You see dis bat? I use dis to score more hundreds playing friendly cricket than I ever did back in Guyana or in de Toronto leagues. I guess you could say I really came of age in de last two decades. Once I had my feet wet, initiated in de leagues, dere was no stopping me. Oh, one tour we went on in Barbados, you know against, what he name? You know, Marcus Jones’ cousin dere. Ah, yes, Dighton. I was facing him and make ninety-nine runs. Game nearly finish and me, I need one run to make a hundred. That would be eight centuries for me in friendlies. So I standin’ guard like dis. I waitin’ for one las’ ball, an’ I see he talkin’ talkin’ to de captain. Next t’ing I know, he bowl wide. Wide! Dat ball come all de way out here so. Wide! You ever see anyt’ing so stupid? Raas! Me cyaan’t believe dat captain tell Dighton bowl wide so me cyaant make me hundred. Wide! Dem noh want give a man a hundred against dem. So I was ninety-nine not out dat day, boy.

Ninety-nine? Ninety-nine? I neva woulda do dat. But you know, dat how t’ings go today. Everyone competition competition. Dem no care ’bout honesty, ’tegrity, or sportsmanship like we learned in before times. What?! When we were boys, we would play morning to sunset an’ no matter you win, lose or draw you always show de other guys respec’. You noh bowl wide. Back den every little nook and crevice we found, like dere, just three square feet, as a likkle chil’ we would play cricket right dere. And de ball would seldom go into de water or go over de fence because we were force’ to control it. I control my ball see. If I bowling or batting, I control it. We make up our games, wit’ whatever we could fin’. A tin can for a wicket, an orange for a ball. I play every day and dem always respec’ me cause I do it all. Given the opportunity, I made my centuries. I was good. Bowl, wicket keep, bat. I neva had a bat like dis in dem days, but still, I could lash!

Stuart Hall provides astute advice concerning the cultural practices of filmmaking in the Afro-Caribbean diaspora: rather than “thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 2003, p. 234). We must question, what are those acts of production and representation? In addition to “routes,” that is, cross-border travel,
the Afro-Caribbean diaspora is produced through emotional experiences and represented through storytelling. Important to Afro-Caribbean storytelling is the style of oration: boasting, using verbal repetition for emphasis and nostalgic monologues. The above narrative, “Ninety-nine Not Out,” weaves together the stories told to me by three spectators at a home game one afternoon. The narrative captures the MCSC member as a man-of-words or, more specifically, the “sweet talking” man (Abrahams, 1983). The interlocutors conveniently leave out the part of the experience that describes failure (e.g., the inability to produce runs with the final ball offered after the wide ball). Stories instead demonstrate sophisticated language, bravado and grandiloquence in service of illustrating prowess and potency. In the space of the cricket ground, where reputation (as opposed to respectability) is valued, men spend their entire afternoon and evenings for the entire summer engaged in embodied, stylised, creative, sport-related storytelling to affirm their racial and gender status. Remembering is a political act; the past may or may not have existed as it is remembered, especially as club members age, their memories fail and their stories merge with the stories of others. Their current inability to produce (in cricket, labour, financial, or sexual terms) can be masked with stories of past potency. Facts about the homeland transform into fiction, but the memory becomes more real with each renewal, especially as such memories are shared.

Longing for the past

The sharing of collective memories is an attempt to recreate, memorialise and relive the past. Afro-Caribbean migrants nostalgically reminisce about cricket experiences. They passionately recount and in some cases, imaginatively recreate their career highlights and lowlights. They often use props, including T-shirts, score sheets and cricket equipment (such as “dis bat”), to help tell their stories and prove their previous athletic prominence. Their stories involve friends and family members who were there, such as “Marcus Jones’ cousin,” indicating the importance of interpersonal relationships to their participation. Their recollections are always acted out, told with gestures, pointing “out here so” (one metre away) to replicate the original events in order for a new audience to bear witness. They also emphasise how different things are today in Canada, in comparison to “when we were boys” and “before times” back in their homelands. Their desires for and stories about other places and other times tie them to plurilocal homelands and to each other. Although men’s talk has been highlighted as a
key feature of Afro-Caribbean blackness (Abrahams, 1983; Wilson, 1973), not enough attention has been paid to the particular way in which older men express themselves in these storytelling circles. Their wealth of experience (seven decades in some cases) provides them with a plethora of past experiences from which to draw. This chapter examines the ways in which older men’s storytelling is nostalgic and recreates a spatial and temporal sense of home as a racialised and gendered space.

MCSC members reflect on three different types of nostalgic stories through which the values of the community become known and shared. First, they discuss how poor they were as children and the ingenuity they deployed to create equipment for the bat-and-ball game that sustained them throughout their youth. They link stories about making balls, inventing drills, risking punishment just to play cricket, and playing alongside future national heroes, to their own sporting prowess and to the achievements of the West Indies (Windies) team in a bygone era. Second, by sharing their memories of the Windies cricket supremacy in the 1970s and 1980s, MCSC members are able to demonstrate their sport and political knowledge, and revel in the pride they once felt for their nation, region, gender and race. Even their discussions of their former poverty and the current Windies failures contribute to understandings of the homeland and exhibit the (dis)continuities of the immigrant experience. Third, in addition to the various routes the Mavericks travel in order to reconnect with their kin and kith, their *stories about their travels* to places in the Caribbean and Caribbean places in other countries appease their longing for the past and an elsewhere. They regenerate what they have lost and confirm their belonging to a Black Atlantic interpersonal network through their travel stories. They become conscious of their black culture as a result of their “out-migration and subsequent return [which], along with tourism, have precipitated an unprecedented degree of cultural self-awareness, canonization of tradition, and pride” (Matory, 2008, p. 950). Around the cricket pitch, the Mavericks use a “wide ball” or a spectacularly hit “four” on a cricket trip as the impetus to recall personal and broader social histories, and deal with the pain of temporal and physical displacement.

