

## **“We Grew Here You Flew Here”: Claims to “Home” in the Cronulla Riots**

***Clemence Due and Damien W. Riggs***

Fiona Allon writes that “... home, now more than ever, is seen as firmly connected to the world of politics and economics, as actively shaped and defined by the public sphere rather than existing simply as a refuge from it.”<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, claims to home as they are located in a relationship to claims of both national and local belonging are often a contested site within Australia, where notions of who is seen to be at home in Australia are constantly being challenged and reworked. Structured around the desire amongst white people to retain Australia as a “white nation,” claims to home may be seen as operating in complex ways in regards to the rights that arise from the ongoing existence of Indigenous sovereignties, and the politics surrounding levels of immigration from groups of people perceived as belonging to minority racial groups.

In this context, the notion of home is frequently drawn upon in relation to both how people perceive the way in which they, and others, belong in a country, and this raises questions surrounding who is legitimately able to call Australia home. Such discourses of home evoke feelings of ownership in people who feel that they have a legitimate claim to a country for reasons

primarily of race or location of birth. In Australia, despite the powerful presence and voice of Indigenous peoples, popular perceptions of the country tend to place such homely rights firmly in the laps of white people, who, through images of white nuclear families in front of white picket fences,<sup>2</sup> perceive themselves as already and rightfully at home in Australia. Yet such conceptions of Australia are not accepted without struggle. Notions of home are very much contested, especially in terms of Indigenous sovereignty and non-white immigration, both of which question the legitimacy of a normatively white Australia.

Such ideas of home as being a contested space in which issues of national belonging are played out in Australia were seen quite clearly in relation to the 2005 Cronulla riots, in which thousands of white Australians gathered around Cronulla beach, shouting at and threatening those located as "Lebanese Muslim" people. The people involved in the riots made it quite clear that whilst Australia was a home for them, it ought not to be home to people who were identified as Lebanese Muslims. Such racist opinions exemplified the fact that Australia is seen to be a white country, and therefore as a legitimate home to white people rather than to non-white minority groups or even to Indigenous Australians. This is discussed in more detail later in this paper.

Yet there was a wide-spread denial of racist causes behind the riots, which was most prominently seen when, in response to media questioning in relation to possible causes of the 2005 Cronulla riots, then Prime Minister John Howard stated that he "did not accept that there is underlying racism in Australia."<sup>3</sup> Howard made this comment despite the prominence of images at the time of the riots that clearly depicted white Australians wearing T shirts saying "no Lebs," chanting "Aussie Aussie Aussie," and even people proclaiming "we grew here you flew here" and "go home."

Howard's denial of racism may be read in part as functioning to warrant a sense of home amongst white Australians that is founded upon the denial of both Indigenous sovereignty and xenophobic violence (for example, in the chanting of "no Lebs" and "Aussie Aussie Aussie"), and in part upon the promotion of a sense of propriety over the very idea of home amongst white Australians (for example, in the banners blaring "go home," and "we grew here you flew here"). As Suvendrini Perera argues in relation to the riots, "...the politics of race became the politics of possession: proprietorial "Aussies" determined to reclaim their territory."<sup>4</sup> Constructions of home thus lie very much at the heart of the violence at Cronulla in December 2005, where it was clear that many white Australians felt that Australia was home to them in a way that it could not be to Lebanese Muslim Australians.

That this was the case is clearly evident in the text message circulated on the day of the riots amongst white Australians:

Aussies: This Sunday every f---ing Aussie in the shire, get down to North Cronulla to help support Leb and Wog bashing day. Bring your mates down and let's show them that this is our beach and their (sic) never welcome back.<sup>5</sup>

