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Resisting a Colonialist Reading: Examining the Strength and Superiority of
Native Women in Joseph Boyden's "Men Don't Ask"

The depiction of Native women in Joseph Boyden's short story "Men Don't Ask" is deceptively complex. Upon first reading it, I concluded that Boyden uses the patriarchal and colonialist oppression of Native women to emphasize the existing abuse of Native peoples. However, after exploring this oppression and conducting a seminar on its presence in the story, I have come to a very different conclusion. Boyden's text does demonstrate the strict and oppressive mindset of Canadian postcolonial society and does represent how Native peoples have been metaphorically and literally penetrated by European colonial forces, but he does not degrade the women in the plot by doing so. Instead, Boyden uses these patriarchal and postcolonial confines as a tool to show the extraordinary resilience and strength of the Native woman in a society that continually tries to erase her existence. By ignoring the strength of the women in the short story, I was myself participating in a colonial reading of the text where I sympathized with and victimized the Native women instead of deciphering Boyden's veiled celebration of their survival. Boyden's "Men Don't Ask" shows that patriarchal and colonial structures oppress the Native woman; however, he uses this oppression not to victimize her, but to instead depict her extraordinary strength in the face of colonial-driven adversity.

Boyden maps the struggles of an Aboriginal woman in a postcolonial world and, in doing so, seeks to criticize colonialist perceptions and treatment of her and ultimately set her voice free

from the oppressive forces that seek to silence her. His work is potentially problematic since it could be argued that he, a male author, is speaking for Aboriginal women and therefore reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes about women; however, Boyden is critiquing patriarchal colonial forces, not reinforcing them. He seeks to give the women in the story a voice and show their resilience and survival in spite of the abuse of colonial forces. Within feminist theory speaking from a woman's perspective may be problematic for men, but ultimately Boyden's short story seeks to liberate the Native voice, whether it is male or female.

In my original reading of the short story *Sylvina* and the other female characters were sad victims of a strict colonial and patriarchal society, but after delving back into Boyden's text I have realized that they are anything but victims. By means of careful inspection, I was able to move past the colonialist reading I originally had, that the story is solely a metaphor for European oppression, and realize that Boyden is actually highlighting the strength and superiority of Native women. In short, the heroine *Sylvina* is not a weak victim of colonization; she is a strengthened survivor of it. Boyden uses colonial constructs to demonstrate the abuse of these women, but, more importantly, to underline their strong presence in spite of colonial attempts to silence them. A deeper reading of his work shows his true message: the Native is not weak and will not go away. They will be strong; they will survive.

My research, heading into my seminar, had thoroughly educated me on the existence of a patriarchal colonialist structure in Canada, and I had concluded that Boyden's work was an echo of these structures. Boyden certainly portrays patriarchal and colonial structures in his short story, but on a deeper level he is challenging readers to see beyond those structures and acknowledge the power of the female in the plot. He manifests this power through his focus on the maternal. In many Aboriginal cultures there is an emphasis on matrilineal authority. In *Laura*

Donaldson's feminist study of Indigenous women she states, "in such a society, mothers – and by extension women – enjoyed a great deal of honour and prestige, and references to motherhood evoked power rather than sentimentality" (52). What Donaldson highlights in her study is the authoritative image that motherhood possesses in most Native communities. Boyden's emphasis on motherhood in "Men Don't Ask" is one of the many ways in which he creates an illustration of a powerful femininity. In my seminar I discussed the cyclical nature of the broken home that Boyden's maternal depictions suggest; however, when looking in the text for an empowered female perspective, I realized that what I perceived to be weakness in the motherly figure is actually extraordinary strength. The story begins with Sylvina's traumatic experience of witnessing her mother and a man having sex. Initially I believed this event to signify the beginning of a scarring home, but it actually suggests much more. Sylvina's courage at the age of four to stand up to a man in protection of her mother is a testament to her strength, not a signifier of her future weakness. A sense of strength and familial protection emerges from this event, not just trauma. Her mother's reaction is another indication of the potent maternal instinct in the family: "Her mother rose up screaming at him, calling him 'bastard' and commanding him to leave" (127). These are not the actions of weak women. Sylvina and her mother have been abused by patriarchy in this instance and surely some trauma is inevitable, but ultimately the event indicates their combined strength in the face of a domineering male figure.

