Once upon a time the travel guide was for missionaries, colonial government workers, or the travelling colonial voyeur. Now living happily ever after, it is for those who still seek (and endorse the notion of) the “exotic,” the “intrepid traveller” who desires a bit of safe (sex?) Paradise … whose paradise?

_Cleo_, the popular women’s monthly magazine, regularly features a “Travel Go Guide.” One such guide, “Papua New Guinea: Primitive Paradise,” attempts to entice the would-be tourist to journey into the exotic (August, 1988). For this intrepid traveller, however, the article is an invitation to explore some of the relationships between euro-phallocentric discourses, desire, violence and the sexual subject.

To understand how _Cleo_ constructs the sexual subject it is necessary to look at desire. The images presented in _Cleo_ create desires to be a sexual goddess, chic, thin, beautiful and worldly, by preying on the reader’s desire to be different/exotic. _Cleo_ does this by fashioning symbols of self/reader and other/Cleo woman. This articulates sets of binary oppositions which seek to locate individuals within only one of the subject positions thus created. Yet the positions created are in fact mythical and therefore unattainable. Consequently, it is impossible to firmly base people in an either/or category, where they may assume a “real” or “solid” identity. This establishes a state of flux which creates desire or excess. Thus, _Cleo_ actively promotes the necessity to be what one is not and in so doing ties the reader’s sexual Self to discourses which signify the sexual Other.

Generally, then, _Cleo_ is in the business of creating otherness through its projections of what is fashionable or desirable. And in this issue it is the “primitive” that is both fashionable and fashioned. The magazine is permeated by images of women surrounded by and at one with nature. “Natural” _Cleo_ women wear colours which merge with the landscape or jungle prints, or are pictured naked on some apparently
deserted beach. What all these images have in common is that they signify an otherwise intrinsic biological but lost primeval human nature — a timeless natural sexuality. It is through this nostalgia for the primitive that Cleo constructs a desire to be the sexual Other. Thus, primitivism here becomes linked with those "forms of racism that depend upon the idea of a wild humanity" to articulate "true" sexuality (White, 184). Seen in a present day Cleo kind of way, "primeval women" are desired, desirable sexual images to project or, more insidiously, objects to possess.

Cleo also tells us what it is to be a sexual subject — a "real woman" — through its prescriptive narratives on ways of being which women need to adopt in order to display/have a sexuality. The article on Papua New Guinea does this through dual narratives; one fabricates the sexuality of Papuans while the other constructs the sexuality of western women. These narratives work together to create both what the other is and what the self desires. In Cleo two dominant sexual subject positions are juxtaposed and consummated. The first is the representation of the sexual subject as an object to be seen/admired/observed. The accompanying photographs picture women semi-clothed, either looking away from the camera (the seeing subject) or else, headless. These establish the "innocent" sexual projections to which women must aspire in order to be a Cleo Other. The second is that of the "knowing seductress." In this instance the women are pictured gazing at and flirting with the camera; displaying a "come and have me" image of women, complete with pouting lips and dishevelled hair. These establish the "knowing" sexual projections to which women must aspire in order to become another Cleo Other. Cleo's demand here is complex: the sexual subject must achieve both projections to attain a "real" sexuality. The Cleo reader thus becomes caught in the binary opposition of the Madonna/Magdalene. Having established this duality Cleo reveals through its travel guide(s) the pure sexual subject — the "primitively erotic savage."

In the fallac(ious)/phallic paradise of the travel guide, sexuality is represented as au naturel. Cleo constructs Papuan sexuality as "primitive," or as the "way it was meant to be," again as a timeless given. Here, Trobriand Islanders are depicted as "a delightful people" blessed with "fertile soil" which encourages "carefree, casual ways [which] extend to their sex lives." Cleo authorises this myth of "primitive, unbound sexuality" by referring to anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's 1920's text The Sexual Life of Savages. This is used in the article as a guide to "understanding" Trobriand libido. Claiming that Malinowski is an
"eminent sociologist," Cleo accepts his phallocentric and eurocentric discourses as truth instead of seeing them as perhaps a manifestation of his own libidinal gratification. Cleo uses his subject matter to journey into the different/exotic where images of the primitive become synonymous with sexual, sensual, uninhibited and erotic. Cleo's writer, Michael Gebicki, is in complicity with such fantasies when he states that "from an early age, the islanders are taught that sexual activity is as natural as the papayas that grow so well in their gardens." Such is Gebicki's excitement over this natural ungoverned sexuality that he is unable to imagine that in fact there were/are rules governing Trobriand sexualities. These notions of the "primitive," where nudity, unhidden sex and so on depict true sexuality, should be seen as violations of western rules, taboos and hang ups rather than as accurate reflections of Trobriand life.

These constructions impose ways of being and endorse ways of acting on both Papua New Guineans and the readers of Cleo. The reader must adopt this "natural" sexuality and these "casual ways" in order to satisfy/appeal to men and themselves. And Papuan women are presented to western readers as always willing sexual objects. Thus Cleo constructs a "universal" sexuality which is imposed upon both Papuans and western women and insinuates that all women must become willing sexual objects. This universal is inescapably linked with the famous pathological male fallacy that rape does not exist. After all, there was/is no rape in paradise, only willing subjects/objects — the "growing papayas." In this sense, the paradise constructed in the Papua New Guinean travel-guide (and Cleo generally) is a sexual paradise — but it is an old paradise where Cleo takes us, and the tickets seem too expensive. Cleo, then, is not merely a coffee table glossy but a technology of power. At the same time, however, it must not be forgotten that Cleo also provides an escape from the bipolar Victorian construction of sexuality (or lack of) and therefore promotes an alternative of sexual freedom which endorses new ways of acting and being for women, which is also an act of power.

The relationships between the "primitive" and "sexuality" have been established in Cleo as interchangeable referents signifying the "desires" its readers should have. These in turn easily become referents for discourses signifying and legitimising "male" desires of domination and forced (which becomes viewed as wanted) submission. However, if one projects or is impositioned with "otherness" s/he does not necessarily desire to be dominated. It is necessary then to rearticulate these constructs and divorce them from their phallos-eurocentric chains of violence, rape and
domination. The signs of the “primitive” and “sexuality” in Cleo can also be drawn on to articulate desires to be the “other,” where questions of domination and submission are absent unthinkable concepts, and to construct alternative sexualities in which the subject is not confined to either the Madonna/Magdalene or the primitive “always willing” sexual object. For those readers who simultaneously desire alterity and reject the Malinowskis of the world it can articulate self-determining sexual freedoms. But while these representations are offered to the readers of Cleo, they have quite different implications for any Papuan woman. The construction of the Trobriands is inescapably captured in colonial discourse and thus Cleo effectively (re)enslaves Papuan women. Although Cleo writers would presumably never condone rape and other violence, it remains a problem that both reader and writer are trapped in, and perpetuate, colonising languages.

If you step outside and take a brief look at any current news stand you will see that Cleo is not alone in perpetuating such racist and sexist representations of otherness: recent examples include Woman’s Day’s “Hula in Honolulu” (June 1992) and The Weekend Australian’s “Fiji Shuffle” (June 20-21, 1992). It seems high time we recognised that exoticism, the cultural encoding of others and violence-endorsed sexual practices in our mass media and culture constantly need to be questioned.

WORKS CITED