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Authors as Figures, Functions, and Persons: Theories on Intention

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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Authors as Figures, Functions, and Persons: Theories on Intention

Ever since Monroe Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt published their 1946 essay “The Intentional Fallacy” claiming that the author’s design and intention is not available as a standard for literary criticism, theorists have been pointedly attacking the idea that authors and their intentions are the appropriate focus of criticism. Breaking from the traditional approach to literary criticism, theorists repeatedly attacked the idea that the determination of an author’s intent had an important place in criticism. Two of the most influential anti-intentionalists are Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault—in his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes asserts that writing is the point where all identity is lost and that language is what speaks, not the author, while Michel Foucault in his 1969 essay “What Is an Author?” dismisses the author as a function necessary to capitalism and designed to control and limit our experience of a text. These anti-intentionalist theories influenced postmodern thought more generally while denying the interpretive value of authorial intention and granting the reader entire authority to construct her own interpretation of a work. Since Barthes and Foucault, critics have become more concerned with what a text can be made to say rather than what any single author intended to say in her work.

Although the rejection of authorial intention as a standard for literary criticism now seems absolute, several later theorists have sought to restore authors and intentions to the center of literary criticism. In his 1989 essay “Writer, Text, Work, Author,” Alexander Nehamas responds to Foucault by asking, “Who *can* be speaking?” and by separating author from writer and proposing that we recognize the author figure as whatever plausible historical variant of the writer emerges from the work, and not from behind it. Reed Way Dasenbrock calls for an even more traditional intentionalism. In his 2001 book chapter “Taking It Personally,” Dasenbrock

recommends a more ethical form of criticism, one which respects authors as just other persons trying to communicate. Although Nehamas and Dasenbrock are just two of the theorists who make arguments for the author figure, most critics still take a dead-author approach to literary criticism.

Despite there being several different theories on how to interpret a work and an author, anti-intentionalism was the primary (if not only) approach to literary criticism in most of my undergraduate English courses, so I was intrigued when I learned about the many other theories that existed. This thesis is the result of my desire to learn more about these different theories and to explore how they operate in practice. I chose three theorists to focus on—Foucault, Nehamas, and Dasenbrock—and I wanted to investigate each of their theories fairly. Rather than trying to prove or disprove any theories, I approached this thesis as an exercise in applying each theory to one work of literature, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Using one novel for all three theories allowed me to show the three different results of each theory while identifying similarities and differences. I chose Foucault, Nehamas, and Dasenbrock because these theorists were already directly in conversation with each other—Nehamas answers Foucault's question, "What does it matter who is speaking?" by asking instead who *can* be speaking, while Dasenbrock responds to the logical inconsistency in Foucault's insistence that all authors be anonymous, showing that such impersonality is not always possible, especially when the author is known to us and someone we care about. Foucault is the stark anti-intentionalist of the three, but each theorist presents a distinct theory, making for an interesting project of theory application. I have dedicated a chapter to each theorist, and I begin in Chapter 1 with Foucault.

In his "What Is an Author?" Foucault considers the author to be a function that came about only to accommodate the modern capitalist state's need for ownership and punishment, a

function that limits our experiences and interpretations of a work. I introduce Foucault's argument that the author figure is temporary—since it has not always existed, it will eventually cease to exist once again—and that it is a function necessitated by capitalism, not literary criticism. After breaking down Foucault's theory with his own reference to Saint Jerome's four criteria of authenticity in *De viris illustribus*, I turn to *The Woman Warrior* to determine how the author function limits the work according to Foucault. I organize this exercise by first looking at the author significations on the book's cover and copyright page (author's name, author's picture, publisher, etc.), and next I consider Saint Jerome's criteria and determine how Kingston as an author function sets limits on our understanding of the work by serving as a constant level of value, as a field of conceptual coherence, as representing a stylistic unity, and as being limited within a certain timeframe. I then consider the implications of this book's categorization as a memoir and finish by discussing how the removal of all authorial limitations leaves us with the type of anonymous text that Foucault desires and how the experience of reading would change had we only works without authors, similar to Greek epics and other narratives without a single source.

My second chapter focuses on Nehamas's theory which offers an alternative to Foucault's readiness to remove the author figure. Nehamas defends the author figure as reasonable and necessary when reimagined as a plausible historical variant of the writer, the writer being the flesh-and-blood person who wrote the text and the author being the figure that emerges from her work. I first address how Nehamas and Foucault agree in many ways, including the idea that the author is not a person or figure who comes before a work, but they do not agree on everything. While Foucault suggests that it does not matter who is speaking, Nehamas counters with the author figure, the plausible historical variant of the writer, who could

be speaking. To make the distinction between the author figure and the writer, Nehamas defines the difference between a work and a text. I explain this difference between these terms by breaking down Nehamas's process: when we view a text as something to interpret, we construe it as a work, as a product of an action, and the agent of that action is the author figure. After showing how Nehamas views the author as a product of interpretation instead of as being prior to interpretation, I discuss the expansiveness of the author figure. For Nehamas, the author figure is transcendental to the work and emerges from a whole *oeuvre* of works. To apply Nehamas's theory to *The Woman Warrior*, I spend the rest of the chapter considering who *could* have plausibly written *The Woman Warrior* in an effort to generate a plausible historical variant of the actual writer of the work. By closely examining themes, topics, perspectives, and other elements of the text, I construe a plausible author figure for the book.

Dasenbrock, who also responds to Foucault in certain respects, is the focus of my third chapter. I explain Dasenbrock's argument for the necessity of reading for authorial intent in ethical literary criticism, and I then apply his theory to *The Woman Warrior*. Dasenbrock acknowledges that it is possible to read in the postmodern way, without respect to the author's seeming intentions, but he asks if it is *always* possible. He suggests that it is not always possible and uses the de Man affair as an example of the problem he has with what he calls impersonalist readings which have no concern with trying to understand what an author could be saying. His issue with this style of interpretation is that it is easy to do until a reader interprets their own works or works authored by someone whose selfhood matters to them. Dasenbrock uses Jacques Derrida's participation in the de Man affair as an example of this interpretation. Derrida, the arch anti-intentionalist who practiced impersonalist interpretation and had no interest in reaching an understanding, completely changes his approach to defend the true intentions of Paul de Man,

whose collaborationist wartime writings resurfaced after his death. Dasenbrock uses the de Man affair to identify the inconsistency in impersonalist readings and to present a more reliable interpretive approach: good faith readings. Interpretation becomes the ethical choice of choosing whether or not to treat authors as person, and as persons, authors deserve to be read with an attempt at understanding, to be read in good faith. Rather than performing a “good faith” reading myself, I refer to Zhang Ya-Jie’s article “A Chinese Woman’s Response to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*” and consider how Ya-Jie’s article can be understood as an excellent example of the value of the good faith reading as described by Dasenbrock. This exercise reveals that Ya-Jie ultimately discovers that Kingston’s identity and intention are crucial to actually understanding her work, as opposed to misunderstanding it. As Dasenbrock recommends, she makes an ethical choice to treat the author as a person who deserves at least an attempt at understanding.

