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The “Real Cool” Men: Exploring Black Masculinity, Transracial Families and Vulnerability in *This Is Us*

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1. Introduction

In the U.S. television universe, the representation of characters and working crew who step outside the established mainstream path, as successful and lucrative, has always been limited to a courageous few. The canon that the television industry embraces aims to gather a specific profile of characters and cinematic crew: White, cis, heterosexual and normative. Attempting to step out of the lines drawn by the patriarchy in which our society lives is usually punished, and in this industry, the price is paid with lack of representation or with a misguided one. The attempted erasure of certain social minorities and ethnicities has been an ongoing situation from the beginning of the television journey. This dissertation aims to demonstrate how the TV series *This Is Us* offers a fresh and “progressive” perspective on Black masculinity (Mutua), which will be analysed from an intersectional perspective that combines cultural, race, and gender studies. Through its racially diverse crew and cast, as well as its inclusion of healthy practices and attitudes that diverge from the normative Black masculinity usually displayed on television, *This Is Us* poses a necessary turn on Black males’ representation on television that will be hereafter proposed for discussion and analysis.

Lately, the television industry has taken several hits that have affected its existence, production and modus operandi: the pandemic of 2020 and the WGA/SAG-AFTRA strikes of 2023. As society grows and develops new ways of living, its industries need to grow with it, or perish. These events have shown people that the combination of “[t]he double strike shows the power of collective action. After decades of being devalued, writers and actors have organized and fought back” (Ramón, Ana-Christina et al. 67). It is widely known that inclusivity in this field has been a pending task for decades, and despite the fact that recently there has been an increase in the number of racialised workers in the television industry, the battle is not nearly finished yet. According to the *Hollywood Diversity Report*¹, in 2022 “only 3.6 out of 10 lead actors in digital scripted TV are people of color” (Ramón, Ana-Christina et al. 25). Furthermore, it seems imperative to complement this data with the final reflection of the study: “In broadcast and digital during the 2021-22 television season, each viewer group across race, ethnicity, gender, and age categories watched a majority of top ten shows with racially and ethnically diverse casts” (Ramón, Ana-Christina et al. 68). If one is to pay attention to these two statements together, the conclusion of this report is obvious: our society

¹ Annual report on film and television conducted by the University of California’s (UCLA) Institute of Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE).

is demanding racially, ethnically and multiculturally constructed shows to watch, but the industry does not seem to be willing to be as inclusive as it should be just yet. Although it is true that in recent years this industry has taken many steps in the right direction in terms of inclusivity, the streaming industry is still a long way from reaching the level of representation of diverse characters, lives and situations that society is longing for. We live in a world with plural, colourful, multicultural and unique individuals, so it seems only right that the audience should be able to enjoy a fair representation of this diversity on television.

The U.S. show *This Is Us*, created by Dan Fogelman, has portrayed one of the most multicultural, multiracial and diverse stories to ever been created in television. In 2016, the TV show aired on NBC and became a huge success until its end in 2022. Nowadays, it still gathers millions of spectators in different streaming services and its legacy is more alive than it ever was with the recent creation of the podcast called *That Was Us*, carried by three of the series' leading actors: Mandy Moore, Sterling K. Brown and Chris Sullivan. The series has received numerous nominations and awards, praising the performances of its superb cast, the high-quality storytelling, the attention to detail in the writing of its scripts, as well as the intrinsic value of the series in the television landscape in comparison to others. These awards have been granted by renowned institutions such as the Television Academy and the Golden Globes. Within the framework of US television, *This Is Us* is a critically acclaimed drama series that sets an example in terms of inclusivity and integration of social minorities, challenging the standards of a predominantly White and non-inclusive industry. Starting behind the scenes and continuing with the ensemble cast, the directing and writing team is one of the most racially inclusive in the industry, among them one can find Black writers such as George Tillman Jr. or Regina King, and scriptwriters Kay Oyegun, Jas Waters and Eboni Freeman, whose meticulous writing has made this show's story compelling, with a multilayered and relatable storyline. The creator of the show, Dan Fogelman, as it was discussed in a radio program broadcast by the National Public Radio, made it his job to "... hire a diversity of people and then let them create" ("3 Black writers" 04:11) and that is directly linked to the rawness of the show's narrative. This active choice of action positively affected the final products of the show in a way that could not have been possible if the crew had not been as inclusive as it was. The groundbreaking work of the series has been, among other acknowledgements, recognized when Sterling Kelby Brown, leading actor in the series, was announced as the first Black man to ever win "Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series" in the history of the Golden Globes since they first started in 1944. Brown's win is as deserving of pride for its pioneer and immaculate work as evoking

for reflection in our society: the racial gap in the TV industry has obviously handicapped these kinds of artistic recognitions for a very long time if this win had to wait until 2018 for it to bare the name of an African American actor. That is the reflection of the kind of work and effort that has been put into building the legacy of *This Is Us*. A trailblazer series that narrates the lives of the Pearson family, which does not shy away from diving into difficult conversations that include themes of race, social class, economic and political power, sexual orientation, disabilities, death and mental health. Despite the fact that the core Pearson family is the common thread throughout the series, as the show progresses there is a constellation of characters (see Appendix A) and families that branch out and present endless possibilities for analysis, as mentioned directly above. Notwithstanding, for this dissertation I made the decision to focus on the representation of Black masculinity as the basis of the main argument, from which the different areas of knowledge that will be mentioned in this introduction branch off.