Nostalgia, from the Greek *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (longing), is an important dimension of the production of Afro-Caribbean identity and community. Nostalgia, once portrayed as a private, pathological, physical illness characteristic of those forced from their homes or unable to return to them (i.e., soldiers, slaves and refugees), evolved to be considered a normal collective emotional state (Davis, 1979, p. 14). Today, nostalgia is no longer regarded negatively and is not only connected to pining for a geographical home. It is seen as
a “bittersweet” emotion of wistful longing for the past and recalling or reliving “the way things were,” combined with the recognition that return is impossible. Emotions such as nostalgia are not merely individual. Emotions, associated with signs, objects and the power of language (Ahmed, 2004), can be collectively felt and expressed (Ritivoi, 2002).

Men’s stories told around the boundary, in their changing rooms, and at their hotels, parties, dances or meetings narrate the past: how it really was, how it may have been, and how they knew it was not, but hoped it would be. The truth or accuracy of nostalgic memories and stories are not as important as the bittersweet feelings they evoke (Fairley and Gammon, 2005, p. 185), and why and how these memories emerge and are used (Wilson, 2005, p. 46). Diasporic communities are characterised as having fragmented identities and lacking of a sense of belonging as a result of leaving behind a first home and language, a familiar environment and a previously unacknowledged sense of security – especially for racialised subjects in their new, inconsistently welcoming homes. In postmodern, globalised societies, Wilson (2005, p. 8) points out, there are a number of threats, distractions and obstacles which prevent the construction and maintenance of a coherent, consistent self; “the acts of remembering, recalling, reminiscing and the corollary emotional experience of nostalgia may facilitate the kind of coherence, consistency, and sense of identity that each of us so desperately needs.” Even if migrants are unable to make a physical trip to their place of origin, they can access the homeland and the past through shared nostalgic memories. As Stephens (2005) writes of one of Claude McKay’s black diasporic literary characters, “community is enacted in the act of telling and listening to a story, not by official categories of race and nationality” (p. 202). A good story is neither journalistic nor concerned with representing ideology. The sharing of collective memories recreates and memorialises the homeland and the individual and collective past.

An excess of time for conversation and reflection increases nostalgia according to Boym (2001, p. xv). At cricket games when men are liming – sitting around the boundary watching the game or waiting for their turn at bat, standing in the field waiting for a ball to fly or roll in their direction, or leaning against a car parked on the grass, waiting for their thirst to be quenched and their bellies to be full – they have ample time for conversation and reflection, or what they call “keeping noise,” that is, joking, socialising and recounting their histories. The anecdotes of one become the yarns of many. Their nostalgic stories, including island- and region-specific verbal and physical vernacular expressions, paint a picture of a nurturing past/other place that helps them to mediate longing for and belonging to plurilocal
homelands. They transcend local communities and are welded into a common culture with other members of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora.

Davis perceives nostalgia as a strategy to resolve the tension between the search for continuity and the threat of discontinuity, a tension noted by Stuart Hall (2003) in his description of the process of postcolonial Afro-Caribbean identity formation. Hall explains that there are at least two different ways of thinking about cultural identity: a sort of collective “‘one true self’ … with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (p. 234) contrasts sharply with a sense of rupture from heritage or homeland. Gadsby (2006, p. 18) describes the discontinuity as potentially crippling for migrants who experience “a type of exile that at the same time separates one from place of birth as well from the new society encountered.” At once homesick and possibly sick of home, diasporas create identities that depend on both estrangement and longing, and both remembering and forgetting.

Memories of childhood cricket

Stuart Hall (2003, p. 235) draws on what Edward Said once called an “imaginative geography and history” to describe an important component of the identity of postcolonial peoples: the “imaginative rediscovery” of “hidden histories” offers a way of “imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation.” Hall emphasises that Afro-Caribbean people’s sense of continuity, oneness and similarity is not discovered through archaeological unearthing, but grounded “in the re-telling of the past” (p. 235, emphasis in original). In retelling their childhoods, the Mavericks affirm their values and pride in their (sporting) heritage. Their stories spill into tales of poverty, creativity, perseverance and community cohesion. Hall reminds us that the past is “always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth” (2003, p. 237). The Mavericks’ stories of their pasts may not all be true, but they are detailed, numerous and similar, regardless of the specific Caribbean territory in which they grew up.

When I asked how long he had been playing cricket, Vilroy, a 68-year-old black Barbadian-Canadian, exclaimed that he was “born with a cricket bat in hand … When I was a boy we would play morning to sunset. Cricket was a religion!” MCSC members often described how poor they were as children and provided dozens of examples of ingenuity they deployed to create equipment and play the game. Helmets were deemed unnecessary until the late 1970s even for professional
cricketers, so it is no surprise they were not a concern for the Mavericks as children in the 1950s and 1960s. Even gloves, shoes and shin pads were all a luxury they hardly considered until they were adults. However, bats and balls were a necessity. When the cost of one bat and one ball was more than the combined weekly income of some of their parents, boys came up with innumerable strategies to gain access to the equipment they needed. Regardless of which island or territory they were from, all of the Mavericks were familiar with the terms “coco bat” and “rubber ball.” In group discussions, MCSC members would laugh at each other’s stories of the lengths they would go to obtain cricket equipment and each man had an elaborate description of his particular technique.

Their bats were especially treasured because they each made their own and lasted much longer than balls. Generally there were only two means of fashioning a bat, with woodworking equipment or with a machete: “I liked making [my bats] from wood because I loved working with wood and a saw, so I cut my bats out myself with wood and a saw. I used a plane and planed them out and stuff like that. But that was later on” (Marshall). Later on, when Marshall was an adolescent, he had access to wood and carpentry equipment. However when he was a child, like most of his peers, he would make his “willows” from coconut branches. The instructions were simple and echoed by nearly every player I talked to: We would find “a coconut branch from a coconut tree, and wait until it dry, and then we shape a bat out of it with a machete” (Warlie). Every Caribbean territory has its share of coconut trees and this was the dominant strategy boys used to make bats.