My project covers a select few of the many different and complex theories that exist on authorial intention, and concentrating on Foucault, Nehamas, and Dasenbrock allows me to study each in greater detail. These three theorists all in some way fit together, yet they make such differing arguments. Foucault and Nehamas both disagree with the idea that we can ever identify what an author truly intended and that the author function comes prior to the work or is the source of the work’s true meaning, but Foucault addresses this problem by rejecting the author figure as a capitalist-born function that limits and controls works, while Nehamas still finds that authors are not so easily dispensed with, that there are good reasons that we still care about authors. Like Foucault, he separates the author from the writer, arguing that the author figure emerges from a work and is transcendental to it, emerging from all of the writer’s works. Dasenbrock agrees with Nehamas in that he, too, finds the author indispensable, Foucault’s

arguments notwithstanding, but on ethical and not logical grounds. He regards Foucault as a kind of hypocrite, suggesting that no postmodern author manages in practice to inhabit the required anonymity and impersonality when it comes to his own works or the works of his friends.

Foucault's theory, like Derrida's, would fail Dasenbrock's test of symmetry. That is to say, theorists like Foucault and Derrida never manage to consistently practice what they preach.

Although Nehamas and Dasenbrock both defend the author figure, they take different approaches in their arguments. Nehamas is very logical and focuses on the practicalities of reimagining the author figure, while Dasenbrock is focused on consistency in theories and acknowledging the humanity of the authors being discussed. The following discussion and application of these three theories will hopefully reveal how different interpretive approaches can influence the way we read and interpret works and whether a variety of interpretive approaches benefits or hinders literary criticism.

1. Foucault and the Author Function: Freedom in Interpretation

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher who challenged the notion of the author figure and its desirability for literary criticism. In his “What Is an Author?” Foucault considers the author to be a function that was created out of a need for ownership and that limits our experience and interpretation of a work. Asking “what difference does it make who is speaking?” (22), Foucault explains how the author came into being as a figure who is valorized as a genius and hero. According to Foucault, the author figure became the center of literary focus only when a need for ownership and punishment appeared, a need that the story’s hero could not fulfill. Foucault’s main issue with the author function is the assumption that the author precedes the works as an indefinite source of significations that define the works. To this idea, Foucault writes, “The truth is quite the contrary: the author . . . is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (21). Since the author figure has not always existed, Foucault argues that the author figure may cease to exist later on, and he supports this claim by explaining how the author is a function created by culture and capitalism that limits works’ interpretations, making it a restricting function for what could be a more radical and revolutionary literary criticism.

A part of systems of punishment and ownership, Foucault considers the author to be an object created by and necessitated by capitalism. When defining how the author function came to be, Foucault identifies its origin in a need for ownership of works. He explains that this need for ownership first came about when there was a need for punishment:

Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors (other than mythical, “sacralized” and “sacralizing” figures) to the extent that authors became subject to

punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive. . . . [Discourse was] an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and profane, the licit and illicit, the religious and the blasphemous. (14)

If someone deems a work profane, illicit, or blasphemous, there needs to be someone to blame and punish, and therefore, the author function emerges as the perfect subject for that punishment. The standards that works were held to were those of the State and the Church, so writing became an act of risking disapproval by their standards. Foucault describes how assigning authors and making them subject to punishment created a system of ownership that enforced punishment but also revealed the benefits of ownership. Foucault explains how capitalism made being an author and claiming ownership beneficial since rules were established “concerning authors’ rights, author-publisher relations, [and] rights of reproduction” (14). Although authors risked punishment by claiming ownership, they also had the ability to achieve fame, fortune, and prestige with their works. For Foucault, the author functions’ roots in capitalism make the author function useful for profit to the individual author but also restrictive for literary criticism.

One way the author figure restricts interpretation is via the author’s name—the name of the author on a text is a function and product of ownership that informs readers about the text and causes readers to make assumptions about the text, both of which can happen before a reader even begins reading. Foucault claims that the proper name of the author “has other than indicative functions: more than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone, it is the equivalent of a description” (12). He uses the example of Aristotle to show how Aristotle’s name on a text indicates more information beyond the name itself; the name Aristotle calls to mind other labels such as “the author of *Analytcs*” and “the founder of ontology” (12), both of which can cause readers to make assumptions about a text based on the name (Aristotle) on the cover.

Foucault continues to discuss the problematic nature of the author's name by showing how the name represents more than an individual. He suggests that if we proved the works of Shakespeare and Bacon to have been written by the same author, then the function of the author's name changes. A change in what the names represent causes us to reconsider how "Shakespeare" and "Bacon" function in relation to the texts and encourages reinterpretation of the texts to find a new meaning even though none of the words in any of the texts would change. Foucault resists the author's name because of how it limits interpretive possibilities, going beyond the abilities of a label and performing a function of discourse: "Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts" (13). The author's name allows the individual writer to collect profit or receive awards for her text but at the cost of the name functioning to limit interpretation of the text and close it down to other potential meanings.

Foucault defines more limiting functions of the author figure by referring to Saint Jerome's four criteria of authenticity in *De viris illustribus*. According to Foucault, these four criteria, which were initially created to ensure the authenticity and saintliness of the authors of Christian texts, demonstrate how the author function still limits possible interpretation and meanings and relies on a unity that can give arbitrary authority and value to texts. The first criterion is that "if among several books attributed to an author one is inferior to the others, it must be withdrawn from the list of the author's works (the author is therefore defined as a constant level of value)" (16). For Foucault, this constant level of value gives readers the presumption that a text is a certain level of value, high-quality or low-quality without even having read it, as the author guarantees that value, and this restricts the readers' ability to interpret a work for themselves. The second and third criteria are these:

(2) The same should be done if certain texts contradict the doctrine expounded in the author's other works (the author is thus defined as a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence); (3) one must also exclude works that are written in a different style, containing words and expressions not ordinarily found in the writer's production (the author here is conceived as a stylistic unity). (16)

These criteria require a conceptual and stylistic unity of an author, making for Foucault an author figure that functions to confine interpretations within the limits that the author figure represents. If a text falls outside of an author figure's standards of unity, the text must either be excluded from that author figure's works or the differences of the text must be explained and reasoned for. The fourth and final criterion considers the author as a historical figure: "Passages quoting statements that were made or mentioning events that occurred after the author's death must be regarded as interpolated texts (the author is here seen as a historical figure at the crossroads of a certain number of events)" (16). The criterion deems the author to be a person in history whose writing is limited by the confines of her lifetime—she could not have written about an event that did not happen until after her death. These four criteria define the author function as a symbol of unity in writing style and content that "serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts" (16). Foucault claims that the author figure of these four criteria is how modern criticism incorporates the author function, and he resists the use of this author function because it creates an authorial box which all interpretations must fit within instead of letting interpretations be free of a constraining figure.

After considering the ways that Foucault suggests the author function shuts down the text and limits interpretation, we can turn to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* to examine how the author function operates with this work specifically. By applying Foucault's

theory, we can consider as critics how the author function limits our interpretations with the author's name and what it represents while also looking at how the author function focuses or inclines us to restrict our interpretations of the work. In addition to determining how the author function operates in *The Woman Warrior*, I will also attempt to remove the author from the work (to the extent that I am able) by looking for the elements Foucault seeks to remove and considering the text that I am left with—Foucault acknowledges that for a full removal of the author function, there must be a change in ideology, and since I cannot enact such a change, I will do my best to imagine the type of authorless text that Foucault envisions. Foucault calls “for a form of culture in which fiction would not be limited by the figure of the author” (22), so by using his theory, I will determine how the author figure is limiting this work according to Foucault's ideas and how the work could exist without the constraints of the author figure.

