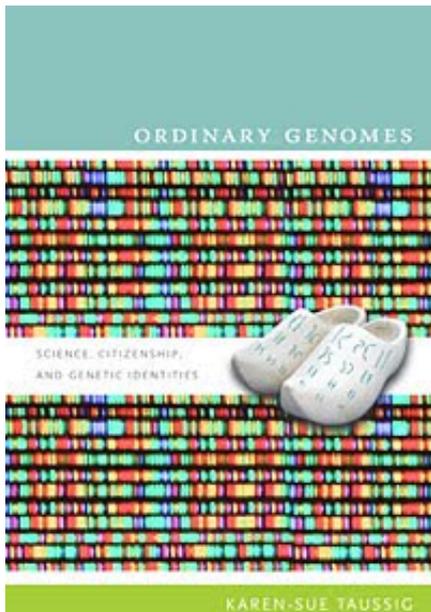


Karen-Sue Taussig's Ordinary Genomes

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[Ordinary Genomes: Science, Citizenship, and Genetic Identities?](#)

by Karen-Sue Taussig?

Duke University Press, 2009
264 pp., \$22.95 (paperback)

Reviewed by Abigail Baim-Lance (Fashion Institute of Technology/SUNY and Researcher, New York State Department of Health, AIDS Institute)

At its brightest moments, [Karen-Sue Taussig's](#) *Ordinary Genomes: Science, Citizenship, and Genetic Identities* (2009) deftly challenges universalist assumptions about the genetic sciences. Taussig observes and analyzes genetic technology in the Netherlands to “localize” it given Dutch culture, politics, and history. Taussig’s monograph provides a counter-weight not only to the bold universal truths declared in the field of science, but also to representations of “the west” as a monolith, because the forces that shape genetic science and biomedicine are, in all their complexity, distinctly Dutch.

The five intriguingly titled chapters of the book (like “Backward and Beautiful” and “Bovine Abominations”) are based on fieldwork Taussig conducted in the 1990s at one of eight nationalized genetic testing

centers, which were at the time the only settings in which individuals were able to test for genetic linkages to biomedical conditions. Taussig tells us that individuals sought diagnoses for conditions that they, or their children, or their future children, possessed, or might develop. Once tested, clinicians linked people to therapeutic services at other sites, or advised them in reproductive decision-making. In addition to observing the interactions between clinicians and individuals seeking tests, Taussig bases her analysis on data gathered in a range of meetings, drawing especially from one called “the audit,” in which diagnostically difficult cases were presented and discussed by clinicians and geneticists. She conducted interviews with them, as well as with individuals attending the clinic. Though most of Taussig’s fieldwork-based analysis draws from the center, she also calls two high schools and a community center primary field sites. She further relied upon formal and informal conversations with a range of Dutch people about genetics, and she traced circulating public discourse about genetic science.

What is culturally specific about genetics in Holland, and how does its implementation illuminate important matters of social life? From the outset, the reader is drawn into an argument about how genetics is a platform that has been colonized by a set of specifically Dutch “values,” or a “world view,” or “social ideals”—terms that Taussig uses interchangeably throughout the monograph (32-33). The particular values (or worldview or ideals) couple “the desire for ordinariness...and a commitment to tolerance” (5). Finding ways for people to “fit in” by demarcating, but also accepting differences is a widespread societal mechanism and attendant social structure, and Taussig argues that it is the basis of Dutch genetic practices. In her formulation, being ordinary, or *gewoon* in Dutch, has been made possible via the diagnostic work of genetic testing, which produces and substantiates nosological categories in which people can be placed. If they were not considered “normal” before, then a biomedical category allowed a person to *become* ordinary, and to be better incorporated socially as *relatively* ordinary to that category.