Here again the claim to home (“our beach”) is juxtaposed with a construction of Lebanese people (amongst others) as needing to be shown that they are “never welcome back” – that their sense of home must lay elsewhere, and certainly not at Cronulla. In fact, notions of Australia as being home only to white Australians were particularly evident in constructions of the beach as belonging to white Australians,<sup>6</sup> beaches that were therefore reclaimed from Lebanese and Muslim people who were perceived as invaders. This positioning of Cronulla beach as belonging to white Australians is particularly reinforced by the low number of immigrants born in non-English speaking countries living in the Sutherland Shire in which Cronulla is located.<sup>7</sup> However, Cronulla is the only Sydney beach suburb accessible by train, leading to the paradoxical situation whereby “the existence of a commuter train service allowing travel between the Western suburbs of Sydney and Cronulla Beach enabled a form of mobility for Lebanese families and youth [which] seemed to subvert the de facto containment of Sydney’s ethnically and racially diverse populations.”<sup>8</sup> As such, Cronulla beach is situated as “belonging” to its predominately white inhabitants whilst at the same time experiencing high levels of “intruders” (such as Lebanese Australians) who, as the Cronulla riots illustrated, are not seen as belonging on the beach.

Given that the media is the forum through which many populist notions of “home” and “belonging” are conveyed in Australia, this paper considers several extracts taken from newspaper articles which reported on the riots. The extracts analysed in the following section are taken from articles which appeared in *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* between the 12<sup>th</sup> December 2005, when the riots occurred, and the 31<sup>st</sup> December 2005. The articles were sourced using the database “Factiva” and were identified through combinations of keywords such as “Cronulla riots,” “race riots,” “riots” and “race.” Five hundred and eighty three articles were retrieved through this process. Two recurring discourses or themes were identified from the articles, and the articles containing the most pertinent and representative extracts were chosen for analysis within this paper.

The two discourses mobilised within the press in order to legitimate claims to home on the part of white Australians found within these articles

were: the deployment of a notion of "Australian values" to account for the violence of white Australians in excluding Others from the right to call Australia home; and a corresponding construction of belonging that delineated who was seen as entitled to belong upon the beach (and by implication in Australia), and who was able to make decisions about that space.

## Terminology

The question of how to categorise the two main cultural groups that were most typically referenced within the riots demands attention before discussing the constructions of "values" and "belonging." Given that part of the analysis focuses on the way in which the media dichotomises the two nationalities "Lebanese" and "Australians" (thereby excluding Lebanese Australians from the term "Australian"), it was recognised that this paper could potentially encounter a similar problem when differentiating between the two groups.

A further issue of categorisation is that relating to how best to represent the diverse experience of Lebanese Australians, particularly when the aforementioned deployment of the category "Lebanese" often appeared to function to construct a homogenous category of "Lebanese others" that failed to acknowledge the cultural diversity within the category "Lebanese." Furthermore, the category "Lebanese" often reads within the articles examined here as an implicit marker for a presumed-to-be religious identity (i.e. Muslim), even when this may not accurately reflect the identities of all Lebanese Australians; nor does it recognise the diverse range of practices and beliefs that constitute Islam as a religion and the varying meanings this has for Muslim people.

To address these issues, the categories chosen for use in this paper were "Lebanese Australians" or "Lebanese Muslim Australians" (in order to recognise Lebanese Australians as being Australian and also to recognise that, in the case of the Cronulla riots, religion did play a part) and "majority white group members" or "white Australians" (used interchangeably) to denote the other group involved in the riots. It is acknowledged that there are different experiences included in these terms; especially in relation to the categories used in relation to the Lebanese Australian people, as these terms do not capture the complexity of the relationships between different groups of people bundled under the same term. However, the aim of these categories is not to conclusively denote a nationality, cultural or religious group, but rather to represent the clear divide between the white majority who were the main protagonists in the violence on the main day of the riots (December 11<sup>th</sup> 2005), and the cultural group (generally classified as

“Lebanese Australians” in this paper) who were the main target of the racial violence.

### **“Home” and the notion of “Australian Values”**

The currency of “Australian values” used in an attempt to define “home” has increased since the Cronulla riots, where, for instance, we have seen politicians make a wide range of claims in regards to who is deemed to be a desirable Australian citizen. Such claims were evident in media reports following the riots, where the concept of defending Australian values was used not only to justify the riots, but also to create a dichotomy between white Australians and other cultural groups. Such a dichotomy centred upon the assumption that the values held by white Australians are inherently superior to those of other groups of people, and thus ought to be adopted by all people in Australia.

