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‘Their culture has survived’: witnessing to (dis)possession
in *Bra Boys* (2007)

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This article reads the recent surf documentary *Bra Boys* as a challenge to contemporary discourses on belonging and citizenship that have called upon settler Australians to witness to the testimony of the socially and politically marginalised. Over the past two decades settler Australians have been repeatedly ‘unsettled’ by testimony. The voices of Australian Indigenous peoples, struggling migrants, and more recently, disenfranchised asylum seekers, have received unprecedented attention in the public sphere, disrupting comfortable stories of white belonging. Within this sea of ‘new voices’, *Bra Boys* draws upon the seductive power of the iconic battler trope to advance a testimonial narrative of triumph over adversity. The film invites the viewer to take pleasure in the reproduction of white victimhood and re-position the white, socially-disadvantaged male at the centre of national narratives of belonging. In doing so, *Bra Boys* demonstrates the extent to which the testimonial voice, the voice that stakes a claim for truth and authenticity, can continue to be used to reinforce existing relations of power.

**Keywords:** witnessing; testimony; belonging; victimhood; the battler; whiteness

**Introduction**

Released in 2007, *Bra Boys* chronicles the struggles of the Abberton brothers – Sunny, Jai, Koby and Dakota – core members of the eponymous surf gang. Based at Maroubra beach in Sydney’s south-eastern suburbs, the Bra Boys are Australia’s most infamous and internationally recognised surf gang, an amorphous ‘tribe’ including hundreds of ‘members’. Directed and co-written by Sunny Abberton, the documentary focuses on his siblings as the nucleus of the group. The film describes the Abbertons’ impoverished, violent childhoods, and offers a redemptive battler narrative in which the brothers find salvation through surfing. The Boys have attracted negative media attention due to their frequent involvement in conflicts with rival surfers and the law. As a documentary produced by its own subject, *Bra Boys* is a performance of defiance, an attempt to proudly tell ‘their story’ in the face of ongoing scrutiny. In this way, *Bra Boys* functions as a form of testimony, drawing upon the iconic battler trope to express ‘the truth’ of the Boys’ experience.

Generically, *Bra Boys* is a surf movie. Through its portrayal of the exhilaration of surfing, the film participates in a long-standing international tradition of films produced by and for surfers. While the surf has been a subject for film-makers since the earliest days of cinema, surf movies emerged during the early twentieth century as a distinct genre and, despite a spike in popularity during the 1960s, have always maintained a niche audience. Yet, within Australia, *Bra Boys* has attracted an outstandingly large general audience. In fact, *Bra Boys* has become something of a
phenomenon, breaking all existing box office records – and surpassing previous record-holder *Cane Toads* (1988) – to become the country’s highest grossing documentary. It is my contention that the wide appeal of *Bra Boys* demonstrates the way it engages with a broader discourse of national storytelling. *Bra Boys* is not simply a surf movie; it actively participates in struggles over history, identity and belonging within the public sphere.

Central to *Bra Boys*’ success is its use of the iconic battler narrative as a mode of testimony. The ‘battler’ figures within Australian cultural history as the embodiment of the national values of hard-work, egalitarianism and perseverance. While the battler is closely related to the pioneer myth, it was consolidated during the labour struggles of the nineteenth century to become a celebrated radical-nationalistic archetype. In essence, the battler is an underdog figure, someone who struggles to succeed against-the-odds. The battler reappears frequently in public culture, most recently as the key theme of the film *The Castle* (1997), the focus of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party during the 1990s and as former Prime Minister John Howard’s target constituency. *Bra Boys* employs the battler narrative as a way of authenticating the film as a type of victim testimony. In drawing upon such a powerful cultural myth, *Bra Boys* places the Abberton brothers within a familiar history of white struggle, inviting the audience to identify with the Boys and to understand their story as the ‘truth’. As such, *Bra Boys* serves as an intervention into contemporary testimonial culture.

Over the past two decades settler Australians have been repeatedly ‘unsettled’ by testimony. The voices of Australian Indigenous peoples, struggling migrants, and more recently, disenfranchised asylum seekers, have received unprecedented attention in the public sphere, disrupting comfortable stories of belonging and national identity. In particular, the testimony of Indigenous people complicated Australia’s self-image as the egalitarian land of the ‘fair go’. The challenge of testimony has been to re-imagine a vision of good citizenship against the revelation that Australia is not only a nation founded on the colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples, but is a nation that perpetuates the disadvantage of a range of social and cultural groups. Testimony has emphasised the ongoing struggles of many Indigenous peoples, recent migrants and asylum seekers, while highlighting the privilege of ‘ordinary’ settler Australians. In contrast, *Bra Boys* demands that we listen, once again, to the voice of the ‘struggling’, white battler.

