

## THE SYNCRETIC BEINGS LAB

DOUG WALTERS

The story is that your lab is the most secretive, and the work you are doing is classified.

TONYE BEKE

That may be the story, but there are many stories. We don't spend much time with stories. Here in the ancestral beings lab we have more to do with what are MAYBE better called PERFORMANCES.

Much of our work begins with a phrase taken from early 20th century anthropologist Franz Boas. For many years he studied and wrote about American Indian groups of the Northwest Coast, mainly in the area of British Columbia. In a key passage, he directly quotes one of his Indian informants as saying that those in his culture "Try to imitate what their ancestors were told to do by the creator."

The key thing to NOTE in this, and to not forget, is that their ancestors do not "try to FOLLOW" what they were told to do by the creator, but that they try to actually imitate, to PERFORM what their ancestors were told to do. If you don't grasp this concept, you really won't understand most of what we are doing here in this lab. If at one time your ancestors told you to do or not do something, for example, this would not mean that you simply follow the order, that you just do or do not do something. What this really means is that you engage in some performance that might not even look like you are following that thing they told you. You see, what the creator told your

ancestors to do is, first, probably a public secret, something all know but do not talk about.

There are also a series of things you are obliged to do to protect and maintain that secret. Such secrets come mostly in two forms.

First, there are those you get from stories, like what are called myths; stories that everyone in a group hears, some meant to be secret to just that group, like to only men or to women, and so on.

Second, there are much more INDIVIDUAL secrets that concern you personally, that involve your fate, secrets that may be more or less widely known and confined to certain groups. Both kinds of secrets can involve many ways to PERFORM them, many ways to ACT THEM OUT, while not talking about them directly.

You might say we are mainly interested in the performance of BEING persons, places and things; like being in the present, in the past, at some time, between places or travel, being dangerous, inaccessible, foreign places, space, páramo, and so on.

We are also interested in kinds of performance that involved tricks, like that of salesmen, medical practitioners, those in the legal professions, and scientists.

We really study what appears to be a diversity of subjects that WITHOUT the employment of syncretic beings in what we do, I think would make little sense at all.

To illustrate some themes, let me list a few:

First, we employ our syncretic beings to study stages of life,

from infancy through all stages of adulthood, including those beyond death.

We also have projects that look at the notion of cohorts as they exist in various cultures, including professional cultures, workplaces, and so on.

In so many African societies, our own understanding of and separation between ancestors and elders seems to not be reflected. We try to apply these ideas inspired by African concepts to a wide variety of areas.

Much of what we do also proceeds from the idea that there is no living and no dead, but that we all exist related to each other in different ways. This might APPEAR to be the strangest and most scientifically incompatible part of what we do, but it's really not. Much of what we do has to do with TIMES AND PLACES, what I would call place-times, combined places and time where ancestors are found. These include woods, rivers, underground spaces, or the sky and space.

We spend a good deal of time studying syncretic beings from around the world, older and newer. We are often combing through what have been labeled art objects and the like and using them or beings inspired by them.

In addition to the traditional beings and objects we work with, like the other labs, we have a series of synbedevels, syncretic beings in development. While other labs are doing this too, here we are particularly focused on treating all such beings as neither alive nor dead. All beings are in a certain sense elders, and all are therefore ancestors.

Like our interest in performance, we stick to the notion that ALL beings BEHAVE, in one way or another. We study the question of what is it to behave, and we begin with the idea that ALL behaviors are essentially ANCESTRAL.

One project we're working on is a recreation of a synbedevel originally employed by Doug Walters in 1999. We call it a Walter's ball because he never named it, but just rather referred to it as his ancestor. While THIS one is made of string, yarn, thread, paper and other such things, we're actually now in the process of developing a more electro-active version.

(Tonye waves his hand over a table full of materials.)

These are the materials we're using for this project.

Coming back to performance or behavior, we're very interested the EMERGENCE of syncretic ancestral fiber beings from wild or sacred spaces. We study the details of this emergence.

Our focus on fiber beings comes from our own observation, or MAXIM even, that all elements are compounds of other elements (ad infinitum), but vibrating fibers are where we begin and end.

From this comes an interest in strings, compounds and fabrics. We operate on the idea that fabrics are just parts of strings, and we see the universe as a string or fiber with no room left for space. There is no space in our way of working.

One of our joint projects with the Mnemonic Beings Lab is Solaris Studies. Through this syncretic

beings in development, we study transgressions against ancestors.

Another driving idea of our lab is individual cultural multiplicity, the fact that we all participate in a range of cultural groups, most subtly pushing and pulling us and individuals.

We sort of see ourselves as key aids and supporters of scientists, we try to help them in changing their performance repertoires, without going against their publicly sacred natures.

Perhaps more than at any time in human history, most individuals today participate in a variety of social groups that can be called distinct cultural groups. Our participation in a variety of cultures creates contradictions in us, contradictions that others seek out to in some way know us better, to get us to LIKE them, to do things for them.

Those people who and ways that override the contradictions that come from such a multiple investment in cultures are urging the denial of syncretism. Many are found in popular culture and elsewhere.

A certain light-heartedness, a certain sense of self-fascination is needed to overcome the force of these persons, a light hearted, celebratory SCIENCE.