Before even opening the book, a reader is faced with the name Maxine Hong Kingston on the front cover and the spine and a picture of the author on the back cover. From her name alone, we can assume that Kingston is a woman from “Maxine” and that she is most likely Chinese from “Hong.” These assumptions are reinforced by the picture on the back cover. The picture is of Kingston in her later life as revealed by her gray-white hair, and her facial features show that she is likely Chinese-American. A big smile stretches across her face; she seems happy, wise, and friendly, not pompous. Because Kingston looks happy in her picture, we may assume that the work will be joyful and include pleasant stories. Her name and picture both imply that she is Chinese-American which may influence us to read the work as telling the author's own experience. These assumptions are formed before even opening the book, and this effect is one that Foucault resists. According to Foucault, the name and the picture of the author on the cover are products of capitalism, a system designed to promote the individual and bring the author a

profit for her work, and these capitalist products contribute to an author function that restricts a reader's interpretive abilities—when we know something about the author, we assume we know something about the work.

Still before the actual text, the copyright page gives ownership to Kingston, credits Vintage International for publication, and establishes a timeframe with the year of publication. The front cover also names the author as the “Winner of the National Books Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction.” Although there is no flashy medal on the book cover, the inclusion of the award inclines us to think that it is an award to be proud of and that it indicates this work as being of higher value and quality than other nonfiction works. The award also implies that this work is nonfiction despite the genre listed on the back cover being “fiction/literature.” This implication can cause readers to assume all of the book is true when in actuality it may not be. According to Foucault, all of this information that is external to the text inclines us as readers to make assumptions about the text before even beginning to read it. If this work is a reader's first experience reading Kingston, the award mentioned on the front cover and the praising reviews on the back cover indicate that this work is of a high quality and value to the literary community. The reader is influenced by the function of the author as a constant level of value and by the ability of the author's name to be equivalent to other descriptors such as “award winner” that all represent the same author function. To Foucault, the many signifiers and their implications on the outside of this work are all functions of ownership that work to close down the work and cause readers to make assumptions about the work before beginning to read it.

According to Foucault, the author limits the work by functioning as a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence. If a reader has read other works by Kingston, she will assume that this work will be of a similar value and quality as the others. A page in the front matter of *The*

Woman Warrior lists works that are also authored by Kingston: *China Men*, *Tripmaster Monkey*, *Hawai'i One Summer*, and *The Fifth Book of Peace*. This list of works influences how we interpret *The Woman Warrior* because it places the work in context with other works. For example, *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey* focus on Chinese-American characters and their experiences balancing two cultures while also including traditional Chinese stories. Based on these recurring topics and themes, *The Woman Warrior* would also deal with the Chinese-American experience in a similar respect, maintaining coherence throughout her works. Any ideas or beliefs in a past essay, book, or story by Kingston ought to appear in *The Woman Warrior* as well—for example, if Kingston includes themes about the power of storytelling in her book *The Fifth Book of Peace*, a reader could assume that the same themes would appear in her other works. This concept of coherence for the author figure is greatly limiting for critics. Kingston's function as an author sets standards for what her works can be about, what they could mean, and how they could be interpreted. Since her other works describe difficulties of being Chinese-American and learning to appreciate Chinese heritage, *The Woman Warrior* should too, and this expectation restricts readers' interpretations—for example, an interpretation of this work as hateful of Chinese culture would not be reasonable because it goes beyond the conceptual field established by the author figure. Interpretations are limited for readers, and possible meanings of the writer are limited as well because of the presence of the author figure.

This theory of coherence also goes beyond the author's works and includes the author's concepts or theories as expressed in interviews. Just as with her works, if Kingston expresses certain values or themes important to her, we are then influenced by the author figure to assume that those same values and themes will be present in her work. In a 2020 profile of Kingston from *The New Yorker*, Kingston gives some background on a story in *China Men* which

describes her grandfather trading his son for a daughter who he eventually trades back due to his wife's anger about the trade. She pulls this story from her own life but describes how she designs it for her work: "The way I wrote it was to show how he loved her, how he just wanted to hold her, and he wanted to sing to her. But I wrote it to give myself a grandfather who would love me as a girl" (Hsu). From Kingston's description of her story writing in *China Men*, we as readers become inclined to think that her other works will operate similarly—*The Woman Warrior*'s stories should also be drawn from Kingston's desire to frame real stories with her own fictional design, and the work should also include the same compassion for the female experience that Kingston expresses in the interview. Kingston as an author function ties together the many instances of herself—books, stories, interviews—in a way that creates interpretive influence and limitation that Foucault resists. The author function as a field of theoretical or conceptual coherence limits the works to that field and therefore limits the interpretive freedom of readers.

The author figure also limits the work by representing a stylistic unity. Kingston often in her works plays with the line between fiction and nonfiction and mixes reality and story in a way that makes them difficult to separate. If a reader is familiar with Kingston's other works, she will immediately assume the same narrative strategy to exist in *The Woman Warrior* that is in her other works. The label that is the author's name on the cover limits the work to what is possible and expected of a Kingston work—it regulates all potential interpretations. Similarly, both the author figure and the copyright information set this work within a certain timeframe that limits possible interpretations and meanings. Kingston was born in 1940 and this book was published in 1976, so the author as a historical figure can be said to be influenced by the culture of that time. According to Foucault, these dates limit the work—Kingston could not have meant to allude to a work like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* because it was not yet published. Foucault also

would resist an interpretation that Kingston's work is influenced by second-wave feminism of the 60s and 70s based on the timeframe established by the publication date. Based on timeframe alone, readers could assume that her work touches on the Civil Rights Movement or is commenting in some way about the Vietnam War. Foucault wants interpretation to be free of these constraints that leave critics to resolve any differences or explain any irregularities in a work; both the ideas of stylistic unity and historical placement of Kingston confine her work to the expectations that it will reflect the mixture of reality and story in her other works and will also reflect the timeframe in which the author and the work exist.

If we could fully remove Kingston from her work and *The Woman Warrior* came to us as truly authorless, we would be left with a work much like Greek epics. Homer is labeled as the author of *The Odyssey*, but we do not know Homer—Homer is not a person, just a name. If Kingston was similarly just a name, the experience of reading her work would change. Perhaps her book would become simply an account of the Chinese-American experience, read for the learning opportunity it offers. Reading a work written in first person without a single authoring source would be confusing, I think. Even without an author, there is still a speaker in the work, and the question of who that speaker is would remain, unless we read the first-person language as an opportunity to insert ourselves into the narrative. *The Woman Warrior* tells personal stories, shares emotions, and explores the details of close relationships, and what would it all be for if these intimate details came from an unidentifiable source? Maybe it would not make that great of a difference in the reading experience, but either way, removing the storyteller from the story creates a distance between a work and its audience.

Foucault attacks the author function in literary criticism and calls for its removal, so what might *The Woman Warrior* look like if the author function disappeared? Naturally, Kingston's

name and picture on the cover would need to be removed along with the copyright information giving ownership and credit to Kingston and her publisher. To remove any indicators of value, we must also take away the book reviews and the mention of an award (although the award could possibly still be awarded to the book alone and not its author, it still functions to provide information that sways readers in their experiences with the work). Without Kingston's name or picture on the book, there are no implications that the "I" in the book is any person existing outside of the subject of the narrative. "I" no longer indicates that Kingston is confiding in her audience by telling them her own stories, and it leaves the work much freer to interpretation and possible meanings. Without Kingston's presence on the book, modern criticism may determine that the work loses its authenticity or some of its value since this work about the female Chinese-American experience is no longer supported by the female Chinese-American author who has lived that experience, but Foucault celebrates the freedom in interpretation that Kingston's absence permits and hopes for a culture in which "all discourses, whatever their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected, would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur" (22).

