

Remembering and Dismembering the Past: Rugby, Race and the Politics of Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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As James Baldwin (1985) stated, “the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and that history is literally present in all that we do.” In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, the past is being reinvented as people deal with changes in society. In particular, personal histories are being altered to fit the perceptions of the resulting shifts in politics, culture and power since the ending of apartheid.

This paper examines the reconstruction of personal histories using case studies of white rugby supporters and “Coloured” rugby players and administrators. The research is based on historical records and oral interviews carried out in South Africa between 1992 and 1995. While a sense of nostalgia is present in personal accounts, a clear process of glossing over aspects of the past is clearly evident. These cases allow for an examination of the ways that dominant and subordinate groups deal with and even reinvent the past in personal strategies for relating to the present. While racial reconciliation in the dominant discourse was present since the Rugby World Cup of 1995, there are clear racial undercurrents evident in personal accounts.

The process of reconstruction of historical experience is difficult. Historians of the recent past must understand it to reconstruct past events from recollections based in the present. The paper concludes with a discussion of what present versions of the past can tell us about the past and present in South Africa.