Reading "Salt and Pepper": Social Practices, Unfinished Narratives, And Critical Interpretations

Diane Downer Anderson
Swarthmore College, danders1@swarthmore.edu
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A researcher and three third-grade authors reread their story across an 8-year period, discerning how gender, class, and race are narrated—albeit unconsciously—through familiar and often stereotypical metaphors of “opposites.” Their reflections make clear that different perspectives—in this case, age and experience—result in widely different interpretations.

*All of it [writing Salt and Pepper] was about being friends.*
“Sam,” 2005

We make ourselves vulnerable in the stories we tell.

I often speak with pre- and inservice teachers who wonder how they might conceptualize literacy as social practice during the elementary years, when they, as classroom teachers, are primarily engaged in teaching children to decode and understand texts. In this article, my commentary on *Salt and Pepper*, a story authored by children, is juxtaposed with concurrent and retrospective interviews with its third-grade authors in order to show how a social lens might be used on children’s writing. These close readings of the story honor children’s writing as social in two senses: as reflective of everyday social categories that shape ideologies and as the social aspect of “being friends.”

My multiple readings of *Salt and Pepper* and my interviews with its authors suggest that children’s stories are not completed in the writing of the story, nor is meaning fixed at the time of writing. The collaborative read-alouds and recursive revisions the children did in readers’ and writers’ workshops, with their inflections and intonations, were crucial to the constitution and refinement of meanings. In addition to the original interviews that were conducted close to the writing of the text, I also interviewed the girls eight years later so we could reread and reflect on the meanings of their story. The eight-year retrospective review provides both affirmations and contestations of both my interpretations and the girls’ early interpretations. In this article, I first describe the context in which the story was written and my methods of analysis. I then present my own and the authors’ interpretations side by side (see Figure 1). My reflections occurred within a few days after each interview, and I continued to write about the story as I reread the text and the girls’ interpretations. You can read the full text of Chapter 1 in Appendix A on p. 284. The full story is available in Appendix B in the online version only (www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/la).

**The Setting and Time**

Before the “No Child Left Behind Act,” there were three White girls who learned together in a text-rich, progressive, multiage third- and fourth-grade classroom in a predominantly White public school. They lived in an upper middle class neighborhood where resources were plentiful and where expectations for young children’s academic success took the form of an unfaltering belief in children’s ability to become literate through authentic literacy experiences such as reading trade books, writing stories, and talking. Their personal and social literacy practices were continuous with the culture of their community, a small college town in the Mid-Atlantic Region near a major East Coast city. Trees abounded, schools received Presidential Blue Ribbons, and families enjoyed the resources of the local college and the company of highly accomplished neighbors and friends.
Living among real authors in their community, these children found it easy to identify as writers and to imagine and assume that they, too, could be writers. They had the agency and inclination to write numerous and lengthy stories, often in collaboration with one another. Like real writers, they could work over time and were offered feedback from teachers and classmates along with opportunities to revise and edit. Their story writing bridged the usual boundaries between the classroom and the home, the school year and the summer, and the academic and the personal/social. Their self-initiated, non-graded stories were valued by the teacher and by their classmates through practices such as writer’s workshop and author’s chair (Atwell, 1987). In the context of their school and community, these students thrived as academic readers and writers.

In the larger study, I collected ethnographic data for six months from two multiage classrooms in which teachers were enacting a rich literacy curriculum using literature circles, writers’ workshop, skits, and poetry writing. While investigating the ways in which students constituted social identities of gender through their literacy practices, race and class emerged as well, often traveling on the coattails of anthropomorphic characters. Salt and Pepper is a rich example of such literacy work: a collaboratively written, ten-chapter story that was student-initiated.

**THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

I assume that literacy is a situated social practice, that language indexes identities and hierarchies, and that feminist and critical race theories can inform our understandings of literacy practices. Researchers and theorists have proposed a view of literacy as locally situated social practice (Collins, 1995; Street, 1997; Yagel ski, 2000) where “language learning and socialization are two sides of the same coin” (Gee, 1990, p. 64). Language, as a cultural and social tool, functions as both product and shaper of cultural history—that is, narratives. Naturalistic studies suggest that children use literacy to constitute identities for themselves and others in context (Anderson, 2002; Egan-Robertson, 1998; McCarthey, 1998).

