

Finding Regina, Third Wave Feminism, and Regional Identity

by Shelley Scott

I teach in Lethbridge, a prairie city with a population of about 80,000, and I taught *Finding Regina* by Shoshana Sperling in my third-year level undergraduate Canadian Theatre course in the spring of 2007. This paper is grounded in the response of my 44 students to the play, and in the power of *Finding Regina* to speak to my student demographic. The manner in which the play deals with regionalism is an especially effective representation of post-colonialism and its continuing effect on Canadian identity, and regionalism also manages to intertwine with the play's feminism in an intriguing and contemporary way.

I assigned a weekly report on the plays we studied, and for *Finding Regina*, I asked the students to write about whether or not they could relate their own high school experiences to those of the three characters in the play. As I had anticipated, most of them related very strongly, and in most cases, the students cited the characteristics common to growing up in a small city or town. Their hometowns ranged from small cities like Lethbridge and Fort MacMurray (51,000), to very small places like Brooks (12,500), Drumheller (6,500), and Coaldale (6,000). Hometowns outside of Alberta ranged from Langley, BC (117,000), Summerland, BC (11,000), Weyburn, SK (9,000), Blind River, Ontario (4,000), down to Ste. Anne, Manitoba, with a population of 1,500. Students from cities the size of Regina (population 200,000) or larger, such as Vancouver, Calgary, and Saskatoon, had a harder time relating to the play, but those students were in the minority.

The majority of my students are from places much smaller than Regina, and these were the students who spoke repeatedly of how well the play depicted life in a small city or town just like their own. One student wrote that, "It was uncanny: the similarities in everything from the weather to the people to the cars to the stereotypes." ¹ Beyond the expected points of recognition around things like blizzards and hockey, there were two main topics of intersection: first, the realities of substance abuse and suicide in their communities; and second, the love-hate relationship they have with their hometowns, and their profound sense that where they are from informs who they believe themselves to be. One student referred to the experience of reading the play as "a forced review of my life thus far."² Identifying with where you live is a kind of kinship bond. Many of my students wrote about the experience of coming from a place where they know everyone and everyone knows them; as one student put it, "One mistake and you'll never live it down."³

In his 1997 book, *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing*, W.H. New asks what constitutes a city in Canadian literature and concludes that it is size and economic advantage: "But relative size, along with location and local influence and reputation, also determines the image that any urban area projects" (157). He cites Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg and Halifax as cities struggling between a desire to be recognized as "world class" and a desire to remain neighbourly, and then asks: "What, then, of 'small cities': Kelowna, Regina, Saint John, Trois-Rivières? As far as power is concerned - at least, *felt* power," they are all equally remote from the centres of real power, which New identifies as Toronto and Montreal (157-158). New concludes that this sense of being remote from the centres of power leads, in small

cities, to a sense of political injustice: "people attach multiple resonances of meaning to place when they claim 'place' for an identity" (131). In other words, to identify with one's geographic location is a "claim upon significance" resulting from a desire for influence that comes from this "felt *lack* of power" (131). In their introduction to *A Sense of Place*, the editors write that, "The use of the term regionalism, indeed, has always been a conflicted one, bringing into view tensions between the centre and the periphery, the rural and urban, the local and cosmopolitan, the regional and the national" (xi). My students identified with the experience of marginalization through the belief that one's hometown does not really count in the larger identity of the nation. This marginalization from power is further compounded by virtue of their age and status as students, in some cases by their race, and - because the majority of my Drama students are female - also by their gender.⁴

Finding Regina was published in Winnipeg by Scirocco Drama in 2003. The play began as *The Regina Monologues* in Toronto at Buddies in Bad Times' Rhubarb! Festival in 2001, and was then produced as *Finding Regina* by the Globe Theatre in Regina, in association with Nightwood Theatre and Theatre Passe Muraille. It premiered at the Globe on Oct. 8, 2002, directed by Nightwood's artistic director, Kelly Thornton, and then went on to a run at Passe Muraille (Feb. 18 to March 9, 2003).