To make cricket balls, however, there were nearly as many instructions as there were cricketers. At one of the Mavericks’ practices in the batting nets, the players lined up behind the batsman to await their turn. I sat by the entrance charged with the task of ensuring that each batsman would have his 12 minutes at the crease. As each player finished his turn, he came to sit with me and tell me about his ball-making technique:

We would make our own balls by melting down rubber we could find, for instance, the casing around a ham was good, or we would smash up a milk tin until it was round. (Warlie)

[To make knit balls] what you needed was something round in the centre … we’ve used a rock inside there or a seed … and then we took cloth and wrapped it around and kept it round. [At] Easter, we flew kites, then after Easter there was lots of twine around and that’s what you knitted the balls with. (Marshall)

A rubber string ball … is actually made from the inner tube of a bicycle [tyre] so you cut it into strips six to eight millimetres in width and it’s just like
an elastic [string] … so you have to get enough string to wrap around a piece of wet newspaper and you actually form it into the shape of a ball … it’s black when it’s finish’ and the rubber gives it the good bounce and the paper makes it hard. (Robert)

We would tape up the orange [and play with it] until it explodes then we would get another one, we would start with a bucket of oranges and you know when we’d run out of tape we’d just throw the oranges at the batsman just to play. (Kundell)

A few of the MCSC members with economic privilege came from families or attended schools that provided equipment; however, the majority grew up poor and cherished one particular ball-making technique.

The MCSC members enjoyed showing me the wounds they received from playing cricket with improper equipment. These wounds act as objects of nostalgia. They are embodied artefacts that have no inherent meaning, but are imbued with the power to act as symbols of creativity, perseverance, courage and racial and gender pride when they tell stories about them. Every male member of the MCSC could describe an injury, superficial scrapes as well as deep lacerations, with which he continued to play cricket as a boy. At times, they built on each other’s stories, interacting without any probing questions from me, and sharing their similar experiences, facts and myths despite different nations of origin and even class backgrounds. Afro-Caribbean men in the diaspora use their bleeding shins, foreheads, elbows and the resulting scars to attest to how serious and passionate they once were – and in some cases, still are – about the game. The dangerous situations they put themselves in, especially in the 1970s as ferocious fast bowling became a marker of Windies pride, also attest to their bravery, a marker of Afro-Caribbean masculinity.

Roland, a 51-year-old black Guyanese-Canadian, explained to me that they had to be prepared with nails and a heavy rock to use as a hammer at the cricket grounds because “if the bat would split we would nail it back together … [unfortunately] sometimes nails would fly out (laughs). Oh yes!” Projectile metal caused many of the scars Kundell and Marshall lay bare:

We used … Carnation milk cans … as a ball when we didn’t have one … By the time you’ve hit that around a few times it’s pretty round … and obviously when you miss … and you get hit with the corner? Ooooh! I’ve got lots of wounds on my shins to attest to that. (Marshall)

What we did was we would burn up a whole heap of plastic nylon and … when the plastic is soft you put it in the coconut shell, roll it around and then it becomes the shape, and then you have a cricket ball, but it is as hard as a rock you know (laughs)! If dat catch you [hits your shins], wow [it hurts]! (Kundell)
The Mavericks acknowledge that they were forced to use these strategies to make equipment and accept the scars that resulted because they were unable to “put a few pennies together and buy one ball” (Roland) much less purchase a bat. Nevertheless, they have found a way for their lack of pennies to be a source of pride. Their testimonies about living in poverty, their ball making techniques and the resultant wounds demonstrate Wilson’s (2005) and Ritivoi’s (2002) findings that informants can recall in vivid detail a tragic experience, yet regard the experience with humour or positive feelings.

Ahmed reminds us that scars are traces of injuries that persist in the healing of the present: “a good scar allows healing, it even covers over, but the covering always exposes the injury, reminding us of how it shapes the body” (2004, p. 202, emphasis in original). Their tales contributed to the healing; putting a positive spin on their former life circumstances, according to Ahmed (2004) and Davis (1979) allowed them to feel better about many of the injustices that have shaped their lives. Nostalgic sentiments are almost always positive; framing disappointments in an “it-was-all-for-the-best attitude,” or creating a sharp contrast between the “triumphant past” or idyllic other place and a “lamentable present” is nostalgia’s rhetorical signature (Davis, 1979, pp. 14–16). The lamentable present includes their physical decline and the concomitant decline of their favourite team: The Windies.

Today, their equipment bags are not only full of bats and balls, but also the hip pads, gloves and helmets they want, together with the bandages, ointments and bifocals they wish they could do without. Their previous economic distress, which they rationalise as integral to their skill development, has disappeared along with their physical prowess. Kundell explained that “playing without equipment is a good way of developing your skill.” Because the only thing between him and “busted shins” was his bat, he trained to use it as a defensive weapon. Roland also noted: “You learn to avoid getting hit on the shins. Because, if it hurt enough you’ll find a way to avoid it … Yeah so that helped our technique quite a bit.” Warlie added: “We made do with what we had. The grounds were not that good, but we produced lots of good cricketers in those early days.” The Mavericks and their peers are confident that they made the best of a bad situation, created by the powers of global capitalism, colonialism and racist exploitation. Though they had very few resources at their disposal, colonial oppressions did not achieve total domination. They used their creativity, the blessings that nature provided and the refuse others discarded to transform material lack in the 1950s and 1960s into exceptional skills in the 1970s and 1980s. They are quick to note that their contemporaries, boys from underdeveloped nations who
grew up using the same (makeshift) equipment and playing on inferior grounds, ended up conquering the world in international cricket. They do not long for another place; rather they long for the time when “their team” ranked number one in the world and they felt physically able to face any threat. These days the Windies consistently ranks in the bottom third of international teams and the Mavericks’ own bodies are beginning to betray them.

