A dead body on the tracks:
Managing and coping with the horrid

Chapters 3 and 4 illustrated how railway employees cope with complexity in practice. Chapters 5 and 6 developed this further, showing that attempts to reduce and manage complexity are performative as such attempts change the territory that they purport to neutrally represent. In this chapter I combine both these insights to make an additional step in my argumentation. The data that I draw on in this chapter are based on railroad suicides, unfortunately one of the more ‘routine’ breakdowns for the Dutch railways. However, for those employees involved, a suicide may also be a traumatic experience. This chapter explores the suicide as a breakdown from these two perspectives: i) how it is phenomenologically experienced in the territory by, for instance, train drivers and railway emergency staff and, ii) how such traumatic events are managed in rational ways to help the infrastructure recover from the breakdown as efficiently as possible. In the context of the broader argument of the dissertation, this specific chapter allows to make several points. First, breakdowns are systemic: they may occur locally and appear small, but they trigger a whole system dispersed over several locations to, often routinely, restore order. Second, coping with breakdowns happens in the territory as much as through maps, and one needs to look at how these two ‘worlds’ relate and interact to understand how organizational complexity emerges. Finally, dealing with breakdowns such as suicides through maps only can, when maps are taken too seriously, lead to exactly that what it wants to avoid: rationality becomes irrational, the reduction of complexity introduces complexity, and the urge to avoid contradictions by means of causal thinking may turn up as a paradox in practice.
“My first one? It was a woman”, Mike says while he accelerates the train to depart the station. “It happened between the stations of City and Townville and it must have been around four o’clock in the afternoon.” Mike was driving 130 km/h round a bend, he tells me, illustrating this by making a big loop with his arm. “And there she was, suddenly... in the middle of the tracks. The woman squatted, and I thought she was looking for something she’d lost.” He pauses but then continues, softer and slower this time. “But she squatted further and further down. She went all the way down. She made herself as small as she could with her arms around her body”. Mike lets go of the throttle to illustrate what he means. He wraps both his hands tight around his shoulders and puts his chin on his chest. He sits straight again and looks me in the eyes. “When I saw that, I knew it. I told myself: Mike, this is going to be your first one” (field notes August 7, 2015).

For those who jump under a train and stride through ‘the golden gate of nothingness’ (Konrád 1989, p. 46), it is perhaps a tragic liberation of the constant brooding that torments them. For train passengers, it usually means delay and, perhaps, being late for work. For train drivers, conductors, and the railway emergency services, a railroad suicide can be a traumatic experience. Dutch railway organizations codify a railroad suicide under the generic category of a ‘collision with person, bike, moped, or other small object’. It falls under the rubric of a ‘Train Incident Scenario 3.1’ or T.I.S. 3.1. The aim of this chapter is to show the organizing work behind the ‘management’ of a railroad suicide, focusing on the process of how railway organizations ‘translate’ the dead body on the tracks into a code.

Railroad suicides occur in numbers high enough to consider it a pervasive problem for European railway systems. In fact, whilst disruptive in destroying the orderly flow of routine work, railroad suicides have become routine in their own right. On average, more than eight train suicides happen in Europe on a daily base (European Union Agency for Railways, 2016). The yearly average is around 200 people in the UK, 875 in Germany, and 223 in the Netherlands. Yearly, around 1 million passengers in the Netherlands are, in one way or another, affected by suicides on the railroads and it is estimated that this costs Dutch society a little over 60 million Euros on an annual base.

A suicide occurs every 1.4 million train-kilometers, meaning that a train driver can expect to experience a suicide at least every 15 years of his or her career (European Union Agency for Railways, 2016, p. 36). In a cynical and tragically real sense, death is part and

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A dead body on the tracks: Managing and coping with the horrid parcel of train drivers’ and conductors’ work. The question is not so much if they will ever encounter a ‘jumper’ or a lifeless body on the tracks, but rather when and where and how then to respond. For them, the tragedy constitutes a problem that needs to be managed properly, following the right procedures.

In the organizational studies’ literature the work of people operating in an emotionally or physically challenging environment is sometimes referred to as ‘dirty work’ (Ashforth et al., 2007; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Dick, 2005; McMurray and Ward, 2014; Simpson et al., 2014; Thiel, 2007; Tracy and Scott, 2006). Whilst I feel slightly uncomfortable using this term in the context of railroad suicides, dirty work literature may be a useful theoretical lens for trying to understand it. Physical, social, moral or emotional ‘dirt’ offends the fantasized purity of an organized order (Douglas, 1966), and this challenges actors to restore order and to ‘manage’ taint (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Dirty work literature conventionally highlights how individuals or specific occupational groups counter the taint of their work to construct a positive identity—thus focusing on the ideational dimension of dirt in the context of individuals or groups. It tends to overlook the visceral and practical dimension of dealing with dirt (see also Simpson et al., 2016) in the context of an organization. Organization as comprising various ‘modes of ordering’ (Knoe et al., 2015) may also mobilize a response against dirt’s offence of order by engaging in taint management or ‘cleansing work’—both literally and figuratively—to rationalize labor and cast off the symbolic and material taint that dirt leaves behind. The contribution of this chapter is to illustrate how dirty work is as much an organizational as a psychological or occupational phenomenon. It builds on recent studies which have argued that the literature should take the context in which dirty work is practiced into greater account (McCabe and Hamilton, 2015; McMurray and Ward, 2014; Tyler, 2011), thereby showing how organizations may rationalize such work and with what effects.

To bring into view the casting off of dirt as an organizational phenomenon, I show, first, how railroad suicides are ‘organized’ and, second, how such rationalizations make railroad suicides ‘manageable’ and, at the same time, ‘dehumanized’. I do so by drawing on ethnographic data generated over 2,5 years of fieldwork in the Dutch railway network. The findings show that, in its effects, a railroad suicide breaks through the day-to-day routines of different organizations, disrupting the railway system at large and triggering what I here coin ‘organizational cleansing work’. To detail this cleansing work my data analysis ‘follows’ a suicide through the railway system in order to explore how, at different points in the system, the taint or dirt that suicides leave behind is managed. This shows that, in the process, railway
organizations decontextualize the body by carefully stripping dirt away from the tragically personal and shockingly visceral context of the dead body. The body that is managed is a different body at different points in the system: it is, in the process of the cleansing work, transformed, translated, and modified in crucial ways (e.g. Callon, 1984; Latour, 2005). More generally, the analysis demonstrates that dirty work is as much a psychological or occupational phenomenon as an inherently organizational one.

This chapter starts by briefly discussing the literature on dirty work to develop a lens through which, in the second part of the chapter, I present the data on the organizing work triggered by railroad suicides. I then analyze these practices and rituals as different forms – physical and procedural – of organizational cleansing work.

7.1 Dirty work theory

Notions of dirt and dirtiness are currently addressed in the organizational literature on dirty work. Departing from the work of sociologist Hughes (1958, 1962), dirty work is defined as work that is stigmatized or frowned upon by society. It is work that is ‘physically, socially or morally’ (1958, p. 122) tainted. Whilst Hughes leaves this tripartite typology of dirty work unexplained, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) conceptualize the typology into a theoretical model in their seminal article titled ‘How can you do it?’, referring to the question posed to dirty workers with a mixture of admiration and a touch of inadvertent disdain. Work that is considered as physically tainted, so they argue, usually refers to those who work with dirt as physical matter or under dangerous conditions (e.g. refuse collectors, embalmers, miners). It concerns most directly the material and embodied aspects of encountering dirt (Simpson et al., 2016). Social taint, on the other hand, occurs where workers deal with groups of people that are themselves stigmatized (e.g. police officers, social workers) or where workers have a servile relationship with others (e.g. house cleaners). Moral taint, finally, refers to work that is considered shameful or immoral (e.g. sex workers, drug dealers). McMurray and Ward (2014) extend this typology and suggest that the literature has long neglected the role of emotional dirt, claiming that there is a range of occupations where workers deal with the difficult and burdensome emotions of others (e.g. Samaritans, or volunteers for the helpline suicide prevention). This typology is of significant analytical value in understanding the meaning of and variance in dirty work, and it has stimulated a research agenda on topics largely
marginalized in earlier organizational literature. At the same time, however, the typology has spurred a somewhat biased interest.

