Spring 5-2-2011

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Tokyo’s “Human Accidents”: Jinshin Jiko and the Social Meaning of Train Suicide

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May 1, 2011
Abstract

In the dense metropolis of Tokyo, hundreds of Japanese commit suicide along railway lines each year. Japanese use the term *jinshin jiko*, or “human accident,” to describe these suicides – this term is frequently displayed on status monitors, which are seen by millions of commuters as they navigate the delays and challenges of the Tokyo. Based on interviews with young Japanese students, this study seeks to understand how everyday Japanese commuters imbue the ambiguous act of train suicide with meaning. I argue that the everyday reproduction of *jinshin jiko* “shrouds” the embodied, individual act of suicide within the cultural space of the commute. Here, shrouding refers to the social re-production of train suicide as an everyday commuter event. Commuters utilize cultural scripts of dying to read the shrouded event of *jinshin jiko* through discourses of social obligation, depression, and the role of the commuting worker. This thesis contributes ethnographic case studies of mortality confrontation amid the rapidly changing perception and discourse of suicide in Japanese society.
Acknowledgement

My sincere thanks goes to Ron Barrett, my advisor on this project. For his insight, humor, straight talking, perpetual willingness to pay for my tea at Coffee News, and general good-guyness, I am grateful.

For Tom, Andrew, and Jon, who tolerated my gradual takeover of our living room with overdue library books and abandoned coffee cups, and for the knowledge that my pacing back and forth will always be interrupted by some thoughtful, helpful remark, thank you.

Thank you to all of the professors who took my calls, shared their pastries, and made me feel welcomed into new worlds of ideas. Alisa Freedman, David Slater, Susan Orpett Long, Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, and Christopher Scott, thank you… a special thanks to Jack Weatherford for his surprise visit and interest! My deep thanks to Olga González for her warm encouragement, sharp wit, and great book recommendation, even from across the world; and to Dianna, Margo, Arjun, Diana, Scott, and Brad for providing the wonderful community in the basement of Carnegie where much of these words were formed.

Thank you to Kurt Vonnegut and Mom, who both failed their thesis defenses the first time around but still turned out okay. Thank you to Dad, Matt, and Mandy for their encouragement. Thank you Sarah for all the support, especially that which came in the form of sandwiches and burritos.
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Introduction

A walk through Shinjuku Station, the train-transit hub for the de facto business capital of Tokyo, is a dance through endless flows of people. Some are clad in the business suits and deliberate air of Tokyo’s *sarariiman*, or salaried employees; others pause to wait for midday curry snacks in long lines, or laugh with classmates in matching uniforms, or drink tea from vending machines. Outside the station entrances, the neighborhood of Shinjuku comes to life; *gaijin* (foreigners) like myself and men with suits and towering hair mingle and smoke cigarettes as giant monitors advertise Korean soap operas from the sides of buildings.

Though Shinjuku is the busiest train station in the world, with an average 3.64 million commuters passing through on a given weekday, it is hardly an anomaly within the context of Tokyo (Freedman 2010:10). The entire metropolitan area comes alive through this grappling with the enormous flows of individuals, from the farthest suburban train station to the downtown transit hubs. When I traveled to Tokyo in March 2010 to study as an exchange student, I found myself overwhelmed by the massive flows of people and information in the world’s largest metropolitan area, which is home to a massive 35 million people. But the space of the trains compelled me, even in that initial moment of disorientation. The Japanese train, or *densha*, provided a window into everyday Japanese life, a glimpse into the experience of schoolchildren with uniforms and box-backpacks and elderly couples riding the trains on early afternoons.

The daily commute on the *densha* soon became an indispensable aspect of my life in Tokyo. As with my Japanese classmates at Sophia University, I relied upon the morning commute to take me into class, and the evening’s last train to take me home.
safely at the end of a weekend night out. The to-the-minute regularity of the trains made the system stable enough to build complicated routes and ultra-brief transfers into any number of trips. But despite the extent and precision of the railway network, the trains were not without disruptions and delays. At any given moment, digital status monitors inside train cars listed half a dozen or more delays that had occurred throughout the metropolitan area. Most delays were minor; almost all occurred in the distant elsewhere of the train network. But occasionally, the effect of a given delay would ripple through the system close enough for my daily route to be affected.

On one such instance, on a sunny morning in late March, my train came to a halt on a bridge just before Akabane station. “The emergency breaks are being applied,” a female voice announced in Japanese and English as the train glided to a swift halt. Aside from swaying in unison as the train stopped moving, the passengers remained as aloof as before – some buried in small pocket-sized novels, others sending text messages on their *ketai* (cell phones). I looked up at the status monitor and noticed that only one delay had occurred. The cause ascribed to the delay at the distant station, read *jinshin jiko*. Not knowing what the term meant, I searched the faces of other passengers for reactions, and listened for comments that might lead me to the meaning of the delay. But I was the only one who seemed to be behaving differently. Expressions remained the same as the car settled into silence, which remained unbroken until the train resumed its course towards Akabane station.

As time passed in Tokyo, I gradually became aware of the ubiquity of *jinshin jiko*. I noticed that some of my classmates would arrive an hour late for morning sessions, mumble something about *jinshin jiko*, and present a tiny slip of paper to the professor. I
noticed that the term appeared on the monitor nearly every morning, announcing an event at some distant corner of the railway system. As I spoke to my peers about the delays, I came to realize that the English translation of “accident” displayed on the in-car monitors was not a complete translation; rather, the delays read, in English, “human accident.” “I’ve never felt comfortable with that term,” one friend confided as he explained that in the vast majority of situations, the “accident” in question was actually a suicide committed as an individual leapt into the path of an oncoming train.

Before coming to Tokyo, I had heard that Japan had a “culture of suicide.” In literature and my studies, I had encountered many of the emblematic images of suicide in Japan: the samurai who, in disgrace, commits seppuku, or ritual disembowelment; the kamikaze pilots of World War II; the pop stars and politicians caught in televised scandals; and the poet who commits suicide facing Mt. Fuji. Each image evoked a distinctly “Japanese” worldview – in other words, a few vague ideas about social obligation and Buddhist philosophy, perhaps a sense of preoccupation with aesthetics.

At the same time, I was aware of the “crisis of suicide” that Japan is currently undergoing. Since the turn of the 21st century, at least 30,000 Japanese people have killed themselves each year, which constitutes one of the highest rates of suicide in the world (Ozawa-de Silva 2008:519). The pervasiveness of suicide in Japan becomes even clearer when considering that 100 to 200 unsuccessful suicide attempts accompany each successful act of suicide (Ozawa-de Silva 2008:519). Over recent years, the Japanese government has begun to enact policies of suicide prevention, albeit with a strong emphasis on the economic stability of middle-aged working men above all other groups.
and concerns (Ozawa-de Silva 2010:394)\(^1\). Though I assumed the current crisis in suicide involved some fusion of traditional values and contemporary issues, I had no idea how those social forces actually combined in everyday life.

My preconceived notions of suicide in Japan did not prepare me for the peculiar realization that train suicide is a common occurrence in Tokyo. Roughly 2,000 Japanese individuals commit train suicide each year, a figure that accounts for about 6% of total suicides nationwide (New York Times 2009)\(^2\). From my perspective, the train was a space of everyday life, characterized by casual people watching, uneventful stretches and ennui. How was it that people chose to die, here, too? Other foreign exchange students in my morning Japanese course took routes to university that frequently experienced *jinshin jiko* delays; they would make frank and exasperated comments, or off-color jokes about *sarariiman* dying, to which our professors would say nothing. Though I cringed at the tactlessness of my fellow Americans abroad, I shared their sense that some excessive transgression had occurred. I was in awe of the ability of my Japanese peers to confront suicide not only in news reports and horror movies, but also in their daily experience as commuters. At the same time, I knew so little about their experience as commuters, and as members of a so-called suicide nation (Ozawa-de Silva 2008:519).

As my awareness of *jinshin jiko* increased in my daily commute and explorations of Tokyo, I also became aware of the peculiar ways of talking about and experiencing *jinshin jiko*. When I spoke with friends about their experiences with *jinshin jiko* delays

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\(^1\) Middle-aged men commit suicide in Japan at a rate higher than any other age-gender cohort. This phenomenon is particular to this historical moment – in the 1950s, for example, young adults were most likely to commit suicide (Kawanishi 2008:63).

\(^2\) I found it far more difficult to obtain a reliable report on the annual rate of train suicide in Tokyo alone. Estimates generally ranged from 200 to 500 suicides a year, or roughly a train suicide each day.
growing up, I heard not poignant narratives of life and death, but stories of mid-day McDonalds meet-ups and karaoke sessions near the halted train station. Many people answered my question with an empathetic grunt of annoyance, or a *tsking* comment about how burdensome such events are – or in the case of my host parents, an apprehensive look and silence. The harder I sought discrete facts about train suicide, the more I discovered about the ambiguity and peculiarity of *jinshin jiko* as a commuting event woven into the fabric of everyday life.

**The Problem**

Perhaps nowhere is suicide as public, or as everyday, as on commuter railways. *Jinshin jiko*, the “human accidents” that affect Tokyo metropolitan commuters on nearly a daily basis, is the point at which the continuous experience of the commute and the discontinuous violence of suicide meet. Unlike the suicides of politicians and cultural figures, which incite televised debates over biographical details and the state of Japan’s suicide crisis, the subject of *jinshin jiko* remains, for the large part, anonymous. The delays impact the daily schedules of tens of thousands of commuters, as ultra-terse news articles take pains to emphasize. But hours, or occasionally minutes after a *jinshin jiko* delay, the railways are once again operating on time, with no trace of death left behind.

How does public suicide become comprehensible in terms of everyday life? I went into my research expecting to clarify *jinshin jiko*, perhaps through case studies of train suicide. Not only was this task virtually impossible in terms of access to bereaved families, narrative details of train suicides, and statistical records; the search for a straightforward and factual portrayal of train suicide was at odds with the everyday
commuter encounter with *jinshin jiko*. As I conducted interviews with young commuters and searched for patterns in their narratives and reactions, I gradually realized that the information I collected was not a portrait of dying and suicide as such, but rather, that of a society struggling with a confrontation with public suicide in the hyper-visible cultural space of the railway commute.

I argue that *jinshin jiko* “shrouds” the violence act of public suicide within the banal, everyday event of the commuter delay. Here, shrouding refers to how the spatial, social, and linguistic practices of the commute mediate and constrain representations of train suicide. Through the construction and utilization of explanatory models for train suicide, or *scripts of jinshin jiko*, commuters read and narrate the shrouded act of train suicide through discourses of social obligation, depression, and the role of the commuting worker, which converge in the cultural space of the railway commute. Noting the transformative, and often socially critical nature of these emerging scripts of *jinshin jiko as depressive suicide*, I suggest that the shrouding of train suicide might actually facilitate the popular use of train suicide as a discursive space to apply and re-think the cultural concepts of depression, work, and social obligation in Japanese society.

My research attempts to complement the substantial psychological and sociological investigations of suicide in hypermodern societies with a sustained look at the struggle to recreate ordinary life and social meaning in the wake of a death that pushes us to the very limit of human meaning. As important as researching the causality of suicide for the sake of prevention is, I believe it is imperative for the social sciences to document the human capacity to continue building a comprehensible world amidst challenges like the daily encounter with suicide in metropolitan Tokyo.
Literature Review

*Jinshin jiko*, as a subject of anthropological inquiry, maps onto a variety of bodies of literature without being wholly explicable in terms of any one. My research enters into dialogue with theories of suicide in the social sciences, and builds upon the insights and concerns of the anthropology of suicide in Japan. But my concern for the social experience of suicide, as opposed to concern for suicidogenic behavior, lead me towards the anthropology of violence. In particular, I sought tools for understanding partiality and silence in the ways of speaking suicidal violence; the theoretical work on social suffering and the public secret proved indispensable for this task. Finally, the literature on commuter spaces and other “non-places” helped me place the public death of train suicide within a particular understanding of public-ness.

*Suicide*

Across disciplines, methodologies, and cultural contexts, academic writing on suicide invariably enters into dialogue with Emile Durkheim and his book *Suicide*. Durkheim’s investigation into the social production of suicide pioneered a new mode of sociological inquiry. His structural functionalist approach sought to explain collective social behavior, or social facts, in terms of particular elements of the social structure (Durkheim 1897:310). He interpreted the relative stability of the suicide rates in countries as indication that such social behavior was wholly comprehensible in terms of large-scale analysis of society along a few key vectors. For Durkheim, social institutions like religion
and marriage all confer a definitive tendency toward suicide, which coalesce in the observed suicide rate of a given society (Durkheim 1897:48).

The methodology of sociological statistical analysis he pioneered has gradually been critiqued and reworked. But despite the faults in Durkheim’s quantitative reasoning, and the gradual move away from structural functionalist analysis in the study of culture, the four-part typology proposed in *Suicide* has been tremendously influential for subsequent attempts to link to explain suicidal behavior within the social sciences. Durkheim proposed that imbalance in a society’s level of integration and regulation fosters four forms of suicide, each with discrete sets of properties:

- *Egoistic suicide* occurs when individuals are not adequately integrated into society; without the meaningful sense of belonging in work, family, and social lives, individuals experience a sense of dissatisfaction that may lead them to suicide.

- At the opposite end of the spectrum, an overly strong sense of collectivity may inspire individuals to place the needs of society over their own lives in the act of *altruistic suicide*. Durkheim evokes the ritual suicide of the Japanese warlord as an emblematic image of altruism in suicide.

- Perhaps the most curious and resonant of Durkheim’s types is *anomic suicide*, in which a destabilized society fails to regulate the individual significantly enough to prevent impulsive and emotional suicide. Durkheim unearths the Greek concept of *anomie* or lawlessness in order to describe social contexts
such as economic depression, unemployment, as well as evoking the micro-
social anomie of domestic disturbances.

Durkheim follows his structural model to its logical fourth form of the
fatalistic suicide, in which over-regulation creates a sense of entrapment and
loss of recourse in the suicidal individual, but is less convinced of the
historical and social relevance of such a suicide.

