|Book Symposium|

Hierarchy and conflict in mutual being

Comment on SAHLINS, Marshall. 2013. *What kinship is—and is not.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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David Schneider's (1984) career-long study of kinship famously culminated in the discovery that North Americans didn't have it and that nobody else had any either. While continued use thereafter of the noun "kinship" implied determinate sense and reference, many scholars, wary of essentialism, projection, and premature closure, have been indisposed to state what these might be. Marshall Sahlins' *What kinship is—and is not* (2013) is quite the other thing, developing a general characterization of kinship as a probable universal of human experience from comparative exploration of its ethnographic variousness.

Potted histories of kinship

Disciplinary micro-histories of kinship commonly feature "dying god" (or "Finnegan's Wake"?) narratives of prior omnipotence, ignominious death, and glorious pre-millennial resurrection in the 1990s (cf. Faubion 1996). Post-rebirth book titles variously promise "transformation," "newness," "reconfiguration," "beyond-ness," and the inevitable Strathernian "after." Typically a "before" made of biologization, rule enactment, formalism, baroque terminologies, and descent vs. alliance wars is opposed to a value-added "after" (or "now") populated by strategic practice, agency (a different species), gender, kin-we-choose, dividual subjects, nonmodern nature-cultures, and (especially) assisted reproductive technologies and artificial life. The Blackwell reader (Parkin and Stone 2004) divides moiety-like between a "before" section labeled "Kinship as social structure: descent and alliance" and an "after" section called "Kinship as culture, process, and agency," the latter including gender, genetics, soap operas, and chimpanzees. Some before/after stories have greater probity than others. For example, any kinship "now" defined by strategic practice requires contrivance of a "before" from which Bronislaw Malinowski, Audrey Richards, and most of the Manchester School have

been strategically erased. The before/after divides also obscure ongoing co-exist-ences of earlier and newer orientations in various conditions of dialectical tension, serene mutual indifference, or cross-pollination. Maurice Godelier's 1993 *Maison suger* roundtable and resulting volumes (Godelier et al. 1998; Godelier 2004; Trautmann and Whiteley 2012) applied newer methods and orientations ("context and overlay," for example) to perduring questions of terminology, descent, and alliance. The more balanced appraisals of recent kinship history attend both to continuity and transformation. Carsten (2004: xi), for example, suggests that her title *After kinship* is partly ironic: "the message of the book appears to be that 'after kinship' is—well, just more kinship (even if it might be of a slightly different kind)."

What kinship is—and is not exhibits its author's signature brilliance, erudition, and originality (not faulting wit), and it is impossible to address its many virtues--even within the uncompressed latitudes of a *HAU* Book Symposium. Sahlins' Janus-faced universalizing-particularizing orientation provides an encompassing context whose value for the exploration of both earlier and contemporary kinship concerns would be difficult to exaggerate. His exposition makes creative use of North American Indian ethnology. I make occasional use of the same below but defer to another occasion the book's implications for studies of Native American kinship. What follows is a frighteningly skeletal exposition of what I take to be the essential thesis and then a slightly more extended discussion of other entities that may be what kinship is or isn't—specifically subjectivities, practices, conflict, and hierarchy.

Mutuality of being and transpersonal praxis

Sahlins' kinship *is* intersubjective "mutuality of being": conditions of corporeal and spiritual consubstantiality and of dispositional and experiential interpenetration that unite kin and divide them from non-kin. In Lévy-Bruhl's idiom, this is not fusion of pre-individuated beings but *ab initio* unity always already immanent in them (33–34). Sahlins attends symmetrically both to egocentric inclusion of plural related others in the single subject and to the same single subject's simultaneous sociocentric dispersion across plural related others. "Transpersonal praxis" (44) is transference of subjects' qualities and experiences as effects on the condition of their kin, and correlative practices that mediate, neutralize, or capitalize on these influences. The repertoire is broad and heterogeneous: sharing bodily well-being or malaise, observing the couvade, suffering the sins of the fathers, ingesting deceased grandparents, or serving as a guiltless and yet entirely culpable surrogate when a sibling murderously breaches the peace. The specific properties of kinship in Sahlins' analysis—as of Sahlins' analysis of kinship--are centered in the principle of mutuality and its correlative praxis (43). Their conjunction affords a point of departure for looking at kinship's rigid or fluid boundaries with other participa-tions—sex and gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class, subculture—whose members may also experience what they share as mutual being and use kinship to talk about it. Hence, for example, "classificatory" (or is it?) sibling-talk by the likes of union members, civil rights workers, feminists, co-religionists ("so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" [Romans 12:5]), and outlaw motorcycle gangs. In a section (37–44) which devout post-humanists may find disturbing, Sahlins marshalls exceptionalist findings in de-velopmental psychology which suggest a uniquely human provenance for the inter-