The depiction of the family as a series trope has been widely explored and successfully exploited in the history of television. It should be noted that nowadays one can find very diverse and unique representations in the television landscape, such as *Pose* (2018-2021), that proposes the model of the “chosen family,” which advocates for the choosing of the people who constitute a family unit, rather than the one assigned by blood. Nonetheless, it has always had a broadly homogeneous structure, with strongly identifiable characters. In the more recent history of TV, it has indeed come to one’s attention that a shift in media representation has been steadily taking place. Series such as *The Fosters* (2013-2018), *Modern Family* (2009-2020) or *Parenthood* (2010-2015) have recently contributed to the representation on TV of family models and interpersonal relationships that differ drastically from the hegemonic models established in the past in the history of television of how diverse U.S. families are. Giving such characters this space in the industry is crucial for the advancement of the art of television, and consequently, of the society of which it is a reflection. Arguably, what differentiates *This Is Us* from the other family series that have been screened so far is that it places the spotlight on a transracial family, following the adoption of a Black child. As it was aforementioned, nowadays there are shows like *Modern Family* (2009-2020) that depict diverse family structures, or *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-ongoing), in which there is another case of a White family adopting a Black daughter. However, the depth in which *This Is Us* addresses the social barriers that a Black adopted child experiences in a transracial family cannot be overlooked: it is unlike anything ever seen on television.

Ravinder Barn, a renowned scholar on social policies and its intersection with ethnicity and race, defines transracial adoption (TRA) as “an adoption that involves the placement of children in families that are racially and culturally different from them. In modern western societies, this practice largely involves the placement of minority ethnic children in White adoptive families” (1273). Randall Pearson is a Black child, who was abandoned by his biological parents, and adopted on the day of his birth by the Pearson family, who just happened to have given birth to their triplets, losing one exactly on the day of Randall's birth. This transracial adoption seemed the hand of destiny from the beginning, but one can only imagine the implications that this sudden decision would have on the lives of the Pearsons, especially Randall's. The Pearson family has accomplished a milestone in television culture: to tell Randall's story with the honesty and rawness of the struggles that entail growing up as a Black male in an all-White family, without any cultural reference, attachment or Black selfhood in his childhood and much of his adult life. Despite his parents' good intentions, Randall grew up with a number of deprivations during his upbringing that robbed him of a sense of belonging to a cultural collective. In addition to many other factors, such as the absence of his biological parents or the absence of Black referents in his life to whom he could turn to with problems that only a racialised person would understand, this situation led to a series of assimilated behaviours and attitudes that would trigger severe social and mental health issues in his life. Randall's personal growth in the series allows for an in-depth character examination that can be enlightening both for the African American community, who can finally see themselves mirrored on a screen that tells stories that resemble their own, and for White viewers, who can empathise and comprehend that there are realities far different from the normative ones seen in film or television.

With that being said, depictions of race like the ones that can be seen in *This Is Us* were not (and maybe still are not) the common portrayals in television. The history of Blackness on TV is stained with misinterpretations and stereotypes related to Black characters whose misleading depiction was ridiculous and impossible to escape. Steve Craig reflects on this situation, stating that “. . . regrettably, many early small screen programs portrayed Black characters in demeaning, stereotypical roles which was not much different from the minstrel shows during the nineteenth century” (89). The flawed history of Black representation has been marked since its beginning: racist interpretations where the laughingstock of the show was a White man doing Blackface. Craig even goes further and affirms that, at the time he published this book in 1992, “White America's awareness and obsession with Black culture came from theatrical performances of dance, music and

comedic skits performed by Whites in Blackface” (88). Researching through the archives of television one finds that the legacy of the stereotypes that emerged in the Blackface era, deeply stigmatising Blacks, started to change at the end of the 20th century. In the late 70’s and early 80’s there was a surge of comedy family shows like *Good Times* (1974-1979), *Diff’rent Strokes* (1978-1985), *Webster* (1983-1989), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Family Matters* (1989-1998), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996). At that time, while Blackface was no longer admissible, or legal, and there was an obvious advancement in the way Black citizens are central to TV shows, the way African Americans are being typified in these sitcoms must be a matter of discussion: “There is a tendency to find characters of color concentrated in programs of particular genres, such as sitcoms and dramas with all or mostly Black casts” (Craig 161). Bell hooks is one of the most influential scholars who has discussed this matter during her years as a social activist. In her book *We Real Cool*, hooks explores the stereotyped version of the “gangsta” Black men, who are mentally imprisoned in fake ideas of manhood and patriarchal power in relation to violence and “coolness.” In the following quote, hooks gives insight on the role of media representation of this stereotype and its impact on the Black male population:

A biased imperialist white-supremacist patriarchal mass media teaches young Black males that the street will be their only home. And it lets mainstream Black males know that they are just an arrest away from being on the street. This media teaches young Black males that the patriarchal man is a predator, that only the strong and the violent survive. (*We Real Cool* 26)