All forms attempt to unify social malaise, subjective experience that leads to a
decision to commit suicide, and the ensuing phenomenon of a stable rate of suicide. As
numerous critics have pointed out, however, Durkheim’s attempt to identify the
relationship between specific social statistics and the suicide rate alone ignores the
complex correlation and convolution of such statistical quantities, as well as the cultural
construction of suicidal behavior (Douglas 1967; Taylor 1982). Durkheim tries to
extrapolate a total, quantifiable structure to suicide; like many to follow him, his results
are only partial and contingent.

The theorization of society in Suicide as an interlocked system of determinable
parts largely ignores the lived, subjective experience through which suicidal behavior
arises in favor of reductive social modeling. With Suicide, Durkheim initiated the
academic project of reversing the perceived crisis of suicide in contemporary societies.
He asserts that the disapproval of suicide in 19th-century European societies is a product
of a gradual increase in disapproval from ancient societies to the present, whereas the
modern removal of legal sanctions towards society, as an aspect of the degradation of
norms and regulation, is a pathological historical anomaly. Durkheim was convinced that
poor governmental policies and an increasingly immoral social milieu are uniquely to blame for the rise in (anomic) suicide. But those who have reexamined the historical record discover that when looking at societies with so-called permissive attitudes towards suicide, Durkheim ignored the elaborate rituals that dealt with the taboo and impurity of suicide (Marra and Orru, 1991). In his readiness to generate a structure that might explain suicide in terms of contemporary society, Durkheim cast no light on how individuals have always relied upon cultural practices to grapple with the voluntary deaths of others. Though we cannot fault *Suicide* for not being another, more ideal book, it’s important to identify the shortcomings of scope in the seminal moment of suicidology, as their effects run the course of the sociological literature on suicide.

*Suicide as Symptom in the Japanese Context*

The early social science literature on suicide in Japan drew heavily upon the Durkheimian notion of societal imbalance producing acts of suicide. Ruth Benedict’s influential (and infamous) *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, written as an interpretive distance-ethnography during World War II, portrays Japanese society as engulfed within a dialectic conflict between militant and aesthetic cultural impulses. Tasked with explaining behaviors such as the suicides of *kamikaze* pilots to a baffled American public, Benedict argued that shame as a system of cultural valuation was the primary determinant and constraint of action such as suicide by *kamikaze* (Benedict 1946:101). While not explicitly evoking Durkheim, Benedict nonetheless contributed to the perception that suicide in Asian societies like Japan is a result of the excessive emphasis of the collectivity over the individual – in other words, that altruistic suicide is endemic to Asia.
The Chrysanthemum and the Sword had the unfortunate effect of crystallizing “traditional values” of collectivity as the cultural determinant of suicidal behavior, rather than seeking a more rigorous understanding of social behavior.

As the twentieth century progressed, social scientists utilized various, sometimes contradictory readings of Durkheim’s typology in attempting to explain the rise of suicide in Japan. Theorists like Mamoru Iga noted that while the economic strength and stability of Japanese society increased during the post-war economic miracle (from 1960 through the 80s), suicide rates rose as well (Iga 1986:2). Iga argued that in the context of immense personal and societal expectations for success, individuals who lacked the adequate internal resources to meet their perceived societal needs were prone to developing “weak egos that led them to the impulsive act of anomic suicide. (Iga 1986:192-193). The attempt to bring Benedict’s concern for cultural patterns under the service of Durkheimian quantitative analysis is ultimately clumsy and unconvincing, for it continues to oversimplify social relations into typologies and patterns only tenuously rooted in subjective experience. In contrast, Chikako Ozawa-de Silva’s recent scholarship on online suicide pacts among Japanese youth is an example of an anthropological exploration of egoistic suicide, or the insufficient integration of individuals into society (Ozawa-de Silva 2010:404). Ozawa-de Silva notes the decline of real-world social interaction among Japanese commuters in conjunction with the rise of digital spaces in which individuals express their despair and desire to die (2010:412). Her ethnographic research benefits from a close attenuation to value Japanese youth ascribe their experience and choices, and demonstrates how, when stripped of the statistical
methodology, Durkheim’s typology can provide a valuable starting point for framing an investigation into the causes of suicide.

While Durkheim contributes an analytic vocabulary for theorists to debate and reinterpret, that vocabulary relies upon a speculative construction of social reality. The boundaries between anomic and egoistic social pathology do not correspond neatly to merely different types of societies, as Durkheim imagined. I am persuaded by Ozawa-de Silva’s efforts to situate anomie within the lived experience of a particular cohort of Japanese youth in a material context of isolation; but when utilized as such, the original concerns and approach of Suicide as a sociological project lose their relevance. The pathological model of suicide – suicide as a symptom of social malaise – simply does not attend adequately to the complex social dynamics that envelop acts of suicide.

Towards Social Meaning

The literature on suicide that succeeded Durkheim over the 20th century and into the present draws upon two major research interests: suicidogenics (that which looks at the causality of acts of suicide) and social meaning (that which looks at the social meaning, experience, and valuation of acts of suicide).

The former is typically the domain of psychologists and sociologists who write to inform clinical practice or social policy. In his 2005 book Why People Die By Suicide?, Thomas Joiner allies himself with mid-20th century psychologist Karl Menninger’s positivist ambition to accept the theory that can explain the most facts about suicide (Joiner 2005:33) Joiner, like many before him, extracts and reconfigures concepts from Durkheim’s typology; he places anomie within the subjective frame of “social
disconnection” and the conditions of altruistic suicide as the experience of burdensomeness (Joiner 2005:37). He identifies Schneidman, Beck, Baumeister, and Linehan as theorists who join Durkheim in contributing partial explanations to the factors and circumstances that precipitate suicide (Joiner 2005:42).

Joiner, in particular, contributes a persuasive suicidogenic theory, configured in such a fashion to explain the greatest number of facts within a scientific frame. At the same time, I am intrigued by the framing of *Why People Die By Suicide?* – Joiner lost his father to suicide, and is driven by this sense of loss to understand and know suicide. Unlike other works, which leave the moralist project of suicide prevention unstated and assumed, Joiner foregrounds his desire to know in the face of inexplicability.

Numerous ethnographic studies of suicide situate the challenges of theorizing suicide within the human practice of knowing and struggling to understand. Michael Brown, an ethnographer working with the Aguaruna people of the Peruvian Amazon, writes,

“No matter how much one knows about what is clinically called ‘self-damaging behaviour,’ the fact of a suicide – the confrontation with an actual case of a known person willfully and violently withdrawing from life – poses an existential riddle stunning in its opaqueness. At times such as this, and probably only at time such as this, one is inclined to agree with the sentious assertion of Camus that ‘there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.’” (Brown 1986:311)

Critically, the suicide of Brown’s ethnography is not merely a symptom, but a social process in which meaning and value are contested. Brown pursues the genesis of suicide in the Aguaruna context, collecting and analyzing historical figures, formal elements of dying, and other correlated factors. In suicidogenic terms, the local context imbues the structures of selfhood and affect with a culturally-determined meaning, and
thus must be considered when attempting to applying psychological principles across cultural contexts. In his consideration of the relatively high rates of suicide among young men and women, Brown notes how individuals conceptualize themselves within gendered structures of social obligation, and turn to suicide as recourse or symbolic escape from structural paralysis. Individual intention and social perception both negotiate this structural entanglement of power, albeit from different positions (Brown 1986:325). The cultural tensions enmeshed in the act of suicide do not merely inform the act of dying, but alter structures of power for the survivors in the community, who must negotiate the social meaning of the suicide and narrate the events in a meaningful fashion.

The anthropological investigation of suicide is intimately involved in questions of power, social relation, and structure. The ethnographic record of suicide in societies reveals how these conflicts are embedded in daily life. Brown writes, “The Amazonian case I have just described lends support to the view… that in some situations powerless people use suicide to become subjects in a world that relegates them to the status of objects” (Brown 1986:324). Here, Brown is not relying upon symbolic and interpretive claims of death and suicide taboo. Instead, the ethnographic material in question is the everyday, lived negotiation of meaning – the reactions, value judgments, and practices that constitute the fabric of everyday life, and must respond to the representational challenge of suicide.

Brown and the broader ethnographic investigation into suicide encouraged me to shift my focus from the causality and psychology of jinshin jiko and towards the lived experience of jinshin jiko – specifically, as lived by young commuters on the Tokyo
trains. But how can this shift in focus help account for the ethnographic observation that for many commuters, *jinshin jiko* is both suicide and something other than suicide? I didn’t want to rely too much on the analytic stability of suicide, especially when the social experience of *jinshin jiko* operated on the ambiguity of knowing for certain whether an individual died or not for certain. As a result, I sought to supplant the literature on suicide with other anthropological concepts.

**Violence and Social Suffering**

While the literature on suicide helps frame the nature of my research problem and its commitments (I am not, for example, going to attempt to build a comprehensive psychological structure to explain train suicide), it also leads me to search for the right set of anthropological tools with which to represent the contestation of meaning and social production of train suicide in Japan. How is *jinshin jiko* at once an excessive act of transgression and an aspect of banal, everyday life? How does the language used to represent suicide relate to the act of suicide itself? Here, I turned to the anthropology of violence.

Does railway suicide constitute violence? When examining the work of theorists in violence, I grappled with this issue. In *The Anthropology of Violence*, Riches offers the influential definition that violence is an “act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses” (Riches 1986:8). Riches’ definition implies a performative scenario in a public setting, in which actors may possess competing claims of legitimacy and illegitimacy. In one sense, this presumption contrasts with the perceived privacy of suicide. One could easily imagine the suicide of a reclusive
individual in which the individual deems their own actions legitimate, and no witnesses exist to mark the suicidal action as illegitimate. But in the vast majority of suicides, other individuals in society encounter the physical hurt of the suicide victim in some manner, whether in the discovery of the body by family members or the reading of an obituary. In the absence of direct witnesses, society retains the last word as whether to mark the action as legitimate, and therefore not violent, or as a violent and illegitimate act. With or without explicit reactions and judgments, the cultural discourse on suicide imbues the act with the qualities of violence, non-violence, or perhaps an ambiguous in-betweenness. Furthermore, railway suicide is an exceptional act within the spectrum of suicidal forms. The performance is not only public, but occurs within the ultra-public space of the commute. The social witnesses that Riches emphasizes are likely to be commuters adversely affected by the occurrence of jinshin jiko. And yet, amongst my informants, it remained ambiguous whether the occurrence of jinshin jiko actually constituted violence. Riches’ definition is helpful to the extent that it emphasizes a relationship between transgression, society, and the harmed body. But the theorized encounter between performer and witness, mediated by the performance of violence, reduces the complex and diverse social processes of violence to a misleading simplicity (Whitehead 2004:57). Whether an individual assigns jinshin jiko the label of violence or not, the everyday encounter with train suicide engenders a set of practices related to the creation of social meaning; in this sense, jinshin jiko constitutes violence not as a resultant state, but as a social process of everyday life.

The conflict at the crux of social suffering, or the social experience of violence, is the re-constitution of order and meaning in the face of violence. In documenting the
experiences of urban Punjabi families in Delhi, Veena Das notes that violence is not merely a bodily experience, but located in the sense of violation and fragility it creates in everyday maneuvering within society (Das 2007:9). Das traces the relationship between violence and the everyday through diverse practices, such as the realm of rumors, which mimic the individual’s ability to relate to everyday life but stem, instead, from a damaged terrain of everyday that is closer in its structure to paranoia (Das 2007:134). The subjects of *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* struggle to speak their lives meaningfully in the structural context of violence, and in doing so, take up the “delicate task of repairing the torn spider web,” or re-producing a comprehensible social reality from the fragmentation of violence. (Das 2007:15)

Das’ approach provides a means to re-conceptualize the relationship between the language of the commute, the event of train suicide, and the narrative and representational strategies of everyday commuters. My ethnographic data demonstrates the importance of the language of the commute in the subjective experience of banality and unremarkability; in other words, I look at the production of the ordinary in the face of transgressive public death. But that particular sense of order – the public and the ordinary of the commute – is, itself, inextricable from deeper processes of violence and the conflict of social meaning. To extract the suicide lurking within *jinshin jiko* and address it independently would be to project a theoretical cohesion that does not exist, in practice, for my informants. In light of Das’ work, I’ve formulated my investigation into the social re-production of *jinshin jiko* as a negotiation between empowered structures of

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3 In this passage, Das quotes the linguist Wittgenstein.
knowing (or the spatial/social/linguistic logic of the commute) and the human confrontation with the unknowable (or the transgressive character of public suicide).

I found a close analogue for the struggle between knowing and the unknowable in the anthropological literature on the public secret. A simple definition of the public secret is the social knowledge of *knowing what not to know* (Taussig 1999:2). In anthropological practice, the public secret gestures towards negativity – silences, partial explanations, opaqueness – and situates such knowledge within the social process of knowing. In *Defacement*, anthropologist Michael Taussig argues that a kind of liminal tension exists at the site of the public secret that acts of defacement release in a creative and destructive force (Taussig 1992:3). In my examination of the re-production of knowledge in relation to *jinshin jiko*, I found the idea of public secret as tense limit between knowing and not knowing to be of tremendous utility.

*Shrouding and Scripts of Train Suicide*

From theoretical tools gathered from the anthropology of suicide, violence, and the public secret, I developed the concept of *shrouding* to explain the mediated social re-production of *jinshin jiko*. Only a miniscule portion of the Japanese commuting population will ever experience the collision between a human being and a train firsthand. For the majority of commuters, *jinshin jiko* is a tangle of euphemistic terms, experiences of delay and annoyance, newspaper calculations, value judgments, and partial and contradictory narratives.

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4 My advisor Ron Barrett suggested I use the term ‘shrouding’ to express the opaque and indeterminate representations of death that I found in my data. While the ethnographic observations and theoretical structure of shrouding are a product of my own work, I am indebted to Ron for bringing apt terminology to that process.
Within all of these forms of representation, I observed a two-sided phenomenon occurring – the means of speaking meaningfully about *jinshin jiko* relied upon, and often reinforced, the ambiguity and obfuscation of the act of train suicide. *Jinshin jiko* resembles the public secret in that it is a structure of knowledge based around the indeterminacy of some things and the clarity of others. It resides at the boundary between the banal explicable of the commute and the threatening inexplicable of horrific violence in public space. And like the public secret, *jinshin jiko* is a structure of knowing/unknowing woven into the fabric of everyday life, as an ubiquitous aspect of the cultural space of the commute.

