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**The Construction of Maori, Melanesian and  
Aboriginal Peoples in the writings of Jean Devanny**

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

Historical constructions of racial otherness have legacies which endure to the present. The analysis of the discursive practices of the past helps to understand the present tenacious investment in notions of racial difference. This thesis examines the construction of Maori, Melanesian and Aboriginal peoples in the writings of Jean Devanny.

Western texts which are informed by the [impossible] need to become indigenous, attempt to incorporate the indigenous character as an “other-within”. Where no conflict regarding indigenisation exists, such tension is minimised and the indigene remains a more distant other.

In Devanny’s New Zealand novels, the attempt to incorporate Maori as “one of us” is subverted by essentialist constructions which assign to them a fixed, irreducible otherness. In the Australian text, racial difference is acknowledged and deployed to challenge the prejudice which such difference generates. Additionally, this text offers an exploration of the colonial processes which assign a group identity on the basis of racial difference.



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## Introduction

My whole life-work and outlook, my ingrained acceptance  
as a New Zealander of the coloured man as equal with white,  
my studies in anthropology, my cultivation of coloured persons  
as personal friends, my writings – all together, these establish  
that a tolerant attitude towards injustice perpetrated on coloured  
peoples is not to be numbered among my many faults.

Point of Departure, 302.

Jean Devanny's passionate identification with the struggle against oppression of and discrimination against women, indigenous people and migrant workers pervades her autobiography Point of Departure. Fiercely committed to championing the causes of various marginal groups, Devanny herself occupied a number of marginalised positions both within the dominant bourgeois hegemony and as a woman and writer in the Communist Party. However, while a shared experience of oppression offers the occasion for affinity between marginalised groups, theories of oppression which equate the marginalisation of women with that of colonised indigenous people cannot be easily assumed. Various critics have pointed out that while white colonial women occupied a problematic position, placed both inside and outside the dominant hegemony, their collusion with and sometimes active participation in the colonial enterprise cannot be ignored.<sup>1</sup> Colonial ideologies of race and gender continue to inform life in the late twentieth century. As Margaret Jolly points out in her essay "Colonising women: The maternal body and empire": "Colonising women concern me because they are a contemporary presence, not an ancient absence" (104). An analysis of their articulations of and challenges to the dominant ideologies may assist in developing an understanding of the pervasive role they continue to play in sustaining the racial and gender divisions of our contemporary society.

My examination of Devanny's work will trace the development of her construction of the "racial other" from two early New Zealand novels through to a later work written in Australia in an attempt to establish the extent to which her work conforms to the discursive

frameworks of colonialism and identify what counter-hegemonic features inform her writing. The thesis examines the novels The Butcher Shop (1926), and Lenore Divine (1929), and the Australian work Cindie, published twenty years later in 1949. The short story “Maori Love”, from the collection Old Savage and Other Stories 1927, is considered alongside these works. Devanny contributed a number of articles on Aboriginal peoples to various publications and extracts from these and her autobiography Point Of Departure, are referred to where these illuminate the texts examined. Devanny’s unpublished study “The Sex Life of the Maori”, has also provided some valuable insights to her works. While my thesis does not include a detailed analysis of this study, I have included a transcription of the manuscript as an appendix to the thesis since no copy of it is available in New Zealand.

Edward Said’s seminal text Orientalism, has been a principal influence on post-colonial critical theory. His critique of a dominant Western discourse of Orientalism has however, been contested by various critics who argue that a unified theory of the power of an essentially homogeneous male discourse may fail to take into account marginal and counter-hegemonic voices and ignore the gaps and contradictions which these produce. In her analysis of women’s travel writing, Discourses of Difference, Sara Mills comments on Said’s lack of address to gender and identifies his view of Orientalism as a peculiarly male preserve which ignores women’s role as agents in the imperial and colonial enterprise (57-59). Similarly, Reina Lewis argues that while Said’s subsequent works suggest a more complex dialectic, Orientalism pays no attention to the part women played in imperial cultural and textual productions (15-22). Both critics insist that while women must be considered as agents in Orientalism, a theoretical framework which considers the complex and shifting position of women within the dominant hegemony is essential.

