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Split Archives in Selected War Poems by Dunya Mikhail and Brian Turner

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the post-2003 Iraq War poetry by Brian Turner and Dunya Mikhail to argue that it produces a split in archival poetics. The term refers to the poetic practice by which the literary texts mediate a certain historical event which affects what is remembered or omitted in its archival record. The significance of the study lies in moving beyond the readings of war poetry as response to trauma, into investigating how poetry participates in the historical record of war. The methodology follows a comparative close reading of selected poems from Dunya Mikhail's *The War Works Hard* and Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*. The findings demonstrate that Iraq War poetry constitutes a split archival field rather than a coherent body of testimony, based on which position the witness stands. Future studies may examine war poetry through comparative lens as well as the cultural effect of reading such poetry through translation.

Keywords: Dunya Mikhail, Brian Turner, Split Archive

انقسام التوثيق الأرشيفي في قصائد مختارة من شعر الحرب لدنيا ميخائيل وبراين ترنر عمار

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المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في شعر ما بعد حرب العراق 2003 عند الشاعر الأمريكي براين ترنر والشاعرة العراقية الأمريكية دنيا ميخائيل لتظهر كيف ينتج هذا الشعر انقساماً في شعرية الأرشيف، ويشير هذا المصطلح إلى الممارسة الشعرية التي تجعل النص الأدبي يكون وسيطاً للأحداث التاريخية وتأثير ذلك على ما يُحفظ من هذه الأحداث وما يُسقط منها. تكمن أهمية هذه الدراسة في أنها تتجاوز القراءات التقليدية لشعر الحرب التي تحلله بوصفه استجابة للصدمة النفسية والانتقال إلى دراسة الكيفية التي يشارك بها الشعر في تدوين التاريخ. تتبع الدراسة منهجية القراءة المنهجية المقارنة لقصائد مختارة من ديوان "الحرب تعمل بجد" لدنيا ميخائيل، وديوان "هنا، أيتها الرصاصات" لبراين ترنر. ويظهر التحليل أن شعر حرب العراق يشكل انقساماً في شعرية الأرشيف وليس مجموعة من الشهادات المتسقة، وذلك بناءً على الزاوية التي ينظر منها الشاهد. تقترح الدراسة أن تبحث الدراسات المستقبلية شعر الحرب من منظور مقارن، وكذلك دراسة الأثر الثقافي لقراءة هذا النوع من الشعر مترجماً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دنيا ميخائيل، براين ترنر، الانقسام الأرشيفي

Introduction:

Literary texts work as dynamic archives in historical documentation. Yet their archival role could largely be shaped by institutional authority and politics which affects their function as neutral sources of historical truth. Paul Ricœur (2004) grounds the archive in testimony. He asserts that it goes through a sequence of transformations and undergoes institutional mediation. When the living testimony is transformed into an archive, it gains permanence and accessibility, yet it becomes detached from its original source. In Ricœur words, "the document sleeping in the archives is not just silent, it is an orphan. The testimonies it contains are detached from the authors who "gave birth" to them." (p.169). In *The Power of the Archive and its Limits*, Achille Mbembe (2002) theorizes the archive as a mechanism through which authority controls what enters into the historical record, while Diana Taylor (2003) asserts that written records do not preserve experience transparently or completely, but certainly privilege certain forms of memory. Such readings offer a new approach to Iraq War poetry which foregrounds what this poetry could achieve as archival record when regarded from two distinct perspectives: Dunya Mikhail's exilic stance in *The War Works Hard*, and Brian Turner's position as a poet writing from within his experience as a soldier. Raheef (2026) compares *Here, Bullet* and *War Photographer* through the lens of trauma theory, arguing that both writers portray war as a traumatic force that harms the body, mind, emotions, and moral consciousness, though from different perspectives. Turner writes as a soldier-poet offering direct testimony from combat, using the bullet as a personified symbol of violence and addressing it directly to condemn the brutality and ethical corruption of war. By contrast, Carol Ann Duffy presents war through the mediated perspective of a photographer whose memories, revived in the darkroom, reveal both personal psychological trauma and the emotional detachment of distant audiences who briefly witness suffering through images before quickly moving on. Turner served as a U.S. soldier during the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent war and because of his position, his account is thought to be more credible and authoritative. His voice is shaped by what Mbembe describes as the archive's core principle of selection and preservation, he holds the position of an approved witness whose testimony is easily drawn into dominant literary and national narratives. Mikhail's poetry, on the other hand, follows a different archival logic, she brings to light the gaps and omissions in the archival systems. Using irony and fragmentation, she

