

Blackness in Black and White: Serra Pelada and Sebastião Salgado

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Abstract: Since their publication in *Sunday Times Magazine* in 1987, the photographs of the biblically sized Serra Pelada gold mine in northern Brazil by Sebastião Salgado have garnered an emphatically positive reception. In “Blackness in Black and White: Sebastião Salgado and Serra Pelada,” I argue there is a system of racial coding in his photographs of the Serra Pelada gold mine that has received little attention in the photographic discourse. I examine the photographs in dialogue with visual histories of enslavement and the exploitation of black bodies in nineteenth-century Brazil and the United States, and the complexities of racial identity and hierarchy in late twentieth-century Brazil. Through this analysis, I also highlight blind spots in the English-language discourse on Salgado’s gold photographs, which seek to both universalize their themes and aestheticize their content by challenging his own characterization of the photographs. My primary objective is not to argue that Salgado’s photographic decisions, which were made manifest in this systemization, were premeditated, but rather to assert its presence within the photographs and in doing so, offer a more politically and culturally nuanced analysis of the photographs.

Key words: Serra Pelada, photography, Sebastião Salgado, racial identity

In September 1986, Brazilian documentary photographer Sebastião Salgado arrived at a remote hill in the state of Pará in northern Brazil. As Salgado himself described the scene thirty-three years later, “When I first reached Serra Pelada, I was left speechless. Before me, I saw a vast hole, perhaps 200 meters in diameter and almost as deep, teeming with tens of thousands of barely clothed men, roughly half of them carrying heavy sacks up broad wooden ladders, the other leaping down muddy slopes back into the cavernous maw.”¹ Before him, some 50,000 men worked with rudimentary tools in search of gold. The rugged terrain and weather made it impossible for heavy machinery to be used.

Taken over the course of four weeks, the photographs of the miners at Serra Pelada were the first installment of a six-year project undertaken by Salgado to photograph manual labor in an industrialized and mechanized world. The project, eventually titled *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*, took him to five continents photographing lead and iron mines and refineries in Kazakhstan, tobacco and sugarcane plantations in Cuba, fishing in Galicia and Sicily, and bicycle factories in Shanghai and Tianjin, China, in addition to twenty other sections. There has been a largely successful campaign by proponents of the *Workers* photographs and Salgado himself to universalize their subject matter and themes, with sociologist Tamara Kay arguing his work covers “the ‘Family of Man’ gamut, depicting people working, building, loving, warring, playing, celebrating and grieving—without invoking stereotypes.”² Particularly, the discourse on the Serra Pelada photographs tends to universalize themes and aestheticize the contents of the photographs. I argue the photographs of Serra Pelada shun these rather simplistic and one-dimensional interpretations, instead requiring a more nuanced and multi-dimensional analysis of their thematic and

¹ Sebastião Salgado, *Gold* (Cologne: Taschen, 2019), 5.

² Tamara Kay, “Building Solidarity with Subjects and Audience in Sociology and Documentary Photography,” *Sociological Forum* 26, no. 2 (June 2011): 425.

aesthetic ambitions.³ I will argue that within Salgado's photographs of Serra Pelada, there is a systemized racial coding of black labor, which engages with both visual histories and contemporary socioeconomics. Through the evocation and allusion of race and class dynamics in Brazil, the photographs collectivize rather than universalize. Thus, the photographs must be situated within the context of late twentieth-century Brazilian economic and labor politics and visual histories of black labor in the United States and Brazil.