On the other side of the spectrum of representation, one also finds the figure of the nerd or intelligent Black man, hooks puts it as follows: “Certainly television representations of the studious Black male in comedic sitcoms (for example, Urkel on *Family Matters*) suggest that the studious Black male is a freak, a monster” (38). One could wonder what has happened with these typified characters associated to Black race in today’s television culture. The reality is that there are residual marks and scars that are still present in many shows of today. As it was previously mentioned, there are TV series at the present time with family tropes that discuss many issues of race, masculinity, or transracial adoption. Such is the case of *Parenthood* (2010-2015), which has attracted academic interest and it is the focus of the article “Exploring representations of Black masculinity and emasculation on NBC’s *Parenthood*.” What is established in this article is something that happens in many other

shows of this calibre which is that, “. . . upon closer examination, the seemingly innocuous storyline actually reinforces stereotypical, pejorative representations of Blackness and Black masculinity in subtle ways that must be deconstructed” (Castle Bell and Harris 149).

After this overview of the representation of Black males and families throughout the history of television, one encounters *This Is Us*, which seems to differ from its counterparts. Having said that, it should be clearly noted that by any means does the portrayal of Black masculinities in *This Is Us* avoid the patriarchy’s grip on Black men. What they do avoid, however, is to get caught in entrenched stereotypes that have long limited the representation of Black masculinities in television. Its racialized characters undergo traumatic experiences, suffer racial aggressions or are stereotyped by their own social circles. While the argument could be made that all of these situations are also common tropes for Black characters, what differs from previous TV representations is that in *This Is Us*, these events and abuses are not normalised or overviewed. This series makes an active effort to deconstruct stereotypes, to have the difficult conversations needed in order to heal from these past wounds that Black people have faced due to racism all throughout history. There are no other series that combine: the representation of a transracial adoption of a Black child by an entirely White family, the depth of character exploration and development from childhood to adulthood that Randall undergoes, and the success of *This Is Us* in mainstream media. These unique and irrefutable conditions are only applicable to this series, therefore they make it deserving of investigation in order to decipher its use and power of what they represent in their episodes.

It has already been mentioned earlier in this introduction that the level of opportunity for ethnic and racialised minorities is immensely lower as to that of their White counterparts. On those grounds, an analysis should be carried out to comprehend what is being done with the level of representation that they are allowed. Research studies have recently addressed a number of topics relevant to *This Is Us*. The relevance of the series can also be observed in the growing interest in the academic community through publications such as “*This Is Us* : An Analysis of Mediated Family Communication at End-of-Life” (Nickels et al.), “This Is Us: a Case Examination on Black Men in Therapy” (Wooten et al.) or “Is This Us? Perceived Realism and Learning Outcomes of Entertainment Media Portrayals of Transracial Adoption” (Moss and Waddell). The academic appeal of this television product can also be appreciated in the recently introduced course HDF 130G: “This is Us”: Individual and Family Development in the University of Rhode Island, thus raising awareness of its transcendence and value to the academic community. The potential opportunities for exploring issues related to media products, and this one in particular, are endless.

This research aims to delve into fields yet to be explored in relation to both this series and the television industry. The subsequent discussion is innovative in its intersectional approach, focusing on the representation of Black masculinity in Randall's character as well as its evident interplay with other areas of interest, which are key in order to thoroughly analyse the character in question. Scientific literature on transraciality, Black masculinity, childhood and adult trauma, and mental health in Black men will be mentioned and discussed in the main body of the dissertation. Finally, clarification will also be provided on how the character tries to deal with the burden of emotional baggage through studies on emotional vulnerability, healing and happiness. It should be stressed that, while drawing on other disciplines, the common thread of the work will be that of representation, all other areas of knowledge and their approaches will be applied to the analysis through the filter that this is a television representation of a fictional character, not a real person.

This dissertation is divided into three sections, in which the areas of research will be divided by the theoretical approach that better describes the development of the character in relation to Black masculinity. In view of this, the dissertation is titled after Gwendolyn Brooks' challenging critique concept of "real men," which was also used by bell hooks as a starting point for one of her most prominent works regarding Black masculinities: *We Real Cool*. The chosen title gives a spin to the original concept of "real cool," pointing the way towards a different type of coolness, not based on deadly patriarchal ways for Black men. Throughout the sections of this work, the intention is to develop an analysis of Randall's character in order to shed light on the representation of his masculinity from an intersectional lens. To this end, the first section of this research will begin by tackling Randall's childhood from a transracial adoption perspective. Transracial adoptions began in the 1950s, and would not become a popular subject of debate until the 1970s. The surge of transracial studies took place in the late 20th century, but more recent studies such as "'Doing the right thing?': transracial adoption in the USA" (Barn) and *BirthMarks Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America* (Patton) contribute to a better critical approach to this phenomenon and its portrayal in *This Is Us*. Similarly, studies on Black masculinity and racism in patriarchal and television culture will be used transversally. While studies on racial discrimination and the lack of representation of ethnic minorities on television are, fortunately, nowadays an ever-present topic, this was not always the case. Studies on Black masculinity emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, with leading scholars such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Hazel Carby and Cornel West, among others. These scholars have explored in the past issues regarding Black masculinity and its interaction with popular

culture. An example of this would be *We Real Cool* (hooks) or *Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* by Michael Eric Dyson, a distinguished scholar that continues to work on representations of Black masculinities and racial issues. Since then, academic studies such as *Black Masculinity and Visual Culture* (Gray) and *Boys Don't Cry? Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.* (Shamir and Travis) have also explored the Black male experience and identity on a cultural level. Through the examination of these aforementioned studies, as well as foundational and pioneering works, this chapter will explore Randall's racial trauma and its implications on his life.