works on preserving civilian experience that might otherwise disappear due to lack of archiving that rely on direct civilian experience. Turner documents war from within the machinery of combat, Mikhail reconstructs what war leaves behind among civilians and the displaced. Philip Metres's (2007) employs the concept of war resistance poetry. This framework emphasizes poetry's role in challenging dominant narratives about wars. For Metres, the soldier-poet has long been positioned as a principal voice of resistance poetry which comes as a privilege that marginalizes the other side as a testimony of war. This exclusion is not an incident, it is structural as war poetry anthologies have consistently relied upon the first-person autobiographical lyric of the soldier. This allows for naturalizing a form of witness that perpetuates the myth of soldiers as the only tragic victims of war. Metres's framework recognizes that the soldier-poet's critique of war, however genuine, is never fully free of the military institution's influence that the soldier belongs to.

Methodology:

This study adopts a comparative close reading methodology to examine how the post-2003 Iraq War poetry constructs competing archival narratives of memory and violence. The study analyzes the selected works of Iraqi- American poet Dunya Mikhail and American veteran-poet Brian Turner to explore how different perspectives generate divergent poetic archives of the same war. Whereas Mikhail writes largely from the perspective of exile and civilian loss, Turner records the war from the position of an American soldier within military experience of war. The comparison presents how war is differently archived depending on historical location and embodied experience.

The primary corpus consists of Mikhail's poetry collection, *The War Works Hard* and Turner's *Here, Bullet*. The textual close reading of Mikhail's collection involves three poems: "The War Works Hard," "Bag of Bones," and "America." In these poems, Mikhail focuses on the themes of violence, displacement, irony and the geography of war. From Turner's collection, the selected poems include "Here, Bullet," "The Hurt Locker," "Body Bags," "Autopsy," and "Najaf, 1820," these poems are chosen for their sustained engagement with the soldier perception of the bodily trauma, battlefield witnessing.

Analysis and Discussion:

Turner's poetry is rooted in the psychological experience that comes with the direct involvement in the frontlines of war. The speaker in the poems is the poet himself in direct encounter with violence. In "Here, Bullet," war is not remembered or presented through reflections from a distance, it is a hostile physical force, rendered through precise anatomical language:

If a body is what you want,
then here is bone and gristle and flesh.

Here is the clavicle-snapped wish,

The aorta's opened valves, the leap (l.1-4)

The body becomes the ground on which violence is engraved, in "The Hurt Locker," trauma is presented as enduring psychological condition which remains unresolved, it is not limited to the battlefield. The speaker keeps repeating, "Nothing but hurt left here" in several lines in the poem. Douglas Higbee (2015) argues that, although Turner inherits elements of the tradition established by poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Keith Douglas, and W.D. Ehrhart, he departs

from its dominant didactic mode. He notes that Turner tends to employ the present or the conditional tense in his poems, and that he refrains from the direct address to civilian readers. In his essay *Embedded Poetry: Iraq Through a Soldier's Binoculars*, Sinan Anton (2014) offers a critical reading of Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet* which argues that Turner's poetry does not stand apart from the military structures it occasionally critiques; it remains embedded within the very apparatus of occupation. Iraq is represented through military modes of seeing, binoculars, rifle scopes, surveillance, and fragmented observation. *Here, Bullet* archives the conditions through which the occupation understands Iraq. Antoon suggests that the soldier-poet's perspective, however humane in intention, remains conditioned by the institutional and ideological structures through which it is produced. Turner's work is placed within a broader critique of embedded discourse that risks reproducing the ideology behind the war itself. In this sense, the term "embedded poetry," with which Turner describes his poetry, indicates a mode of writing that inherits its field of vision from the structures of war-making rather than from an external critical standpoint. The archive Turner constructs is an embedded one, characterized by authoritative and institutionally oriented voices, it is bounded by the limits of what the occupying soldier's position makes visible.

Dunya Mikhail approaches war through ironic distance and structural critique. In "The War Works Hard," violence is depersonalized and bureaucratized; war appears as an efficient laborer tirelessly managing social life:

How magnificent the war is!

How eager
and efficient!

Early in the morning
it wakes up the sirens
and dispatches ambulances
to various places (l.1-7)

The absence of a lyrical "I" is significant, it indicates an emotional distance. Mikhail catalogs every atrocity in war as a job well done, from "summoning rain from the eyes of mothers" to "building new houses for the orphans." In her poetry about Iraq, Mikhail does not fill the poems with palm trees, rivers, and ancient myths. She avoids building an ideal image of the country out of memory and longing, there is no golden past in her poem, no Gilgamesh, no Euphrates held up against the horror of war. War is simply the only thing in the poem; efficient, eager, tireless, and treated without any romantic softening. The need to evade surveillance shaped Mikhail's poetic style. Her use of metaphor, personification and irony is not a literary choice as much as it is a strategy of survival. She explains that while writing in Iraq, she relied heavily on metaphor to hide true meanings from censors (Khan, 2015). The irony in the poem tells us about war, and it reflects in its very structure what it cost to speak about war. The poem itself becomes an archive, unlike Turner, whose critical distance to war is limited.