Boyden shows us many ways in which "colonialism eroded many matrilineal or woman-friendly cultures and practices" (Loomba 141), but not to serve a sympathetic purpose. His depiction of the apparent erosion of female power serves only to indicate the strength with which the Native woman rises again and again. For instance, although the plot of "Men Don't Ask" appears to be driven by the men in Sylvina's life, the reality in the narration is that she makes all

of the decisions herself. Though we as readers may not agree with her decision to leave her children, it is ultimately her choice. She exhibits the strength and control to make that choice, which is our first indication that she will be the decisive agent for the majority of the plot. Sylvina also demonstrates power over addiction, while her husband doesn't: "She managed to quit it all by the end of the first trimester. Her man couldn't" (130-131). Her superior ability to control herself signifies her strength over all men, not just non-Native men. This power is established very early on in the story and is reinforced when Sylvina is later challenged sexually.

The overwhelming sexual imagery mirrors colonialist exploits, as Terry Goldie, examining European representations of the indigene, mentions in *Fear and Temptation*: "The image of the female as receiver of the male power provides an explicit opportunity for the white patriarchy to enter the land" (65). Goldie's observation about white texts seems to be reinforced by the white men's treatment of Sylvina in "Men Don't Ask," but she actually refuses to relinquish control. "Her island. Her reserve" (128) she calls it, taking possession of the land, declaring it hers, and defending it from the greedy hands of the patriarchal figures she encounters. She exhibits strength when defending her land, but her sexual exploits can suggest weakness. However, although she seems to sexually submit to the pilot and is completely reliant on him financially, Sylvina maintains a subtle power that is only discernable in the narration. She analyzes and understands every man she encounters, perhaps better than they understand themselves. Sylvina has insight that these men lack: "If she's anything, Sylvina's a seer. A watcher. She's good at reading men" (129). Sylvina exerts a power and superiority over the men who seek to dominate her. She can understand them and, more importantly, she can laugh at them. It is this inability to mentally dominate her that drives the men in the plot to physically

subdue her. Although this sexual abuse is a metaphor for colonial domination, Sylvina maintains her authority through her mental superiority.

Boyden's narrative maps the sexualisation of indigenous women, particularly the stereotypes of the "Indian princess" and the "easy squaw." Analysis of these stereotypes constantly reappears in scholarship and Boyden's use of them is intensely purposeful. Goldie's book highlights the use of these stereotypes to legitimize colonial practices: "Both maiden and squaw are manifestations of the white culture's felt temptation by the indigene and by what the indigene represents in the land" (72). Sylvina's protection of her family and of her land signifies that she is not the Indian princess eager for domination, despite the men's desperation to depict her as such: "'She's beautiful,' Drew says, knowing she's in earshot. 'You got yourself a real little Pocahontas there.'" (132). However, as the men become increasingly desperate to dominate her, Sylvina's status is degraded from princess to squaw, and, as Johnston states, "'squaws are perfect drudges and sexual conveniences'" (54). When Sylvina is flirting with the cowboy in the bar, he refers to her as a "pretty Indian" (137), but when she denies his sexual advances, his tone switches: "take your jeans off, squaw" (140). Goldie highlights the violent sense of entitlement that patriarchal-colonial forces feel towards Natives: "The normative sexual relationship of the white male with the indigene female is rape, violent penetration of the indigenous" (76).

The stereotype of the princess and the squaw in Boyden's narrative suggests the different, convenient sexual images that colonial forces have created for Indigenous women and how "sexual violence is part of the colonial and postcolonial destruction of. . . the integrity of the body as well as the mind, the spirit, and the emotions" (Emberley 220). In the cases of the cowboy's abuse and Drew's rape of Sylvina, they first see her as the princess accepting of their desire and domination, but after her strong resistance, they degrade her status to that of a

dehumanized squaw and seek to conquer her body as their colonialist ancestors conquered the land. Only when Sylvina responds with strength do the men forcefully take what they believe they are entitled to. Sylvina's denial of the entitled colonizer results in her identity's reduction to that of a stereotype and the violent rape of her body, but she rises from this trauma as a symbol that the Native woman cannot be erased, that she refuses submit and die. The sexualisation of her culture and her eventual rape denotes the presence of colonial attitudes, but these attitudes do not destroy her. On the contrary, her traumatic experience eventually strengthens her ties to her land, her culture, and her family. What I was previously missing in my analysis was the positive strength of Sylvina and thus all Native women living in a postcolonial world. As horrific as their trauma is, the colonialist penetration in the short story results in a stronger Native bond, signifying that the Native woman is not something you can degrade or erase. She survives any abuse the colonial powers exert over her.