Such claims to a set of unique Australian values are ridiculous not only, as Hage suggests, for their ignorance of the multiple values held by a wide range of people in Australia, but also for their disregard of the values that migrant people (for example) may bring to Australia. Statements about Australian values thus only make sense if we are to read them as referring to *white* Australian values. The implication of this racialised construction of Australian values is that in order to belong in Australia, one must be seen to adopt these so-called “values,” and adhere to the norms set by white Australia.

As such, values can be viewed as a tool through which the parameters of Australia as home to white people are able to be established. These so-called specific Australian values form part of the imagined nation<sup>9</sup> in which white people construct an image of how they want the nation to look. Such conceptualisations work to exclude Indigenous Australians and other minority racial groups from being at home in Australia unless they too adopt these same specific values. Therefore, notions of home as they relate to the promotion of a set of Australian values thus function to implicitly (and at times explicitly) construct those who are positioned as “undesirable” within white Australia’s conceptualisation of home.

### **“Home” and belonging**

Adherence to what are often referred to as specifically Australian values is typically regarded to be a prerequisite for a desired assimilation into the dominant culture (in this case, white Australia). As such, it could be argued that in order to belong in Australia, and therefore to be able to con-

sider Australia as home, one must be seen to adopt these so-called "Australian values," and adhere to the norms set by white Australians. Discourses concerning this concept of belonging (both in Australia and more specifically on Cronulla beach) were frequently used in the media following the riots, and were often used in order to explain and justify the riots, and to mitigate the possible racist elements involved.

In his book *Banal Nationalism*, Michael Billig writes that nations are "imagined" by the people living in them, rather than being founded upon objective criteria.<sup>10</sup> They are based on the idea that the people making up the nation have an image of the way they want that nation to look. This involves the construction of a national identity for those in the nation, therefore creating a national "we" (as opposed to "foreigners," who are then positioned as "them" or the "other," from whom "we" identify ourselves as being fundamentally different).

From this understanding of nationalism it follows, Hage writes, that dominant group members of a nation have an image of what that space "ought" to look like, in terms of who gets to occupy that space, and under what conditions. As such, notions of "undesirability" rather than "inferiority" become important.<sup>11</sup> Whilst a dominant group may not necessarily consider a certain racial group to be inferior, they may nonetheless consider them to be undesirable, and therefore not want them occupying "their" space, unless perhaps it is under certain terms. This means that the problem becomes a spatial-national one rather than one of racism, in which discourses of belonging and nationalism imply a positioning of a minority group into the national space according to how and where the dominant group wants them to fit.<sup>12</sup>

Within Australia, where the denial of Indigenous sovereignty continues to provoke fear as to the possibility for the denial of *white* sovereignty, those positioned as "undesirables" become anybody who is seen to not fit the desired category of whiteness. Such people become seen as a threat to Australia as a legitimate home to white people, and raise unwanted questions surrounding how and when a country can be home to others. Within white Australia, the country can only be home to others when those others are seen to be conforming to the desired prerequisites. In the case of the Cronulla riots, it is clear that Lebanese Australians were not seen to be doing that.

Such a framework of the "undesirability" of certain racial groups confirms, as Joseph Pugliese argues, "the impossibility of securing for oneself an identity indissociably tied to place, origin or nation."<sup>13</sup> In other words, stereotypes about a certain person will already be in place based on their racial appearance even before they are able to create an identity for them-

selves. Pugliese discusses this specifically in relation to the category “of Middle Eastern appearance” (one which was used frequently in the Cronulla riots). He writes that “the figure of Middle Eastern appearance is constructed by a set of stereotypical attributes, it operates in terms of a *pre-disposition*: it situates and establishes the cultural ineligibility of a subject’s identity *quasi-prior* to the arrival of the subject.”<sup>14</sup> And as such, people are frequently only seen to be “at home” in the country in which their racial appearance places them. Hence it is frequently reported that it is not enough to answer “Melbourne” or “Sydney” when asked “where are you from”? should you happen to look in some way “un-Australian” (or not white?).