2. Nehamas and the Author Figure: Who Can Be Speaking

Alexander Nehamas's "Writer, Text, Work, Author" defends the usefulness of the author concept against Foucault's views on the dispensability of the author function. A philosopher at Princeton, Nehamas defends the author figure and argues that authors should not be so quickly left for dead. He agrees with Foucault that it is futile to attempt to recreate the author's mind state or to go "deeper" within the work to find the author behind the text, as though he is somehow prior to or behind the work. Foucault takes issue with how the author function imposes limits on a work and restricts a critic's freedom of interpretation. Nehamas refrains from defining a work by its author by arguing that what the critic actually does is look to the work to determine who the author could be. Distinct from an understanding of the author as the actual human being who wrote the work, what Nehamas calls "the writer," Nehamas's author figure does not reside behind the text offering explanations and meanings of the text but is a figure that the interpreter constructs after reading the work, a figure derived from the work. Just as when a crime is committed, we study the crime scene and ask what kind of person could have committed the crime—we do not search behind the crime for answers. By distinguishing between the writer and the author figure, Nehamas counters Foucault's argument while accepting Foucault's main critique, "the view that to understand a text is to re-create or replicate a state of mind which someone else has already undergone," because such mind states "belong to writers but not authors" (110). For Nehamas, construing the author figure is not a matter of determining the mind state of the author at the time the work was written but instead considering who the author could have been based on the kind of work that author has produced.

Despite the fact that he spends much of his essay attacking Foucault, Nehamas argues that Foucault is right in certain fundamental respects: we must distinguish between the author

and the actual, flesh-and-blood writer, and he agrees with Foucault that this distinction depends on the difference between a text and a work. A work, according to Nehamas is merely a text that is subject to interpretation. Nehamas argues that a text is merely language constructed to communicate a message and nothing more, language we do not bother to interpret; for example, if someone came across a piece of paper titled "Grocery List" that read "eggs, bread, milk," the reader would understand this text to be a grocery list with no additional meaning. But when the reader construes a text as something she is going to interpret and asks questions about possible figurative or metaphorical meanings (why does "bread" come before "milk"?), then the reader is construing the text to be a product, the result of a purposeful action, and this product is what Nehamas considers a work. As objects of interpretation, we consider works to be meaningful, the result of a purposeful action. For every action, there must be an agent, and this agent is what Nehamas considers to be the author: "Texts, then, are works if they generate an author; the author is therefore the product of interpretation, not an object that exists independently in the world" (104). In this way, Nehamas distinguishes between the author and writer: the author does not come prior to the work but emerges from it and is a plausible account of the person who *could* have written the work, whereas the writer is the actual person in history that produced the text, existing before the text. And so the sequence goes: "Writers produce texts. . . .

Interpretation construes texts as works. Works generate the figure of the author, a character manifested, though not represented in them" (106). To Nehamas, the author is not the writer who sat down and wrote a text but rather the figure we understand as a "plausible historical variant of the writer, a character the writer could have been. The author actually means what the writer could have meant, even if the writer never did" (109). This plausible historical variant is a possible version of the writer, the sort of author who could have produced the work. For

Nehamas the generation of authors is a matter of plausibility, not certainty. From a work or multiple works, interpreters imagine what kind of person would write such things, and as Nehamas puts it, “we become interested in whoever it is who can be said to have produced that text and to be manifested in its characteristics. We assume that the text’s characteristics, unusual as they may be, are as they are because the agent who emerges through them is as he is” (104).

Thus, according to Nehamas, a text becomes a work as soon as it becomes subject to literary or figurative interpretation, but a writer is never the same as the author figure. Nehamas encourages a model of interpretation imagined as expansion, one that is ever-broadening rather than searching deeper within a work. Interpreting an author figure is not the process of digging further into a text to discover the writer behind it. Nehamas identifies the writer as the living person who wrote the text, but the author is different, not a person but a figure the reader imagines after having read the work, a figure generated from the work. Therefore, Nehamas argues, the author is a *product* of interpretation and is not prior to interpretation. The author figure emerges from a work similarly to how fictional characters are produced within texts, but Nehamas makes a clear distinction between the two: “Unlike fictional characters, authors are not simply parts of texts; unlike actual writers, they are not straightforwardly outside them” (100). The author figure is thus both inside the work and transcendental to the work. Not only is the author figure transcendental to the work, but it is also “a figure that emerges from a whole *oeuvre*” (101). In the same way we imagine what kind of figure emerges from one work, we imagine what kind of figure emerges from a collection of several books by the same writer. The author does not emerge differently from each work but transcends individual work. Nehamas explains the transcendental quality of the author figure:

[The figure] constitutes the very principle that allows us to group certain individual works together and to consider them as parts of such an internally related collection. Since the author, as we have seen, is never depicted, but only exemplified, in a text, this figure is transcendental in relation to its whole *oeuvre* as well as to the individual texts of which that *oeuvre* consists. (101)

With this idea, Nehamas's theory considers what the authorial figure could be or could not be and does not spend time looking for who the writer was. The author figure permits Nehamas's expansive type of interpretation to expand beyond one work to several works with the same writer while avoiding the limited type of interpretation that seeks meanings "concealed within the text and located in the writer's intention or experience" (101).

Whereas we saw that with Foucault's interpretive model what happens to Maxine Hong Kingston when we approach *The Woman Warrior* with his criteria, when we approach it from Nehamas's viewpoint, we find that our job as critic is to determine what kind of person could plausibly have written such a book, in order to generate a plausible historical variant of the book's actual writer. When applying Foucault's theory, we looked for the limiting influences of the author function on the text, but with Nehamas's theory, we will look at the text to determine what type of author figure emerges. For a fair comparison of these theories, we will look at how they operate on the same work. We do not need to debate whether *The Woman Warrior* is a text or a work since Nehamas considers texts produced for interpretation and interaction in a literary community to be works since they ask to be interpreted. Surely, *The Woman Warrior* falls under this category, as it has often been the subject of literary interpretation. In order to imagine the author of this novel as Nehamas suggests, I will determine what kind of author figure the work appears to generate. Any reader of this work would presume that the likely author is a Chinese-

American woman who understands the experience of being a Chinese American and a daughter who greatly values the truth. This author figure is generated from various elements within the work and not from external evidence about the writer's biography. In response to Foucault's question "What difference does it make who is speaking?" Nehamas asks not "Who *is* speaking?" but "Who *can be* speaking?" (112), and with this in mind, we can examine different elements of *The Woman Warrior* to determine who *can be* speaking as the author figure of this work. By asking who can be speaking in this work, we find a plausible author figure emerging from the work who is a feminist woman inspired by the women in her life, who is likely Chinese-American and wants to understand the complexities of her identity as Chinese-American and as a daughter, and who values language and storytelling as vehicles for truth and understanding.