Sylvina uses sex as a tool when dealing with men in the short story. Although this development of sex as a weapon is a product of colonial stereotypes, Sylvina reclaims her power by using these degrading images to get what she wants. She reclaims the stereotype of the "Indian princess" and uses it to exert power over non-Native men. After some time it seems the stereotypes are swallowing Sylvina and that colonial power is overcoming her, but, in contrast to my seminar's thesis, she counters white oppression with resilience and strength. For example, she is objectified by the pilot's friends at the bar when he is "showing her off," but doesn't speak in her own defence. In a colonialist reading this could be interpreted as her submission to her white company, but a second look reveals the quiet dignity and power of her silence. When Sylvina finds her voice, she makes fun of white views of Natives, creating a biting mockery of the stereotypes the white characters attribute to her people. This can be easily misconstrued as

subordination, as I previously thought, but it actually denotes her strength and power over the entire table of white colonialist attitudes: “The crowd is taken off guard. A few of the men laugh. The women smile with tight lips and look elsewhere. . . She doesn’t know where to take this thing she has created” (134). The table does not know how to respond, indicating Sylvina’s control of the situation. She is unsure of what she is doing, as is the reader, but one thing is made clear in this exchange: she is not weak and she is not submitting to the non-Native’s expectations of her. Her choices are to “use it like a punch in their faces or make it look like she is Queen of the Cree and friend of the white” (134), both of which are powerful choices. She either punches them or is Queen; neither denotes submission or conversion.

Sylvina’s power is often translated into her ability to laugh in the face of the oppressive white man: “She’s not dangerous. She’s a good joker” (134). Her ability to laugh and joke is a sign of her control and defiance, and it is this defiance that results in her rape. The subject of her mockery, white society, cannot process how an indigenous woman has the confidence to challenge their “superior” authority. She is anything but submissive and weak in the bar, where she physically overpowers Drew and humiliates him: “Sylvina laughs especially hard, aiming the force of her breath at Drew. He can’t look at her” (135). She doesn’t hesitate to punch Drew in a delicate spot and then openly mock him at a table of his friends. When the pilot suggests a threesome with Drew, she responds with ridicule: “Sylvina laughed out loud when he said that. . .her laugh hurt the pilot’s feelings more than she could have guessed” (137). This laughter is a recurring theme when Sylvina comes into sexual contact with non-Native men.

Sylvina is in total control of the story up until the violent threat made by the cowboy: “She lets a cowboy buy her drinks and touch her hair” (137). The narration is very specific in its wording and constantly reminds the reader that she is in control. She “lets” the cowboy touch her

and she makes the decisions about her life. Sylvania decides herself to go back home and tells the pilot. She doesn't ask him or let him know: she tells him. She is not under the thumb of any man, despite her financial reliance on them. A colonial reading could suggest that she is being used by the men, but in reality it is she who is manipulating them. She has the gift of understanding and subtly controlling these men, therefore threatening their masculinity and diminishing their power over her: "She can tell from the cocky way he talks, from his eyes, that he fully expects her to come home with him now that he's lavished her with booze. But Sylvania is in control" (138). Sylvania is rather silent in this exchange and she hardly speaks to the cowboy, but when she does she is manipulating him to achieve a result. She gets what she wants out of him and leaves, igniting the cowboy's sense of entitlement; he has bought her drinks and, therefore, he thinks she owes him sex. Sylvania's control halts at this point, but does not disappear. She regains her power later and rises as a stronger woman, but first Boyden strips her of her strength and voice: "Sylvania is frozen. . . Sylvania wants to cry out" (140). It is this helplessness that caters to a victimized reading of Sylvania.

Boyden uses the rape to compare the different ways in which the Native woman and the non-Native man react to threats: "'No!' Sylvania screams, not even aware it's her own voice. Her shout sets the cowboy in motion, like a grouse scared out of the bush by a shotgun blast" (140). When she finds her voice again, her meagre words send the mighty cowboy fleeing like an animal. Her strength and confidence return with her voice, and she resumes her laughter in the face of the white patriarchal male: "Sylvania bursts out laughing. This is all just too much. . . She looks over at Drew and can see he's hurt and she wants to explain to him that her laughter is release, not aimed at him" (141). It is this laughter that in turn inspires Drew's rape of her. Although this is a horrific moment that depicts the colonial attitude of the white male towards the

