

Queer Waves

Queer: German *quer* (traverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist) English *athwart* (across)

My phone rings. It's Sam. The swell is coming up from the southeast, and the prediction is for a long period and light winds. Sam wants to load up the van and head down the south coast to an isolated beach that turns long lines of swell into spitting sand-bottom barrels that can break your neck. The beach is a favourite of ours. We've had good times there – waves, beers, fishing, and campfires.

Black-and-white cows, rolling grass hills, and snippets of unmolested bushland drift by. The inside of the van is plastered with surf company stickers, and one saying *Don't come aknockin' if you see the van rockin'*.

The long drive is punctuated with talk of relationships, politics, sport, work, boards, music, and what that clunk is every time the van goes over a bump in the road.

We pull into a sandy car park. It's raining and windy, so we change out of our clothes and into our rubber wetsuits in the back of the van as it rocks back and forth. We laugh as we fall over. We watch the waves peak and peel through fogged up windows.

The surf is crumbly, but we surf for hours anyway. We are exhausted when we hit the beach. The sun comes out and we strip off the wetsuits, and sun our bare backs.

Sam walks off to collect some firewood, and I begin prepping the food. After dinner we sit next to the fire and talk some while draining a case of brews, until we're pretty wasted. The conversation ends on something like how trippy the night stars are, and us trying to work out which constellations are which.

Sam and I crash out in the back of the van. We lie side-by-side because the boards take up most of the space. As we drift off, the talk gets personal – relationships, hopes, dreams. To cut the tension following what seems to be an unmanly moment Sam farts. It stinks. I open a window to the pleasure of hundreds of blood-thirsty mozzies.

It's dawn. I wake up with Sam's drool on my sleeping bag. I give him a slap in the head.

'Lets go, it's offshore!'

'Fuck off!'

'Caaarn!'

As the sun comes up we bob around out the back. Waves rise, peak, split, funnel and spit all around us. The water turns golden as the sun gets higher, and the clouds break up. Fog falls off the headland in a misty waterfall.

'Couldn't be better,' Sam says quietly.

I nod and enjoy the moment.

The drive home is quiet. Sam breaks the silence, and talks about how he is heading over to London for a year. He wants to surf the European coastline and chase Atlantic storms. I understand.

Back at my place we clasp hands in a handshake, and decide a hug is more appropriate. It's awkward, quick, and involves a heavy slap on the back. I watch Sam's van turn the corner at the bottom of my street. When he is out of sight I go inside my apartment.

This scenario is common amongst the boys. We bond by doing things together – surfing, hanging out, going to surf flicks, moshing at concerts, meeting at the footy, and having lunch and dinner. After each activity we will inquire as to when we will meet up again. Text messages zoom back and forth if someone is out at the pub or the surf is good somewhere.

Dave Carnie, ex editor-in-chief of a US skateboard magazine called close non-sexual relationships between two blokes a 'Bromance'. This is a blend of the words 'bro(ther)' and 'romance'. Australian journalist Tim Elliott writes that a Bromance is different to a 'mateship'.

Mates meet up for a quick beer at the pub; bromance happens when two guys make a dinner date weeks ahead. Mates get pissed at Cold Chisel tribute bands; bromantics make compilation tapes for one another.¹

I am pretty sceptical about the whole 'Bromance' thing being new. Blokes have always hung out together. It sounds like marketing bullshit to me, a bit like the whole 'metrosexual' thing where marketing firms wanted to sell to a 'new' type of man and reassembled words dragged off the etymological compost heap.

Does watching a sunrise together count as Bromance or mateship? What about sleeping in the same van? Group sex involving one girl and several mates is not that uncommon. Does that mean you have hit a home-run in Bromance terms?

It seems like any differences between Bromance and mateship is pretty arbitrary. It was suggested by the *New York Times* that a 'man date' involves a man doing things with another man that you would do with a woman when out and about.² But going surfing, grabbing a bite to eat, walking on the beach, camping, and staring into a campfire next to one another could all be 'date' material.

Male-only relationships have always been common in surfing. While I sometimes take my girl along on coastal runs to chase waves, it never quite feels like a 'real' surf trip. From an early age I was told that it was important to surf with the boys, and not to become 'pussy whipped'.

If I ever had difficulty in a relationship the boys would take me on a run up or down the coast chasing swell. The conversation as we followed the white lines and bitumen always turned to sexual conquests at some point – or lack thereof (it was okay to fail at getting sex as long as I had a go).

This activity taught me from a very young age that women are whom I should want to have sex with, but they should not be the focus of my life.

Bruce Mackenzie once wrote a great story for *Tracks* called 'The Priority Boy'.³ The story is about Paul, who loves his surfing but meets a woman, Shauna, who is 'a walking wet dream' and has 'a body he thought was built for sex'. Paul begins spending more time with Shauna than surfing with his mates. Then during a beach picnic Paul notices that the beach break is beginning to fire on the incoming tide. Paul ends up surfing for hours, to Shauna's annoyance. Shauna leaves Paul at the beach, and drives off. Paul gets a lift home in a ute (pick-up truck) from a couple of blokes he met in the surf. At home Shauna has moved out, and Paul 'gently places his board beside his bed – where it belongs'.