In all societies, an individual may participate in one or more ethnic groups, and at the same time in one or more professional cultural groups such as that of mechanical engineers, one or more religious groups, hobbyist groups, fan cultural groups, sports cultures, and so on. Each cultural group compells this individual to act in

certain ways, sometimes in harmony, and sometimes in conflict with the denial of their essentially syncretic natures.

In cases of conflict, each person may think but not say: "I am happily taking part in both cultures, so they are clearly syncretic in me and people like me."

Contemporary American society has many ways to separate these cultural effects out and erase many if the conflicts that arise. Most of this is done through language and related taboos that lead us to no longer acknowledge any contradictions or very slyly acknowledge any contradictions that exist between groups in some acceptable manner. I'd say anthropologists and some historians are constantly aware of a great many of such cases.

While in the popular imagination social or cultural anthropology is thought of by the general public as studying ethnic groups, for many years now it has been perhaps more focused on a much broader and diverse range of cultural groups, as well as the harmonies and conflicts of individuals taking part in them.

This remains a very hard point to get across.

\*

During Galileo's time, there was a great amount of knowledge that was not being accepted in educational, scientific, medical, technological, or political arenas.

This knowledge was actually considered "syncretic-scientific," or even magical, professional trickery.

Galileo's behavior was not about changing the way we see or think, but about changing the persons, place and things in the universe THEMSELVES.

It wasn't about opinion, belief or perspective. It was about CHANGING THE UNIVERSE.

I really think part of the fear at the time was that we would become syncretic beings like cyborgs, beings acting based on extra-human perception, more like animals, natives, witches, instead of beings acting on normal perception approved by scientists at the time. I think there was a vast public secrecy around the REALITY of the knowledge of animals, witches, natives and so on that Galileo was being accused of breaking.

When he sticks a wood sliver into an apple and demonstrates the movement of the earth in relation to the sun, he doesn't describe "how things really are." No.

Instead, he actually changes the person and thing he is addressing and the place in which they exist. It is no longer the same person, place, or thing.

For a few years now I have been advocating for the development of a mnemonic being that involves telling/remembering Galileo's story.

Was Galileo's problem with religion and belief vs science? No, it really wasn't. "The Church" was not the sole defender of belief for belief's sake. The Church was rather that area of the State that dominated the educational, scientific, and political denial of syncretism, which means it was the enforcer of the PUBLIC SECRECY of

syncretism through which it worked not just in Italy, but around the world.

As a syncretic scientist, Galileo was taking one or more persons, places and things and syncretically fusing them with others. He was taking an essentially syncretic group of scientists who were denying the syncretic nature of science, and was seeking to syncretically fuse these scientists with persons, places and things around them- including those persons, places and things considered by these scientists to be the from the lower, uneducated, unscientific cultures in and outside Italy at the time.

One joint project we are working on is with the Delusional Beings Lab. We're studying what Doug Walters was doing teaching Galileo in Kosovo back in 2002.

Walters was combining Galileo with Kant and Husserl, all somehow linked to the greater case of Europe. I don't feel I really know enough to say more.

Another important question to us is how could it be that today there exists such a wealth of knowledge about how human beings successfully change the persons, places and things that make up the universe but, like in Galileo's time, this knowledge has little or no effect on practice?

This really points to the place and kinds of engagement Anthropology has in the world today. Any given cultural anthropologist is only a POTENTIAL syncretic-scientist. More often that not, he or she is limited by a group of anthropologists who strongly deny their syncretic nature. Persons within these groups are working to

make their fellow anthropologist  
RESIST being syncretically fused  
with the persons, places and things  
around them.

This even includes those persons,  
places and things considered by  
certain influential or a great  
number of cultural anthropologists  
to be from the lower cultures  
around them, in their own societies  
where they live, shop and send  
their kids to school.

Even Doug Walters is just a  
syncretic being IN DEVELOPMENT.

There is a certain tragic element  
in many cultural anthropologists,  
in that so many yearn to be  
synbedevels but they do not have  
the means of existence to get  
there.

Being of African origin, maybe this  
is why I often wonder if  
Anthropology excessive fetishism of  
people, Causes, objects, and so on  
is a result of this.

One of the things we've been  
developing here in collaboration  
with the Delusional Beings Lab is  
what we might call a statement of  
acknowledgement that we have  
actually included in all of our  
partnership and employment  
contracts.

It's like a form to be filled in,  
and it says:

As a/an [insert singular cultural  
identity here] I am only a  
potential syncretic scientist and  
syncretic being. More often than  
not, I am limited by an essentially  
syncretic group of [insert plural  
cultural identity here] who  
strongly deny their syncretic  
nature and are resisting being  
syncretically fused with the

persons, places and things around them. This includes those persons, places and things considered by certain influential or a great number of [insert plural cultural identity here] to be the lower cultures in the society around them.

The degree of cultured-ness of any individual or group of persons is confused with the denial of syncretism, and those groups or individuals considered by so many to be more cultured are rather simply more in denial of, maintaining a wealth of public secrets containing their syncretic natures.

Educators, scientists, medical people, technology developers, and political analysts need to rediscover and re-choreograph the essentially syncretic nature of their own practices in order to make these practices more effective. This is one of the key goals to which SBL is dedicated. In creating syncretic beings, it provides a point of focus point to help achieve these goals.