We chose the term *shrouding* to emphasize that the representational strategies of the railway commute render inaccessible and unknown the experiences of the suicide victim as an embodied individual. Shrouds conceal what lies beneath, even as an underlying form supports them. Shrouding also gestures towards the psychocultural issue of mortality confrontation, which is largely beyond the scope of this thesis.

Given that train suicide is shrouded within the commuter event of *jinshin jiko*, what types of judgments, narratives, and social meaning do commuters ascribe to train suicide? Another major theoretical resource to the construction of my argument is the idea of cultural scripts of dying. I first encountered the idea in the work of Susan Orpett Long, who argues that Japanese individuals facing end-of-death decisions rely upon culturally available scripts of dying well in evaluating the cultural worth of those decisions (Long 2005:64). Long builds on the work of sociologist Clive Seale, who noted that cultural procedures of dying are not determinative and constraining, but rather, spring dynamically from the cultural context in which one dies (Long 2005:64).
Re-imagined outside of the original context of end-of-life decision-making, cultural scripts of suicide express how society perceives the acts, decisions, forms, and qualities of suicidal death. Indeed, my informants all accessed cultural scripts of train suicide when speculating about the actions taken by commuters, the decision (or spontaneous indecision) they underwent, and formal features such as position on the platform and identity of the suicide victim.

A script of suicide is more powerful an analytic tool than a “discourse of suicide” or a “narrative of suicide” because it emphasizes both the cultural construction of constituent actions of death (i.e. was this decision made, or was it a non-decision and thus excluded from consideration, etc) and the cultural valuation of those actions. Furthermore, Long’s evaluative construct of a Good Death yields interesting results when inverted to describe the popular perception of jinshin jiko as a Bad Death. (I take up the concept of scripts of jinshin jiko in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis.)

Methodology

In March 2010, I began a semester study-abroad program at a large university in Tokyo, Japan. I lived with a host family in suburban Saitama, a prefecture immediately to the north of Tokyo and located within the Greater Tokyo Area. I relied on a combination of bus, train, and subway lines to travel to and from university each day, and the railway network to explore metropolitan Tokyo in the afternoons and evenings; it is in the context of my daily commute and railway wanderings that I began to keep field notes and formulate some of my research questions.
I arranged ethnographic interviews with a half-dozen young men and women through my host university. All of my informants were college students or recent graduates who used JR East railways to commute to school and/or work. I approached a few of my informants through informal social contexts on campus and asked if they would like to be part of study on *jinshin jiko* in Japan. These first few informants subsequently recommended a couple of their friends to speak with me. An anthropology professor on campus who I had been meeting with infrequently arranged for my final informant to meet with me.

I conducted these interviews using the ethnosemantic methodology of ethnographic interviewing as laid out by James P. Spradley. My informants and I spoke for between one and two hours per sitting, in which time I recorded audio and took notes. Because of my limited Japanese language abilities, I sought out informants who spoke intermediate to fluent English. As a consequence, most of my informants had international backgrounds, either having spent a portion of their childhood in Europe or the United States before relocating to Japan or having participated in a study-abroad program in the United States. I found that my informants with international backgrounds were more comfortable in the interpersonal context of the ethnographic interview; their narratives of transitioning into Japanese society in childhood provided a productive tension, as they helpfully pointed out “typical Japanese responses” which were sometimes aligned with their personal assessments, and sometimes at odds with them. My informants who had learned English exclusively through the Japanese education system, by contrast, were more reticent when speaking about some aspects of *jinshin jiko*. 
The responses of the two groups of informants complemented each other strongly, and I include voices from both cohorts in the ethnography that follows.

One major concern of my ethnographic interviewing process was the potential to upset my informants, given the difficult subject matter of my study. At the outset, I ensured that my informants understood that we would be discussing train suicide, and also made sure to have counseling and mental health contacts prepared in case of an unexpected emotional crisis. I did not ask my informants about their own experiences with depression or suicide, and quickly ended tangents on mental health or family histories relating to suicide that I felt could become invasive. As the interviews progressed, I was relieved to note that the tone of conversation was engaged and upbeat, and strove to keep discussions of explicit violence or other disconcerting material to a minimum. A few times, my informants would appear distressed with a certain comment or concept; in these cases, I would do everything in my power to steer the conversation to a more agreeable emotional tone. My focus on the everydayness of *jinshin jiko*, rather than the emotions and experiences of suicidal individuals, provided a further barrier between our ethnographic conversations and the potential for psychological distress.

When I gained approval for my research methodology, I originally intended to use close screenings of online viral videos as a method of encouraging conversation and analysis. After one attempt at showing a (non-explicit) video at the site of a *jinshin jiko* accident, my informant was more surprised with the scene than I had expected. Although he was familiar with *jinshin jiko* and popular opinions about the delays, my informant had never been in the position of standing along the platform in the proximity of an accident, which is from where the cameraman was filming. Even though he had been
involved in jinshin jiko delays, the sudden relegation to a new, proximate position rendered him silent. After discussing the method with him, we decided that inducing a new experience via video had less value than eliciting, through conversation, the beliefs and ideas he already has. Though I retired the video methodology, I was able to use his reflections about the position of the commuter in my analysis of shrouding.

I met with several professors in the liberal arts department at my host university to discuss their academic and personal perspective on jinshin jiko in Japan. One professor in the anthropology department made himself available for casual advising sessions biweekly, and helped put me in touch with valuable local resources. A professor of comparative literature who focuses on the pre-war literary culture surrounding the commute provided an invaluable cultural frame for the contemporary phenomenon of jinshin jiko; I have largely incorporated her work into Chapter 4. While I attempted to bridge the Japanese and English-language academic literatures via these meetings, I was ultimately limited by my inability to read advanced Japanese. At the time of writing, I was unable to identify and incorporate Japanese academic perspectives on the phenomenon of jinshin jiko into my research, nor could I draw upon legal and literary representations that may exist outside of my limited Japanese searches.

Upon my return to the United States, I continued to collect resources and followed up with a few informants via e-mail for questions of clarification. I corresponded for a period with a journalist who claimed to have collected government reports of train suicide, including the kind of detailed statistics unavailable anywhere else. Unfortunately, his persistent request for money and my inability to confirm his legitimacy led me not to pursue this likely compelling, but nonetheless problematic source of data. In a similar
effort, I traced a collection of blog posts and “urban legends” throughout various Internet spaces, but ultimately felt that the material was too chaotic to use in a meaningful fashion. In the final stage of my research, I sought to situate my ethnographic findings within the literature on suicide, the commute, and anthropology of violence, as shown in my literature review.

Due to the constraints and commitments of my work, I end up approaching the cultural phenomenon of *jinshin jiko* through the lens of popular perception and the social contestation of meaning. The material for a more rigorous investigation into the rates and statistics behind the act of *jinshin jiko* likely exists in publication somewhere in Japan, and future research may perhaps draw upon that body of work in strengthening the epidemiological and legal underpinning to the phenomenon of train suicide. As it stands, my work constitutes a focused investigation into the everyday experience, sentiments, knowledge and silences of train suicide for young commuters in Tokyo.

**Chapter Summaries**

In Chapter 2, I introduce *jinshin jiko* through the cultural space of the railway commute in Tokyo. The section begins with a prologue that demonstrates the ambiguous relationship between *jinshin jiko* and the act of suicide for everyday commuters. As a *non-place* characterized by abstracted spatiality and contractual solitude, the railway network discourages individuals from relating to *jinshin jiko* as an embodied act of suicide. I explore how spatial, social, and linguistic practices of the commute constrain the type of information determinable in a *jinshin jiko* delay. The concept of *jinshin jiko* as an encounter mediated by the representational constraints of the commute system provides a framework for subsequent sections.
In Chapter 3, I examine the social processes through which commuters characterize jinshin jiko as a troublesome and bad death. I argue that practices like the exorbitant fining of families and the calculation of inconvenience in newspaper articles provide a means for commuters to connect their personal annoyance and frustration with a wider evaluation of train suicide, despite the limited knowledge available about the acts. I introduce the script of meiwaku as a cultural model that commuters use to critique the act of train suicide as selfish and asocial; in doing so, commuters simultaneously reinforce the space of the commute and their membership within it.

In Chapter 4, I consider how emerging scripts place jinshin jiko as the depressive suicide of the worn-down commuting worker. I trace the development of a cultural understanding of depressive suicide in the discourses of the sarariiman (salaried employee) and karô-jisatsu, or suicide-by-overwork. I note that the perception of jinshin jiko as a spontaneous suicide borne of depressive exhaustion contradicts the construction of agency in other scripts of train suicide; yet everyday commuters continue to draw upon both in their off-the-train narrations. I argue that in the absence of concrete information and journalistic details, jinshin jiko provides an important cultural and discursive space for commuters to examine emerging ideas of suicide and its relationship to social issues.

In the concluding chapter, I reflect upon how Japanese commuters read and relate to jinshin jiko in a historically specific manner. Contested and transforming ideas of the value of suicide and death, the nature of depression, the social and psychological cost of overwork, and the demands and limits of social obligation all converge in the commuter encounter with the shrouded act of jinshin jiko. I note that this contested reading reproduces the act of jinshin jiko as a comprehensible act within the everyday experience of
the commute, while also opening a space for commuters to question and critique everyday life in Tokyo. I discuss the limitations and potential implications of my ethnographic study, and gesture towards future research projects within the anthropology of suicide in Japan.
Chapter 2: Jinshin Jiko and the Commuter Event

Prologue

It was just as I was gathering my notes and preparing to leave that Akio told me a story he heard in church. We sat in a crowded Excelsior Coffee for a little over an hour, in which time Akio, a bright young student from the suburbs of Tokyo, had told me about his everyday experiences as one of the eight million daily railway commuters in metropolitan Tokyo. Akio moved to Japan as a small child, and spoke English with a hybrid British-Japanese accent that marks his place of birth (his family also spent a year in Germany). He commuted regularly since his first days at Japanese elementary school, when he first learned of the packed rush-hour cars, aggressive *sarariiman* (salarymen), and ubiquitous delays that characterize rail transit in Tokyo. But despite all Akio has learned about the proper way to be in public, and those things that “cannot be helped” (*shou ga nai*), some things still surprise him.

M.: That’s good, that’s helpful, thank you. Anything really last minute?
[long pause]
Akio: Ah. Well, I don’t know whether this is helpful, but I once had a friend who was actually on the train that, you know, went over the person.
M.: Oh?
Akio: Yeah. And like, well, I go to church on Sundays. But we were at church and he was telling me about that. He was on the, you know there’s many – I don’t know how to call it, but cubes of trains…
M.: Oh, train cars.
Akio: Like, he was actually on the train car that, you know, really went over the person. So it stopped, and he said that he felt that the train went over something. And then, after that people of the train station and the police came with blue sheets. And like, people, you know, other people taking out their mobile phones and taking pictures of it. And he said that he really felt an urge – he was like, an ambivalent feeling. He wanted to take a look at what happened to the body. At the same time, he felt like maybe it’s not – I don't remember what he said, but maybe not ethically good or maybe it would become traumatic. He said many people
were taking out their mobile phones and taking pictures. And he said that being on the actual car that went over a person really, you know, made him realize that *jinshin jiko*, like, people actually die on *jinshin jiko*. Like, not die—like, not exactly die, but people get injured. Like, it’s people who are involved. Like, living people…

In the hour that preceded Akio’s unexpected story, we had certainly broached the topic of *jinshin jiko*, the “human accidents” that account for over three hundred deaths a year along major railways in the Tokyo metropolitan. Akio reads the characters for *jinshin jiko* (人身事故) on the train car’s display panel every day; his peers occasionally show up late for class with delay excuse slips in hand; references to the “accidents” scroll across the bottom of cable news screen, come up in innocuous small-talk, and appear in ultra-brief online newspaper articles. As another informant aptly put it, “*Jinshin jiko* is everywhere.”

The event lurking within the ambiguous term of *jinshin jiko*, however, is not everywhere. Though the terse reporting on *jinshin jiko* commonly cites the number of individuals affected in a given delay (generally between 10,000 and 80,000+), those passengers most proximate to the collision number only a small proportion of that figure. Many Tokyoites, like Akio, will spend decades of their lives commuting throughout a system deeply marked by the effects of *jinshin jiko* and references to the event, yet never contacting its material reality captured by the stark phrasing of being “actually on the train that, you know, went over the person.”

What is most remarkable about Akio’s retelling of the collision is not the rarity of his friend’s positionality, but the two layers of obfuscation we find operating superimposed upon one another. The first is that of Akio’s friend who is encountering the embodied reality of *jinshin jiko* for the first time. Caught in an encounter with the
grotesque reality of the *jinshin jiko* victim’s body, the friend realizes, with a start, that *jinshin jiko* involves an actual, embodied human being. The presumption at work in this statement – a presumption that has guided the courses of my ethnographic inquiry – is that there is something about the everyday experience of *jinshin jiko* that obscures the actual event of a collision between a body and a train. Only in the hyper-proximity of the collision does Akio’s friend report experiencing a certain connection between the visceral violence of *jinshin jiko* and the everyday commuter experience.

The second layer of obfuscation occurs as Akio himself expresses discomfort with equating *jinshin jiko* the concept of “people actually [dying].” Akio first qualifies his statement by saying that people get injured rather than die, and then concludes that his friend’s epiphany is that *jinshin jiko* involves a person at all, rather than a specific state of that person. Though the story he has just finished relaying to me clearly involved a dead individual, he seemed reluctant to characterize *jinshin jiko* in such absolute terms. An earlier portion of our conversation elaborates the nature of Akio’s uncertainty:

M: When you hear that, what does it mean?
Akio: Well, the word *jinshin jiko* means that the train’s delayed and more trouble, I guess. Like, yeah. It means that somebody got injured. Like, originally it was supposed to mean, I guess, that somebody got injured or died. But because it’s so everyday thing. Like you see and hear about *jinshin jiko* like about fifty times a year, it just directly connects like, when you hear the word, you feel, ‘oh, the train’s delayed againnn.’ And you’re going to be stuck on some place. When you’re in a hurry, you feel really irritated. When you’re late for school anyway, you feel glad that you can get the delay ticket. Yeah. You don’t really think about the people who died, I guess. Who got injured. It’s just about your train getting delayed.