The discovery of gold at Serra Pelada in January 1979 by a local farmer brought some 22,000 prospectors to the area within five weeks. Without any regulation or oversight, the site and nearby boomtown quickly descended into the chaos. In the photographs taken from the upper rim of the mine, the viewer is forced to confront the sheer scale and enormity of the operation, both in terms of the mine's physical size and the amount of people [Figure 1]. While anybody was allowed to prospect with rudimentary tools, thus leading to the almost biblical amounts of prospectors, the actual mineral rights were those of the government. In May 1980, the government in Brazil ordered the Federal Police into Serra Pelada, and the state-owned mining company Companhia Vale do Rio Doce, or CVRD, opened an office at the site. Salgado had first attempted to photograph Serra Pelada in 1980, but was denied access by the military dictatorship, which had instituted restrictions on the press when it seized power in 1964.⁴ Salgado was living in Paris at the time, in self-imposed exile as protest against the regime. By 1986, the military dictatorship was no longer in power and the prospectors cooperative indulged Salgado's request. Despite the free-for-all appearance, the mine operated under a regimented structure. The open pit was divided into plots or *barrancos*, each around sixty-five meters square (6.5 x 10 ft.). In the introduction to *Gold*, the 2019 exhibition catalogue for the entire body of Serra Pelada photographs, Salgado describes a labor hierarchy made of three classes: the owner of the plot; an investor in the operation who functioned as a form of supervisor, called the *capitalista*; and some thirty peons, or diggers and carriers.⁵ Working eleven hours a day, six days a week, the peons would dig up the ground on the plot, filling sacks with forty kilos (eighty-eight pounds) of earth, and carry them up the slopes on narrow paths and up ladders. From the numerous sacks of earth dug each day, each peon would pick one to keep for themselves, with the *capitalista* taking the others. Inevitably, the vast majority of sacks contained no gold or other valuable minerals like manganese and black gold, which can be separated into regular gold and palladium were thrown out in the search for gold.⁶

One of the most recurrent themes across the photographs is the physicality of gold mining, with many emphasizing the exhaustion of the men and the emotional and physical toll their labor has taken on them. Often, this takes visual form in men completely covered in mud and dirt. In these images, the men have become almost completely consumed, in appearance, by the mine [Figure 2]. Through this, their individuality is lost and bodies and faces merge into large, amorphous, and unruly organisms.

While Salgado himself said in 2019, "Here, blacks and whites and men of every shade between worked shoulder-shoulder, with gold the only color on their minds," I am not certain that this statement tells the entire truth.⁷ For one, the notion of a space without considerations of color is problematically simplistic given the immense complexity of racial and ethnic identity in Brazil. Equally, there is something potentially problematic in how Salgado describes the racial complexity of the miners, with white and black

³ See David Levi Strauss, "Epiphany of the Other. (the Photographs of Sebastiao Salgado)," *Artforum International* 29, no. 6 (February 1991): 96; Matthew L. Wald, "Sebastiao Salgado: The Eye of The Photojournalist," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 9, 1991; Deborah Carr, "Celebrating the Work of Sebastião Salgado: A Sociological Lens of Salgado's Documentary Photography," *Sociological Forum* 26, no. 2 (June 2011): 416–17.

⁴ Salgado, *Gold*, 5.

⁵ Salgado, *Gold*, 6.

⁶ George Russell, "The Treasure of Serra Pelada," *TIME* (New York), September 8, 1980.

⁷ Salgado, *Gold*, 6.

on the opposite ends of a spectrum. I would argue that Salgado deliberately suggests a colorized labor hierarchy, critical to which is the usage of black-and-white film.

In the nearly all photographs of Serra Pelada by Salgado, the *capitalistas* are easily identifiable in their white t-shirts amongst a sea of ochre stained skin and clothes. In one image, the *capitalista* stands on a flat piece of ground, as lines of peons slowly trudge past him towards the ladders [Figure 3]. He looks towards the sky, with a watch on his wrist and a clipboard in his hand. On the far right of the image's lower register, a man identifiable as of African descent looks directly at the camera as he waits his turn to climb the ladder in search of wealth. Within the visual vocabulary Salgado utilizes, there is a colorization of the worker hierarchy in the mine that explicitly suggests black labor and white management. Those who work are identified with dark colors and those who oversee are identified with lighter colors. Even in images that show labor on smaller scales, that division is still clear. While the peons pan for gold in what is likely water heavily toxified by mercury, a pair of *capitalistas* lean against a wooden railing, looking out of frame.

Unlike works by other photographers, including Alfredo Jaar and Robert Nickelsberg, a considerable amount of Salgado's photographs of Serra Pelada are focused on the floor of the mine, as opposed to around the rim. As such, many images, particularly those of the ladders, have a striking upward viewpoint [Figure 4]. These images, in effect, embody the perspective of the peons, and through this compositional device, Salgado intimates a literal stratification of labor. In many images from within the mine, like the one discussed earlier, the *capitalistas* are positioned above the peons, often standing upon these huge piles of sandbags. Equally, within a given image, the peons could outnumber the *capitalistas* twenty or thirty to one. This huge disparity in the amount of dark labor and white management is visually suggestive of a slave plantation. This is undoubtedly a serious comparison to make, and I do not do so lightly.

