

THE MARITIMES

African Nova Scotian English in an Enclave

Shana Poplack and Sali Tagliamonte

This piece comprises excerpts from a book entitled *African American English in the Diaspora* (Oxford & Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) by Shana Poplack (University of Ottawa) and Sali Tagliamonte (University of Toronto). These excerpts (pp. 1, 3, 39-42, 44-45, 52-55, 63- 66) focus specifically on one of Nova Scotia's relatively isolated African Canadian communities, Guysborough.¹

The research we report in these chapters was originally prompted by one of the oldest and as yet unsolved questions in modern sociolinguistics -- that of the origins of contemporary African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Is AAVE the descendant of some creole widespread across the southern colonies of British North America, converging over two or three centuries towards mainstream American English varieties, while conserving some traces of the original creole grammar? Or did the ancestors of today's AAVE speakers in fact learn to speak in much the same way as colonists from various regions of the British Isles? In this case, modern AAVE has actually diverged from mainstream varieties under conditions of community cohesion and segregation from the dominant society. These questions are extremely important for sociolinguistics. According to the first scenario, the evolutionary history of AAVE is a prime example of the process of decreolization, well studied throughout the Caribbean and elsewhere. But if the second scenario is more accurate, then AAVE exemplifies instead the process of divergence of related language varieties through internal evolution, but does not provide data appropriate to the study of decreolization. Perhaps even more important are the social and cultural implications of questions. The theme of a prior creole arose partly in response to generations of stereotyping and stigmatization of African American varieties as ungrammatical and inferior deformations of Standard English by educators and other elements of the White establishment, and

¹ These passages from Poplack and Tagliamonte's book provide some historical context for their rigorous study of diaspora dialect features. For a linguistic analysis of African Nova Scotian English and theoretical implications, see their article "African American English in the diaspora: Evidence from old-line Nova Scotians," *Language Variation and Change* 3 (1991): 301-339 <http://queensu.ca/strathy/apps/Poplack-Tagliamonte1991.pdf> as well as their ANSE bibliography <http://queensu.ca/strathy/apps/ANSE-bib.pdf> —Eds.

partly as a component of a unifying heritage of an African American community distinct from the surrounding mainstream....

The African American Diaspora

Partly as a response to the dearth of suitable records of an earlier stage of AAVE, some researchers (DeBose 1983; 1988; Hannah 1997; Poplack and Sankoff 1987; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989; Singler 1989; 1991a; Tagliamonte and Poplack 1988; Vigo 1986) have focused on the language of what may be termed the African American Diaspora. Prompted by conditions in the United States in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tens of thousands of African Americans dispersed, at various periods and in various waves, to such far-flung locations as Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Caribbean, South America and Canada, where small enclaves of their descendants have maintained their own communities to this day. This book focuses on three such settlements, one on the Samana peninsula of the Dominican Republic (Poplack and Sankoff 1987) and two on the eastern coast of Nova Scotia, Canada (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991a). Residents of these communities continue to speak a distinctive, and to all appearances archaic, variety of English. We describe [below] the circumstances of linguistic isolation which have contributed to the maintenance of their vernaculars for nearly two centuries, and which are also responsible for the resistance of their grammatical structures to contact-induced change postdating the dispersal. Allowing for independent internal evolution, such circumstances should qualify them as bona fide descendants of AAE spoken in the early nineteenth century. . .

African Americans in Nova Scotia: Immigration Settlement and Data

At approximately the same time as the "Americans" were settling Samana, other African Americans were heading to other destinations. By some accounts (Landon 1920: 22), the majority of those who left the United States during, and just after, the period of slavery -- as many as 60,000 -- went to Canada (Clairmont and Magill 1970; Grant 1973; Hill 1981; Walker 1980; Winks 1968; 1971). The bulk of this immigration took place in three major waves into two different areas: Black Loyalist immigration into the Maritimes after the American Revolutionary War (ca. 1783-5), refugee slave immigration into the Maritimes following the War of 1812, and fugitive slave immigration into southwestern Ontario between 1815 and 1861.

