

# STRING ORIENTATIONS OF SIMPLICIAL HOMOLOGY MANIFOLDS

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ABSTRACT. Simplicial homology manifolds are proposed as an interesting class of geometric objects, more general than topological manifolds but still quite tractable, in which questions about the microstructure of space-time can be naturally formulated. Their string orientations are classified by  $H^3$  with coefficients in an extension of the usual group of D-brane charges, by cobordism classes of homology three-spheres with trivial Rokhlin invariant.

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## 1. NOTATION AND BACKGROUND

**1.1** In homotopy-theoretic terms, a **string structure** on a smooth manifold  $M$  is a lift

$$\begin{array}{ccc} & & BO\langle 8 \rangle \\ & \nearrow \text{dotted} & \downarrow \\ M & \longrightarrow & BO \end{array}$$

of the map classifying the stable tangent bundle of  $M$ ; where the 7-connected cover  $BO\langle 8 \rangle$  of  $BO$  is the fiber

$$BO\langle 8 \rangle \rightarrow BO \rightarrow (BO)_{(7)}$$

of the map to its Postnikov approximation [27] having homotopy groups concentrated in degrees seven and below. Alternately:

$$(BO)\langle 8 \rangle = B(O\langle 7 \rangle)$$

is the classifying space for the topological group

$$O\langle 7 \rangle \rightarrow O \rightarrow O_{(6)}$$

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whose homotopy groups agree with those of  $O$  in degrees greater than or equal to seven.

A string structure can thus be interpreted as a ‘reduction’ of the structure group of the stable tangent bundle of  $M$ , from  $O$  to  $O\langle 7 \rangle$ , just as a spin structure is similarly a ‘reduction’ of that structure group to

$$\text{Spin} = O\langle 2 \rangle \rightarrow O \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_2 \times H(\mathbb{Z}_2, 1) .$$

An oriented manifold  $M$  admits a spin structure iff the Stiefel-Whitney class  $w_2 = 0$ ; similarly, the existence of a string structure requires the vanishing of a version  $p_1/2$  of the Pontrjagin class defined for spin manifolds. The set of spin structures on  $M$  admits a transitive free action of  $H^1(M, \mathbb{Z}_2)$ , and by essentially the same argument the set of string structures is an  $H^3(X, \mathbb{Z})$ -torsor. The associated twisted  $K$ -groups of  $X$  are natural repositories [7] for Ramond-Ramond  $D$ -brane charges.

The interest in string orientations comes from quantum field theory, where they were recognized as necessary to define an analog of the Dirac operator on the space  $LM$  of free loops on  $M$ , but mathematical interest [1] in their properties goes back to the early 70’s [16]. There is a parallel interest in the representation of three-dimensional cohomology classes in local geometric terms, analogous [6] to the description of two-dimensional classes by complex line bundles.

**1.2** If  $G$  is a connected, simply-connected simple Lie group, then

$$\pi_3(G) = \mathbb{Z}$$

by a classical theorem of Bott. A theorem of Kuiper says that the group  $\text{Gl}(\mathbb{H})$  of invertible bounded operators on an (infinite-dimensional) Hilbert space is contractible; the projective general linear group

$$\text{PGL}(\mathbb{H}) = \text{Gl}(\mathbb{H})/\mathbb{C}^\times \sim B\mathbb{T}$$

is therefore an Eilenberg-MacLane space of type  $H(\mathbb{Z}, 2)$ , from which it follows that the classifying space for  $\text{PGL}(\mathbb{H})$ -bundles is an EM space of type  $H(\mathbb{Z}, 3)$ . The associated bundle

$$1 \rightarrow \text{PGL}(\mathbb{H}) \rightarrow G\langle 4 \rangle \rightarrow G \rightarrow 1$$

is an extension of topological groups [28]. The following construction is due to Kitchloo [18, appendix]:

A level one projective representation of the loop group of  $G$  on  $\mathbb{H}$  defines a homomorphism to  $\text{PGL}(\mathbb{H})$  which pulls  $\text{Gl}(\mathbb{H})$  back to a version of the universal central extension of  $LG$ . Let  $\mathcal{A}$  denote the topological Tits building of  $LG$ , modeled by the contractible space of connections on a trivial  $G$ -bundle over a circle; the pointed loops act freely on it, and the holonomy map makes it a principal  $\Omega G$  bundle. The diagonal action of  $LG$  on

$$\mathcal{A} \times_{\Omega G} \text{PGL}(\mathbb{H}) := G\langle 4 \rangle$$

factors through an action of  $G$  on  $G\langle 4 \rangle$  lifting the action of  $G$  on itself by conjugation.