One particular photograph directly engages with the visual history of slavery [Figure 5]. In it, a young man sits before the wall of ladders. The dark tones of the man's skin and shirt appear to almost merge into a single surface. The rippling on the back of the young man's shirt is undoubtedly suggestive of photographs of keloid scarring on the backs of enslaved people from the nineteenth-century United States [Figure 6]. While the image of *Gordon* by William McPherson is from the United States, the visual evocation of slavery within a Brazilian context is a loaded one. The abolishment of slavery in Brazil had occurred less than one hundred years prior to these photographs, in May 1888. Photographs of slavery and enslaved people by the likes of João Goston and Marc Ferrez during the final years of its existence in Brazil belies its immense brutality. Of the roughly twelve million African people enslaved and trafficked to the New World, almost half were sent to Brazil.

Beyond the more direct connections to imagery of slavery and exploited black labor, other compositional techniques are more metaphorical. Images specifically of the ladders and those taken from the rim of the mine emphasize it as a space of containment of black labor. In many images of Serra Pelada, the ladder itself functions as a metaphor for the existence of the peons. In climbing the ladder, they are attempting to climb the social ladder. Each trip up the ladder represents their potential ticket out of Serra Pelada and to a new life, but each failed trip sends them back into the mine and back into the clay. When a peon would find gold, they would don a clean, striped t-shirt, making themselves identifiable to the guards as in need of protection from theft or assault.⁸ Not only have they obtained wealth, but they are also now entitled to protection by, what is in effect, law enforcement.

Within the color hierarchy, this is in effect, a "mulattoization" of the peon upon their discovery of gold and obtainment of wealth.⁹ Still, they are not allowed to fully transform into a *capitalista* and don a white shirt. In wearing a striped shirt, they are no longer a peon, but not quite a *capitalista*. Even upon their gaining of wealth and associated socioeconomic status, their status as a peon, an ochre-stained laborer,

⁸ Salgado, *Gold*, 7.

⁹ The term "mulatto" is a problematic one in English, but I decided to use it given the Portuguese linguistic context as the term is common in Brazil.

cannot be forgotten. In one particular image, a man in a striped shirt, sits on a rock ledge, looking out across the vast mine which he has now, partly, and perhaps only temporally, escaped from. To his left, a man in a black shirt and shorts slowly climbs into frame. The thick wood rungs on the ladder partially obscure him. His head looks downward at the dozens of men beneath him. If he were to find gold in the sack on his back, he may don a striped shirt too and be allowed a moment of reflection and relaxation.

In press coverage of Serra Pelada, there was an attempt to characterize the operation in relation to nineteenth-century gold rushes, with it being described in a *TIME* article from September 1980 as “a tropical version of the nineteenth-century Klondike.”¹⁰ Following the discovery of gold in the Klondike region of the Yukon Territory in 1896, some 100,000 prospectors made the long and dangerous journey to the minefields over the next three years. While gold fever was not a new concept and can explain the general fervor, the specific reasons why so many would go to Serra Pelada requires us to examine the socioeconomic conditions of 1980s Brazil. It was under the military dictatorship that the Brazilian government expanded economic policies of state-centralized planning and market regulation begun during the Estado Novo in the 1940s by Getúlio Vargas, partially through the creation and expansion of state-owned enterprises like CVRD. These economic policies and their consequences were described by economist Marcos Mendes as having “amplified an already historically high income and wealth inequality, making Brazil one of the most unequal countries in the world.”¹¹

In 1985, forty-two percent of the Brazilian population lived below the poverty line and these economic inequalities effected Afro-Brazilian people at much higher rates. According to the Institute of Applied Economic Research, while the white and black populations six years later, in 1991, accounted for fifty-one percent and forty-seven percent of Brazil’s 147 million people, respectively, sixty-four percent of the nearly fifty-nine million in poverty were black. I do not dispute Salgado’s claim that people of a multitude of racial and ethnic backgrounds worked and prospected at Serra Pelada, but given how Afro-Brazilian people disproportionately experienced income inequality and poverty and the potential riches on offer in gold mining that would likely be unobtainable otherwise, it is not unreasonable to assume the majority of peons at Serra Pelada were people of color.