Considering what kind of author figure could have written with the voice of the work, it is plausible that the author is someone supportive of strong and powerful women and who has feminist values, encouraging women to break boundaries. The work's title *The Woman Warrior*, its language, and its stories all suggest that it was likely authored by a strong, powerful woman who praises the strength of other women. The language, perspective, and storytelling in this work all highlight the strength of each female character as a warrior and encourage a resistance to traditional roles meant for women. The narrator is herself a woman, and she recounts her urge as a young woman to resist the traditional requirements of being a "good girl":

It was said, 'There is an outward tendency in females,' which meant that I was getting straight A's for the good of my future husband's family, not my own. I did not plan ever to have a husband. I would show my mother and father and the nosey emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency. I stopped getting straight A's. (47)

The narrator's voice seems influenced here by second-wave feminism's resistance to societal norms for women in its rejection and mocking of the limitations and expectations assigned to women. A person with feminist values who praises and admires strong women could be the author figure speaking in this work.

Because the stories repeatedly identify women as formidable warriors and the authoritative tone of the narrator's voice when speaking of female experience, the author figure of this work is likely a woman who was repeatedly inspired by other strong women in her life. This author figure emerges from a narrator who repeatedly criticizes the traditional roles granted a woman in both Chinese and American cultures as she describes growing up with her mother's stories of female fighters who defend the family. The narrator spends much of the book sharing stories about her family and the stories that her Chinese mother has told her throughout her life. One of her mother's stories is about the female warrior Fa Mu Lan, who takes her father's place in battle. The narrator tells the story in first person as if she is Fa Mu Lan, and the story follows her through trials and victories in training to be a warrior and through many battles she fights as leader of her army, continuing to fight even while pregnant. This story praises the endurance and leadership of Fa Mu Lan and continually reminds readers that she overcomes additional trials as a woman but never lets those trials stop her from being the strongest warrior and savior of her village. Speaking as the narrator of the book and not as Fa Mu Lan, the narrator shares what she learns from stories like that of Fa Mu Lan: "We learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen. . . . Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound" (19). The author figure who emerges from the narrator's voice and the stories like the one of Fa Mu Lan admires and respects women as strong warriors with the power to be more than wives or slaves. This is an author figure who chooses to

focus on women in the book and to highlight in each story their strengths and the fear that they can instill in those who stand against them. Along with its admiration of women, this author figure also has an understanding of the trials women face, reflected in intimate female details in Fa Mu Lan's story such as that menstrual days did not stop her training and being pregnant did not keep her from leading an army—she “was as strong as on any other day” (30). From this work emerges an author figure who is most plausibly a woman herself and who identifies with and is inspired by the other strong women in her life.

The type of person who could have authored this work is most likely someone highly knowledgeable about Chinese culture, specifically within the Chinese-American experience. This someone could be Chinese-American themselves or could just be someone who is interested in the Chinese and Chinese-American cultures and has studied them extensively—either way, understanding the Chinese-American experience has value to the author figure. This book centers on the narrator's struggles with her identity as a Chinese-American woman. The narrator tells many stories about different types of “ghosts,” mentions many Chinese customs and behaviors, and speaks often about how she differs from other people in her life who are not Chinese, but the narrator tells her audience that she has never been to China and that she was born in America. Throughout the book, the narrator rejects Chinese traditions and recounts numerous times that she resisted her mother's authority and Chinese influence, but she also identifies with the characters in her mother's stories and refers to her Chinese family as emigrants and not immigrants, emphasizing an identification with China as opposed to with America. Thus the author figure it appears to generate is someone intimately connected to the Chinese-American experience and who seeks to understand it.

Beyond being likely a woman and having an understanding of the Chinese-American experience, the work generates an author figure who has with a special understanding of how the Chinese-American experience complicates a mother-daughter relationship. From this work's portrayal of the relationship between mother and daughter containing two different Chinese-American generations emerges an author figure who understands 1) how being Chinese American can impact a mother-daughter relationship and 2) the experience of being a daughter who grows to understand her mother's intentions that she understood differently as a child. This author figure is interested in the complexities and dynamics of a relationship between a Chinese-American mother and daughter, but the interest seems to come from a place of experience.

Considering the work's emphasis on how the Chinese-American experience exists within a mother-daughter relationship, we imagine the author figure who arises from this work to be someone who understands what it is like to be in a mother-daughter relationship and how the multigenerational Chinese-American experiences can complicate that relationship. Throughout the work, there is turbulence in the narrator's relationship with her mother, and the narrator spends many pages of the book thinking about this relationship. The narrator and her mother disagree often, they fight, and the narrator is often made to feel small by her mother. When the narrator as a young girl told her mother, "I got straight A's, Mama," her mother responded, "Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village" (45). On another occasion, the narrator misunderstands her mother, thinking that she had been calling her ugly, when her mother had actually never meant that. Her mother explains, "That's what we're supposed to say. That's what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite" (203). Most of the tension and the misunderstanding between the mother and daughter are because of the generational and cultural differences between them, and the work uses moments like those I have quoted above to show

the different expectations that each woman has for the other. The mother, as a Chinese-American woman raised in China, understands the roles of mother and daughter differently than the daughter, who is Chinese-American but born and raised in America, and it is logical and plausible that the author figure emerging from this work is someone with a detailed understanding of such a relationship and its complexities.

Within the author figure's understanding of Chinese-American mother-daughter relationships is the understanding of the experience of a daughter who grows to learn that she misunderstood her mother. Despite all of the disagreements the mother and daughter have, the voice of this work does not frame the mother negatively and celebrates her as one of the book's many woman warriors. The narrator makes sure to highlight her mother's bravery in stories about ghosts she encountered in medical school, about her defending a woman the best she could from being stoned as a supposed Japanese spy, and about confronting her sister's Americanized husband—the mother's name is Brave Orchid, and the narrator describes her accordingly. The narrator also speaks of her mother in loving ways, recalling sweet moments between the two of them. The narrator lovingly remembers a night when the mother called the narrator "Little Dog," an endearment her mother uses to trick the gods since both she and the narrator are Dragons, born in dragon years (109). Although the narrator demonstrates the many ways her and her mother disagree—she even begins the book by directly disobeying her mother's instructions to not tell anyone their family's stories—the work does not overlook the love shared between them. The mother may have made the narrator feel not good enough, but the narrator shows her audience that she now understands that her mother encouraged her and gave her the tools to be a strong woman with her many stories. From this growth in understanding and love between mother and daughter emerges an author figure who has experienced this kind of relationship. It is

certainly possible that the author figure is not a daughter or mother in this kind of relationship and that the author learned about this type of relationship from other people who have that experience, but the detail and careful balance between frustration and love for the mother in this work suggest that the author figure understands and is interested in Chinese-American mother-daughter relationships because she has personal experience being in this type of relationship.

