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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’.\textsuperscript{26} 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.\textsuperscript{27} In \textit{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.

\textit{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.

\textbf{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:

\begin{quote}
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.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

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’.\textsuperscript{29} 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’.\textsuperscript{30} 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 \textit{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’.44 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”’.45 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’.46 Within this context, the attempt to fix selfhood through testimonial expression serves as ‘a vital expression of agency’.47 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* witnesses 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.
Reinforcing the myth: Constructing Australian identity in ‘reality TV’

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The current incarnation of ‘reality TV’ in Australia has a strong focus on the portrayal of everyday life. Although based on ‘real’ situations or people, there is a clear tension between ideas of authenticity and performance. As a global phenomenon, ‘reality’ formats are produced for local audiences by highlighting aspects of the national culture and identity, with format popularity directly linked to identification and affirmation of the spectacle of ‘reality’. This paper will analyse the use of popular Australian myth in ‘reality’ formats by charting narrative and character construction as an ‘illusory everyday’, with reference to Bondi Rescue (Cordell Jigsaw). The paper will examine the representation of Australian identity through both myth and construction in ‘reality TV’ as the perpetuation of a cultural simulation. Implications for research on the genre and the industry are also discussed.

The worldwide phenomenon of ‘reality TV’ is well entrenched in current Australian broadcasting. While the dominant feature of the genre is the portrayal of the ‘everyday’ through the inclusion of ordinary people or situations, there is an underlying tension between elements of authenticity and performance regarding programme production and reception. Australian ‘reality’ formats have evolved over time according to audience popularity and with a clear focus on reflecting aspects of national culture and identity. This paper will explore the representation of national ideals and popular myth in ‘reality TV’ as an ‘illusory everyday’, with reference to Bondi Rescue (Cordell Jigsaw). Through the examination of the combination of the Australian beach myth and the spectacle of ‘reality TV’, the representation of Australian identity at work can be viewed as the perpetuation of a cultural simulation. In this way, the portrayal of national ideals is reinforced through a constructed performance within negotiated television conventions. This also raises further questions of viewer reception, genre categorizations, and the relationship between the television industry and audiences.

Reality TV and myth

‘Reality TV’, or Popular Factual Entertainment, has been a prominent feature of Australian broadcasting, particularly since the turn of the millennium and the proliferation of global formats marketed for local production. As a result, it is increasingly possible for anyone or anything to have the opportunity to be broadcast on television, albeit within certain structural or competition parameters. The genre’s success and development signals its significance in contemporary television production and reception, and it is thus equally

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important to examine how these national narratives are being represented to their audiences.

Superficially, the genre title itself highlights the convergence of fact and fiction involved in formats, as an important aspect of their packaging and appeal. The ‘reality’ represented is distinguished by production choices to mould and choreograph the content into engaging and identifiable viewing for audiences, such as documentary norms of ‘fly-on-the-wall’ recording, talking-head interviews and omniscient voiceover, in combination with entertainment practices including multiple narrative strands, evocative soundtrack and slick editing. It is common for formats to be classified with terms such as ‘docu-soap’ or ‘game-doc’, which highlight their hybridity from various genres (Murray and Ouellette 2004, 4–5). As a result, ‘reality TV’ defies easy definition as a result of this blurring between established norms of television. However, this also leads to a point of difference between the industry and its critics.

Use of the term ‘reality’ is fraught with epistemological arguments of subjectivity and objectivity, and the nature of truth and representation. In her extensive study of ‘factual’ television, Annette Hill summarizes the critical view of such terms as a ‘container for non-fiction content’ (2007, 3). However, on closer examination, this is indicative of a simplistic view situated close to traditional notions of television genre and representation as a fact/fiction opposition. As a result of their popular and often sensational status, ‘reality’ formats have been criticized as ‘trash’ or the lightening of documentary culture, which Dovey (2002, 12) argues ‘threatens to float the whole TV documentary tradition off into some Disneyfied pleasure garden of primary colour delights’. These strands of criticism suggest a hierarchy of value in ‘factual’ television where documentary is informative and worthy, while popular entertaining forms are solely for diversion. In effect, ‘reality TV’ has opened up a televisual space dealing with more complex questions than this binary opposition.