However, much of the popular discourse on the Pelada photographs does not engage with the political context or the evocation of race. Inevitably, the discussion focuses on the scale and monumentality of the photographs’ subject matter and Salgado’s methodology. Praise is effusive and free flowing. In a 2019 review of *Gold*, Neill Burgess, the man responsible for the photographs being first published in *Sunday Times Magazine* in May 1987, described the series as “a romantic, narrative work that engaged with its immediacy, but had not a drop of sentimentality. It was astonishing, an epic poem in photographic form.”¹² The vaunting of the photographs draws in the monumental, perhaps the biblical. A strange phenomenon exists in the discourse in which the photographs are discussed in the abstract and not as actual photographs. Among the sources that deal with the Serra Pelada photographs more or less exclusively, there is not a great deal of formal analysis, and it seems that the photographs are, disappointingly, utilized as proxies for large and grandiose discussions of the universal human experience. That is not to say that all these discussions are not valuable or intriguing, but most of them miss the mark.

A sizable portion of the discourse focuses on the importance of the Pelada images in the revitalization of black-and-white documentary photography. Indeed, color photography had surpassed black-and-white in importance by the mid-1980s, and color photographs of Serra Pelada had already appeared in *Life Magazine* in December 1980 and *Time Magazine* in 1985. Salgado shot in color earlier in

¹⁰ Russell, “The Treasure of Serra Pelada.”

¹¹ Marcos Mendes, *Inequality, Democracy, and Growth in Brazil: A Country at the Crossroads of Economic Development* (London: Elsevier, 2015), 5.

¹² Neil Burgess, “Sebastião Salgado: Gold,” *British Journal of Photograph* 166, no. 7887 (September 2019): 20.

his career, despite his preference for “the chiaroscuro palette of black-and-white images.”¹³ Indeed, it is the heightened expression of drama and intensity of black-and-white photography that gives the Serra Pelada images so much of their baroque magnetism.

Equally, it is the usage of black-and-white film as a system of control that allows for the colorization of labor to be effective as a visual vocabulary and thematic device. Given how deliberate and patient Salgado is in all aspects of his practice, the notion that those specific details would have come by chance or accident simply does not fit. And that begs the question, why does Salgado not acknowledge these choices? He does allude to race consistently in the exhibition catalogues for *Workers*, which included twenty-eight images of Serra Pelada and *Gold*. In the brief introduction to the photographs of Serra Pelada in *Workers*, Salgado writes, “No one is taken by force, yet once they arrive, all become slaves of the dream of gold and the need to stay alive. And once inside, it becomes impossible to leave.”¹⁴ This single quote alludes to three distinct aspects, both historic and contemporary, of the black experience in Brazil from the Atlantic Slave trade and enslavement on plantations to contemporary socioeconomic repression. Dynamics of race, socioeconomics, and labor inequality are all at play within the mine and they are at play in Salgado’s photographs.

While there is criticism and dissent among scholars and critics about Salgado’s practice more broadly and these photographs in particular, the issue of race is typically not directly addressed in relation to the Serra Pelada photographs. Criticism is usually focused on the aestheticization of suffering, which is a frequent point of discussion with regard to Salgado’s work.¹⁵ That said, I am not the first English-language scholar to assert the visibility of black labor in these photographs. Marcus Wood makes mention of Salgado’s Serra Pelada photographs as the late twentieth-century photographic apogee of the intersection of action photography and the visibility of black bodies in Brazil in *Black Milk*, although the discussion is contained to a single sentence.¹⁶

Regardless of intentionality, to allude and evoke the complexities of blackness, racial identity, and labor politics in Brazil in the visual themes and subject matter of the photographs, in the written promotional materials, and in the scholarly and critical discourse, and then to deny or simply not address those complexities as a critical part of the photographs’ thematic ambitions is both a wasted opportunity to examine the images in their dynamic sociopolitical context and more troublingly, a relegation of the importance of black labor and black bodies to the point of non-acknowledgement. The evocation and allusion to blackness is more explicitly and deliberately present than Salgado himself says.

