Trying to think back,

descending

from my conceptual,

cultural distance

down to

a real situation,

a real experience,
On some remote runways in Tanzania, the pilot has to make a preliminary pass to chase away the cattle and wild animals.

I wish to attempt to retrace my own path, wondering what if anything was left by me during the years I taught philosophy in Tanzania. Is there any African dirt remaining on my shoes, have I left any footprints?

This then is not a presentation which attempts to philosophically situate something African. I feel wholly unqualified to place Africa in any conceptual scheme. I merely wish to gesture toward something even less accessible, something outside of the line of vision, which animates much of what takes place there and threatens the manner in which cultural identity and difference is understood. Perhaps an attempt to remap cultural difference which has adapted itself to the map. Perhaps a desire to intellectually return, to touch ground, to re-land at Kilimanjaro International Airport.

And if I do manage to retrace my path, will I see the landscape the
Before leaving to teach philosophy in Tanzania, I was prepared to dispense with what I considered to be intellectual self-indulgence and luxury, namely, my preoccupation with the problematic of post modernism and contemporary culture. Yet upon my arrival there was one moment which impressed itself upon me and revived for me the whole question of post modernity with regard to Africa.

As the huge 747 jet was banking low over the African savanna for its final approach towards Kilimanjaro International Airport, down below (so close I could see their faces) were Maasai women, walking along a footpath and carrying upon their heads water and firewood back to their homes.

A western man looks down from above, from the artificial environment of a jet plane at a traditional people on the tableau below. A traditional people inhabiting a landscape are engaged in the rhythm of their daily tasks as a huge jet roars overhead, and strange faces look down, from the regular series of windows.

Certainly here is a dramatic intersection of cultural difference. Yet it would be a mistake to overdramatize this event for the Maasai women who seemed far more indifferent to this scene, which they were probably very accustomed to, than was I.

But I am led to question run-ways, roads and footpaths, rivers and water-pumps, the movement of the sun and electric lights. It seemed to me that there things were operating on extremely divergent paths which cross one another, which parallel one another, and even converge with one another, which operate simultaneously, at divergent paces, at convergent paces, which operate in such a way the the boundaries between what is Western and what is African are obscured, and which con-found the discourse of cultural difference.

Without making any judgments concerning this event, we will leave it hanging in the air, for now.
I began working on Hölderlin and Adorno out of default. The other books for my dissertation were sent surface mail and took six months to arrive. Hölderlin and Adorno were the last minute items I carried on my back.

Besides teaching classes in the history of western philosophy, I was also working on my Ph.D. dissertation on Hölderlin and Adorno. I was interested in the intersections of art and nature, the artificial and the natural, and the manner in which they approached this problem. For Hölderlin and Adorno, the distinction between art and nature reflected the distinction between the subject and nature and culture and nature. What opposes itself to nature (art, subject, or culture) is a kind of second nature (in the Kantian sense) which dominates and eclipses true nature and is therefore an act of hubris. This hubris must be atoned for through the sacrifice of the work of art, the subject, or the cultural construct which commits this conceit. The bubble must burst, the monad must collapse, for a reconciliation with 'true nature to occur. Nature cannot be experienced directly but only indirectly by the attempt and failure to capture it directly.

The discourses of cultural studies seem to operate in the same way. Cultural identity is still represented monadically. Much is placed at stake here. The cultural Other, so long repressed by dominant cultural ideologies, must now be given a chance to subvert these deceits, to de-construct these oppressive cultural constructions, to overcome their marginality, and to contribute their voice to world discourse. To have a voice of its own, the cultural Other must have its own identity, integrity, and boundaries. So the moral agenda of these discourses have preserved a monadic model of cultural identity, and it continues to perpetuate the manner in which we are conditioned to think of intersubjectivity and the interpretation across cultural boundaries.
I once had a long conversation with a young man in Zanzibar who had never set foot outside of Tanzania and yet was an expert on the American civil war.

While Adorno never departed from his negative dialectical model, Hölderlin in his writings was to restrict it to the Greeks who lived in the early stages of humanity when there was still a relationship (albeit an indirect sacrificial one) with nature. For Hölderlin, such a relationship is no longer possible for us. Our experience precludes us from the nativity of monadic construction and the moment of hubris. Our free activity conditions nature, becomes nature, and thus there is no pure state of nature to reconcile with. He uses the imagery of the stream to make his point. The following is from his commentaries on the Pindar fragments:

In regions such as this, the stream had originally to wander about aimlessly before it could tear out a course... the waters longingly sought their direction. But the more firmly the dry land took shape upon the banks and secured its direction by means of the firmly rooted trees, by bushes and grapevines, the more the stream also, which took its motion from the shape of the bank, had to gain its direction, until, forced on from its source, it broke through at a point where the mountains that enclosed it were more loosely connected ("Pindar Fragments", trans. J. Adler, Comparative Criticism 6 (1984) p. 45)

Our free acts harden themselves into necessity - become nature - and thus condition the possibilities of future choices. Truth becomes what has been established and the way back to the origin becomes obscured.