*Jinshin Jiko* and the Commuter Event

For Akio and other young commuters, *jinshin jiko* is a phenomenon of the commute: a constellation of station names, minutes delayed, ultra-brief newspaper
articles, and announcements on stalled train cars. Through the mediated reproduction of *jinshin jiko*, commuters experience an event that is simultaneously an act of suicide and an ambiguous commuter delay that makes the embodied act of the suicidal individual indeterminable and unspeakable.

In this chapter, I place the dissonant and uncertain meanings of train suicide within the experience of the commute itself. I examine how the railway network spatiality, commute terminology of the delay, and social practices of the Tokyo railway commute contribute form and meaning to the social reproduction of *jinshin jiko*. I argue that the everyday social reproduction of *jinshin jiko* shrouds suicidal content via representational strategies that emphasize the positionality of the commuter while constraining the degree that suicide as a particularized action of an individual can be expressed. Through this dual structure of the determinable and the indeterminable, *jinshin jiko* reassembles the potentially disturbing and disruptive content of suicide into the continuous experience of the commute.
Tokyo and The Non-Place of Transit

The Tokyo metropolitan is a dense entanglement of *karaoke* towers, apartments, alleyway Shinto shrines, shopping malls, and other buildings arranged in complex and occasionally obscure fashions. The city was rebuilt after the 1923 Kanto earthquake, which devastated the urban landscape, and again after the 1944-45 fire bombings of Tokyo during World War II. Walking down its city streets, one might traverse a path from the original planning of Edo (the former name of Tokyo when it functioned as the seat of the Tokugawa shogunate); or perhaps the street will conform to a new concrete reconstruction project from either of the major rebuilding efforts.

Despite a certain degree of convolution at the street level, Tokyo derives an immense sense of spatial logic and continuity from the *densha* (train) network that spans

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JR East is a private railway company and operates the majority of above-ground lines in the Tokyo metropolitan area. This is one of the maps handed out at stations across the city – the multi-colored loop in the center marks the Yamanote loop.
the entire metropolitan area. The construction of the major railways at the turn of the 20th century transformed Tokyo from a concentrated urban center into an expansive megapolis, in which a new middle class commuted from the booming suburbs to downtown workplaces each day (Freedman 2010:27). Tokyoites rely upon routes such as the iconic Yamanote line, which connects the major business and commercial districts of Tokyo (Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, Harajuku, etc.) in a railway circuit that loops continuously. From the widespread sale of key chains adorned with station names to the frequent discussions of transfers and station meet-ups among friends going out for an evening in Tokyo, the densha represents an indispensable framework for urban life in Tokyo.

Within the train cars, the relationship between commuters and the space of the commute is marked by the visibility and tension of hyper-proximity. Commuters in Tokyo are subjected to the infamous rituals of tsūkin rasshu, or “commuter rush-hour,” in which rush hour passengers compete for enough space to stand comfortably, and railway employees with white gloves shove commuters into train cars already packed at double or triple the official capacity. Another term for the overcapacity train rides is tsūkin jigoku, or “commuter hell.” (Freedman 2010:12). The dense space of the railway allowed for the construction of new social archetypes, such as the overworked sarariiman (see Chapter 4) and the schoolgirl, through which commuters perceived the pathologies and diverse roles of urban life. (Freedman 2010:31-33).

While the cultural space of the railway brings iconic representations of order and chaos to Tokyo, the densha also encourages individuals to relate to spatiality and temporality through the framework of the commute. Commuters like Akio rely on precise itineraries to take them between home, school, part-time jobs, and social engagements.
When Akio enters the commuter system, he engages what anthropologist Marc Augé terms the *non-place* of the railway. In his treatise *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Marc Augé notes that the sense of place once imagined in ethnography has eroded and given way to a new sense of place (Augé 1995). Individuals in “super-modern societies” live amongst shopping malls, airport terminals, highways, and railway systems, all of which elicit an entirely different phenomenal and cultural situation of “being in a place” (Augé 1995). The Tokyo railway system may be understood as a *non-place*, which becomes comprehensible via abstracted nodes and the procedural navigation of the itinerary as opposed to the sustained, sensory encounter we normally ascribe our sense of being in a place.

For the *jōkyaku* (passengers) of the railway, Tokyo’s sprawling metropolitan area transforms into a series of railway lines and stations, arranged as spans of commuting-length connected in abstract space. Upon entering the commute network, the *okyaku-sama* enters into a contractual relationship with the railway provider that governs their movement through the *non-place* of the commute (Augé 1995:101) Though the commuter is amongst others and occupying a very literal sense of space, they have, in a significant manner, purchased a “contractual solitude,” in which the railway operator is obligated to maintain their continuous commute by bringing them to their destination in a timely fashion (Augé 1995:94-95).

The occurrence of railway delays, far from breaching the contractual solitude of the *non-place*, occur as commute states that flicker across the nowheres of the railway network in a continuously disappearing present. Delays, disruptions, and accidents provide day-to-day challenges to the continuity of commute; at any given moment on the
railway, around a half-dozen delays appear on the train car’s status monitor\(^6\). The impact of these events ranges from a notification of a distant delay on a monitor to a train car pausing for an hour or more on the tracks. As soon as the delay is resolved, the trains continue again and begin making up time; perhaps an evening news program mentions the delay, or a few lines written in a newspaper. But for all practical purposes, the system of commute erases delays from its memory, and commuters are forced to adjust accordingly.

The principles of contractual solitude and abstracted spatiality that Augé outlines for *non-places* prove highly useful as we consider how commuters make sense of *jinshin jiko* delay events in the everyday railway commutes.

**Commuter Terminology of Jinshin Jiko**

For Tokyo commuters, train delays are an inevitable aspect of the railway commute. When riding in one of JR Japan’s train cars, commuters can watch the subsequent stops and next station name displayed on a monitor screen above the doors. Every ten seconds, a list of delays cycles on to the screen; the *kanji* for “earthquake” and “overcrowding” appear, and then flicker into English translations.

The term for one common delay, *jinshin jiko*, encourages commuters to prioritize a commuter-centric interpretation over all others. On a given day, perhaps one or two of the delays listed on the in-car monitor are the characters 人身事故, pronounced “jinshin jiko.” The English translation of the term is ambiguous – “human accident.” A “human

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\(^6\) Delays disproportionately appear along the Chūo line, which runs east-west through downtown Tokyo and through the suburbs. The line is notorious as a hotbed for *jinshin jiko*.
“Human accident” indicates that somewhere along the railway system, trains are stopped or delayed. The term itself does not indicate what physically occurred to cause the delay, or indicate the social actors involved; rather, it applies the adjective “human” to *jiko*, which denotes an occurrence or incident. *Jinshin jiko* is an intransitive verb, and as such, is not an action that an individual commits. The term is filled with such ambiguity that it also used (in government studies, for example) to denote automobile traffic accidents, which carry none of the same implications as railway *jinshin jiko* and affect Japanese commuters with far less frequency.

In the context of the railway, *jinshin jiko* often signifies that an individual committed suicide somewhere in the railway network. But though commuters like Akio and his friend attach the event of suicide to *jinshin jiko*, there persists a disconnect between the *jinshin jiko* delay and the knowledge that an individual has actually committed suicide. In addition to the euphemistic ambiguity of the term “human accident,” the term does not distinguish between the various positions through which commuters experience the delay event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jinshin jiko (人身事故)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Automobile</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delay/Overcrowding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witness <em>jinshin jiko</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Train halted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Collision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own car</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Positions of the Commuter in Relation to Jinshin Jiko. Dark shading indicates ability to see body. (Please note this not an ethnosemantic taxonomy but rather a visual analysis of positionality).*
The table above summarizes the positions in which the commuter encounters *jinshin jiko* as an event relevant to their commute. One determining factor for *jinshin jiko*’s non-exceptionality in relation to other delays is the rarity of the type of encounter that Akio’s friend recollected. The most distant position, as one might expect, is also the most common; reading “human accident” on a screen occurs between five and ten times each week.

For the everyday commuters like Akio, *jinshin jiko* does not necessarily elicit a unique reaction beyond the inconvenience it produces as a train delay:

Aiko: Considering train accidents… It’s really about the time, which is important. It doesn’t matter whether it’s late because of typhoon or whether a tree fell down or whether it’s jinshin jiko. What’s important is how much minute [ed.] is late, I guess.

The official response to *jinshin jiko* reinforces the contractual relationship between the commuter and the railway, as well as the enmeshment of the railway within urban social performance. In instances where commuters find themselves in the position most severely affected by *jinshin jiko* – waiting for an hour and a half in a stalled train car, for example – officials on the platforms and near the ticket counters will hand out delay certificates. Commuters can use these at school and work to prove that delay circumstances occurred beyond their reasonable capacity for anticipation; unfalteringly, schools and workplaces accept these certificates. Thus, the contract of the *okyaku-sama* does not simply cease to exist as she or he steps out of the station exit. Commute is enmeshed within the systems of work and education, as a primary aspect of membership within mainstream society in Tokyo.
Media Representations of the Railway Network

Newspaper narratives of *jinshin jiko* reinforce the manner by which the spatiality of the commute simultaneously explicates and obscures the event of train suicide. Newspapers remain a widely read medium in Japan; on any given train car, at least one *sarariman* will be pouring over the financial section or reading the results of their local soccer team’s games. In contrast to the rarity of references to train suicide in other cultural realms, the Japanese *shinbun* provide frequent articles after *jinshin jiko* delays, which are also reported online. Below is an article representative of a typical *shinbun* narrative of a train delay:

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『JR東日本によると、18日午後1時5分ごろ、JR上野駅（東京都台東区）構内の京浜東北線ホームで、女性が線路内に飛び込み、大宮行きの快速電車にはねられた。この影響で、京浜東北線は全線で約45分間にわたって運転を見合わせ、約1万4千人に影響した。』
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"According to JR East, at around 1:05 pm on the 18th, at JR Ueno Station (Taito) on the Keihin Tohoku line platform, a woman jumped into the railway line and was hit by an express train bound for Omiya. As a result, all trains on the Keihin Tōhoku Line suspended operations for approximately 45 minutes, affecting approximately 14,000 people" – (2010 Asahi Newspaper)

The news article quoted above is one of several dozen such articles published in Asahi Newspaper in 2010 that function as a kind of public service announcement. The article manages to represent an incident of *jinshin jiko* in a pithy two sentences. In the first, the incident is attributed to an exact time and location – in this case, a platform in Ueno station in the early afternoon. The accident appears to have occured alongside the platform, as opposed to along the stretch of rail between stations; this detail, and the perception it engenders, plays a huge role in the construction of railway suicide narratives, as we shall see later. The accident involved an *express* train, which move at
greater speeds than *local* trains and speed by smaller station’s platforms without stopping (though Ueno station is a significant enough traffic hub that virtually all incoming trains pause to discharge passengers.) The article specifies the gender of the individual and constructs them as both the grammatical agent (“she jumped into”) and object (“hit by train”), but provides no further details about the individual involved. The second sentence quantifies the effect of the delay in both people in minutes.

In the absence of information and text that addresses the positionality of the suicide victim in greater detail, the Asahi article and others of its type are, in a sense, the most direct representations of *jinshin jiko* accidents, in that they convey the particulars of accidents. At the same time, their intensely constrained and formulaic style leaves only trace evidence of the event as an embodied reality of an individual. No attempt is made to narrate the life and experiences of the deceased individual, nor does the article gesture towards the human toll of the incident beyond the calculated effect on other commuters. The emphasis is on the specific moment and its enmeshment within the commute network.

What kind of relationship do commuters have with delay events that occur within a *non-place* like the railway? In the United States, families of those who have died at an intersection or off-ramp occasionally install a small cross memorial near the site of the collision. The monument serves the interesting function of disrupting the sweeping continuity of the roadway, provoking the onlooker to “stop and reflect” at the event that happened – or, as is more often the case, to reflect for a fleeting moment. Such a disruption is inconceivable in the synchronous space of the Tokyo railway, where events leave no lasting trace. Once workers address the site of the physical collision, minor
delays continue to ripple outwards through the various train lines affected. But after delays cease and the trains return to the typical timetable, the platform, station, and indeed the entire railway network express no residual memory of the collision; a railway crew can clean even the most violent collision between a human being and a train in 1.5 hours or less (Otake 2006). The Asahii article shows how the terminology of the railway non-place actually obfuscates the incident as the death of an individual, emphasizing, instead, the railway network and the continuity of the commute.

Upon discussing this idea of train suicide as unremarkable or unspectacular, one of my informants mentioned that, in addition to brief articles in nihon no shinbun, she would often read about jinshin jiko in the scrolling ticker at the bottom of cable news shows. Instead of warranting a segment in the news cycle, train suicide becomes relegated to a space it shares with weather updates and other minor information. The ticker space is perhaps the extreme example of train suicide as pure transit information to be consumed and adjusted for in the context of the commuter’s practice of their everyday commute.

**Train-car Continuity: Social Shrouding of the Jinshin Jiko Delay**

Along with the spatiality of the train system, the individual practices and interactions between commuters on the train both formulate and indicate the nature of events that occur in transit. What is most striking in the investigation into behavior on the train car is the dramatic resistance to acknowledging events that may disrupt the continuity of commute and demand that Japanese individuals ‘emerge’ from the depersonalized and disembodied space of the train. Here, I draw upon personal
observations and my conversations with the young commuter Jiro to demonstrate how through the “contractual solitude” of the train car, commuters re-produce the continuity of the train car space, despite the occasionally violent and disturbing attempts to disrupt that continuity.

As I rode the Keihin-Tohoku line each morning from my home eki towards the stations at the western edge of the metropolitan core, I found people doing the same things in various combinations. The majority of passengers had their ketai (cell phones) flipped open and were in the process of mailing a friend, or perhaps watching television. A few salarymen would be lost in pocket-sized novels or manga, the cover concealed by a privacy wrap. Cables snaked from iPod to earbuds, people watched looping digital screens advertising McDonalds and reporting the weather.