Taussig’s overarching argument meets an examination of the historic precedence of this social structure in the first chapter. She lays out how the concept of *verzuiling*, or “pillarization,” became a distinctive Dutch process of normalizing diversity in the mid-nineteenth century as a way of fostering religious tolerance. Demarcating difference meant that, at least in theory, each religious group was recognized and accepted. Over time, this practice became a kind of infrastructure to incorporate emergent social blocs (*zuij*); in passing, Taussig recalls the incorporation of socialists and humanists into *verzuiling*, demonstrating that segmentation moved beyond religion to other political and social associations. In the aftermath of World War II, pillarization became even more central as a “worldview [providing] the conceptual model for incorporating new or divergent social practices

into Dutch social life” (28), and thereby a plausible organizing principle in the field of genetic science.

The wide lens meets the ethnographic account of genetic testing in Taussig’s subsequent chapters, as she describes the centralized organizational structure of testing (chapter two), the normalizing practices associated with testing (chapter 3), and the way testing has become a platform to make sense of the Netherlands’ social geography. Her insights are generally offered as support for her structural argument: clinicians are shown to go to great lengths to identify disease conditions and place individuals in bounded syndrome groups, while individuals seek genetic testing to substantiate their desires to just be “ordinary.” At one point, Taussig recounts a story a clinician told her about a pregnant woman who said that she does not mind if her child has learning disabilities because “...We aren’t very intelligent either. It would be very difficult for us to have a child who was very clever. It would be worse for us if you told us that we should expect a child that is very smart” (131). This example, among others, is meant to show how testing enhances the possibility of making and maintaining groups of people who are just like one another.

There is another level of Taussig’s analysis having to do with the contradictions and tensions in maintaining this same-but-different rubric. This emerged not so much in the world of genetic testing per se, but within Dutch social structure more generally. As Holland becomes a nation of people who represent diverse ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds, classification as a means of fostering tolerance is increasingly tested. Further, the Dutch collective continues to grapple with the bodies that perished via mechanisms of classification in the 20th century. The history of Nazi science and eugenics does seem to link to people’s concerns about genetics, but how this bears upon practices of testing is largely unexplored in Taussig’s narrative. Rather, in her final chapter, Taussig connects the dots by examining a political campaign against transgenics – genetic modification and cloning – to suggest that the logic of tolerance and difference can hit a limit if genetics moves from the plane of informed decision-making around health, illness, and treatment, to being perceived as a rationale for social engineering. In Taussig’s estimation, what it means to be Dutch and what it means to belong to the nation are questions that dialogue around the frontiers of genetic possibilities.

By book’s end, Taussig impresses upon the reader the ways that social structural mechanics echo, and perhaps become amplified in different areas of Dutch contemporary life. Her attention to the way such social contexts shape genetic practices makes *Ordinary Genomes* a useful classroom text to examine science as cultural manifestation. The implications around the limits of tolerance in regards to an increasingly heterogeneous nation is certainly timely, but unfortunately is more thinly

developed ethnographically and not as well connected to what I find most interesting about this text.

In fact, one might ask if something is not lost by Taussig's focus on making and maintaining social structure as the unit of analysis, especially in terms of national identity. Her generalizations of normative values and related practices require some caution as they might substantiate crude stereotyping. Further, a pitfall resulting from the framework is that the details of social life are at times clumsily pushed past. Taussig's data invite more meaningful consideration for a reader who brings her interpretive imagination to the material. For example, to my mind the monograph brings forward remarkable practices of interpretation taking place at the genetics center. Photographs taken with a camera are used in diagnostic practices just as much as laboratory tests. Family members are brought into discussions because of the inherited nature of genetic material and clinicians rely on their ability to reveal, and understand, relations between people. This small opening is ripe for thought, and surely there are other moments like this in the text. I encourage a reading of *Ordinary Genomes* because of its analysis, and also as an exercise in analytical departure, and unstructured flight.

Abigail Baim-Lance received her PhD in Anthropology from the Johns Hopkins University. She is currently co-PI of an ethnographic study sponsored by the New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute.

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