

## Traversing Deathscapes: State Violence, Bureaucracy, and the Politics of Movement in Khalid Khalifa's *Death Is Hard Work*

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**Abstract:** *The Syrian civil war, which erupted in March 2011, represents not merely a political or military conflict but a profound reorganization of life, death, and space under conditions of prolonged violence. As the conflict escalated, Syria became a contested landscape governed through what Achille Mbembe conceptualizes as necropolitics, the state's power to dictate who may live and who must die. The regime's violent suppression transformed civic spaces into sites of terror, precipitating an armed conflict that fragmented the nation along political, sectarian, and territorial lines. In this fractured terrain, mobility itself became perilous; roads functioned less as conduits of connection than as bureaucratized zones of delay, coercion, and death. This paper situates Khalid Khalifa's *Death Is Hard Work* within the framework of necropolitical governance and traumatized mobility, reading the road as a space where state power, bureaucratic violence, and human vulnerability converge.*

**Key words:** *Trauma studies, necropolitics, deathscapes, state violence, bureaucracy, existentialis, Syrian war literature, mobility.*

The Syrian civil war is a protracted, multi-sided conflict that began in March 2011 within the broader context of the Arab Spring uprisings. Sparked by popular protests against President Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian governance, corruption, and economic inequality, the unrest escalated rapidly after the regime responded with violent repression, transforming a civil protest movement into a complex armed combat. At the core of the conflict stands the Syrian Arab Republic, led by Assad and supported by the Syrian Armed Forces and key allies including Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. Opposing the regime are diverse rebel formations, notably the Syrian Interim Government, which encompasses nationalist and pro-democratic factions such as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Army, alongside the Syrian Salvation Government, dominated by Islamist groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The war has also involved the Kurdish-led autonomous administration of Rojava in northern and eastern Syria, whose military wing, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), played a central role in defeating the Islamic State (IS). Extremist organizations such as IS and the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front further intensified the conflict, particularly between 2012 and 2017. Foreign intervention has been decisive, with Russia's military involvement from 2015 which reinforced Assad's position, while Iran and Hezbollah provided sustained support. The United States led an international coalition against IS,

Turkey intervened against multiple factors while backing opposition groups, and regional spillovers included Israeli strikes and destabilization in neighbouring states.

Necropolitics, derived from the Greek *nekros* (“corpse”), is a concept developed by Achille Mbembe to explain how modern sovereignty is exercised through the authority to decide who may live and who must die. Critically extending Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics, Mbembe shifts the analytical focus from the regulation of life to the deliberate production of “death worlds” spaces in which entire populations are rendered disposable through war, colonial domination, systemic violence, and structural neglect. Within these zones, human life is stripped of intrinsic value and reduced to an expendable resource in the service of political or economic power. As Mbembe argues, “The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die . . . To be sovereign is to exert one’s control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (*Necropolitics* 11–12). Foucault’s notion of biopolitics conceptualizes power as operating through the management and optimization of life, permitting death as a necessary byproduct rather than a central objective. Mbembe challenges the adequacy of this framework in addressing contemporary forms of political violence, asking whether biopower can account for regimes in which the explicit aim is the destruction of the enemy, justified through war, resistance, or the rhetoric of the “war on terror” (*Necropolitics* 16).

Achille Mbembe proposed the term “necropolitics” to place death in the foreground, to describe how power seeks to maximize death and obliterate its enemies, and to address contemporary forms of life subjugated to the power of death. Biopolitics and necropolitics are not opposites but two sides of the same coin. Contemporary research applies necropolitics to diverse settings. Studies of conflict zones such as Syria show how state-sanctioned violence and technologies of warfare enable absolute domination and mass abandonment. Migration demonstrates how border regimes function as lethal filters, transforming mobility into a matter of survival. Urban and public health research highlights how the withdrawal of social services and tolerance of hazardous living conditions produce forms of “slow death,” where marginalized groups are left to deteriorate through poverty and poor health rather than overt killing. Other analyses focus on surveillance and visual control as tools that dehumanize populations and legitimize violence. These studies underscore necropolitics as a

framework for understanding sovereignty as the power over death, including states of exception, racialized exclusion, and the gradual attrition of life.

