

# **Book Review: 'Metasex - The Discourse of Intimacy and Transgression' (2020), by A. Storch and N. Nassenstein**

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Storch and Nassenstein's, *Metasex - The Discourse of Intimacy and Transgression* (2020) propose a holistic approach to the discursive strategies and cultural meanings around sexualities and metasex, namely the 'metapragmatic discourses on sex' (p. 1). Broadly defined, sex talk (sexting, jokes, seduction, etc.) is nowadays studied in prominently online settings in the West. However, its existence is transposed into face-to-face encounters in somewhat 'staged' and 'embodied' experiences in other parts of the world (p. 14). Using a pragmatic and ethnolinguistic lens, the book moves away from a sensationalist and etic interpretation of sexual discourses, materials, and consumerism by broadening the research scope and taking into account Southern and African perspectives that reveal the intricacies and multiple meanings of metasex and discourses of intimacy, transgression, and sensualization. The authors exemplify inventive and complex translanguaging and multimodal practices to work around existing taboos. From censorship to the offensive and the cultural do's and don'ts that may exist in various levels of

society (p. 15), such studies, therefore consider and explore the implications and traumatic consequences of (post) colonialism on bodies, power relations, and vulnerability (p. 17).

The book is divided into five chapters, each of them presenting and analyzing metasex in different ways. The authors admitted to their conscious decision to bring together a diverse, almost unusual presentation of research work, surely in terms of topics, but also geographies and times (p. 4). Doing so, rightly shows the intricate and sly nature of metasex discourses, finding their way in the often mundane and everyday communicative acts. From bar talks to advertisements, as well as social media, Storch and Nassenstein write about metasex in the context of 1) the mediatizing and sharing of 'dick pics' and other sexual content, 2) the sexualized and pornographic essences of food ('foodporn') in various forms and the transgressive act of eating, and 3) the socializing and linguistic strategies used in intimate encounters as well as the playful and flirtatious performances of bonding.

The introductory chapter sets the tone and exposes the multilayered and porous boundaries of the metapragmatic discourses on sex. By delving precisely into discussions of intimacy and transgression, Storch and Nassenstein present fluid narratives of metasex and explore its nuanced and competing realities in the Global South, inevitably interwoven with and tied to elements of power, creativity, and agency. This body of work revolves around these central questions: ‘How do people address sex talk, taking into consideration taboos, linguistic etiquettes, concepts of shame and respect, and how explicitly or implicitly does sex talk play a role? What are the stories and rumors around sexual practices, objects and bodies that are spread in non-Western contexts?’ (p.11). In these countries (i.e. Nigeria, DR Congo, Kenya, and Uganda) metasex is not necessarily a matter that is relayed or interpreted as banter or in humoristic ways. Rather, it often deals with significant actions and experiences of intimacy, rooted in marginal and oppressive realities that may have meaningful impacts on the protagonists, while being on the verge of or undoubtedly transgressive.

Chapter 2 focuses on the mediatization of sexual content, especially what the authors refer to as ‘dick pics’, a quite recent phenomenon that made us more bearable to transgression (p. 20). Sometimes solicited and appreciated, sometimes unwanted and perverted, these images are more than ever widely accessible and mediatized online. Here, the authors are ‘studying the ways in which images of genitalia are made meaningful as social activity, and as speech acts that address very particular social and cultural practices and processes’ (p. 22). ‘Dick pics’ are perceived in multiple transgressive

ways; from the stigma around the consumerism of porn-like material to their role as a conversation starter or as a ritualized exchange on dating sites (p. 25). Looking at the Nigerian context, the metasex discourse on these images bring to the surface other social realities of insecurity and vulnerability. The emphasis on complete bodies (p. 29), the importance of size paired with the rumors of ‘shrinking’ genitals are central to the spread of fear campaigns mainly alimented by homophobia (p. 43) and other perceived deviant sexual practices. The penis is a vulnerable point of the manly and providing man, whose incompleteness exposes him to social marginalization or violence, therefore susceptible to affect his perception in culturally strict power distribution and gender norms. The phallus is perceived as a cornerstone of the fragile masculinity, shifting the discourses from the Western and colonial gaze of the hypersexual, powerful, and exotic African body (p. 41). Such accounts bring into the (academic) discussion a different perspective on sexual discourse.