Discourses about the undesirability of certain racial groups position the white Australian as a worried national manager who is concerned with national spatial control (rather than concern about a specific race), therefore relegating the migrant or minority group members to the role of a national object who is able to be positioned according to where they are “meant” to fit in. Hage argues that under such an ideology, dominant group members have an “ideal” nation in which people from other cultural backgrounds are included only as long as they know, and keep to, the place assigned to them.<sup>15</sup>

The question then arises as to how it is that certain people in a national space end up taking a managerial role concerning that space whilst others do not. The concept of space management is discussed by Goldie Osuri and Bobby Banerjee, who elaborate an understanding of the dilemmatic nature of constructions of belonging in Australia. For example, whilst non Anglo ethnic groups in settler countries (like Australia) are often marked as diasporic (and therefore considered to be migrants), Anglo groups are most often *un*marked as diasporic, and as such are considered to be logically “in control” of, and “at home” in, the national space.<sup>16</sup> This way of thinking about different cultures in Australia reveals the manner in which white Australians retain ownership of the nation, and take the managerial roles over the nation as discussed by Hage.<sup>17</sup>

As national managers, the talk of dominant group members often reflect worries surrounding minority groups “not integrating” enough, even though, as Hage points out, integration into a country is often inevitable.<sup>18</sup> Such discourses (similar to those concerning the denial of racism discussed earlier) justify racist attitudes towards minority groups when such groups are supposedly not making an effort to “fit into” Australian culture and adopt Australian values. Paradoxically, however, discourses concerning integration also reflect a need to “supervise,” so that dominant group members still retain their managerial role and remain in control of the nation. Such a need indicates a fear of the changes that “real” integration

could potentially bring to a community.<sup>19</sup>

Discourses concerning national space and belonging were common following the riots and, as will be shown in the following analysis section, debates concerning whether the riots were about racism or the fact that Lebanese Australian people do not “belong” or adhere to “Australian values” were prevalent.

### **Analysis: “Home” on the beach**

In the following four extracts we can see some of the complex ways in which constructions of home, values and belonging are deployed to construct whiteness as central to Australia, and to exclude from national and homely belonging others who are not considered white enough to be Australians.

#### ***Extract 1***

##### ***Our Racist Shame***

***Les Kennedy, Damien Murphy, Malcolm Brown and Tim Colquhoun***<sup>20</sup>

The Premier, Morris Iemma, led a chorus of ferocious condemnation. “These hooligans have brought shame upon themselves,” he said. “Some today tried to hide behind the Australian flag. The Australia that I know, and intend to preserve as Premier does not support the sort of behaviour that we saw today.”

The Police Commissioner, Ken Moroney, said the rioters – many of them carrying the national flag and even singing the anthem – were “clearly un-Australian.”

“I’m ashamed as a man and as the Commissioner of Police,” Mr Moroney said. “Never have I seen a mob turn like they have today, particularly on . . . women and . . . the NSW Ambulance Service. That has brought a higher level of shame to those involved.”

Extract 1 appears to condemn the actions at Cronulla by quoting both the Premier of NSW and the Police Commissioner who spoke out against the behaviour seen at the riots. However, whilst this is the case, the extract appears to be less concerned with the racial violence underpinning the riots, and more concerned with the fact that the actions were seen to be “unhomely” or “un-Australian.” We can see this in the contrast between “the Australia that [the Premier] knows” and the group of “hooligans who brought shame upon themselves.” As a result of this contrast only a small



handful of people are held responsible for the violence displayed, whilst “ordinary” people are not culpable and are not implicated as being racist. This portrays racism as only existing in the fringes of society, with “ordinary” people neither being affected by racism, nor being responsible for it.

In regards to the Premier’s statement that “some today tried to hide behind the Australian flag,” Michael Billig (in his work on mundane nationalism) examines how the rhetoric of “the flag” often serves, in very subtle ways, to reassert white hegemony, even when it is white people who have “brought shame upon themselves.” Billig writes that, along with more explicit acts of nationalism (such as the Cronulla riots), we also witness mundane enactments of nationalism that occur on a day-to-day basis that are arguably equally as problematic (such as the Premier’s reference to the flag as representative of the “Australia [he] knows”).<sup>21</sup> Perera comments that the Australian flag acts as an “affirmation of enduring racial kinship with ‘British stock,’” and as such use of the flag further reinforces Australia as a home to white people.<sup>22</sup>

The Premier’s comments further suggest that whilst it is seen as important to proudly be “Australian” (and hence to have the ability to differentiate between being Australian and un-Australian), it is not acceptable to explicitly wave the Australian flag as a marked sign of a claim to nationalism.<sup>23</sup> When the behaviour of any individual crosses a certain line (whereby their behaviours shift from national “pride” to national fervour), it becomes unsuitable for them to employ symbols of nationalism that could be misread as violent (such as the flag waving during the riots).