Interestingly, the industry does not tend to adopt the label of ‘reality TV’ as widely, and in its place has a range of terms for its myriad forms, such as Factual Entertainment, Popular Factual or Contemporary Documentary. For Bondi Rescue producer Rick McPhee, ‘reality’ and ‘factual’ as industry terms do not lend themselves to more literal considerations used in the genre’s criticism, as for television production ‘reality is where you construct something, you change something, and you impose something on a group of people’ (McPhee 2009). So while the common label and its criticism adheres to the promise of everyday people and events, ‘reality’ formats attain their authenticity by constructing simulations, as highly selective and purposeful productions. Alternatively, Bondi Rescue is considered as ‘factual’ by its creators as a result of its style as ‘observational documentary’. This is determined in relation to the existence of its subject matter regardless of the camera’s presence, and the production technique to ‘just follow what the lifeguards do . . . [the crew] don’t create anything’ (McPhee 2009). The footage gained in this ‘factual’ style then receives similar post-production editing to ‘reality’ formats through entertainment conventions to create a ‘mix’ with ‘a bit of humour, a bit of drama, a bit of character, a bit of human interest’ (McPhee 2009). The use of terms such as ‘reality’ and ‘factual’ can thus be seen to differ between a value judgement in its criticism, and as relating to style or technique in its production. In light of this, ‘reality TV’ is more effectively considered within the notion of verisimilitude, as a relationship between the programme and its referent through systems of credibility for the viewer, rather than a perceived fidelity to ‘real’ or ‘fact’ (Neale 1999, 32). The representation and its efficacy is thus contingent on the construction and cognition of familiar generic and/or cultural conventions.
Similarly within semiotic discourse, Barthes (2000, 129) describes myth as ‘neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion’. The opposition between fact and fiction in relation to myth is thus likewise questionable in this sense, rather to be considered as a series of dominant ideas and values that are naturalized. Silverstone (1988, 23) argues that myth and television occupy the same space of ‘intimate distance’ in attempting to identify cultural experience through continual narratives concerned with everyday life. In this way, myth also has an important role within ideas of nation, where it is an essential part of cultural meaning and maintenance. Foundations of national ideas and values are established through myth and highlight that which is considered natural and accepted or alien and excluded within a culture. These continuous narratives are embedded with various rituals and symbols lending coherence to a collective discourse (Schöpflin 1997, 19–20).

Within both ‘reality TV’ and myth, then, can be identified an ‘illusory everyday’. Illusion here is not meant to signify fallacy or deception, but rather a mirage that accords with the norms and pleasures of its producers and audiences. Both myth and ‘reality TV’ are sites of liminality where the everyday is stretched and blurred through dominant ideals and representation techniques, constantly evolving as open and ambiguous spaces of national narratives and ideals, not quite fact or fiction. For television, the inclusion of national cultural elements in format production has been argued as a performance of ‘Australian-ness’ that ‘speaks to its local audiences’ (Roscoe 2001, 475). This is achieved in the local production of formats that emphasize elements of ‘banal nationality [to reproduce] national identity in multiple taken-for-granted, invisible, or unnoticed details’ (Aslama and Pantti 2007, 64). Through the use of popular national myths, formats not only have the ease of recognizable symbols and references but also an aspirational view of national ideals and values for viewer identification. In this respect, television has an important role in fostering national culture by promoting a ‘sense of citizenship, social identities and creating and representing a common cultural and political core’ (O’Regan 1993, 81). However, the construction and performance involved in the ‘reality’ genre leads to questions of the nature of the representation at work and how this is mediated by both its mythic qualities and television production. To examine this further, television series Bondi Rescue provides an interesting case study in relation to the Australian myth of the beach.

**Bondi Rescue and the beach myth of ‘Oz’**

The myth of the Australian beach has been explored, theorized and contested over some time. The beach has been identified as ‘central to the Australian imagination’ as a space of pleasure and freedom in close proximity to urban lifestyles (Drew 1994, xi) and posited as liminal, iconic and oppositional in Australian narratives. This paper does not intend to assess the viability of the myth; rather, its arguments provide a framework to examine its continuing role in nationalism and identity, specifically for ‘reality TV’. Turner (1994, 5–10) argues that established national discourses are ‘notoriously hard to dislodge or deconstruct’ from the common imagination, with steady characteristics such as the ‘cheeky, resourceful larrikin’ and a ‘prescriptive, unitary, masculinist’ identity. In particular, the beach holds a ‘special place in constructions of national identity’ as a space of leisure and constant return (Bonner, McKay, and McKee 2001, 270). Beach imagery and ideals permeate Australian art, literature, theatre, film and television, as an evocation of innocence, freedom and community, not only for national consideration but also the promotion of the country worldwide as an idyllic, open and pleasurable space. Although problematic to refine national ideals to specific qualities, it is a technique commonly used
by televisual media ‘as a means of pitching and selling to off-shore industries’ as an identifiable image of ‘Australian-ness’ (Waddell 2003, 40).