In this article, I read *Bra Boys* as a resonant text within contemporary Australian discourse on testimony and belonging. Produced in the wake of the 2005 Cronulla riots, *Bra Boys* complicates ideas about the ways testimonial expression circulates in the public sphere. Both *Bra Boys* and the riots – a series of violent clashes between Anglo and Lebanese Australians at south Sydney’s Cronulla beach – hinged upon a resurgent identity politics that emphasised the proprietary rights of white, masculine and ‘mainstream’ subjects. If the voices of marginalised Australians have received focused attention over the past decade, *Bra Boys* works within an older, foundational discourse that asserts the primacy of narratives of white, male struggle. As a form of testimony, I argue that *Bra Boys* interpellates the audience as active participants in storytelling, calling upon them to witness to the truth of the Boys’ experiences. In doing so, *Bra Boys* employs the iconic battler trope to re-tell an old story about settler belonging in Australian spaces.
Here, I consider *Bra Boys* as demonstrative of the proliferation of contemporary testimonial forms. I also read *Bra Boys* as a reminder of the ambivalence of witnessing as a liberal cultural politics oriented towards the struggles of ‘minority’ subjects. If the fin-de-siècle explosion in testimony has been crucial in the development of a national politics of recognition and reconciliation for the subaltern, *Bra Boys* reanimates an older discourse in which the white, male citizen figures as the only ‘authentic’ subject of victimhood. *Bra Boys* is proof, in the words of the film’s narrator, Russell Crowe, that ‘their culture has survived’, but it is also a reminder of the shifting ways we hear the voices of the ‘dispossessed’. In using the battler narrative as a form of testimony, *Bra Boys* participates in an enduring discourse of white belonging that legitimates settler possession as the ‘reward’ for historic suffering. It is a powerful cultural narrative fuelled by a blithe amnesia that claims moral virtue as it elides the sovereign claims of Indigenous Australians. As Clifton Evers, cultural critic and surfer, was once warned by ‘Max’, the Indigenous custodian of his local surf spot, settler Australians ‘forget the power [they] have to ignore our stories while furthering [their] own’.6

**The Age of testimony**

Since the late twentieth century, testimony has come to play a central role in public life as the pre-eminent mode of self-representation. Yet historically, testimony has been closely associated with the struggles of marginalised or traumatised groups to secure recognition. Testimony is, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other’.7 Hence, testimony has been employed most notably by victims of the Holocaust and other events of historic injustice, such as those who testified at South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But if testimony has proven to be a crucial tool of self-assertion for the marginalised, it has also been taken up by a numerous and diverse range of groups and individuals as a powerful form of self-representation. As Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey have argued, ‘the desire to testify now pervades contemporary culture. The imperative to speak out and to tell one’s story operates across the traditional boundaries of public and private spaces, and is mobilised by disenfranchised subjects and celebrities alike’.8 Testimony has become so compelling as a mode of authentic self-expression that Australian historian Bain Attwood has described the present as ‘the age of testimony’.9 This ‘age’ signals the emergence of ‘a new kind of cultural politics’ centred upon the ‘truth’ of individual stories.10

Yet, within an Australian context, testimony has been most evident as a subaltern mode of engagement, particularly in the decades-long accrual of Indigenous peoples’ testimony. Indigenous testimony has been most audible since the release of the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, *Bringing Them Home*.11 While the outpouring of public emotion that accompanied the report was extraordinary, it was, in fact, the result of decades of protest and testimonial work on the part of Australian Indigenous peoples. Throughout the twentieth century, and intensively from the mid-1980s, Australian Indigenous people have given testimony in a variety of forms and contexts: from poetry and life writing to legal evidence for land rights cases.12 Subsequently, a vast body of critical work has emerged to trace the diversity of settler Australians’ responses to Aboriginal testimony.13 During this
same period settler Australians were called upon to listen to the testimony of migrants and asylum seekers. While these groups occupy different structural relationships to the nation, the common use of testimony as a medium to achieve social and political recognition has been crucial in the emergence of a public culture of testimony.