Benjamin was interested in this same dynamic. Responding to a line of poetry by Hölderlin which claims that we step on truth as upon a carpet, Benjamin writes:

the illusions engendered by distance. Yet I was there. I left behind
Now in the image of the carpet, where a plane for a spiritual system is placed, the spiritual arbitrariness of the ornaments of thinking can be seen — and the ornaments put out a true determination of this plane, making them absolute — so that the walking-onward [Beschreitbar] order of truth itself inhabits the intensive activity of these ways as their inner plastic temporal form. Walking-onward is this spiritual region, which more or less necessarily leaves the stepping, with every arbitrary step, in the order of the true. (*Illuminationen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1961. s. 34)

Humanity’s *walking-onward* through its history conditions nature, and establishes what is true. Here we are reminded of Vico’s principle “verum et factum convertuntur” (the true and the made are interchangeable). Notice also that we step on the true and create the true through our steps. The carpet is below our line of sight. There is an element of blindness involved here. As we act and walk-onward, our actions precipitate down into the landscape and change that landscape. We do not see what we are doing. This element of blindness is also expressed by Benjamin in his famous fragment on the painting by Klee “Angelus Novus”.

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (*Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969.)
The Kiswahili word for the sun – “Jua” – is also the verb for “to know”.

East Africa is a very dry place. The population has traditionally been distributed according to water sources, such as moist uplands, lakes, and the streams descending from mountains such as Mt. Kilimanjaro. Now pipelines buried within the ground redistribute the water and the population. The paths now lead to the pump and the tap, rather than to river and spring.

Electrical lines are strung across the savanna. They feed electricity to homes, schools, offices, businesses, and banks. They power radios, televisions, computers, and lights. The measurement of time, which in Kiswahili begins counting at sunrise, now becomes replaced by world time, indifferent to the motion of the sun.

The road has paved over the footpath. People travel by Matatus (taxis), and buses, visiting relatives relocated across the country. The road opens new landscapes of speed and accelerates intercultural mixing. Within each town is a mixture of peoples: Warusha, Wachagga, Maasai, Wahaya, Kikuyu, Buganda, Asian, European, North American, etc.

What is a pipeline, an electrical wire, or a road? We can perhaps think of them as an artifacts which have become hardened into nature, the projection of a destiny, a free act become necessity, something en-visioned which has disappered into the landscape, and which now – no longer seen – controls the way we think, act, react, and live. The blindness inherent in these artifacts free them from being merely western-northern-white-colonial-male. Like any creation, they escape the control of the creator. As they are established into the landscape, they are quickly adapted to and appropriated by a myriad of peoples. In this way the artifactual channels permeate cultural boundaries. They swallow identities and project new identities and differences. We are hot-wired prior to our engagements.

contributed to the paths. Yet much remained invisible, unseen,
I had a Tanzanian student tell me that he once thought he knew what it meant to be 'African', until he came to school and met students from other parts of East Africa whose customs and ideas were completely different from his.

So how can we project boundaries between cultural groups as they travel the same roads, transverse the same electronic circuitry? It seems a mistake to use communication across boundaries as a model for cultural (or sexual) difference. The idea of a failed communication only has sense if judged from the difference of a perceived truth within the respective cultural monads. Yet traveling along artifactual circuits becomes its own truth – a blind truth – whose motion does not allow monads to form. Our cultural integrities break down and we inhabit a horizontal tower of Babel.

All multi-cultural discourse would occur along these channels. The whole act of self-interpretation and expression of a group, the medium through which this takes place, the institutions, the audience, and the interests to which such expressions are connected, all are animated and at the same time distorted by these channels.

mis-interpreted, yet interpreted nonetheless, and so my memories
Some of the most popular films in African cities are ‘Rambo-style’ action pictures which depict all non-americans as an enemy or a threat.

And yet I do not want to diminish the stakes involved. Racism, tribalism, sexism, oppression, and exploitation are very real. Yet these tensions, differences and conflicts play themselves out along these channels. Redemption is located flickering in the same circuits as oppression. The attempt to turn back to any state of pre-colonial purity would be misguided, there is only a walking-onward. Both Hölderlin and Benjamin saw this as an occasion for melancholia, yet they also saw the importance of recognizing this characteristic of our age. This would mean for us the importance of dispensing with the self-righteousness of much of our cultural discourse. But the choice is one between looking back and looking forward, trying to watch where we are stepping.

Again arises the question of whether I have really understood anything, or if the word understanding was ever really appropriate here. But even if I have remained blind to the situation, for better or worse, I have left some mark (however minor) on the African landscape. Even though my conceptual flutterings might not quite touch down ...

And yet I know that a jet now lands at Kilimanjaro International Airport, that the passengers file out of its doors, they board taxis and buses, and disperse into the landscape.

are caught between their concrete engagement with a landscape,
the curvature of

re-membered across

lightness,

powerlessness,

transparence,

and their ephemeral