Stories of Windies supremacy

The Windies have not been consistently successful since the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, MCSC members continue to support them through mediated access to their games, actual visits to their international test matches, and sharing memories of their past triumphs with each other. They are as passionate about celebrating prior successes as they are about critiquing the minutiae of today’s Windies players’ lacklustre performances. The personal attachment so many Afro-Caribbean men have to professional cricket has not changed in a century. In 1963, C. L. R. James commented, “There is a whole generation of us, and perhaps two generations, who have been formed by [the cricket ethic] not only in social attitudes but in our most intimate personal lives, in fact there more than anywhere else” (1963, p. 41). He continued:

All of us knew our West Indian cricketers, so to speak, from birth, when they made their first century, when they became engaged, if they drank whisky instead of rum. A test player with all his gifts was not a personage remote, to be read about in papers and worshipped from afar. They were all over the place, ready to play in any match, ready to talk. (1963, p. 62)

The small populations of the various Caribbean territories, the centrality of past Windies team members to the Mavericks’ personal social circles and their ongoing social exchanges around the boundary suggest that what occurs at the professional cricket ranks and at an international scale remains central to some Afro-Caribbean-Canadian men’s identities and narrative exchanges at the local scale. James’ (1963) examination of Windies cricketers showed the passion with which fans attended to every success of Learie Constantine, George Headly and the three Ws: Worrell, Walcott and Weekes. The Mavericks’ attentions are directed not only to them, but to the superseding generation of men – Gary Sobers, Vivian Richards, Desmond Haynes, Michael Holding and Courtney Walsh – with whom they grew up in Barbados, Jamaica and Antigua. The
Mavericks memorised and memorialised these heroes’ record-breaking performances, artful mastery of bowling and breathtaking strokes.

When they recount and celebrate the Windies achievements, the Mavericks are not engaging in romantic or wilful nostalgia, imagining success where there was none. A striking number of the world’s best-ever cricketers come from this tiny region (Garfield Sobers, Vivian Richards and Brian Lara to name a few) and from 1980 to 1994, Wilde (1994) documents, the team won an unprecedented 79 per cent of all tests played, 16 of the 24 test series, and comprehensively beat the English team, winning all five tests in England in 1984, all five tests in the Caribbean in 1985–86, and four of five tests in England in 1988. The Windies team enjoyed an era of supremacy that has been matched in intensity and longevity by poor performances since the mid-1990s. In the Toronto Star newspaper, Garry Steckles (2009) asked a question on which the Mavericks ruminate regularly:

For decade after glorious decade … [the Windies] ruled imperiously with style, with panache, with the sort of swagger that no other cricketers, no matter how talented they were, could hope to match. It was called Calypso Cricket … How could one of the greatest teams in the history of sport – any sport – go from a swashbuckling, world-conquering dynasty to a pitiful and pitied basket-case in just over a decade?

The Windies dramatic deterioration leaves the Mavericks and their supporters longing for the heyday of their younger years. Their own physical decline and inability to perform as they used to are mirrored by the Windies’ failings on the international stage.

Kundell, a 52-year-old St. Lucian-Canadian, eloquently described for me his passion for cricket and pride in “his team” despite its now predictable lack of aptitude and negative attitude:

Kundell: I give up on them every game but the next game I think the interest is just the same (laughs). Yeah, every game they lost and I [say] “Ok that’s it, these guys are worthless!” and then I can’t wait until the next game (laughs).

Janelle: What is it for you that keeps you coming back?

Kundell: I don’t know it’s, I guess, my love for cricket and being a West Indian … I followed the West Indies team when they were at their strongest and I always … admire teams that play cricket at that level and the West Indies team, as they did during that era, were the toughest team around and nobody could beat them … not even England!

Janelle: Can you describe the feeling of beating England? What did that mean for you?
Kundell: Yeah it was always a joy to beat England, you know. I think it goes back to colonialism because we felt a little oppressed by the English, so every time we beat England it was like a moral victory. We beat the white boys again, and we beat them, and we beat them to the ground! It was a Caribbean victory, not just for the West Indies team or for the eleven players on the team, but the whole Caribbean enjoyed beating England. Even in 1980 when England toured the Caribbean, or was it ’82? And the tour manager had a heart attack … There was no sympathy for them at the time, even with the tragedy.

Janelle: He died?

Kundell: Yeah he died of a heart attack. There was no sympathy throughout the Caribbean over that because it was the West Indies causing the pain!

Kundell paints a vivid picture of the links between cricket success, political “moral victory,” and racial pride so often described in the Windies cricket literature (which many club members have read and lent to me for my research) and by so many male MCSC members. The black man as a particularly gendered symbol of race power, citizenship and domination began during the decades around the turn of the century and were directly influenced by American and Victorian notions of national strength and gentlemanly behaviour (Stephens, 2005). By the middle of the twentieth century, black power was symbolised by a man in cricket pads wielding either a bat or a ball as his weapon of choice. Players and supporters take the opportunity around the boundary to compare the best-ever players and their weapons, recall their favourite games and discuss their cherished moments in the Windies archive. These stories often have a racial element as they discuss how “surprised those white boys were,” or recall the pleasure of beating “the English bastards.”

In the twentieth-century Caribbean, St. Pierre (1995, p. 112) explains, non-whites aimed to out-perform whites in all facets of European culture: “There was the dress, the speech, the culinary habits – and there was cricket! The thirst for recognition produced non-white cricketers superior to white cricketers in every department of the game.” The impact of spending a childhood prior to national independence, when white British and light-skinned black people held all the positions of power, cannot be underestimated. Until 1957, the Windies team was captained by a (near) white and the game of cricket mirrored life in general in Caribbean society where those with light skin were represented in the top echelons of society out of proportion to their small numbers in the population (St. Pierre, 1995). It was common knowledge that white privilege had allowed many of the planter and merchant classes to play for and captain the
West Indies team in preference over talented, darker skinned players. When, in 1960, black Barbadian Frank Worrell was chosen to captain the West Indies side on a tour to Australia, it became clear that the challenge to British authority and white racial supremacy within the game and within the nation(s) were parallel (Malcolm, 2013, pp. 82–83). The Mavericks, growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in the Caribbean, witnessed a profound shift in social and political power out of the hands of upper-class whites and cricket best exemplified that social mobility and meritocracy was possible for black boys and men. Given that the debates concerning whether or not the Caribbean region was deserving of independence hinged on questions of the nature of Afro-Caribbean masculinity (Stephens, 2005), and that the international Windies team comprises the region’s best men, it is with a specifically gendered lens that MCSC members take pride in their national and cricket accomplishments. Slowly over the coming decades the majority of Caribbean territories claimed their independence from European colonisers, dark-skinned governments replaced light and black (and Indian) cricket-playing men replaced white men.