Foucault explores the meaning of what he means by “power,” explaining that power for him is not the domination or subjugation exerted on the society by the state or the Government, instead it has to be looked upon “as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate . . . . Power is everywhere . . . because it comes from everywhere.” It is a part of the social relationship and strides from top to bottom of the society (The History of Sexuality 92-102) The human cost of the war, over half a million deaths and the displacement of millions, cannot be examined solely in quantitative terms. Widespread human rights violations, enforced disappearances, and mass displacement have generated collective trauma, reshaping Syrian subjectivity through grief, loss, and endurance. Refugee movements further underscore how the conflict extends beyond Syria’s borders, transforming exile into a permanent condition rather than a temporary rupture. Large-scale fighting had largely subsided by 2023 and the Assad regime had reasserted control over much of the country, but still Syria remains marked by unresolved violence, authoritarian consolidation, and lingering trauma.

The novel traditionally, has functioned as a vehicle for engaging the worldly through the aesthetic transmutation of the mundane, elevating neglected details into sites of recognition and shared meaning. This mediating role of linking writer and reader through affect and pleasure presupposes a condition of relative social normalcy anchored in stable homelands and national imaginaries. With the disintegration of Syria as a coherent “home base” for reading and writing, the Syrian novel has been forcibly displaced into a global literary economy. Increasingly exposed to external expectations, it is pressured to conform to a narrow repertoire of themes like war, extremism, and displacement while simultaneously being tasked with fulfilling and resisting the demands of international audiences and publishers.

Cathy Caruth, in her Preface explains the need for the study of traumatic experiences as, “in effect, not only to ease suffering but to open, in the individual and the community, new possibilities for change, a change that would acknowledge the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experiences bears witness” (Trauma: Explorations in Memory ix). Within this context, Khalid Khalifa’s work exemplifies both the possibilities and constraints of the Syrian novel’s global circulation. While the

trauma of conflict often produces narrative hesitation, oscillating between empathy and withdrawal, Khalifa's fiction resists reductive representations by grounding catastrophe within an intimate human framework. His novels have achieved significant international visibility, receiving recognition in global literary spheres. *Death Is Hard Work (DHW)* translated by Leri Price, has contributed to its transnational reception. Critics such as Robin Yassin-Kassab praised Khalifa's "dense, luxurious realism" and striking metaphorical language; yet this expressive richness, when taken as representative on a global stage, risks obscuring the struggles of many Syrian writers whose work remains marginalized or constrained by expectations of metaphorical excess.

Khaled Khalifa (born 1964) is a Syrian novelist, screenwriter, and poet. He has been nominated three times for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, including being shortlisted twice. His works have often been critical of the Syrian Baathist government and thus have been banned in the country. His major works are *The Guard of Deception (1993)*, *In Praise of Hatred (2006)*, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City ((2013 trans. 2016)*; *Death Is Hard Work (2016 trans. 2019)*; *No-one Prayed Over Their Graves (2019 trans. 2023)* The enduring power of Khalifa's fiction lies in its insistence on a human scale that resists the dominance of abstract political narratives. Drawing on his lived experience (having grown up in Aleppo and Damascus) Khalifa repeatedly exposes how social norms, ethical certainties, and familial bonds erode under conditions of authoritarianism and civil war. His works not only reflect the worldliness of the Syrian novel in exile but challenges the conditions under which that worldliness is produced and consumed.

Khalid Khalifa's *Death Is Hard Work* is widely situated within Syrian war literature that foregrounds the everyday experience of trauma rather than direct representations of combat. Emerging from the prolonged violence and social fragmentation of the Syrian civil war, it emphasizes how war infiltrates domestic life and disrupts intimate rituals. Khalifa's novel exemplifies this tendency through its minimalist road-journey structure, following three siblings transporting their father's corpse across a landscape governed by checkpoints, delays, and territorial fragmentation. Scholars frequently align Khalifa with contemporaries such as Samar Yazbek and Nihad Sirees, whose work critiques authoritarianism and conflict through familial, psychological, and ethical lenses. Within contemporary Middle Eastern

fiction, *Death Is Hard Work* resonates with texts by Elias Khoury, Hassan Blasim, and Sinan Antoon that deploy mobility and its obstruction to explore displacement, fractured belonging, and the impossibility of closure. The decaying corpse at the centre of the narrative has been read as a potent metaphor for the nation itself - decomposing, divided, and burdened by unresolved histories while the novel's restrained style and symbolic economy mark a broader shift away from spectacle toward narratives that bear witness to war through endurance, waiting, and the slow erosion of social bonds.