It is within this wider context that I read Bra Boys as a form of testimony. To do so is not to ignore the importance of testimony as a powerful medium for Indigenous peoples and other liminal groups. Nor is it to argue that Bra Boys constitutes a form of appropriation. If the most obvious use of testimony within Australia has been by Indigenous peoples and, to a lesser extent other disenfranchised groups, Bra Boys demonstrates the contemporary shift from testimony as a subaltern genre to a pervasive mode of self-expression. To be sure, the rise of testimony and the formation of a cultural politics of ‘intimacy’ are global phenomena; and Bra Boys circulates within worldwide commercial surfing networks. Yet Bra Boys remains concerned with expressing a narrative of identity connected to specifically Australian places. In particular, Bra Boys engages with a network of national storytelling in which Indigenous testimony, and its implications for settler belonging, has been prominent. Bra Boys, with its unambiguous assertion of ownership over Maroubra beach, implicitly challenges Indigenous testimony as a reassertion of sovereignty.

**Testimony and first-person documentary**

To consider Bra Boys as a form of testimony is to recognise that the rise of first-person speech as a mode of authenticity has fuelled the proliferation of new testimonial forms. Directed and co-written by Sunny Abberton, the film departs from a conventional documentary framework in being produced by its own subject. This ‘lack’ of objectivity has troubled some reviewers, in particular ABC TV’s At the Movies’ David Stratton who bemoaned the film’s lack of ‘balance’, as ‘all a bit self-serving’. Here, film theorist Michael Renov’s consideration of ‘first-person’ or autobiographical documentary is instructive. First-person documentaries function as acts of self-definition, the means by which individuals and groups can harness the medium of visual self-inscription to intervene in public discourses about themselves. First-person documentaries constitute a departure from so-called ‘objective’ or ‘distant’ schools of documentary film-making to participate in the ‘diversity of autobiographical practices that engage with and perform subjectivity’. In doing so, first-person documentaries register the ‘collision’ of autobiographical and documentary forms and test the perimeters of foundational concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘self’.

In what follows I consider Bra Boys as a controlled exercise in self-fashioning, an attempt to testify to the truth of a collective experience.

**Setting the scene**

Bra Boys opens with a frenetic five-minute montage that works to establish the Boys as ‘survivors’ within the harsh suburban landscape of Maroubra. Amateur film clips of the Boys surfing and hanging out is spliced with police footage of altercations between the Boys and the local establishment. Here, Bra Boys uses the trope of suburbia as a wasteland to set up what Evers aptly describes as ‘a ghetto imaginary of Maroubra’. This is sustained throughout the film via shots of Long Bay Gaol,
dilapidated Housing Commission flats and graffitied streetscapes. The sense that Maroubra is a suburb ‘under siege’ is further emphasised through the use of footage of hovering police helicopters, and the piercing sound of sirens. Scored by Bra Boy Jamie Holt with a mixture of acoustic guitar and faux ‘gangsta’ rap, Maroubra emerges unequivocally as a place where, in the words of one the film’s interviewees, ‘heavy shit’ happens.

Against this backdrop of suburban disintegration, Bra Boys advances its core narrative of struggle and triumph. In essence, the film tells the story of how the Abberton brothers rose to surfing stardom from a childhood of poverty and neglect. With their fathers absent and their mother addicted to heroin, the brothers seek the company of older boys and friends in the surf. There, they form the ‘Bra Boys’, a surfing ‘brotherhood’ and second-family. But surfing not only provides a way to escape domestic troubles, it ultimately becomes the brothers’ main focus in life and eventually, a way to secure their financial futures. This overarching narrative of triumph pivots around three main episodes in the development of the gang. Firstly, the events surrounding the Boys’ violent clash with off-duty police at the Coogee-Randwick RSL Club on 22 December 2002; secondly, the death of local ‘standover man’ Anthony Hines in August 2003 and the subsequent arrest and murder trial of Jai Abberton; and lastly, the Boys’ role as community mediators in the aftermath of the 2005 Cronulla riots.

The core episode is the ‘death’ of Anthony Hines, for which Jai was charged with murder, and Koby attempting to pervert the course of justice. While the Boys are presented as essentially good-natured the film is not shy in depicting their aggression. In this sense, the film acts as an attempt to ‘clear’ the Boys’ name and make the violent aspects of their life understandable. While the film doesn’t attempt to deny Jai’s actions and confirms that he did indeed shoot Hines and dump his naked body over a cliff, Hines is portrayed as a vicious stand-over man who terrorised the community and attempted to rape Jai’s girlfriend. Here, Jai is exonerated as masculine protector. More broadly, the film attempts to provide a context and a host of mitigating circumstances to account for the propensity of the Boys to engage in acts of violence and intimidation.