In understanding dirty work, the individual dirty worker and members of occupational groups whose work is deemed tainted are privileged at the expense of dirty work as occurring within, and conditioned by, an organization. A focus on ‘the occupation or workgroup level of analysis’ is legitimate, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 414) argue, ‘because the stigma of dirty work is typically a group-level issue’. The main point that this literature then addresses is the puzzling observation that dirty workers, whilst performing work stigmatized by society, seem to have relatively high occupational esteem. Consequently, questions are raised to understand how dirty workers counter the taint of their work to construct a positive identity and by which normalization strategies they seek to do so. Inspired by Social Identity Theory, this is assumed to happen on the level of group identity. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) discuss two defense mechanisms through which dirty workers counter taint and maintain a positive sense of self. First, dirty workers rely on their occupational ideologies to recast the meaning of dirt in more positive terms, e.g. by focusing on less-dirty aspects of the job or reframing dirty aspects of work in positive terms. The second mechanism, that of selective social comparisons, means that dirty workers compare themselves with those outside their occupational group. For example, by casting those who condemn the job of dirty workers in more negative terms while supporting those who appreciate their work. These defense mechanisms seem important in transforming the meaning of dirt and sustaining a positive sense of self (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999).

In recent studies on dirty work these issues of ‘taint management’ have been explored more broadly by, for example, including managerial normalization strategies (Ashforth et al., 2007), comparing taint management between different occupational groups (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014; Tracy and Scott, 2006), understanding how dirty work relates to class and gender (Simpson et al., 2014; Thiel, 2007), or, in social constructionist approaches, bringing in the impact of the context in which dirty work takes place and accounting for dirt as subjective (Dick, 2005; Tyler, 2011). Yet, despite this broader and more inclusive understanding of dirty work, the literature still emphasizes dirt as mainly symbolic and socially constructed, a perspective which is often accounted for by making reference to Mary Douglas’ well cited phrase that ‘There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder’ (Douglas, 1966, p. 2). It does make sense to treat dirt as socially constructed, perhaps most clearly illustrated by scholars such as Foucault (1967) and Elias (1994) who have traced how
the meaning of things considered ‘dirty’ – madness, spitting, sexual acts – evolves and is contingent upon specific historical eras. However, although a notion of dirt as subjectively construed fits the interpretive approach to dirty work on which the current chapter is based, it blatantly fails to capture the ‘dirt’ and impact of a railway suicide.

Phenomenologically speaking, the handling of fragmented corpses by railway emergency service employees is as much visceral as it is subjectively constructed, and grasping in which ways dirt is exactly constituted in the work of these employees requires to analyze dirt in physical as well as symbolic terms. The analysis of taint management techniques through which dirty workers counter the stigma of their work, highlights how socially constructed dirt is ‘cleaned’ through psychological processes such as recasting work in more positive terms. Yet, for railway employees, merely coping with dirt through symbolic taint management strategies is arguably not sufficient: there is still a dead body on the railroad tracks that must be cleaned in a much more literal sense. These two sides of taint management – symbolic and physical – should not be thought of as a dichotomy. Rather, both imply each other, as ‘symbolic management is rooted in the particular materialities involved and... the latter can support and/or undermine the meanings afforded to such work’ (Simpson et al., 2016, p. 2). The taint of a gruesome and bloody railroad suicide may be countered by, for instance, creating a strong occupational identity. However, it may also be the case that the materiality of the ‘dirt’ withholds employees to make sense of it and hinders them to resort to symbolic taint management strategies: the ‘taint’ of blood on the tracks after an accident involving children, for example, is so great that any attempt to normalize or rationalize would become absurd and irrational.

In this chapter I argue that taking into serious consideration the materiality of dirt in dirty occupations creates opportunities to imagine taint management beyond the individual or occupational level. In line with several recent studies, I claim that the role of the broader context affecting dirty work should be examined more fully (McCabe and Hamilton, 2015; Tyler, 2011), as this captures better how organizations enable or constrain dirty work and how it subjects dirty workers to rules, procedures, quality standards, or performance measures. In other words, it means to look at ‘the manner in which dirt is organized within and across organizational boundaries’ (McMurray and Ward, 2014, p. 114) as ‘to understand the complexity of dirty work it is important to consider the entire social system from the vantage point of the various actors involved, not just the tasks workers perform’ (Fraher, 2017, p. 135). If dirt is indeed ‘in the eye of the beholder’, then the different occupations concerned
with a single dirty phenomenon experience the taint of their work quite differently; an organizational view may reveal how organizations are ‘literally washing away the “taint” of such work’ (McCabe and Hamilton, 2015, p. 103). In this chapter I ‘locate’ the dirtiness and the variations of how dirt is experienced within the different practices of employees in the railway system. This enables me to show how railroad suicides are ‘managed’, how the process is organized through a diverse array of interconnected practices and a strict division of labor, and how the railway organizations engage in ‘cleansing work’ to counter taint in a physical as well as symbolic sense.

7.2 ‘Dirt’ and ‘clean’: Two sides of the same organization?

Organizations are generally represented as physically, emotionally, rationally, and morally clean places. We somehow find it hard to think of ‘organization’ beyond its orderly confines. Disorderliness hardly resonates with the common understanding of organizations as places where money is made, strategic plans are written, management is made lean, or where the latest technological innovations are carefully thought out. Perhaps Weber was right. Describing the increasing rationalization of Western societies, he argues that values, emotions and beliefs in modern, ‘bureaucratic’ organizations are gradually being replaced with, and subjected to instrumental calculations. As Weber says (1978, p. 975): the more bureaucracy’s nature develops ‘more perfectly, the more it is “dehumanized”, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation’.

Yet, there is evidence to suspect that these conceptions of modern bureaucracies are, indeed, nothing more or less than ‘ideal types’. The organization as a ‘hygiene machine’ (Ten Bos and Kaulingfreks, 2001), for instance, often falters and fails in a rational, moral or physical sense to clean up the mess. Classic and modern ethnographic studies on work have described how efforts to rationalize organizational life may have irrational, dysfunctional, unethical or unclean consequences (e.g. Blau, 1969; Crozier, 2009; Gouldner, 1954; Jackall, 2009; Pachirat, 2011). In his ethnography on restaurants, Fine (2008) shows how restaurant employees work in unpleasant and hot-tempered environments; before the beautifully decorated dish arrives at the guests’ table, the meat has been handled and carved with bare hands, ingredients have dropped to the floor only to be picked up again, and all of this happens in kitchens filled
with heat, smoke, and the smell of grease. Lawton (1998) talks about how nurses in hospice care deal with deteriorating bodies, which is a central but often marginalized aspect of their work. She describes how nurses take care of Annie, who ‘rotted away below’ (125), or how Deborah was ‘found in the staff toilets totally covered in excreta’ and that ‘the walls and floor of the toilet were also splattered with her faeces’ (129).