Wortham (2001) has demonstrated how narrators “enact the self” (p. 9) in their storytelling, both autobiographically and through others. He says that, “by speaking through or ventriloquating others’ voices, narrators can establish positions for themselves” (p. 69). Narrative language is composed of three layers: narrative language refers to and characterizes narrated objects; it indexes the voices of the represented characters; and it establishes a social position for the narrator himself [sic] (Wortham, 2001, p. 67). Additionally, sociolinguists such as Coates (2004) show how dialogue indexes gender differences, dominance, and social networks.

Feminist and anti-racist theorists such as Butler (1990), Delph (1989), Ladson-Billings (1998), Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), McIntosh (1988), and Nieto (2004) frame ways of understanding how gender, class, and racial hegemony is imbedded in texts. They reveal the ways that “racism is part and parcel of our society, and . . . is deeply imbedded in all our institutions, policies, and practices” (Nieto, p. 203). Critical race theory (CRT; Ladson-Billings, 1998) helps us to see how racism (like sexism and classism) is constructed and in need of exposure. Further, Ladson-Billings (1998) makes the point that CRT helps us to think about the ways in which storytelling and metaphor contain, refer to, and disguise the categories of Black and White. Ladson-Billings says, “... although the creation of the category does not reveal what constitutes membership within it, it does create for us a sense of polar opposites that posits a cultural ranking designed to tell us who is White or, perhaps more pointedly, who is not White!” (1998, pp. 8–9).

In the case of the story Salt and Pepper and authors Pam, Sam, and Emily, I present three girls becoming writers and readers in a highly literate, supportive classroom, school, and community setting. Through contrastive polar categories associated with the characters and the plot of their story, they narrated gender, class, and race into being. These young authors used anthropomorphic species and references from literature, media, and lifestyles in the United States as their source material. The story presents a dichotomous picture (male/female, canine/feline, brown/white, urban/rural), including actions of rescue and help, through character dialogue and the authors’ omniscient viewpoints as narrators. In their omni-
science, the girls position themselves as female authors drawing and shaping available cultural material. They often use humor to realize their desire for an orderly and symmetrical world, but that world is also one that is replete with ideological and hegemonic meanings.

These data (student story, read-aloud, 1997 interview, and 2005 interview) suggest that a story’s meaning is unfixed until it is read or re-read aloud, and that its meaning may be more complex, in cultural and political ways, than the writers initially intended. For example, in the 1997 data, the text of *Salt and Pepper* was brought into existence through the readers, Sam and Emily, who filled in the gaps exposed in the structure of their story (Iser, 1972). They gave “voice” and inflection to the story through their “expressive intonations” and “evaluative accents” (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Volosinov, 1993) as they read the story aloud and continued to negotiate meanings. However, the meanings they established also leave the story unfinished, in a sense, as they renegotiated those meanings in 2005. Future readers may imbue the story with other inflections and meanings. Therefore, my interpretations of the social categories (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and patterns that solidified in the story (Wortham, 2001, p. 67), and those of Pam, Sam, and Emily, who revoiced the story again in the 2005 interview, are not the final word on *Salt and Pepper*, but merely a tentative guide. You will find that this story, like all stories, is unfinished, leaving the authors and readers pondering what happens after “the big fat smooch on the lips” at “THE END.” Additionally, you will find that meanings are contested and tentative, even among authors and literacy “experts” such as myself. Problematically, you will also see how neither the authors nor I attended much to the issue of race in 1997. I was more focused on the topic of my dissertation study, which was framed by a focus on gender, and the girls were distracted by the joy of writing a long, coherent story and continuing their friendship through literacy practice.

In presenting the story and the selected data from two distinct times and places, I ask the reader to imagine being drawn into our conversations, to engage in your own analysis—a kind of conversation in the margins. Teachers who read this article will find affirmation in their understanding of children as social and cultural persons learning to read and write the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Teachers may use this reading of *Salt and Pepper* as a practice model for a social understanding of students as they write, read, and constitute their world into existence. Further, teachers may feel some regret, as I now do, for the many lost opportunities to interrupt children’s “grown-up stories” (Pam, 2005), stories that reflect their understanding of the world while also shaping their world of understanding (Bourdieu, 1999). I am disappointed that I did not work to evoke a deeper conversation about gender, class, and race when the girls were in third grade.