As such, whilst this extract appears to condemn the violence at Cronulla, it does so on the basis of a notion of “un-Australian” behaviour, rather than because the riots were the result of racism. In a similar way, the violence was situated as only being the fault of certain people (in this case described as “hooligans”), and not as an issue which affects people on a daily basis.

The second extract takes this concept of denying racism one step further by effectively excusing the actions of the dominant white group involved in the Cronulla riots altogether. The extract begins by comparing “Anglo Australians” to people from other countries, stating that whilst they may be intolerant, so are people of other nationalities. The extract begins by justifying the intolerance of white Australians and goes on to state that if “outsiders” conformed to specific norms then white Australians may not be intolerant at all, and would be happy to “live harmoniously with them.” This positions Lebanese Muslim people as responsible for conforming to the values held by white Australians. Following this, the article claims in various ways that Lebanese Australians (and in particular men), have not made an

effort to conform. This apparent lack of conformity to white values effectively serves to excuse the actions of white Australians at Cronulla.

**Extract 2**

***Anything to feel proud, be it money or false belief***

***Clive Hamilton***<sup>24</sup>

The causes of the violence at Cronulla and Maroubra are more complicated. Anglo Australians have deep if mostly latent reserves of intolerance, but in this they are not so different from people in most other countries. But as long as outsiders conform to the broadly accepted norms Australians are happy to live harmoniously with them.

It is clear, however, that many Lebanese Muslims have not integrated as well as other waves of postwar immigrants. They are more insular and less willing to intermarry. The macho culture of young Lebanese men is out of tune with modern Australian attitudes about acceptable public behaviour. It is alarming that many of them are in their late 20s and early 30s and are still manifesting juvenile hoonish behaviour.

Extract 2 begins by comparing "Anglo Australians" to people from other countries, stating that whilst such Australians may be intolerant, so are people of other nationalities. In doing so the extract begins by justifying the intolerance of white Australians and goes on to state that if "outsiders" conformed to specific norms then white Australians would cease to be intolerant, and would be happy to "live harmoniously with them." Following this, the article claims that in fact Lebanese Muslims (and particularly men) have not made an effort to conform; that they are "insular," have a "macho culture" which is "out of tune with modern Australian attitudes" and that they display "juvenile hoonish behaviour." These repeated criticisms of Lebanese Muslim people effectively serve to excuse the actions of white Australians at Cronulla.

The construction of Lebanese Muslim people as not entitled to call Australia "home" is made even more evident in the distinction between the use of the racial descriptors "Australian" and "Lebanese," which implies that Lebanese people as a group are not included in the term "Australians," thus further positioning them as "outsiders" who do not belong.<sup>25</sup> Yet the extract also assumes that there are certain conditions under which groups such as Lebanese Muslims *are* welcome in the country, namely that if such groups

want to call Australia “home,” they must conform to the norms and expectations set by the dominant (white) culture, and that if this had already been the case then riots like Cronulla would not have occurred.

This second extract thus again constructs the riots as being about issues other than racism, and does not acknowledge the racist behaviour which was enacted at Cronulla. Rather, the extract portrays Lebanese people as unable to take on Australian values (or “broadly accepted norms”) and thus unable to be included in the term “Australian.” This implies that the cause of the violence at Cronulla was the apparent lack of effort on the behalf of the Lebanese people to integrate into Australia. The rejection of Lebanese Muslims from the category “home” is thus depicted as resulting from their own behaviours, rather than from the exclusion of them by white Australia.

Along with “values” and “home,” another discourse that appeared frequently following the riots (which is seen in the next two extracts) revolved around the idea of belonging in terms of who is allowed to live within the national space, and who gets to make managerial decisions regarding that space. Hage discusses this in regards to the ways in which white Australians often claim to “worry” over the shape of the white nation, and its changing face as a result of ongoing immigration.<sup>26</sup> Such worries reflect the fears of white Australians that, as a result of non-white immigration, their home is changing in a way which is beyond their control.