Expressing the ‘truth’

Crucial to the testimonial status of Bra Boys is its focus on the individual Abberton brothers and their struggle to succeed. The movie adopts this classical survival narrative – a key testimonial trope – and anchors it through footage in which the Boys speak directly to the camera about the difficulties they have faced. The bulk of the film is comprised of ‘talking heads’-style interviews in which the audience sees the Abberton brothers and other members of the gang talking about their experiences. Further, the film works to sustain a direct relationship between the Boys and the audience through an emphasis on the physicality of the Abbertons, particularly Koby, the most talented surfer and ‘star’ of the film. The camera lingers on the Boys’ bare, tattooed torsos; a nakedness that signals their intimidating physical strength at the same time as it figures an embodied vulnerability. Koby is most often shot, naked from the waist up, against a darkened studio background: the spareness of these images serving not only to reinforce a sense of immediacy in his connection to the viewer, but to present Koby’s words as the unvarnished ‘truth’. In
other instances, the Abberton brothers are shot against the beach, or most notably, inside a burnt-out, vandalised building. The contrast between the urban decay of Maroubra and the vivid surf is stark: the beach emerges as the Boys’ only escape.

**Audience as witness**

*Bra Boys* is an extremely slick production. It is fast-paced, melodramatic and peppered with stunning footage of the Boys surfing. Accordingly, Evers has described it as a ‘film [that] sucks you in’. For Evers, the audience is drawn into ‘quite an ugly world of surfing, localism, violence, mateship and masculinity’. The film is certainly appealing, though it is not simply that surfing and violence are inherently exciting. The ‘success’ of *Bra Boys* as a form of testimony lies in the way it consciously works to ‘suck’ you in, to establish an emotional connection and to interpellate audience members as sympathetic witnesses. When Crowe, in his opening narration, utters the words ‘this is their story’, he invites the audience to witness to the truth of *Bra Boys*. In this way, the audience is drawn to actively participate as witnesses to the Boys’ story.

Theorists of testimony have described this method of storytelling as a process that actually involves two witnesses: the primary witness who provides the testimony and the figure that Gillian Whitlock has named the ‘second person’, a listener who is called upon to complete the testimonial exchange. The concepts of ‘testimony’ and ‘witnessing’, then, are inextricably linked. More specifically, the presence of a witness is a necessary condition of testimony. As Dori Laub contends, ‘the absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story.’ Thus, to function as testimony, *Bra Boys* needs to elicit the affective response of the audience. Its primary mode of achieving this is through the reproduction of the iconic Australian battler narrative.

**The surfer as battler**

Drawing upon the nationalist iconography of the surfer, the film places the Boys firmly within an Australian history of anti-authoritarianism. This narrative is crucially foregrounded by the deployment of larrikin icon and Academy Award winning actor Russell Crowe as narrator. Best noted for his hyper-masculine performances, Crowe has also played a role in a real life battler struggle: that of the working-class South Sydney Rabbitohs Rugby League Club. Central to the film’s appeal is the way the Boys are established as marginalised ‘outsider’ figures who have struggled to succeed. Crowe positions the Boys as having overcome the establishment’s historic antagonism towards surfers: ‘over the years,’ he intones, ‘authorities have battled to disperse the surf tribes’. In this way, *Bra Boys* merges the ‘surfer’, a marginal, subcultural figure, with the image of the hard-working, struggling, ‘battler’.

During the twentieth century, the surfer emerged alongside the lifesaver as a key figure in Australia’s national imaginary, as heir apparent in a lineage of ‘battler’ icons including the bushman and the digger — the ‘continuing image of Australian masculinity — able-bodiedness, heroic sacrifice and racial purity’. The figure of the battler has endured as the embodiment of the so-called ‘Australian values’ of
hard-work and persistence. The battler is, according to Sean Scalmer, ‘the protagonist of the Australian legend.’

The surfer is, however, an ambivalent figure, often coded as the hedonistic other to the lifesaver, a disciplined figure devoted to hard-work and public service. In *Bra Boys*, the surfer is transformed into the noble battler through an emphasis on hard-work and mateship. While surfing is indeed a leisure activity, the pastime of choice for ‘bludgers’, *professional* surfing has been the means by which the Boys have escaped the poverty and neglect of their childhoods.