Figure 1 (pp. 277–281) contains brief chapter synopses, followed by selections from the authors’ 1997 and 2005 interviews in the left column, and selections from my 1997 field notes in the right.

**Ch. 1 Salt & Pepper**

During a storm, Pepper (brown, spotted male dog from the streets of NYC) knocks on the door of Farmer Joe’s farmhouse, where Salt (white, rural female cat) lives, and is welcomed into their cozy home.

**Ch. 1 Young Authors’ Rereading**

**1997**

*Emily:* We thought, “What’s it about?”

*Sam:* . . . and she said, “How about a dog and a cat?” and I said, “OK” and “What should it be called?” She said, “I don’t know.” We were thinking of all these weird names like . . .

*Emily:* . . . like Peanut Butter and Jelly or something that goes together.

*Sam:* Like banana and peel [they laugh] and then I came up with the idea of Salt and Pepper. So that’s a good idea and . . .

**Ch. 1 Researcher’s Analytic Commentary**

I am struck by the dichotomies that show up in the names of Salt and Pepper. The names themselves seem to reiterate the cliché of the cat as female and the dog as male. The cat, of course, is a blond female, who is cared for in a family and is mesmerized by Pepper’s sad tale of woe. Pepper is of an attractive lower social class than Salt, with hints of the “bad boyfriend,” and she (Salt) is clearly taken with the orphan, professing love in the first chapter. I see gender and class constituted here. Is Pepper’s coloring—“a little brown dog with little brown spots” in contrast to Salt’s whiteness—a marker for
Emily: . . . and we decided that the cat should be Salt, and the dog should be Pepper. And she decided she wanted to be the cat and I wanted to be the dog.

Emily: Brown with little brown spots.

2005

Pam: There’s those kinds of stories out there and I’m sure we were influenced and there’s Lady and the Tramp, a nice dog and a kind of trampy dog.

Emily: I was like Pepper, I was a rebel kind of. He’d experienced everything, like adventures. He went out into the world and Salt was innocent, like a house cat. And Pepper needed to broaden her horizons.

Sam: We just needed for Pepper to be out on the streets, and for him to come in and for him to get lost, so the other family just came in.

Emily: I don’t remember wanting to be a boy. I just like dogs and you were a cat.

Sam: I don’t even think we viewed him in the story as a boy, except for the whole Salt and Pepper love story. Honestly, at that point in our lives, I don’t think we viewed it at all. Like with all our friends we would go and play soccer with the boys and it wasn’t a big deal. We weren’t at that point where there was a distinct separation between boys and girls. I don’t think that’s what our motives were. Dogs we thought of as living in the city and cats . . .

Emily: . . . like house cats.

Ch. 2 Pepper’s New Home and Ch. 3 The Adventure

The storm clears and Salt and Pepper have fun playing together. However, Pepper announces he is moving back to New York because he has to “move on.” Salt gets “cranky.”

Salt sobs and says goodbye. However, she has a secret plan and she follows Pepper’s footprints. She surprises him and he jumps up and is knocked out. This makes him “crazy in the head.”

Ch. 2 & 3 Young Authors’ Rereading

1997

Emily: Well, I see Pepper as more dirty and . . .

Sam: . . . I know we saw that . . .

Emily: . . . covered with grease spots. And so that’s how we made that happen. Because we couldn’t see Salt doing that.

Sam: We sort of like imagined it as a farm with animals and a big red barn, white doors, and peeling paint. And we just imagined that place and then sort of took notes of how it was and then we turned it into a story.

2005

Sam: We were trying to make like a grown-up story.

Emily: We could just imagine Pepper sitting on the couch.

Sam: I was reading it and everyone was laughing.

Emily: I kind of remember how the characters are and what they look like in my head.

1997

Emily: It’s like a drunk voice.