Note that because  $\mathrm{PGL}(\mathbb{H})$  is the group of automorphisms of  $\mathrm{Gl}(\mathbb{H})$ , the cohomology group

$$H^1(X, \mathrm{PGL}(\mathbb{H})) \cong H^1(X, H(\mathbb{Z}, 2)) \cong H^3(X, \mathbb{Z})$$

can be interpreted as a Brauer group of bundles of  $C^*$ -algebras (up to Morita equivalence) over  $X$ . A refinement of this argument [21] represents the Brauer group of bundles of **graded**  $C^*$ -algebras over  $X$  by the generalized Eilenberg-MacLane space

$$H(\mathbb{Z}_2, 1) \times H(\mathbb{Z}, 3),$$

which suggests interpreting  $O\langle 7 \rangle = O\langle 4 \rangle$  in terms of a bundle of such algebras over  $(S)O$ .

## 2. SIMPLICIAL HOMOLOGY MANIFOLDS

**2.1** I also want to thank Kitchloo for observing that in low dimensions, the map

$$\mathrm{PL}/O \rightarrow BO \rightarrow BPL$$

is almost an equivalence: the homotopy groups of the fiber are the Kervaire-Milnor groups of differentiable structures on spheres, which (aside from the smooth 4D Poincaré conjecture ...) are trivial below dimension seven. This implies that a string structure on a smooth manifold is the same as a smoothing of a topological manifold endowed with a lift

$$\begin{array}{ccc} & & B\mathrm{Top}\langle 8 \rangle \\ & \nearrow \text{dotted} & \downarrow \\ M & \longrightarrow & B\mathrm{Top} \end{array}$$

of the map classifying its tangent topological block bundle. The theorem

$$\mathrm{Top}/\mathrm{PL} \sim H(\mathbb{Z}_2, 3)$$

of Kirby and Siebenman [24] seems also to point in this direction.

**2.2** The classification of string structures on geometric objects more general than smooth manifolds is accessible nowadays, thanks to many researcher-years of deep work related to the Hauptvermutung, suggesting that questions like ‘Who ordered the differentiable structure’ may not be out of reach. I will summarize some background from Ranicki’s elegant account [22], but in some cases I’ll use terminology from [15]:

DEFINITION: A space  $X$  is a  $d$ -dimensional homology manifold iff for any  $x \in X$ ,

$$H_*(X, X - \{x\}; \mathbb{Z}) \cong H_*(S^{d-1}; \mathbb{Z});$$

but a **simplicial** homology manifold is a simplicial complex  $K$  such that for any  $k$ -simplex  $\sigma \in K$ ,

$$H_*(\text{link}_K(\sigma); \mathbb{Z}) \cong H_*(S^{d-k-1}; \mathbb{Z}) .$$

The polyhedron  $|K|$  of  $K$  is a homology manifold iff  $K$  is a simplicial homology manifold. A manifold homology resolution  $f : M \rightarrow X$  of a space  $X$  is a compact topological manifold  $M$  together with a surjective map  $f$  with acyclic point inverses.

The element  $\varkappa_k(K) \in H^k(|K|, \Theta_{k-1})$  Poincaré dual to the cycle

$$\sum_{|\sigma|=d-k} [\text{link}_K(\sigma)] \cdot \sigma \in H_{d-k}(|K|, \Theta_{k-1})$$

[29 p. 63-65] with coefficients in the group of simplicial homology spheres (up to cobordism through PL homology cylinders) is trivial unless  $k = 4$ : for  $\Theta := \Theta_3$  is the only nontrivial coefficient group. [It is **not** finitely generated [12, 15, 25].] There is a block bundle theory [14, 15] for simplicial homology manifolds, resulting in a fibration

$$BPL \rightarrow BHL \rightarrow H(\Theta, 4)$$

of classifying spaces.

**Theorem** [cf. [22 §5]]: A simplicial homology manifold  $K$  of dimension  $\geq 5$  admits a PL manifold homology resolution iff

$$\varkappa_4(K) = 0 .$$

The resolutions themselves are classified by maps to  $H(\Theta, 3)$  [8].