As for the second section, the focus will be on Randall's own perception of Black masculinity and identity after his encounter with his biological father. This will be done by drawing on studies that illustrate these scenarios, such as “Extra-Special Effects: Televisual Representation and the Claims of ‘the Black Experience’” (Harper) and *Communicating Marginalized Masculinities: Identity Politics in TV, Film, and New Media* (Jackson and Moshin). What distinguishes this chapter is that it will consider the representation of the character's mental health, also drawing on work that has discussed the mental health status of Black men in popular and television culture such as “Popular Television and Public Mental Health: Creating Media Entertainment from Mental Distress” (Henderson). Regarding these matters, studies that combine both Black males' mental health and its representation in the media are not that frequent in academia. This intersection of research has been more prolific since the beginning of the 21st century, studies such as “Racism and Psychiatry: Contemporary Issues and Interventions” (Medlock et al.) paved the way for contemporary investigations on the mental health state of Black males, which are in urgent need for academic attention.

The third and final section, will conclude this discussion through Randall's personal growth, using studies related to vulnerability, the growing area of studies on healing and the power of the concept of happiness in one's own life. I will refer to authors such as Sarah Ahmed and her books *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and *The Promise of Happiness*, as well as on the insight of Judith Butler, who explores the relation between “vulnerability” and “resistance.” Additionally, the discussion will also include relevant contributions to the analysis of mental health with works such as *Adverse Childhood Experiences: The Neuroscience of Trauma, Resilience and Healing throughout the Life Course* by Kathleen Brewer-Smyth.

Due to the extensive length of the series and the wide range of themes dealt with throughout its six seasons, it was deemed appropriate to limit the focus of the use of scenes to

crucial moments for the narration and de/construction of Randall's character. Having said that, given the non-linear nature of the series' plotline, it was necessary to approach its analysis by first viewing the entire six seasons, each composed by an approximation of eighteen chapters of around forty-five minutes, and then selecting the critical moments to target the object of study. The significance of this research stems from the need to explore the growing interest in racial issues and the significant success of *This Is Us*. There is an academic gap to be filled with the study of Randall Pearson's development from an intersectional, racialised perspective of male identity. The studies that combine research on transracial issues in popular culture with a gender perspective are very scarce in relation to *This Is Us*. Hence, this dissertation provides an innovative analysis and its findings. Evidence of this can be found when one looks for recent literature that discusses racial trauma in popular culture, and finds a gap that requires further writing. The book *Trauma in American Popular Culture and Cult Texts, 198-2020* (Travers), published in 2022 further supports the claim that there is an urgent need to combine the areas of knowledge that have been proposed hitherto, and thereby contribute to the creation of knowledge about a product which, as it has been noted, offers the prospect for valuable research.

One of the aims of the study is to demonstrate that it is possible to create diverse representations for the television industry that can also be successful and well-received by the audience. Furthermore, it is intended to illustrate that Randall's fictional narrative features a highly innovative evolution in terms of the representation of Black masculinity on mainstream television. This will be achieved by a thorough analysis of the character's portrayal throughout the series that will illustrate the way Randall integrates Black culture and healing into his life through therapy, vulnerability and resistance. These factors are depicted as positive tools that serve the character, rather than typecasting him into stereotypes and predestined endings, as has been the case for Black male characters for so many years in the television industry.

2. A Transracial Adoption Journey: Childhood Trauma

In the *This Is Us* universe, on the 30th of August 1980, Randall Kenneth Pearson was born in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia. His first hours of life were spent on a bus, going from the apartment where his mother gave birth to him, to the fire station where his father would abandon him with only a blanket to keep. The abandoned baby would be found by Jack Pearson in the hospital where his wife, Rebecca, had just given birth to triplets: two alive, one

stillborn. As Jack saw the baby placed next to his other two, in Rebecca's own words ". . . it felt like destiny" ("Kyle" 29:21), and they adopted the baby as their own. This unexpected adoption would entail complex challenges throughout the life of little Randall and his family: the baby was Black, and his family was completely White. Transracial adoptions (TRA) were met with serious concerns and opposition from the very beginning of its practice in the 1950's. Barn explains that in 1972 the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) protested against ". . . the practice of TRA, asserting that it constituted a form of 'cultural genocide'" (1274). This conception was based on the claim that transracial adoptions were going to have unprecedented consequences on the identities of Black children raised in White families, harming Black citizens and their culture in unthinkable ways. This debate continued to be an on-going conversation among several social groups, so much so that it became a matter in need of legal regulation from the government. In 1994, the Multiethnic Placement Act² was enacted under the following ruling:

[It] prohibits child welfare agencies that receive federal funding from delaying or denying foster or adoptive placements because of a child or prospective foster or adoptive parent's race, color or national origin and from using those factors as a basis for denying approval of a potential foster or adoptive parent. ("The Multiethnic Placement Act")

After this law was passed, transracial adoptions were regulated in a way that it was legal to continue with the practice, but that did not imply that the social debate was not going to take place anymore. Transracial adoptions are a matter of discussion even nowadays, and it definitely was at the time Randall Pearson was to be legally adopted by his White family in 1981. In the second season of the series, there is a flashback to Randall's first year of life. After he had been a member of the Pearson family for a year, his parents start the legal process to officially adopt the baby as their own. Jack and Rebecca longed to be recognized as Randall's legal guardians, but the Black judge who was in charge of their case was not prone to easily give them custody of the baby. The judge presents fair concerns to the couple associated with the child's identity and understanding of himself, which align with the aforementioned protests from Black associations:

² Also known as MEPA/IEP to acknowledge amendments passed in 1996.

JUDGE. You will teach him? Mrs. Pearson, I was nine years old before I understood that I was Black. Now, I understood my skin color, the color of my friends, and my parents, but I never really understood what my Blackness meant until a White man called me a nigger. And my father sat me down, and he explained to me what that word meant. He didn't sympathise or feel sorry for me, because he understood all the pain that that word elicits. My father had been called that word more times in his life than he could count. Now, you see, what you have in your possession is a Black child who will grow up to become a Black man, and my fear... is that he won't have the tools that he needs in his life if he stays in your home. ("The Most Disappointed Man" 17:25)

This powerful speech reflects on the difficulties that Black individuals endure in their daily lives. The Black experience is not something that can be taught, as the judge tries to explain to the young couple. Being Black is not a concept that can be apprehended, no one can teach someone how to understand themselves, but what they can do is provide them with the necessary tools to navigate the racist society in which we live in. The Pearsons filled the baby, from the beginning, with love and care. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the judge's fear is more than justified, being himself Black, he is expressing concern for a child who would most probably encounter similar situations as he did growing up. Not having Black referents in his life will indeed have a crucial impact in Randall's life. At the end of the episode, the conflict is resolved as Rebecca writes a letter to the judge, advocating for their right to adopt the baby and they promise to commit to Randall's well-being and raise him to the best of their abilities. The judge, after officially making the couple Randall's legal parents, confesses to another judge his doubts about the adoption ruling. This transracial adoption comes with a deeper layer of complexity: the ethnicity of the adopted child in combination with the rest of his family's Whiteness " . . . disrupt[s] dualistic, immutable conceptions of the contemporary racial order, and complicate[s] our understandings of racial identity by emphasizing the multiplicity of racialized experience" (Patton 17). The scene where the judge ponders on his final decision reflects the duality of this adoption: the whole of a person's life is definitely affected by the decisions made for them, but it is impossible to know if he would have been better off without the Pearsons. What is indeed possible, is to assess and analyse the consequences and the events that took place in his life after he was adopted by his family. As the series progresses, the audience realises that Randall did indeed suffer from lack of instruction to handle the hurdles in his path.

Another crucial issue to take into account is the origin of the parent's wish to adopt Randall. It is possible to affirm that their wish to adopt this Black baby is a direct consequence of having lost their third child at birth. Even though this decision was not premeditated, it is necessary to assess the implicit question of salvation in this case. The so-called "White saviour complex" is a tendency based on colonialist and racist notions that takes place when certain white individuals condescendingly make it their duty to supposedly save (metaphorically, but also physically) generally Black, but also people of other ethnicities. In the book *BirthMarks Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America*, Sandra Lee Patton establishes that transracial adoptions imply "... the 'redemption' of Whites from the "burdens" of racism and guilt . . ." (182). These words of moral duty make one recall Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden," whose lines still resonate with this question of salvation in the 21st century, despite the fact that it was written in the late 19th century in the context of Western imperialism. Racism and colonialism began what is now a tradition of extremely rooted notions about White supremacy and how the Whites are supposed to fulfil their duty as saviours of societies and communities. The truth is that Jack and Rebecca Pearson adopted a Black child as a direct consequence of the death of their White son. It was the aftermath of a death, as Jack and Rebecca were not considering adoption when they embarked their journey as potential parents. That is not up for discussion, even though there are endless conversations in the show about how Randall was meant to be theirs, while they reassure him his place in their family. When a White family is presented as the only possible salvation for a Black child's life and future, it begs the question whether it is a representation that encourages or aims to eradicate the social stereotypes built around the idea of Blackness in a predominantly racist society. As the scholars Jackson and Moshin put it, for the systematic breakdown of Black families due to deaths and drugs, as is Randall's case "... the ideal 'replacement' family structure is White, and upper class" (181). This idea that White "saviours" will come to rescue Black children is sending the message that only with the assistance of White individuals can Black people attain social and economic success, as is Randall's case when he grows up. It seems fair to suggest that if he had stayed with his drug addict father, and his supposedly dead mother³, his life would have taken a much more different path.

³ Randall's father died believing that Laurel, Randall's mother, passed away right after giving birth to Randall due to an overdose. Later in the series and in Randall's life, particularly in season five, Randall discovers that his mother survived, but was already dead at the moment of the finding.