Sam: Sorta like when he’s knocked out he sort of got that voice and is it permanent now? (She asks Sam, who has taken the role of Pepper in the read aloud)

Ch. 2 & 3 Researcher’s Analytic Commentary

Salt and Pepper are so stereotypically gendered! Salt is domesticated, expected to stay in her safe, cozy home with the farmer and his wife while Pepper has to “move on,” as if he has wanderlust. Pepper has to be careful that he doesn’t upset Salt, who has previously professed her love for him. Could Salt have been Pepper and could Pepper have been Salt?

Whew! I am so glad Salt was only pretending to be sad. She has broken out of her cozy, safe home and, with a plan of her own, she pursues Pepper, tackling him in true tomboy fashion. But is the tomboy a better stereotype? Or does it simply valorize the male while still constituting Salt as a woman focused on a man?

Pepper becomes “crazy in the head” as if he is a cartoon character in the 1950s. Is this about craziness or is Pepper acting drunk?

Salt, the prototypical female cat, is starting to look stronger and smarter, or at least cleverer, than Pepper, the male dog. I recall the movie Homeward Bound (Dunham, 1993), which I suspect the girls have seen, where there were two male dogs (the older one wise while the younger one was frisky and always getting into trouble) and one female cat (who was cautious, particular, and fussy).

Figure 1. Salt and Pepper chapter synopses and author comments (continued)
Emily: (reading from the 1997 transcript) “It’s like a drunk voice.”
Sam: I really want to hear Emily do the drunk voice.
Emily: I wish I could hear us do the voices. I just want to see what Pepper’s drunk voice is.
Sam: Why did we do that?
Emily: I remember Pepper drinking beer a lot but Salt probably never had it. She was like good and all.
Pam: Sour cream and soda and then beer.
Sam: We were trying to make a grown-up story. We just thought that makes a good story.

**Ch. 4 Lost and Ch. 5 The River**

Salt and Pepper head to a party but get lost in the woods as it is getting dark. They banter and Pepper scares Salt; Salt hits Pepper to get him to “shape up.” They are taking notes from “how it was” in their heads. This is what Bakhtin (1981) would call a visual–verbal dialectic, where the act of writing is really an act of reproducing what one sees. What one sees is informed by the cultural capital available. So where does this knowledge come from? The obvious and general answer is that it comes from all that they know. But what, specifically, do they know?

Although Pepper never actually drinks beer in the story, he seems to be “really drunk” according to Emily. And in 2005, Emily remembers Pepper drinking beer, but Salt was good, implying that Pepper was bad. A good story seems to contain a protagonist and an antagonist. In this case, the bad character is brown, male, and urban poor.

Emily: (reading from the 1997 transcript) “It’s like a drunk voice.”
Emily: I thought it was like a real story.
Emily: We did write a lot about beer.
Pam: We were probably trying to write a good story. We just thought that makes a good story.

**Ch. 4 & 5 Young Authors’ Rereading**

1997

Emily: Salt has to show Pepper that it’s all right for him to trust her and [know that] she . . . like she’s helpful.
Emily: [She trusts him] Because—
Sam: —because he rescued her. And if he’s gonna go on doing that she can trust him and have faith in him.

2005

Emily: Did the boy rescue the girl? And the girl only helps?
Pam: And Salt helps him.
Emily: I thought he was helping her, at least now I think of it that way. Because he was making her adventurous and she was “Oh, we can’t do that.”
Sam: I think they were helping each other. I don’t think he was rescuing.
Pam: I know when I was writing stories for classes, I would always try to write a good story and I was really conscious of trying. If we are going to write a good story, we have to have the boy rescue the girl.
Emily: We were probably trying to write a good classic story.
Sam: That was what we were introduced to. That was all we knew.
Pam: Like those big adventure stories with a dog and a cat and the boy rescuing the girl; and maybe we thought of the grown-up stories that our parents liked, with people getting drunk, so maybe we thought of that.
Sam: Or maybe even being introduced to being drunk, not even being introduced, but beer was something our parents drank.
Emily: And we were trying to make it a grown-up story.