Destruction in war extends beyond the physical death to encompass another form of devastation, that is the reduction of the dead bodies into anonymous objects, categorized by numbers or entries. Turner's "Body Bags" and "Autopsy," alongside Mikhail's "Bags of Bones," position the body as

an archive of war. Each poem encounters the body at a distinct stage of destruction, the flesh that still carries traces of daily rituals and family memories. In this sense, the poems which describe the history of the dead bodies challenge the state archive which deals with the body as data, by archiving what is deemed unidentifiable. In Turner's "Body Bags," the dead remain mysteriously close to life. The bodies have not yet fully entered anonymity; they linger at the threshold between existence and death.

A murder of crows looks on in silence
from the eucalyptus trees above
as we stand over the bodies –
who look as if they might roll over,
wake from a dream and question us
about the blood drying on their scalps, (l. 1-6)

Turner's imagery insists on the bodies' ability to feel life and respond to what the senses provide for them. Even in death, the body retains an archival density, as though it still holds fragments of a life that has not yet been fully closed or filed away. In "Autopsy," this logic is extended and rendered explicitly forensic.

Through Staff Sergeant Garza's incision, the corpse is transformed into a site of interpretation where the heart emerges as an archive of the feelings the body once experienced. In the beginning, the speaker describes in detail the biology of the body as it is being dissected, then he shifts into a biography of feelings. Turner turns the autopsy into something closer to reading than examination, the body cut open not to confirm death but to retrieve what death tried to take with it.

...in the deep flesh
where she cuts the cords which bind the heart,
lifting it in her gloved palms, weighing
and measuring the organ, she can't help
but imagine how fast it beat when he first kissed
Shawna Allen, or how it became heavy
With whiskey and what humbled him. (l. 7-13)

Mikhail's "Bags of Bones" presents the body at a stage where almost all traces of a person seem to have been destroyed. Unlike the bodies in Turner's poems, where traces of life remain and the organs can still be examined, in Mikhail's poem, the body has decomposed and all that is left are bones. In the soldier's case, organs, wounds, and bodily features are still fresh enough to be identified and incorporated into official systems of archiving. By contrast, in Mikhail's poem, the bodies are abandoned by such institutional structures, and the remains are barely identifiable, their individuality is threatened by decay and anonymity. The poem's central notion is to refuse this anonymity. The opening line creates strong irony; the tragic event of finding a loved one's bones is described as a fortunate event:

What good luck!
She has found his bones.
The skull is also in the bag
the bag in her hand

like all other bags

in all other trembling hands. (l.1-6)

The bag of bones in the woman's shaking hand is both a sign of terrible loss and the only physical evidence that can help restore the dead person's identity. As Antoon (2014) suggests, in the embedded war poet's work, the soldier is recorded because he is part of the military system, while the civilian often remains unknown because he is the target of that system that defines the visibility of suffering and how it is recorded.

The character in Turner's "Autopsy" who performs the autopsy of the soldier's body is introduced by name and she is performing her role as a staff sergeant, while in Mikhail's poem it is an anonymous woman. Each character mediates between the bodily remains and their interpretation. In Turner's poem, the sergeant transforms clinical procedure into an involuntary act of imaginative reconstruction, the body is not only examined but re-personalized through empathy. In Mikhail, the unnamed woman searching a mass grave performs a parallel function from outside institutional authority. Her identification of bones is an act that resists the anonymity imposed by mass violence. In both cases, the hands that touch the remains become instruments of counter-archival resistance, refusing the closure imposed by war. Mikhail's figure works from the position which is the only viable option in contexts where official archives have been not merely neglected but systematically destroyed (Alsaden, 2023).