Windies cricketers from the 1970s and 1980s are described as embodying their frustrations with the unequal power structure in Caribbean society and releasing violence in the forms of long run-ups and ferociously fast bowling, big swings and tremendous centuries. According to Kundell, the Windies players were so powerful they were even able to cause the pain of England’s assistant team manager Ken Barrington, who died of a heart attack in 1981 at 50 years of age. Success in cricket and even the death of a white English sporting figure were a means for black Caribbean men, including those already living in the diaspora, to feel proud and united since they were forced to carve out an alternative path to hegemonic success, given the strictures placed on their advancement.

Jared described embodied black pride in this way: “You probably can’t really appreciate this because it was before you were born, but you know, it was like anything was possible back in those days. Anything.” The Mavericks impassioned memories of the time when the Windies was supreme are significant, because this period coincides with a time of transition, hope and pride. It overlapped with the granting of political independence to their nations and the period when the rumblings of the US civil rights and black power movements reverberated across the Caribbean. It was an era when beauty, power, knowledge and accomplishments of black people finally began to be valued in the public sphere. And for some, it coincided with their migrations out of their tiny islands and territories and the start of their adult lives.
Like C. L. R. James (1963), who insists that racism in sport “was in its time and place a natural social response to local social conditions [that] … sharpened up the game” (p. 58), the Mavericks saw their achievements as a response to the challenge posed by whites who did not believe in their intellectual and physical capacities. In What’s my name?: Vernacular Intellectuals, Farred writes that “[t]alented batsmen and bowlers gave voice, through their cultural actions on the cricket oval, to a black (male) agency that colonialism denied the colonized” (2003, p. 134). The Windies provided a rich source of accomplishments to draw from for gendered, racial and regional pride. The accomplishments of black male professional cricketers provided an empowering vision of self-determination and made the Mavericks believe that they too were capable of greatness, that anything was possible. Furthermore, the supremacy of the Windies in the 1970s and 1980s coincided with some of the Mavericks’ migrations to Canada, their hopes for educational and economic success, the birth of their children and their dreams for opportunities and achievements beyond what they were able to access in the Caribbean. These decades were also a time when the Mavericks were at the apogee of their own physical prowess; they were dominating cricket leagues in southern Quebec and Ontario. Today, both they and the Windies are in decline.

The losses of the Windies and black power movements, along with personal strength, ability and control suggest that Mavericks’ stories about a previous time are examples of what Boym (2001, p. 55) refers to as reflective nostalgia: “a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future” (Boym, 2001, p. 55). Boym contrasts reflective and restorative nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of individual and collective remembrance and dreams of another place and time. In contrast, restorative nostalgia “puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” (2001, p. 41). Other than through the material donations they make to their nations of origin to invest in cricket for boys, there is little hope for the Mavericks to restore the power of the Windies, of their bodies or of the Black Power movement.

Gilroy, in Postcolonial Melancholia (2005), draws our attention to nostalgia as the process of mystification and mythification of societal transformation; our memories of purportedly great eras when our people were the most powerful in the world always ignore less favourable elements of the era, and are tied to the aching loss of racial and gender power. The MCSC members’ memories are called upon to do important cultural work, that is, to recall a time when they felt powerful. This is connected to both gender and race, since traditional markers of hegemonic masculinity decline with age, and living in multicultural
Canada they see that the dreams of living lives free of racism – dreams they initiated during the US civil rights movement and after their nations gained independence – have not come true. Their naive expectation of increasing hospitality and power in Canada is countered regularly when police target them, they receive passive hostility or micro-forms of aggression in public spaces, or they encounter structural and everyday racism in their workplaces. To counteract these negative experiences, they invest significant energy in recalling more positive times.

Charles, a black 67-year-old Jamaican-Canadian who is a passionate and long-standing Mavericks supporter railed against the West Indies Players Association (WIPA) that went on strike (in July 2009) because the players wanted more money. In “his day,” Windies players would “never strike” because they knew how “privileged they were” to have risen above their humble beginnings and be selected to represent the region at the highest level. He had a vituperative exchange with a number of players around the boundary because the West Indies Cricket Board decided to “put in the second-string guys [to] play against Bangladesh an’ they lost!” His interlocutors mentioned:

They should fire all a dem, pay dem for their stats. Den you can see who shows up for work, who really wants it, who has skills.

They pay so-and-so this much money and he ain’t bat thirty-five. You can put any one a dese ol’ men on the fiel’ right now into dat line up an’ dey can bat thirty-five!

Charles continued: “Lose to Bangladesh?! What kin’ of bullshit is dis?! Black people everywhere should feel shame! … Players today are no talent, selfish SOBs. WIPA is a fuckin’ joke!” Charles’ complaints reminded me of the literature that documents decades of condemnation of the West Indies Cricket Board. Half a century ago C.L.R. James wrote letters of complaint to the Board over their censure of Gilchrist, a fast but unruly bowler and hero to the people. The Board ignored James’ advice and the people’s wishes. He notes, “This was not the first time that I had had doubts of the inability of the Board to understand the age in which it was living” (1963, p. 236). Obviously, complaints about the West Indies Cricket Board are enduring. The racial pride of Charles and his friends is linked to the success of the Windies team, which Charles believes is actively prevented by the “stupidness” of today’s Board. His displeasure with losing to Bangladesh can also be examined in relation to local and historical Indo-Afro ethnic antagonisms (see Chapter 6). He explicitly equates the Windies’ previous successes with a sense of racial accomplishment not only for people in the Caribbean, and not merely for the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, but for “black people everywhere.”
Watching the Windies’ successful performances at international games, at home, or more likely, in sports bars in Toronto, offered a diasporic resource for MCSC members. The images themselves, as well as the opportunities for socialising professional games presented, helped to unite geographically dispersed black men. In contrast, the Windies’ failures denote racial shame.