The defeat of IS did not restore normalcy; instead, the war left behind a scarred social and spatial order. It is within this context of necropolitical governance and traumatized mobility that *Death Is Hard Work* situate the road as a site where state power, bureaucratic violence, and human vulnerability converge. The novel reconceptualizes movement not as freedom but as an existential trial shaped by state violence and bureaucratic obstruction, producing a politics of suspended death and unending trauma. The road operates as a necropolitical space or deathscape structured by checkpoints, bureaucratic delays, and fragmented territorial control, where mobility is contingent, reversible, and perpetually threatened.

Throughout *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe examines how terror and death have become central organizing forces of contemporary politics. He argues that modern regimes increasingly require the construction of an ultimate enemy, figured as an existential threat to the life of the body politic, whose elimination is framed as necessary for collective survival. In the pursuit of this enemy, states authorize extraordinary violence and produce spaces that operate beyond ordinary legal and ethical constraints. These “states of exception,” once imagined as temporary responses to crisis, increasingly seep into everyday governance. As Mbembe observes, the violence that was once “more or less hidden” within democratic and biopolitical systems now “grips the imagination and is increasingly difficult to escape” (2019 7). He describes a political order that is progressively reorganized around death itself:

Nearly everywhere the political order is re-constituting itself as a form of organization for death. Little by little, a terror that is molecular in essence and allegedly defensive is seeking legitimation by blurring the relations between violence, murder, and the law, faith, commandment, and obedience, the norm and the exception, and even freedom, tracking, and security... Every occasion is now one in which the supreme stake is to be risked. (*Necropolitics* 6)

Although the state initially seeks enemies outside its borders, this logic often turns inward, identifying internal populations as threats to be managed, assimilated into biopolitical regimes, or eliminated through necropolitical means. This suspension of juridical norms resonates with Giorgio Agamben's theorization of the "state of exception." In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben revisits biopolitics through the figure of the *homo sacer*, a life that may be killed without the act being considered homicide, distinguishing between bare life (*zoē*) and politically qualified life (*bios*). As he argues,

If it is the sovereign who, insofar as he decides on the state of exception, has the power to decide which life may be killed without the commission of homicide, in the age of biopolitics this power becomes emancipated from the state of exception and transformed into the power to decide the point at which life ceases to be politically relevant. (*Homo Sacer* 142)

Constructing on Agamben's framework, Mbembe introduces the concept of "death-worlds" - "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (*Necropolitics* 92). These death-worlds include overt sites of war, terror, and genocide, spaces where total destruction is justified by the rhetoric of emergency and entire populations are reduced to "collateral damage," if not designated enemies to be exterminated.

Giorgio Agamben's notion of *bare life* further illuminates this terrain by theorizing sovereignty through the state of exception, wherein individuals are stripped of political belonging and reduced to biological existence. However, Mbembe departs from Agamben's largely juridical and abstract framework by situating necropolitics within specific historical and geopolitical contexts, particularly colonialism, racialization, and contemporary war zones. Whereas Agamben emphasizes legal exclusion and the suspension of rights, Mbembe underscores the material, spatial, and embodied experience of death-worlds, spaces where violence is routinized and survival itself becomes precarious. These distinctions are particularly resonant in *Death Is Hard Work*, where the Syrian civil war produces a necropolitical landscape governed by checkpoints, bureaucratic arbitrariness, and the constant threat of violence.

The siblings' journey to bury their father unfolds within what Mbembe would term a death-world, where sovereign power repeatedly asserts itself through the control

of movement, time, and bodily integrity. Unlike Agamben's concept, which operates as a fixed site of exception, Khalifa's novel presents the road itself as a mobile necropolitical space, in which life is continually exposed to the possibility of death. Here, power does not merely suspend the law but weaponizes bureaucracy, rendering mourning and burial, fundamental markers of human dignity, subject to negotiation, bribery, and delay. While waiting for the release of Lathif's body, Hussein and Zuhayr witness a scene of an ambulance carrying the bodies of the soldiers,