The many means of distraction may not be particularly surprising, given Japan’s reputation as an innovator of digital technology. But we should avoid assuming that media is consumed in the same manner across all countries that encounter it; indeed, in Japan, the term uwa no sora, or “having one’s head in the clouds,” has a resonant cultural implication for the environment of the train-car, in which commuters are immersed in the aloof elsewherees of digital media. When the trains are at their busiest, the vast majority of passengers in the crowd retreat into uwa no sora.

The elsewhere of the train – to be uwa no sora – is not merely a type of distraction, but gestures towards the peculiar spell of the continuous commute, in which the commuter never needs to ‘emerge’ as an individual actor. One extreme example of practices of detachment in the train car is the phenomenon of chikkan, or ‘pervert.’ The chikkan is imagined as younger or middle-aged man who gains sexual pleasure out of
groping female passengers anonymously. A loud declaration of “chikkan!” is enough to cause the offending individual to stop in embarrassment and attempt to flee into anonymity; it is enough, too, to create a commotion on a train-car and cause attention to be brought to an uncomfortable point of focus. Despite the effectiveness of the phrase, why are there countless stories of groping taking place without response, even with several witnesses and, on occasion, acts of intensely sexual and invasive nature? When instructing a group of foreign students about how to handle the incidences, a Japanese professor mentioned the option of legal recourse reluctantly, stating that “keep in mind you may never be able to prove what has happened, and it might be worse to try.”

While my personal reaction towards this sentiment was distaste at the apparent cynicism and disregard for others, Jiro helped me better understand the discomfort and social scrutiny of the train car. Jiro agreed to meet me in the early afternoon, after his shift at a coin-gambling parlor elsewhere in Tokyo ended. Unlike many of his peers, Jiro only attended school part-time and worked multiple ‘baito jobs to support his studies. The trains in Japan brought him between jobs, classes, impromptu jam sessions, and meet-ups like the one we conducted in late spring.

As a male, Jiro experienced a lower risk of being the target of a chikkan groping. What bothered Jiro in crowded train cars, however, was the threat of being mistaken for a chikkan.

Jiro: It’s not only girls’ problem, it’s men’s problem, right? Because I’m scared of this. Everyday, it’s uncomfortable.

For Jiro, the possibility of being misidentified on the train constituted an essential aspect of the uncomfortable space of the train-car. It’s significant to note that Jiro
volunteered his anxiety with a *chikkan* accusation amidst our questioning of the delayed train car. Though Jiro had trouble articulating some of his thoughts about *chikkan* in English, he wrote down the name of a film called *Soredemo boku wa yattenai*, or “I Just Didn’t Do It!” The film follows a young male commuter as he is wrongfully accused of groping a woman on the train, and must navigate the notoriously difficult Japanese criminal legal system. Jiro described the film as a realistic portrayal of life on the train car, and one that caused his fears of misidentification to intensify.

Though the safety and well-being of passengers on the train are threatened by the potential for *chikkan* its recognition as an act involving specific social actors threatens something even more essential to the experience of commute: the continuity won through disembodiment and detachment. To emerge as a whistleblower goes against the paradoxical social context of the train, in which the confluence and interaction of countless individuals coexists with a definitively asocial mode of being. We should not mistake this reluctance with callousness or lack of empathy; rather, it one of the manners by which the space of the train becomes livable and comprehensible through a kind of willful objectification of one’s own body. The reluctance to respond to graphic sexual acts in the train car draws attention to the unique phenomenal context of the train car, and its relationship to events which, in other cultural contexts, would seem to elicit far more acute and direct responses.

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On March 20, 1995, members of the Aum cult punctured bags of poisonous sarin with sharpened umbrella tips on the floors of subways across Tokyo, killing thirteen and injuring thousands. The popular novelist Haruki Murakami was one of many Japanese who responded to the 1995 Aum Subway bombings with a turn to cultural introspection. His book, *Underground*, collects interviews with everyday commuters caught up in the chaos of the ‘bombing.’ These interviews constitute one of the most vivid ethnographic portraits of the space of the commute both within mundane everyday life and under
As Japanese people maneuver the trying space of the train car, they constitute and re-produce a contractual solitude via cultural determined practices of participation and disengagement. Again, I must stress that this solitude is not borne of apathy or desensitization. Rather, the solitude is established and reinforced in a context of continuous challenge, whether in the form of uncomfortable or sexually violating physical contact or the prolonged and ambiguous delay of the stalled train awaiting the resumption of service after a *jinshin jiko*.

**Conclusion**

The social unease with acknowledging an event on the train, the linguistic indeterminacy of the commuter delay, and the amnesiac spatiality of the railway network all contribute to the shrouding of train suicide. The resultant event of *jinshin jiko* is enmeshed within the cultural space of the commute. While this enmeshment by no means precludes commuters from speaking meaningfully about train suicide, it constraints and mediates such conversations, as we will explore in subsequent chapters.
Chapter 3: *Meiwaku* and Calculations of Inconvenience

What constitutes a good death? In Japan, among other countries of the world, the answer is increasingly ambivalent. In her study of the Good Death in Japan, anthropologist Susan Orpett Long argues that vast transformations in technological and social spheres are generating new *scripts* by which individuals imbue death with meaning. Traditional ideals continue to be relevant to everyday life and death, but not as totalizing determinants of value. Rather, they offer material for the struggle of the bereaved and the public alike to comprehend death and their relationship to it. Small talk, official policies, popular culture, and an entire spectrum of other cultural practices all interact in the production of the social meaning of death, whose locus is not a single image or interpretation but a social process of everyday life.

One such practice that frequently arises in casual conversation is the fining of the family after a *jinshin jiko* suicide. In a well-known policy, Japan Rail routinely charges the bereaved family 150 million yen ($2 million) or higher -- a financially devastating sum of money that JR bills as the total cost of the delay for the company and commuters. Though it is unclear whether most or any families actually pay the bill, the gesture of fining appears to carry a heavy symbolic weight, particularly in a country that prioritizes social duty and respectability. As I spoke with my informants, I realized that the *jinshin jiko* fines communicated something essential about the quality and meaning of a train suicide death.

I found that my informants described *jinshin jiko* as a Bad Death, utilizing a critique quite consistent with Long’s work. In particular, they critiqued the act of train
suicide for producing meiwaku, or inconveniencing and burdening others. The discourse on the fining of families of victims enables everyday commuters to explain train suicide as an individual creating massive burden for everyday citizens, ignoring the cultural expectations of the Good Death in favor of selfish self-expression. A constellation of related cultural practices, such as what I term the “calculation of inconvenience” in newspaper representations of jinshin jiko, contribute to what I term the *script of jinshin jiko as meiwaku*. I argue that through the *script of jinshin jiko as meiwaku*, abstract quantifications of social burden provide the means for commuters to position themselves in relation to the subject of jinshin jiko, who is conceived of as an asocial transgressor.

**Meiwaku on the Train**

Every so often, during his train routes home in the afternoon, Akio hears a computerized voice announce that the emergency break is being applied. In a deceleration swift enough to cause passengers to sway in unison, but smooth enough to prevent anyone from tumbling onto the floor, the train car comes to a halt. Emergency stops occur in a variety of situations. Akio has stood in cars of strangers soaked from a rainstorm; waited an hour and a half while the station platform stood within sight; and waited for a few brief moments in delays that originate in the distant elsewhere of the railway network.

While the circumstances producing these delays remain ambiguous for commuters, for reasons we have discussed elsewhere, a common thread that runs through these everyday encounters is annoyance. Despite the consistency of minor and the occasional major delays, commuters expect the train system to move tightly on schedule.
In a colorful example of the range of annoyance expressed on the trains, Akio describes how *sarariiman* will occasionally shout back at the electronic voice announcing a delay, and continue to monologue complaints and expletives into an otherwise silent car. Other commuters will begin yelling at the first employee they see.

M: [How do you react to these outbursts?]
A: Usually I think, whoa, drop it, kind of stuff. Like it won’t help, shouting at other people. At the same time, I do feel the understanding of the urge to shout at other people. Because like, this is a very rare case, but one time the train stopped like about, like it was just before the Shinjuku station and the train stop about, I don’t know, twenty meters or fifty meters away from the station. And it didn’t go, because another train was in. And I was really tired that day, and I also wanted to go to the bathroom badly. And I’m stuck on the train, and I can’t go to the bathroom. And I really felt really irritated about the stuff. Of course, I never shouted at the speaker or anything because it won’t help. But I kind of understand that urge, I guess.

What’s most curious about Akio’s empathy for the outraged *sarariiman* is not that he, too, experiences agitation. Rather, it’s the tension that Akio experiences between two possible relationships to the experience of the delay. The first is what I have previously termed the “denial of the event,” in which a basic commitment to the continuity of the commute takes precedence over reactions to particular events. Akio understands that no action he could take in this situation could alter the unfortunate and burdensome experience of being stuck on the train car. The second, and perhaps complementary stance is expressed in the *sarariiman*’s apparently irrational urge to relate to annoyance as something someone else has created for him, and to which he can respond to in direct and interpersonal terms (i.e. not in terms of the non-place of commute).

It’s important to make this distinction at the level of banal, everyday annoyance, which may appear to be a generalized and inevitable product of commuter networks worldwide. The affective structure of annoyance arises out of a particular Japanese
understanding of what it is to be burdened or to burden another, or to create *meiwaku*. *Meiwaku* implies a failure of social reciprocity and a violation of normative social conduct. The outraged *sarariiman* responds to his experience of *meiwaku* by vocalizing it to others (or imagined others) and demanding accountability.

This response offers a crucial context for the discourse of *jinshin jiko* as *meiwaku* that, far from being contained to outbursts and internal monologues, is an essential aspect of casual conversations about *jinshin jiko* that occur off the train. In these conversations, the *meiwaku* that the commuter experiences forms the basis for the critical evaluation of *jinshin jiko* as an act of suicide:

Akio: Like, it’s – so like, when we were in high school, we often discussed like, jinshin jiko is so, I don’t know, uh, I can’t find the English word, but meiwaku.

M: Meiwaku? And what do you mean by that?

A: Meiwaku. That’s the phrase we use. It’s… uhh… annoying? Troublesome? Inconvenient? It gives somebody a pain, I guess. Like, it’s really troublesome for everybody because it delays the train and messes up people’s schedule. And it also gives trouble to the family left behind. They have to, you know, actually pay that huge amount of money because of the people who actually got kill[ed]. So, yeah, so that’s the way I think general Japanese young people see jinshin jiko. It’s very troublesome. I think it’s one of the worst ways of killing yourself. Like, there’s so many other ways you can kill yourself, and you just involved so many people.

M: … When and where and with who would you discuss that? With your friends?

A: It’s usually when the train was late, you know. And if you were with a friend, you would discuss it on the train. And for, for example, if I was late to school because of jinshin jiko, or if some friend was late for jinshin jiko, you usually tell the friends why you were late. And they say, oh it was a jinshin jiko. And I’m like, oh, that’s so horrible, that’s troublesome. And they’re like, it does no good for anybody, and I don’t know why people to do that. It comes –not out of the blue, but it’s just one of the casual topics of being late, you know.

In contrast to the ambiguous and often unknowable circumstances that produce delays on the train, Akio utilizes *meiwaku* in conversations with his peers to describe the
act of suicide and its consequences as a form of death. Akio groups the annoyance of the delayed commuter and the fining of the bereaved family together as social practices that produce *meiwaku* – or rather, ways that the suicide victim creates burden for others. For Akio, the fact that *jinshin jiko* involves a large amount of people, and creates burden for them, means that *jinshin jiko* is an extremely bad form of death, even amongst other methods of suicide.

Jiro also evoked *meiwaku* when describing the act of *jinshin jiko*:

Jiro: I think the suicide people are a bit selfish. They know about that, if I jump on the Chuo line, the Chuo line will be late. They know that, right? And also, lots of *meiwaku*… it’s like annoyance. It sucks. Because they, the Chuo line, there are so many people. So he is kind of, suicide person’s fault, right?

Like Akio, Jiro cites the temporal and social cost of the *jinshin jiko* delay as evidence that it is a selfish and negative act. The critique that the two expressed in our conversations pivots on their use of the concept of *meiwaku*, which, though encompassing the affective state of annoyance, relies upon a social exchange and valuation that overspills the experience of the commute. In the next section, I investigate the cultural notion of *meiwaku* and place it within the context of death and dying in Japan. I also examine how the sociality evoked in the critique of *jinshin jiko* as a bad death relates to the sociality experienced on the train.

**Good Death, Bad Death**

In the 1990s and 2000s, anthropologist Susan Orpett Long studied the emerging cultural spaces of hospices in Japan. Her observations about the transforming values and practices of death and dying, or what she terms scripts of dying, provide a cultural and
critical background through which we can better understand the relationship between *meiwaku* and *jinshin jiko*. In this section, I focus my attention on (1) the Good Death, (2) critique of *jinshin jiko* as Bad Death

*The Good Death*

What kind of value do Japanese individuals assign to death? While that question may be considered along the philosophical axis of perception of an afterlife, metaphysical nature of the soul, etc, no clear answer would likely be distilled from the muddled religious and philosophical context of Japanese culture, which draws upon Shinto, Christian, and Buddhist influences in a complex and idiosyncratic manner.

Another way of asking about value is to pursue the forms of death themselves, or the perceptions of those forms. What manners of dying are considered more ideal than others, and what characteristics do they share? Long identifies *pokkuri* and *rosui* as the two archetypal forms of dying (Long 2001:272-273). An individual who experiences *pokkuri* dies suddenly, and perhaps unexpectedly, as with a sudden heart attack. *Rosui*, by contrast, evokes the gradual decline of health in old age. With *rosui*, the individual has time to put her affairs in order and express gratitude towards their family, but knows, too, that they are placing a burden upon the family for an extended period of time. The sudden death of *pokkuri* eschews the burden of a long period of decline, but hastens or eliminates the transition to death for the family and the dying individual (Long 2001:273). While the two forms of death appear opposed, Long argues that they share a common set of emphases: the ideal of peaceful transition over painful; dying in the presence of family; and, critical to our investigation, avoidance of being a burdensome (Long 2001:273).
Within the context of the family, formal elements of death allow the dying individual and their loved ones to demonstrate that social roles and reciprocity have been performed well, and that they have attained a Good Death. For instance, for many Japanese, the presence of a “peaceful face” on the departed indicates that the family has succeeded in preventing excessive pain for their loved one (Long 2001:273). The literal presence of the family at the bedside is another practice through which the family demonstrates and enacts their social duty. The Good Death is not reducible to the forms of death themselves, but rather, is a collection of ideals that guides the performance of death and imbues it with value.