subjective capacities presupposed in kinship. Since it is *non*-human hominids who are both more disposed to rational maximizing and in greater danger of extinction, Sahlins envisions dismal prospects for the discipline of economics (42).

Procreative and performative constitutions

The book's comparative metalanguage divides kinship between procreative (a.k.a. natal, consanguineal, genealogical, substantial) and performative (a.k.a. post-natal, affinal, made, sociological) modes. The procreative mode based on shared bodily substance is neither universal nor necessarily dominant in kinship: among Lakhota, for example, "Biological relationship was only one of several ways of becoming related" and was not "accorded primacy or pre-eminence in the definition of relatedness either in theory or in daily life" (DeMallie 1994: 35). The book privileges variability: if present, shared substance may attach progeny to one parent or to both or to non-parent humans or to non-human parents by diverse pro-creative "substance codes" (blood, breast milk, semen, bone, among others) or immaterial "spiritual" affiliations (Sahlins 2013: 86–87). The book's second half is an original contribution to anthropology's longstanding deconstruction (Sahlins traces it back to Durkheim) of kinship as biologized convention. What kinship in general and local procreative schemata in particular emphatically are *not* is biology qua sexual reproduction or genetics. Kinship is vehicle and genealogy metaphoric tenor, and there are no "fictive" (metaphoric, classificatory, etc.) extensions outward from primary (parent-child, sibling) ties to more distal kin or non-kin. There are here parallels with Françoise Héritier's (1994) argument that incest rules "begin" with affines and "extend" to primary consanguines, not the reverse. Group and child are reciprocally born in and to each other: the Mae Enga fetus, for example, is more significantly the product of a patrilineal clan ancestor's im-material influences than of its parents' procreational substances (Sahlins 2013: 83–84).

The book also addresses diverse ways and means of made kinship: affinity but also "commensality, sharing food, reincarnation, co-residence, shared memories, working together, blood brotherhood, adoption, friendship, shared suffering" (9). The Eskimoan-speaking peoples emerge as planetary virtuosos of performed kinships, with particular emphasis on their (and others') onomastic creations of it. In addition to turning non-kin to kin, performed kinships may effect such trans-formative segués between different statuses as that of adoptive child to spouse. The book invites reflection on the forces in play where systemic agency accords subjects powers to make and unmake particular kin relations. Where commensalism sometimes confers kinship and sometimes not, what conjunctural factors of desire or occasion or biography then condition different outcomes?

Rather than franchising procreation to *physis* and performance to *nomos*, Sahlins takes each to be equally and irreducibly semiotic and discursive--cultural all the way down. He includes spiritual agencies in procreation (4), and cases where procreated subjects performatively predetermine their own birth and identity are interesting blends of the constituting means. A Rock Cree of my acquaintance, for example, stopped over in a midwife's dream shortly prior to birth.

> So she had a dream like someone come in, a man with a dog team, eh? I guess she dreamt that I stopped by, eh? Told her I'm coming to these people. I told her my name was Cahkāpīs, eh? I said, "I'm gonna . . . I'm coming in and stay with you guys." Shortly after, somebody came in and called her. My mom was sick [about to give birth]. I was supposed to be born then. So after I was born, yeah, I was a boy and she [midwife] told 'em [family], "Shit, I dream . . . had a dream about him two hours ago," she said. "His name is Cahkāpīs." That's the old lady who gave me the name because she dream I told her it was my name.

Note the versatility here of the "kinship I" and also the pre-natal subject's simultaneous presence *pawānīwinihk* ("on the dreamside") as an enculturated and discursive adult male whose attributes predetermine—not predict—sex, name, longevity, and other traits of the infant simulacrum. Alike in constituting the multiplicitous unity (or unitary multiplicity) of kinship, procreative and performative likenesses exceed differences: "I take the risk: all means of constituting kinship are in essence the same" (28–29).