Charles’ “reflective nostalgia” (Boym, 2001) assuages algia, a longing for the past or home. His longing is not for a specific place (Jamaica) or region (the Caribbean) or a time (childhood, or the era of the Windies’ supremacy). Rather, like many young Afro-Caribbean men of the generation that witnessed their countries’ independence from British rule, he longs for a social space of black power and pride he felt in the 1970s and 1980s. The Windies’ success provided proof that blacks can, in fact, compete against the best in the world, that being from “little” islands, the “third world,” and “the periphery” did not equate to little achievements, third rate performances, or peripheral status. During the era of supremacy, the West Indies Cricket Board (WICB) and the Windies players, finally managed and captained by blacks, showed promise and unity. Since then, however, Hussein, a 66-year-old Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian, notes the WICB has “fallen apart”:

Before times, we were this powerful black team, like you see how the Australians see themselves as all white and all Australian. After they [British colonialists] realised they couldn’t hold us down we were really like one black nation. These days there are more internal rivalries between the islands, no cohesion or team work.

The signature nostalgic move, according to Davis (1979) and Wilson (2005) is to compare then and now, “before times” and “these days” and to look for culprits to explain why things have gone downhill. Among the Mavericks, discussions of the dysfunctional Board spill into more general discussions of internal rivalries among Caribbean nations, the fractures within regional and national politics, and widespread political corruption and individual failures. Charles explained: “These days, when people think of Jamaica, all they think of is gun violence in (Toronto suburbs) Scarborough or Jane and Finch. Even our people. They don’t know about [Michael] Holding or Courtney Walsh!” Charles may have overlooked contemporary Jamaican sporting heroes, such as Usain Bolt who, in 2008 were synonymous with Jamaica for “our people” – Afro-Caribbean-Canadians. Nevertheless, his point remains that the Mavericks are fearful that, especially among second-generation Afro-Caribbean-Canadians, the knowledge of the prowess of former Windies players and its associated regional and racial pride, will soon dissipate. Losing to weak teams such as Bangladesh certainly
would not be of help. Concomitantly their own accomplishments will soon be forgotten as the number of MCSC members decrease as they age, retire and, sadly, die.

The positive emotions associated with the era of Windies supremacy tell us about a deep history. Ahmed (2004, p. 202) helps us understand that emotions “are the very ‘flesh’ of time … Emotions show us how histories … of colonialism, slavery and violence shape lives and worlds in the present.” Rather than focus on current failures, the Mavericks enjoy reminiscing about momentous events in Windies’ test match history that they witnessed and their own cricket accomplishments of the past. This “ethnic myth,” as Paul Gilroy (2005) calls it, allows for a one-sided construction of the past. The Mavericks’ own mythology surrounding the 1970s and 1980s allows them and their countrymen to emerge as heroes and ignore the embarrassing elements of the era, including sexism, pigmentocracy, ethnic conflicts, class wars and homophobia, to name a few of which they were both victims and aggressors. The pattern of melancholy for the lost past “has become the mechanism that sustains the unstable edifice of increasingly brittle and empty national identity … it is around sport that more habitable and … more modern formations of national identity have been powerfully articulated” (Gilroy, 2005, p. 106). The Mavericks are able to use sport and nostalgic sport-related stories to retain a racial identity.

Narratives of club travel

In addition to stories of their childhoods and Windies’ supremacy, MCSC members share memories of their travels to regenerate their race and gender. When the MCSC travels, members inject into their trips meaningful, commemorative, heritage practices such as cricket games, picnics, city tours and dances. The trips club members take and, importantly, their stories of their experiences, often prompted by artefacts of nostalgia (e.g., plaques, pictures), reinforce the idea of cricket trips as about much more than sport; they are diaspora “heritage practices,” which permit the consumption of other spaces and other times (Joseph, 2011b). Their practices within the rituals of the games and tournaments and other activities they enjoy while abroad resemble what Boym (2001) calls “restorative nostalgia,” which stresses nostos and a remaking of the past/home. Notably, the “home” they remake is not necessarily their nation of origin. As I have stressed throughout this book, members of the MCSC are attached to plurilocal homelands.
Memories the MCSC members share about the trips they have taken reinforce each other’s nostalgic recollections, the identity of the community and their longing to return again. As Fairley and Gammon (2005, p. 192) note: “When repeat trip participants come together to take part in a trip, memories of past trips become particularly salient … [N]ewcomers become aware of the activities that are important to the group to the point where they are able to relive past trips vicariously.”

MCSC members constantly compared their current activities (playing cricket, drinking, dancing, or playing dominoes) to spectacular experiences they had in other times and places. When I told Erol, a 55-year-old black Barbadian-Canadian, I had never before visited his homeland of Barbados, he assured me that there is no better way to see the island than on a cricket trip:

You come wit’ us an’ you see the whole island. We play games every part and we have fun. You go fish fry, you see all the stadiums. You get to really party … Every tour we went to Barbados [we had] coolers pack up with ice, drinks, Barbados rum, Guinness. Dem bring fish cake, dumpling, food [plantains and yams], everyt’ing! We drink an’ play. What?! Play and drink same time. No matter what you drink you never get drunk. You jus’ relax. Go beach for conch salad. Jamaicans brings jerk chicken, Barbadians brings sweetbread, rice an peas and this is every day! They had police escorts, security to protec’ we and our bus pack up wit’ drink! You will see.

This description of an all-you-can-drink-and-eat affair is Erol’s idea of paradise. Sport is a marginal element of the way he describes a cricket trip to his homeland and stories such as these are repeated to entice others to join the team on their upcoming trips.