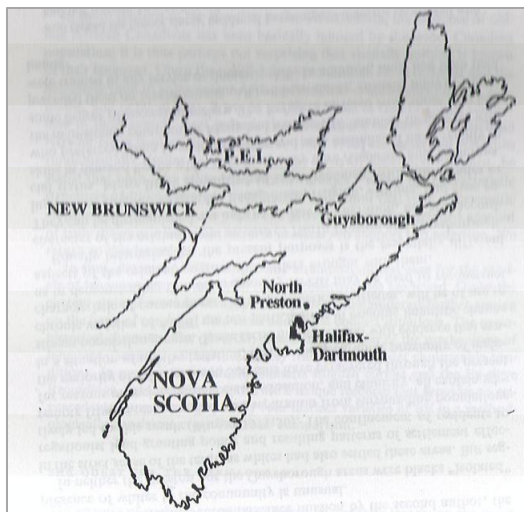
Although the influx into Ontario, a well-publicized terminus of the underground railroad, was numerically greatest as well as historically most prominent, we focus here on the Canadian Maritimes, and in particular, the province of Nova Scotia, to which the majority of both the Black Loyalists and refugees were sent (Cassell 1972: 153). In the late eighteenth century, in fact, Nova Scotia was said to have contained "the largest free black settlements anywhere in the world outside Africa" (Walker 1980: 31). Although many of the first immigrants made their way to Africa, Nova Scotia for many years remained home to perhaps the largest population of former African American slaves outside of the United States.

From the outset, their settlements were rural, remote or urban-fringe (Clairmont and Wien 1978: 143; Clark 1942: 265; Winks 1968; 1971), reinforcing the segregation later imposed by institutionalized racism in education, religion and employment (Abucar 1988: 3 Walker 1985: 44). The African Americans were forced to develop independent churches and schools, which were under-funded and lacked materials. These were served by local Black preachers and teachers, mostly community-trained and appointed (Moreau 1987; Pate 1976; Rawlyk 1968; Winks 1968). Infertile land allotments, small acreages (when land titles were granted) and skills that were unappreciated in the White community prevented the immigrants from attaining self-sufficiency or financial success. From the time of their arrival in Nova Scotia, former slaves and their descendants have been characterized by a low degree of participation in mainstream political, economic and social life (Clairmont and Magill 1970). Their history of separation, if not the driving force behind it, is comparable to that experienced by the "Americans" who settled Samana at approximately the same time. This led to the hypothesis, investigated in this volume, that African Nova Scotian English should retain conservative linguistic features as well.

Diaspora Settlements

Despite diminishing numbers in recent years, due in large part to the search for material advancement in less economically-depressed provinces (Clairmont and Magill 1970; Clairmont and Wien 1978; Rawlyk 1968), there remain some communities in Nova Scotia which are almost entirely populated by the descendants of these two waves of immigrants. We study two of them here: North Preston, located in the eastern central portion of the province outside of the Halifax-Dartmouth urban area, and a cluster of hamlets in the vicinity of the small town of Guysborough, located on the northeastern corner of peninsular Nova Scotia, approximately 250 kilometers from Halifax. . . . (See **Map 1** below.)

Guysborough: The Black Loyalists are particularly well documented. Early in the American Revolutionary War, British generals had begun to promise protection to slaves who would desert their rebel masters. This policy was codified in 1779 when Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander-in-chief, issued the Philipsburg Proclamation, which promised "to every Negro who shall desert the Rebel Standard...full security to follow within these lines, any Occupation which he shall think proper" (Eno 1983: 103). This policy, intended to destabilize the rebel economy and affect morale, was astoundingly successful. As the British armies moved up and down the eastern half of the United States, African Americans would join in, as soldiers or support staff (Hodges 1996: xiv). Estimates of the total number of Black Loyalists range to over 100,000, some one-fifth of the total slave population (Eno 1983: 103). American colonists were mortified -- one wrote, "Hell itself could not have vomited anything more black than this design of emancipating our slaves" (p. 103).



