

Troping the Tropics: Reflections on Nietzsche's Geophilosophy and the Philippine Rice Terraces

Caroline Joan (Kay) Picart¹

CEO, Kinaesthetics, LLC, 5057 Shuler Road, Tallahassee, FL 32304

Email: kinaestheticsllc@gmail.com

Abstract

Following in the styles of Jacques Derrida (1998) and David Farrell Krell (1996), or from a different tradition, Gaston Bachelard (1994), I engage in a phenomenological and deconstructive meditation, arriving at my own construction of what could be called a *Nietzschean geophilosophy*. By that, I mean the deployment of Nietzsche's trope-ic army of metaphors and metonymies in relation to an analysis of connections that spread like tendrils over themes of space, time, and the flows of power, life, and beauty, among other motifs. Crucial to my meditation or analysis is my own positioning as a woman who lives cross-culturally, both in terms of biological and cultural heritage, and in terms of professional training as someone trained as both a molecular embryologist and philosopher in the Philippines, England and the U.S. Just as crucial are my own experiences as a visual artist and dancer: one whose awareness of tyrannical binaries ('cultured' mind versus 'primitive' body; outside versus inside; West versus East) leads me to see that a Nietzschean geophilosophy results not in a modernist closure nor a nihilist refusal of all boundaries, but in a 'mapping' that resists closure: a space in between oppression and resistance, within which I personally ground myself as a philosopher-critic and artist. But I believe that this



subject position – one I call an insider-outsider perspective – is one everyone lives, in that flux of contingency and necessity. Thus, in my own journey, a meditation on Nietzsche's geophilosophy leads to a reflection on the complex interplay of Apollonian (rational reflection) and Dionysian forces (primordial energies that foreground and transcend rationality) in artfully depicting the cycle of life (such as in a girl's transition to young womanhood), and to visualizing the Philippine Ifugao tribe's connection to myth, land, blood and sweat. The art form I use to depict this relationship between tribe and land, which harnesses pen and ink in a semi-pointillist fashion, appears a realistic and documentary portrait, but on closer inspection refuses fixture and closure, much as the Ifugao in perpetual transformation are shaped by, as well as resist, forces of tourism and neo-colonialism. In other words, the Ifugao lifeworld, as mythically cast by Masferre's 'documentary' photographs (which have often become tourist mementos) and filtered through my own fine point pen and ink drawings in pointillist fashion, intersect with my subject position. My black and white images appear as photographs, and as such may seem to be 'objective' snapshots of cultural identity; yet closer inspection reveals not sculpted outlines but a mass of dots, hinting at the flows of power and cultural identity that render me, alongside all others, an insider-outsider.

Inside Notes from the Outside

The position from which I spring, as outlined in *Inside Notes from the Outside* (Picart, 2004; see also Picart, 2008) moves and attempts to translate across multiply hybrid realms of being and becoming – of being perpetually both inside and outside, negotiating differences and attempting in collaboration with others to translate across incommensurabilities, knowing that translation, ultimately, can never be perfect or exact.

The questions this paper begins to wrestle with flow from *Inside Notes from the Outside*. What does it mean to be defined as a member of a specific 'race,' especially as a former 'foreigner' now married to a Puerto-Rican born American, now simply a newly-sworn in citizen, living within the erst-labelled 'salad bowl' of multi-cultural America? What does it mean to be characterized as a 'Filipino' woman – a Filipino woman whose mother tongue is English and whose name reveals a lack of racial purity, particularly in a country like the U.S., whose concept of civil rights is derived historically from a strict white versus black divide? What does it mean to look 'Asian' to non-Asians and 'not-quite-Asian' to Asians? What price does being (and not simply looking) both Eastern and Western, in language and in values, exact?

Both Maria Lugones' (1987) and Donna Haraway's (1991) terminologies of *mestizaje-ness* (being neither white nor brown) and being a "cyborg" (a hybrid

being, for whom ‘purity’ is impossible) are useful because they evoke some aspects of the politico-cultural chiaroscuro of inside-outsideness I inhabit and live – which we all live, in various ways. Thus, this account begins with a self-reflection – a proverbial throwing of the self in front of the self to get beyond the usual binaries of subjectivity and objectivity, to arrive at some notion of an “inter-being”, simultaneously porous and yet having boundaries. In my case, I occupy the liminal realm of the “mestiza” genetically and the metaphorical “cyborg” culturally. I am Filipino by birth, but my family is of mixed ancestry both genetically and in terms of cultural and linguistic heritage: my father has French-American roots, and my mother, a hint of Spanish-Chinese lineage; my mother tongue was English, as it was the language that best bound my parents, who came from different parts of the Philippines and spoke different dialects. This description attempts to get at how the notion of ‘race,’ while it cannot be essentialized to biological or cultural components alone, does connect to these categories, and however imperfectly, tracks the flows of power that underlie these verbal handles that latch on to real physical bodies that are culturally, legally, and politically mapped. But I also inhabit this in-between space professionally as a trained molecular embryologist and philosopher, and professional visual artist and now professional ballroom dance consultant.

