

Indigeneity and the ambivalence of eco-cultural imageries: A critical review of Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis*

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Sebastião Salgado's photographic project *Genesis* seeks to portray the planet's most 'pristine' landscapes and Indigenous cultures. Through its aesthetic power, this project leads us to examine the temptations of falling into romanticized and dangerous tropes of the 'noble savage' and 'endangered other'. By focusing on the ambivalence in Salgado's portrayal of Indigeneity, his project can be seen as a site of both mourning and transformation: a visual elegy that risks aestheticizing suffering, yet also gestures toward post-anthropocentric modes of responsiveness, poetic memory and embodied ecological responsibility.

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Even at the apparent apex of human dominion over nature, the deep interdependencies between human and non-human life have become undeniable. The boundaries once drawn to separate the two have proven porous – both ontologically and ecologically. Yet, even as we confront this entanglement, there is no return to a mythical pre-modern, putative Eden.

Instead, we need a radical decentring of the human – a shift toward a post-anthropocentric worldview. Only through such reconfiguration can we hope for the survival of nature–culture relationships amid planetary crisis. Understanding where we stand today, and how we might move differently, requires juxtaposing past and present, untouched and transformed, human and more-than-human. The arts – particularly those that render ecological realities sensuously visible, such as theatre and photography – play a vital role

in communicating the stakes of climate change. Iconic images, like those captured from space by astronaut Chris Hadfield, offer rare perspectives on Earth's fragility.

Likewise, Sebastião Salgado's photographic series *Genesis* invites viewers into an evocative encounter with landscapes and life forms seemingly untouched by industrial modernity. Salgado (1944–2025) was a Brazilian documentary photographer and photojournalist. Together with his wife and creative partner, Lélia Wanick Salgado, he founded *Instituto Terra*, a visionary project that seeks to heal what has been broken – reforesting lands degraded by human hands and rekindling a rural world on the verge of disappearance.

In this essay, I reflect on Salgado's *Genesis* project as a poetic and political provocation – one that both seduces and unsettles. While the project offers a powerful aesthetic experience of 'pristine' nature, it also raises critical questions. What, precisely, is the status of the Indigenous peoples depicted? Are we witnessing the revival of the 'Noble Savage' trope or the ideology of the 'Endangered Other'? What are the ethical and epistemic implications of such visual elegies for nature and culture? Engaging these questions, I situate Salgado's work within broader debates about post-humanism, poetic expression and the socio-cultural critique of the Anthropocene (cf. Küpers, 2020). Drawing on the idea of a poietic-poetic mode of perception, I argue for a shift from nostalgic visions of lost origins toward a post-dualistic ontology and toward enlivenment and a bio-cultural poetic way of regenerative dwelling.

Salgado's *Genesis* project

Genesis is the outcome of an eight-year photographic odyssey through some of the planet's most remote and ecologically intact regions, and functions as both visual testimony and aesthetic offering. It explores what Salgado calls "the most pristine" parts of the planet – landscapes, seascapes, flora, fauna, and Indigenous cultures that, in his view, remain relatively untouched by industrial modernity. In her curator's note, his partner Lélia Salgado describes the project as "a quest for the world as it was formed, as it evolved, as it existed for millennia before modern life accelerated and began distancing us from the very essence of our being" (<https://galeriasmunicipais.pt/en/exposicoes/genesis>). The project is thus both an artistic and spiritual journey into a world before – or recovering from – the transformations wrought by the Anthropocene.

Unlike Salgado's earlier work, which documented the visible scars of displacement, labour, migration and other devastations wrought by global capitalism, *Genesis* shifts attention to that which appears to have resisted or eluded such damage: places and people that evoke a mythical prehistory. Through light and lens, Salgado captures not what has been lost, but what remains – fragile, persistent, sublime.

The artfully composed black-and-white photographs are breathtaking: sweeping glaciers, dense jungles, desert plateaus, volcanic highlands and the dignified presence of animals and human communities alike. These pictures express awe and fascination, evoke reverence and invite consolation, for the artist as for the viewer. Yet, while on the surface they invite us to establish a

contemplative relation with nature's magnitude, beauty and power, digging beneath these seductions of the sublime, we find that Salgado's project is interpretively ambiguous. On one reading it can appear to retreat into a pre-modern vision of purity and original harmony, while on another it can look as if it advances a post-humanist view that decentres the human perspective within broader ecological relationships.

This ambiguity is clearest when we examine the portrayals of Indigenous peoples featured in *Genesis*. In Salgado's framing, they are not merely subjects of ethnographic interest, but embodiments of another way of being – one that unsettles Western assumptions about progress, development and mastery. But can these images help us unlearn the assumptions and false certainties of a civilization that has led us to ecological brinkmanship? And if so, how might we relate to these 'Others' without romanticizing, appropriating or fossilizing them as symbols of what we have lost? In these tensions – between nostalgia and critique, aesthetic awe and ethical reflection – *Genesis* performs a subtle but urgent function: it unsettles. It asks us to linger with what endures and to consider what it means to witness, through the photographic gaze, not only what is at risk of vanishing, but also what might yet guide us toward a more inhabitable future.