It was a terrifying scene. There were more than forty corpses there in military dress; some had lost their lower extremities, others half their heads. A furious officer was speaking to someone out of sight, requesting more ambulances from the hospital in Homs. . . . The nurses were opening the morgue fridge and piling bodies on top of one another like lemon crates; their tiny fridge hadn't been designed to deal with so many bodies. (*DHW* 60)

Death is foregrounded as an everyday administrative reality rather than an exceptional event and aligns more closely with Mbembe's necropolitical framework than with Foucault's biopolitical paradigm. The novel illustrates how sovereignty operates through the orchestration of exhaustion, decay, and humiliation, transforming ordinary citizens into socially dead subjects long before biological death occurs. Khalifa's narrative not only dramatizes necropolitical governance in wartime Syria but exposes how state power reconfigures space, movement, and kinship under conditions of prolonged violence.

Every power strategy is the result of the greed of humans to dominate and their minds are guided by the influence of the socio-political and economic factors of their immediate environment. Mbembe's concept of commandement and the banality of coercion elucidate how violence in *Death Is Hard Work* is routinized through administrative practices rather than spectacular force. The siblings' repeated encounters with low-level officials, soldiers, and militia members exemplify a diffuse sovereign power exercised through delay, humiliation, and arbitrary permission. Examining through spatial trauma theory, particularly Maria Tumarkin's work on traumascapes and Karen Till's concept of wounded cities (Tumarkin 2005; Till 2012), the journey reveals space itself as a carrier of historical violence, saturated with affect and memory. Roads, checkpoints, and border zones operate as traumascapes that reproduce fear, paralysis, and moral exhaustion in those who traverse them. The decomposing corpse

at the narrative's center materializes Mbembe's claim that the body becomes the ultimate surface upon which power inscribes itself, transforming burial into a necropolitical negotiation rather than a private ritual of mourning. *Death Is Hard Work* reframes movement not as escape or progress but as prolonged immersion within a wounded deathscape, where trauma is continually reactivated through spatial passage rather than resolved. Bolbol narrates his life as a refugee where fear dominates everything else,

Bolbol had worked hard to gain the trust of his neighborhood. The details on his identity card marked him out for suspicion; for four years now, similar details had spelled catastrophe for many others. Thousands of people disappeared without a trace, simply for being born in areas controlled by the opposition, just as many regime supporters had disappeared in those same areas. Kidnappings, ransoms, and random arrests were widespread and tit-for-tat responses meant they only escalated in frequency. People's movements were tightly controlled. Any error could be very costly. (*DHW* 44)

Ministering to interior mazes of thought reveals fear as an ineradicable metaphysical condition of Syrian subjectivity. In *Death Is Hard Work*, fear generates an ouroboros like narrative structure that continually folds back on itself, destabilizing linear progression and foreclosing clear teleology. Rather than functioning solely as pathology, fear becomes a mode of contingency and survival within a violently overdetermined social order. Death, accordingly, is not an endpoint but an ongoing logistical, emotional, and political burden. These dynamics structure the novel, set in contemporary Syria and centered on three adult siblings' attempt to transport the body of their father, Abdel Latif al-Salim, from Damascus to his village of Anabiya—a journey that would ordinarily take only hours. The burial journey emerges as a governing metaphor for Syria's collective suffering, with the decomposing corpse materializing a betrayed revolution and a nation collapsing inward, "Death is a solitary experience . . . the living have a harder task ahead of them than the dead; no one wants to see their beloved ones rot" (*DHW* 16). The novel portrays stark realism with its hypercentralized narrative voice exposing both its critical power and its representational limits, privileging embodied trauma and private grief over revolutionary myth as the dominant register of historical meaning. Khalifa reveals how war restructures spatial experience

The scene in the hospital was horrifying. Officers were pacing the corridors and shouting curses against the opposition fighters. Troops in full combat gear were wandering around aimlessly, smelling of battle. They had brought their friends, either wounded or killed, and dawdling there was their only way to escape or postpone returning to battle, where death would no doubt find them as well. Death always seemed near in this chaos. (*DHW 9*)