The rise of the beach myth coincides with ‘increasing urbanization’ along the coastline as a sanctuary ‘to escape the stresses, strains and complexities’ of modern life (Booth 2001, 3), in combination with the shift away from the ‘bush’ identity, which had been associated with toil and isolation (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987, 54). Huntsman (2001, 173) identifies the transitory state of the beach as impermanent, active and constantly ‘becoming’, while Drew (1994, 106) defines the coast as a fault line; ‘a place of transition’ that encircles the continent as an open boundary. Similarly, the beach myth is also transitory, shifting with a national psyche and increasing presence in Australian media narratives, and regularly appropriated to ‘suit the dominant ideologies of particular groups in specific periods of time’ (Waddell 2003, 43). The landscape’s ambiguity results from the amalgamation of land and water, as the transition between spaces of tangible nation and foreign. Here, ‘culture–nature is a combination’ where the nature of the beach is engaged and incorporated with urban civilization (Game 1989, 4–5). This establishes a ‘new paradigm’ of beach as myth in the ‘complex negotiations between the ideal beach of nature and the material culture of the city’ (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987, 55, 64), as a discourse that celebrates the pristine coastline for leisure while simultaneously containing any number of dangers.

The beach has been grounded in an ideal image of Australia and way of life: ‘classless, matey, basic, natural’, where its egalitarian qualities can be linked to its natural elements (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987, 55). In this respect, the beach is an ‘equalizer’: ‘no one owns the sun, sea, surf’ and it is open and used by all for pleasure (Game 1989, 8). The myth also couples the landscape with the figure of the lifesaver as an ‘ideal type of manhood’ (White 1981, 155). This has remained a prime image in national myths as an identity promoting courage, initiative and service, and now part of the beach iconography along with the ‘red and yellow’ flags. Historically, the image has been primarily masculine, white and classless, leading to questions of a political role in this ideal type and its maintenance:

Rather than working in rural industry, he fights the elements to preserve the life of citizens at innocent play on the urban beach. Like the Anzac he represents discipline and sacrifice in a far safer environment. The representation embodies the best of the old images and reworks them into a new modern form. (Saunders 1998, 103)

This representation can be seen to be reworked further using the evolving mythic ideals of the Australian beach through the genre of ‘reality TV’ in Bondi Rescue. The series is distinctive to Australia and broadcast internationally, with four series produced at Bondi Beach gaining ratings figures, on average, of 1.2 million viewers, and subsequent DVD releases. Both the Seven and Nine Networks ‘[rode] the coat-tails’ of the success of Bondi Rescue through the production of their own surf formats, titled Surf Patrol (Cornerbox) and Deadly Surf (Nine Network), respectively (Cuming 2007). Both initially gained significant audiences, but only Surf Patrol endured from sustained ratings. Interestingly, the addition of Bondi Rescue: Bali (Cordell Jigsaw), which took the lifeguard team to assist the locals at Kuta Beach, did not continue the ratings success for the Ten Network, and had an early exit from their schedule (Casey 2008). Taking these factors into account, purely on a quantitative basis, it suggests that there is more to audience engagement in these formats than simply watching the ‘everyday’ occurrences of surf patrols and rescues. In reviewing the eight episodes of the first series of Bondi Rescue, certain format elements become apparent as distinct from its derivatives. Most importantly is the fraction of time
used in the representation of rescues as only a small proportion of the format, with more segments within episodes devoted to uncovering the characters’ personalities and backgrounds, as well as the story of the service and beach itself, with the series described in its voiceover as ‘the untold story of the boys in blue’ (Bondi Rescue 2006). This is in direct contrast to the formats produced by the Seven and Nine Networks where the emphasis was more on dramatic rescue scenes. While this may be engaging in terms of action, it appears through rating figures that audiences prefer the inclusion of character development within this setting.