The cast featured Shoshana Sperling herself as Annabel, with Jeremy Harris as Josh, and Teresa Pavlinek as Rae. Shoshana Sperling had been better known as a stand-up comedienne than as a playwright, often performing character-based comedy at Toronto venues and on television.⁵ Sperling describes *Finding Regina* as a love letter: "this play is really an homage to Regina because I have this love for the place that I just can't quite shake" (quoted in Nightwood 1). In fact, the published play is prefaced with a

list of acknowledgements written in the form of a letter to Regina, which begins, "I miss you so much when I'm away from you." Further along, she writes. "This play is for me and also those still finding Regina way out in Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Montreal" (5). Sperling has received many comments that "the play could be set anywhere in Canada as it is such an honest depiction of going home" (Nightwood 1). As Sperling implies, to find one's Regina is a metaphor, meaning to reconnect with where you come from and who you are.

In his *NOW* article, theatre critic Glenn Sumi offers a brief summary of the play: "In Sperling's deceptively simple piece, three former high school friends meet up in the local ICU when another friend attempts suicide. They reconnect, throw their weight around, smoke up, then bemoan their current lives and chip away at the past and each other with emotional ice picks" (58). The situation does not immediately read as explicitly feminist, yet feminist concerns underline all the themes of the play. The focus is on the fortunes of a generation that grew up together in Regina, and the disproportionate number of them who have committed suicide. Old high school pals Annabel, Rae, and Josh have gathered at the hospital in Regina to wait for news about their friend Clarky, who has attempted to kill himself. The character Annabel, the one played by Sperling, has moved to Toronto and is doing a master's degree in Women's Studies, "with a specialization in concepts of male and female archetypes in Western Civilization" (Sperling 22). This allows Annabel to deliver a mini-lecture on how classics written by women have been "misinterpreted by patriarchal society" (22). She tries to explain her thesis but the other characters are unable to follow her argument, which is dense with academic jargon, especially after sharing a joint or two in Josh's car. Thus,

Annabel's feminism is positioned as something that is vital to her new life in Toronto, but irrelevant once she comes back home to Regina.

The character Rae, a pretty and popular girl in high school, has moved to Vancouver and become a wife and mother. She is now thirty and, like Annabel, she has been back to Regina a few times - often for the funerals of friends - but this is the first time in ten years that all three have been together. At first Rae seems shallow, bragging about her status as a "permi parent" volunteer at her daughters' private school and her husband's skills as a provider (17). Rae is a proponent of popular psychology and self-help books to explain her marriage, but Annabel cynically rejects all such theorizing about personality and identity. Annabel declares that, "It's all about looks. We're conditioned to believe that if we find a mate with ideal physical beauty, then we'll fall in love" (27). She argues that marriages based on looks alone will end up being empty and devoid of intimacy, concluding that, "most people who grow up being splendidly beautiful might find themselves in a relationship that might be splendidly empty" (28). She is obviously referring to Rae, and the roots of her hostility become apparent later in the play.

Josh is the character who stayed in Regina. In recounting his extensive sexual exploits, past and present, Josh inadvertently admits that he does not remember having sex with Annabel in high school. This prompts an angry Annabel to reveal that she was in fact very promiscuous throughout high school, "But not looking as girls should look, it was kept a secret. Boys tell their adventures. Unless they're embarrassed" (38). Unlike popular and sought-after girls like Rae, who Annabel describes as "tall, thin and perfect" (38) Annabel never had a "public" boyfriend, but she did have sex with many guys in

secret simply because she made herself available. She explains: "Girls wanted to have sex but they were so worried for their reputations. I never worried about any of that because... No one ever told. They just came back for more. I practised this behaviour into my university years until I finally moved out of Regina" (38). For Annabel, Rae is the centre and she is at the margins.

This focus on a complex and unequal relationship between women marks the play as Third Wave in its feminism. While the suffrage movement is considered to be the First Wave of feminism, and the 1960s through the early 1980s was the Second Wave, we are currently in the Third. Individual (rather than collective, gendered) identity, personal choice, and sexual freedom are issues pertinent to the Third Wave, which has been particularly willing to address the differences and antagonisms between women as a topic for feminist inquiry. Annabel and Rae were the best of friends, but their shared gender was not enough to unite them in the face of sexual competition and a culturally determined beauty standard. To honestly address this painful dynamic in female relationships is exciting for the audience, especially for young women who recognize and have grappled with it themselves, but may not have seen it dealt with onstage before. By the end of the play, the two friends are able to clear the air and admit they miss each other, but their physical and economic circumstances will continue to determine their female identities.