As the journey progresses, travel becomes increasingly hostile and intractable. The siblings are burdened not only by Abdel Latif's decomposing body in the vehicle but also by the omnipresence of war, which manifests through snipers, air raids, tank convoys, and armed militias patrolling the roads. Shortly after departing Damascus, they are detained at a highway checkpoint, prompting Hussein's whispered remark to Bolbol that the regime is going to arrest the body. While the statement initially registers as hyperbolic, it reflects a grim reality due to the father's oppositional political sympathies, an arrest warrant remains active even after death. The episode exposes a necropolitical logic in which death itself fails to confer moral reprieve. By imagining a scenario in which a corpse is subject to arrest, the novel underscores the extent to which sovereign power extends beyond life into the regulation of the dead. This moment encapsulates one of the novel's central questions: how does one navigate a system in which even death does not interrupt coercion? The scene implicates both oppressor and oppressed within a self-perpetuating spiral of violence and fear, binding them within a political order from which neither can fully escape:

Bolbol saw Hussein coming back, escorted by an agent waving his gun and gesturing to the rest of the family to get out of the van. Hussein stood next to Bolbol and whispered, "They're going to arrest the body." Bolbol assumed there must have been some mistake, but no, when the agent led them to a tiled, windowless room, opened the door, and pushed them roughly inside, he understood that things were serious. It was true: they had placed the corpse under arrest. Their father had been wanted by more than one branch of the Mukhabarat for more than two years now. (*DHW 28*)

At the first of many military checkpoints, guards recognize Abdel Latif's corpse and attempt to "arrest" it for alleged crimes against the regime, extending state surveillance even into death. After prolonged negotiation, Bolbol secures the body's passage through bribery, allowing the journey to continue. As this pattern repeats at

subsequent checkpoints, Bolbol reflects on the absurd ease with which goods might circulate compared to a human body, remarking that the journey would be far simpler if they were transporting sacks of cumin rather than a corpse. These encounters prompt introspective recollections of his childhood, shaped by a neighbourhood and upbringing marked by wartime precarity.

Lauren Berlant responds to Mbembe's notions of death-worlds and living death by proposing the concept of "slow death." In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant defines slow death as "the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (95). Berlant looks at the experience of living under oppressive conditions in a state that systematically works against one's flourishing. Abdul Latif has endured much "the things that had happened during the brutal siege, when those who had remained behind had been forced to cook the leaves off the trees and to eat grass. They made bread from chaff, and shared what little they had left" (*DHW* 49). Under biopolitics and necropolitics, life and death, extreme and ordinary, are simultaneously taken to their extremes and entangled.

Disciplinary power treats the body as a complex machine, seeking to discipline, optimize, and integrate the body into "systems of efficient and economic controls" through an "anatomy-politics of the human body" (*The History of Sexuality* 139). Disciplinary power tends to function through institutions, employing tactics like incarceration and surveillance to target individuals. Bolbol is pushed into custody at the check point of Qatifa and he shudders at the thought of brutal violence that could follow,

No one could enter a place like this and know what was in store for them. So many people had disappeared in the previous four years, it was no longer even shocking; there were tens of thousands whose fates were unknown. . . . His memory summoned up the tales he had heard of the horrendous tortures endured by detainees in just such situations. The facts related by those fortunate enough to be released from cells like these were discussed and circulated everywhere, too terrifying to be believed. In his heart he knew that he would never be able to endure torn-out fingernails or electrocution or suffocating indefinitely in a congested cell or being forced to walk over rotting corpses. (*DHW* 29-30)

Deborah Horvitz opines that the relationship between political power and sexual violence towards women has to be analyzed in order to resist cultural repression. Numerous instances unfold as the novel narrates how women and children are jailed because they have a male member fighting against the regime, “The exceptional had become habitual, and tragedies were simply mundane – perhaps that was the worst part of this war” (*DHW* 14). Fathima’s narration of her sister-in-law who has been released from prison only a week back presents the sexual violence endured by the female prisoners,

The girl’s face had turned yellow, she had lost half her body weight, and her head had been shaved to the bone. At night she raved deliriously. Fatima was sure she had been raped while she was inside. Hussein was ready to provide some pithy response, but Fatima went on, saying that the girl had scabies, too, so her family had been forced to isolate her in an old chicken coop on the roof, after all of which her fiancé dropped her and demanded compensation from her family. (*DHW* 21-22)

As they pass through erratically cut-up statelets, armed men inspect their IDs at every turn, “his identity card with its incriminating birthplace had been the principal problem; now, the body of his father, the wanted man, had almost drowned them all” (*DHW* 36). Many reject the very idea of letting a secular dissident cross, dead or alive: “The officer said the word “terrorists” most emphatically, then indicated with a brief wave of his hand that they should leave before he changed his mind, or anyway before a telegram arrived demanding that the corpse be taken back into custody” (36). As the corpse undergoes accelerated decomposition, the group begins to encounter a paradoxical form of leniency at the checkpoints; guards hasten their passage, motivated less by compassion than by a desire to be rid of the increasingly unbearable sight and stench of death. This reluctant accommodation underscores how decay itself becomes a form of negotiation within the bureaucratic machinery of war.