**2.3** Using this technology, the question motivating this note can be formulated as the problem of understanding the map

$$B(\text{Top}\langle 7 \rangle) = B(\text{PL}\langle 7 \rangle) \rightarrow BHL .$$

Its fiber can be decomposed as

$$\text{PL}/\text{Top}\langle 7 \rangle \rightarrow \text{HL}/\text{PL}\langle 7 \rangle \rightarrow \text{HL}/\text{PL} = H(\Theta, 3) ;$$

the fibration

$$\text{PL}/\text{Top}\langle 7 \rangle \rightarrow \text{Top}/\text{Top}\langle 7 \rangle = H(\mathbb{Z}_2, 1) \times H(\mathbb{Z}, 3) \rightarrow \text{Top}/\text{PL} = H(\mathbb{Z}_2, 3)$$

shows that  $\text{PL}/\text{Top}\langle 7 \rangle$  is a three-stage Postnikov system, with homotopy group  $\mathbb{Z}$  in degree three and  $\mathbb{Z}_2$  in degrees one and two. The group  $\pi_*(\text{HL}/\text{PL}\langle 7 \rangle)$  is therefore  $\mathbb{Z}_2$  in degree one and zero in degree two, while in degree three there is an exact sequence

$$0 \rightarrow \mathbb{Z} \rightarrow \pi_3(\text{HL}/\text{Top}\langle 7 \rangle) \rightarrow \Theta \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_2 \rightarrow 0 .$$

The map on the right can be identified with Rokhlin's invariant

$$\Sigma \mapsto \rho(\Sigma) := \frac{1}{8} \text{signature}(W) \text{ modulo } (2) : \Theta \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_2$$

of a homology three-sphere  $\Sigma$  (where  $W$  is a spin four-manifold with  $\partial W = \Sigma$ ). Let  $\Theta_0$  be the kernel of  $\rho$ .

**Corollary:** When  $K$  is a smoothable ( $\varkappa(K) = 0$ ) simplicial homology string manifold of dimension  $\geq 5$ , PL manifold structures on a homology resolution are classified by elements of  $H^3(|K|, \tilde{\Theta})$ ; where

$$\tilde{\Theta} := \mathbb{Z} \oplus \Theta_0 \cong \pi_3(\mathrm{HL}/\mathrm{Top}\langle 7 \rangle).$$

**Proof:** The exact sequence above splits, because the infinite cyclic group maps isomorphically to the three-dimensional homotopy group of  $\mathrm{Top}$ . This suggests, among other things, the existence of a combinatorial formula [2] for its Pontrjagin class. When that class vanishes, lifts of the classifying map from  $|K|$  to  $B\mathrm{HL}$  to a map from a homology resolution  $X$  are classified by maps to  $\mathrm{HL}/\mathrm{Top}\langle 7 \rangle$ .  $\square$

**2.4** The inclusion of the fiber in

$$H(\Theta, 3) \rightarrow B\mathrm{PL} \rightarrow B\mathrm{HL}$$

is trivial at odd primes:  $B\mathrm{PL} \cong B\otimes [30]$ , but  $K$ -theory is blind to Eilenberg - MacLane spaces  $H(A, n)$  for  $n > 2$ . At the prime two, there are still open questions. In particular, it is not known if  $\rho$  splits: this is equivalent to the conjecture that all topological manifolds of  $\dim > 4$  are simplicial complexes.

Freed [10] identifies the classifying space of the Picard category of  $\mathbb{Z}_2$ -graded complex lines as a two-stage Postnikov system. Its associated infinite-loop spectrum

$$\mathbb{L}_{\pm} \longrightarrow H\mathbb{Z}_2 \xrightarrow{\beta Sq^2} \Sigma^3 H\mathbb{Z}$$

is the truncation to positive dimensions

$$(\Sigma^2 \tilde{I})_{<0} \rightarrow \Sigma^2 \tilde{I} \rightarrow \mathbb{L}_{\pm}$$

of the double suspension of the Anderson dual [17 appendix B, 18] of the sphere spectrum, which is characterized by a short exact sequence

$$0 \rightarrow \mathrm{Ext}(E_{*-1}, \mathbb{Z}) \rightarrow \tilde{I}^*(E) \rightarrow \mathrm{Hom}(E_*, \mathbb{Z}) \rightarrow 0$$

associated to a spectrum  $E$ . This same small Postnikov system appears as the base

$$F/\mathrm{PL} \cong \Sigma^{4*} H\mathbb{Z} \times \Sigma^{4*+2} H\mathbb{Z}_2 \times \Sigma^2 \mathbb{L}_{\pm} \quad (* > 1)$$

of the (two-localization) of the infinite-loop space classifying piecewise-linear structures on a Poincaré-duality space [19]. These observations can then be assembled into the diagram