The issue of sexual choice also relates to the repressive atmosphere of secrecy that prevented their friend Clarky from revealing his homosexuality. Annabel reveals that Clarky came out to her in high school, but that there was no one else he could tell, including his homophobic best friend Josh (40). She claims that Josh's extreme

promiscuity with women was subconsciously an attempt to distance himself from Clarky. Annabel criticizes Josh for downplaying his friendship with Clarky as one of casual drinking buddies. She accuses, "He's the only real relationship you've ever had outside of your family. The most important relationship in your life is with a gay man. He didn't try to kill himself because he was gay. It's because he was alone. With you every day and totally alone" (49).

In retaliation, Josh confronts Annabel with the fact that she too once attempted suicide, the summer after high school, and that it was Clarky who found and saved her. Annabel recalls how she hated her life at that time: "I just had nothing to look forward to. I was always comparing myself to others. What they had, that they were loved, the way they looked and I was never as good" (52). There are fascinating parallels here with the classic post-colonial belief that life is better elsewhere, *somewhere* more glamorous: the same dynamic is echoed in the experience of the young woman who believes that life is better for *someone* else, *someone* more glamorous. Annabel remembers that Clarky drove her home from the hospital "and helped me pack my stuff and got me out of Regina cause he knew it was killing me to stay. And not the city, the place" (53). When Clarky called her unexpectedly she did not return his call because his voice brought it all back to her: "I'm not the same person I was... his voice is this place to me and the way he sounded...is...me. The old me and ...I didn't call him back" (53). Like so many others, Annabel tries to disavow the margins of geography and the experience of where she is from in an attempt to build a new, more cosmopolitan identity for herself at the centre.

One could argue that Annabel and her friends blame Regina for their distress, even though their problems have clearly followed them to their new cities. Frank Davey

has argued that geography seems more important to the concept of regionalism than to the concept of the nation-state as a whole, and because of this, regionalism can seem more concrete and less abstract, more inevitable:

What is often obscured in these various constructions are the politically oppositional aspects of regionalism: that regionalism is cultural rather than geographic, and represents not geography itself but a strategically resistant mapping of geography in which historic and economic factors play large but unacknowledged parts (4).

New suggests that representations of land "illustrate many of the sociocultural and socioeconomic issues raised by post-colonial theory: the issues of colony and empire, wealth and power, centre and margin, the opportunity to speak and the likelihood of being heard" (New 11).

Other theorists have also speculated on the cultural nature of regionalism. According to Marjorie Pryse, "As a preliminary definition, we might agree that regionalism represents the deep structure of local knowledge, where geographical and literary landscape become imbued and interwoven with features of culture" (19). David Martin says that, "A local colour story [...] tries to render the inner logic of these places - what the people are like, how they live, and why" (37).

One of the things that my students found most compelling about the play is the recognizable way the characters talk and how layered the dialogue is in local expressions and references. Geography, in this case particular locations in Regina, is deeply resonant with shared associations. This is also evident in their nicknames for Regina: Red China, Reggie, and Vagina, Saskratchyrbum (31). (My own students could cite "Deathbridge"

as our near equivalent). Another geographically-related topic of humour in the play is the intense cold. The play begins with the song by Foreigner, *Cold as Ice*, and continues with jokes about wind chill, how quickly exposed skin can freeze, and an elaborate classification system for degrees of winter coldness culminating with the very coldest: "Humongatory Frozation" (42). New writes that,

Those whose sense of land (and self, and the language of expressing this connection) reinforces and is reinforced by their dominant position within the culture at large will differ from those whose sense of land, self, and language (however acute and locally fulfilling) still divides them from the dominant forms of social power (117).

There is an irony in the fact that the use of local language binds the characters in a shared sense of belonging, history, nostalgia and comradeship, and yet all of this is predicated on disenfranchisement. As Linda Hutcheon has noted, irony, like other forms of doubleness, paradox, and self-reflexivity, is a technique for "resisting yet acknowledging the power of the dominant" (82).