From the outset, Bondi Rescue presents an informative façade through the depiction of lifeguard duties and the promotion of water safety. It appeals to audiences through the common Australian experience of the beach; however, this is only part of its engagement. The format follows a soap opera structure in its division into various narrative strands referred to by its production as a ‘mix’ (McPhee 2009). These are interwoven from footage taken across the summer recording period, and can be suspended across one or multiple episodes. The transitions between narratives are designed to create suspense by delaying information of ‘what happens next’ and resolution, often involving the serious rescue enigmas. As the everyday situations of the beach and lifeguards tend not to play out within half-hour blocks for maximum action and suspense, this packaging is crucial to maintain the interest of viewers. The audience is invited to engage with the unpredictability and familiarity of the narrative structure, following the story and characters within their ‘everyday’. This is also reinforced by an omniscient voiceover that guides between narrative strands, re-caps what has already taken place, emphasizes the work of the lifeguards and speculates on the outcomes of their rescues. For example, within the first episode, the narrative of a young girl pulled unconscious from the surf is drawn out across the episode so that she is only arriving at the hospital with a suspected ‘worst case scenario’ injury at its conclusion. The enigma of her condition is suspended by the voiceover during the final credits and then subsequently resolved in the following episode with a more positive diagnosis and a visit from her rescuing lifeguard, Deano. The narrative gains closure in her visit to the lifeguard tower on her recovery to express her gratitude; however, this specific scene appears staged by the production in order to neatly resolve the story, indicated by the optimal framing of the doorway as she enters the lifeguard tower and Deano waiting just off camera. ‘Fill-in’ footage also extends the notion of the ‘factual’ format, where the crew may arrive late to a rescue in progress, but may ask the same lifeguard to run in the water again afterwards in order to complete the footage recorded for the rescue narrative (McPhee 2009). The lifeguards have admitted that ‘it took a while to get used to the cameras always being around’ (Cuming 2007), with particular use of lightweight, waterproof cameras attached to lifeguard boards and jet-skis to emphasize the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ conventions for a sense of immediacy and proximity to the action. However, the lifeguards have adjusted to the presence of a television crew while going about their ‘everyday’ job, now less self-conscious but more aware of what the production is looking for in footage to avoid re-takes, such as repeating questions or giving full answers in their talking-head interviews or responses to off-camera producers (McPhee 2009).

Central to the format are the lifeguards’ characters as mythic heroes, labelled as ‘elite watermen’ by the voiceover. This portrayal is consistent with the national type identified with the ‘sun-bronzed physique, the masculinity, the cult of mateship, the military associations, the hedonism and wholesomeness of the beach’ (White 1981, 157). The lifeguards are referred to in the series as ‘iconic Bondi bloke[s]’ or ‘cast from a vintage Australian mould’ (Bondi Rescue 2006) as a reflection by the production on their mythic qualities. Their bodies are constantly on show as tanned and svelte, highlighted in montage
sequences of their topless walks, swims or paddles along the beach. This is also defined through their constant training and yearly fitness challenges, which act as a source of rivalry between the ‘band of brothers’ (Bondi Rescue 2006), emphasizing their discipline as well as their camaraderie and larrikinism. The lifeguards regularly confide to the camera of the pride in their work and sense of service, but at the same time they revel in this ‘fraternity’ and the benefits of working on the beach. In this way, the characters embody the ‘dedication, self sacrifice and humanitarianism’ associated with the iconic lifesaver, combined with the stereotype of the ‘free-wheeling, hedonistic surfer’ (Jaggard 1997, 185). The lifeguards are referred to only by nickname through the programme, such as Harries, Chappo or Whippet, either through the voiceover or by caption, which encourages a sense of mateship and familiarity for audiences. This proximity to their character also helps establish their authority through ‘talking-head’ moments where they relay their thoughts on events, people and issues of the beach. Throughout the series, the narratives follow not only their rescues but also explore their personalities through their backgrounds and lifestyle. Elements of their characters are revealed through short vignettes combining footage from the beach and personal photo montages, such as Reidy’s previous ‘life’ as overweight, or Harry’s and Kerbox’s former status as professional surfers. The series also makes reference to their ‘other’ jobs away from the beach, and includes a segment where a group of lifeguards attend a speed dating session. This focus on the characters increases the possibility for audience engagement beyond the action in order to relate more closely with the lifeguards and empathize with their situation and personalities, thus affirming their classic model of Australian identity.