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} & & \Sigma^2 H\mathbb{Z}_2 = \mathrm{Top}/\mathrm{PL} & & & & \Sigma^2 \tilde{I} \\ & \nearrow & & \searrow \rho & & & \downarrow \\ \Sigma^3 H\Theta & \xrightarrow{=} & \mathrm{HL}/\mathrm{PL} & \xrightarrow{\kappa} & F/\mathrm{PL} & \xrightarrow{\cdots} & \Sigma^2 \mathbb{L}_{\pm} . \end{array}$$

On the other hand, the Rokhlin homomorphism defines an exact sequence

$$\cdots \rightarrow \tilde{I}^2(H\Theta_0) \rightarrow \tilde{I}^1(H\mathbb{Z}_2) \rightarrow \tilde{I}^1(H\Theta) \rightarrow \cdots ;$$

but  $\tilde{I}^2(H\Theta_0) = 0$ , so (the nonzero invariant defined by)  $\rho \in \tilde{I}^1(H\mathbb{Z}_2)$  maps to (the nonzero invariant defined by)  $\kappa \in \tilde{I}^1(H\Theta)$ : which defines a homomorphism from  $B\Theta$  to  $\mathbb{L}_\pm$ , and can thus be interpreted as a topological field theory mapping the category with one object, and 3D homology cylinders as morphisms, to the category of  $\mathbb{Z}_2$ -graded complex lines.

This can be regarded as a lift of Rokhlin's invariant, regarded as a topological field theory taking values in the Picard category of real lines. It suggests the interest of super-Chern-Simons theories [11 §9] defined on simplicial homology spin manifolds.

### 3. ÜBER DIE HYPOTHESEN, WELCHE ZU GRUNDE DER PHYSIK LIEGEN

Following [6 §VII], it is tempting to interpret the elements of  $\mathbb{Z}$  in  $\tilde{\Theta}$  as topological twists ‘in the large’ (or at infinity), and elements of  $\Theta_0$  as twists ‘in the small’. Physics has a tradition of concern (cf eg Wheeler) with the possibility that the microstructure of the Universe might in some way be nonEuclidean. This seems legitimate: experiments in **very** high-energy physics probe the topology of space-time at very short distance, and it is conceivable that at very fine scales physical space might be described by some kind of quantum foam model [23], possibly involving ensembles with varying topology.

These ideas have a big literature, but interested researchers seem not to be very aware of the long history of interest in analogous questions among topologists. In particular, the extended homology cobordism group  $\tilde{\Theta}$  seems to capture rather precisely the idea that the space-time ‘bubbles’ in which very-short-distance interactions occur - I’m thinking of the way Feynman diagrams are often drawn - might be bounded by non-standard spheres.

If physics starts by hypothesizing the existence of a simplicial homology manifold structure<sup>1</sup> on some (say, ten or eleven-dimensional) space-time  $K$ , then the vanishing of  $w_2$  decides the existence of a spin structure and the vanishing of  $\kappa(K)$  decides the existence of a PL resolution. When  $p_1/2 = 0$ , resolutions of  $|K|$  admit string structures; this is quite like the standard situation. However, the possible **twists** of that string resolution (related to  $B$ -fields [26], Vafa's discrete torsion [2 §1.6] and perhaps more generally to  $D$ -brane charges [5 §4.4]) lie in  $H^3(|K|, \tilde{\Theta})$ , which is much bigger than the usual group of gerbes over  $|K|$ . There may even be ‘experimental’ evidence for the physical relevance of twisting by homology three-spheres, in that deep results about the structure of such manifolds are derived by scattering Yang-Mills bosons off them: ie, from Donaldson theory [9].

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<sup>1</sup>conceptually similar to a causal structure

As for exotic homology manifolds [4], hypotheses non fingo: in part because they, unlike simplicial homology manifolds, seem to lack the clocks and measuring rods that play the role of rulers and compasses in classical geometry. This is probably a lack of imagination on my part; a deeper concern is that major questions in 4D geometric topology remain open. Here I want only to make the point that simplicial homology manifolds are understood well enough to test against the models of contemporary physics.

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