Chapter 3 explores transgression and intimacy in the discourses on sex and food. Concepts such as ‘food-as-porn’ (p. 51), ‘food-as-intimacy’ (p. 71), ‘food-as-transgression’, and food-as-healing (p. 79) are among the topics touched in these pages. The authors again expose a plentitude of experiences. The pornographic nature of food and eating is defined by a lack of self-control, a transgressive act of ‘sensual indulgence’ in a place of filthy abundance (p. 52), which they articulate as ‘a strange twist that makes eating complicated, sinful, once it is no longer targeted at survival but at sensual pleasure instead’ (p. 52). From a greasy feast to the organic and locally grown farmer’s basket, food often fosters authentic and deep connections

(p. 51), imagined or real, yet potentially subversive or obscene. It exists in explicit manners when analyzed through the photographic trends on social media or the use of emoji in sexting as euphemistic substitutions of the genitals, but it also manifests itself in more implicit forms. For instance, the authors describe the linguistic metaphors pertaining to sexual education with the use of expressions borrowed from the cooking lexicon in Uganda (p. 68) in order to illustrate and avoid verbal taboos. This chapter, therefore, goes beyond a simple description of food as a socializing element but goes deeper in looking for its complex and manifold meanings in relation to its sometimes transgressive - hedonistic and overarching - nature in the postcolonial world.

The fourth chapter, and the last one written by the authors, dives into the various manners in which people connect, socialize and create liminal or lasting bonds. Storch and Nassenstein analyze the discursive constructions and social exchanges between people in touristic places known for sexual encounters in Uganda. The relationship between the paying tourist and the sex workers are often unequal which is one of many 'experiences of ruinous yet bonding relationships [that] reflect the metalanguage about intimate practices of social cohesion' (p. 87). These socializing moments are rich in material and represent a window into the practices and modalities of interaction with which people seek, seduce, and engage with potential sexual partners. The authors explore the metalinguistic patterns and tactics that people strategically use to bond, describe their fantasy, and more generally, verbally discuss sexual matters in one or many languages (p. 88-93). In these nightspaces, the intimacy is built on different grounds: on one side, it

stems from the European consumerist - 'colonial' - gaze, and on the other, it arises from the sex worker's hope and desire for 'stability and fixity in a volatile paradise, where deep misery and inhuman exploitation are expected' (p. 89). The transgressive is woven into these nocturnal flirts, their complexity, their intentions, in a context where the roles are clearly and historically defined. In addition, these authors also explore more innocuous and popular sexual bonding practices, through games and performances (i.e. Mbetologie) in DR Congo. These are not transactional, but rather empowering (p. 105) by playing on exaggeration and mimicry in an informal-like, educative tone (p. 111). They also look at the materiality of bonding, through a discussion of love lock installations in public places (p. 113). In sum, this chapter exposes the intricacies and various strategies involved when sexual matters are discussed in order to create ties and relationships.

Chapter 5 is an afterword written by the Africanist Agnes Brühwiler who adds to the content of this book by discussing some of her observations in Tanzania in relation to sex talk. She also summarizes in an elegant manner the main takeaways from this book.

Storch and Nassenstein's studies have brought to attention the complexities of sexual discourses in many contexts, exposed the multilayered meanings of transgression and intimacy, as well as acknowledged the interrelation between power, gender, race, space, past, and present. As Brühwiler writes: '[c]ommendably, the authors regard the Global South and its peoples as a space from which knowledge and theories about gender relations, power and sexuality can be elaborated and applied even beyond that space' (p.123).

This book is an excellent read for anyone interested in works on language, gender, and sexuality in Africa, or anywhere in the world. The authors' descriptive abilities and (auto) ethnographic accounts allowed me to picture myself in these various locations and overall, made the theoretical

content very accessible, yet substantial for any type of reader. The disparities between the topics covered could be as much a burden as a strength, but this book rightly fulfills its goals in bringing Southern perspectives into the academic discussions. It was a pleasant book and above all, an enlightening one.