The format strongly emphasizes the high proportion of visitors to Bondi and the sociability of the lifeguards, often shown making conversation with patrons enjoying the beach or recently rescued. The series estimates Bondi as populated mainly by tourists on any day over the summer season where ‘many haven’t got a clue about water safety’, although the lifeguards ‘learn so much meeting all these people’ (Bondi Rescue 2006). Their open and friendly approach is highlighted further through a segment concentrating on Harry’s and Yatesy’s ability to converse with foreign visitors in French and Spanish, respectively. This works as a reinforcement of the lifesaver icon as ‘a user-friendly national identity for domestic and, more importantly, international audiences’ (Waddell 2003, 40). The emphasis on equality acts to re-establish a more positive portrayal of the Australian beach after events such as the Cronulla riots, which are referred to in the series. Footage of the ‘eruption of racial tension’ is juxtaposed immediately with a rescue of an Iranian family who are then warmly greeted by their rescuer, Reidy, and his important reminder of the ‘red and yellow’ flags. The audience is aligned with the lifeguards in this way in restoring the egalitarian and open mythic nature of the beach, but also a simultaneous ‘othering’ of the naïve or deviant patrons. Any offensive behaviour, exemplified in perverts or thieves, or the constant display of surf inexperience is characterized as separate from the values of the lifeguards, and therefore draws a clear line of a beach ‘us and them’. Game examines this issue as part of the mythic beach nature/culture distinction in the beautiful/unbeautiful of Bondi (1989, 6). The lifeguards as ‘civilizers’ mediate the wildness of the natural beach as a positive effort, while an undesirable ‘culture’ from the urban city damages the innocent nature of Bondi.

Bondi Beach itself is a feature for the format and takes on a character-type role. The voiceover reference as the ‘world’s most popular sandpit’ represents Bondi, both locally and globally, as the epitome of Australian beaches; a ‘recreational and social playground’ typical in the national lifestyle (Brawley 2007, 7; Jaggard 1997, 183). The recognizable location and beach rules invite a link with the viewers’ own possible experiences for cultural identification
and reinforcement. The portrayal also highlights the mythic combination of its location in metropolitan surroundings, with commercial buildings and houses evident along the edges of the beach, while simultaneously exploring the dangers of the beach including rips, bluebottles and sharks. This again emphasizes the lifeguard as ‘the regulator and preserver of all this innocent pleasure wherein, ironically, danger lurk[s]’ (Saunders 1998, 98). Bondi is described as a ‘home’ to its lifeguards who have ‘lived and breathed the beach all their lives’ (Bondi Rescue 2006). The centrality of the beach to ‘Australian-ness’ is further emphasized with the inclusion of the Nippers club and voluntary lifesavers, where these beach activities are inextricably linked to Australian maturation and lifestyles.

Although Bondi Rescue attempts to enhance the equality and classlessness of the mythic beach, the format’s representation also highlights its masculinity. Within the first series all the professional lifeguards are male. This is not stated as a criticism of their employment practices (as a later series has seen the hiring of female lifeguards) but rather it is important in how this gender distinction is portrayed through the format. Bikini-clad sunbakers or ‘damsel in distress’ stereotypes are a common female presence, often with the inclusion of their comments on the lifeguards’ physique. Similarly, the lifeguards remark on the perks of their job in spending their time surveying and being thanked by attractive, mostly naked women. This is directly linked to historic notions of beach culture and specifically Bondi itself as a ‘site of voyeurism: go to Bondi to look at, look at looking at, be looked at’ (Game 1989, 9). However, this beach ‘scenery’ is also effective as ‘cultural commodities’ to market locally and abroad as ‘signifiers’ for ‘Australia’ (Waddell 2003, 49). The lifeguards admit to the ‘distractions’ involved and this is exemplified through montages of scantily clad, attractive women on the beach. The body becomes a source of pleasure in this way, not only for those at the beach but also for viewers.