Map 1 Communities sampled in the African Nova Scotian Project

When the tides of war turned against the British, Black Loyalists were evacuated along with soldiers and White Loyalists. The great majority went to the Bahamas, Jamaica, and East Florida, or escaped to the American hinterlands. The number of Black Loyalists evacuated from Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, has been estimated at between 5,000 (Eno 1983: 103) and 10,000 (Frey 1991, cited in Hodges 1996). Many went to the Caribbean, but a "few thousand [southern African Americans] made their way to New York by way of Savannah or Charleston" (Eno 1983: 104).

When plans were made to evacuate the last British stronghold of New York, governor Sir Guy Carleton's generous reading of the Philipsburg Proclamation saved many Black Loyalists from a return to slavery. American general George Washington demanded the return of all former slaves. Carleton refused, and revealed that he had already begun to send Black Loyalists to Halifax (Eno 1983: 105). The resulting agreement involved a cutoff date for evacuation, and required that detailed records be kept in the event that future reparations were to be paid to the Black Loyalists' former owners. Between May and November 1783, a Book of Negroes was set up. The book (edited and reprinted as Hodges 1996) names all "1336 men, 914 women, 339 boys, 335 girls, and 76 children of unidentified gender" (p. xix) permitted to sail from New York, including their ages, former owners, place of origin, and general physical condition. . . .

Nova Scotia was completely unprepared for the flood of Loyalists, Black or White. Land was distributed based on assumed losses during the war, so the best and biggest properties went to wealthy White Loyalists, and much of the remainder to ex-soldiers. Bureaucracy was difficult, and ex-slaves were not skilled in navigating it. Blacks were segregated from Whites upon their arrival in Shelburne, and were forced to perform public labor to get land that Whites got free (Eno 1983: 106). Blacks from Birchtown began moving into Shelburne; their acceptance of low wages (in competition with poor White ex-soldiers) led to North America's first race riot. In 1784, most Shelburne

slave owners freed their slaves to avoid the inconvenience of feeding them through the long winter. They were taken in by Birchtown free Blacks (Eno 1983: 107).

Disaffection was understandably high, and when an opportunity to emigrate to Sierra Leone was offered in 1791, some 1,196 of the original settlers chose to leave (Walker 1976/1992: 137), about one-third of the free Black population (p. 128). Included in this group were many of the community's leaders, including David George, Moses Wilkinson, and Boston King. . . . Thus the bulk of Black Loyalists, despite the rather large remaining population, were unable to form a strong single community. The exception was Guysborough County's Little Tracadie -- due to its remote location in eastern Nova Scotia, it had not been visited by recruiters for the Sierra Leone project (Walker 1976). Guysborough was the first of the Nova Scotian isolate communities. Tracadie was one of the few places where a large land grant was made to African Americans, in 1787, albeit on land of extremely poor quality (Muisse and Corbett 1971). . . .

African American Enclaves in Nova Scotia

At the time of data collection, Guysborough County was considered the most economically disadvantaged county of Nova Scotia, and the African Nova Scotians who resided there, "the poorest of the poor" (Clairmont and Magill 1970: 64). The "settlements" we sampled in 1990 were simply clusters of between 8 and 40 homes aligned along back roads. Stores, services and recreational facilities were sparse in the county in general, but completely absent in these rural, non-agricultural areas. With the closing of the last public school, churches were the only remaining public institutions at the time of data collection. The scattered houses were surrounded by wilderness, and not served by public transportation. Conversations with residents of adjacent White hamlets revealed that only one had ever visited an African Nova Scotia community, despite the geographic proximity. The homogeneity of both the original input settler cohort and their descendants over the duration is a key feature of Guysborough Enclave: in contrast to most other Black Loyalist communities, it remained unaffected both by the mass exodus to Sierra Leone, and the subsequent influx of refugees. Study of its speech patterns is thus particularly relevant to this research. . . .

The quest for the vernacular

In sharp contrast to the situation in the United States, the existence of old-line African Canadians has been basically ignored by the wider Canadian population; it is thus perhaps not surprising that prior to the research reported in Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991a), virtually nothing was known of their language. The sole linguist to have considered an African Nova Scotian dialect (Dillard 1971b; 1973) characterized it as fundamentally similar to AAVE. Both African Nova Scotian English and AAVE, according to him (1973: 508), "reveal the characteristic structures of Pidgin English," Gaining access to the vernacular speech data necessary to assess Dillard's (anecdotal) claim was perhaps the greatest challenge in this project. In the African Nova Scotian context,

as in many other situations of asymmetrical status or power, the vernacular, or what members refer to as "slang," is restricted to intimate interaction with fellow community members (Poplack 1980, 1981; Rickford and McNair-Knox 1993) as can be observed in (2).