"Own" and "different people"

Kinship mutuality subsumes a universal distinction of "own people" one cannot marry and "different (affinal) people" one does. The two are not in simple correspondence, respectively, with procreative and performative modes but commonly exhibit distinct forms and causes of solidarity and conflict. That progeny usually contract "primary affiliation" with "own kin" of one parent or the other (54–56) is certainly the Fourth World default case—but leaves as interesting desiderata those systems, notably of mobile hunter-gatherers, where residential composition is flexible—or inchoate—to the degree that there exist no perduring groups between which maternal and paternal kin are necessarily divided or progeny's productive or reproductive labor transferred.

The distinctions of procreative/performative and own/different people direct attention to local qualitative and quantitative sub-classifications of mutual being. Some Swampy Cree discourses suggest "classificatory" practice—which amounts to prescriptive use of the same lexemes and conducts for kin differently positioned (procreated/adopted, proximal/distal, own/affine) in the kin universe. As concerns procreated vs. adopted progeny, for example, the normative value Swampy Cree attach to their *non*-differentiation is well-expressed in vigorous (albeit incorrect) denials that the two are lexically distinguished. So also with some affines—who really *aren't* lexically distinguished:

> My wife's side of the family, her sisters and their children and grandchildren, I treat them exactly the same way I would my own. Because they come to me, they call me "grandpa," call me "uncle."

This speaker is *nōhkomis* ("uncle," today either MB or FB) to his WZ's children and *nimosōm* ("grandfather") to their grandchildren—as well he might be as husband of the grandmother's sister who is equally "grandmother" to them. Genuinely *fictive* kinship would seem to obtain in cases where asymmetric or reciprocal exchange of kinship talk and conduct fails entirely to entail, in any measure at all, the presupposed mutuality of being.

The book concludes with a generalization of broad scope: procreative and performative constitutive means are hierarchically dominant in unilinear and in cognatic or bilateral systems, respectively (86). This invites further investigation of the combinatorial relations, the constitutive means, and attached praxes that contract with different varieties of terminology, descent, and alliance (with, of course, due attention to insubordinate societies: matrilineal people with Omaha terminology, and the like). Back in the 1980s, when kinship was dead, Alan Rumsey (1981) described register-like switching between different Ngarinyin terminologies (cf. recent work on Crow and Omaha terminologies as historical and contextual overlays on underlying Dravidianate classifications [Trautmann and Whiteley 1981: 283–86]). Amongst much else, *What kinship is—and is not* is an invitation similarly to examine distributions of co-present procreative/performed and own/affine mutualities and their correlative transpersonal praxes across different discursive and interactive contexts.

Fear and loathing in the mutuality of being

For Sahlins (contra another authority), kinship possesses differentiating properties of its own while sharing qualities with other cultural domains. Its signature qualities are mutuality and its correlative praxis. There remain questions of whether "what kinship is" also embraces peoples' subjectivities, affects, and (other) practices, specifically qua kin relatedness. At issue is whether what kinship "is" is equivalent to what, in different senses, it includes. Such seems the case with amity and solidarity: "amity is subsumed in kinship relations" and "diffuse enduring solidarity and the like [are] the corollary subjectivity of mutual being" (24). Likewise immanent within the "own people" category is the feature of virtual (and oft-compromised) equality (54).

The issue is complicated by the relationship of kinship order to its failures and negations (cf. Faubion 2001: 17; Carsten 2000: 24; Franklin and McKinnon 2001: 18–19). Solidarity and equality do not occur socially as pure products, but insofar as the book ascribes them hierarchically dominant positions in mutuality then it might plausibly dispatch conflict and hierarchy, the respective contraries, to kinship's antipodes. Degrees of material or social support prescriptively owed to kin under local axioms of amity are famously variable. In those mobile foraging societies where autonomy (from dependence and responsibility alike) is the dominant value, the bar of prescriptive altruism may be set so low that failed kinship requires strenuous efforts to achieve (cf. Woodburn 1979 [Hadza], Gardener 1972: 419 [Paliyar]). More commonly, kinship norms overrun peoples' capacities to satisfy them. Thus Rupert Stasch's (2009: 136) observation that Korowai kinship ideals include the failure they inevitably produce, and Sahlins' that kinship failure returns the favor by presupposing the ideals (24). From this point of view, what kinship is subsumes shortfalls and transgressions actuated as by-products of the institutions and prescriptions in place.