Although the literature on dirty work does acknowledge a tension between ‘dirty’ and ‘clean’, this is mainly done to show how dirty workers symbolically counter taint, establish a positive self-image, to construct an orderly environment. Ashforth and Kreiner, for instance, state that ‘dirt threatens the sanctity of cleanliness, it is cast as taboo, and societies strive to separate what is clean from what is dirty’ (1999, p. 416). My take on this tension is slightly different, and I interpret it as more pertinent. While I see value in their conceptual separation, I also claim that in practice they are more intimately related. Thus, rather than looking at the separation of ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’, I argue that we need to better understand the act of separating. For instance, constant cleansing may be necessary to cast off dirt and keep the illusion of clean order intact. As Bateson (1987, p. 386) explains, disorder and order – or, what he at times refers to as ‘muddle’ and ‘tidy’ – should be seen as a matter of difference, a difference between ‘some present unwanted state’ (the dirt) and ‘the preferred state’ (the clean). The act of separating and establishing these differences, is the act of creating the boundaries around an organizational system (Cooper, 1986).

Pachirat’s (2011) ethnography on industrialized slaughter works as a case in point to show these relations between clean and dirty worlds, and how industrialized slaughter is organized in such a way that the industry is able to maintain a legitimately clean appearance. He describes into the greatest detail how the killing of cows occurs, focusing on interrelated processes of concealment and surveillance. In examining what he calls ‘the politics of sight’, he shows how not only the slaughterhouse itself is carefully removed from societal sight, but also how these politics inside the slaughterhouse work out through the spatial and procedural division of labor. In the abattoir, with some 800+ employees, it is one person only, the ‘knocker’, who is involved in the actual killing of animals. The division of labor is pervasive and happens through physical, discursive and phenomenological ‘walls’ (Pachirat, 2011, p. 236). This leads to the absurd event that the shooting of an escaped cow by the local police causes upheaval amongst the very same workers who are responsible for the killing of a 2,400 cattle on a daily basis. Dirt, however, being ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas, 1966, p. 36), has the nagging quality to permeate these well-constructed boundaries. For instance,
menstrual blood is in many cultures considered as excremental or ‘waste matter’ precisely because it crosses boundaries between inside/outside, life/death, pure/contaminated. For the Lele of Congo, menstruating women are thought to pose a danger for men and they have to adhere to a set of strict rules to avoid ‘defilement’ (Douglas, 1966, p. 152).

Taking the examples of industrialized slaughter or the Lele of Congo as an analogy for the current chapter, a railroad suicide offends the order of the ‘preferred state’ of the railway system, violating the boundaries of its organizations. It then becomes a matter of how the system responds to this violation (i.e. how the management of railroad suicides is organized) in order to restore the rational order of a clean organization. A practice-based approach, which I will briefly address in the next section, is capable to illustrate the different practices of those who are, directly or indirectly, involved in a railroad suicide, and to understand the ‘cleansing work’ of railway organizations as a carefully orchestrated physical and symbolic cleaning of the dead body on the railroad tracks.

7.3 Methodology

The data presented in this chapter are drawn from an ethnographic research on railway coordination centers’ management of railway disruptions. For two and a half years, I studied diverse disruptions and incidents, ranging from small, day-to-day technological failures such as broken railway switches to larger breakdowns caused by computer systems running riot or tank wagons leaking toxic substances. The general belief among members of the coordination centers seemed to be that the actual coordination work was conducted ‘inside’ and that the people ‘outside’ were merely players amongst a broader set of actors that had to be managed after a disruption. To gain access to the ‘dirty’ field outside and to get closer to those people working on actual tracks and in actual trains to experience what disruptions entail from this point of view was not easy. I had to successfully finish a safety exam to be able to join the emergency service crew. I also had to arrange a ‘Cab Pass’ which permitted me to be allowed in the cabin with train drivers, and this was a lengthy process via several people that showed a glimpse of the ‘bureaucratic dungeons’ at the headquarters of one of the organizations. After several months, however, every official step to gain access was taken and I was finally allowed to conduct further research outside.
7.3.1 Ethnographic methods

The study was conducted ethnographically in order to uncover the exceptional as well as mundane aspects (Bate, 1997; Ybema et. al 2009) of, in this case, the railway world. Constantly switching converging and diverging lenses in both fieldwork and headwork (Nicolini, 2009), the ethnographer is able to observe and describe in detail both the micro-world of winks, gestures, practices, and conversations and the wider organizational context within which these practices unfold. Moreover, an ethnographic approach usually means to also be sensitive to how people in a specific cultural system relate to their material and physical environment, for example by analyzing how tools, objects, or spatial settings are used (Gherardi, 2010; van Marrewijk, 2009). With this in mind, this study was conducted in a style where practices are regarded the ‘units of analysis’ where different material and social worlds meet and overlap (Callon, 1984; Mol, 2002).

The main ethnographic method used for this study was that of observation. I was not able to fully participate, simply because I was not allowed to conduct many of the tasks that railway employees do (e.g. driving the train or operating computer systems). At the railway emergency services, however, the line between observing and participating sometimes blurred. These employees, not unlike medical emergency services, usually work in a high demand setting. In their own words this implies they ‘have to be able to go from zero to hundred’: at one moment they are waiting for something to happen, and the next moment they have to immediately start working fully concentrated. It was for this reason that I sometimes conducted simple tasks, such as driving the emergency services’ car to an incident so the employee could make specific calls to inform or be informed by others.

A solution to overcome the ‘problem’ of not being able to fully participate was to use the technique of shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007). Rather than going into the field to observe that what happens at a specific site, shadowing means to follow one specific person for the duration of a whole day or shift. This technique allowed to, to a certain extent, experience work through the eyes of those being shadowed. In addition, 34 interviews (see table 7) were conducted to further probe on issues related to railroad suicides at different sites in the railway system. Nine of these interviews were conducted by a master student who did an ethnographic study for her thesis at one of the teams of railway emergency services. The aim of her thesis was to analyze how these employees relate to their material environment, including but not limited to the bodily waste after a suicide and the tools used to clean train and tracks from blood and body parts.
The interviews, most of which were recorded and transcribed, were conducted at the worksite or the offices of the interviewees. Although this was useful in terms of staying close to the natural setting of the workers, it also led to some challenges. I conducted the interviews with train drivers during the ‘shadowing’ of their shift. Since this could last from several to eight hours, the moment the audio recorder was switched on an unnatural situation was created that was perceived as a sudden break with the more informal observations. Since the purpose of the interviews was to probe into the sometimes personal and emotional stories of railroad suicides, and the audio recorder became a contested object possibly hindering an open conversation, I decided to not record the interviews with train drivers. I made extensive notes during the conversations, regularly checked with interviewees whether I had understood them correctly, and elaborated all the notes into more detailed fieldnotes at the end of the drivers’ shift and immediately after each interview. At the emergency services it could occur that the employee’s beeper went off and the interview had to be interrupted. Sometimes I had to stop the interview for a few minutes, and one time the employee suggested to keep talking while we jumped in the car driving to an incident. This made it difficult at times to continue the ‘flow’ of the interview, but it also provided a deeper experience and understanding of the work of these people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
<th>Occupational group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Train personnel:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manager train drivers (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Train drivers (4, not recorded)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Train dispatchers at regional control room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Traffic and incident coordinators at national coordination center (OCCR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Emergency services:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Duty Officers Rail (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team members emergency service rail (9)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manager Incidents and Emergencies (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Total number of interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Summary of interviews for chapter 7
7.3.2 Analysis and ethnographic writing

In the analysis of how the terror, tragedy and trauma of a railway suicide is ‘organized’ I was inspired by a practice-based approach on work (Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012). Practices, regarded as ‘the site of the social’ (Schatzki, 2002), are the recurring patterns of action (doings and sayings) that constitute social and organizational life. As such, they are more than the tasks or activities of individuals, as practices are always social. In the context of this study, a practice-based approach was especially relevant for the following reason.