In "Najaf, 1820," Turner depicts Iraq, specifically Najaf, as a landscape saturated with death since ancient times. The city is renowned for being sacred place of burial, though centuries and to this day, dead bodies are brought to be buried next to Imam Ali. This establishes the city's long relationship with mourning, the poem frames Iraq as a place where bodies accumulate across generations. Death is not confined to the contemporary war but embedded within the land itself. Najaf is seen as a repository of historical suffering that is inflicting Iraq. The country becomes an archive in which violence is layered and continuously emerges in various historical periods:

the earth pregnant with the dead;

cemetery mounds stretching row by row

with room enough yet for what the years

will bring: the gravediggers need only dig,

shovel by shovel. (l.14-18)

The term 'pregnant' suggests that death is continuously generated in this land, as if it is given birth to, and what is required for this process is only gravediggers digging only. These concluding lines allow Turner to link the past with the present, the cemetery's labor is continuous since the dead continue to arrive. Once again, Turner's attempt to access Iraq's historical depth becomes mediated by the embedded gaze of the occupying soldier. American intervention is represented as another episode within a much longer history of violence and mourning. This normalizes understanding the American war on Iraq as inevitable incident in the sequence of violent events that inflict the country throughout its history.

Mikhail's "America" is heavily archival record shaped by exile and diaspora. Having left Iraq in 1996, Mikhail did not witness the war directly. The poem locates violence in the displacement of those who have crossed borders in the aftermath of war. Addressing America directly, the speaker

confronts a huge number of questions about names, birthplaces, signatures, languages, flags, the number of the dead, the count of boats and suitcases, all are demands that render the displaced identifiable and countable.

Please don't ask me, America.

I don't remember
on which street,
with whom,
or under which star.

Don't ask me ...

I don't remember
the colors of the people
or their signatures. (l.1-9)

Each time the answer is 'I don't remember,' this refrain suggests refusal, it is not a traumatic incapacity: the speaker declines to supply the categories through which the archive would file the displaced. Instead, she insists that people are grass who grow everywhere, which is a truth that goes beyond documentation.

In Mikhail's "America," the exiled speaker directly addresses America and its institutional authorities. Turner roots war violence in history, while Mikhail verifies the consequences for those who fled from it. The poem is structured around negation and refusal: "please don't ask me," "I don't remember," and "stop your questioning" are refrains that act as resistance of categorizing in statistic terms, disregarding the individuality of the displaced people. This pattern evokes the bureaucratic logic of immigration interviews and border interrogations, in which displaced individuals are compelled to narrate and verify trauma in administratively legible forms. America emerges in the poem as an interrogative authority, demanding names, places of origin, languages, and routes of movement. The speaker's refusal to provide these details is not an attempt to conceal facts. The displaced subject resists the idea that suffering must be documented in state archives to gain legibility and to deserve compassion.

The official archive's dependence on measurable information has its own limits, and Mikhail exposes them by turning the categories of the classification into absurd questions at the end of the poem. The state is unable to capture the complexity of the feelings that the displaced person is experiencing:

How should I know, America,
which of the colors
was the most joyful
tumultuous
alienated
or assimilated
of them all? (l. 210-216)

Against the official archive, the speaker insists on a more personal archive of intimate objects and memories, "just one picture," and the lover's handwriting arriving in the mail, the speaker remembers the two rings kept in a wooden box, "entangled / by the absence." These are material

records which carry a huge emotional value in their lives. For the speaker, these objects retain their value from the past lives that they stand as witnesses for.

Another form of memory exists beyond both official and personal archives: embodied and lived memory that cannot be stored or classified. Things like stories, songs and moments of intimacy and shared life cannot survive through documents and questionnaires, they survive through performance, repetition, and human connection. The speaker says America to “leave your questionnaires to the river / and leave me to my lover.” These three positions convert the poem's address into a claim about archival authority. The official archive claims power through classification, while the speaker offers a personal counter-archive grounded in emotional and material traces.

Conclusion

Turner's position as a soldier produces an embedded archive shaped by the structures and modes of perception of the military apparatus, whereas Mikhail's condition of exile generates a counter-archive assembled from the experiences and memories that are often excluded in such contexts. Through comparative reading, the research demonstrates that war is documented differently depending on where one stands in relation to violence. Turner's poetry records war from the position of a soldier whose attitude is affected by the military institution that initiated the war. The result is an embedded archive shaped by battlefield experience and the limits of a soldier perception. Mikhail, by contrast, writes from exile, constructing a counter-archive that tries to preserve more individual and intimate objects.

Instead of relying on the soldier's account of war to examine the literary depiction of war, future research might adopt comparative approach to war poetry by examining the various positions of testimony coming from different angles and witnesses. Translation also deserves greater scholarly attention, since Mikhail's poetry reaches much of its readership in English, the civilian archive her work constructs is mediated through translation, where choices of language, tone, and cultural reference shape what survives across linguistic boundaries. Translation is therefore not a neutral or transparent medium but an archival process, one through which testimony is also selected and mediated. Future studies may consequently examine how translation reshapes what war poetry records and transmits as it moves across languages and cultural contexts.

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