When I introduced myself as being of Antiguan descent, most players had a story about a great trip they had to Antigua that involved watching or playing at least one game of cricket. Wesley, a black 57-year-old Jamaican-Canadian spoke longingly of the beautiful weather and challenging games he played in Antigua when he travelled there with a masters’ team in 2005. In fact, he was wearing the team shirt from that trip the first time I met him and he used the shirt as a prop in a story he told me about the loss they suffered in the final game in that tournament. Wesley’s detailed explanation of how his team had been on a pace to win and ultimately gave away the game is paralleled by his intricate description of the parties they attended on that trip:

I still wear dis [shirt] with pride even though we lost that tournament. De guys tryin’ to show off. Against my advice, I might add. Dey gave up de wickets slowly, by not running and waiting instead fe see if balls dey hit mek it to de boundary.
“What you standin’ dere for?” I was yellin’ at dem … “Take t’ree [runs]! OK, take two!” Not even one? Dem t’ink the ball a go out so dey waitin’, waitin’, den it just drop an’ roll deep square leg [fielding position near the boundary] an’ him pick it up an’ t’row (shakes his head). So den dey decide fe run. Ah (pause). We end up losing’ by t’ree runs (holds up three fingers and shakes his head) … But you know we were in beautiful Antigua, so I cyan’t really complain. Dey say 365 beaches, you know. Wow. Dat sand was beautiful and white, white, white. Dey really know how to party. We went to one fête on the beach an’ dey was playing some sweet calypso an’ reggae. I t’ink we party till sun come up. I don’t t’ink I did dat since I was your age but we had some fun in Antigua, boy!

That game obviously meant a lot to Wesley who can recount every detail of the final moments three years later. He was disappointed and embarrassed by his teammates’ failure (or inability) to run and their resultant second place finish in the tournament, but he contrasts this with one of the goals of the trip they managed to achieve: to party all night long. Repeating “waiting” twice and “white” three times is an Afro-linguistic strategy that adds emphasis (McLaren, 2009). He recites the Antigua and Barbuda Department of Tourism’s official line of “365 beaches” and encourages others to travel there as well. Staying up all night partying on brilliant white sand is a strong motivator for cricket-related travel. Players transport each other back to the event or place through their artefacts and stories of great parties and even sad defeats. Although he is Jamaican, Wesley longs for a return to Antigua and wears his T-shirt from that trip as a reminder of the experience.

For most tours, the cricketers create a new uniform with an embroidered team name, and sometimes the date and location of the tour. Trophies, plaques, flags and pins are all exchanged between teams to commemorate the games. Statuettes or plaques engraved with the date, location and names of the teams involved are given to the man of the match and/or captain of the team to honour his contributions. When they return from their trips, some of the Mavericks display in their homes the plaques and trophies they have received among team pictures, old uniforms, balls (which they had hit for a century), framed newspaper articles, photos of them playing or receiving awards, or posters advertising their matches and dances that took place in Toronto, elsewhere in Canada, the Caribbean, the United States and the United Kingdom.

These metonymies of plurilocal homelands represent who these men are. They are irreplaceable artefacts that “anticipate and provide material support for a state of mind. They offer a vantage for creating a retrospective story, which not only aspires to record a past event, but also purports to immortalize it” (Ritivoi,
2002, p. 131). It is clear that particular objects and the nostalgic stories told about them become “sticky or saturated with affect … language works as a form of power in which emotions align some bodies with others, as well as stick different figures together” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 194). The objects on the walls or mantles from previous cricket games and trips are made and displayed specifically to help them remember; along with their scars from cricket injuries, the objects, material aspects of myths, prompt discussions among the Mavericks that reify experiences, unite club members, commemorate loss and celebrate past visits to Caribbean spaces.

At one meeting held at the home of Reggie, a 52-year-old Indo-Guyanese-Canadian player, I noticed a picture on the wall of uniformed cricketers arranged in two lines. A few players and their wives gathered around the photograph, which, in my view, did not feature any overt indication of when or where it was taken. Based on which MCSC members were present, the uniforms they were wearing, and the characteristics of the cricket field in the background of the photograph, it didn’t take long for those who had been there to figure out that it was from a tour they had gone on six years prior: “No it couldn’t be Grenada because Hussein was having heart surgery that year so he didn’t go, remember?” “Oh yeah, then it must be Barbados. You see the crest [on the players’ shirts]” “Yeah, yeah, we really gave it to ’em dat game, boy!” Individual recollections intertwine with collective memories weaving a tapestry of emotions that allow meaning to be generated.

The pictures they took, at cricket matches and also at tourist sites such as Derek Walcott Square and Castries Market in St. Lucia, Piccadilly Circus or Lillywhites department store in London, or the Mount Gay Rum Factory and Sunbury Plantation House in Barbados, serve as reminders of their national, regional, racial and ancestral histories, and their enjoyment of various Afro-Caribbean spaces as holiday destinations. When Hussein shared his photo album from the most recent Barbados trip at the meeting, he fused his experiences with the memories of others who were on the trip and the fantasies of those who could not make it. The Mavericks’ exchanges continued over drinks for over an hour after the meeting had formally ended. Wilson (2005, p. 36) reminds us that “nostalgia may be experienced collectively, in the sense that nostalgia occurs when we are with others who shared the event(s) being recalled. In this way, nostalgia might be used as conversational play and as a strategy for bonding.” Ahmed (2004) also suggests that individual subjects come into being through their alignment with the collective. Collective memories are how groups pass on traditions, rituals, culture and group history.
As the Mavericks age they incorporate an increasing number of ‘heritage cricket tours’ into their lifestyles. While this is certainly a result of more free time due to retirement, fewer parenting obligations and more disposable income due to paying off their mortgages and their adult children leaving home, one cannot ignore the impact on their memory making of their decreasing levels of performance, increasing illnesses and injuries and impending sense of mortality. These factors also amplify a desire to connect with another place and time through storytelling about the past. As Boym writes of reflective nostalgia, what is most missed during exile “is not the past and the homeland exactly, but rather this potential space of cultural experience that one has shared with one’s friends and compatriots that is based neither on nation nor religion but on elective affinities.” In other words, analysis of the Afro-diaspora also requires mining of stories about friendships. As men age, and the folds in the fan of memory multiply, collective memories shared between friends mediate between the past and the present, self and other.