The idea of national space is also discussed by Billig, who writes that nationalist thinking involves a dichotomy between “us” and “them,” with “us” being considered to be superior to the “foreigners.”<sup>27</sup> These discourses were common in texts written after the riots, with Lebanese people often being constructed as the “other.” Often Lebanese Australians were considered as not belonging to the category “Australian” and were thus denied an Australian national identity.

The idea of belonging follows directly on from the idea of values. A re-occurring theme in this discourse is that in order to belong in a country you have to ascribe to certain “norms” of the dominant culture. This is directly related to values, in that if such values are not adhered to by a minority group, the people within that group are not considered to belong in a specific culture, and therefore are unable to lay claims to that country being “home.” This theme of belonging is evident in third extract below.

**Extract 3*****Making Sense of a Black Day******Michael Gordon***<sup>28</sup>

What makes the violence most troubling is it was carried out in the name of defending Australian values. It had one group of Australians assaulting ambulance officers and police as they went to the aid of another group of Australians.

NSW Premier Morris Iemma insisted the trigger for the bloodshed and bigotry was "a cowardly attack on an Australian icon, a surf life-saver" by youths of Middle Eastern appearance the week before.

Locals say the seeds of trouble were sown more than a decade ago as gangs of youths of mainly Lebanese background made a habit of invading the one beach connected to a railway and accessible from the western suburbs.

"I don't condone violence," says Ian Goode, 57, who has lived at Cronulla for 50 years. "But I certainly don't condone the thuggery that these guys display and how they treat women. I think the locals had just had enough."

Similar to Extract 1, Extract 3 provides examples of values being used to defend the actions of white Australians at Cronulla, and to deny any allegations of racist behaviour. It differs from the first extract however, as it begins by condemning the use of values as a justification for the violence, stating that "what makes the violence most troubling is that it was carried out in the name of defending Australian values." Despite this condemnation, the extract continues on to quote the New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma who stated that the riots were a "cowardly attack on an Australian icon," and also to quote a person living at Cronulla beach saying that he does not "condone the thuggery that these guys display and how they treat their women." Both of these quotes refer to presumed Australian values and serve to create a divide both between those actions considered to be Australian or un-Australian (as seen also in the previous extract), and those values which are seen to differentiate "Australian" people from "Lebanese" people.

Despite the condemnation of the violence of white Australians on the basis of values, the use of the word "trigger" in line 4 effectively removes any responsibility for the riots from the hands of those white Australians.

Much like in Extract 2, the use of this word constructs the riots as a *reaction* to an event which was initiated by Lebanese people. If white Australians are seen simply to have been reacting, then the responsibility for the event is removed from the dominant group members involved, and by implication placed in the hands of Lebanese Australian people. This is reinforced by the statement that the riots were in reaction to a “cowardly attack on an Australian icon.” Again this implies that the behaviour of the white Australians involved was in reaction to an action initiated by Lebanese Australians (the attack spoken of occurred a few days before the riots when a white surf lifesaver was attacked by a group of men reported to be “of Middle Eastern appearance”).

Whilst Extract 3 does go some way towards acknowledging Lebanese Australians as Australians by stating in the first paragraph that “it had one group of Australians assaulting ambulance officers ... as they went to the aid of another group of Australians,” it nevertheless still invokes the notion of Lebanese Australians as not able to claim Australia as home by using the words “locals” and “invading.” By positioning “locals” directly opposite “gangs of youths of mainly Lebanese background,” the implication is that such youths are not local and therefore do not belong in the Cronulla beach area. This is further supported by the description of such gangs as “invading the one beach connected to a railway.” Once again, the use of the word “invading” implies that the beach is an area in which Lebanese Australian youth do not belong.