As one student wrote, " Every word that came out of the characters' mouths made me want to keep reading. I felt as though I knew the characters, and as I read the play I assigned images of people I know to the roles. This play is intensely Canadian in its words, characters, locations, and actions. Shoshana Sperling has done an impeccable job of not creating a world, but recreating a world. A very real world which exists not only in Regina, but in all marginalized Canadian cities struggling to find identity."⁶

Post-colonial plays draw attention to cultural differences and one clear example is the authenticity of language, the celebration of local (not proper) usages. New concludes

that those writers who are "the most forceful challengers of the normative presumptions of anglophone Ontario male history" are writing from regionalism and marginality - whether of geography, ethnicity, or gender (152). Shoshana Sperling, as a Jewish woman growing up in Regina, would certainly qualify. At one point, her character Annabel asks about an old friend and sarcastically identifies him as "Another member of the massive Jewish population in Regina" (30).

The play also touches on racism towards the Aboriginal population. There is reference to police abuses of Natives, stories about violent crime, and the recounting of an urban legend about a gang of Native girls who allegedly disfigured pretty white girls at the mall (34). This was an aspect that resonated with some of my students. One wrote about moving to Portage la Prairie (population 7,000) for high school and the attitude she encountered: "The one thing I noticed when I was in high school was that everyone was extremely racist toward aboriginals in the community. Since I grew up in a northern community with both Caucasian and Aboriginal people who lived happy together, I literally had no clue what racism was. It hurt my heart hearing these two groups of people fist fight and call each other horrible racist names. It was a definite eye-opener for me." ⁷

Another negative aspect of the characters' experience, and of my students', is the abuse of drugs and alcohol and the prevalence of suicide and untimely death. In reference to the widespread use of cocaine in her hometown of Brooks, one student wrote, "This is in part due to the large amount of money generated by the oil industry and partly due to the fact that there is officially nothing to do there. The summer after high school, I worked in a local bar and one of my jobs was to regularly go into the bathrooms and wipe my hand across the top of the toilet tank and do a 'coke check'." ⁸

In *Finding Regina*, Josh recounts the fate of one of their classmates who died in a "Drinking and driving accident near Prince Albert. Froze to death. They found her sitting straight up 100 feet from the car. She mighta lived if anyone had driven by" (36). New says that when writers place their works on the Prairies, "*distance* is one of the chief attributes of description.[...] distance is an image affiliated with time as much as with space, and with pressure as much as with comfort" (126). Most often, my students attributed the death of their peers to drinking and driving: "Probably because there wasn't much to keep us occupied, and we couldn't always go to Calgary, people turned to substance abuse instead [...] The high school isn't known for any significant suicide rate [...] but only because people tended to kill themselves with overdose and reckless driving." ⁹ Yet another student wrote, "Within this past year I have had to unfortunately bury two of my friends from high school. Each of the funerals became largely high school reunions and we would all spend hours catching up and re-connecting with each other. I haven't spoken to any of them since the last funeral, but I know that we all still share a special bond. We survived the most awkward years of our lives together." ¹⁰ And in one further example, "I have been out of high school for three years, and since then, three people I went to school with have committed suicide." ¹¹

Finding Regina is not the official story, not the "Chamber of Commerce" narrative, but is, instead, postmodern: of the margins. Not a metanarrative but a fragmented and subjective piecing together to create a story of a place, according to these characters. The negative interpretation of Josh is that he is still acting like he is in high school and in denial about Clarky's pain (49). But Josh did leave at one point and chose to come back. His biggest fear is that he will be the last one of his generation who does

stay; at the end he recounts a nightmare: "I look around and I'm the only one who's my age. You know? Anywhere. The city is totally cleaned out of people from 19 to I don't know...40. They're all gone" (59). In the dream Josh realizes that everyone from his yearbook is dead and "I know that I'm the only one left to say anything over the coffins" (60). Josh tells the stories, recounts the lives, of everyone they went to school with. His narrative is multiple, spiraling, unraveling, and defies any coherent, centralizing interpretation. Josh claims, "Everyone knows me and I know all of them. Most of them intimately" (31) and urges the two women to test him: any name they call out, Josh knows what happened to that person. He is the keeper of community.