Thus, my point of entry into conversations regarding race and gender is rooted both personally, as a body and entity marked by multiple hybridities, but also professionally, as a philosopher (and former molecular embryologist and pre-medical student) concerned with metaphysical and ethical questions of ‘truth’ in relation to narrativity. Yet I am also a professional visual artist and a US Open Dancesport champion, interested in the hermeneutics of color, form and movement; the language games of bodies, gestures and rhythms; fluctuations across the realms of two- and three-dimensionality; the poesis of abstraction agonistically and intimately intertwined with lived experience. It is from this perspective, of being a perpetual insider-outsider, translating across different worlds, negotiating with the flows of power, that I enter into contemporary discussions on Nietzsche and Geography, with its reflections on space, place, and positionality.

The Apollonian and Dionysian in Ifugao Folklore and Lived Experience

Perhaps it is strange to begin with an image derived from one of Masferre's photographs (see de Villa, Garcia Farr and Montgomery Jones, 1988), born from his experiences living with the Ifugao, one of the northern tribes in the Philippines. Titled “Portrait of a Young Woman,” (Figure 1), the words evoke the literary memory of one of James Joyce's novels, artfully transvalued to become less a principally interior journey written from a first person point of view, than a view from the outside, a snapshot in time composed from a third person point of view. The face of the young girl on the brink of becoming a woman is as much suffused

with light as it is with darkness. Dionysian shadows, signifying the primal forces of life and materiality that resist and precede rationalization, veil half of her face, even as much of the portrait seems lit by the Apollonian clarity of her gaze, which seems to hint at a certain kind of detachment that comes with some measure of rational reflection. The portrait reminds me that for Nietzsche, paraphrasing *The Birth of Tragedy* (2000) the alleged serenity of Greek culture is not some happy prelapsarian state, and so an emblem of an original innocence that has since been irretrievably lost, but rather the end result of an arduous and protracted struggle to come to terms with suffering caused by life, the hard-won triumph of Apollonian form over Dionysian insight, which is the essence of the artistic, and the deeply spiritual, beyond conventional categories of 'good' and 'evil.'



Figure 1 Portrait of a Young Woman

My choice of the Ifugao tribe in relation to an attempt to explicate a version of Nietzsche's geophilosophy, by which I mean a deliberate deployment of his army of metaphors and metonymies in relation to space, place and time to track the flows of power, is deliberate. The Ifugao are legendary for having hewn, with nothing but their bare hands and the most primitive of tools, out of the rugged and wild mountain face, the eighth wonder of the world: the Philippine rice terraces. The Ifugao, one of the twelve surviving ethnic tribes (Conklin, Lupaih, Pinther and American Geographical Society of New York 1980), are perhaps the Philippine equivalent of the native American Navajo tribe: one of its "original settlers" that have survived relatively peacefully through their taming of the land, their proud respect for their traditions, and their ambivalent resistance and embrace of commercialist tourist forces. Theirs is a subject position both mythically and 'ethnically' Filipino, and potentially open to colonial forces of exploitation, as much as their land is the life-blood of their culture and source of sustenance, as it has simultaneously become appropriated as a touristic 'wonder of the world.' In the first piece of this triptych, it is the magnificent vastness of the landscape that dominates (Figure 2). The rice terraces, which in local mythology constitute the ladder between sky and earth (that is, the conduit between the gods and humans) stand majestically, with the human beings planting rice appearing as insignificant

little specks. Done in fine point pen and ink pointillist style, the sketches leave open the possibility, visually, of speaking esoterically (to the “donkey-eared” crowd of touristic consumers) and exoterically (to the “small-eared” “higher spirits” who have learned to read with suspicion). To the former, the images are simply artistic versions of snapshots: mementos of their ‘wild adventure’ into the ‘exotic Third World.’ To the latter, the images may be seen as an act of resistance against the forces of colonialism and modernism: an attempt to return to a nature-oriented lifestyle, which views human beings as part of a larger organic whole.



Figure 2 Stairway to the Sky 1

Troping the Tropics

Nietzsche suggests a vocabulary for thought that draws on resources from geology, geography and meteorology. For the purposes of this short essay, I am choosing to focus on the word “tropical” (which is one among many geographic terms Nietzsche deploys) simply because it is not only rich in metaphors, but actually also factually fits the weather and the geography in which the Ifugao live, and the flows of power I am trying to evoke. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1989, 197) for example, he asks whether we are right to regard Cesare Borgia and his like as “pathological” or, on the contrary, should recognize them as “the healthiest of all tropical monsters and growths.” Why not re-conceive of the life-worlds we inhabit as divided into various interdependent and agonistically related zones of intensity? If we do, we might see that European moralists privilege models appropriate to the

moderate rather than the tropical (or polar) zones, but we see that this is simply one of several possibilities open to exploration.