**Ch. 4 & 5 Researcher’s Analytic Commentary**

Salt has gained the upper hand. She is mature and sensible to Pepper’s “nonsense.” She is serious to Pepper’s joking. Although she says Pepper is scaring her when they think they are lost, she straightens Pepper out with a “smack” and orders him to “shape up.” The conflict and tension of their blossoming relationship plays out in how Salt and Pepper speak to one another, which, to me, sounds like a cross between a TV situation-comedy and a Saturday morning cartoon.

The rescue and help characteristics of Salt and Pepper seem to structure the plot. Although the girls say it is about a relationship of trust and faith, I still have my doubts. Was falling in the water a kind of test for Pepper that Salt has set up (or the authors have set up)? When Salt provides sanctuary in Chapter I for Pepper to come out of the cold and damp, she is being helpful. When Pepper provides a branch for Salt to get out of the water (can we assume she is also cold and damp?) he is rescuing her. Could we say that Salt rescued Pepper from his lonely, cold, damp life? Could I also say that Pepper helped Salt by handing her a branch so she could rescue herself? Where did they get this rescue/help dichotomy? And how have those gender binaries drawn in race and class? Does one binary relationship help to solidify another?

Is a classic story the same as a grown-up story? Do classic stories tend to have gender and rescue/help binaries?
Ch. 6 The Bone

They exchange problematic endearments as they search for Pepper’s relative, Uncle Nutmeg, who has transformed from a dog into a squirrel. Pepper is suspicious of Nutmeg’s identity. The Wicked Witch of the West appears and, just as things are declared complicated, Glinda arrives to guide them down the Yellow Brick Road.

Ch. 6 Young Authors’ Rereading

1997

Emily: She doesn’t want him calling her babe, sweetie, and honey.
Sam: And he’s sort of falling in love with her now ‘cause she’s not really loving him now. She just thinks they’re friends. So, like now he’s falling in love with her.
Emily: Or he’s just like saying that to annoy her but he might mean it that he loved her.
Sam: We couldn’t think of another way to describe that he loved her ‘cause he doesn’t have any friends to like whisper little like “Hey, I like Salt.” (She whispers as if she is Pepper)
Sam: Yeah. He knows [that he loves her] and he can’t really stop himself.
Emily: Right.

2005

Emily: I’m just surprised at this part. She gets upset when Pepper calls her “honey,” where we just say these things about all of these relationships, but we have no idea what we’re talking about.
Sam: That’s why the story is so influenced.
Emily: But these are things like now we experience, like “Oh, I don’t know if I like him or I just want to be friends” but we were saying [Salt and Pepper] don’t know if they want to be friends or not.
Pam: It just seems like in third grade we were so little but we thought we were so big, writing this story. We were sooo cool!
Emily: So cool.

Ch. 6 Researcher’s Analytic Commentary

A tension is developing between Salt and Pepper over what Pepper calls Salt. The endearments of “babe,” “sweetie,” and “honey” are irritating Salt. Additionally, the dialogue of Uncle Nutmeg slips into vernacular, non-Standard American English, with phrases like “You’re not going to take it no more!”

This maps on to the tension in the classroom, where boys are “falling in love” with girls, usually the smart, pretty, good soccer players. I am secretly pleased that at least intelligence and athletic competence have made it into the mix of desirable traits with beauty. The girls are having mixed feelings about the social love interests in the classroom, with a fourth friend ripping up the notes that Emily has received from a boy in class, as well as the hearts Emily has made with this boy in mind. But do the girls see that they’ve constructed this male, Pepper, as someone who “can’t really stop himself”? Is this how they see the boys in the classroom, as unable to help themselves?

In 2005, the girls see how “influenced” the story is, influenced by experiences that they had not yet had in third grade. They also seem to be implying that part of being a third grader was trying on older identities, identities of coolness, through writing.

Ch. 7 The Wizard of Oz and Ch. 8 Farmer Joe to the Rescue

Salt and Pepper realize they need the broom of the Wicked Witch to transform Uncle Nutmeg back into a dog. After an interlude with the Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Cowardly Lion, they find the broom and continue down the Yellow Brick Road.

