel and his profession is on the verge of extinction; for Billie, she is just coming into her own. Instead of

helping the others trap the infamous beavers in town, Billie rescues one and releases it; she starts a relationship with another character in town and the novel ends with her in the hospital (getting out of surgery after having been shot in a bizarre turn of events at Sunday mass), looking up at her new partner. Davis notes: "It was the first morning of the world" (Davis, 275). In not ascribing to any cultural mythology or investing herself in the past, Billie manages to create a sense of place and her *own*, personal creation story.

Billie's "outsiderness" allows her the freedom to explore and create a sense of place in Varennes. Billie exists in a comfortable medium between the excess of place that the Murdocks experience and the complete lack of connection to place that the character, Virginia, in Fisher's *Petunias* experiences. Though the Murdocks are seen as outsiders to some of the characters in the novel, compared to Billie they become trapped in their own "insiderness," each living separately in their own created mythologies of place. The crisis of their relationship forces them apart, each one seeking and clinging to differing narratives of New England. Fisher's character, Virginia, however, is much more of an outsider than Billie. She returns to the vacation spot of her youth, having "a whim for self analysis, a desire to learn if the old glamour about the lovely enchanted region still existed for her weary, sophisticated maturity" (Fisher, 20). Like Billie, Virginia is a wanderer, having no real connection to place anywhere. Billie, however, does not have the pretensions that Virginia possesses, which bars Virginia from befriending the Pritchard family she boards with. Nor does Billie have the cultural baggage of the Murdocks. Possessing an open mind and a willingness to connect with the community, Billie is able to create and manage her own sense of place.

Davis aptly demonstrates the difficulty of establishing a sense of place in contemporary small-town Vermont. Her characters bear similar responses to place that the characters in Fisher and Mosher's work experienced, particularly in *Where the Rivers Flow North*. Living in New England, but on the border with Canada, how does one establish a New England identity? Andrea chooses a kind of Yankee identity, Daniel creates a northern New England identity at the same time he pushes these boundaries north, and Billie is taken out of this cultural mythology, establishing a unique, personal sense of place. With all these struggles for place-based identity, what is Davis saying about place? What is she saying when Billie, the newest resident in Varennes, is one of the few in novel who make it out unscathed? I suggest that Davis argues one can become trapped in our cultural, natural and mythological heritage. While this cultural heritage helps establish a sense of place for people, acting as a drawing board on which characters each pull their own definitions of place, at the same time one can also become "bogged" down by the cultural baggage of regional narratives.

Davis says at one point, "Of course, beyond the acres and acres of forest there was the world. The world with its houses and cities, its people, machinery, weapons, germs and noise—something always encroaching from somewhere. Encroaching and pushing until something else had to give. Until it had to shoot loose like a storm of invective from a father's mouth or a weapon from an underground silo. There was only so much room" (21). There is only so much association of place that one can take before one loses a sense of self-identity and become part of the "myth." Billie, part of the "world," comes into Varennes and forces something in the town to "give," so that she can establish her identity. Though place in this novel is "thick" with associations, as the

world becomes more global and people take their sense of place with them, dominant regional narratives of identity become disrupted and destabilized. For Billie Carpenter, place is "thin," free from the many associations it possesses for Andrea and Daniel Murdock. In a "thin place," Davis believes that one can escape the cultural heritage of regional narratives and invent and participate in one's own creation stories.

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