Cronulla is a suburb nested in the Sutherland shire, an area of Sydney known for its ‘whiteness’, insularity and parochial cultural traditions centred on ‘surfie’ culture. This is represented in the self-image of people from ‘the shire’ whose local pride and proprietary sense of belonging is noted in claims that Cronulla is ‘God’s country’ and that there is no need to ‘cross the bridge’, a reference to the geographical separation of Cronulla from the broader Sydney community.

The specific event that was said to have led to the Cronulla riot was an attack on off-duty lifesavers by ‘Lebanese’ background youth on Cronulla beach. For ease of use I will use the term Lebanese background youth as a term to differentiate this social group from ‘white’ or ‘Anglo-Australian’ locals of Cronulla, though the analysis also goes some way to demonstrating the problematic nature of using this term given that the young people in question are second-generation Australians. The same can be said to apply to later descriptions of Sudanese and Pacific Islander young people, as well as descriptions of ‘white’ or ‘Anglo-Australian’ youth.

Whilst prompted by September 11, it should also be noted that these narratives fed into longer running political debates regarding the perceived ‘fracturing’ of the national community by a multicultural policy agenda (See Noble 2009; Harris 2013).
As a critical observer I found that these narratives, which identified the use of the Australian flag with an unproblematic, uniform identification of white youth with a national field of power opposed to an equally unproblematic, uniform ethnic minority ‘other’, marginalised aspects of the violence that were not easy to assign to these categories of difference, but signalled a complex, ambivalent and hybridised expression of youth identity, conflict and contest. These ideas resonated with the work of Les Back (1996), Anoop Nayak (2003), and, in an Australian context, Greg Noble (2009), Amanda Wise (2009) and Anita Harris (2013) who speak about the complex identifications young people forge in diverse, urban contexts; exhibiting uneasy cosmopolitan identifications alongside racism, intolerance and violence.

The findings of my doctoral research, which comprised interviews with 26 Cronulla youth in the period from 2006–2007 attests to this ambivalence, with locals contesting the idea that the riots were driven by nationalistic violence against ‘ethnic youth gangs’. Rather, some responses highlighted the unexpected convergence of these discursive identity spaces, by commenting on the way the Australian flag was displayed as though it were ‘gang colours’:

I think on that day they used – you saw the Australian flag all through these units.... Now ordinarily on Australia Day I would be happy to see that, but that day it looked like a badge of honour...I guess you could say a colour, like you’re a gang.

Suzi, Anglo-Australian background

They’re young and everyone wants to belong to something – they all just banded together.... They were patriotic but in a way that’s not patriotic to Australia. In a way it was like gang colours to put on the Australian flag.

Amanda, Anglo-Australian background

These understandings were strengthened by a project I worked on in 2008–2009, exploring young people’s perceptions of violent youth conflict in the

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4. During two research trips to Cronulla between December 2006 and July 2007, I interviewed 26 young people whose ages ranged from 18 to 30. The ethnic origin and gender of these young people is as follows: 26 residents of Cronulla, 24 of Anglo-Australian origin (12 males, 12 females), two of Lebanese-Australian origin (one male, one female). See doctoral thesis “Risk Nations: Shrinking space, lost security and the rise of violent youth sovereignties in Australia’s suburbs” (2012), for a more detailed description. The findings of my doctoral research will also be appearing in a forthcoming book, “Battle for the Flag” (Melbourne University Press).

5. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain the anonymity of interviewees and focus group participants.