Figure 3 Stairway to the Sky 2

Figure 3, which is the second of the triptych, zooms in for a closer look at both the rice terraces and a lone figure with a spear. The perspective chosen is aerial, hovering above both landscape and lone human figure, troping a tropical image as a negotiation between human will and industry, the rise of technology, and undomesticable power of nature. In a verbal twist, if we were to reconfigure “tropic zones” as also “zones of troping,” we would view the human figure in relation to the landscape as presenting opportunities for twisting away, for pendular ruptures, from a standard. That is, employing one of Derrida's (Derrida, Hartman, Miller, Bloom and de Man 2005) techniques, reversing the order of words often unveils the zones of power that underlie the architecture of the sentence. Thus, reconfiguring “tropic zones” to “zones of troping” enables us, to use Nietzsche's language, to re-mythologize a meteorological description to a possible deconstructive project. Thinking geographically in terms of zones means being sensitive to such complex formations or assemblages as climates, not as ends in themselves but as part of a larger whole.

The distinctive note in the geophilosophical Nietzsche is the alternative it provides to a solipsistic reading of the modernist/Cartesian view of the “Thinker” – one perhaps popularly iconized in Rodin's sculpture: a huddled, solitary figure lost in introspection, isolated from his surroundings. In contrast, geophilosophy recognizes that thinking takes place, not between subject and object but “in the relationship of territory and earth” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 85). Much like the insider-outsider position I gestured to at the beginning of this article, Deleuze and

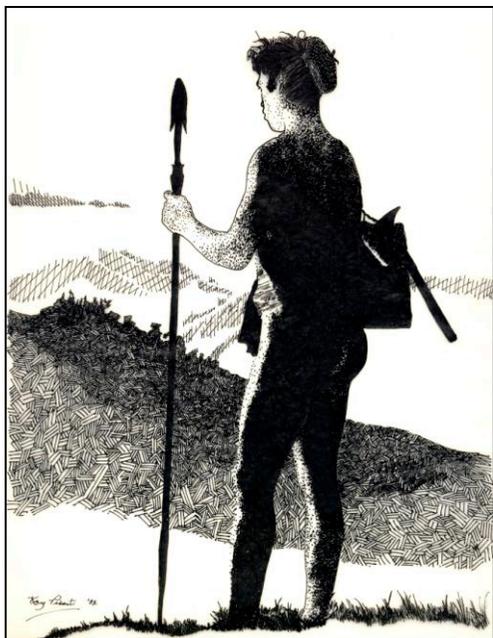


Figure 4 Stairway to the Sky 3

Frankenstein. The choice of the image as a cover is hardly surprising, as it is a stirring rendition of the modern Cogito as world explorer and scientific genius. What better depiction is there of glorious colonial conquest or the conquest of nature? The third image in my triptych is similar, but different in crucial ways. First, my Ifugao warrior stands sideways, not allowing the kind of direct identification or appropriation of the subject position through psychological transference which Friedrich's image allows. Many of Friedrich's paintings had figures with their backs directly to the audience – a visual device that some art historians have argued allow a direct transference or identification with that subject position; this is a stance my image deflects. Second, my image is about how the Ifugao tribe has retained its dignity and traditions despite the onslaught of tourism, and the ravages of nature; it is not about the colonial conquest of Nature, or primitive Others, as Friedrich's *Wanderer* is.

Nevertheless, all my images are similar to Caspar David Friedrich's paintings in one way: they all portray images of metamorphoses, of transformation, of negotiation; in that sense, Friedrich, the painter, and Nietzsche, the philosopher, are brothers in the Romantic spirit, and I have imbibed and consciously embraced this element of their inheritance even as I struggle with the Eurocentric and colonialist impulses that undergird their work. Thematically, my art images evoke the transformation of girl to woman; of mountainside to rice terrace; of lone individual to proud member of a tribe, bound by blood, land, and sweat: themes that both Friedrich and Nietzsche would have appreciated.

Guattari's rendition of a Nietzschean geophilosophy gets at the notion of an "inter-being" that I ultimately attempt to point to, without fixing it, while acknowledging its rootedness in context. The last image of the triptych captures this spirit (Figure 4). Standing on the edge of one of the terraces, a lone male figure stands proudly, clothed in the ancient attire and weapons that mark his lineage: the symbols of his forebears', and his overcomings and those of his forebears. One could on one level compare the image as resembling one of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, *The Wanderer Above the Mists*, in which a lone heroic figure stands upon a mountain peak, haloed in clouds. Friedrich's painting has often been used as the cover image for contemporary paperback versions of Mary Shelley's

Formally, although my images appear as black and white photographs from afar, upon closer inspection they dissolve into masses of dots, lines and planes – also philosophical convictions whose traces can be glimpsed in Nietzsche's writings, and to some extent Friedrich's paintings. These images remind me that much like the landscape, the Ifugao tribe remain to some extent a mystery: tropeable, traceable and map-able to some extent, but in the end, recalcitrant, obdurate, resistant. These images serve as a testament, and a hopeful call to action, that it is possible to sojourn forth, exploring a space of “insideness” and “outsideness” – a space in between oppression and resistance, with cautious hope and a determined commitment to translating across differences, while celebrating them, knowing that in the end translation is always less than perfect. But it is a task and a process that is pragmatically possible.

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