The journey is further destabilized when the siblings pass the half-devoured body of an unknown man, prompting a heated confrontation between Bolbol and Hussein. Bolbol provocatively suggests the ease with which they could abandon their father’s corpse to a similar fate, left to be consumed by animals, unnoticed and unaccounted for. In the ensuing argument, Bolbol recounts Hussein’s personal history, highlighting his habitual volatility, emotional excess, and long standing pattern of

conflict within the family. Meanwhile, the father's body has deteriorated to such an extent that even cologne can no longer mask the pervasive odour of decay.

When the siblings stop for the night inside their van, the smell attracts a pack of wild dogs, whose attack heightens the atmosphere of fear and psychological exhaustion. Amid the chaos, Hussein turns his aggression on Bolbol, striking him down with little resistance. The incident marks a critical breaking point; the accumulated strain of the journey fractures what remains of familial restraint. That night, the siblings retreat into silence, each succumbing privately to grief, panic, and emotional collapse. After navigating several additional checkpoints, the siblings are intercepted by an extremist faction that denies them passage unless Bolbol undergoes a compulsory "religious re-education" course. With no viable alternative, Hussein and Fatima, who has by now been rendered mute are forced to continue the journey without him. Their urgency intensifies as the father's corpse begins to show visible signs of decay, including maggot infestation.

Hussein and Fatima reach Anabiya before nightfall, where they are received by a cousin and an uncle, the only surviving members of their extended family in the village. Arrangements are made for the burial to take place at morning prayer. Bolbol eventually arrives in Anabiya later that night, having been released into the custody of his uncle by the extremist group. In the quiet, each sibling privately confronts the realization that, once the burial is completed, they have little desire to maintain contact with one another.

In the aftermath of the burial, Bolbol asserts a symbolic rupture by insisting on being addressed by his given name, Nabil, marking a rejection of the infantilized identity that has accompanied him throughout the journey. Fatima, irreversibly affected by the cumulative trauma, remains permanently mute, while Hussein uncharacteristically withdrawn, retreats into silence. As the siblings begin their return to Damascus, they experience a palpable sense of relief while passing through the checkpoints with unexpected ease, now unburdened by the physical presence of their father's corpse. The absence of the body exposes the extent to which death itself had functioned as an obstacle within the architecture of surveillance and control. Hussein and Fatima drop Nabil off in his neighbourhood without exchanging words, their separation marked by emotional finality rather than reconciliation.

Cathy Caruth, in her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* is of the opinion that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4). Alone in his home, Nabil becomes acutely aware that the space still carries the lingering odour of his father’s decomposing body. In a moment of visceral identification, he imagines his own face dissolving under hot water, mirroring the slow disintegration of the corpse; a disturbing image that collapses the boundary between the living and the dead, and signals the enduring imprint of trauma beyond the journey’s end.

The road operates as a deathscape; a spatial formation shaped by social, political, and economic power and encoded through symbolic and bureaucratic regimes. Rather than enabling mobility, it becomes a regulated zone where sovereignty is exercised through checkpoints, surveillance, and arbitrary authority, suspending life between survival and extinction. The siblings’ journey is marked by delay, decay, and enforced waiting, transforming movement into spatial trauma. From this perspective, the road accumulates collective memory and psychological injury, as repeated encounters with ruins, checkpoints, and decomposing bodies embed trauma into space itself. The journey enforces stasis and repetition rather than progression, mirroring the cyclical structure of trauma and producing exhaustion and moral paralysis. The decaying corpse intensifies this necropolitical logic, revealing how power extends beyond killing to the bureaucratic management of the dead. The road thus emerges as a site where spatial control, political authority, and biological decay converge, transforming movement into an ordeal governed by trauma and the omnipresence of death.

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