Indigeneity and the 'noble savage' trope

In Salgado's portrayal, Indigenous communities are presented as inhabiting deep ecological symbiosis, having developed ingenious ways of meeting their needs while preserving the integrity of their environment. Yet this aesthetic reverence risks reinscribing an old trope: the romanticized figure of the 'noble savage'.

Long familiar in Western thought, the noble savage is often cast as simple, innocent and untainted by the moral decay of modern civilization – a being whose virtue is inseparable from their proximity to nature. Such depictions simultaneously idealize and infantilize, portraying Indigenous life as pure yet doomed while erasing complexity and agency. Why does this trope persist in the Anthropocene? Why does the ideal of a prelapsarian harmony with nature hold such appeal for late- and post-modern subjects disillusioned with their own civilization? Does it project our longing for innocence, or critique modernity through imagined alternatives?

In Salgado's photographs, Indigenous figures appear as visual anchors of an ecological imaginary. But are they also being positioned as relics – remnants of an earlier stage in human development that we can no longer access, except as spectators or mourners? Do these images risk turning living cultures into museum pieces – preserved snapshots of 'authenticity' frozen within an evolutionary narrative that positions them as earlier stages of human development? Salgado thus joins a long tradition of travellers, artists and critics of civilization who have projected meaning onto the 'Other'. Since Columbus, Indigenous peoples have been described as generous and beautiful – traits idealized as a foil to European corruption. In the 20th century, neo-primitivist movements in art similarly sought to retrieve a 'golden age' of human expression from beyond the reach of industrialization and rationalism.

To be clear, Salgado's images do not replicate the colonial gaze in any overtly racist or ethnocentric way. There is no suggestion of Indigenous inferiority; rather, his lens honours their resilience and ecological intelligence. Still, critical absences remain. The photographs omit inconvenient truths: the presence of internal conflict, environmental degradation initiated by Indigenous groups themselves, and practices that may not conform to modern ideals of harmony or nonviolence.

This approach distances Salgado from scholars like Napoleon Chagnon, whose controversial *Noble Savages* (2013) depicted Yanomami life as inherently shaped by aggression and evolutionary conflict. Similarly, Salgado does not subscribe to Jared Diamond's form of ecological determinism, which tends to explain societal dynamics through environmental factors while subtly reinforcing evolutionary hierarchies of cultural development (e.g. Diamond, 1997; 2005). Unlike Diamond's systematic comparative framework in *The World Until Yesterday* (2012) – which explicitly examines what modern societies might learn from traditional practices in conflict resolution, child-rearing and risk management – Salgado's engagement with Indigenous wisdom is more suggestive and poetic. Diamond's central question – *What can contemporary Western societies learn from traditional ones?* – hovers over *Genesis*, but Salgado offers no prescriptions. Instead of anthropological analysis, he presents fragments of a premodern imaginary that invite contemplation rather than comparison. His work gestures rather than argues, suggesting that traditional ways of life may offer value by opening space for reflection on how we moderns live and what we might recover.

Nevertheless, Salgado's portrayal risks veering into what might be called a form of 'nature mystique' or 'romantic naturalism' – a seductive belief that all that is deemed 'natural' is inherently good, pure or spiritually superior. This view suggests, albeit implicitly, that Mother Earth bestows her favour upon those who live in harmony with her rhythms – more so than upon the so-called 'civilized' human, estranged from nature by industrial modernity. Such a fantasy is not only reductive but politically fraught. It glosses over the complexity and internal diversity of Indigenous experiences and lifeways, and it obscures the historical fact that the figure of the noble savage has long served ideological purposes – from justifying conquest and colonization to reinforcing paternalistic preservationism. What appears as reverence may thus conceal an unexamined projection – one that flattens difference in the name of ecological purity.

As Ellingson (2001) has compellingly demonstrated in his genealogy of the noble savage trope, this figure has long served multiple ideological functions. Historically, it has been deployed both to rationalize colonial domination – enabling anthropologists and imperial agents to create the cultural climate in which slavery and genocide could be imagined as civilizing necessities – and to romanticize resistance, framing Indigeneity as a reservoir of moral purity or ecological virtue. Its persistence in artistic and popular representations reveals less about the lives of those depicted than about the longings, desires and anxieties of those who observe them.

And yet, even armed with this critical awareness and knowledge, we may still find ourselves drawn to these images – not because they offer unmediated truth, but because they resonate with a deep cultural ambivalence. As witnesses to ecological breakdown, we are haunted by the realization that these last ‘noble savages’ may not survive and soon vanish under the pressures of global(izing) modernity. Paradoxically, this anxiety often gives rise to a preservationist impulse: a desire to fix such communities in place, rendering them timeless, untouched and untouchable. But such a gesture mistakes petrification for preservation, confusing ethical responsibility with aesthetic arrest.

The challenge is to move beyond the myth while remaining open to a relational wisdom these communities offer as living cultures, not static icons. We must resist the urge to cast them as mirrors for our own disillusionment, or as screens onto which we project fantasies of innocence and lost coherence. Instead, we are called to recognize them as participants in an unfolding, entangled planetary story – one marked as much by struggle and transformation as by continuity.