I still have this story. The paper is now yellowed and torn. I lived by its code for years: 'bros before hos' and surfing before women.

In the total scheme of things, men's bonds with women are often set up as a subordinate, complementary, and instrumental relation to bonds with other men. Blokes often use women, objects, and activities to fuel and enable bonds with other blokes.

The technical term for such social bonds between persons of the same sex is: 'homosocial'. This is a neologism coined by literary theorist Eve Sedgwick when she discusses male bonding in literature. However, it's meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual', and can be characterised by intense homophobia. Male-only bonding will often involve homophobic jokes and references which work to distance homoerotic desire from the experience. And male-male relationships are often 'routed through triangular desire involving a woman'.⁴

Films use the technique of bonding *through* something – a woman or activity or object – to underscore male-to-male mateship stories as straight, and not gay.

Think about the relationship between Keanu Reeves (Johnny Utah, an ex pro-footballer now turned FBI agent) and Patrick Swayze (Bodhi, a heroic surfer) in that horrible Hollywood 'surf' film *Point Break*.

Utah and Bodhi go to the edge of death together – skydiving, surfing giant waves, and robbing banks. Bodhi and Johnny have a bit of a Bromance. Utah certainly thinks so and finds himself increasingly attracted to the adrenaline-charged lifestyle of Bodhi.

To ensure the audience don't begin to think Utah is becoming attracted to Bodhi himself a woman is thrown into the mix, who Utah has to save from Bodhi. In the grand scheme of things the woman doesn't really matter to the storyline. It's the intimate mateship between Bodhi and Johnny Utah that keeps the film ticking over.

But this tactic of using women as something to bond through and reinforce heterosexuality is not just a tactic used in Hollywood films. The run of the mill surf flicks always include shots of young women barely dressed. These shots are interspersed between images of crew in rubber, all ripped and flexing, glistening wet, shirts off, and changing into and out of wetsuits naked and in plain view.

These images of women work to short-circuit homoerotic interpretations of what's going on. It doesn't necessarily work. It is very easy to skip these images and get back to the wet muscular male bodies, if you are gay and dig perving on male surfers.

When hanging out with the boys talk about women comes up often: who shagged whom, how and where. Or we talk about surfing, sport, surfing, cars, surfing, work, surfing, politics, or surfing.

What this way of talking with a 'crutch' does in male-only groups, and during male-only events, is interrupt homoerotic interpretations of what's happening when we hang out and talk shit. To just want to spend time with your mate and talk about personal issues is ridiculed as a bit, well, 'gay'. You are allowed to be with the boys but not to want the boys.

The policing of male-to-male social bonding and mateship in surfing is common, and is due to an ever-present undercurrent of homophobia (fear of homosexuality). As a grommet I once read 'Tracks hates all poofers and thinks they should be put in a giant piston and squashed'. It stuck with me.

Homophobic jokes and insults are common in surfing. Out in the surf and at the beach I've heard heaps of crew use the words 'fag', 'poofers', 'homo' and 'faggot' to insult and abuse other crew. This attitude frames being gay or queer as 'deviant' and 'negative', which they are not.

The fact is, the idea of calling someone gay, bi, straight or otherwise is relatively new. Defining people according to their sexual choices and partners has only existed since the nineteenth century.⁵ Prior to this there were no 'homosexuals' or 'heterosexuals', but rather sexual acts that were approved of or disapproved of. Saying you were 'gay' or 'straight' wouldn't have made sense.

With the rise of biology, anatomy, medical science, and psychiatry in the modern era sex and whom you liked to have sex with became an object of study. 'Experts' like doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists wanted to manage people's sex and sexuality, and in turn what people could and could not do with their bodies.⁶

Some of these experts begin with the assumption that 'normal' sexuality is straight, and everything else – like being gay – is 'deviant' or a 'fetish'. People are then studied and categorised or boxed according to type of sexuality.

It works out far easier to classify and control people according to whom they prefer to have sex with than what they like to do and how they do it. The actual practices of having sex are too messy.

During a photo shoot for *Stab* magazine Bra Boy Koby Abberton surfed a notoriously dangerous and localised wave in a white wetsuit with pink accessories – gun belt, gloves and cowboy hat. The magazine called him a 'gay caballero'. Koby wasn't coming out of the closet, he was making fun of being gay. As he says in the article, 'You can tell what's gay. You know those guys we mean...they're the cowards who can't paddle in to a six-foot wave'.⁷ Acting gay was all a bit of a joke for Koby, and reminded everyone that he thinks being gay is about being weak and wearing pink – read feminine – and so not a 'real' man like him.

But being gay does not mean what Koby reckons. It doesn't mean attending the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras whilst spanking each other with pink paddles when wearing studded collars and leather chaps while prancing about with a poodle on a gold chain. Also, lets get real here; pulling back in the surf has absolutely nothing to do with someone's sexuality. Koby and Co. have some weird images and ideas in their heads about being gay. It makes me worry about their sanity.