Native woman, Boyden is again contrasting the reactions of the white man and the Native woman. Sylvina's response to a traumatic situation is to laugh in relief, but Drew misreads this laughter as mockery and uses it as an excuse for rape: "'Don't you go embarrassing me in front of my friends,'" (142) he says as he hits her. The two responses of her male oppressors depict the weakness of white men in relation to Sylvina's bold survival. The cowboy flees in fear and Drew is driven to rape because of his injured pride. These overconfident white men are driven to commit pathetic and cowardly acts by the strength of the Native woman: Sylvina shouts and the cowboy flees; she laughs and Drew begins to rape her. Her reactions are filled with a sense of power and their reactions reek of pride and weakness born of a patriarchal and colonialist sense of entitlement. In his representation of the mistreatment and rape of a Native woman by white men, Boyden constructs a colonial and patriarchal metaphor in which Sylvina is an abused victim, but with the higher purpose of proving that she is stronger than this metaphor would suggest. Although the brute force of colonialism overpowers the mental strength of the Native, their need to rape her is an indication of the powerful threat she poses to them. Sylvina represents strength, power, and superiority over the white man, and these qualities are precisely why they feel the need to possess her. Although her rape places her in the position of the pitiful victim, the image of her survival makes us see the unrelenting strength in the Native woman.

The issues of justice and healing in the short story reveal the biased perspective of colonial forces. The policemen who find Sylvina contribute to her abuse rather than help her. As a white reader, I wish Sylvina would tell the police what has happened to her. Initially I perceived her silence on the matter to be a sign of her victimization and her inability to deal with her trauma; however, given my revelation on the topic, I now perceive her silence as an indication of her strength. Julia Emberley discusses the treatment of Indigenous women in

judicial systems and concludes that “under colonial patriarchy the material realities that emerge in the stories told by women of sexual violence and abuse are not generally recognized as having authorial power and the legitimacy of transacting knowledge. Instead. . . they are rendered invisible” (232). This injustice is infuriating to read, but Boyden has expertly constructed Sylvina’s strength to indicate that she does not need the biased police forces to heal – that she has the power to do so on her own. She does not seek vengeance, as the men who rape her do, but rather embodies personal healing and strength. Sylvina’s silence signifies her refusal to participate in a colonial-minded system. Her reaction to the police speaks to this defiance: she fights back when they touch her and she does not seek their aid when she is in her cell.

Sylvina experiences some of her weakest moments in the cell when she is literally confined by colonialist forces. It is in this weakness that she contemplates suicide and degrading herself, but chooses not to. This choice to live, to survive, shows Sylvina’s refusal to submit to their expectations of her as a drunken squaw. The police treat her with as much animosity as her rapists, assuming the worst of her and reducing her to the stereotypical drunk Indian. When a new officer enters and apologizes, we think that at last there is some sympathy, but he continues, “It seems that the officer doing shift change forgot to mention your presence” (145). We do not hear an apology; instead we witness a re-enforcement of their neglect of Sylvina. This policeman continues to check on her and offers some help, acts which show some potential for justice, but he is ultimately insignificant in her healing process. Her time in prison also robs her of her voice: “She wants to ask him for something for her headache, but in the time she searches for her voice, he leaves” (145). This is a weak moment for Sylvina, for she is suffering from invisibility as well as silence in the hands of postcolonial forces; however, her experiences in prison are what ultimately guide her to an ending that is full of strength, survival, and stability.

The Native woman who finds Sylvina raped in the cold knows her identity by simply looking at her: “Look at you *Anishnabe* woman” (143). With just a glance in the snow this woman knows who Sylvina is and calls her by her respectful and specific Native name. This subtle moment shows the contrasting knowledge of the white men versus that of the Native woman. The men, despite their supposed superior status as colonial patriarchs, are not educated enough to properly identify a Native woman. They only call her princess or squaw. Yet this “crazy squaw” (143) on the street knows more about Sylvina by just looking at her than the white men will ever know. This is not the first example of superior female knowledge exhibited by Sylvina and her Native friends: “She has left friends who can see each other in the dark. Friends who can sniff one another out in a blizzard. They have good ears and noses, her friends” (135). The unspoken connection between Native women is an image that underscores the short story and proves the powerful connection that the non-Native male cannot understand. The value of Native women’s knowledge and power is far superior to that of the white men in Boyden’s short story.

There is an emphasis on dreaming in the narrative and the dreams are initially referred to as “the deep lake in her head” (127). This description depicts Sylvina’s mind as expansive and fluid, relating to the recurring image of the frozen river. The solidity of the river is linked to her relationship to her Native traditions. When the river freezes, she freezes that part of herself and her mind flows South to a non-Native lifestyle. Only when the river cracks does she return home and her healing begins. Throughout the story her dreams serve to bring about a reconciliation with her people, which ultimately thaws the river and leads her back home. Her Grandpa wakes her and saves her from the cold after she has been discarded by Drew. In prison her series of dreams indicate her mental return to the reserve and the rehabilitation of her strength and power.