W. H. New believes that, "Canadian writing recurrently takes characters on journeys home; far from the standard American model of eternal progress - 'you can't go home again' - Canadian writing advises that you must return, in order to place the past apart, to read its other-centred rules in a fresh way, and to make the present and future home, whatever its relationship with a distant childhood, your own." New quotes a character from Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* who declares "sardonically and self-deprecatingly" that she is "on home ground, foreign territory" (159-160). Many of my students expressed an ambivalent attitude toward the place they went to high school and, not surprisingly, related most with Annabel, who escaped through education.

One female student wrote: " Like Annabel, I feel like my life is more worthwhile now that I am away getting an education. I hope I never have to go back to where I am from for any extended period of time because it is a draining place to be and one that is very unhealthy to my growth as a person."¹² In a similar vein, one student wrote, "Looking at my graduating class of 2004, it is apparent that the people who left as soon

as humanly possible are the ones that will end up making something of themselves." ¹³

On the other hand, some students became nostalgic for what their hometowns had meant to them: "It really made me miss my back home friends. Reading this play made me remember what a double-edged sword going back home can be. Your friends are the people who know where you've come from, but they are also the ones who have the hardest time accepting who you want to become." ¹⁴ Many expressed gratitude for having grown up in a close-knit community they feel they can always go back to. As one Aboriginal student said, "I always find [...] that when someone dies, like so many people do on the rez [...] that's when your true family and friends come back into your life." ¹⁵

Another student pointed out that the three characters had better stories about their lives in Regina than their new lives in Vancouver or Toronto; she reflects:

Those stories made them who they are and growing up in a small town made me who I am... I still have a little Josh inside me that wants to just stay in Brooks and party with my old friends and know everyone I see in Safeway and raise my kids the way I was raised: catching gophers with my bare hands. There is also a little Annabel in me who wants to be free and live in a place where no one knows me and can appreciate things like art and theatre and music that isn't by Garth Brooks... Also there is some Rae in me who wants a family in a big city where I can put my kids through private school and buy them designer diapers. This play was basically a blueprint of my life and it made me realize a little more that I would not trade growing up in a small town for anything in the world. ¹⁶

As Sperling has commented, "Where we are from is who we are. I'm still friends with so many people from Regina. When I meet people from the prairies, even from Winnipeg, there's a bond. Maybe it's the weather that makes you reach out. If you see a car on the side of the road you pull over, because there's not going to be another for a long time and that person might freeze to death" (quoted in Sumi 58).

Sperling's equation of weather-related peril to a sense of responsibility is an excellent illustration of the link between geography and identity. It is a clear example of how shared hardships help to forge life-long bonds. Annabel (and Shoshana Sperling herself) would not feel the pull to return if they did not take an almost perverse pride in having survived a difficult adolescence in a place they hated, but with people they loved. Annabel owes it to Clarky, and to Regina, to come back and help. It is interesting to note that the Saskatchewan government plays on a similar sense of responsibility in their print advertisement campaign, which runs in Alberta newspapers and invites those who have moved away to come back. The message is that, even for those who have left, Saskatchewan will always remain "home" in a way that no other place can feel. *Finding Regina* captures the contradiction between a lingering post-colonial sense of disenfranchisement, and an experience of regionalism that profoundly shapes one's sense of identity and belonging.

¹ Whitney Exelby. All student quotes are used with permission.

² Nic Barker.

³ Megan Tolsdorf

⁴ All but two of the students I will quote from in this paper are female.

⁵ Other plays by Sperling include the one-person shows *The Rise and Fall of Vella Dean*, *The Golden Mile*, and *Sheboobie*. Most recently, Sperling wrote *The Guilty Play Room* with Teresa Pavlinek, premiered it at the 2004 Hysteria Festival. Since then she has recorded an album of music for children. Most of her theatre work has been done at Fringes or at other festivals. After leaving Regina, she attended university at York and Concordia.

⁶ Michelle Thorne.

⁷ Pattie Dwyer.

⁸ Jenna Erlandson.

⁹ Karin Atkinson.

¹⁰ Jenn Campbell.

¹¹ Amy Davey.

¹² Cathie Brown.

¹³ Jenna Erlandson.

¹⁴ Michelle Thorne.

¹⁵ Murray Pruden.

¹⁶ Jill Oberg.

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