Long uses the concept of a “script” of death to demonstrate how sets of actions and practices undertaken by the dying individual and their families attain value and meaning in relationship to the ideals of the Good Death. One interesting theoretical ambiguity of scripts of death, for our purpose, is that they are utilized not only by the dying individual and their family, but also in wider cultural discourse to mark death with value. The social meaning of the death differs from the meaning that death holds to one self (Long 2001:280). The script of dying engages the formal elements of death that are specific to the individual dying, and its content emphasizes the dying individual’s positionality in relation to others; but the script itself is also read by a wider social audience without access to the deceased individual’s inner reasoning, and read in a fashion specific to their own cultural context.

When we apply the concepts of the Good Death and scripts of dying to the context of contemporary Japan, as Long has done, we discover that the production of meaningful death, for any social actor, is a complex and ambiguous process. As a
researcher of bioethics and end-of-life decisions, Long emphasizes the manner by which the dying navigate death in a medicalized context that alters the dimensions of sociality and burden drastically. The implicit challenge in these navigations is to avoid a script that fails to attain social readership as Good Death, or becomes judged as a Bad Death. But outside of the context of hospice care, a spectrum of other forms of death exist, and along with them, scripts of intentionality and value.

*Train Suicide as Bad Death*

One way to re-approach the conception of Japan as being “culturally permissive” of suicide is to complicate the homogenization of suicide into one type of act. There are a variety of methods that individuals use to commit suicide, which occur in various social contexts. For instance, the inhalation of hydrogen sulphide gas is a suicide method that has become popular in recent years via online discussion boards (Wei and Chua 2008:435). Individuals who choose to die via toxic inhalation avoid damaging their bodies externally, and may still be perceived as having made a peaceful and relatively painless transition to death. The process of procuring a brick and securing an enclosed space ensures a degree of forethought and meditation before the act, allowing time to leave a note and set legal affairs into order. In the absence of a totalizing condemnation of suicide in discourses of dying, particular forms of suicide may continue to evoke the ideal elements of the Good Death more than others.

Let’s return for a moment to Akio’s earlier declaration that railway suicide “is one of the worst ways of killing yourself.” Not only does railway suicide, as a form of death, fail to attain the criteria of the Good Death; it emphatically negates them. While rail
suicide maps loosely onto the ideal of *pokkuri* as a sudden event, its tremendous, disfiguring violence is the antithesis of a peaceful and painless transition to death. The *meiwaku* that train suicide produces is considerable and extensive; in lieu of an exchange of loving reciprocity between family members, train suicide occurs in the social context of innumerable commuters.

In our conversation, Akio emphasized the *meiwaku* of *jinshin jiko* as the basis of his assessment. At no point does he engage the visceral reality of train suicide directly, by, for instance, referencing the violent disfigurement of *jinshin jiko* as part of what makes it a Bad Death. His focus is on the aspects of *jinshin jiko* that are comprehensible to him -- the experience of the delays as burdensome, but also, a perception of the “cost” of train delays and the burden such a cost creates for the family of the departed.

Akio evaluates train suicide as a chosen method, or a *script* with which the suicidal individual acts. That is to say, though the content of the script refers to an individual’s chosen course of action and its consequences, Akio reads it through his positionality as a non-family member, a member of Japanese society, and as a commuter. What practices and policies enable the commuter readership of *jinshin jiko* as a script of death?

**Calculating Meiwaku at the Public Scale**

A significant portion of the representations of *jinshin jiko* in newspapers is devoted to calculations of inconvenience. On January 22nd, 2011, Asahi published an announcement entitled, “Morning *Jinshin Jiko* on the Yamanote Line Affects 49,000 People (朝の山手線で人身事故、4万9千人に影響)” The article read:

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At around 7:10 am on January 22 at JR Shinjuku Station in Tokyo’s Shinjuku Ward, a man who is thought to have jumped from the platform was hit by an 11-car train on the outer ring of the Yamanote Line and died. The accident postponed the operation of the Yamanote Line until 8:20 am, affecting approximately 49,000 people and also causing some delays on the Saikyo Line. According to Shinjuku police, the individual was in their 30s. (2011 Asahi)

In the previous chapter, I discussed how ultra-brief media representations like this article narrate events within the spatiality and terminology of the commute. Here, we can observe how these media representations calculate the “effect” of the delay in human terms, which is subsequently highlighted in the title of the article. In such articles, the number affected is typically in the tens of thousands; in other words, it is well beyond the human scale of friends and families. The calculation of inconvenience reinforces the understanding of jinshin jiko as vastly antisocial and burdensome act.

The social impact of this calculation becomes far more profound when we consider it in conjunction with the practice of fining. In a well-known policy, Japan Rail often bills the family of the bereaved for an amount meant to represent the total financial impact on all affected commuters (Prideaux 2006). My informants agreed that the fines could easily exceed 100 million yen or more, or $1-2 million USD.

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8 Every informant whom I spoke with confirmed the existence and enormity of fines. Additionally, many of my casual conversations about jinshin jiko provoked an acquaintance to volunteer a report of the fines. At the time of writing, however, I was unable to collect any verifiable primary source documents that verified the practice of fining. As a consequence, I approach fining in this section in terms of the social perception of fines rather than through an analysis of company policy or applicable law.
Though it is unclear under what circumstances the railway companies actually collect the funds they bill for, the sole threat of fining and urban legends that threat engenders affects how everyday commuters ascribe value to the act of train suicide. When Akio listed the various ways in which train suicide produces massive *meiwaku* earlier, he emphasized the fines as a primary consequence:

Akio: They have to, you know, actually pay that huge amount of money because of the people who actually got kill[ed].

One curious aspect of Akio’s narration is that he does not vilify the train company for expecting such a massive sum of money from a family in grief and bereavement. Instead, he views the policy of fining as part of the consequences that the act of train suicide inherently brings; in other words, the fines do not merely symbolize or suggest *meiwaku*, but are an aspect of the burden of train suicide, as a perceived consequence that makes life more difficult for the family left behind.

The calculated *meiwaku* of *jinshin jiko* differs, in some critical ways, from the negotiation of *meiwaku* in death at the scales of individuals and families. In Long’s description of death in the hospice, the conflict of *meiwaku* is an attempt by the dying individual not to place too much burden upon others. But in the context of the commute in metropolitan Tokyo, an interpersonal exchange is beyond the reach of the everyday commuter. The commuter only has access to the burden and inconvenience they themselves feel, as commuters. But the calculation of *meiwaku* confronts commuters with the supposed social effect of a *jinshin jiko* delay. It doesn’t humanize the incident; to the contrary, it makes an ambiguous event intelligible by evoking the massive scale of the commute and public death.
Contesting the Commute: Defiant Meiwaku in Collective Society

The calculated inconvenience of *jinshin jiko* reproduces a limited reading of the confrontation between the actor and the system of the commute. Figures like tens of thousands of delayed or hundreds of millions of yen underscore the popular perception that the individual has burdened society through a selfish act. But why might an individual act selfishly? What are the implications of a *meiwaku* act when that act is chosen deliberately?

In the homogeneity of urban Tokyo, *jinshin jiko* may be a desperate attempt to be noticed as an individual. This was how Mariko learned to read acts of train suicide after moving to Tokyo after middle school. I met with Mariko at the recommendation of a university anthropology professor. Mariko was a petite girl who thought carefully, and often spoke with a hint of sarcasm. When Mariko left Miami for Japan and began commuting across Tokyo to school each day, she discovered that *jinshin jiko* delays occurred several times a week. At first, she struggled to understand how train suicide could be part of her peers’ everyday lives.

Mariko: Oh, when I first about it, like, was again was in freshmen, so like first year, when I got to Tokyo. Like, I didn’t know what it was in the beginning. I just thought it was some technical problems with the train system and everything. But then I had a friend explain to me that somebody jumped, jumps into the rail and, you know, it’s got to be stopped. So when I first heard that, I was in shock. Do people actually do that, you know. But then, yeah, at the same time kind of grossed out, I guess, by the thought of people getting run over.

Over the years, Mariko’s initial impression of the violence of *jinshin jiko* faded. When I asked her what a *jinshin jiko* delay is like today, as a twenty-year old college student, she responded:
Mariko: ...Even while the train is stopping, nobody actually talks about it. ‘Cause it’s like, it’s part of your daily life. It like, it happens so often, it’s not a big deal anymore, you know? Those little stops, the little delays? It’s like nothing. So, people are just like there, oh, again, the train stops again. Don’t even talk about it. It moves again, and it’s like, ‘Yay, it’s moving. Just keep on with our lives.’ You know?

For Mariko, the delay event now acquires meaning through vocabulary of the commute and the commuter delay, rather than the starkness of “people getting run over.” Jinshin jiko is banal and everyday, even though for her, it was once violent and disturbing. As we spoke, I came to better understand Mariko’s everyday encounter with train suicide in these commuter-centric terms, as an act that was shrouded for her.

In the context of her acquired reading of jinshin jiko as a commuter event, however, Mariko continues to wonder and speculate as to why jinshin jiko occurs, and for what reason such an inconvenient act is chosen:

Mariko: ...And I was just like wondering why do people do that, you know? Why do people choose to commit suicide in this form rather than all of these other forms of committing suicide, you know what I mean? It just like, it just involved so many people, you know...

M.S.: Could you say why people choose [suicide by jinshin jiko]?

Mariko: I don’t know. Well, I guess, people would choose to choose that form if they want their death to be noticed by a lot of people. Because if you just hang yourself, for instance, in a room, by yourself, then nobody would know that you were dead, and that you were having such a hard time that you had to commit suicide. But then, if you do choose to, choose a form of jumping into a train, then you’d have all these people knowing that you just died and then even thinking about, you know, at least just for a moment, thinking about you. You know. So I guess, in a sense... less lonely?

Mariko speculates that the individual who chooses the meiwaku form of death of train suicide intends to bring society to a halt. While other forms of suicide may fit neatly into cultural models of ideal ways to die, or might be performed in the unseen peripheries of a society, train suicide is unique in its ability to draw mass attention on the individual.
in a discontinuous act amidst the system of the commute. Train suicide implicates the everyday Tokyoite in a confrontation with death, albeit a confrontation mediated and constrained by the system of commute.

Mariko’s reading of deliberate *meiwaku* utilizes an empathetic vocabulary. It perceives suffering in an individual who wants only “to be noticed” as opposed to the social antagonist who burdens their families and inconveniences others. It also is a sentiment expressed in contrast to the empowered structures of the newspaper, the private railway company, and the television channel, all of which exclusively represent the *meiwaku* of *jinshin jiko* as a failure and a burden. In her reading of *meiwaku*, Mariko signals that an individualistic act might be a response to the normative collectivity of the commute:

M.S.: Why people would choose that? Like, among all possible forms, like why that, in the public transit system, you know?
M: Maybe salaryman, like in Japan, you know, like in general. You know how they like fit, like, they’re just a part of one big society, like, company, you know. And they probably don’t feel that they’re noticed in their daily life. They’re just like a part of this big crowd, all dressed in their uniforms, suits. They probably don’t feel noticed as an individual. So maybe, by doing this, they’d be noticed as one person, and not just one part of the whole big group.

To what extent do commuters like Mariko perceive the act of *jinshin jiko* as a political act? To what extent is the halting of the train commute via one’s own body an attempt to destroy, symbolically or literally, one of the major cultural spaces of urban life in Tokyo? Despite the empathy that Mariko extends towards the individual acting out against society, she is simultaneously reluctant to grant *jinshin jiko* the status of an act of violent disruption. This became clear through a comment Mariko made after our initial meeting with the anthropology professor who introduced Mariko and myself. I had
spoken to the professor briefly about his thoughts about *jinshin jiko*, which he believed to be a violent protest against mainstream society. Mariko returned to this topic over the course of our conversation:

Mariko: Yeah. I want to ask you if you think jinshin jiko is the sort of thing that people plan ahead of time to do. Like, I’m going to jump at this station at this time…. I don’t feel like it’s something really planned. Because if it’s planned, it’s like violent, like how [our professor] put it. But then, I don’t know if people plan it out that carefully, for *jinshin jiko*. They’re just there, and they just like, all of a sudden, get sick and tired of everything, and just do it.

In this critical passage, Mariko establishes the limits of interpreting deliberate *meiwaku* as a deliberate violence against society. In one sense, Mariko, Akio, and other informants read the *meiwaku* of *jinshin jiko* as an inevitable consequence of train suicide, one that should be immediately evident to the commuter who selects such an act, and for which the suicide victim should be held accountable. When considering the potential for *meiwaku* to be a kind of political weapon of protest wielded against normative society, however, the reading of *meiwaku* as deliberate begins to break down. Mariko’s narrative of impulsivity draws upon competing narratives of exhaustive and spontaneous suicide, which we will discuss in earnest in the subsequent section. But it also expresses the concept that *meiwaku* is most readily understood by commuters in the context of the commute and the commuting space, and most vaguely understood in terms of the agency of the suicidal actor of *jinshin jiko*, who is shrouded in the commuter delay event.

**Conclusion**

The thorough integration of railway policy, newspaper practices, and everyday evaluations demonstrates the cultural resonance of the script of *jinshin jiko as meiwaku.*
Meiwaku, as a structure of affect, runs deeper than the exasperation of the train car would appear to suggest. Through the script of jinshin jiko as meiwaku, everyday commuters utilize their experiences of annoyance and frustration in order to imbue the act of train suicide with the value judgment of a Bad Death. By marking the perceived actor behind train suicide as a transgressor of cultural values and norms, commuters reinforce the legitimacy of the cultural space of the commute. The official policies and representational strategies of calculating meiwaku further encourage the everyday commuter to read the script of train suicide as a Bad Death, and in doing so, grant it determinable value as a form of death. We might say that through the shroud of public death, commuters may assemble a meaningful valuation of train suicide that draws upon commuter-centric experiences rather than interpersonal connections at the human scale.