And herein lies the key stumbling block of discussing and examining Salgado’s images of Serra Pelada and its miners. By not recognizing the evocation and allusion to the complexity of labor and race in Brazil, we are unable to engage with the photographs from the perspective that is the most important. Widening the scope further to include the entire body of *Workers*, what makes the photographs deeply magnetic, consequential, and captivating is the way in which they engage with their temporal and geographic contexts. How gold miners in Brazil relate to ranchers in North Dakota or oil workers in Kuwait in a globalized, complex system of labor is vastly more interesting than how the photographs document the universal aspects of work and humanity. Rather than focusing on the universal, we must focus on the collective and the complex. In doing so, we will be both getting the most out of Salgado’s photographs as works of art and documents of socioeconomic tectonics and doing the most for ourselves as we attempt to end inequity and inequality.

¹³ Salgado, *Gold*, 193.

¹⁴ Sebastião Salgado, *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age* (New York: Aperture, 1993), 16.

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 78–9.

¹⁶ Marcus Wood, *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 293.

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Figure 1. Sebastião Salgado, *Serra Pelada, State of Pará, Brazil, 1986*, Museum of Fine Arts Houston.



Figure 2. Sebastião Salgado, *Serra Pelada, State of Pará, Brazil, 1986*, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

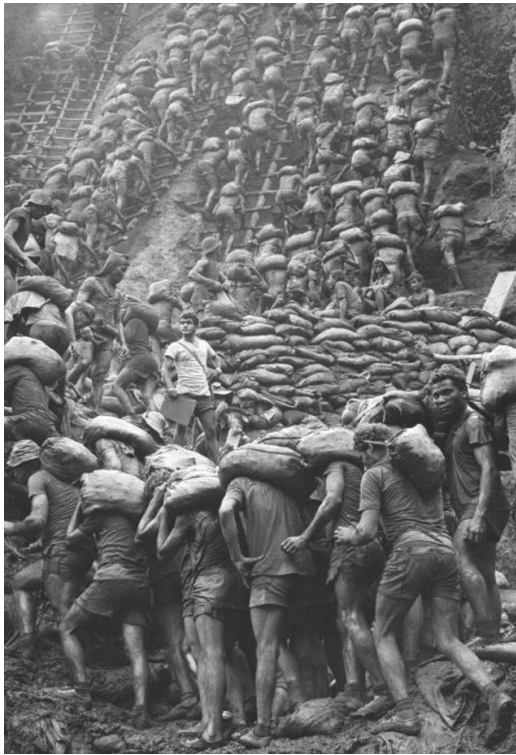


Figure 3. Sebastião Salgado, *Serra Pelada*, State of Pará, Brazil, 1986, Brooklyn Museum.



Figure 4. Sebastião Salgado, *Serra Pelada*, State of Pará, Brazil, 1986, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 5. Sebastião Salgado, *Serra Pelada, State of Pará, Brazil, 1986*, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

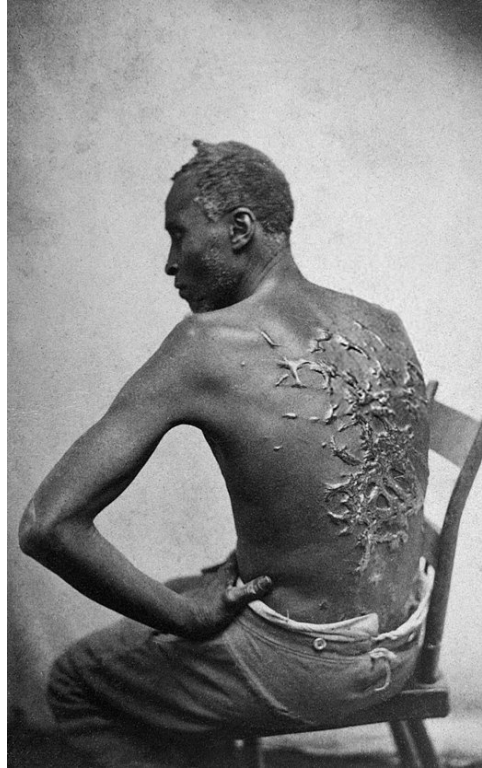


Figure 6. William McPherson, *Gordon, 1863*.