Back home, Farmer Joe is worried and calls the Animal Rangers. After some verbal confusion, the Animal Rangers agree to look for Salt and Pepper. Salt and Pepper are found while looking for Uncle Nutmeg, and Farmer Joe comes to take them back to the farm.

Ch. 7 & 8 Young Authors’ Rereading

2005

Pam: We were going to write a really grown-up story, and you [the researcher] were going to be there, and we were going to show you how grown-up we were. I remember they went on an adventure because I really liked the movie Homeward Bound.
Sam: All of it [writing Salt and Pepper] was about being friends.
Emily: I remember doing lots of projects together.
Sam: We would do plays, go to each others’ houses. I don’t know that we were ever apart.
Pam: Since like kindergarten.
Sam: This is what we did together.
Emily: We would go to each others’ houses. We would make music videos, make stories.
Pam: I remember a lot of plays for some reason.

Ch. 7 & 8 Researcher’s Analytic Commentary

Suddenly the ultimate intertextual references to The Wizard of Oz (Baum, 1982) show up. Not only does the Wicked Witch of the West appear “out of a bolt of fire,” but so does the dialogue of “I’ll get you my sonny and your little dog, too. Ahhhhh.” Sam, Pam, and Emily are no longer pretending that this is a totally original story. Many characters and terms from Oz have shown up, including the chant to keep away fear: “lions and tigers and bears, oh my.”

Writing is what these girls do for fun, to “be cool,” to be who they are in their community. And they say that they don’t need school or to “know anything” to write. They don’t think about punctuation. What they do, as writers, seems implicit in their daily lives. Writing down dialogue is just an extension of what they already know.

Figure 1. Salt and Pepper chapter synopses and author comments (continued)
Emily: Yeah, we did act out a lot of plays, puppet shows.

Sam: We were thinking that we wanted to be writers and it would be really cool to write a book so, “Let’s write a book!”

Emily: We were also trying to write a good story, that’s just what we did, created stories.

Sam: And projects.

Emily: It wasn’t for school so we really didn’t care about punctuation, the capitalization, all that stuff. It was just our free time. I also don’t remember when our teachers were making us subtly do things. I took everything in third grade literally. I remember doing simile and I was like, “Wow, they’re trying to change the style of how we write.”

Sam: I think we thought that writing is such a universal thing that you don’t really need to go to school. You just don’t need to know anything to write. I don’t think we were focusing on punctuation, like we just knew we could write down dialogue.

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**Ch. 9 Home Again and Ch. 10 New York**

Salt and Pepper are happy to be home with Farmer Joe. Pepper decides to stay because “it does feel good to be home.” At Pepper’s request, they visit New York one more time. They party and are married by Uncle Nutmeg. They give Uncle Nutmeg the broom and he is transformed back into a dog. The story ends with a “big fat smooch on the lips.”

**Ch. 9 & 10 Young Authors’ Rereading**

1997

Sam: We’re going to make a series of this. See, they’re gonna have babies and the boys are gonna be ‘dats’ and the girls are gonna be ‘cogs.’ We took dogs and cats and like . . .

Emily: . . . mixed their names.

Sam: Dats and cogs.

2005

Emily: I really think in all of this . . . we didn’t mean to write it. We did mean to. But all of these ideas that are incorporated, we didn’t mean to write them. Do you understand what I’m trying to say? The deeper ideas that are in it, I don’t think we were aware of them, and I think it was just something we wrote.

Sam: A lot of these ideas, we’re just around them. We heard it from our parents. We heard it from our teachers. But we never . . . Now I look at these ideas and of course we are introduced to them in school, or in history class, and we talk about them all the time, like race and gender. But when we were in third grade we never . . . Like I don’t ever remember beer, even the gender thing, we were not aware, not necessarily not caring, but not worrying about it, you know?

Emily: This was a really productive time to spend [writing Salt and Pepper].

Sam: Rewriting so many times. But it wasn’t a burden or anything.

Emily: We were the cool kids. Other people looked up to us and followed what we did but we weren’t aware of it.

Pam: I don’t know if we were trying to be cool, if it came across like that. I just know it wasn’t a burden. It wasn’t a job. It was just something that we liked to do.

Emily: Third grade was the best year of my life.

Sam: Oh, we had so much fun.

