West Indian children in Canada: the authorial voice in two stories

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Two stories about West Indian children in Canada, Cynthia Allen's *Tanya in Canada* and Yvonne Singer's *Little-Miss-Yes-Miss,* are useful examples of the importance of the authorial voice in children's fiction. In recounting the adventures of two young newcomers, the authors choose different narrative techniques, involving management of dialogue, choice of language, use of emblems, and above all intrusion (or refusal to intrude) into the story with direct comments.

Cynthia Allen's story is about the adventures of a thirteen-year-old Trinidadian girl in scintillating Montreal. The story is appropriately simple: Tanya visits her aunt Cindy, a West Indian school teacher who can shift from English to French-Canadian culture with remarkable ease. Tanya's immersion in the unfamiliar tempo of the bustling city is immediate but at times surprisingly blasé. Coming from a city which has very few multiple-storeyed buildings, narrow streets or darkened alleys, Tanya is impressed by Montreal's resplendent skyscrapers and wide, traffic-clogged boulevards. But the child's reactions and responses are not particularly childlike, and at times they are even uncommonly school-bookish. Here, for instance, is Tanya marvelling that daylight lingers well into the evening:

> She knew that in Trinidad it would have been quite dark. . . But then she remembered . . . that the sun was over-head at the tropic of Cancer during the months of June and July. This had to do. . . with the revolution of the earth on its axis on its journey around the sun.[1]

Aunt Cindy takes her to see some of the obligatory tourist spots, treats her to a movie in Place Ville Marie, introduces her to the children of a well-to-do French Canadian family, gives her permission to date an uncommonly stiff French-Canadian youngster, with whom she has a brief romance, and takes her on a visit to Toronto. This visit is also confined to the usual tourist spots and, surprisingly, is given rather short shrift:

> Tanya thought the town very clean and tidy too, but not quite as interesting as Montreal. She did not know whether it was the French signs or the French language or just what it was. But she finally decided that it was something more than just that. (pp. 81-82)

Tanya never discovers exactly what this "something" is. At the end of the story

Tanya, who is returning to Trinidad presumably wiser and older, meets a Barbadian boy who is of the same age as her French beau. And he is more: this boy, who shares Pierre's ambition to attend Oxford University — the ultimate achievement for a thoroughly indoctrinated colonial — is meant to be the French-Canadian's black surrogate.

Tanya in Canada is only ostensibly a children's book; it is also, one feels, a convenient peg upon which Allen can hang a not particularly subtle discussion about the deficiencies of Trinidad society and by extension, West Indian society. The reader is always aware that he is being continually instructed, and this is the story's most serious flaw. The child's adaptation to the social and ethnic nuances of a complex metropolis is given, at best, only marginal treatment, and the voice of Tanya's expanding consciousness is replaced by the intrusive authorial voice. Tanya's romance with Pierre illustrates, rather effectively, one of the drawbacks of too much authorial intrusion. We do not hear a pre-adolescent's reactions; instead, the romantic rhapsodies of a controlling adult voice are inserted into the narrative:

> |Pierre's smile| started from his chin and worked itself up to his light blue eyes that sparkled like little pools of water made translucent by the sun and then on to his forehead lined by a crop of dark brown curly hair. . . Tanya smiled too and her light brown eyes sparkled just like his and in their smile there was a communion of spirits. (p. 55)

Taken out of context, this passage resembles the sort of romantic cant one might find in a Harlequin Romance. The authorial voice also uses Tanya's developing sensibilities in order to express several grievances about members of Trinidad society: gruff store-clerks; indolent street cleaners; incompetent teachers; impolite flight attendants; irresponsible West Indian men. The alleged irresponsibility of the West Indian men is driven rather hard, and the behaviour of black Trinidadians is singled out for special criticism. More than once Allen takes a few stodgy turns around this hackneyed complaint and comments upon their alleged happy-go-lucky attitude to life (pp. 17, 49).

But Allen is particularly interested in Tanya's racial background; and indeed she makes much of the youngster's rapidly developing racial sensitivities. Tanya's racial amorphousness is described with blunt directness at the beginning of the story. Allen's description is instructive:

> She was an attractive looking child *by European standards* — a straight nose and oval face. *She could have been a European* who had acquired a deep tan from exposure to the sun, but her dark brown almost black hair . . . was not straight, *though not very kinky.* She was one of those admixtures of African, White, and what-have-you whom one sees regularly in the West Indies . . . (p. 15. My italics)

Although Allen mentions the widespread existence of the sort of racial amalgam Tanya represents, the child's subsequent broodings and Allen's comments about racial differences decidedly tend to qualify this description of the youngster.

Stress falls on Tanya's tenuous European look which is obviously the desirable standard. But even though Tanya is palpably West Indian — and therefore negroid — Allen, we notice, implies that she is not hopelessly negroid. In a word, if her heroine cannot fully satisfy the desirable European standard, she is, nonetheless, the desirable West Indian.[2]

The author's preoccupation with racial differences is particularly noticeable in her treatment of Tanya's romance with Pierre. When Tanya broods about this romance her thoughts turn, not upon the confused, unfamiliar but exciting nature of "first love," but upon disturbing racial and ethnic issues. To understand Allen's particular point of view one must be familiar with the West Indian's (and especially the Trinidadian's) obsession with the varieties and subtleties of racial differences. Race prejudice in Trinidad is an intricate matter which has its origin in the slave society of the early colony. A history of this period in the West Indies is well-known and should not detain us. One need only emphasize that differences in shades of skin colour within the same racial group are as crucial and important in determining status as are differences between various races. (Indeed this sort of prejudice is sometimes noticeable even among members of the same family!) Discovering the differences between French and English in Canada is not a learning experience for Tanya; these differences merely serve to reinforce Tanya's (and Allen's) uncommon sensitivity to the centuries-old West Indian obsession with race mixing. Here is Tanya fantasizing about dating and marriage:

> What if a French-Canadian boy asked her and he spoke only French? What would she do? She wondered what it would be like to marry a French-Canadian. Her father whose mother had come from Surinam was a mixture of Indian, African and Dutch so that he looked almost like some of the people she saw around. . . Trinidadians were all so mixed-up. . . She had Indian, African and Dutch blood on her father's side. . . and if they looked further back. . . they would probably discover some Amerindian blood on both sides and now she was thinking of adding French-Canadian blood to it! She wondered whether that was such a good thing after all. Some people in Trinidad thought it was. "*Add a little milk to your coffee,*" she had heard some of the older people say. (p. 28. My italics)

The whitening of the coffee is pertinent. As far back as the 18th century Trinidadians believed that the acquisition of "White blood" would enhance one's social position; and in the 19th century the colonizing British invented a terminology which they used to distinguish persons of various racial mixtures. This terminology — although it is somewhat attenuated — still exists in modern Trinidad and is widely used for instant racial identification.

The bogey of race mixing, which is such an important part of the collective consciousness of West Indians, disturbs Tanya's developing imagination. Children who are biologically "mixed up," she thinks more than once (pp. 28, 78), are doomed to be emotionally traumatized in later years. Not surprisingly, Tanya's only reported dream (she's "the only dark person" in a hall full of people "rocking and holding their sides with laughter," (p. 23) has racial

resonances, and is a rather transparent manifestation of the child's subconsious anxieties. The extent of the authorial intrusions in Allen's *Tanya in Canada* is especially apparent when this book is compared with one on a similar subject.

In *Little Miss-Yes-Miss,* the anxieties of ten-year-old Cicely, who leaves Jamaica to be reunited with her parents in Toronto, are also the focus of the author's interest.[3] Cicely's problems, as she tries to adjust to an altogether new culture, are varied: the heavy, unfamiliar clothes she must wear ("By the time I get my clothes on, recess will be over"); the unfamiliar speech of her schoolmates as well as her self-consciousness about her own "funny" Jamaican accent; and, more important than either of these, the tendency of the children to treat her as if she were an inferior person from an inferior place. Yvonne Singer makes much of this; but her treatment is admirably controlled and subtle. We notice, for instance, that Donna, a black Canadian child and Cicely's antagonist, is offended when Cicely asks her if she's from Jamaica. The perceptive child reader may, perhaps, see Donna's persistent mocking of Cicely as a rather obvious reflection of her own insecurities and position in the scapegoat hierarchy; But the author gives the reader no such direct "message."

Cicely, like Tanya, is a sensitive child; but the narrator of *Little-Miss-Yes-Miss* is altogether effaced, and the story is told through effective dialogue and the consciousness of a ten-year-old child. Allen, on the other hand, reduces dialogue in *Tanya* to a minimum, and her voice often interrupts the action to insert an editorial comment. Allen's language, moreover, is inappropriately stiff and even inflated ("they procured the tickets"; they "repaired to the ladies' room."). Tanya, to be sure, is a little older than Cicely, and her sensibilites are naturally more developed. Even so, she is less of a child and more of a mouthpiece for her author. But Cicely is authentically childlike and her charms are thoroughly engaging: wiping away tears, Cicely tells a close friend, on the eve of her departure for Toronto: "I'll hide you in my suitcase and take you with me."

There are other differences. By far the most important is the change experienced by each child. Tanya's sojourn in Montreal has changed her only superficially, and this is confirmed when she steps off the plane proud of her "new pants suit and a new pair of shoes" (p. 88). The new respect which she thinks she has won from her brother is clearly focused upon her smart outfit:

> She knew she looked different for she saw the look of surprise on the faces of her parents and on those of her little sisters who were staring at her with mouths wide open and even on that of little John who looked as if he could not believe it was she. Don was also looking keenly at her and she knew that she had truly gained his attention and respect for the first time. (p. 88)

There is, on the other hand, a significant change in Cicely at the end of Singer's story. Armed with her parents' fortitude acquired from their own experiences

as blacks living in a white society, as well as with her own growing self-awareness, Cicely becomes noticeably assertive and more self-possessed. The author suggests the child's growing self-respect through a symbolic conch shell. Cicely's pride in the Jamaican conch shell which she has brought to Canada is, we may say, an emblem of her growing pride in her own identity as a Jamaican. The magical properties of the conch shell might well suggest, but without authorial intrusion, the mystery of Cicely's growing up.

Neither Tanya nor the reader is certain of her identity, and she remains largely an amalgam of the author's shifting points of view. But Cicely's sense of her developing personhood is unmistakable, and this, together with the story's tautness, make *Little-Miss-Yes-Miss* a better crafted and a more compelling piece of fiction for children.

NOTES

[1]Cynthia Allen, *Tanya in Canada* (Port of Spain: Inprint Ltd., 1978), p. 19. Subsequent references will be incorporated in the text.

[2]Cf. Walter Rodney's comment in *The groundings with my brother* (London: Villiers Publications, 1969), pp. 32-33: "The adult black in our West Indian society is fully conditioned to thinking white because that is the training we are given from childhood. . . West Indians of every colour still aspire to European standards of dress and beauty."

[3]Yvonne Singer, *Little-Miss-Yes-Miss* (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1976).

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