*Bra Boys* explicitly draws upon the notion of the battler though its emphasis on the efforts of the Boys to work hard to escape poverty. Theirs is a brotherhood forged through the experience of violent neglect. Life could be hard, but as Koby argues: ‘it was good, it turned us into what we are’. This experience of disadvantage not only cements the strength of fraternal bonds, but solidifies familial connections. This is illustrated in the film’s focus on the close relationship between the Boys and their grandmother, Mavis Abberton, the family matriarch who raised the brothers in the absence of their parents. The film’s depiction of this filial connection is crucial not only to its attempt to soften the more violent elements of the Boys’ personae, but to the film’s emotional appeal to the audience. The relationship between the Boys’ and their grandmother is anchored through a montage of family ‘happy snaps’ that show the Boys playing at creating surf gangs named in her honour. It is the now-adult members of one of these infant gangs – Ma’s Hell Team – that serve as her disconsolate pallbearers in a funeral scene that provides this otherwise tightly-controlled film with a core of unvarnished emotion.

**Howard’s battlers**

While the battler is related to the long-standing nationalist archetypes of the digger and bushman, the battler has figured in recent cultural memory as a key trope within former Prime Minister John Howard’s neo-liberal ideology. In 2004, Howard indicated the diffuse nature of the battler label:

> It’s not an exclusive definition, the battler is somebody who finds in life that they have to work hard for everything they get . . . normally you then look at it in terms of somebody who’s not earning a huge income but somebody who is trying to better themselves, and I’ve always been attracted to people who try to better themselves.

Here, the battler is defined through a self-perception of struggle; the image is cross-class or aspirational. While the battler is a historic term, with distinctly working-class and union resonances, during the Howard era the battler came to apply to an amorphous group: ‘the ordinary, struggling people’. As Nick Dyrenfurth has argued, within Howard’s battler discourse, the notion of ‘the working class is made obsolete not only due to its material wants but also by its aspiration to middle-class membership’. For Howard, the affect of the battler narrative lay in its ability to engage a broad group of Australians who imagined themselves as ‘struggling’.

Crucially, the Abbertons embody the ambiguous class identity of the Howard-style battler. On the eve of his final court appearance on charges of perverting the course of justice, Koby talks with Sunny about his ambitions. ‘I want’, he asserts, to ‘try to do good things for my family, make money, buy houses and you know, sell them, and get my little brother a good education and help out my family with money’. It is a striking scene in which Koby, obviously terrified of a conviction,
struggles to articulate the greater purpose of surfing professionally. The film does not detail the Boys’ income from surfing competitions and endorsements, so it is difficult to gauge whether Koby’s fears about lack of money are based on a poor financial situation. Yet, this is beside the point. In expressing love for his family and desire to care for them, Koby actually asserts, repeatedly, his need for ever more money. In the quest to provide for his family, Koby illustrates the extent to which the contemporary, aspirational battler must ‘battle’ to attain a mythic state of ultimate financial security.

The film portrays Maroubra as a site of dysfunction and does so by eliding the area’s recent gentrification and the Boys’ own participation in an aspirational lifestyle. Evers has been particularly critical of this aspect of *Bra Boys.* I agree that it is essential to emphasise that the levels of social and economic disadvantage experienced by Maroubra locals is more uneven than the film suggests. Yet, while the film’s portrayal of Maroubra might be unrealistic, the audience is drawn to identify with the brothers as self-proclaimed battlers. The strength of the narrative lies not in its relationship to reality, but in its attachment to long-standing Australian myths about virtue and victimhood. If it is easy to decry the film for its heavy-handed tone and its exaggerations, it is another thing entirely to address the film’s seductiveness and to explore the enduring appeal of narratives of white victimhood.

The most striking way in which *Bra Boys* offers the viewer the opportunity to indulge in the pleasures of identifying with white victimhood is through its presentation of Koby’s murder trial. While the film, as a whole, advances a generic battler narrative of triumph, the events surrounding Koby’s trial form a suspenseful subplot in which the viewer joins the Boys on their journey to support their brother. The film strategically extends this subplot, frequently digressing to present more general material about the Boys’ lives. The tension around Koby’s fate is reinforced through a series of interviews with his brothers who all express anxiety about the pending outcome, so it is not until quite late in the film that we witness Koby’s acquittal. The emotional ‘reward’ for investing in this subplot is large, as the joyous party that follows is the film’s affective highpoint. The party scene, in which Koby’s lawyers are lauded with a drunken guard of honour, echoes the ending of another iconic battler movie *The Castle,* in which the QC and the Everyman toast the white battler’s final defeat of adversity. The pull to invest emotionally in Koby’s trial is reinforced when it is revealed that members of the jury who acquitted Koby lingered after the end of proceedings to comfort and hug him in an exuberant, public affirmation of his innocence. It is, moreover, crucial that Koby’s testimony – his insistence that Hines was shot during an attempt to protect his girlfriend – is seen to be validated by the legal process. As a viewer it is difficult to resist the cumulative pleasures of identifying with Koby’s struggle; it not only forms the heart of the narrative, but offers an affective release that draws upon the enduring power of narratives in which the ‘little Aussie battler’ triumphs.  