Therefore, while Randall and his family (his wife Beth and their daughters) shine a positive light on Black families dynamics and life experiences, it cannot go unnoticed that the influence of Whiteness in his life made him who he is, and that is a message that goes out to the public. Randall had the opportunities he did because he was raised by Rebecca and Jack, and while he has made a respectable life for himself, the influence of the resources of his White adoptive parents sends the message that it is not that easy for a Black family to achieve that on their own. Maybe the means justify the end, but that does not necessarily denote one should not pay attention to the process involved in getting to that end, and how its factors affect the ultimate portrayal made of a Black successful man. Therefore, it seems plausible that the figure of the “White saviour” is reinforced by this narrative, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as an ironic term applied to “a white person who helps non-white (typically black) people, esp. for reasons viewed as ultimately self-serving, such as seeking recognition or assuaging guilt.” The Black successful man that the audience sees is challenging stereotypical representations of Black masculinity on a personal level, but his path to get there is inevitably marked by his White parents, who saved him from poverty and a brutal adoption system. While it is true and undeniable that this stereotyped background takes place in Randall’s early life, there are also multiple depictions of Black households in the series that challenge the idea of White salvation. An example of this is Randall’s wife, Beth Pearson, who comes from a middle class Black household and is an educated and self-made successful woman. This multiplicity of Blackness, identity and backgrounds does not negate that Randall’s past was portrayed based on a common and stereotyped narrative for Blacks. Nevertheless, it is indeed imperative to look even further and remember how that past is depicted. The common tendency, when using stereotypes, is to represent characters on a surface level, based on preconceived ideas of what Blackness and masculinity are and staying within those invisible but strict boundaries. In Randall’s case, the audience is able to dive into his Black parent’s past and find that there is a complex story beyond the stigma that their characters are participants of, while acknowledging the possibility of success in a Black family without any White person’s implication in it.

This takes us to the sociocultural context of Randall’s life. The social aspects and culture in his upbringing are to be analysed in order to fully comprehend his living situation as a transracial adoptee. As Randall himself recalls in his adult life, he lived in Bethel Park, Pennsylvania, “. . . pretty much the Whitest place on Earth” (“The Pool” 37:17). The Pearsons lived in a predominantly White middle class neighbourhood, where Randall was one of the few Black persons. Additionally, He was the only Black kid at his school and this

marked his entire childhood in a way that deeply affects his identity as a Black man. The following paragraph belongs to a speech from the fourth episode in the first season which tackles key moments regarding Randall's childhood experience and its consequences in the present time. In this precise scene, one finds adult Randall confessing to his biological father the distress and trauma he experienced in his childhood. This scene is one of the many that could be used to exemplify Randall's internal conflict of racial identity within society and his own family:

I had this little notebook, and every time I met a new black person I would put a mark on this notebook. And everytime I met a black man, I wondered if, somehow, if that man could possibly be my father. But I couldn't say that. You know I couldn't say it out loud because I loved my father. My white father. And my white mother. ("The Pool" 37:19)

In the context of a racially stratified community, Randall was continuously aware of his race. As Zora Neale Hurston writes in her influential essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me": "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (541). Randall's mere presence in his family and his neighbourhood is a persistent reminder of what he can never become in order to be fully accepted: White. As Neale Hurston argues, Randall's Blackness was the most aggressive contrast against a widely White population who pointed him out as "the Other" (Hall). Stuart Hall explores this otherness in his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, specifically in the fourth chapter titled "The Spectacle of the 'Other'." The author goes over the representation of racialized bodies in the media and popular culture, under the premise of the "... necessarily interpretative nature of culture" (27). This way, Hall exposes the clear inclination built from stereotypes and false conceptions of Blackness used to otherize Black individuals. Randall's notebook, which is only mentioned in the aforementioned scene, is proof of the lack of Black referents the child had in his early childhood. In addition to that, his longing for a Black father figure is also portrayed in the confession he makes in his adult age, as Patton writes: "The metaphor of roots resonates beyond the lives of adoptees. It assumes that identity (who we are) is shaped at least in part by who our ancestors were, whether we define that identity through blood, genes, culture, nature, biology, or nurture" (1). In this case, Randall, as it happens for many transracial adoptees, has an urgent need of discovering who he is through the search of his biological parents. On the third episode of the second season, titled "Déjà

Vu,” there is a flashback to Randall’s teenage years, and one gets to see Randall’s first real intention to find his biological mother by placing an advertisement in the newspaper. Unfortunately, Randall is deeply disappointed when he meets a woman who assured him to be his mother, only to find her to be White and trying to scam him for some money. The notebook he kept as a child, this meeting with a scammer, among other events related to his race and his ancestry, Randall carried all of his young life with him, and they even remained present in his adulthood.

