

## Blood is Thicker than Water: Stains on the Land in *Bra Boys*

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We would like to begin this paper by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we work and write: the Pambalong Clan of the Awabakal people and Giabal and Jarowair people of Toowoomba.

This chapter is a critique of the way in which the documentary *Bra Boys* constructs history, memory and identity. The Bra in *Bra Boys* is short for Marou BRA beach in Sydney. *Bra Boys* was released in 2007, and is the most commercially successful Australian documentary ever released. It tells the story of the Abberton brothers (Sunny, Koby and Jay) and their extended Bra Boys surfer gang, or 'tribe': a band of multi-ethnic males from the suburb of Maroubra. The film's director, Sunny Abberton, is a Bra Boy himself, and, along with his brothers, offers an overview of Maroubra's surfing history and culture – which includes claims to place, issues of class and race and violent interactions with authority. The localism of the film is well-defined and constructed by boundaries of colonialism, racism and the physical landscape (the differentiated beaches). The signification of 'Boy' in the title immediately establishes the film's hyper-masculine purpose and approach. In this chapter, we consider how the film attempts to re-narrativise colonialism using an ethnocentrically specified perspective and location.

The documentary begins with a very short history of white Australia in broad strokes: in 1770 Captain Cook landed and encountered the Eora people of what was later named Botany Bay. Russell Crowe's narrative voice-over attempts, from the beginning, to position the protagonists of this story alongside the assailed Indigenous Australians. Initially adhering to the notion of 'discovery', the narrative describes the 'vast and unexplored continent' and the 'unexplored land', ignoring the Indigenous cultures already inhabiting the land for centuries though it subsequently provides a reconsideration of Eurocentric perspectives and acknowledges the local Eora people who named the beach 'Maroubra', meaning 'place of thunder'. From here, the documentary aligns the attacks made on the Eora people with later attacks – physical, cultural and social – made on the Maroubra 'locals'; that is, the Bra

Boys. The narrative positions the surfers of Maroubra as almost the inheritors of the racism and injustices experienced by early-contact Eora people. The film constructs a post-colonialist narrative of Maroubra surfing history and culture, displacing peaceful beachside identity with imposed violence on Maroubra male surfers. It positions Bra Boys as having to constantly defend themselves and their beach from attacks by law enforcers and outsiders (those who are not from Maroubra). Surfers are represented as discriminated against and the victims of social injustice within *Bra Boys* since they were considered to be 'the scum of the earth, vermin, respected outside of Australia but not within their own country'. The discrimination suffered by the early-contact Indigenous community is seamlessly equated with the discrimination felt by the boys from Maroubra. Thus, the documentary positions Bra Boys as 'natives' of the local landscape, in particular the beach. And it is this nativism that they are continually forced to defend from the attacks of invaders – whether these be the local authorities or other outsiders.

The documentary provides another perspective on Australia's construction of history and national identity that has been developed on notions of peaceful settlement and egalitarianism. It relies on the topography of the local landscape and beaches (each beach is isolated from the next by cliffs and rock faces) to represent the sense of isolation the Bra Boys feel from society. In describing the coastline, the 'Beach tribes' and their relationship with their local area becomes a part of their 'native' myth; that is, the beach they 'belong' to is seen as their mother and father – their family – and when someone attacks the beach, they are attacking the tribe it nurtures and shelters. Those who belong to the Maroubra 'tribe' are bordered on one side with a rifle range and on the other side by one of Australia's largest prisons. The male youth of Maroubra live amongst violence and attacks – stab wounds, being shot at and street fights – as well as the persecution from those in authority that is inherent in being a Bra Boy. 'The beach, the surf, have been their saviours' and therefore the Bra Boys protect 'their' beach, their surf, in return. Moreover, they have a reputation for doing so, indeed they claim to be 'infamous and recognised worldwide' for it. Such notoriety appears to be as much about their surfing achievements as it is about their hell-raising exploits and Kelly Jean Butler has observed that before the documentary was released, the Bra Boys mostly attracted negative media attention.<sup>1</sup> This defence of the beach, defence against authority, defence of the brotherhood, is referred to in the film as 'tribal warfare' and 'localism'.

The term 'localism' derives from territorialisation processes in the surfing community, explaining the way participants from one beach 'defend their patch', excluding and competing with surfers from other locales (beaches, geographical areas or even nationalities and cultures).<sup>2</sup>

Abberton states in the film that if you take localism away, the whole thing disintegrates. You're taking away that people are actually proud of where they come from. You just can't do that.... Surely the local Eora people would agree. Following this quote in the documentary is footage of a beach brawl: two males involved in a fist fight. Is the implication that one of them is protecting their place? Protecting their brotherhood? That violence is the only option for those persecuted and 'targeted' by the police, like the Bra Boys?