(2) **Interviewer:** But there's a lot that speak broken English too. Like, we do speak slang. That is no word of lie. There is ways-- there is some times when we speak slang, I find.

Informant: Yeah. And sometime we talk like they don't even understand what we're saying.

Interviewer: Yeah, like, we can have a conversation going and nobody would ever know what the conversation was about.

Informant: Mhm.

Interviewer: Like you and I could have a conversation and- and there could be a White person sitting there and they wouldn't understand a word we were saying. (NPR/006/2123-33):

Community members are keenly aware of (real and perceived) differences between their vernacular and those of surrounding populations, as can be seen in (3a-c), and take pride in the distinctiveness of their variety (4).

(3) a. **Interviewer:** Did you find that- like, even in Nova Scotia? You know, like, people from Hammond's Plains and North Preston?

Informant: Yeah. Some have a different a-- ...

Interviewer: Sunnyville? [an African American hamlet adjacent to Guysborough Enclave]

Informant: ...Oh God, yeah. A different accents altogether. (GYE/045/1524-30)

b. **Interviewer:** Did- did- have you ever heard the Blacks from United States talk?

Informant: They got a wang to their talk. ...It's different than ours. Different altogether, yeah. (GYE/056/1846- 8)

c. **Interviewer:** What about White people talking like Black people?

Informant: They doesn't. I never heard. ...not a White person talking like a Black person.

Interviewer: In your life, eh?

Informant: No, they always got different accents. (NPR/OI6/1072-5)

(4) **Interviewer:** Have you ever heard a Black person talking like a White person?

Informant: Yes. I did. Trying to. But couldn't come near of it. And we should try to be our own self. (NPR/OI6/1067-70)

Indeed (somewhat contradictorily, in view of the psychological and real segregation that has persisted until recently), virtually all African Nova Scotians also have at their disposal a variety of English that is very close, if not identical, to generalized standard Canadian or Nova Scotian English, a fact of which informants are well aware (5).

(5) **Informant:** And that's why we're in two language really, when you look at it. 'Cause we can go both ways when you look at it. When we're around each others we can speak a certain way. But when we're around Whites, we-

Interviewer: Our voice change.

Informant: Change. Our attitude, everything change.

Participant: Voices change. (NPR/007/1031-4)

The diglossic partitioning is so extreme that observers had assured us that African Nova Scotian English had no distinguishing features (e.g., Donald Clairmont, personal communication). To ensure representation of at least some vernacular features, we adopted participant observation techniques of data collection, requiring that field workers be community members, and that the informants be participants in the fieldworkers' social networks. Under Tagliamonte's direction, local interviewers were trained in the administration of the Sociolinguistic Interview (Labov 1984), the use of high-quality digital audio, tape recorders and microphones, and elicitation of demographic information. Virtually all of the African Nova Scotian interviews were conducted by a single individual native to each locale among members of her extended social network during the summer of 1991. . . .

Nature of the data

The result of our fieldwork in Nova Scotia is a corpus of 159 hours of informal taped conversations, ranging from approximately one to five hours in length. In addition to dozens of narratives of personal experience, it contains a cornucopia of stories (16), home remedies (17) and ghost lore, as in (18), many of which were part of group interaction, as in (19).

(16) **Interviewer:** How did - where did your clothing come- how did you get your clothing? You- know, you were small? Did your mother buy-

Informant: No. Somebody give her something, we had it. Or else she took the flour bag. Used to buy the flour bag and white bags with the Robin Hood on it. And she boiled it on the stove 'til she got the Robin Hood out of it. And then she would uh- make us a pair of pants.