A practice-based approach is usually sensitive to the idea that practices are sociomaterial accomplishments (e.g. Orlikowski, 2007; Suchman, 2007), thereby addressing my point of critique that ‘dirt’ in the literature on dirty work is presumably understood as socially constructed. This approach has the potential to understand dirt beyond symbolism and as actual matter, providing access to the phenomenologically experienced life-world (Sandberg and Dall’Alba, 2009) of dirty workers and understanding how these people are entwined with others (e.g. colleagues; the dead body) and with objects (e.g. the blood; rules and procedures). By accessing the lifeworld of the different actors involved in the management of a railroad suicide, I was able to analyze dirty work as an organizational phenomenon by tracing how practices at various parts in the railway system are connected. A body on the railroads activates several responses at once, each practice triggering another one. The individual task of dirty workers alone does not account for taint management, but it are the connections between practices that illustrate how dirt is managed. Investigating the variation of diverse practices that are all concerned with the same phenomenon, I was able to understand how this phenomenon, as a problem disrupting an orderly situation, ‘travelled’ through the railway system. The dead body – or at least as how it is experienced from the different sites in the system – is not a neutral object that moves through the system unmediated, but takes on a specific meaning and constitutes a specific problem in practice (Latour, 2005; Mol, 2002). In other words, the dead body that must be managed is encountered differently through the practices of emergency services (e.g. collecting body parts) when compared with the practices of coordinators (e.g. managing delays as a side-effect of this incident). Tracing the connections of these different practices, an image emerged that I then coined the ‘organizational cleansing work’.

A specific part of the analysis happened while writing the empirical findings for this chapter. In organization studies it is increasingly acknowledged that the act of (ethnographic) writing is not so much a matter of accurately representing the world under study but that it
is yet another layer of interpretation (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2009; Van Maanen, 1979). Rather than convincing the reader audience on the truthfulness of that interpretation, it is important for the ethnographic text to give a plausible account of what has happened (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993; Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). Thus it has become generally accepted amongst ethnographers that certain styles of writing and rhetorical techniques can be usefully employed to better get a specific message across (Czarniawska, 1999; Van Maanen, 2011). Since I had to deal with intimate and sensitive data, I have decided at several points to ‘fictionalize’ specific details of a suicide. This entailed a careful deliberation between the attempt to treat the victim and bereaved in a respectful way whilst staying as close as possible to the original data. Moreover, and in a more functional sense for this chapter, I decided to focus on one specific suicide while drawing on the material of different cases. This allowed me to zoom in on how the management of a railroad suicide chronologically unfolds, thereby illustrating how a suicide should be interpreted as a systemic phenomenon travelling through the network and with the ‘cleansing work’ as an organizational response.

7.4 Findings: From suicidal person to T.I.S. 3.1

Although routine, train drivers generally experience driving a train as a continuous journey. They often contrasted the freedom and autonomy of their work with more tedious office jobs where employees are confined to desks. For drivers, a train cabin is ‘their own moving office’ (informal conversation 13 July 2015). As one put it: ‘The freedom you experience while driving, the places you get to and the people you meet, that freedom is just beautiful’ (informal conversation 14 July 2015). What’s more, having a clear view on the tracks in front of you not just means to enjoy the picturesque sceneries of the Dutch landscape passing by, but is also a way to gain an adequate understanding of the infrastructure ahead and to develop what train drivers refer to as ‘track-knowledge’ (e.g. where to look for railway signals, where to be cautious for notoriously dangerous grade crossings, etc.).

A ‘jumper’ brutally disrupts the very same sight from the cabin. The drivers can’t do much when one day they see their professional nightmare materialized. A train, once at full speed of 140km/h, cannot stop on command nor change its course. One time while departing a station, a big bird sat on the tracks ahead. Rather helplessly we observed how our metal monster ran over the animal. It was simply inevitable.
Although train drivers do not always see exactly how a suicide happens (e.g. because the train is simply too fast or because it might be pitch-dark when driving a train in the late evening), it comes with a shock nonetheless. Train drivers usually see at least a shadow of ‘something’ (a rock, an animal?) colliding with their train. Sometimes, bodily tissue covers the window in front of the driver’s eyes. Moreover, ‘the sound is quite specific’, as driver Benny explains. Holding his hands a little over 30 centimetres apart: ‘Imagine there’s just this much space between the train and tracks. It’ll rip you apart. You can hear the bones rattling’ (informal conversation 7 August 2015). Although a suicide happens in an instant, he always remembers what has happened vividly:

‘I drove about full speed and came around the bend when I saw this young guy crossing. He walked from the left to the right side and I remember that I still thought: “What are you doing! Watch out!” When the man had arrived at the right-hand side he didn’t crawl underneath the boom gate to leave the tracks as I expected he would, but he just stopped and then slowly turned around. He looked straight into my eyes. A very uncanny gaze. Almost as if he wanted to tell me: “And now I’ve got you”. And then he threw himself in front of my train. BAM! [He claps his hands once and it remains silent for a second]. It really happened in the blink of an eye’ (field notes 7 August 2015).

Drivers know that a collision with a person is an almost inevitable part of their career, as evidenced in such statements as ‘I’ve had three’ or ‘I haven’t had a single one... yet’. Collisions with people tend to leave stains on train drivers, some temporary and physical (e.g. when bodily remains still cover the window in front of the driver’s eyes) others more enduring and emotional (e.g. the annual memento of a Christmas card that surviving relatives send to the driver, or an ever-present fear of it happening again). The immediate problem at hand, however, is the proper management of the situation.

7.4.1 Experiencing the suicide: Between tragedy and cold procedures

Usually, only the drivers witness the transition from a living human being to dead body. The memory of the ‘jumper’ may then linger on, but when the train hits someone, the ‘management’ of the collision requires to quickly transform the person to ‘merely’ a body and to treat ‘it’ as matter out of place; a problem disrupting the orderly flow of the daily railway operations. Being ‘merely’ a body opens up the possibility to objectify ‘it’ and to make the problem manageable. This discursive piece of objectification was also employed
by train drivers to make sense of what has happened. One driver remembered how he once went outside with the conductor to see whether the victim was still alive: ‘The impact of a suicide? It really depends on your day and how you feel... But I do find it hard to have to go outside and check: “Is it still alive?”’ (fieldnotes 14 July 2015).

Yet, first thing after a collision is for drivers to take several measures to start the process of coordination as well as to ensure safety for passengers and neighboring trains. The driver stays in the cabin and lights the ‘danger signals’: a white headlamp on the top front of the train and two red lights at the bottom. This warns other approaching train drivers that something has happened, and they should get to a complete stop immediately. He then sends out an alarm call via GSM-R, a wireless communication network, to inform all drivers in a specific area near the collision.

The official procedure starts with the driver calling the train dispatcher responsible for coordination and safety in that area.

In my time as a train dispatcher, we were explicitly taught to not ask the driver how he’s doing. That was not done. You had to behave businesslike: “You’ve hit a person, where are you, what’s the condition of the train?” If you’d ask the driver how he’s doing, you’d run the risk that he’d break down (interview Incident Coordinator reflecting on his dispatching job, 3 August 2016).

In light of a potentially overwhelming situation, the stripping of immediate emotion is an inherent part of the procedure to handle the situation. The organizational strategy to cleanse the terror of a suicide is to provide each actor in the system with clear and ‘simple’ tasks. In fact, as I was often told, the management of a railroad suicide is, at least in procedural terms, the simplest of all disruptions as work is so rigorously divided and clearly spelled out. The conductors’ tasks after a collision, for instance, are dispassionately described in their handbook as: ‘Go to the scene of the incident and give first-aid. Cover mortal remains.’ In the moment itself, however, dispassion constantly needs to be achieved.