The author figure derived from this work is someone who values getting to the truth but is also fascinated with how the line between fiction and nonfiction can be manipulated. As a part of the narrator's attempt to understand her Chinese-American identity, untangling what is true from what is untrue becomes a theme in the work, placing value on being honest. While this work plays with the line between fiction and nonfiction, it is also careful not to lie to its audience. We see this value of honesty in storytelling in the way the narrator presents her stories, and a great example of how she presents them is the story about her mother Brave Orchid and her aunt Moon Orchid confronting Moon Orchid's husband in America. Moon Orchid traveled from China to California to see her husband who had moved to California long before she came to visit. The narrator describes her mother and her aunt driving to see Moon Orchid's husband, and upon arrival, the husband does not recognize her. The story goes on to include the husband's dismissiveness of his first wife and Chinese culture, which for him have been replaced with an American wife and an American life, and the women's reactions to the husband's behavior: Moon Orchid is too ashamed and embarrassed to speak, and Brave Orchid angrily defends and speaks for her sister. After the story ends, the narrator reveals that she was not present for this story and instead heard it from her brother who was only present for part of the story. The narrator crafted her own version of the story, making it fictional, but then reveals afterward that her story was not an honest account, that it was "twisted into designs" (163). The type of author

who could create such a narrator, who does not have to reveal that she merely imagined this story but then does, is a figure who values honest storytelling, trying to tell the truth as best one can. The emerging author figure is someone who enjoys imagining and designing stories but still takes care to identify what is fictional and what is real. This author figure also recognizes the difficulty of separating fiction from fact specifically in the context of a Chinese-American identity, and we see this recognition in the narrator's efforts to understand her own identity. With the many stories her mother tells, the narrator has difficulty determining what is true of her identity and culture, what is made up, and what is a mixture of both. Having never been to China, she cannot know for sure what is true and what is fictional in the stories her family tells her about the country and life there. The narrator describes her untangling of the unknown: "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (205). This work blends fiction and nonfiction in a way that represents the narrator's difficulty in separating the fictional and factual elements of her life growing up Chinese-American. Our plausible author figure emerges from the work as someone who has experience differentiating between fact and fiction in other people's stories and then practicing the same mixture of fact and fiction in her own stories and who is capable of creating a narrator with a deep understanding of the difficulties of that experience as a Chinese American.

Not only does the plausible author figure value the importance of being honest in storytelling, but she also likely acknowledges the power of language as a vehicle for truth and as a power that must be wielded carefully—to the figure, it is not just being honest that matters, but it is important that hidden truths be told as well. The author figure of this book is someone who decided to make a statement about truth and storytelling by beginning the book with a story that the narrator's mother explicitly tells her not to share with anyone. This story is about the

narrator's aunt who drowned herself and her newborn baby in the family well after being shamed and having her home raided for becoming pregnant outside of marriage. After telling the story, the narrator notes that she "alone devote[s] pages of paper to her" and that she is the only one who no longer wants to participate in her aunt's punishment which "was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her" (16). The narrator rejects the secrecy around her aunt, whose name she does not know, and shares her aunt's story, sharing the truth about what happened to this woman whose family chose to forget her.

After collecting different aspects of the plausible historical variant that emerges from *The Woman Warrior*, we find an author figure who admires and supports strong women and who is likely a woman herself, one who values understanding the Chinese-American experience, understands and possibly identifies with Chinese-American mother-daughter relationships as a daughter, has navigated the complexities of the Chinese-American experience, values the truth in storytelling and the power of language, and is interested in experimenting with the line between fiction and nonfiction. This author figure could very well be a Chinese-American woman trying to understand her mixed identity through storytelling and a search for truth. By using Nehamas's ideas, we imagine that this kind of author figure emerges from the work, and we can also use the same ideas to imagine what kind of author figure would not likely emerge from the work.

Nehamas's focus on how the author figure emerges from the work also helps us to determine who likely cannot be speaking. Where Foucault would kill off the author in order to free the interpreter, Nehamas reminds us that works cannot plausibly be supposed to have been written by just anyone. In this case of *The Woman Warrior*, it seems improbable that someone who is not Chinese-American could be speaking in this book. The book includes details and opinions about Chinese culture and the difficulty in balancing both Chinese and American

cultures that only someone with personal experience in both of these cultures could likely describe. Similarly, it is unlikely that the author figure could be a man. The narrator's voice and each story's perspective emphasize and identify with the formidable qualities of women and the struggles they face. The stories also include frustration and resistance against traditional roles for women that are written in a personal style that seems implausible for even a man sharing in the narrator's feminist values to have written. It is also implausible that the author speaking does not actually value truth and does not mind lying to her audience. With such an emphasis on truth throughout the work and the narrator's readiness to break with traditions of secrecy to share the truth of stories, it is highly improbable that the author figure is someone who does not value the truth.

Using Nehamas's model for the construction of author figures, I have construed an author figure from this work. Considering what is plausible and who could be speaking, the work generated for me the plausible historical variant of the writer of this book I describe above. The author figure that emerges from her work is likely a Chinese-American woman, someone who understands the complexities of being both Chinese-American and a daughter, and someone who values truth in storytelling, even when dealing with both fiction and nonfiction elements.

Nehamas claims that "the author, who is the joint product of the writer and text, of critic and interpretation, who is not a person but a character, is everything the work shows it to be and what it is can in turn determine what the text shows" (110), so perhaps the author figure that emerges from *The Woman Warrior* can help readers and interpreters better understand the work and avoid getting lost in a search for a singular, true meaning which Nehamas makes clear is not sitting behind the work waiting to be found.

3. Dasenbrock: Authors as Persons

Reed Way Dasenbrock argues in his *Truth and Consequences* that to read a work with an anti-intentionalist approach is an ethical choice. A professor and philosopher at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Dasenbrock argues for the necessity of authorial intention based on the reader's ethical obligation to the author. He agrees that it is possible to ignore the author's intentions when interpreting a work but asks if it is *always* possible. In his fifth chapter, "Taking It Personally," Dasenbrock looks at the de Man affair—the revelation of Paul de Man's collaborationist wartime writings in *Le Soir* and Jacques Derrida's necessarily intentionalist defense of de Man's writings—to show that not even the arch anti-intentionalist can maintain an impersonalist attitude toward the text when the text happens to be written by a friend or loved one. In his sixth chapter, "The Social Turn," Dasenbrock compares Derrida with other theorists, one being Foucault who shares Derrida's inability to practice his own theory consistently—while Foucault calls for anonymity, he fails to be anonymous himself. Identifying the inconsistencies in Derrida's and Foucault's theories, Dasenbrock suggests a mode of reading that treats the author as a person. Because the author is, or was, a person, Dasenbrock argues that we are ethically obligated to respect her as we would any human being, making a good faith effort to express whatever it is that she has tried to express in her work, whether we agree with it or not.

To make his case for good faith readings, Dasenbrock introduces Jacques Derrida and his deconstructionist approach to reading texts. Dasenbrock mentions Derrida's interactions with the texts of Searle and Gadamer to establish how Derrida interprets texts: he denies authors interpretive control and rejects the idea that "correctly" understanding authors is of any importance. In his paper "Text and Interpretation," Gadamer considers the concept of "good will" and understanding another person: "Thus, for a written conversation basically the same

fundamental condition obtains as for an oral exchange. Both partners must have the good will to try to understand one another” (90). Derrida responds to Gadamer, disagreeing with his “good will,” and claims that reading often expresses our “will to power” which is concerned with not what the author meant but what the reader wants to see (90). By responding to Gadamer with elliptical questions, Derrida undermines the idea that a desire to communicate can always be assumed and then proposes that “good will” may not suffice as an interpretive guide. He reads and responds to both Gadamer and Searle impersonally, denying either theorist any authority over their texts and dismissing the idea that his interaction with these texts could be reduced to a conversation between two people. Dasenbrock explains how Derrida boxes Gadamer and Searle in by simply disagreeing with them:

Because he is arguing against their views of interpretation and communication, which he views as too committed to agreement and closure, Derrida ‘wins’ each of these exchanges if the end result is disagreement; a failure of Gadamer’s good will or Searle’s regulative conventions to create understanding is simply more grist for [Derrida’s] mill. (92)

With this strategy, Derrida seems undefeated in theoretical debates, but he changes his approach when the de Man affair begins.