White virtue

In drawing upon the authority of testimony to authenticate a story of white struggle, *Bra Boys* should be read as part of what Ann Curthoys has described as the ‘white victim narrative’ of Australian history. This narrative emphasises the character-forming difficulties experienced by Anglo-Australians since settlement, such as the
harsh pioneer experience and the defeat at Gallipoli.  

For Curthoys, the legitimacy of the white nation hinges on its self-perception of victimhood. Through their experiences of struggle and suffering, white settler Australians have earned the right to claim the nation as their own. To be sure, it is a narrative that excludes – but it is also a narrative that claims virtue. To speak from the position of the victim is to claim a highly affective, authoritative voice. Testimony, as a mode of speech, draws much of its power from this nexus between victimhood, virtue and ‘truth’.  

In this way, we can read *Bra Boys’* invocation of the battler as part of a broader, legitimating white victim narrative. Yet as James Jupp has suggested, the experiences of the majority of recent non-Anglo migrants to Australia fit clearly within the bounds of a battler narrative of struggle. The battler could thus be seen to encompass a broad range of individuals and experiences – particularly those of Indigenous peoples and migrants who have often struggled to ‘succeed’ within Australian society. This broad ‘neutrality’ of the battler signals both its malleability as a cultural concept, and its intrinsic, unmarked ‘whiteness’. Accordingly, Sean Scalmer has argued that:  

> the battler is the key actor in the drama of white Australian history; the key exponent of the ‘Australian’ values of egalitarianism and mateship. The whiteness of the battler is amplified by the historical resonance of the term – its very mustiness harks back to an earlier time when inequalities of income were not strongly associated with ethnicity, and when non-whites did not struggle economically (because they were politically invisible).  

To understand the extent to which the battler, particularly Howard’s aspirational battler, figures as white, allows us to recognise the way *Bra Boys* engages with and perpetuates a broader narrative of white victimhood. It is crucial to explore the way this victim narrative continues both to play a central role in the marginalisation of non-white voices within the public sphere, and to underwrite white Australian possession. At the same time, it is essential to confront how the endurance of the battler narrative is inextricable from the pleasure it provides white Australians through its dissemination in popular cultural forms like *Bra Boys*.

‘Local’ histories  

Within the context of a post-Cronulla and now, post-Apology Australia, *Bra Boys* is an ambivalent text. If Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s Apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples was designed to mark a symbolic break from a past deaf to the testimony of the dispossessed, the popularity of *Bra Boys* demonstrates the ongoing role narratives of white victimhood play in the maintenance of prevailing structures of power. *Bra Boys* exists within a wider milieu in which the valorisation of the voice of the white battler has become central to an often aggressively racist cultural politics. Indeed, it is difficult to read *Bra Boys* without some reference to the complex politics of race, space and national identity that has coalesced in the wake of September 11, the Bali bombings and, most recently, the Cronulla riots.  

While the Abberton brothers were not themselves directly involved in the Cronulla riots they did position themselves as mediators in its aftermath. The film depicts their efforts to engage Lebanese and Anglo youth in productive dialogue. Yet, other episodes portray their perpetuation of a highly exclusionary, violent localism.
Commentators writing on the riots have emphasised localism as one of the key causal factors.\textsuperscript{38} Evers has described localism as a way of ‘carving up space’: it is often described by surfers as the flow-on effect of ‘being proud of your beach’ and while it may entail violence, directed towards outsiders as well as ‘insiders’, it is nevertheless a form of care and bonding between men.\textsuperscript{39} *Bra Boys* emphasises the often violent process of initiation that individuals must go through to become ‘locals’. Once a member, many of the Boys tattoo Maroubra’s postcode 2035 on their bodies, cementing physically their ‘tribal’ claims.