The concept of belonging is reinforced in the next paragraph when a “local” is quoted, stating that “I don’t condone violence ... but I certainly don’t condone the thuggery these guys display and how they treat their women. I think the locals had just had enough.” Once again, “these guys” (Lebanese Australian men) are portrayed as separate to “the locals” (and therefore constructed as not local and not at home), and the responsibility for the violence is removed from the hands of the dominant group members (the locals) who were apparently driven to the actions seen at Cronulla because they had had enough of the “thuggery” displayed. The use of this particular quote in Extract 3 serves to portray the violence as being about gender. The reaction of the white people involved in the Cronulla riots is depicted as being about the “thuggery” of Lebanese Australians and the (apparently negative) way in which they treat “their women.” Once again, whilst such issues clearly played an important role in the riots, the extract focuses on the concept of gender values in order to mitigate the responsibility of white people and to deny the racist element involved.

As such, this extract constructed the riots to be about struggles over belonging in terms of white Australians defending their beach (as their

home territory) from the "thuggery" of the Lebanese Australian men and their treatment of women, and the earlier attacks on an "Australian icon" – the surf lifesaver. Given that the riots are constructed in such a way, not only are the racist elements once again not acknowledged, but the white Australians involved are once again portrayed as only reacting to an external trigger rather than displaying racist behaviour.

Similar to Extract 3, and to many of the other previous extracts examined, the fourth and final extract also claims that the riots were about issues other than defending Australia as a home to white people. The start of the extract states that "testosterone-fuelled misbehaviour at beaches ... is common," and it goes on to claim that "clashes of varying intensity have been happening for years." These claims effectively liken the riots at Cronulla in December 2005 with the tensions that existed in the 1960s when there were "regular fights" between "surfies" and "rockers." As such the racist elements of the violence are down-played, and the actions are instead normalised and equated to any other form of tension between different groups of people, under the banner of "beach culture," in which white people are seen to be able to participate and Lebanese people are not.

#### ***Extract 4***

##### ***Let's take back our beach***

##### ***Editorial***<sup>29</sup>

Testosterone-fuelled misbehaviour at beaches – not just Cronulla – is common. That does not excuse it, but it should be placed in context. The beach is where Australians relax, but it is also where cultures mix at leisure. Or they should. In practice it does not quite work like that. The beach culture tends to dominate as those who live nearby gradually acquire a proprietary attitude towards the beach itself. "This is our beach," said one inflammatory text message circulating this week. Our beach? Who are "we" here?

The Sutherland Shire, despite the presence for a time of a migrant hostel in South Cronulla, was for many years a particularly homogeneous Anglo-Celtic enclave. To some extent it still is. Because it is the only Sydney beach on a train line, it gets many visitors on weekends who do not belong to the local culture. Clashes of varying intensity have been happening regularly for many years. In the 1960s, Cronulla was one venue for regular fights between gangs of locals – surfies – and the out-group of the day, rockers ... The out-group

were not just different, they were inferior – cowardly people who roved in packs, used weapons and would not fight man-to-man.

Similar things are said about Middle Eastern youths today. Quite apart from the events of last week, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that indeed some do rove in packs and on the beach their behaviour can be ill-mannered in the extreme. The fact that they may feel excluded by the beach culture, and that their exaggerated aggression springs from a feeling of inferiority, is no excuse.

This extract involves the notion of belonging rather than racism as being the central component to the riots – there are people who *do* belong on the beach and people who do not. Again, notions of home become important here, since for those who “do not belong to the local culture,” the beach cannot become a part of their conceptualisations of Australia as home. This reinforces the idea of a white Australian identity, where the beach is home to white (male) Australians, and where white men become national heroes in the form of surf lifesavers.

Furthermore, when stating that the beach gets many visitors who “do not belong to the local culture,” it seems that this fact is used to justify the tension between different groups of people as something that is apparently “so common” at the beach. Not only this, but once again Lebanese Australians are positioned as not belonging either on Cronulla beach, or (by implication) in Australia more broadly.

The extract then moves from a discussion of “in-groups” and “out-groups” at Cronulla beach to discuss the “Middle Eastern youths” more specifically. It compares them to the “out-group” of the 1960s, stating that there is “anecdotal evidence” to suggest that their behaviour on the beach is “ill-mannered in the extreme” and that they “rove in packs.” Once again Lebanese Australians are presented in a negative light with no mention of the specific anti-social behaviour of the dominant group members involved, and once again the riots are constructed to be about issues other than racism.