Dasenbrock responds to Derrida’s writings in effort to show his hypocrisy and how quickly he abandons his own stated interpretive principles. Derrida changes his approach when faced with the work of his friend and mentor Paul de Man. When de Man’s wartime writings resurfaced after his death and revealed his support for Nazism, Derrida came to his defense, claiming that de Man in no manner supported or collaborated with Nazism. Derrida admits that the “dominant effect” of the writings on readers at the time de Man wrote them was the understanding that the writings in the collaborationist newspaper were regarded as

collaborationist and antisemitic. Despite his admittance of the writings' collaborationist nature, Derrida claims to know what de Man was thinking at the time, which was different from what his writings suggest: "He was aware of having never collaborated or called for collaboration with a Nazism that he never even named in his texts, of having never engaged in any criminal activity or even any organized political activity, in the strict sense of the term" (94). In arguing for this secret, inner meaning, Derrida takes an intentionalist, personalist approach that runs contrary to all his oft-stated deconstructionist principles, showing that no one, not even Derrida, "is prepared to have such a[n impersonalist] theory applied to works written by people whose selfhood matters to us, especially ourselves" (105).

Of the critics who responded to de Man's wartime writings, only one agreed with Derrida's interpretation. Abandoning his previous interest in disagreement, Derrida reacts to those who criticized him and de Man by accusing them all of reading in bad faith. Dasenbrock questions on what grounds Derrida can insist on good faith readings over bad faith ones and uses this dilemma to present his argument for good faith readings as having priority: "We can therefore insist on good faith having priority over bad faith, good will over a will to power, only if we insist on an ethics of interpretation in which because authors are persons, they must be respected in the way persons in general must be respected" (99). Derrida had not treated other authors like persons until he and his friend were under scrutiny. Derrida's anti-intentionalist theory is inconsistently applicable because authors cannot regard their own works with the required impersonality to give them a textualist or impersonalist reading. Dasenbrock identifies this failure of symmetry to support his argument for a theory of literary interpretation that is consistently applicable. By insisting that all authors be treated as persons, Dasenbrock presents a consistent literary theory that considers all authors deserving of good faith readings.

Foucault similarly struggles to practice his anti-intentionalist theory when it is applied to himself. As we discussed in the first chapter, Foucault imagines a culture in which all authorial voices are reduced to an anonymous murmur, but as Dasenbrock points out, Foucault himself has not reduced himself to such anonymity. Repeating his idea that “one can be perfectly willing to critique humanist notions of personal identity in other people” until “one’s own selfhood of that of one’s friend is at stake” (114), Dasenbrock wonders how consistent Foucault will be with his anti-intentionalist theory as compared to Derrida’s failure to apply his theory to himself and those of de Man. Although Foucault spoke as if he wanted to be anonymous, Dasenbrock points out that even Foucault’s supporters are not fully persuaded. When a posthumous biography of Foucault revealed his “experimentation with drugs and sadomasochistic homosexual practices,” there was “a good deal of public comment,” which to Dasenbrock suggests “that most of us interested in Foucault remain unpersuaded by his arguments about the desirability of authorial selves being reduced to an anonymous murmur” (114). Dasenbrock further reveals Foucault’s theoretical inconsistency, specifically the paradox that Foucault has a following. If it does not make a difference who is speaking, then to be a Foucault supporter contradicts his insistence that individuals do not count: “There is not supposed to be a Foucault to be Foucauldian about” (115). Like Derrida, Foucault is firm in his impersonal anti-intentionalism until it applies to himself.

Both Derrida and Foucault approach works with an impersonality that makes no attempt to recognize an author speaking and are better examples of bad faith readings, so to see what Dasenbrock’s good faith reading looks like in practice, I will look at critic Zhang Ya-Jie’s reading of *The Woman Warrior* in her article “A Chinese Woman’s Response to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*.” Although Ya-Jie’s reading was published almost 15 years

before Dasenbrock's *Truth and Consequences*, Ya-Jie's reading embodies the qualities of a good faith reading. She is willing to put aside her first interpretation to make the effort to better understand Kingston and her work, she respects Kingston as a person with identity and intention, and not only does she listen to Kingston, but she also identifies Kingston's purpose for her work as the key to understanding the work the way it was meant to be understood.

In the article, Zhang Ya-Jie explains how a change in her understanding of Kingston's intentions changed her interpretation and opinion of Kingston's work. As a Chinese woman, Ya-Jie initially read the work as a reflection of Chinese culture, but after realizing that she misunderstood Kingston's work, she considers the work again in an attempt to understand the author, just as Dasenbrock encourages readers to do. When Ya-Jie first encountered this work as a visiting professor from China, she was initially unimpressed with this novel that was a favorite of her American friends and found Kingston's stories "somewhat twisted, Chinese perhaps in origin but not really Chinese any more" and states that some of the author's remarks "offended [her] sense of national pride" (103). Her perspective on the book changed when she studied it in an American class by a Chinese-American professor who helped Ya-Jie understand that Kingston's work is not a Chinese story but an American one. After recognizing her own Chinese identity as the cause of her mistaken assumptions about the work, Ya-Jie begins a conversation about "Kingston's purpose" in her work and shows how her view of this purpose completely changed how she viewed and treated the work (104). This article frames Kingston as an author whose intention and identity matter to Ya-Jie, a critic who makes an effort to understand what Kingston shares in her book, and because of the way she respects Kingston as a person, Dasenbrock would consider this effort to be a good faith reading in which the critic tries to listen to the author.

By recanting her original views about Kingston's memoir, Ya-Jie shows that understanding Kingston as an author trying to communicate is important to her. The language Ya-Jie uses is especially telling of how she treats the act of interpreting a work; for example, when considering her original interpretation of *The Woman Warrior*, she calls some of her assumptions "wrong from the very beginning" (104). To consider her assumptions "wrong" means that Ya-Jie believes there are "right" assumptions of interpretation to be had. She determines what qualifies interpretations as "right" by looking to Kingston's purpose for her work: "Kingston's purpose is to make use of all these stories to show how a Chinese American finds her own identity, how much she has to struggle through—the old culture as well as the new—and how she uses words and stories to rebel against the old and to contribute to the new" (104). Ya-Jie presents the intention as a perspective through which she can accept and understand the way Kingston distorts Chinese culture and tradition for the purpose of exploring her Chinese-American identity. Ya-Jie takes great care to listen to Kingston and defines her interpretation of *The Woman Warrior* by her understanding of the author's purpose.

In addition to the intention of the author, she also recognizes the importance of the author's identity—especially in how it is distinct from her own—in understanding the work. Ya-Jie clearly identifies that she misunderstood Kingston "because [she is] Chinese" and Kingston is a Chinese-American woman writing about Chinese-American identity (104). She writes that she had overlooked the American part of Kingston's identity, but once she realized that this book about Chinese culture was also distinctly American, Ya-Jie determines that understanding Kingston and her narrator as both Chinese and American is essential to understanding Kingston's intentions in the work. She explains how Kingston's identity is critical to her novel and its purpose and how being Chinese-American allows Kingston to meld what she knows of both

cultures while also separating herself from both for a new perspective: “In mixing ancient Chinese stories with her own imagination, Kingston has created a new woman warrior who actually challenges the old and new. . . . She must break away from both worlds, use her own words as swords to avenge wrongs, to fight, and to build” (104). Ya-Jie defends the value of Kingston’s identity as that which legitimizes her appropriation of Chinese stories. Using her own interpretive experience as evidence, Ya-Jie recognizes that a Chinese woman like herself could not have written Kingston’s novel because it relies on the experiences and knowledge only a Chinese American could have—experiences and knowledge that were sooner recognized by the Chinese-American professor than the Chinese professor. For Ya-Jie, it not only matters *what* the author says but *who* is speaking.