The script of meiwaku suggests that somebody has prioritized their experience as an individual above their social obligations towards others. As such, it supports readings like Mariko’s that the individual who commits jinshin jiko wants to be noticed by society and create a situation to disrupt the continuity of the commute. But the reading of that meiwaku as being mobilized by a desire for political symbolism or radical violence remains unclear to the everyday commuter, whose perception of the commuter event arrives via the continuous filter of the commute.

Commuters construct and utilize a script of train suicide as a form of dying that presumes a knowledge of consequences and a certain kind of decision. But where does such a script come from? In the final section, I will examine how commuters’ perceptions of the agency and other aspects of dying in train suicide take form from contemporary medicolegal discourses, which are in a state of turmoil and transition.
Chapter 4: Karô-jisatsu and Emerging Scripts of Depressive Suicide

How can train suicide be both a “bad decision” and “accidental”? The popular understanding of jinshin jiko as a burdensome and poor decision – the focus of the preceding chapter – coexists with emerging explanatory models for train suicide that are not always logically compatible with one another. Nonetheless, narratives of train suicide as a depressive, spontaneous event figured prominently into the ways in which my informants explained jinshin jiko events.

How do the ongoing conversations about the social role of the worker, depression, and suicide as a fatigued and desperate death help everyday commuters imbue jinshin jiko with meaning? In this chapter, I seek the origins of depressive scripts of suicide and examine their implications. In the early 21st century, the popular explanations and conversations surrounding suicide in Japan are unlike those of only a generation ago. At the center of these discursive shifts is the rising influence of depression as an explanatory model for suicidal behavior. The broadening cultural awareness of karôshi, or death-by-overwork, has provided an important discursive space for the re-conceptualization of social and psychological strain, and their relationship to acts of suicide, in Japanese society.

I first look at the historical development of the sarariiman archetype as an overworked and beleaguered figure of the commute, and then consider the sarariiman within the discursive formation of death-by-overwork and suicide-by-overwork. While jinshin jiko is too ambiguous an event for commuters to subsume wholly within the medicolegal framework of karôshi, I describe how the script of jinshin jiko as depressive suicide takes form through a critical vocabulary for the sarariiman and emerging forms
of psychological knowledge. I argue that through the script of *jinshin jiko as depressive suicide*, commuters are transforming the everyday encounter with train suicide into a space to apply and negotiate the complex and shifting discourses on suicide, overwork, and social responsibility in contemporary Tokyo.

**The Sarariiman**

“You’ve got to work really long hour[s]. Your wife doesn’t like you. Your kids don’t even know you.”

“They seem always tired. They seem always... sitting in a chair. Either reading a book – reading an academic book, or a really difficult novel, or they’re falling asleep. Really sound asleep. They really look tired.” – Haruki

As a child, Haruki had no doubt that he would grow up to be a *sarariiman*. He joined “all of the other Japanese kids” in assuming that his life would lead to a salaried job in an office. When I met twenty-year old Haruki in the smoky basement of a Shinjuku café, however, it was clear that much had changed since his elementary school days. Haruki sat across from me wearing a black death-metal t-shirt, his build on the stocky side and with a thoughtful, somewhat mischievous expression on his face. By his own admittance, Haruki had “never fully integrated into Japanese society,” despite growing up and spending his entire life in Tokyo. Now, Haruki is completing an undergraduate degree in the liberal arts; he follows American pop-culture and dreams of landing a job in California.

Haruki is part of a generation of young middle- and upper-class people in Japan who, for one reason or another, are deviating from the expected process of socialization: high school student, college student, *sarariiman*. Among the emerging archetypes that subvert the expected pathway to social integration are *parasaito singoru*, or twenty-somethings who delay the transition to salaried employment by living at home and
earning a disposable income via part-time positions (Zielenziger 2006:161). At the same time, transformations are occurring in the meaning and value that Japanese society places upon work. Though people continue to exert themselves to incredible lengths in the workforce, individuals like Haruki now read the *sarariiman* as a kind of misguided hero. As Haruki puts it, *sarariiman* are “brave,” but for the wrong reasons.

Haruki’s early impression of *sarariiman* as an inevitable social role draws upon the profound importance of salaried employment in the social structure of Japan. During the Meiji restoration, a period that lasted from 1868 until World War I, Japan transformed itself into an industrial superpower with a rising presence on the international stage. The capital city of Tokyo evolved into a sprawling metropolitan area, one bustling with economic opportunity and united by an expanding network of commuter trains that reached far into the emerging suburbs. Economic opportunities in the workforce also expanded – new bureaucrats were needed to manage urban affairs, and a spectrum of businesses appeared with offices to staff (Freedman 2002:25). Within this convergence of transforming social structures and spaces, the *sarariiman* emerged:

“The salaryman epitomized this new pursuit of personal success and was often depicted as a worker who commuted from his home in the suburbs to his office in the center of Tokyo and who supported his wife and children by his wages… these men usually dressed in Western business attire and were frequently sighted walking to their offices or to the modern mass transport vehicles that would take them there” (Freedman 2002:25)
The image of the *sarariiman* represented an amalgam of values, such as social duty and strong work ethic, which have long played a significant role in public life in urban Japan. At the same time, the *sarariiman* was a distinctly modern performance, one inextricable from the pragmatic and performative cultural space of the commuter train. Before the establishment of the commuter rail system, individuals of different socioeconomic standing seldom occupied the same spaces in public. With the advent of the train, diverse individuals were brought into hyper-proximity with one another for the first time. The train cars served as a microcosm of society, in which the commuter came into contact with the spectrum of social roles that make up society (Freedman 2002:26).

Though Haruki learned about workers growing up, it was in the cultural space of the commute that he witnessed “real-life *sarariiman*.“ Haruki’s father was a lawyer who owned his own practice, and thus never needed to commute into a distant Tokyo office. It wasn’t until he began commuting to a private middle school in downtown Tokyo that Haruki spent considerable time in close confines with *sarariiman*. He noticed how tired the workers around him appeared. He described their stress and exhaustion as constantly visible. When I asked Haruki what kind of impression the *sarariiman* left him with, he responded:

Haruki: I remember when this one salaryman was talking to the wall [on a train]. He was literally having squabble with the wall, having words. ... He was obviously suffering from social stress… he was talking to the wall about his boss, how his boss treats him… I was 14. It shocked me. It astonished me. I thought, wow, do we even have to sacrifice some part of who we are to make money?

In his narrative of growing up as a commuting Japanese kid, Haruki emphasized his railway encounters with fatigued and broken-down *sarariiman* as a major influence on his adult life ambitions. The troubled *sarariiman* is a memorable manifestation of that
encounter, but according to Haruki, represents only part of a sustained exposure to fatigue and mental duress on the train.

Haruki’s observations of the physical and mental strain of sarariiman are not necessarily unique to the historical moment in which he commuted. In her study of the early 20th century literature on the commute, Alisa Freedman (University of Oregon) cited a 1906 article “On Observing People’s Faces on the Train,” which was published in *Enterprising Japan*. The article catalogued the facial expressions that a commuter might observe in a given train car, and, according to Freedman, made the argument that “tired and disappointed looks [of the sarariiman] were signs of the fatigue these company employees felt as they commuted on crowded trains from their suburban homes to inner-city offices… [The writer of the article] emphasized that the faces of salarymen silently shouted the need for better health care and awareness to protect the vitality, spirit, and well-being of youth” (2002:28). In the train car, the physical cost of the social role of the worker becomes visible for all to see. But while the perception of exhaustion and stress in 1906 was largely anecdotal and disorganized, Haruki’s childhood commute and my ethnographic observations occurred during a time when Japanese society was engaging and rethinking the medical toll of work and over-work.

**Karôshi and Karô-jisatsu (Death-by-Overwork and Suicide-by-Overwork)**

In a social context where self-sacrificing dedication to the corporate structure carries considerable social prestige, Tokyoites occasionally exert themselves past the natural limits of their bodies. The concept of karôshi, or an individual being
“overworked” to the point of death emerged over the course of the twentieth century to explain the stress-related deaths of individuals in extreme workplace environments (North 2011:147). Through a number of high-profile lawsuits, karôshi developed into an important legal mechanism to explain the relationship between biological pathology and the reasonable constraints of the social role of worker. Of significant interest to this study is how karôshi developed as an explanatory model for acts of suicide, which lawmakers have increasingly asserted as equivalent to cardiovascular disease as a stress-related pathology.

Near the end of the 21st century, Japan placed some of the highest demands upon its workers in the world. A 1989 estimate found that a quarter of Japanese employees worked between 3,000 and 3,500 hours a year (North 2011:147). While the general condition of stress and exhaustion produced by the workplace was widely acknowledged, Japanese society generally regarded those workers with extreme workloads as being individually responsible for their excessive commitment to work. Workers in extreme conditions had few recourses available to them. The Japanese corporation plays a family-like role, in that it is assumed to care for the salaryman and provide for their lives; a consequence of the familial-corporate structure is that corporations react to workers’ complaint and conflict as illegitimate acts of disrespect (North 2011:157). Faced with immense workloads and cultural constraints against seeking a more balanced pace of work, overworked white-collar Japanese employees occasionally labor past the physical limitations of their bodies (Vickery 380). Dr. Uehata Tetsunojo coined the term karôshi in 1978 to refer to death brought about by complications from high blood pressure considered a direct result of a particular working environment (North 2011:157). Yet the
families of deceased sarariiman who sought justice and reparations for their losses initially won few victories in the legal system, which continued to emphasize individual prudence over collective responsibility.

Gradually, the popular, medical, and legal understanding of karôshi began to shift towards collective responsibility and social introspection. In 1995, the government awarded compensation to only 15 of the 500 claims for karôshi. In 2006, that number increased to 560 approved claims out of 1,757 (North 2011:147). What was once an exceptional claim working against the grain of cultural ideas of responsibility and corporate community has since acquired greater legitimacy and cultural salience. Anthropologist Ken Vickery writes, “Now a household word, karôshi… has not only become commonplace, it has become a notorious representation of the idea that Japan’s famed work ethic can go too far.” (Vickery 380) Thirty years after karôshi’s inception, everyday Japanese individuals recognize karôshi as a pervasive and worrisome phenomenon at the intersection of major social issues in contemporary Tokyo.

Perhaps the most complex application of karôshi is to instances of suicide. Of the 560 successful claims for death-by-overwork in 2006, 66 went to the families of suicide victims or those who had attempted suicide (North 2011:147). Unlike claims related to cardiovascular failure, where the assumption is that the stress of the workplace creates the fatal physical condition of stress, there is a greater degree of ambiguity between the act of suicide and the physical and psychological conditions that cause it. In addition to working against the cultural taboo of blaming the employer, karô-jisatsu (or suicide-by-overwork) relies upon two very recent re-conceptualizations in the popular perception of suicide: (1)
the relationship between depression and suicide and (2) intentionality in the act of suicide.

In recent years, karô-jisatsu has helped erode the Japanese resistance to depression as an explanatory model of suicide. Early twentieth century Japanese psychiatrists adopted the biological determinist perspective of suicide as the result of a diseased brain or genetic predisposition (Kitanaka 2008:153). However, psychiatrists in postwar Japan emphatically rejected the idea of suicide as something other than the volition of the individual (Kitanaka 2008:153). The cultural understanding of suicide of resolve, or suicide as the ultimate expression of personal will, formed a significant aspect of the resistance towards “medicalizing” suicide; in comparison to pathological suicide, the suicide of resolve continued to carry tremendous weight in the psychiatric context up through the 1990s (Kitanaka 2008:153). A series of lawsuits that claimed family members had died via karô-jisatsu provided a critical discursive space in which a new generation of psychiatrists advanced the notion that some suicides are the results of depression (Kitanaka 2008:153).

This transformation is occurring not only in legal discourse, but also through popular representations of the sarariiman. In his analysis of the 2002 television miniseries PsychoDoctor, anthropologist Ken Vickery describes how emerging narratives of “the depressed salaryman” represent the convergence of depression, the demands of the workplace, and the social archetype of the sarariiman. Vickery notes that the episode utilizes the phrase “cold of the heart” for depression, which is an invention of the pharmaceutical industry in Japan meant to encourage a wider acceptance of pharmaceuticals. But Vickery rejects the argument that the show acts as an extended
argument for anti-depression medicine, arguing instead that *PsychoDoctor* speaks from a still-emerging discursive space in which the psychological effects of the workplace are being reevaluated under the framework of depression (Vickery 2010:376-378).

The rise of *karô-jisatsu* as an explanatory model for the suicide of the salaryman creates ambiguity and dissonance as previous explanatory models persist, especially in terms of the perception of intentionality. The legal claim of *karôshi* asserts that the responsibility for death-by-overwork lies with the employer. But when applied to an act of suicide, does the responsibility of the employer extend to the act of suicide itself? To what degree does the suicide victim possess responsibility for their actions? What kind of agency does depression have, as a force exerting itself upon the afflicted individual?

Even as depression receives wider cultural, legal, and medical acceptance, it is not immediately capable of providing a total explanation for all constituent aspects of behavior such as suicide. In anthropologist Junko Kitanaka’s stunning ethnographic portrayal of conversations between suicidal individuals and psychiatrists in an early-2000 in-patient hospital, for example, Kitanaka observes that the narratives and affective structures of depression are still being formed, contested, and re-fashioned, even as psychiatrists extend them to patients as meaningful ways to conceptualize their experiences (Kitanaka 2008:155). When patients describe a force compelling them to suicidal action, psychiatrists often provide the framework of “suicidal depression” to explain that cognitive occurrence, even as psychiatrists debate with one another the applicability and explanatory ability of such a claim (Kitanaka 2008:165). The ambiguity observed in the cultural space of the in-patient hospital may have a different quality than the popular or public understanding of depression, as it operates at such a micro-level.
But it offers a valuable illustration of contestation in the process of social meaning, especially in relation to the popular perception of choice and affect in the act of suicide.