Due to homophobia there are few openly gay surfers. Fred Pawle did an inspiring interview with ex pro-surfer Matt Brannon for *Stab* magazine. The by-line: 'Ex-pro surfer Matt Brannon is the toughest man in surfing (He's also Gay!)'.⁸

Branno reckons when he came out and told his mates he was gay they freaked out. Some of Branno's mates stopped hanging out with him, even though it took heaps of guts for him to 'come out of the closet'. It took more guts for Branno to tell his mates he was gay than to push himself over the edge on a wave sucking dry over the local reef. That's because while a wave may hurt, openly admitting you're gay pretty much guarantees emotional pain, if not physical pain.

There aren't many positive images of gay male surfers like Branno, but that is all beginning to change. In an echo of director Ang Lee's gay western movie *Brokeback Mountain* English director Ed Aldridge has made a gay surfing film called *Tanlines*.⁹ The film is about a gay relationship between two surfers in Australia. The reaction to the film in the surfing press and community was very defensive, rubbishing the film before it was even made. Crew told Aldridge to piss off with his 'homo' take on surfing, and the actors and director were even said to be worthy of being bashed.

Another surf film was released in March 2008. *Shelter* also deals with the conflict and confusion many surfers experience when trying to fit into surfing communities and still pursue their attraction for blokes.¹⁰ The film follows the lives of two Californian surfers who fall for each other after sharing waves, hanging out, and bonding. The director, Jonah Markowitz, was aware of how lots of surfers are cautious about depicting gay surfing and said

We'd be in a diner and people would ask what the film is about...I'd say, 'Oh, it's a family drama with some surfing involved,' just to feel it out before letting the whole world know I was filming a gay surfing film.¹¹

Positive images of blokes like Branno, and shown in *Tanlines* and *Shelter*, are important. They show us that gay blokes surf, even though there continues to be intimidation and denial. Homophobic abuse, and negative images burden gay surfers with a lack of acceptance, discrimination, sadness, poor self-esteem and self-perception, shame, and rejection. It is far worse than any unprovoked localism. If you show affection to another person, you get ostracised or assaulted. Go figure that one.

The positive images in the recent films, and of Branno, are in stark contrast to what happened to prominent surf photo journalist Paul Sargent.

Fred Pawle explains that in 2005 Sarge is alleged to have sexually assaulted Adam Blakely, another surf journalist, after a pro surf contest at J-Bay in South Africa.¹² The Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP) held an investigation and interviewed people Sarge was associated with. It was found that Sarge's behaviour was inexcusable.

I do not condone the non-consensual sexual act, it was very wrong. But I got to thinking about how the expectations in the surfing world that you be straight would have made it difficult for Sarge to maintain friendships, deal with clinical depression, and cope with his sexuality. The non-consensual sexual act was only the final nail in the coffin.

I find it disheartening how much of the surfing community is still overtly homophobic, while those who claim not to be homophobic stay silent far too much, myself included.

This silence can too easily equate to complicity with homophobic violence, ostracism, abuse, expectations etc. But mates are mates. Bromance, mateship, homosocial, what-the-fuck-ever. Homophobia should have nothing to do with it, and no place in surfing.

Sam comes back from London. We go to see the surf flick *Blue Horizons*, by Jack McCoy. It is showing at the plush Hayden Orpheum Picture Theatre in Sydney.

It's a wet night, so we park Sam's beat-up ute around the back of the building where there's more cover. It doesn't help. By the time we get to the theatre we're drenched, our shirts clingy.

In the cinema we scream and hoot at the screen as celluloid surfers belt the lip and get shacked. We scoff free choc top ice-creams, and promotional handouts for some lame-arse surfing company.

After the film we mill about, and grab a beer in the foyer. It is still pouring rain outside. Sam asks me what we should do next.

'Dunno.'

'How about heading back to my place for another beer, then a shower?'

There was a twinkle in Sam's eye as he said this. What the...? 'But I've seen you pashing heaps of girls mate.'

Sam tells me that he isn't strictly gay, but sometimes bloke's turn him on. He tells me about some raucous adventures in London.

'Nah, mate. Thanks for the compliment, but I'm just a boring vanilla straight bloke.'

We both laugh ourselves stupid.

When Sam drops me off at home he asks, 'You surfing tomorrow?'

'Yep.'

'Pick ya up at dawn, mate. Check ya.'

– Clifton Evers

¹ 'Relax Dear, It's Just a Bromance', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 August 2007.

² 'The Man Date', *New York Times*, 10 April 2005.

³ *Tracks* magazine, November 2007.

⁴ Sedgwick, E. (1985) *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia: Columbia University Press.

⁵ Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, London: Vintage.

⁶ Foucault, 1978.

⁷ *Stab* magazine, Issue 16.

⁸ *Stab* magazine, Issue 20.

⁹ *Tanlines*, Directed by Ed Aldridge, 2006.

¹⁰ *Shelter*, Directed by Jonah Markowitz, 2008.

¹¹ Available online at <http://gaysurfreport.com/media.htm#shelter> [accessed May 8, 2008].

¹² Pawle, F., *Stab* magazine, Issue 26.