Any discussion of memory, especially among older immigrants, necessarily raises questions of “truth” and the relative value of verification for the social scientist. This chapter is based on the notion that imaginative, narrative or collective truth (based on relationships, emotions, values and interpretations) may be just as important as, if not more significant than, historical truth (based on facts that can be verified). Salman Rushdie (1991, p. 10) writes, “imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect.” The meaning of a memory is more complex than simply resurrecting events. Rushdie (1991) uses the metaphor of looking though a broken mirror: only fragments of the past can be recalled due to the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance (e.g., alcohol consumption). But he values the broken mirror because it shows that every truth is fractured. As their memories fade, older adults rely more and more on the stories they tell each other, which are crucial in generating gendered and racial pride, showing their class status and preserving their version of the past when their stories of recreational cricket are forgotten or ignored by national (both Canadian and Caribbean) historical sporting archives. Boym explains that rather than “recovery of what is perceived [sic] to be an absolute truth,” the focus of reflective nostalgia is “on the meditation on history and passage of time … shattered fragments of memory … [and it] can be ironic or humorous” (2001, p. 49). This type of nostalgia “does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home,” Boym continues (p. 50). The storyteller is aware of the gap between the real and imagined homeland, but the “defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their story, to narrate the
relationship between past, present and future” (p. 50) and averts their sense of alienation, loneliness and uprootedness; assuaging the “ache of temporal distance and displacement” (p. 44) said to be characteristic of diasporas. When the historical “facts” are insufficient, Afro-Caribbean peoples turn to oral narratives that are often shared in the kitchen, at a community meeting, or around the boundary of a cricket match.

The memories of home that the MCSC members choose to share simultaneously mask the experiences they would rather forget. When reflecting on their youth some players who attended their islands’ top grammar schools, where they were first introduced to formal team cricket, do not highlight the class hardships they experienced as the scholarship students (admitted because of top grades, not family income). For example, Jared, a black 57-year-old Antiguan-Canadian, told me of his simultaneous disappointment and joy due to not being invited to social functions with his school and cricket mates. He was disheartened because the upper-class boys did not want to associate with him, but joyful that he would not have to attend parties in his school uniform (the only nice clothes he owned). When reflecting on their homelands, the Mavericks also do not focus on the hurricanes, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes that damaged their villages on a semi-regular basis. When pressed to discuss this Tayana, a 46-year-old black Guyanese-Canadian, recalled flippantly, “Oh, well of course, every few years you feel a strong wind, the sky turn dark. You see a metal roof flying down the road … You know a hurricane coming and you rush inside.” Her simplistic description of living through hurricanes obscures the fact that some of the MCSC members’ homes and communities were severely damaged in hurricanes Baker (1950) and Donna (1960) when they were young. More recently, hurricane Ivan (2004) caused fear for the safety of their loved ones remaining in the Caribbean who were left without homes, electricity, water or sewer services, and the club raised money to spend on hurricane relief efforts. Many MCSC members fail to acknowledge the feelings of insecurity and trauma imposed by Mother Nature – not to mention colonial powers – in favour of remembering their homelands as beautiful places to live, holiday and play cricket. Like their nostalgic memories, their selective forgetting of various aspects of the homeland forms their identities.

Afro-Caribbean-Canadians, as is the case for other Canadians, may yearn for another time or place as a result of the postmodern condition; that is, the industrial, urban, capitalist culture that creates a sense of alienation and fragmented identities with a dizzying array of possibilities for creating the self (Featherstone, 1991). Alternatively, like other elderly people, their physical
decline and impending mortality may be the reason they look to the past with such fondness. Older adults reminisce about past successes to maintain their self-concept through the lifespan and memories are validated through dialogue with others (Radley, 1990). Additionally, the observation of the deterioration of Windies performances, with no evident hope for restoration, combined with the fact that many of their dreams of black liberation remain unfulfilled both in their nations of origin and in Canada, may cause older Afro-Caribbean Canadians in particular to reflect on better times in the past and the narratives they construct may act as vehicles for facilitating the continuity of their diasporic identities, and boosting their national, regional, racial and gender pride. Regardless of the reason, their active memory making allows them to remain connected to each other, their homelands and Afro-Caribbean spaces around the Black Atlantic.

This chapter shows how the Mavericks, who have been playing cricket together since at least the 1980s are unable to recreate history, but they come close to capturing the past through stories about their childhood cricket games, memories they indulge in about professional cricket supremacy, and narratives of previous cricket trips they tell and retell. Through these linguistic strategies MCSC members hold on to “the way things were.” Collective memory is an important aspect of group identity and solidarity, and is especially significant in shaping the social life and communal consciousness of diasporic men as they use selective group memories and fable formulations of sport-related events to portray themselves, their pasts and their homelands.

The nostalgic object of longing for many men of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora or the Black Atlantic, is not necessarily the nation of origin and not always a place called home; rather, they long for the past, for a time when creativity and perseverance were precursors for success, when a child with “nothing” could still achieve greatness on a world stage, and when they could associate their racial pride with the achievements of Caribbean athletes. The older, racialised, male diasporic subject turns to meaningful, locally available resources, including his own sport memories and those of his peers, to reconstruct what Rushdie (1991) calls the “imaginary homeland.” Older Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women, in contrast, are less likely to tell sport stories about the past. The following chapter explores the experiences of women, including the wives, lovers and friends of male players and supporters in this sport and social club. Their gendered experiences reveal some of the disjunctions of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora.
Notes

1 In 1957, black Barbadian Clyde Walcott was vice-captain under white Barbadian John Goddard (St. Pierre, 1995, p. 107). This fact is often overlooked as the accolades of the first black West Indies captain normally go to Frank Worrell in 1960.

2 During the period between 1974 and 1994, the black West Indians developed an aggressive, intimidating, fast-bowling playing style far removed from the White-determined, English traditions of the game. The fact that this was in keeping with racist ideologies of black physicality and violence led to the vilification of the team at the time. Nevertheless, black people across the Caribbean celebrated their team and the wins their aggressive style allowed them to accrue as evidence of Black Power and support for the assertion of West Indian ‘national’ identity (Malcolm, 2013, pp. 83–85).