**Depressive Train Suicide**

Unlike the lawyers that assess whether an act of suicide occurred as a result of particular workplace conditions, everyday commuters cannot determine the “true reason” behind an act of train suicide past the limits of their positionality as commuters, which we have discussed in earlier chapters. Nonetheless, in the absence of an explicit explanatory model for train suicide, the discourses surrounding the *sarariiman* and *karô-jisatsu* influence how everyday commuters narrate acts of train suicide. The perception of the depressed and beleaguered *sarariiman* plays a significant role in the popular imagination of a *jinshin jiko* incident. Commuters apply the emerging understanding of depression as the causal factor behind suicide to the formal elements of train suicide, whether the elements are known or speculated upon. In this section, I explore the connection between emerging popular and medico-legal discourses on depressive suicide and narratives of *jinshin jiko*.

M: So tell me more about *jinshin jiko*.

One critical element of train suicide, reported to me by my informants, was that it involved the spontaneous act of a commuter who, in all likelihood, was a *sarariiman*. Though some *jinshin jiko* accidents could conceivably occur in the spaces between stations, or involve non-commuting individuals who premeditated their actions with a deliberate plan, Haruki insisted that the typical *jinshin jiko* involved a commuter who was...
overcome with the spontaneous urge to die. That actor was not an outsider, but part of the social microcosm of the commute.

Many ideas converge in the hypothetical reading of *jinshin jiko*: the idea of an individual acting against society, an exhausted and depressed act borne of too much work, and perhaps mental disease. One thread running through these analyses and narrations is the premise that extensive physical and psychological demand can provoke an act of suicide, which is articulated in *karô-jisatsu*. When I asked Akio why individuals choose to commit *jinshin jiko*, knowing it will be labeled a bad death, he responded,

Akio: “[W]e do have this kind of idea that jinshin jiko is unplanned. Like, people usually just, you know, jump into that line because they suddenly feel by it. They’re so lured – not lured, but attracted to it…Yeah. So like, it’s not something, well, we do say it’s troublesome. But at the same time, we do have the idea that it’s something that people do unintentionally.

M: Interesting. What do you mean by that?

Akio: They often say that some people who are really depressed or tired, is like, well, if this guy suddenly, you’re standing on the train station or whatever. Near the train. They suddenly feels like – like, it’s psychologically more easier. It just takes one answer. You jump. Jump. And it’s not that much of height. You can kind of imagine that it’s going to hurt a lot. But since it’s a train, you don’t feel like it. And you just, you just need to take one step and get out of the station and get off onto the railway. So I guess it’s just more psychologically easier, and you just, suddenly, it comes through your mind, ‘What if I just jump in? Maybe it would be over,’ I guess.

The emerging discourse on overwork and the depressive strain that *karô-jisatsu* has helped create provides a framework through which narratives of unintentional train suicide might be read. In Akio’s narrative, psychological and physical wear renders the act of suicide easier and more accessible for the suicide victim. Interestingly, the concept of “ease” straddles two characterizations of the act of suicide – suicide as an easy action,
and suicide as an unintentional occurrence. For the latter, prior experiences – in the case of karôu-jisatsu, overwork – altered the medical state of the individual to such an extent that the space of the railway becomes a kind of latent weapon, which the depressive urges of the individual uses against him. In the script of depressive suicide, the psychological wear produced elsewhere literally kills the individual through a mixture of exhaustion and depression; karô-jisatsu, as the concept of the workplace killing an individual, offers one particular explanation for the origin of psychological wear.

The cultural concept of being “lured” into spontaneous or accidental suicide is further reinforced via the space of the platform. In 2009, Japan Rail installed soft blue lights above the tracks of Tokyo train stations, along the stretches of track where the majority of jinshin jiko collisions occur. I noticed these lights while awaiting trains home in the evening, but at the time, did not know what function they served. In a recent New York Times article, officials for the major railway companies in Tokyo expressed hope that the soothing effect of blue light would dissuade individuals from the act of suicide, and prompt them to pause and reflect instead.

“We know there is no scientific proof that blue lights will help deter suicides,” Mr. Okawa said. “But if blue has a soothing effect on the mind, we want to try it to save lives.” (2009 New York Times)

The light installation represents one among many recent efforts to curb suicide throughout Japanese society. But is also demonstrates the use of psychological knowledge in these measures, even as the nature and implications of that knowledge is still being determined. The suicide that Mr. Okawa and others hope that the blue lights might prevent is not one chosen deliberately, but rather, a suicide of impulse and emotion – an act that expresses a psychological state.
The attempt at soothing light deterrence at the platform also encourages the perception of *jinshin jiko* occurring in the space of the platform. Though I searched a variety of governmental records and newspaper articles, I could not determine whether train suicide ever occurred on the stretches of railroad *between* stations, as opposed to along the platform. In Chapter 3, I included a passage from my conversation with Mariko where she asked me whether *jinshin jiko* ever occurred in as a premeditated act in the stretches of rail between stations. She considered the possibility and then concluded

Mariko: …But then, I don’t know if people plan it out that carefully, for jinshin jiko. They’re just there, and they just like, all of a sudden, get sick and tired of everything, and just do it.

Mariko rejected the notion that train suicide could be an act that an outsider imposes upon commuters, which would constitute an act of social violence. Instead, she characterized the event as occurring within the cultural space of the railway and the commute. Not only does this narrative further reinforce the psychological reading of impulsivity; it also encourages a perception of *jinshin jiko* as an event born of mutual social circumstances, as opposed to the regrettable actions of an individual producing *meiwaku* for others.

The depressive suicide of the middle-aged male worker is by no means the sole or definitive train suicide. Such an archetypal reading of *jinshin jiko* does not exist outside of the historical context in which train suicide is read. In the case of Tokyo in 2010, my informants encountered and narrated *jinshin jiko* during a time when Japanese society sourced the majority of its conversations on suicide in the experience of work and the worker (Ozawa-de Silva 2010:394). But rather than simply apply a new model to a pre-
existing event, commuters like Mariko and Haruki are combining elements of different scripts of suicide in order to make an everyday event comprehensible in new terms. They link an encounter mediated by the system of the commute to critical examinations of the demands and experience of urban space. In doing so, they engage not just a single reading or explanation, but a process of contestation and emerging narration that seeks to find meaning in the everyday confrontation with violence and death in the hyper-public space of the railway commute.

**Dissonant Scripts and Discursive Enmeshment**

The concepts of psychological ease and allure provoke an explanatory tension between *jinshin jiko* as *meiwaku*, which holds the individual directly responsible for their selection of a Bad Death, and the emerging idea of depressive suicide as an “unintentional” act. In terms of policies of compensation, the two interpretations stand as stark opposites to one another. The family of an individual who has chosen *jinshin jiko* is asked to pay an exorbitant sum of money to the train operating company, whereas the family of an individual who succumbs to suicide as a result of workplace-created depression is compensated financially, given the family can substantiate their claim. The discrepancy between the two hinges on a contradictory understanding of who is ultimately responsible for the act of suicide. But in the context of *jinshin jiko*, in which everyday commuters do not have access to the specific narrative of death (much less a legal inquiry into responsibility), how can two deeply contradictory valuations of suicide coexist with one another?
The dissonance between legal valuations of suicide gestures towards the wider moment of ambivalence and transition for the social meaning of suicide in Japan. Commuters must navigate these discursive transformations in their everyday narration of *jinshin jiko*, which remains elusive and opaque outside of the speculative attempts to imbue it with meaning. Akio and other commuters attempt to construct narratives of *jinshin jiko* that are cohesive and logical, and that express the causes, decisions, and other phenomenal qualities of train suicide in a meaningful way. What emerges from this attempt is not necessarily a clearer or more scientifically accurate portrayal of train suicide, but rather, the enmeshment of *jinshin jiko* within a complex set of discourses that converge in the cultural space of the commute. Perhaps the emerging scripts of *jinshin jiko* as depressive death mark the opening of a cultural space in which Japanese society may explore new critical vocabularies for work and depression in Tokyo.
Conclusion: Public Suicide and Contested Social Meaning

Faced with announcements of suicide day after day, and forced to wait in long lines and crowded train cars for the resumption of railway service, Japanese rail commuters have little recourse altering the course of an event that occurs with the regularity of severe weather and minor tectonic activity – and is grouped with such events in the scrolling ticker space of cable newscasts. In Japanese, the colloquialism *shou ga nai*, or “it cannot be helped,” expresses the cultural valuation of acceptance and endurance in the face of challenges that cannot be readily surmounted. The fact that on top of the regularity and banality of this encounter, little is known about the specifics of any given accident begs the question, what can be said about train suicide? Indeed, my informants posed this question to me directly when they found my line of inquiry to be self-evident or, unanswerable past a shrug.

What I have attempted to draw attention to in my thesis is the vast and complex ways in which stories of *jinshin jiko* are told and re-told, value judgments made and adjusted, perpetrators empathized with and vilified, and conclusions reached that are anything but definitive. Indeed, the materials from which these stories sprout are often partial and ambiguous. Narratives reformulate information that empowered institutions like private railway companies and newspapers mediate and constrain through representational strategies like the calculation of *meiwaku* and the obfuscation of the act of suicide in the vocabulary of the commute. The resulting stories do not map perfectly on pre-existing choices and repercussions, but rather, produce those acts and their valuation in the realm of contested social meaning in Tokyo.
In my research, I identified a shift in how Tokyoites read the act of train suicide from critique and censure of the individual towards a rethinking of psychological strain and social obligation in Japanese society. I laid the foundation for this argument in Chapter 2, where I described how the everyday encounter with the *jinshin jiko* delay is mediated and constrained by the representational strategies of the commute, which shroud the embodied act of train suicide within the spatial, social, and linguistic obfuscation of the Tokyo railway. In Chapter 3, I discussed how through the *script of jinshin jiko as meiwaku*, everyday commuters partake in a reading of social censure that focuses on the suicide victim as an individual acting poorly against society. I pointed towards the excessive fining of families and media calculation of inconvenience as representational practices that encourage commuters to channel their frustration into the reading of censure. My analysis hinted at how some commuters attempt to empathize with the individual acting against society and the reasoning that might drive them to such an act. I explored this possibility in greater detail in Chapter 4, which focused on the *script of meiwaku as depressive death*. I looked at the historical transformation of the *sarariiman* archetype and the emergence of *karô-jisatsu*, or the concept of suicide-by-overwork, as discursive realms in which the popular understanding and acceptance of depression has rapidly advanced. My informants’ attempts to apply and negotiate new psychological perceptions of overwork and suicide to *jinshin jiko* marked a departure away from narratives of *jinshin jiko* that reinforced the validity of the space of commuter. Instead, these scripts approach the commute as a microcosm of urban life in Tokyo and seek to understand the complex social issues that converge therein – why do people work
to the point of death? What is the value of being noticed and being an individual in Japanese society?

Through the contested narration of *jinshin jiko*, or what I have termed the dissonant scripts of *jinshin jiko*, commuters demonstrate the need that has been identified in the anthropological literature of suicide to seek and reconstruct meaning from ambiguous acts of violence. For young commuters in Tokyo, meaning is not an objective uncovering of the epidemiological basis for such an event. Rather, it is a social process that draws upon partial and constrained bodies of knowledge to construct an encounter with public suicide that is livable and comprehensible in the context of everyday life, even if that comprehensibility contains silence and ambiguity.

**Focuses and Limitations**

The phenomenon of shrouding is not a passive amalgamation of narratives, judgments, and explanations. Rather, it is part of an active social process whereby meaning is contested; the actors within this contestation include individuals who draw upon shifting discourses of psychology, suicide, work, and the commute, but also the empowered actors such as the private railway companies who mediate and constrain the information available to everyday commuters. My work has attempted to provide a foundational examination of shrouding and the scripts of train suicide with an emphasis on the experiences and perceptions of daily commuters. Further research into the legal and political dimensions of shrouding would complement my commuter-centric work and provide a more comprehensive portrait of shrouding as a practice that is created and espoused by empowered institutions.
Future study could also benefit from a more deliberate analysis of gender, class, and other vectors of social identity. I elected to emphasize the normative figure of the sarariiman in the commute; but alternative emphases would likely yield intriguing and unexpected results. As it stands, I hope that at the very least, my study can help supplant conceptions of Japan as permissive or indifferent towards suicide with a more rigorous understanding of the relationship between suicide and social meaning.

Though jinshin jiko “is everywhere,” as more than one informant reported to me, it exists in a particular type of everywhere. It is located in shared narratives, exasperated outbursts, monitor screens, platform lights, and the social encounters with all the above. Jinshin jiko arises from a constellation of encounters, spanning the various spaces and moments that constitute everyday life for the young commuters of Tokyo. While much about train suicide eludes the everyday commuter, jinshin jiko re-produces the continuity of the everyday in the cultural space of the commute. In doing so, jinshin jiko comes to express what it means to live and to die meaningfully in Tokyo, even as those very concepts are contested and reformulated.
Glossary

*Densha* – A Japanese railway train, typically above ground and operated by Japan Rail or another private rail company.

*Jinshin Jiko* – Literally “human accident,” the term signifies a railway delay that involves a collision between a person and a train. Generally, *jinshin jiko* occur because of suicide attempts, the vast majority of which are successful.

*Jōkyaku* – Railway passenger.

*Karôshi* – Death-by-overwork. *Karôshi* occurs when extraordinary demand in the workplace causes a worker to suffer from the physical side effects of stress, including the medical symptoms of depression. Dr. Uehata Tetsunojo coined the term in 1978; it has since acquired considerable legal power as a means for families to win compensation from the employer after a suicide or sudden death.

*Karô-jisatsu* – Suicide-by-overwork, which is a subset of *karôshi*. In Japanese, the suffix *shi* means death, whereas *jisatsu* translates to suicide.

*Meiwaku* – Trouble; burden; inconvenience. *Meiwaku* is both an annoyance and a social assessment of the degree to which social obligations are met.
Sarariiman – A middle-class corporate employee, typically male, who commutes to work in Tokyo. The term become popular in the late 1910s, and may have been popularized by the comic artist Kitazawa Rakuten in his 1918 manga “Salaryman Heaven and Salaryman Hell” (Freedman 2011:33)
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