Randall’s Black experience is also deeply affected by his relationship to his family and siblings, especially to his brother, Kevin. The brothers share a complicated dynamic which was partly affected by Randall being both Black and adopted. Throughout the seasons there are endless flashbacks to the siblings’ childhood in order to better depict and describe the state of their actual relationship. One of the first scenes that displays the brother’s relationship takes place in the second episode of the first season, when Randall and Kevin walk into the kitchen and Kevin calls Randall “Webster” (“The Big Three” 0:22). Kevin defends himself from his mother’s reprimand by alleging that everyone calls his brother Webster. As it was mentioned earlier in the introduction, *Webster* is a family sitcom that aired in 1983 and from that moment on, the character of Webster became a cultural referent for the society of the moment. Even though Webster was also a transracial adoptee, like Randall, this character was deeply rooted in stereotypical associations with Blackness. Webster was a child whose age spanned from five to eight years old throughout the series, and he was mainly portrayed as a mischievous, very comical, and quick-witted child. He was the character who provided the comedic relief in the series, thus helping to perpetuate the clownish stereotypes of Black characters on television. In this vein, David L. Moody argues that “. . . the struggle for Black Americans today continues to evolve around a contemptuous depiction of buffoonish images and narratives which are by-products of the past . . .” (76). This statement gains strength when Randall, a calm, obedient, intelligent child, who is far opposite to what Webster represented, is associated with an archetype that does not resonate with Randall’s personality at all. The only link between these two representations of children is that they are Black and their adoptive parents are White. What society perceives as Black popular culture is rather reductionist, and it only constitutes mere glimpses of what they truly are. Therefore, Black characters in TV are condemned to stereotypical representations of race and class, never able to liberate themselves from a limiting past, imposed by a predominantly racist culture and society.

Randall's situation gains even more traction when one reads hooks' claim about the stereotypical impositions that Black males suffer: "Black males who reject racist sexist stereotypes must still cope with the imposition onto them of qualities that have no relation to their lived experience" (45). It could be said that Randall Pearson is a fictional character who perfectly depicts the burdened realities of Black men, as well as the damaging effect that fictional stereotyped representations like *Webster* can have on real life people. This takes us to the designation "man in the box," coined by the academics Jackson and Moshin, and roughly defined as ". . . views of others that reduce and confine. Rather than fully consider richness and complexity in such views, we often rely on stereotypes to take cognitive shortcuts, allowing an inevitably narrow set of attributes to come to typify a social group" (161). That way, Randall becomes an individual who fights not to be the "man in the box" at the fictional level, where the character's story unfolds. On top of that, he also contributes to the creation of non-hegemonic representations of Black masculinity, helping to restore the normative culture of TV representation.

There is another key moment in his early childhood, specifically the seventh grade, where Randall's Blackness and cultural legacy is used against him by his brother. In the second episode of the series' fourth season, the shot shows Kevin and Randall in the company of several of Randall's friends, in fact, his only Black friends. The children are listening to rap music by the pool when suddenly Kevin decides to start rapping along the tune. He looks smugly at Randall, knowing that his brother could never rap, simply because he is not into rap music. At this point, Kevin decides to dare Randall to continue rapping the song before the attentive gaze of his friends. The intention behind Kevin's dare was to obviously ridicule his brother, who struggled to finish the lyrics and felt blindsided by his own kin. On witnessing this, one of Randall's friends asks mockingly: "How is your brother Blacker than you, Randall? Randall's an oreo!" ("The Pool: Part Two" 18:22). According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, an "oreo" is a derogatory term used to describe "a Black person who is perceived as adopting the characteristic mentality and behaviour of white middle-class people" ("Oreo"). After hearing this from his Black friends, Randall tries to laugh it off, like his friends are doing, but if one takes the time to read his face, it is absolutely clear that he was thrown off by this comment. His Black friends and his brother Kevin had a clear conception of what a Black person's musical taste should include: rap. And Randall was starkly failing to fit this cliché. It was yet another time where his identity as a Black man would be shaken and questioned by others for not fitting into the boxes that society tries to put black men into. This is one of the times where Randall started to feel that

he did not fit into the notion of being “real cool” (Brooks). The original idea of coolness associated with Blackness, as it was mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, came from Gwendolyn Brooks and her poem “We Real Cool,” where in a few lines the author depicts the tragic future of the Black men who choose to fit into the White supremacist patriarchal notion of “real cool.”

Unfortunately, this is a recurrent issue for Randall throughout his life, especially with his grandmother, who had never made her peace with the idea of him being an adoptive Black sibling. Even though his grandmother was aware of Randall’s tastes and hobbies, she insisted for several years that he should try out for his school’s basketball team “[he]’d be a natural” (“Still There” 11:30), completely ignoring the fact that Randall was into science, literature and more academic subjects. While his grandmother took the time to look for specific gifts of the liking of his siblings, she simply gave Randall the ball, relying on stereotypes that associate Black men with this sport and the hood, she was not thinking about the personal taste or abilities of the kid whatsoever. In popular culture, there are a vast majority of examples of the link between basketball and the Black male community, one of them being the famous Will Smith from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996). The grandmother’s action adds pressure to Randall’s own idea of what being Black means, as well as deep frustration with himself for not understanding why he cannot ever fit in. What is even more alarming is that his young age at the time, as well as his social background, prevent him from having the tools to comprehend the situation. Events such as the one that has been described above are what led him to internalise this racism in such a way that he could not identify it as such. This becomes clear when, after the basketball situation, Rebecca confronts her mother’s attitude as racist and Randall hears all of it. Randall’s parents try to explain to him that his grandmother is racist; to this, he naively responds: “How can Grandma be racist? She never says anything mean to me about being Black” (“Still There” 29:28). It is clear that little Randall does not fully comprehend the extent to which racism is ingrained in society and the grip that it has over the population. The racist discourse of his grandmother is so entrenched in daily little comments and attitude, that it goes undetected to the untrained eye of a little Black child. As Randall grows up, he starts to understand that racism does not only grieve him directly, but it is also camouflaged in almost every level of societal behaviour. Randall’s presence as a Black child stood out in both his family and his living place, and in that situation he is forced to “. . . lend an ear to racist narratives, to laugh at corny race jokes, to undergo various forms of racist harassment” (hooks, *killing rage* 155). The issue for him was