After telling the story of the suicide, train driver Benny starts about the conductor going to the scene of the incident: ‘For her it must’ve been harder.’ Benny, in the cabin taking safety measures, was still in touch with the conductor over his handheld radio receiver. He witnessed what happened when the conductor walked towards the back of the train to find the victim:
She immediately saw the victim had died. While covering the body, she saw a shadow emerging from the dusk. ‘It was an older man’, Benny says. The conductor told the man he shouldn’t be here. But he had kept on staring in silence. ‘Sir, you really cannot be here’, she repeated. The older man had looked her into the eyes, and then mumbled softly: ‘I think this is my grandson...’ Benny stops talking for a few seconds, and then he goes on. The conductor did not know what to do, how to respond or continue. Later, after all the necessary procedures were taken, she had told Benny how she could feel her blood run cold when the grandfather spoke those words. The police were able to inform them that the victim had a long record of suicide attempts. After another silence, Benny continues on a lighter note. ‘Eventually you’ll forget it, even such harsh events... But take that little boy over there [Benny points to a young boy who stands just too close to the railroad tracks at the station we are passing by], just looking at him gives me the shivers again’ (fieldnotes 7 August 2015).

What Benny explains as being able to forget ‘such harsh events’, can be interpreted as a way through which he tries to reframe the meaning of the emotional dirtiness of what he has just experienced, a way to ‘neutralize’ the negative value of his work (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, p. 422). Yet, as this passage also shows, tragic situations like these and the organizational cleansing work it evokes, requires dealing with several tensions: covering the dead body to clean the unfortunate scene from passengers or passersby; proceeding with official procedures while feeling your blood run cold; forgetting ‘such harsh events’ while the next suicide is already feared.

Benny, hearing the scene unfold over the radio receiver, continued pursuing his procedures and called the dispatching post.

7.4.2 From train to dispatching post

Being bored with today’s quiet shift, two dispatchers are softly humming a song. It’s an old, tad melancholic Dutch sing-along. When the dispatchers are about to start the chorus, several loud and sharp tones suddenly peal through the control room. It resembles the sound of a slot machine, as if someone has just won the jackpot. It disrupts the murmuring in the control room. The dispatchers fall silent and some stand up to see what is going on (observation 29 October 2013).
You simply cannot placidly pick up the phone when it makes this sound. It has become so deeply ingrained in your system that you have to react as quick as you can. It’s almost like a physical reaction (informal conversation dispatcher 17 March 2014).

The alarm call usually means something went wrong. This time a train driver calls, and when the dispatcher picks up the phone she is informed the driver had a ‘jumper’. While answering the phone and exchanging the first words with the driver, she simultaneously and almost automatically puts a piece of paper in front of her on the desk. The paper says ‘Alarm Form’.

Well, the alarm went off and when I spoke to the driver he, uh, he just was in shock. So, you take some time for that first... And then he gave me some information, but I couldn’t extract all the details, he was too confused. He witnessed how someone stepped onto the tracks far before his train hit him. I have been a conductor and I know those tracks. It’s a long and straight section of the railways so you see the inevitable of it all. Especially if someone stands like this [she spreads her arms wide and looks me straight into my eyes] ... So, well, I only filled in the Alarm Form afterwards. During the conversation I jotted down some notes in the order as the driver gave it to me... I first had to give my own emotions a place too. Just the sound of the alarm gets your adrenaline sky-high, so I really had to take some deep breaths first (interview dispatcher 9 February 2015).

It is not only the sound of the alarm call that triggers an almost bodily reaction in dispatchers. It also evokes personal memories, as many dispatchers have been a driver or conductor themselves.

I’ve been a driver myself, and in the cab car you really see it happening. You can’t imagine what it’s like. Someone jumped in front of my train, unfortunately. You don’t want to know how much impact this has had. I can still see it lying there. It wasn’t human anymore... My brain just couldn’t register it (interview dispatcher 28 November 2014).

The alarm call disrupts the orderly flow of routines at the dispatching post, but it also reminds dispatchers of instances of railroad suicides where they were more personally involved. The emotion that comes along with a collision may hinder a smooth intake of the alarm call in which necessary information needs to be given as quickly and completely as possible. To stop dispatchers from becoming too emotionally attached to the situation and to prevent the system from coming to a halt, the Alarm Form is a way to procedurally cleanse the tragedy of a suicide and to stay focused on managing the disruption.
7.4.3 From dispatcher to Alarm Form – writing the body into text

‘The Alarm Form should make dispatchers feel more responsible for supplying a completely elaborated intake of the alarm call’, says a manager during a meeting. ‘We want to force them to use it during the conversation with the driver so not to forget any information’ (informal conversation 29 October 2014). Several performance indicators were instigated that aimed at measuring, controlling, and ultimately improving the process of the alarm intake, building on the premise that, as a manager responsible for the design of the Alarm Form argued, ‘measurement brings knowledge’ (informal conversation 17 November 2014).

The Alarm Form tells dispatchers which questions to ask, what information is needed and deemed relevant, and it suggests the order in which questions should be asked. From the practical viewpoint of dispatchers, this form with its pre-structured order not always makes sense. ‘It’s 90% of bullshit’, a dispatcher laments. In her opinion, the form consists of too many questions asking for unnecessary information (interview 12 September 2014). This for many dispatchers almost bureaucratic tool stands in tension with their main task: guarding safety on the railways. It urges them to stand still, pause, take a breath, reflect and ask deliberate questions, whereas they feel and see emotion, potential danger, and luring drama. The Alarm Form and its attempt to rationalize the suicide, although aimed at supporting the processes in the best way possible (i.e. from the organizations’ perspective in the most rational way), can be interpreted as what Callon (2002) calls a ‘writing device’. It is a way to categorize and simplify an otherwise complex situation. It is a ‘cleansing strategy’ that translates a messy and uncontrollable situation into a more orderly object that can be managed. The ‘young man with mental disorders’ and the ‘grandfather that stared me straight into my eyes’ becomes a ‘collision with a person at kilometer 8.6’. From the organizational perspective this makes sense as such an object with neatly ordered categories is easier to manage than subjects in an unpredictable context.

For dispatchers, however, the ‘cold’ form was hard to digest, and they refused to blindly follow the logic behind this tool. Writing the body into the strict text of the Alarm Form was only partially ‘successful’. For dispatchers, the Alarm Form was reminiscent of many other tools and procedures in railway processes that were imbued with a sense of instrumentality. A dispatcher elaborates: ‘They want us to use this form, so we can handle the alarm intake theoretically. But wait a second, you also have to deal with a driver who just ran over and killed a child!’ (interview dispatcher 28 November 2014). Resisting the cold procedures of the Alarm Form, dispatchers attempted to somehow rehumanize the organizational process of a railroad suicide.
7.4.4 From dispatching post to OCCR – from death to disruption

After having finished the alarm intake with the driver and having taken necessary safety measures, dispatchers inform the incident coordinators at the National Coordination Center (OCCR). From here, the official notifications concerning an incident are gathered, bundled, and then reported to the outside world (e.g. police, mortician, fire fighters). At the OCCR, the same alarm sounds as in the dispatching post, but coordinators answer the call quite differently. They let it ring for a few seconds while preparing themselves for the intake, adjusting their headset, and opening the digital window where they fill in all information. This stands in contrast to the dispatchers who, refusing to take the Alarm Form as the lead in their conversation with drivers, have usually jotted down some notes or filled in only a draft version of their Alarm Form; they are dependent on the information the driver provides and what he does and does not remember. To structure this somewhat messy process and by further cleansing the dirty situation into a clean code, the railway organizations designed yet another writing device: the ‘Digital and Intelligent Alarm Form’.