*Bra Boys*’ depiction of localism can be read as an expression of what Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll have called ‘patriarchal white sovereignty’, a regime of power that has manifested itself historically in acts of white possession.\textsuperscript{40} In the film, we see the Boys enforce their ‘local’s rights’ at Maroubra, but they also take the viewer to Cape Solander, at nearby Kurnell, a surf break they have taken possession of exclusively, dubbing it ‘Ours’.\textsuperscript{41} ‘Ours’ has been the site of violence between Bra Boys and non-local surfers, but it is also the site of the nation’s original act of possession. Cape Solander, located at the mouth of Botany Bay, was first colonised in 1770 by Captain Cook.\textsuperscript{42} Here, *Bra Boys*’ imbrication with dominant, nationally-oriented narratives of possession is marked by its erasure. The casual amnesia of white victimhood asserts that ‘Ours’ simply *is*; this is not an overt challenge to Indigenous sovereignty rather, the everyday, naturalised effects of a white possessive logic.

Despite *Bra Boys*’ portrayal of localism and its reproduction of a white battler narrative, the film defends the group as inclusive. This is illustrated through a particularly striking scene in which some of the Boys assist a surfer with dwarfism to climb into a cave. The extent to which the group is multiethnic is reinforced during the film’s self-congratulatory conclusion in which Sunny describes Maroubra as ‘one of the most multicultural beaches in Australia’. The film ends with a rapid sequence in which members of the Bra Boys stare defiantly at the camera and state their nationality: ‘Australian’, ‘Half Australian – Half Nigerian’, Aboriginal, ‘Half Aboriginal – Half Danish’, and so on. It is difficult to know whether this multicultural sentiment is simply a way to avoid criticism in the wake of Cronulla. In any case, the effect is uplifting, promoting the gang’s ‘locals only’ ethos as the epitome of mateship. But tellingly, when describing the reprisal attacks the Boys faced after the riots, Sunny insists that ‘half the people who defended the beach that night were ethnics and three couldn’t even speak English’. To be sure, there are certainly some prominent Indigenous and non-Anglo members of the Bra Boys, yet the inclusiveness of the ‘tribe’ is firmly grounded in an implicitly racialised localism in which all non-whites are, in the words of Sunny, ‘ethnics’, who use the beach at the Boys’ discretion.\textsuperscript{43}

This possessive logic is, like the discourse on whiteness itself, so firmly naturalised as to become invisible. Cape Solander is simply ‘Ours’, the history of colonisation glossed over as a surfer slides through the waves. As Sunny declares without irony: ‘we think the beach belongs to everyone’ but people coming to the beach need to recognise that ‘there might be a whole history and a culture there spanning for generations and that should be respected’. It is a strikingly possessive claim that gains its power from its very casualness. This uncomplicated and taken-for-granted assertion of non-Indigenous belonging is advanced by the affective force of the Bra Boys’ victim testimony in which historic disadvantage justifies the right to control
use of ‘their’ beach. Sunny’s assertion that the Bra Boys’ surf culture is the only local culture of significance at Maroubra signals the power of his testimony to obscure multiple other ‘local’ stories.

Anxious voices

While Bra Boys illustrates the extent to which narratives of white victimhood are naturalised within popular culture, it is a film that also displays a profound anxiety regarding the legitimacy of settler belonging. In fact, the film draws attention to the tenuous nature of the Boys’ claims to ‘possess’ Maroubra by explicitly linking the story of the Boys with the local Aboriginal people, the Eora. Crowe’s narration provides a history of Maroubra in which the Boys’ conflict with local authorities is said to have originated in ‘colonial times’ when Aborigines were banned from ocean swimming. Moreover, Crowe links the Eora and settlers on the basis of social class, arguing that early twentieth century poverty ‘saw the poor forced to live among the Aborigines in the bays and caves’. In emphasising the extent to which the Boys’ story, and the history of Maroubra itself, is entangled with the experiences of the Eora, Bra Boys attempts to reinforce their possessive attachment to the beach by co-opting the sovereign claims of the area’s Indigenous owners.

In essence, Bra Boys is a declaration of identity that registers a contemporary crisis of the very concepts of testimony and identity. As Ahmed and Stacey attest, ‘if testimony is bound up with truth and justice, then its coming into being also registers the crisis in both of these concepts; for one testifies when the truth is in doubt; [the] “truth” itself has become subject to appeal’. Similarly, Shoshana Felman has argued that ‘testimony is called for in a situation where the truth is not clear, where there is already a “crisis of truth”’. The sense that Bra Boys works hard to establish a coherent group identity foregrounds how testimony functions to contest and assert, rather than simply express ‘truth’. Though the Boys are most obviously concerned to counter the negative images of them produced by the police and non-locals, their desire to anchor their narrative with a connection to the Eora suggests that the implications of Indigenous sovereignty do unsettle the group, albeit in a muted, even unconscious way.