The film attempts to follow a cyclical, as opposed to linear, version of history and memory. From the beginning to the end of the narrative, the stability and security of 'tribal culture' is constant, while ludicrous laws, unjust authorities and even tribe names come and go. The idea that 'tribe names change but their culture survive[s]' is again reinforced by Crowe's narration at the end: 'As time goes on and the tribal names change, the ocean will continue to give solace to the youth of "the place of thunder" and the next generations will fight to keep its culture alive.' What exactly is this 'culture' that the film continuously refers to? It is never made clear whether this reference is to tribal culture, male culture, surfing culture or youth culture. Throughout the documentary the use of the word 'tribe' and the easy manner in which the narrative ascribes 'tribalness' to groups (mostly groups of men) and their connection to an area of land seeks to establish a sense of belonging – rightful belonging. The Eora people are the traditional custodians of that country and never voluntarily gave up their traditions and links to their land. To attempt to ascribe similar qualities to post-invasion groups in colonised Australia is problematic and borderline misappropriation. Maroubra beach is Eora land and always will be. The changing tribe names, which the narrative speaks of, are part of a construction of history and memory that the film uses to support the attitudes, actions and beliefs of the Bra Boys. To justify their claim to place (Maroubra and the beach), the film both supplements and displaces the history of the traditional custodians of the land: it is no longer Eora people fighting for recognition and survival, but Bra Boys.

Throughout the film, the interviewed men use language that excludes women, links landscape to masculinity and purports a defence of multiculturalism. At the very end of the film, each male (no female subjects are interviewed) identifies who they are, whether they are 'Australian', 'part-Aboriginal', 'Lebanese Australian', 'Australian Italian' and so on until the very last person to speak – Koby Abberton – simply identifies himself as 'Maroubra', thus implying that the local 'tribal' identity subsumes all others and the physical landscape is now embodied by a Bra Boy. The film's storyline of history and memory is built on insider/outsider, defend or be attacked, egalitarian/authoritarian dichotomies. Violence is depicted not only as a test of masculinity, but as the connection to landscape and the experience of localism. It is both the beach and those who belong to the beach that

experience adversity, and this experience contributes to the sense of belonging. To be a Bra Boy, certain male characteristics need to be proven and maintained. The physical manifestations of Bra Boy masculinity (shirtless, tattooed, scarred) are linked to the ideology of the 'tribe'. The scars and tattoos are viewed as badges of honour, the boys are seen as surf warriors, and the riots are classified as tribal warfare. This in turn creates a sense of belonging to, and ownership of, the landscape/beach. In both the film and in interviews, Sunny Abberton links societal and familial struggle to landscape and localism. He believes that growing up in a large housing commission area near a consistent surf beach contributed to the community's attitude to both the surf movement and authorities, that is, that the beach offered protection and shelter from the hardships the housing community faced:

But I saw that this really strong tribal culture right on the beach in one of these poorer areas – Maroubra – was unique. So I knew there was a special story about that, and when I researched all the history and social content that dates right back to the late eighteenth century; then I realised how it was even more connected and that story had to be told.<sup>3</sup>

He also states that 'We think the beach should belong to everyone but when people go to a beach, any beach around the world, they need to realise that there might be a whole history and a culture there spanning for generations and that should be respected.' In his defence of specific and localised culture, Abberton's comment depends on the deliberate absence of acknowledging traditional Aboriginal custodianship. At the same time, this avoidance has been constructed by the film's post-colonial attempt to reveal a shared and conflicting history of colonisation and attacks by outsiders.

While *Bra Boys* may centre upon hyper-masculinity, it is a masculinity that celebrates polycentric multiculturalism under the overarching signifier of being a 'Bra Boy'.<sup>4</sup> Hyper-masculinity is embedded in the documentary by Russell Crowe's narration which represents the Bra Boys as embodying the marginalised, hard-done-by Australian battler icon. Hyper-masculinity is a key element of many representations of iconic Australian identity and the film utilises this imagery and associated sense of national belonging.

The hyper-masculinity that characterises the film is supported by the accompanying music CD (simply called *Bra Boys: Music from the Film*). The CD is a collection of highly-localised rap, punk, metal and electronica. The images in the CD booklet further reinforce the localism and tribalism outlined above. An aerial shot of Maroubra Beach is accompanied by a group photo of MarouBRA Boys; there are black and white 'nostalgia' photos of the boys practising boxing, followed by party photos of tattoo-clad and VB swigging Bra Boys 'on da beach', finally topped off with the Abberton brothers

themselves in the surf. These photos are interspersed with the most 'meaningful' lyrics lifted from selected songs on the CD, such as: 'we don't want drama, we keep to our own, but when you push a man out of his comfort zone' (from *Ready to Brawl*), or 'now hands up in the air if you down with us, if you ain't it's ride and collide with us' (from *Bra Boy Warriors*). Music works on an emotional level, and is thus a very powerful, and often underestimated, device to reinforce the imagery, themes and narrative structure set-up in films, as the *Bra Boys* example shows.

### Further Reading

- Andrews, Bruce, 'Their brothers' keepers: Bra boys', *Metro Magazine* 153, 2007, pp.48–49.
- Huntsman, Leone, *Sand in Our Souls: The Beach in Australian History*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2004.
- Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge, London, 1994.

### Notes

- 1 Kelly Jean Butler, 'Their Culture has survived: Witnessing to (dis)possession in *Bra Boys* (2007)', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 33:4, 2009, pp.391–404.
- 2 Belinda Wheaton, 'Identity, Politics, and the Beach: Environmental Activism in Surfers against Sewage', *Leisure Studies* 26:3, 2007, pp.279–302.
- 3 Sonny Abberton in Bruce Andrews, 'Their Brothers' Keepers: Bra Boys', *Metro Magazine* 153, 2007, pp.48–9
- 4 Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge, London, 1994