The colonial enterprise necessarily produced ideologies of gender, class and race, which were complex and contingent on shifting relational modes of power. How comfortably do women, constructed as the inferior other within patriarchal discourse, occupy the dominant position afforded them by a colonial hierarchy of race? Given their restricted access to colonial power, how do women writers participate in colonialism’s assumed power to translate its colonised others? Do the contradictions inherent in their

positioning result in representations of colonised inhabitants which contest or comply (or both contest *and* comply) with dominant colonial discourse? These are some of the questions I wish to address in my examination of Jean Devanny's writings.

Devanny's texts occupy an interesting cusp between colonial and post-colonial writing. In her book Colonial and Postcolonial Literature, Elleke Boehmer defines post-colonial writing as interrogating colonial discourse and attempting to resist its perspectives (3). To what extent do Devanny's texts participate in the prevailing discursive practices and to what extent are these challenged in her narratives? Does the writing display any sense of self-division which might arise from Devanny's marginalisation as a woman and the textual authority bestowed on her as a white woman within the dominant hegemony? Boehmer also argues for the importance of considering the historical and political context in post-colonial criticism. As I attempt to trace the development of Devanny's construction of indigenous people over a period of some 23 years, the influence of geographical location or place is also relevant. The early novels and short stories were written in New Zealand, the later work Cindie in Australia. As Winston Rhodes observes in his essay "Australian and New Zealand Literature", an awareness of Maori as part of a general New Zealand identity has had a profound impact on New Zealand literature. Australian writers, on the other hand, have shown fewer tendencies to identify Aboriginal culture as contributing to a national Australian character. Devanny's ideological relationship with the countries in which she was writing and the awareness of the audience she was writing for must also be considered as a discursive pressure on her work. Terry Goldie's theory of indigenisation as expounded in his analysis of Australian, Canadian and New Zealand writing, Fear and Temptation, is also relevant when comparing the New Zealand novels and the Australian writing. While a process of indigenisation may be at work in the New Zealand texts I suggest that this tension is minimised in Devanny's writing on Australia.

Devanny's ethnographic study reflects the obsessive interest of the late nineteenth century in the history of family organisations and sexual relations, identified by Rosalind Coward in Patriarchal Precedents (9-10). One of the results of this concern was the investigation of so-called primitive societies in an attempt to make sense of contemporary sexual and familial organisation (9-10). This process demonstrates Terry Goldie's theory

that the indigene is of interest only to the extent that he or she comments on the white Western self, and this “commodification” of indigenous people will be explored during the course of the thesis (11).

However, what is also interesting about this work, obviously intended for publication, is the authoritative tone of the writing. Sara Mills has identified an anxiety experienced by many women as they presumed to enter a realm of public literary expression traditionally dominated by men (40-42). However, in “The Sex Life of the Maoris”, Devanny undertakes to challenge the “leading authorities” on Maori peoples in an effort to “set the record straight”. While her own forthright and combative personality must have been a contributory factor, one can assume that her active engagement in the “public” world of socialist politics provided additional confidence in her own authority to intervene in this traditionally exclusively male province.<sup>ii</sup> Her study also reveals her ready participation in colonialism’s assumed authority to translate its colonised others. However, the ambiguities and contradictions which mark her writings reflect the ambivalent nature of her participation in colonial discourse.

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<sup>i</sup> For a wide range of critical analysis of colonial women’s participation in imperialism and colonialism see Margaret Jolly, “Colonising women: The maternal body and empire”; Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire* and *Western Women and Imperialism*. (eds) N. Chauduri and M. Strobel.

<sup>ii</sup> In *Exiles at Home*, Drusilla Modjeska describes the mixed reactions of Devanny’s literary friends to her at times, combative and confrontational manner. Modjeska quotes a letter from Nettie Palmer who wrote of Devanny:

I respect her courage, admire her generosity and friendliness, but resent her general cocksureness, her way of charging into a thoughtful questioner at a meeting, simply riding him down like a policeman into a harmless, interested crowd (127).