It is essential, therefore, that we approach Salgado’s images with a two-fold awareness: of the visual power they wield in evoking reverence and urgency, and also of the dubious mythic residue they may carry. The ‘noble savage’ is not an innocent figure – it was and is a fabrication with political weight, one that can be resurrected for ideological ends. And do we not, in our moment of civilizational fatigue, find ourselves tempted to read these photographs and their accompanying narratives as vessels for projecting our own disillusionment?

In the face of the perceived failures of late modernity and the fragmentation of postmodern pluralism, these images offer the semblance of wholeness. But in doing so, they risk turning societies that are dynamically alive into ‘living museums’ – encapsulated moments of evolutionary time, suspended in amber for our edification or comfort. The ethical task, then, is not to idolize or to ignore, but to listen – critically, humbly and dialogically – to the voices and life-worlds that pulse and persist behind and beyond the frame.

Dangers in relation to the endangered other

The figure of the ‘endangered other’ – most often embodied by Indigenous communities cast as guardians of authentic nature – has emerged as a powerful yet problematic icon within contemporary ecological discourse. These communities are frequently portrayed as holders of sacred knowledge: resilient, adaptive and in harmony with the Earth. Their vulnerability to climate change is positioned as a mirror of our own – yet their symbolic function often far exceeds the complex realities they inhabit.

Framed as ‘living archives’ of sustainability, Indigenous peoples are romanticized as repositories of ecological wisdom, and keepers of balance in a world increasingly defined by collapse. Their beliefs, values, and practices – deeply place-based, historically situated and often geographically remote or isolated – are presented as exemplars of traditional ecological knowledge:

insights accumulated over generations through close, reciprocal relationships with the more-than-human world.

Yet such portrayals risk slipping into essentialism. As Kuper (1988; 2003) shows, the trope of the 'authentic native' reflects modern projections more than the lived realities of Indigenous life. Difference becomes essentialized, remoteness valorized, and tradition reified as a static repository of ecological truth. This 'return of the native' acts as a cultural mirror through which modern societies project their alienation from nature onto the figure of the 'primitive', casting it as a symbol of lost ecological innocence, purity and unbroken harmony – untouched by modern fragmentation and a vision of culture in which nature is not challenged but affirmed.

But this symbolism is dangerous: it homogenizes diverse cultures and erases histories of conflict and transformation into a single narrative of natural harmony. Moreover, the binary framing that casts the globalized West as environmental destroyer and the traditional Rest as innocent victim perpetuates and reinforces a moral geography that needs to be abandoned. These dualisms – nature versus culture, modernity versus tradition – reinscribe the very logic of separation and domination that drives socio-ecological devastation.

We must therefore exercise critical care when invoking the 'endangered other'. These communities with their beliefs and practices are not timeless remnants of a premodern past. Rather, they are dynamic life-worlds of experience and knowledge embedded in evolving ecological and social relations. To idealize them is to immobilize them – to turn them into representations or symbols rather than affective living beings and agents; abstract icons rather than interlocutors with whom dialogue and mutual transformation are possible.

The challenge is to move beyond nostalgia and the colonial gaze, recognizing Indigenous communities as co-creators of futures – neither wholly traditional nor uncritically modern, but shaped through shared struggle, layered histories and collaborative re-imaginings. They are not relics of authenticity, nor romantic foils to modern or postmodern condition, but fellow inhabitants of this challenged planet. This requires an ethic of solidarity: dialogue rather than fetishization, reciprocity rather than reverence, and mutual transformation rather than static preservation. Only thus can we honour the vitality of Indigenous life and inspiring enacting enlivenment (Heron, 2003; Weber, 2019).

Reawakening the senses of the world

In *Genesis*, Sebastião Salgado offers more than visual beauty – he provides a mirror and provocation. His photographs draw us into sublime intimacy with the world while entangling us in contradictions of representation, ideology and longing. They evoke origins we cannot return to and futures we have not yet earned. As the ideological pull of the tropes of the 'noble savage' and 'endangered other' demonstrate, aesthetic reverence may obscure political complexity or reinforce colonial residues. What is needed is not idealization of Indigenous pasts, but openness to embodied, unfinished presence. Living in

the Anthropocene means inhabiting the intersection of grief and hope, memory and invention, solitude and solidarity. It is to recognize that the future is not a place we inherit, but a terrain we co-create – through practices of attention, responsiveness and resistance. It is to remember, as poetry does, that life is not only a ‘system’, but also a song: a rhythm of becoming shared among all beings.

Against the machinery of disconnection and commodification, the lasting value of Salgado’s *Genesis* is that it offers a different kind of gesture – not a solution, but a sensitivity. Not a doctrine and answers, but an indication and an invitation. To see. To feel. To dwell. To begin again, not in innocence, but in an embodied responsibility, as ‘ability to respond’. If there is to be a poetics of survival, it will not be built on nostalgia or fantasies of purity, but on what we make of this entangled moment – how we bear witness, how we respond and how we learn to live with others, human and more-than-human alike.

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