Consider, for example, prescriptive kin amity in Swampy *Maskēkōwak* Cree society. Anthropology's enduring "totemism" comes lexically from Proto-Algonquian **-tōtēma* ("co-resident") by way of the Ojibwe reflex *–dōdēm* ("clan, clan member, clan eponym"). The Cree reflex *–tōtēm* means "friend." Crees readily assert that "friend" ideally should but never actually includes all *wāhkomākanak* ("relatives").

> Some relatives will be *kitōtēmak* ["your friends"] . . . but with some
> you don't get along! Those relatives you get along with, *that's kitōtēmak.*
> Cousins or whoever.

Another "failure" is the ambiguity attending dissolution of kin solidarity with distance (53), a theme explored for a contemporary stateless society in Daniel Woodrell's novel *Winter's bone* (2006). The Missouri Ozarks heroine puts herself in extreme harm's way at the hands of genealogically and geographically distal relatives whose felt obligations to her qua kinswoman she has gravely overestimated. Her FB extracts her from these straits at risk to his own life, securing her reprieve only in transpersonal capacity as kin-surrogate who will "answer for her."

Leaving aside quotidien failure to love (especially remote) kinsmen as thyself, and also near-ubiquitous elements of formality and avoidance, what do we—or other people—make of kinship orders that virtually prescribe, between particular kin or kin groups, agonistic dispositions and practices—from litigious dispute to deliberated familicide—antipathic to diffuse, enduring solidarity? Such Sophoclean kinship may arise among "own people" from a dialectic between virtual equality and uneven distributions of valued offices, privileges, and objects, and among affines from unreciprocated transfers of reproductive potential (54–55). Stereotypes notwithstanding, Sahlins observes that tensions with "own people" may make affinal relations salubrious by comparison (54)—as, for example, among Paliyan (South Asian forager) men who entrust partner roles in honey collecting not to the brothers "who will kill you for your wife" but to the wives' brothers who won't (Gardener 1972: 416).

Another facet of violence in the kinship order appears when Sahlins plumbs the "dark side" of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (2009) animistic troika of kinship, exchange, and magic. If magic resembles kinship, witchcraft and sorcery are analogous to failed kinship, and when exerted by kin against kin are "by definition, negative kinship," specifically as exploitation of relatives' bodily consubstantiality (Sahlins 2013: 59). Witchcraft as negative kinship is, by the way, nicely distilled in the Navaho doctrine that murder-sacrifice of kin is *the* privileged means to distinguished witchcraft careers (Kluckhohn 1967). Like other modes of conflict, witchcraft may be sited as relative permanency or probabilistic trend in and between particular kin statuses. Sub-Saharan Africa is the disciplinary *urheimat* for intra-familial witchcraft and sorcery (cf. Moore and Sanders 2001: 7) but Native North America is not wanting in parallel cases encompassing both "own people" and affines (cf. Walker 1989). In a mid-1900s sample of 103 Navaho witchcraft cases involving kin, eighty-one accusations were directed affinally at WF while a respectable fourteen targeted MB inside the matriclan (Aberle 1961: 170). Sorcery between contending fathers-in-law is a Subarctic theme [Landes 1938: 114 (Ojibwe)] and there are recurrent accounts of Chiracahua Apache mothers inducing infertility in their own daughters (Stockel 1993: 25). In capacity as legitimate (by whose lights?) sanction for prior failed kinship, intrafamilial witchcraft may affirm values of kinship amity. Absent such framing, it subverts the same values, compounding with and itself exemplifying failed kinship. Looked at from different points of view, violent conflicts appear paradoxically both internal and external to kinship order. Arising from incompatible elements in the descent,

marriage, and residence practices composing kinship orders (Sahlins 2013: 54–56), conflict violates or qualifies normative axioms of amity.