Reinforcing the myth

Even from this brief analysis, Bondi Rescue can be seen as a new incarnation of ongoing mythic ideals of the nation. Its ‘factual’ style, format construction and mythic qualities all combine as elements of its performance; where the national myth appears ‘real’. The observational recording of events and characters, either in situ or in constructed circumstances, and its subsequent representation into a hybrid format is essential to how this performance is achieved for television. The genre relies on its audience to be media ‘savvy’ in negotiating the elements of actuality and artifice (Andrejevic 2003, 4), where television is necessarily performative as it ‘tread[s] the line between intention and execution, between reality and the image’ (Bruzzi 2000, 7). On closer inspection, two levels of myth emerge from the analysis of Bondi Rescue; the social and semiotic myths of ‘Australian-ness’ and the beach, and the dominant myth in criticism regarding the ‘real’ in ‘reality TV’.

In particular, Bondi Rescue taps into national ideals through both its production and content. The ‘mix’ developed in the format’s production is designed to reflect the changeable nature of the Australian beach; between its pleasures and dangers. The drama and action of the rescues are balanced with the entertaining narratives of the lifeguards, with constant reminders of their service, masculinity and mateship. The lifeguards become ‘social actors’ for the format in its observational style and also in their own representation of self for the production, where this can be ‘construed as a performance’ (Nichols 1991, 42). In this way, the effect of the national ideals of the beach and lifeguard character should be questioned as to its influence on both the production and lifeguard performance. The location, characters and rescues are inextricably linked to the historic ideas of this dominant myth, but also coupled with contemporary attitudes, such as multiculturalism.
As a result, the transitory state of the myth can be seen to shift to encompass new issues and reflect new values, as a reaffirmation of both its historic and current qualities. Moreover, *Bondi Rescue* refines elements of ‘Australian-ness’ into a set of characters and their location. This is significant for television in representing narratives of the national ‘everyday’ and culture, and specifically in the genre’s combination of factual and entertainment conventions, argued by O’Regan (1993, 81) as an ‘important agency of “popular socialisation”’. In this particular case, Australia is linked fundamentally to, and wholly represented by, the beach. The high ratings of the programme suggest that this portrayal appeals to audiences as a source of entertainment and information, and also as a construction and performance of ‘Australian-ness’. The shift of the format to Bali and subsequent drop in ratings implies less interest for audiences where the representation no longer entirely encapsulated the Australian myth of the beach and lifesavers, with audience figures stabilizing in the following series returning to Bondi.

The ‘reality’ of Bondi Beach is heightened through this visually beautiful, action-packed immediacy to the beach and its lifeguards. Its portrayal becomes a televisial spectacle of ‘Australia’, both continuing and enhancing the beach myth in national culture to local and international audiences. However, the elements of representation and performance suggest a Baudrillardian simulation (1983), where the screened episode of events had no previous existence as seen in its post-produced form. Similarly, the continuing ideals of the Australian beach myth are simulations within this contemporary setting and form. *Bondi Rescue* is its own model of a ‘reality’; one that combines dominant ideas of culture and values with televisial conventions of factuality and entertainment. This is indicative of the phenomenon of ‘reality TV’ and its portrayal of the ‘everyday’. Through the reframing of narrative and characters into a format, ‘reality TV’ works beyond the limited question of actuality or artifice to a more complex and fluid space of blurred genres and mythic televisial conventions. From this point of view, the hierarchy of value traditionally given to documentary styles as opposed to entertainment qualities such as soap operas is deficient as a foundation of criticism, as the genre shifts between and embraces a variety of techniques in order to combine the informative with the entertaining. In this way, the ‘illusory everyday’ is linked closely to Baudrillard’s simulation as a hyper-reality, where everything is re-presented modelling a real that has no origin.

For *Bondi Rescue*, the ‘illusory everyday’ is a perpetuation of a cultural simulation, encompassing the performance of national identity and the representation of the ‘real’ on television. The format reflects the ongoing yet fluid beach myth within the national psyche, combining both its historic and contemporary values, and represents this within a televisial spectacle of the ‘everyday’. As a result, the portrayal of the beach and lifeguards is a performance of national identity that restores and reinforces the positive qualities of the beach myth as an aspirational image of ‘Australian-ness’. Furthermore, the analysis of the myth of ‘reality TV’ reflects a new avenue of consideration of the genre. The common critical problematic of fact/fiction is limiting in a genre that embraces its construction. Recognition of the ‘illusory everyday’ of formats thus aims to understand how these elements are combined from dominant cultural values and televisial codes of representation, in order to create entertaining and engaging programming for audiences.

**Notes on contributor**

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