The digital version has the same questions as the dispatchers’ Alarm Form, but here they are inscribed into a computer system. The order in which questions are asked are predefined, so an employee needs to fill in the answer to question 1 before he is able to continue with the next question. With the help of some appealing visuals – an orange line borders the answer box of the question that must be filled in – the system guides (i.e. forces) the structure of the conversation between OCCR employee and dispatcher. Moreover, the digital Alarm Form is connected to diverse other ‘smart’ systems, so, while filling in the form a range of necessary information is automatically generated (e.g. filling in the location of the collision automatically makes the system search for the maps that correlate to this location). The alarm cannot be officially registered and sent to the emergency services before all the necessary questions are answered.

Obviously, this procedure is legitimizied as a matter of handling the incident as efficiently as possible with as little disturbance for other trains and passengers. Yet, it can also be interpreted as another cleansing strategy through which the railway organizations attempt to almost ritually decontextualize the dead body. In a meeting of a project team responsible for, among others, the digitalization of the Alarm Form, the logic behind the digitalization is explained both in terms of efficiency (i.e. the emergency services are reached quicker) and effectiveness (i.e. the alarm intake is always complete since it cannot be sent out before all necessary questions are answered). The team members agree that more structure is needed
in handling incidents because ‘standardization is good’ and ‘the less freedom [in intakes] the better’ (observation project team 19 January 2015). In the next session they clearly frame the digitalization in terms of cleaning up disorder: the old way of alarm intakes is ‘messy’ and ‘polluting the system’, whereas the new process is about ‘sanitization’ and ‘cleaning up this mess’ (observation project team 16 February 2015). Whereas dispatchers used to be in charge during the conversation with coordinators by providing all the information gathered from the driver in their own practically logical order, the digital Alarm Form forced this relationship to change. The coordinators now became responsible for guiding the conversation and deciding the questions asked. According to a manager, they were now teaching OCCR employees to ‘just be more bitchy’ (interview 1 October 2015), to take charge and let the structure of the digital form be leading.

Most dispatchers, however, thought this systemic and ‘clean’ intake of an alarm call was too distant from what was actually going on, and they mentioned several times that it did not feel respectful to be asked questions in such a forced order about a rather emotional event. The world of efficiency and the world of piety are contrasted at these points in the cleansing of the suicide. These different ‘worlds’ relate to who has or has not seen the jumper or the body. Whereas for train driver and conductors the body also concerns a human being, and for train dispatchers the suicide at least evokes a memory of a person behind the tragic act, it is for coordinators in the OCCR possible to remain distanced and treat the body on the railroad as ‘merely’ an object, a disruption to be managed, matter out of place. In terms of Pachirat’s (2011) ‘politics of sight’, unlike the slaughter industry where only ‘the knocker’ sees the animal being slaughtered, a railroad suicide involves more witnesses. The procedural cleansing of the organizations can be seen as a way to prevent the body as a subject to penetrate the system and shape how the disruption is handled.

Based on the information put in the digital Alarm Form, a decision tree automatically starts, aiming to define what type of Train Incident Scenario (T.I.S.) this particular incident concerns. A suicide falls under the rubric of a T.I.S. 3.1. After the alarm intake of a suicide, when all necessary boxes are checked by the OCCR coordinator, the following message is send out: ‘T.I.S. 3.1: collision with person, bike, mopeds, or other small object’. All contextual details of the collision are now ‘cleansed’ and categorized into increasingly larger, dispassionate aggregates. ‘The young man looking into my eyes and then jumped’ is now a T.I.S. 3.1. The collision concerns a human, or perhaps some other small object.
7.5 Back to reality – re-embodying the body

By the time the T.I.S. 3.1 message is sent out, the conductor may have finished covering up the bodily remains, the train driver walks through the train to find if passengers need support, and passengers at nearby stations are informed: ‘Due to a collision with a person, no traffic in the direction of Amsterdam is possible.’ It is also at this point that a team of railway emergency service employees is informed. The team that I studied was stationed in a nondescript building on the edge of the city. The contrast between their office and the sanitized environment of coordination centers was great, the building located on a spread out industrial area where trucks of refuse collectors roamed freely while taking the rubbish of the city to nearby dump area.

It was also here at the emergency services that the contrast between the two worlds – that of managing the suicide in efficient terms and that of handling the body with a sense of piety – was most apparent, as exemplified in the following examples:

Two Duty Officers [operational head of emergency services] are engaged in a heated debate. Yesterday there was a meeting aimed at making processes more ‘lean’. One of the participating managers had urged to look at the procedures after a suicide. He expected others to come with ‘creative solutions’ and to ‘think out of the box’. To stimulate the discussion, he had started: the main issue with a railroad suicide, according to him, is that it often happens during busy hours, causing delays for other trains. He pondered the option to leave the body ‘on site’ – putting it next to the tracks, covering it up with a blanket, and have it ‘guarded’ by an employee of the emergency services – so everything could be handled ‘at a more convenient time’ (informal conversation 12 August 2015).

The two Duty Officers are visibly upset and say that, although it was perhaps only to provoke a discussion, they find it an incredible idea, neglecting any kind of respect towards the victim. A similar controversy happened when the newly appointed president-director talked at an annual event, saying that: ‘When I get a text message on my phone after a suicide, I usually think: “Damn it, why didn’t you go choose a more convenient and less busy time?”’ This statement was heavily contested in online discussion forums and a controversial topic during several days amongst railway employees.21

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21 See https://nos.nl/artikel/2043452-woede-om-uitspraak-prorail-topman-over-zelfmoord-op-spoor.html
7.5.1 Putting the code ‘back on track’

That these remarks were met with such controversy can be understood once we consider that, after the carefully orchestrated cleansing work that has translated the dead body into a clean code, ironically there still is a body or, rather, body parts that need to be ‘cleaned up’. The employees of the emergency services are the ones who, after all the cleansing work during the alarm intake, engage in the cleaning of train and tracks in the more literal sense. For this physical cleaning work, it is necessary to bring context back into the body:

The beeper of Freddie, Duty Officer Rail, beeps loud. He reads: ‘T.I.S. 3.1. Thijs, put on your footgear as we have a jumper’. My heart starts pumping, but Freddie, with an almost fatherly tone, comforts: ‘Boy, you are the one to decide what you do and don’t want to see, ok?’ I nod, though I don’t know what I’m feeling or thinking. Freddie remains calm. He first finds out more details about the situation, as T.I.S. 3.1 is only little informative to him. He opens a new window on his computer screen to find maps of the area where the incident happened. Moving his mouse along the tracks on the map, he estimates where the train must be stranded and if there are additional details that may influence his work at the scene of the incident. He calls the dispatcher who had the alarm intake with the driver of this train, as he can provide more information than the code on his beeper (observation 4 March 2015).

Freddie tries to re-contextualize the abstract code T.I.S. 3.1. He knows the code means that the incident involved ‘a collision with a person, bike, moped or other small object’ but he needs additional information to form a picture of what might be going on. In other words, a Duty Officer Rail knows that the clean code hides a reality that may be far more dirty or horrific. They need to find out ‘what is really going on’, ‘where the train is located exactly’ in order to assess how the evacuation of passengers should happen and ‘whether or not they have to pass the mortal remains’ (interview Duty Officer Rail, 27 May 2015).