A related question is how social hierarchy composes with mutuality of being. Sahlins likens failed exchange to negative kinship, invoking a Maori text describing adverse effects of the unreciprocated gift on the well-being of both parties (59–60). Such failure evokes Greek gift-like kin exchanges where adverse social or material effects accrue asymmetrically to one transacting party or the other, differences in the prestations creating "inequality, domination, and/or hierarchical inclusion" (60). Mauss conceived reciprocity as the moral opposite and pre-emptive alternative to "warre," predicated ideally on exchange between equal parties of prestations of approximately equivalent value. Mobile foraging societies affirm Mauss' valorization of equality—while according more importance to the discriminatory potentials of asymmetric exchanges. Thus the Inuhuit (Polar Eskimo) Sorqaq corrected Peter Freuchen's infelicitous gratitude performatives:

> You must not thank for your meat; it is your right to get parts. In this country, nobody wishes to be dependent on others. Therefore, there is nobody who gives or gets gifts, for thereby you become dependent. With gifts you make slaves just as with whips you make dogs. (Freuchen 1961: 154)

Approximately a half-century later in Botswana, a Dobe Ju/'hoansi explained that

> When a young man kills much meat, he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this. We refuse one who boasts, for someday his pride will make him kill somebody. So we always speak of his meat as worthless. In this way we cool his heart and make him gentle. (Lee 1979: 246)

Note here the native sociologists' kneejerk association of hierarchy both with dependence and murderousness. These societies use entitlement to shares (a.k.a. generalized reciprocity) and rhetorical leveling of productive differentials proactively to forestall vividly imagined futures (sometimes horrifically objectified by agro-pastoral neighbors?) wherein asymmetric flows of meat (meat givers and meat takers?) have crystallized as permanent hierarchy.

Sahlins explicitly excludes "such politics of kinship practice" (the making of hierarchy among kin) from "what kinship is" (Sahlins 2013: 60). Equality is the virtual condition of what "own people" kinship is (54) and hierarchy might then appear as the contrary it is not. But hierarchy is sometimes no less intrinsic than sameness to the constitution of procreative kinship:

> Because of his privileged connection to ancestral being, the Maori chief has more fellowship, more mana, and more occasion for the "kinship I" than others. Power is in this regard a certain unbalance of mutual being, which is also to say of genealogical priority. (36–37)

The Pacific Northwest Coast is famously resonant of Polynesia. Consider the internal stratification of its matrilineal and cognatic descent groups into aristocratic and commoner divisions—of which the latter's exploited labor has been remarked upon (Testart 1982; Godelier 1999). If hierarchy was procreatively ascribed, it could also be strategically achieved in "potlatch"-like property distributions—and it

is perhaps the hierarchical outcomes of such intra-kin events that compose a political practice outside kinship proper. Since these people value the capacity of asymmetric reciprocities to reproduce and transform rather than level inequalities of social and material condition, ensuing hierarchies are not readily classifiable as "failed" exchange.

In some privileged contexts, conflict and hierarchy are conjoined and seem clearly to override their opposites. In November of 1821, John Franklin, John Richardson, and other survivors of the Franklin expedition were providentially succored by a small *Talʒa̧ hot'inɛ* (Yellowknife) party. Said Richardson (1984: 167), "The Indians cooked for us and fed us as if we had been children, evincing a degree of humanity that would have done honour to the most civilized nation." The amity thus extended to the explorers was not uniformly present internally. One of the men

> beat his wife, a girl about sixteen years of age, severely, before starting in the morning by way of inducing her to encounter with more alacrity the labours of the day . . . and repeated his treatment during the march, as often as she sank amongst the snow through fatigue. He accompanied his blows with the gestures and expressions which the Canadian voyageurs use when they beat their dogs. (ibid.: 169)

The passage invites different interpretations. The conduct was evidently not customary: Richardson wrote that "Such brutal conduct was rarely observed in a Red Knife" [i.e., Yellowknife], called it "capricious," and contrasted it with another married pair's "attentive and even affectionate" relationship (ibid.). Note, however, others' non-intervention. Some entitlement to violence, acted upon or not, may systemically have attached to husbands' statuses, whatever amity otherwise obtained there. Such a prerogative, if it existed, is not readily explicable as the microcosmic effect of co-present forms composing the kinship order. Kinship was bilateral, residence ambilocal, and marriage restricted exchange, probably of patrilateral type (Dyen and Aberle 1974: 288), which would have minimized unreciprocated spouse transfer as a cause of affinal conflict. Gender politics more broadly (cf. Collier and Yanagisako 1987) are an obvious conditioning factor—although too little known here to clarify the case. Interpretation is further complicated by what seems to the husband's idiosyncratic indigenization of French Canadian dog traction practices.