Pam: Learning was not a burden at all.

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**Ch. 9 & 10 Researcher’s Analytic Commentary**

In the world of Salt and Pepper, being a dog and cat is not simple or mutually exclusive if they can breed, making dats (boys) and cogs (girls). Are dats and cogs also biracial? Implied here is the gap at the end of the story, after THE END, after ever after.
THE COHERENT BINARIES OF SALT AND PEPPER

The instability of meanings and the range of interpretations revealed in these data show how these collaborative authors and I, their analytical audience, were not "on the same page" even when on the same page of the story. Emily, Sam, and Pam are at once readers, writers, and characters as they stand outside of the text in their role as authors, but inside the text as characters and performers. In a sense, Sam and Emily entered a secondary world (Benton, 1983) in 1997 when they read aloud, giving voice to their characters through their performance, while simultaneously revising and negotiating meaning from their positions as re-writers and re-readers. The divergences, contradictions, and negotiations of meaning and intent between the young authors, as well as the discrepancies between what they were thinking and how I was interpreting their story and commentary, serve to remind us that writing is also a narration of culture.

As the authors developed the characters for their story, class and race came along with the gendered, anthropomorphic characters. What we see in Figure 2 are the binary character traits of Salt and Pepper that link gender, class, race, urban and rural sites, behaviors, and discursive practices. These traits cohere en masse to produce characters and dialogue that are entertaining, yet troubling, in that they reiterate gender, race, and class-based hegemonies that rely heavily on stereotypes. The authors created the characters in a culturally rational way as they drew on movies and tropes, using them consistently and repeatedly throughout the story. Class and race, which did not appear explicitly problematic in this classroom, link to gender dichotomies in the story and create a package of stereotypes that lean heavily on dichotomies. As Enciso (2003) has reminded us, “racist and sexist frames of reference require dichotomies, coherence, repetition, and rationality to sustain their construction as natural” (p. 159).

For researchers and teachers working in primarily White, upper middle class communities, and familial sources, remain largely un-interrogated in moments of re-reading, perhaps because classroom teachers and researchers have not developed the tools and words to “trouble” (Kumishiro, 2002) the meanings in stories such as this with elementary students. Yet Salt and Pepper is a narrative representing common stereotypes, a host for the pathogens of gendered, raced, and classed identities.

WHY AN ONGOING SOCIAL READING OF SALT AND PEPPER?

Of what value is this close, critical, social reading of Salt and Pepper to the classroom teacher? I suggest three conceptual benefits to a social reading of children’s writing.

First, for stories produced for and by children, meaning is incomplete except in the interaction between reader, text, and context. Opportunities for children to revisit their stories, read them...
aloud, collaborate, and revise allow for refine­
ment and contestations to meanings. This may
be especially true when a story contains mono­
logue or dialogue. Intonations and inflections cast
meanings that cannot be seen but can be heard.
Although it is not efficient for every student­
initiated story to go through this kind of pro­
cess, all children should have the opportunity to
talk and write collaboratively and extensively,
and to revise recursively. This example suggests
that periodic read-alouds of children’s writing
may be a useful strategy in the revision and story­
refinement process.

Second, a social view of children’s writing
allows teachers to engage with students’ writ­
ing as contextualized, contested, and tentative
in the social worlds that children inhabit. Stu­
dent writing in the elementary school is too often focused on the superficial skills that the children are acquiring or have yet to acquire. Dyson (1993) has reminded us that children write what they know, laying knowledge of their lives onto their writing; in doing so (as in all of their social activ­
ities), they try on social meanings and identities,
constituting themselves and others in the world as
gendered, classed, and raced persons. Even when
using animals as props for personal character­
stics and human dialogue, they draw from per­
sonal, interactional, familial, and media sources.
The content and analysis of children’s stories
gives teachers a rich resource for understanding
the world that their students inhabit and the ways
in which they take on or resist the roles available
to them. At the same time, in a world that is raced,
gendered, and classed, it is difficult for children
to identify with “the other.” A broad sociocul­
tural view of learning to read and write in school
extends resources and opportunities for children
to become literate and open to a broad range of
possible selves.