As with the previous extracts, this final extract also ignores both the responsibility for the violence of the white people involved, and the fact that there was a racist element to the riots. This is achieved by normalising the violence seen at the beach by equating it with other forms of tensions that have occurred in the past, thereby overlooking the specific racist quality of the December riots. The extract thus constructs the riots to be about belonging on the beach (which the Lebanese Australian people involved apparently do not), and therefore once again excludes them from being able

to claim that Australia is home.

## Conclusions

As can be seen from the analysis of these extracts, the violence seen at the Cronulla riots was explained in the press by reference to Australian values and the concept of belonging, with a corresponding denial of any racist behaviour. Australia, (and more specifically, Cronulla beach) was seen to be home to white people, whilst Lebanese Australians were not considered to belong on the beach, nor (by extension) in Australia more broadly. Such constructions were normalised in the press by claims to the legitimacy of white belonging, a denial of racism and an assertion of white Australian values, all of which meant that white people were constructed as normatively belonging and being at home in Australia.

Whilst the behaviour of the white Australians involved may not necessarily have been altogether excused in the media on the basis of that homely belonging (although in many cases it was), it nevertheless was constructed primarily as the result of a minority group not assimilating into the dominant Australian culture. The extracts also frequently assumed that if Lebanese Australian people had conformed to the expectations of white Australians then the riots would never have occurred. In other words, the violence of white Australians at Cronulla is mitigated because they were only reacting to the supposed negative behaviour of another cultural group. And furthermore, should that other cultural group have adopted the norms and values of Australia, they would have been seen to be more "at home," therefore possibly removing the stimulus for the riots in the first place.

As discussed, the contribution of racism to the Cronulla riots and in Australia more broadly was either explicitly or implicitly denied in the press following the riots, with the violence associated with the riots frequently being blamed on other factors. If violence among white Australians was acknowledged, the behaviour was often excused through recourse to the supposition that the blame lay with Muslim people because of their apparent lack of conformity to "Australian" norms and disregard of "Australian" values. Such justifications thus tended to produce a denial of racism, as any admission of racist attitudes was constructed as being deserved.

If racism was acknowledged at all it was relegated to a specific place (such as Cronulla) or to a specific group of people (such as "Hooligans"), and was not considered to be a problem affecting ordinary people in their day-to-day life. Once again this effectively meant that racism was not deemed to be an underlying issue in Australia, and was relegated only to the more extreme fringes of society. As such, the denial of racism in the



press following the riots served to legitimise white hegemony, and to therefore assert white values, white ownership of the national space, and a corresponding perception of Australia as a home solely for white Australians rather than any other cultural group.

As we continue to see (for example in then Prime Minister John Howard's praise of Greek communities for "adequately assimilating"), Australia is often constructed as a "good nation" that is willing to accept those who come to its shores, and to allow others to make Australia their home. Yet such constructions of Australia are not adequately demonstrated in reality, when asylum seekers continue to be denied visas, and when communities such as Lebanese Australians (and more recently, immigrants from Sudan) are accused of "failing to integrate" and are therefore unable to call Australia home. Such claims are also in doubt when white Australia continues to deny Indigenous sovereignty rights, thereby constructing Australia as a *priori* home to white Australians which denies the long history of Australia as home to Indigenous people. Focusing on the wide range of ways in which racism is played out within and on behalf of the white nation may help to illustrate why constructions of the "good nation" are so desperately held on to – they are used to mitigate the reality of racial violence since colonisation, and thus to legitimate the claims to belonging made by white Australians.

Refuting Howard's claims to a "good nation" thus requires ongoing analyses of the ways in which racism and constructions of home are enacted both on a daily basis through institutional norms and their protection of white race privilege, and in specific acts of violence such as those at Cronulla. More specifically, examining how notions of "home" are deployed to warrant white violence and legitimate white ownership will assist in the identification of the ways in which "home" functions as an exclusionary tool aimed at maintaining white hegemony and undermining perceived threats through recourse to what are taken as natural categories such as "Australian values." Exploring the functions of "home" significantly challenge the purportedly "calm waters" of white Australian belonging and serve as reminders that those of us who identify as white Australians are never truly at home in a nation founded upon illegal possession.<sup>30</sup>

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## NOTES

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