In these dreams she sees her girls, her culture, her broken husband, and she subconsciously reunites with her home. It is in this stream of her unconscious that the ice begins to thaw and her relation to her Native roots returns: “When she’s awake, she traces her finger along the crack that runs the length of the wall. River ice. Pressure cracks” (147). The image of the icy river cracking, releasing the flow once more, signifies her mental realization that she can return home. These cracks signify the power of her fluid mind, the return of her strength, and the rebirth of her connection to her culture.

Boyden’s tactic of representing the Native female as oppressed to reveal her strength is initially hard to discern, especially considering the ingrained colonial perspective many readers are guilty of. However, in this reading of his text, the empowerment he attributes to the Native female voice is beautiful. The freeing of the Native voice is embodied in Sylvina’s youngest daughter Peneshish. “Her name beckons old spirits who tell her there’s no rush in speaking too soon,” (131) Sylvina says about her daughter, a statement that establishes the spiritual empowerment of the female voice. Each Native woman must emerge strong and vocal in her own time and Peneshish’s liberated words at the end of the short story signify the birth of a new Native female perspective. Peneshish stays silent for most of the story; her voice is frozen, like the river, and cracks free just like her mother’s connection to her Native roots: “In the course of this winter, Peneshish’s throat, her vocal chords, have learned freedom” (147). Kateri Damm explores issues of voice and perspective in Indigenous literature and concludes, “Through our writing we can continue to break the conventions which have strived to render us voiceless and ‘illiterate’” (23). Peneshish’s character is symbolic of Damm’s theory that “we can fight words with words” (24). Peneshish and Sylvina find their voices and thus contribute to a larger female Native vocalization.

Sylvina returns to her culture to heal: “She’s been reteaching herself to bead leather and has pricked her fingers enough times that the tips are becoming callused” (147). This “reteaching” indicates a recovery of strength and culture. As the beading calluses on her hands denote, this process will leave scars, but that does not mean it will not be successful. The strength of Sylvina’s family is emphasized in the final pages of the story as well, indicating the cycle of generational strength in these Native women. Sylvina’s eldest daughter Theresa refuses to speak to her after she returns home, causing Sylvina to reflect on the strength of her daughter: “She can hold a grudge for sure. Theresa stays with Sylvina’s mom, for the most part. Her mother won’t talk to Sylvina either. This stubborn line runs in the family, Sylvina thinks” (148). This hereditary strength shows the enduring power of Aboriginal women, which cannot be erased by oppressive colonial forces. The same strength and hope for the future exists in Peneshish, as is indicated by the final line of the short story: “Sylvina can’t help but smile at her awkwardness, her strong little arm” (149). Boyden’s message is one of strength, hope, resilience and female empowerment, not sympathy and victimization.

The conversation about gender appropriation in Boyden’s writing could certainly yield a lot of debate among Native feminists, but his work has yet to be analyzed from this perspective. Therefore, all I can offer is my personal opinion, though I do not come from a Native perspective. Boyden creates a strong and powerful image of Native women in his story. He constructs them as stronger than the colonial forces that seek to oppress them and therefore advocates for Native female strength and voice. Although his appropriation of the female voice may be problematic from a feminist perspective, Boyden acknowledges that there is a lack of general Native perspective in literature and he says, “I want to try and enter into that dialogue” (McGonegal 1). Therefore, in line with Boyden’s argument on the issue, I believe that no Native

writing should be discouraged. Perhaps it is problematic that he writes about an intimate female experience, but I believe that bringing that experience into a larger conversation is necessary, especially when Boyden's message is positive. I see his short story as a fruitful addition to conversations surrounding a feminine Native perspective.

Boyden's "Men Don't Ask" offers a strong depiction of the Native woman surviving in a postcolonial world. His deceptively complex narrative not only challenges all readers to perceive the strength and truth of Native culture beyond a colonialist veil, but also manages to ignite a new way of thinking about Native women and their experiences in a postcolonial society.

"Contemporary Indigenous writers are writing their cultures back into stability and thereby assuring survival" (39) Janice Acoose says in her analysis of Indigenous writers' self-authorship.

Boyden emphasizes the importance of Native culture and depicts the strength of the Native people through survival. As such, he is accomplishing what Acoose is suggesting; he is ensuring survival by writing about Native culture, but he is also emphasizing the strength and ability of Native women to survive and maintain their superior authority in a postcolonial world that seeks to dominate them.

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