In his account of first person documentary, Renov, following Foucault, argues that autobiographical films illustrate how subjectivity has become the current site of struggle for groups ‘massively separated from the engines of representation’. Within this context, the attempt to fix selfhood through testimonial expression serves as ‘a vital expression of agency’. The film projects an image of Maroubra as an area besieged, and of a people quite literally the subject of the authorities’ panoptic gaze; the beach shadowed by Long Bay Gaol that, ‘from its hilltop location served as a constant warning to the community below’. In this sense, the film is an attempt to control the kinds of images and stories that are produced about the Boys, but it is also, implicitly, part of a broader struggle over whose stories get heard, and validated, within the public sphere.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Bra Boys illustrates the extent to which narratives of white victimhood continue to exclude: spatially, culturally and historically. This possessive logic is
underpinned by a narrative of disadvantage that challenges the white viewer to identify with the Boys as battlers. Here the audience, as secondary witness, is crucial to sustaining the truth of the Boys’ testimony. To adopt a questioning mode in viewing the film, and to acknowledge the hegemonic force of the battler trope, goes some way to blunting the affective power of the film.

But to appreciate the enduring appeal of white victim narratives within a broader national context is to consider the way Bra Boys challenges contemporary discourses on citizenship and multiculturalism that have called upon white Australians to witness to the testimony of the socially and politically marginalised. In this context, Bra Boys is so much more than a flashy surf film. Bra Boys invites the viewer to indulge, once more, in the pleasures of identifying with white marginalisation. By employing the familiar battler trope the documentary functions in a testimonial mode to re-centre narratives of white victimhood. In doing so, the film demonstrates the extent to which the testimonial voice, the affective voice that stakes a claim for truth and authenticity can continue to be used to reinforce existing relations of power. Bra Boys is testament to the enduring, seductive power of white testimony, the continued resonance of stories that luxuriate in the ‘struggle’ – and success – of the white, socially-disadvantaged male. In this way, Bra Boys testifies to the experiences of its protagonists – as an emphatic declaration that ‘their culture has survived’ – and stands as a challenging reminder of the shifting ways white Australians hear the voices of the ‘dispossessed’.

Notes
1. Sunny Abberton (dir), Bra Boys, Bradahood Productions, 2007. All in-text quotations to the film refer to this, the Australian release.
2. Preceding the film’s release, the group attracted a large volume of negative media scrutiny, see especially, Les Kennedy, ‘Night the thin blue line ran into the Maroubra stomp’, Sydney Morning Herald, 24 December 2002. Since Jai’s 2005 acquittal for the murder of Anthony Hines, coverage has tended to be far more positive, often focusing on the charitable activities of the Boys. See Angela Cuming, ‘Freed Bra Boys’ happy but beach visit falls flat’, Sydney Morning Herald, 12 March 2006 and Angela Cuming and Catherine Munro, ‘Rage over 7000 meters for beaches’, Sydney Morning Herald, 7 August 2005.


20. Evers, ‘My brother’s keeper or my brother’s problem?’


22. Dori Laub, ‘Bearing witness, or the vicissitudes of listening,’ in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. 68.

23. Russell Crowe has been an outspoken supporter of the Bra Boys and is now slated to make his directorial debut with a fictionalised version of *Bra Boys*. See Michael Flemming, ‘Crowe to direct “Bra Boys”’, *Variety*, 21 March 2007


31. Evers, ‘My brother’s keeper or my brother’s problem?’.

32. Figures from the 2006 census demonstrate that 52.7% of Maroubra residents were born in Australia, followed by 3.4% born in Indonesia and 3% born in England. Fifty-seven percent of Maroubra residents reported English as the only language spoken at home, compared with a national figure of 83%, which suggests that Maroubra experiences an above-average level of ethnic and linguistic diversity. On the issue of income, Maroubra residents reported a median weekly family income of $1,404, compared with the lower Australia-wide average of $1,171. See ‘2006 Census Quick Stats: Maroubra (State Suburb)’, 2006 Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics. See also, ‘Cultural diversity overview’, 2006 Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics.


37. Scalmer, The battlers versus the elites’, p. 11.


47. Renov, ‘First-Person Films’, p. 47.