Third, and perhaps most important, research­
ers, teachers, and student writers need opportu­
nities to engage in conversations that investigate
children’s expressive language so that the gen­
dered, classed, and raced meanings that per­
meate might be “troubled” (Kumishiro, 2002).
This must be done with care and respect. If chil­
dren do not write about their culture, there
can be no critical analysis of stereotypes and
representations—the very content that we need to
draw into question. We can then use critical dis­
course analysis, feminist theory, and critical race
theory with young authors to interrogate cul­
tural images that work to reify limiting identities
(Comber & Simpson, 2001; Vasquez, 2004). We
must take great care to do so in ways that encour­
ge children to write, reread, revise, and ana­
lyze, taking shared responsibility for how culture
works through readers and writers. We must resist
imposing “correct” interpretations and represen­
tations, instead encouraging broad thinking about
what it means to be of a particular gender, class,
or race. Incorrect and incomplete cultural stereo­
types should be the objects of our scrutiny, not
the stories in which they occur. In third grade,
these authors do not have the critical tools to do
such work. As juniors in high school, they are just
beginning to recognize the “influences” on their
story. Ultimately, only more experience through
the years with this type of analysis will produce
young people who are more comfortable with cri­
tiquing gender, race, and class.

To borrow and paraphrase a concept from
Bruner (1986, p. 26), children traffic in sup­
possedly “settled certainties” as well as “human possibilities”—what he calls the subjunctive
mode. Whether as researchers or teachers, we
should be cognizant of the life narratives of our
students and the ways in which their literacy
growth is enmeshed in and reflective of those nar­
ratives. We should work to craft literacy tasks
that draw on and foster a broad range of possi­
bile selves, for the children in our classrooms as
well as for those differently classed, raced, and
gendered children who are elsewhere. We should
honor student writing as worthy of literary, soci­
olinguistic, sociological, and political interpre­
tations and strive to engage students in acts of
critical interpretation that are ongoing, open­
ended, and collaborative.

Postscript
During the writing of this article, Emily, Pam, and Sam
were in high school, where Emily played ice hockey and
was learning to play the guitar, and Pam and Sam also
played sports and authored a peer advice column called,
“Ask Pam and Sam” for the school paper. They are now in
college.

Author’s Note
This article is dedicated to the memory of Laurel Ste­
vick, friend, mentor, book buddy, reading specialist, and
advocate for young readers and writers. I am grateful
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with this article: Jill Gladstein, Matthew Wallaert, Mallory
Shelter, Marina Meunier, Alex Heustis, Tabatha Sabatino,
Pat Enciso.
Chapter 1 - Salt and Pepper

Pepper was a dog who lived on the streets of New York City. He belonged to no one, and ate out of the trash can. He was a little brown dog, with little brown spots and long floppy ears.

Salt, on the other hand, was a little white cat, who was well loved and lived on a farm with a farmer and his wife. The farm had six ducks, three pigs, two horses, two donkeys, four cows and two other cats besides Salt. One day, a big storm came. Salt was inside when she heard a pounding on the door. “Meroww, meroww,” cried Salt so loudly Farmer Joe had to come out of the kitchen straight at it.

There, standing in the doorway was Pepper: wet cold, damp and shivering.

“Come in dog, come in,” said Farmer Joe. “Come in and rest awhile you poor dog. How did you get out there anyway?”

Pepper just sat on the couch and stared.

“Let me get you some food.”

When Farmer Joe was out of the room Salt said to Pepper “just how did you get here?”

“Well,” said Pepper, “I lived in New York when the storm came. Now I live on the streets and have nowhere to go when I walked past your place. I thought it looked cozy. So I went to your door and pounded on it. FINALLY someone let me in and now I’m here. I have nowhere to go back to so I’ll stay here until I find someplace.”

“Whoa!” said Salt staring straight at him. “Well, you can always stay with us.”

“THANK YOU!” blurted out Pepper, interrupting Salt’s sentence. “Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!” said Pepper. “Oh, oh I love you Salt.”

“I love you too,” said Salt in a weird voice.

Appendix A. Chapter 1 of Salt and Pepper

References


Diane Downer Anderson is assistant professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.