Review: Prita Meier, *The Surface of Things: A History of Photography From the Swahili Coast*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024

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The Surface of Things is a richly layered work that skilfully weaves together what is known of the histories of the people whose photographs were taken, with the use of these images as a springboard for object-based research. With over 200 images published for the first time, the book makes an immensely valuable contribution to the field, offering a rich visual archive for other researchers. Prita Meier's incisive examination of her discipline's challenges paves the way for a fresh perspective on the history of the Swahili Coast, a region where 'people, things, and ideas from the African heartland, the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and Europe have converged for a very long time, creating overlapping material landscapes' (p. 232). The introduction opens with a compelling exploration of how both the medium of photography and the people of the Swahili Coast that are defined by a fluidity that defies fixed or static interpretations. Swahili peoples embrace evolving languages and possess complex identities that challenge colonial categorizations. Similarly, photographs – despite their seemingly fixed nature – carry meanings that shift over time and vary depending on who is doing the looking. To borrow the words of poet Terrance Hayes: 'Never mistake what it is for what it looks like.'[1]

Meier's thoughtful departure from Pinney's generative concept of 'surfacism' lies in her consistent effort to centre her analysis on the 'Swahili Coast users of photography' (p.16). This approach acknowledges the agency of the sitters and underscores the book's strength in raising as many questions as it seeks to answer. However, a tension between agency and oppression remains unresolved throughout the book, particularly in its exploration of photographs of enslaved people. One such example is how to reconcile the concept of certain photographs as 'documents of sartorial joy' (p. 235) with the limited understanding we have of the agency enslaved women may have had in shaping these choices.

[1] Terrance Hayes, *How to be Drawn* (New York: Penguin Books, 3).

In ‘Stilled Life,’ the second chapter, Meier thoughtfully obscures the nudity of women whom photographer Oskar Baumann forced into ‘denigrating poses’ (p. 59). Her analysis reaches beyond violation to suggest that some women, based on their poses, may have exercised a degree of agency. This serves as an important reminder of the sitters’ potential self-determination, but it also sits uneasily alongside the harrowing examples she provides of how enslaved people’s lives could be brutally ended on the whims of their enslavers. The question remains whether her choice to obscure nudity offsets the voyeuristic origins of the photographs—a decision likely to divide readers depending on their perspectives.

The third chapter, ‘Oceans of Postcards,’ delves into ‘creative counter-readings’ (p. 85) of photographs taken in deeply unequal circumstances, arguing that these images hold meanings that go beyond surface-level assumptions. Meier effectively critiques the immediacy of photography, cautioning against seeing in these images what one hopes for rather than what was actually present. Particularly with regard to race science that she briefly references, her analysis could have more fully situated these photographs within the global networks of power and photographic practices that shaped both their production and their circulation.

In chapter 4, ‘The Ornamental Body,’ the author continues to navigate the unresolved tension between historical horrors and moments of agency. Meier uses archival research, including from newspaper reports, and poetry to illuminate the lives of enslaved women, exposing their vulnerabilities and the stark inequalities they endured. Yet, even as she highlights their roles within opulent settings, the photographs reveal their status more vividly than the sparse documentation ever could. While this re-visualization invites us to read against the grain of what is apparent, readers deploying a contemporary equalizing gaze—looking for joy and resistance in these images—risk erasing the very inequalities that defined these sitters’ lives.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on photographs with richer documentation, often depicting elite subjects or individuals resisting colonial authority. These chapters illustrate how clothing transitioned from a symbol of solidarity to a tool of mockery and ultimately a medium through which colonial powers exerted control. This thematic shift effectively ties back to earlier chapters while broadening the scope of the book's enquiry.

The final chapter returns to the central themes of movement and connectivity, tracing how photography flowed through the Swahili Coast and the unexpected lives of itinerant and international women who inhabited this vibrant network. By the end, Meier reaffirms her assertion that photographs serve as dense, layered objects—both cultural

artefacts and historical witnesses. Her exploration of pose and appearance, with the use of fascinating case studies, reflects the tension between what photographs reveal and obscure, reminding readers of the meanings these images might have held for the sitters themselves.

While *The Surface of Things* explores a history of photography on the Swahili Coast with impressive depth, it does not fully transcend the binaries of colonizer and colonized, enslaver and enslaved—a limitation perhaps shaped by the absence of many sitters' voices in the archival record. Nevertheless, the book's dual appeal to historians of the Swahili Coast and photography ensures it will remain an essential reference, offering both a rich archive and an effective call to embrace photographs as objects as a starting point for fluid and mobile enquiries.