(17). We ever got a goose, they would catch every bit of grease and save it and put it in a bottle. Warm it into a little dish on the stove and dip your fingers in, rub your chest. They said, do -that twice you got no cold. . . And you could take a spoonful of it, eh? Never had no cold. Come down with a bad cold, she'd give you that twice, your cold was better. (GYE/066/1068-76)

(18) And once me and Lily seen all kind of gros-- ghosts: . . .
 Steal on Aunt Sue's- stealing on Aunt Sue's uhm- trees out there. Me and Lily were coming
 up the road this night, walking so good. Seen this great big old white thing. "
 I said, "God, Lily, look."
 Lily said, "What? I don't see nothing."
 I said, "Yeah," I said, "look, there- there."
 Had just got off the tree.
 Then we seen this great big white ghost.
 And all- all of a sudden it just disappeart from us.
 Just fade right away from us.
 And was- was I scared! (NPR/020/98-111)

(19) **Interviewer 2:** Yeah, but I was saying like back when you guys was coming
 along, to see a ghost, everyone was like-

Interviewer 1: It was common.

Participant: Oh, [incomprehensible] you couldn't run!

Interviewer 1: And they said that they can't turn
 corners. That's what I- that's all I been hearing. Uh- if you are
 running from a ghost-

Interviewer 2: And you take a k-

Interviewer 1: Don't keep going straight. Turn. And if you turn,
 that ghost got to keep going straight, 'cause they can't turn.

Informant: If- if you run from a ghost?

Interviewer 1: Mhm.

Informant: If who run?

Interviewer 1: If anybody. If you see and ghost and you running,
 if a ghost is chasing you, that's what they told me.

Said you- if you take a turn, the ghost got to keep
 going straight 'cause they can't turn.

Informant: Well nobody can't- ... run from no-ghost.

Interviewer 1: No? .

Informant: How you gonna run from a ghost? What are you
 talking about?

Interviewer 1: I'm gonna run from him!

Informant: No. You can't run from him!

Interviewer 1: No?

Informant: They beat you all the time! How you gonna run
 from- ? I-

Interviewer 2: Like a- like a spirit, eh? (NPR/030/4397-417)

Summary

This is a singular documentation of African Nova Scotian speech, of which only
 one other taped record is known to exist (Jones 1988), and this has never to our
 knowledge been exploited for linguistic purposes. Thanks to the skill and dedication of

the fieldworkers, these data are fully representative of vernacular African Nova Scotian English.

The remarkably detailed records pertaining to the Black Loyalists allow us to trace the origins of individual founders of Guysborough Enclave down to the specific plantation. Coastal South Carolina and Virginia are by far the most frequent regions of origin. We can confidently state that almost all members of the founder population of North Preston were from the Chesapeake area or coastal Georgia. Here again, their sociodemographic characteristics differ little from those of the general population of African American English speakers in nineteenth-century United States. The African Americans who migrated to these diaspora locales clearly included representatives of each of the major population elements presumed to have contributed to the development of contemporary AAVE (i.e., slaves and freedmen, northerners and southerners, house and field slaves). If anything, the balance is weighted in favor of southern field slaves, whose language many consider to represent the precursor of AAVE.

The physical and social isolation of the diaspora communities in both Samana and Nova Scotia explain how their residents maintained the linguistic norms brought there by their ancestors. Each of the diaspora communities was shown to feature a lengthy settlement history (dating back approximately two centuries), minimal in-migration of non-members, historical continuity of current informants with the original input settlers, geographic remoteness from the mainstream, physical and psychological separation from adjacent populations, and a strong sense of group identity. The potential for any of the Early AAE varieties to have undergone structural change due to contact with other varieties of English was extremely limited—by linguistic, social, religious and physical distance in Samana, and by social, racial, and, to a lesser extent, physical distance in the Nova Scotia communities. (Indeed, such barriers to outside influence are considerably stronger than those typically found in dialect relic areas, where speakers may identify linguistically or ethnically with contiguous communities and dialect boundaries are often gradual, rather than discrete.) But while these characteristics are helpful in explaining the developments that resulted in Early AAE, it is the linguistic evidence that is primary. Exploited within a proper context, these diaspora data can be taken to represent the precursor(s) of contemporary AAVE.



Africville, Halifax
Nova Scotia Archives