7.5.2 Arriving at the scene: The harsh reality behind the code

The emergency crew usually does not hold a grudge against jumpers, which are victims to them. As one Duty Officer put it: ‘They don’t want to die, but being-dead is the only way they’re able to live’ (interview 24 September 2015). Yet, while normalizing death on this symbolic level, in practice doing so may be harder. To start, the emergency crew usually does not know what to expect exactly. They know they may arrive in a visually horrible
situation, especially if the body is, how they call it, a case of ‘a long corpse’ (i.e. when a body is ‘fragmented’ or smeared out over a distance of sometimes several hundreds of meters). One remembers an especially horrid case, where a man had jumped in front of a train just before a railway-bridge: ‘There were all these grids and gratings surrounding and underneath this bridge and, well, these had acted as cheese slicer’. The Duty Officer moves his interlocked fingers apart, illustrating how the gratings had ‘torn the body to pieces’ (fieldnotes 30 July 2015).

When asked, the emergency service employees were usually quite specific in describing the scene of a railroad suicide. Arriving at the scene, they may have to move their bodies through mortal remains which, besides clearly discernible body parts, mainly consists of ‘sticky stuff’ that has the tendency ‘to splash back’ when wading through it (interview 31 March 2014). The olfactory senses may also remind what is going on, as ‘the smell of death... is penetrating, really disgusting... it sticks to you and you immediately know when someone has jumped’ (interview 22 April 2014). Moreover, although the bodies of the employees were tightly ‘sealed off’ from the dirty environment (e.g. through protecting uniforms, safety boots, and gloves), bodily remains could still permeate these boundaries at times: ‘Our uniform isn’t fully ‘aerosol’-proof. Aerosol is basically a solution of water and mist, and it happens all too often that we end up in this mist-cloud of water and blood’ (interview 10 February 2014). What’s more, seeing the victim from too close may be traumatic, as it can remind of a near family member or, as one put it:

‘It was in the middle of nowhere. So, I’m walking there with a little light, as it was in the middle of the night and very dark, and then suddenly I see the victim with that face staring at me. Just like in that painting [by Edvard Munch] “The Scream”. That was quite shocking’ (interview 3 August 2016)

‘How can you do that?’ It was a question I indeed sometimes asked in silence. Especially so during lunch breaks when the most repulsive stories were told. As the data suggest, the efforts to cleanse the context of the dead body into a manageable code was a source for coping with as well as constraining the work of the emergence services. To elaborate the former, faced with a situation that may seem ‘senseless’, the instrumentality imbued in the practices and procedures of the dirty workers allowed them to focus on just that:
‘It sounds strange, but you just shut off from some of the stuff, so you can commit to just your tasks. You know something nasty happened, but you are just so focused on clearing and cleaning the tracks, so you don’t really see the rest of it all’ (interview 22 April, 2014).

Having a very strong practical task-orientation (‘we have to get this train up and running again’) helped the employees to do their work, to focus on other things than the blanket-covered corpse or blood-spattered front window. One Duty Officer Rail elaborates:

‘When my pager goes off and I see 3.1 collision person, I know I will encounter something that will never live again. But is it a short or a long corpse? Did someone put his head on the tracks and are head and torso neatly separated? Then you will be done in less than an hour. If it got stuck underneath the train it will take longer than when it hit and bounced off. It’s like the work of a butcher. When he sees a cow enter the slaughterhouse he makes a calculation: it will take me this amount of time to stun the animal, the slaughtering will take this much time, it will give me about this many kilos of meat. So, the butcher has a clear plan of action while the layman may think it is so sad for the cow. Well, as a Duty Officer you can’t be afraid of a bit of red meat’ (interview 3 August 2016).

Another coping strategy was that of focusing on the positive or almost heroic aspects of the job, such as the evacuation of passengers after a collision: ‘That’s what we do as well, ask the rest of the boys. We walk through a full train in our uniform. We’re going to save you madam. Don’t worry, we will fix this!’ (interview 15 May 2014). In terms of Ashfort and Kreiner’s (1999) theoretical model on dirty work, this could be explained as ‘refocusing’, that is, shifting attention from the tainted aspects of work to non-stigmatized aspects. What is remarkable about these examples, however, is that such normalization strategies are not only invoked after the fact as a matter of taint management, but are in a practically real sense also a way to deal with dirt in situ.

At the same time, however, the rationality of the code may constrain or hinder the emergency services in their practices. The code has carefully stripped away all contextual elements of this specific suicide to treat it as a more manageable event. Yet, in reality, it remains entirely uncertain what exactly is going on. The ‘status’ of the body determines how long the process will take. In situ, the firefighters may or may not decide to help the railway emergency services to swill out the area, the mortician may or may not need help in collecting body parts, and he may or may not ask them to operate the hearse-trolley, a little cart that can be put onto the railway tracks to collect and remove the body parts (see photo
A dead body on the tracks: Managing and coping with the horrid... 

5). The world of efficiency is badly capable of dealing with these contingencies, and this sometimes clashes with the practical world where employees are aware of their role to deal with the situation in a pious and respectful way.

For instance, I heard regular complaints from emergency service employees that OCCR coordinators remained too focused on procedures to urge that things should go quicker, while these coordinators only have a limited idea of what is going on, i.e. they experience the suicide only through the code. In cases of technical incidents, such as derailments, one of the crew would regularly make photos of the situation to send to the OCCR ‘to show them what is exactly going on and that we’re not just picking our noses’ (informal conversation 19 August 2015). Although employees would refrain from sending photos during incidents with casualties, it shows how actors within the same system may experience a situation radically differently. Another time, a Duty Officer told me that an OCCR coordinator had called him to inform about the ‘prognosis’ of the situation. He had argued that, according to guidelines and procedures, the suicide process should not take longer than 130 minutes whereas this case already took 150 minutes without any concrete prognosis. The Duty Officer, irritated by his remarks, had bit on his lips and had kindly explained what unique situation they were facing: his team and the mortician were, for almost an hour already, searching through the reed-bed...
in a wetland looking for one of the legs of the victim that seemed impossible to find. They were simply not able to proceed, as according to some other standards a mortician cannot leave for the morgue with less than 80% of bodily remains, something duly impossible with only one of the two legs.

7.5.3 A 'cleaned up' scene and some residual dirt

Near the end of the incident, the emergency crew is mostly concerned with removing all ‘recognizable material’, as it often happens that relatives of the victim return to the location or that innocent passerby hike around the area. The ‘small stuff’ – blood, pieces of fat, or bodily fluids – will be washed away by the rain or eaten by the birds and vultures that are, for a while already, circling above the scene and waiting for the last human being to leave.

In a less material sense, however, some traces of residual ‘dirt’ may be found, too. Railroad suicides are not just isolated occurrences. They are also an ever-present potentiality. In an awkward sense, a train driver is always ‘waiting’ for a next collision, and the emergency crew is already preparing for the next. Most are well aware of the fact that being able to deal with the dead body today is not a guarantee for how they will respond to the next case of a railroad suicide:

‘I always walk behind the hearse-trolley, I always use the shovel, and I always sneak into cart... But later when I’m old, when I’m dribbling in the old people’s house and sipping from a whiskey, then they, the hundreds of people that passed away during my shifts, they must stop by. It has to be like that, they are all here somewhere [points towards his head]. I mean, we do things that normal people would usually run away from’ (interview 12 May 2014)

Whereas the cold code T.I.S. 3.1 attempts to neglect the tragedy – i.e. as the horrific situation is not helping the system in an instrumental sense – this does not mean that the tragedy for the people involved is neglected. Not just bodies, but also traumas may have to be cleansed. A Director Incidents, hierarchical manager of the incident chain, elaborates:
'Collisions with a person are dramatic events that must be approached in a very rational way... The emotion of the suicide, the fact that someone has ended his life, you don’t really take that into account. It’s just like, there arises this situation that causes nuisance for the railways and that is what you have to solve. The emotion that employees need to process, on the other hand, that is an important aspect of our conduct of business. But we need a very cold process to see and find out what action is necessary to get the tracks back available as soon as possible. Alongside, you need to set up a process that takes care of the people who are involved’ (interview 6 June 2016).

