

Africa Day Festival in Yeoville (Johannesburg, South Africa): Reclaiming a Physical, Social and Political Space

Pauline Guinard¹

¹·Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, Geography, Paris, France

pauline.guinard@gmail.com

Yeoville is a pericentral suburb in the City of Johannesburg. One of the first desegregated suburbs and a place of activism against Apartheid (1948-1994) from the late 1970's, Yeoville has been facing a cycle of decline since the mid-1990's, marked by white flight, urban decay, joblessness and xenophobic tensions. Now known as a place of crime and violence, Yeoville residents are trying to improve their life in the neighbourhood as well as to change the image of their suburb in Johannesburg and beyond. For that purpose, several community-based organisations launched an initiative that aimed at creating an annual street festival. The first festival was in the form of a performance and took place in May 2010. The purpose of this performance was to celebrate "Africa Day" – a day established in 1963 in remembrance of the formation of the Organisation of African Unity –, but also to commemorate the South-African xenophobic attacks of May 2008. Thanks to this event, the residents aimed at reinventing Yeoville by making diversity an attractive factor, a source of enrichment and a basis for a renewed identity rather than a sign of fear, tensions and divisions. In fact, Yeoville has always been a place of immigration. Since the early XXth century and until recently, it was home to Eastern European migrants (especially the Jewish community). Currently, it is *the* destination for migrants from other African countries. In this context, the street festival was conceived as a way to make a statement: Yeoville is an African village; a suburb not like any other in Johannesburg. It is a welcoming space and one of cultural exchange, not one of division and exclusion. Indeed, as we will try to demonstrate, this festival can be analysed as a means to appropriate physically the (public) space of the suburb in order to showcase a new (re)presentation of Yeoville; a way to create a social platform for exchange and dialogue, at least for a day; and, a means to attract political attention, particularly from the metropolitan authorities of Johannesburg. Therefore, the presence of all Yeoville residents – migrants or not, legal or illegal – in the streets of the neighbourhood has given this mixed community a visibility, which is in itself a recognition of the migrants' existence as well as a demand for their rights. Finally, this performance is a physical, social and political claim on space.