In her article, Ya-Jie imagines Kingston as an author whose intention and identity matter and are essential to understanding her work fully. Before knowing Kingston’s intentions for her book, Ya-Jie found *The Woman Warrior* to be bitter, distorted, and untrue, and she had decided not to teach the work when she returned to China. Upon learning the context of Kingston’s identity and intentions, Ya-Jie now reads the work as an exploration of Chinese-American identity told by a female voice fighting to share the stories of other women, and Ya-Jie is inspired not only to teach this book upon her return to China but also to “search for her own reed pipe and sing for [her] own kind” (107). For Ya-Jie, the author is a real human being with experiences that matter to the work and readers’ understanding of it—the “correct” way (and perhaps best way) for this work to be read and understood is one that is guided by the author’s intentions which all readers should be listening for.

Just as Ya-Jie does with Kingston, Dasenbrock asks readers to choose to respect authors as persons and to listen to them in an effort to understand what they are trying to communicate in

their works. He recognizes that treating an author as a person is an ethical choice, not a requirement, but he identifies the inconsistencies of impersonalist interpretations, primarily that no author is ready to read her own work impersonally. Dasenbrock's theory fulfills the need for "a mode analysis that is a two-way street" that can be applied to others as well as ourselves (129). Reading *The Woman Warrior* in good faith is an action of respect toward Kingston as a person—Dasenbrock asks readers and critics to listen to the author, but it is up to the readers and the critics to make the ethical choice to listen.

4. Conclusion

Before I began this project, I had no idea there were so many different theories on authorial intent. I knew that readers and critics disagreed about whether the author's intention was of importance to literary criticism, but I did not know about the issue's complexity. The divide on authorial intent is not as simple as I once thought, with anti-intentionalists in one camp and intentionalists in another. The theories on authorial intention make up an array of reasons to listen or not to listen to an author and different ways to consider who or what that author is and how this author functions. For example, Foucault makes an anti-intentionalist argument, dreaming of a day when we could do away with the author function completely, and Nehamas agrees with some of his points although he directly contradicts Foucault when he defends the continued usefulness of the author figure to literary criticism in a newly imagined way. The debate on authorial intention is a web of mixed ideas and new and old theories, all which have their strengths and weaknesses.

The only anti-intentionalist I considered in this project was Foucault whose theory has proven popular among literary critics as a powerful argument for dismissing the author's authority when it comes to interpreting works. Foucault's theory includes several strong points. He claims that the author function is a product of the State's need for ownership and punishment, and we can see how the author functions in this way today. If works are too transgressive or deemed too dangerous to the State, publishers will not publish the works for fear of punishment. If a work is excellent and innovative, we want to reward the author for their contribution to literature. While it is reasonable to limit the amount of control an author figure has on the interpretation of a work, Foucault takes his theory to an extreme that not even he can fully practice. He imagines a culture in which discourses all fade into the "anonymity of a murmur"

(22) and wishes to remove author identifiers from works, but his name is right on the front of his essay along with copyright information (and I do not doubt that Foucault participated in the capitalism that so frustrates him by accepting payment for his work). Foucault's biggest weakness, in my view, is that which Dasenbrock identifies: his inability to apply his own theory to himself.

Nehamas's theory is an ingenious reimagining of the author, providing an author figure that emerges from the work and does not function to limit or control interpretations. Nehamas is thorough in his explanation of the author figure, carefully defining each step he takes to arrive at the logical and necessary distinction between author and writer before explaining how the author figure operates. When discussing how the author figure emerges from a whole *oeuvre*, Nehamas includes other texts like contracts and private letters that can sometimes offer themselves to interpretation. This inclusion is sound according to Nehamas's logic—once considered for interpretation, these texts become works that are the purposeful action of their author, and thus, we can determine what kind of author figure emerges from these works—but the reasoning behind determining texts as up for interpretation is not as exact. Nehamas acknowledges this when considering anonymously posted texts and admits that he has no argument for these texts to never be subject to interpretation. Nehamas gives interpreters the power to construe texts as works, so we then also have the ability to choose what we construe as works. He broadly defines the field of what can be a work, so perhaps someone decides to construe the random jumble of alphabet magnets on a refrigerator as a purposeful action, even if they were thrown on with no purpose at all. Nehamas makes a good attempt at tightly defining each part of his very theoretical ideas but does not completely define exactly when it is logical to construe a text as a work.

In contrast with the density of Nehamas's theory, a strength of Dasenbrock's theory is the clarity and directness of his writing. Dasenbrock writes clearly and takes his time explaining his argument. He is also careful to present a consistent theory that thinks we should listen to authors just as we listen to people, which is especially necessary since the inconsistency of Derrida and Foucault's theories is what he is responding to. As clear and evenhanded as Dasenbrock is in presenting his good faith theory, he does not define exactly what a good faith reading would look like. He encourages readers to listen to authors and does not discuss execution much further. The strength of a good faith reading is somewhat a weakness as well—reading in good faith ensures that our interpretation practices are ethical and we are being fair to the author, but it does not guarantee a truer account of the work. Dasenbrock's argument is about treating authors with respect and honesty in interpretation, not about approaching the text a certain way for best interpretive results.

Examining multiple theories on intention and considering their strengths and weaknesses have made me wonder if there is one best way to approach authorial intention. In my undergraduate English courses, I have almost exclusively been told to ignore the author and to determine what the text is saying, or what I can make the text say. I think this type of interpretation can be productive, especially in its resistance to search for an author's true meaning behind the text or to superimpose what we think we know about the author onto the text; in other words, it keeps readers focused on the text. But my preferred approach to authorial intention is a self-indulgent one—my favorite part of reading is the sense a work gives a reader of connecting with the author. Whether it be understanding another person's experience, relating to a work and feeling seen by the author's words, or reading for the first time the most exacting description of a feeling or experience that before had felt indefinable, the feeling of not being

alone in the moment of reading is invaluable to me. Naturally, I agree with Dasenbrock's call to treat authors as persons who deserve from their readers at least an attempt at understanding their works, but I also like Dasenbrock's theory because of his focus on establishing a standard for literary criticism that is consistent and symmetrical as a theory.

Both Dasenbrock and Nehamas have theories that made sense in execution and were practical to apply to an actual work while Foucault's theory was more difficult in practice. His theory is understandable but difficult to apply because, as Foucault admits, such a removal of the author would require a massive shift in ideology which is no small feat. Determining a plausible historical variant for *The Woman Warrior* according to Nehamas's theory was an enjoyable exercise, and it was interesting to compare the emerged author figure with Kingston as I understand her from interviews. I have my opinions and preferences about authorial intent but so do many others, and I do not believe we will agree on one approach any time soon. So long as critics are realistic and logical in their interpretations, I think a variety in interpretive approaches can result in a variety of interpretations that together could make for an interesting and dynamic literary conversation, but we must maintain at least an openness to the possibility that in works, someone—an author, author function, plausible historical variant, or some anonymous source—is making an effort to communicate. Words do not write themselves, and stories do not tell themselves—as long as there is literature, there will be speakers, storytellers, and conversation starters. If we as readers collectively deny the possibility that someone is trying to communicate with her work, there would be countless speaking voices to which no one would be listening. It would be unfortunate, I think, for there to be literary communities full of critics, theorists, and authors all participating in discourse in which no one is heard.

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