Once the Duty Officer calls the end of the incident, the status of the tracks is ‘back to normal’. The train has been evacuated and passengers have been transported by other means. The train goes to a special shunting yard to be cleaned more thoroughly. After several hours of hard work, the railway emergency employees go back to their cars. They first disinfect their hands and take off their dirty clothes. Back at the office the men take a shower. The driver and conductor get a day off, or longer if they require so. If they want, they can apply for psychological counseling. The first time drivers step into the cabin again, they drive the same trajectory as where the suicide happened. A close colleague joins to supervise and, should it be necessary, take over. In the railway coordination centers, the indicators slowly change from red back to green. In the system, where all the tasks and actions of incidents are registered, one of the OCCR coordinators closes the tab page of this particular T.I.S. 3.1. It still roams around for the rest of the day, visible as a ticked-off taskbar in the upper left corner of the screen, and tonight it retracts deeper into the system until it becomes mere information.

7.6 Discussion and conclusion

‘Following’ a railroad suicide through the railway system and illustrating how this process is imbued with notions of ‘cleansing work’, I wanted to show how dirty work and taint management is as much an organizational as an individual or occupational phenomenon. Doing so, I have been able to address the critique that the dirty work literature usually takes as a point of departure that dirt is socially constructed, and that dirty workers may engage in symbolic and psychological strategies to counter the taint of their work to create a positive sense of self. Of course, such symbolic normalization strategies are not absent in the data and analysis of this chapter. We have seen evidence of train drivers, conductors, and railway emergency employees who, faced with a horrific or emotional situation, neutralize the burden
of their work by focusing on other aspects of their work or by religiously following their handbooks and procedures. Yet, I wonder whether we can fully capture these normalization strategies under the umbrella of symbolic taint management. Rather than a way to ‘neutralize’ work in retrospect to make it seem less tainted towards others and maintain a positive sense of self, there is also a practically real urgency to cope with the symbolic as well as physical taint that a railroad suicide leaves behind. A dead body on the tracks disrupts the orderly flow of the ‘clean’ railway system, and this order has to be ‘restored’ in very concrete ways: collecting the body or body parts, evacuating the train, cleaning the tracks. As argued before, taking the actual sociomaterial practices of dirty workers into account is necessary to understand the depth and breadth of dirty work and taint management techniques.

By taking the actual practices of dirty workers and the concrete materiality of dirt as a starting point, I have responded to several calls in recent studies to include the broader context in which dirty work takes place into serious account. These studies show the importance of, for instance, the spatial context (Tyler, 2011), dirty work’s sociological consequences (McMurray and Ward, 2014), changing labor markets and new technologies (McCabe and Hamilton, 2015), institutional and cultural constraints (De Rond and Lok, 2016), or the political context (Dick, 2005), and they argue that a more contextualized understanding is necessary in addressing the great diversity and complexity of dirty work. Baran et al. (2012), for instance, argue that a variety of tasks exists within an occupational group, and that some of these tasks can be considered dirty and others less so. My analysis shows, much in line with the study of McCabe and Hamilton (2015), that not only within but also between groups of workers there is great complexity as to how one engages in dirty work. The train driver and the OCCR coordinator experience a railroad suicide radically different, and one can say that, while both are occupied with the very same event, the work of the driver is emotionally and physically far more tainted than that of the coordinator. In a similar vein, while the train dispatcher is assigned to handle the situation by gathering information in an instrumental sense in order to not infect the system with ‘noise’ or ‘dirt’, the emergency service employee has to wade his boots through ‘sticky stuff’ in order to handle the situation. As I have attempted to show in this chapter, the variation in the practices of different dirty workers occupied with the same situation is, while at first glance perhaps a striking observation, a sensible and logical thing to do from the perspective of the organization. The burden of the system is to deal with something that is practically impossible to deal with, to make sense of a situation that is destitute of all things sensible. In purely Weberian terms, then, the task
of such an organization is to rationally engage in action and cast off all things irrational, to
divide work rigorously to avoid ‘contamination’, and to do so through a well-defined set of
impersonal rules and procedures.

In the context of this study, I have interpreted the organizational ‘management’ of
railroad suicides as a matter of ‘cleansing work’. This chapter has illustrated two forms of
cleansing: procedural, and physical. Procedural cleansing is evidenced by the process through
which a railroad suicide is gradually translated into the lifeless code T.I.S. 3.1. It is an attempt
to subsume specific situational details under increasingly larger categories. Through ‘writing
devices’ (Callon, 2002) such as the (digital) Alarm Form, the railway organizations ‘cleanse’
the dirty context of a railroad suicide by treating this specific and subjectively experienced
tragedy as ‘any other’ objective case. For the Alarm Form details do not matter as long as
those details do not hinder the efficient management of the situation. There is a remarkable
spatial element in understanding procedural cleansing: procedures only work as long as
the different hierarchies within the system cannot be contaminated. The rationality of the
code only works as long as the OCCR coordinator in principal remains unaware of what is
going on, as its rationality could otherwise immediately be questioned. The creation of such
boundaries has been explored in the literature on organizational stigma (e.g. Anteby, 2010).
It is related to the strategic use and narrative construction of spatial settings to isolate and
create boundaries between clean/dirty and visible/invisible, as becomes clear in a study on
men’s bathhouses by Hudson and Okhuysen (2009). Describing how such core-stigmatized
organizations legitimize their operations towards suppliers and customers, they observe that
men’s bathhouses engage in spatial isolation processes: ‘The location [of these bathhouses],
architecture, and limited signage made bathhouses nearly invisible and anonymous, obscuring
them from scrutiny by anyone other than those intentionally looking for them’ (2009, p. 141).

Yet, what is carefully cleansed in a procedural way still has to be cleaned in a very
physical way. The conductor, after the collision, goes outside to find and cover the mortal
remains. The railway emergency employees help the mortician collect the body or body
parts, put it on their hearse-trolley and ride it over the tracks. They sometimes take a shovel
to bury miniscule pieces of corpse, and the rest is taken care of by nature. An important
aspect in the physical cleansing is to, to some extent, ‘shut yourself off’ and ‘just’ engage in
what you are ultimately responsible for, namely, that the trains must go on. They must also
shut off their bodies in quite a literal sense to avoid contamination with bacteria and diseases,
and only after the incident will they take off their protective gear, clean their equipment,
clothes, and bodies. Sometimes, also psychological cleansing is in place. Some commence work the following day; some need longer to recuperate, whereas for others this specific suicide was the final straw. The procedural and physical cleansing work are both necessary aspects to handle situations like a railroad suicide, but they can also be a world apart. They invoke a sense of piety, where victims and bodily remains must be treated with respect. Simultaneously, however, life must go on and trains must continue their journey.

Perhaps this is the cliché of our human existence, but how a railroad suicide is ‘managed’ also fits a broader cultural phenomenon. As Knausgard (2012) illustrates, there are two ‘types’ of death and dying. There are the deaths that are exhibited in movies, video games, or in newspapers, and we gratefully and collectively consume and even celebrate these forms of dying. There are also deaths that should be covered immediately; bodies that are transported into hospitals using special lifts to avoid a confrontation between life and death. It is in the latter sense that Kristeva (1982) imagines corpses as somewhere between an object and a subject; the corpse, so she argues, is abject as it is not a mere symbolic representation of death but it invokes a bodily reaction that reminds us that we are mere mortal beings, too. This chapter imagined dirty work beyond matters of symbolic taint management and individual or occupational identities and, instead, accounted for dirt as concrete materiality and how we – organizationally, societally – cleanse the abject in our environments. Taking these two aspects seriously is a way to move towards a deeper and richer understanding of dirty work.