A different explanation entirely is that prescriptive amity in conjugal and sibling relations alike precluded any such entitlement, and that what Richardson saw was a woman in the abject position of lacking "own people" kin disposed to act on her behalf against an abusive—perhaps lunatic—spouse. (One recalls here Montagnais responses in 1630s Québec when Jesuits counseled recourse to physical discipline of disobedient wives. If he beat his wife, explained a Montagnais, her brothers would come and tear the nose ring out his septum. This, he added, by way of clarification, would disfigure him and also hurt badly.) The extreme case of such abjection would have been a wife of slave or captive status. When Lévi-Strauss wrote of the "residues of evil" ubiquitous in all social designs, he might have been evoking the condition of those in the margins of indigenous kinship orders.

Depending on how one fills the (many) blanks, violence or hierarchy or both may have been intrinsic to Yellowknife spousal mutuality of being or normatively absent from it. In a broader comparative compass, there exist perspectives from

which mutuality of being can encompass the entire quartet of solidarity/equality and conflict/hierarchy, albeit in disparate ways, the first as ideals and the latter as Realpolitik or included negations. Conflict and hierarchy plausibly possess varying degrees of interiority to Sahlins' characterization of what kinship is. Criteria for diagnosing such compositionality are a desideratum. Hierarchy or conflict may be immanent in kin mutuality itself—as, for example, when conditioned by genealogical distance from founding ancestors or when spousal relations mirror contradictions in affinal exchange. They acquire greater exteriority in proportion as they are effectuated in kin relations by such co-present forms as class or gender asymmetry, or by contingent features of event and biography.

Old kinships and new

In the post-millennial mosaic of older and newer anthropologies of kinship, *What kinship is—and is not* occupies transitional space. For a book about kinship published in 2013, it has two unusual characteristics: it doesn't say much about artificially-assisted reproduction and it engages primarily with indigenous societies, contributing to a partial re-repatriation of kinship from the modern, cosmopolitan precincts whence Schneider and Strathern earlier conveyed it. "But see here!" one might well expostulate. "What about us, the good people of the neoliberal, global, metropolitan-modern North and its planetary appendages and arteries? What of kinship in the epoch of xeno-transplantation and transgenesis and ALife?" Well, it wasn't the moderns who first came up with chimeras of human and nonhuman natural or artifactual kinds: Sahlins (2013: 86) reminds us that in some Amazonian societies a human birth is not necessarily a human birth. Neither, as Lévi-Strauss (2011: 69–75) observed back in 1986, when kinship was dead, was Western biomedicine the first to confront infertility with artificially assisted reproduction. Botanical medicines and ritual practice aside, much of the relevant technology was "social," entailing face-to-face (so to speak) contact with surrogates in place of impersonal, bio-technocratic mediations. Among an obscure Nilotic people, for example, infertile women may be made over as FBs, using bridewealth cattle from their BD's marriage to acquire, in their turn, wives who reproduce, through compensated congress with transient genitors, the lineage's children. In this and other cases, "couples composed of two women practice assisted reproduction in order to have children" (ibid.: 71).

It is now conventional to point out that nobody is more convinced that kinship is biology than people who mobilize assisted reproduction technologies to intervene in it. While oriented toward enduring concerns in the anthropology of kinship, there are many chambers within *What kinship is—and is not* for accommodation of newer topics, orientations, and agendas. "Biosocial" kin groups (cf. Rabinow 1992), for example, formed around shared genetic predispositions to particular diseases exhibit mutuality, transpersonal praxis, sameness, prescriptive amities and equalities, and even exogamy. The frontiers of techno-assisted reproduction are expanding to out-of-the-way places. Having pioneered indigenized modernities and modernized indigeneities, Sahlins is well-positioned to address kinship's planetary hybridizations. What will people ascribing no necessary consubstantiality to parent and child, or according greater value to performed than to procreated relatedness, make of genetically-engineered cross-cousins and cyborg embryos?

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