to always be the odd man out, as the adult Randall confesses to his brother Kevin on a heated conversation about their issues with one another, which started in their childhood:

I never wanted to be special, man. I just wanted to blend in like everybody else. But that was impossible in our family, because I always stood out. Everywhere we went—the store, the park, vacations. And the last thing I needed man...the last thing...was for my brother to use my blackness to-to... To other me also. (“Brotherly Love” 17:19)

As one can see from this fragment, Randall felt like the odd man out everywhere, but what inflicted even more pain was the fact that members from his own family, especially his brother, were not able to treat him for the human person that he is. Instead his Blackness was used, as he said, against himself. What seems interesting to highlight is that it never seems to be enough: Randall was judged for his Blackness, but he also paid the consequences of not being “Black enough.” Hooks writes about this notion, claiming that it is not common to be aware of the pressure Black people endure to prove their Blackness: “This pressure is part of the psychological racial arsenal for it constantly lets educated black people, especially black males, know that no amount of education will allow them to escape the imposition of racist stereotypes” (*We Real Cool* 40). The fact that Randall is a transracial adoptee accentuates his contrast in White scenarios and negatively impacts his ability to blend in. According to Patton, transracial individuals in the same situation as Randall, “. . . are ‘multicultural,’ in that they draw on a repertoire of cultural meaning systems in charting their course through life” (13). Therefore, it is very difficult for Randall to detach himself completely both from the White and the Black experiences. He permanently lives in what Homi Bhabha describes as “in-betweenness,” where individuals live in cultural hybrid contexts and constantly negotiate their identity in society. It is a racial limbo in which each extreme is constantly pulling and pushing, which leaves a deep wound that he will carry forever.

After providing some examples of the racial abuse that Randall went through in his childhood, one wonders what the parents’ stance was regarding Randall’s upbringing. One of the main appeals of *This Is Us* is the couple made up by Jack and Rebecca Pearson. They are two of the most dedicated, caring and loving parents ever represented in TV fiction. Jack is a funny and charming father, always protective towards his kids; Rebecca is the support system of the family, she always offers wise words of advice and affection for her children. The fact that they are presented this way, does not mean that they are perfect, or that their parenting is

always spot on. As it happens in every family, the filio-parental dynamics are complicated and in this case, Randall being a Black transracial adoptee, adds yet another level of issues to unpack and navigate within the family. Jack and Rebecca's approach to Randall's upbringing was developed from a humanitarian approach, which "... depicts a love of humanity and a disregard for racial difference and diversity" (Barn 1281). Their decision to adopt Randall was rather rushed, because of the premature death of their third child. Rhonda Roorda argues in her book *In Their Voices: Black Americans on Transracial Adoption* that the choice to bring a Black child into a White family should be a well thought-out decision, one that takes into account the needs that this baby will have regarding his race: "... in addition to love, providing transracial adoptees early in their lives with the tools that will teach them to value who they are as adoptees and people with a rich cultural heritage is essential" (4). Transracial adoptees require guidance and an active effort on the parent's part to let the child be aware of the culture that inherently comes with his race, because otherwise, the child faces loss and confusion. The issue for Jack and Rebecca's parenting was that they always tried to treat their kids equally, without acknowledging that equality is not the same thing as equity. In the Pearson's case, that is not a wise stance when there are three completely different children in one household who differ in gender and race. Jack himself acknowledges this to his son in a flashback scene when Randal is still a child:

You know, your mom and me, we always try to teach you kids the same. Always have. Hasn't always worked, because . . . Well, you're not all the same. You're adopted, and we don't talk about that enough. 'Cause to me, you are every part my son. Maybe I... I don't want you to feel like you stand out. But I need you to know something. I want you to stand out. I want all of you to be as different as you can possibly be. In all the best way. ("Career Days" 33:09)

When Jack says this, Randall is around the age of seven or eight years old, and he is starting to feel a sense of separation from his brother and sister. While Jack is right to reaffirm Randall in his exceptionality, he fails to see that deeds are more important than words. At the end of the day, Randall's adoption was not planned or discussed, and his Blackness was only mentioned when strictly necessary. By means of trying not to raise a complicated issue they are denying him the oppression he is suffering. Jack and Rebecca try not to see the world in terms of colour, what is commonly known as a post-racial society, but that is an utopian perspective: our society is intrinsically organised in a structure that divides

people according to “. . . racial-ethnic categories, and we are seen and treated by others according to the categories we appear to fit and the cultural meanings attached to such classifications” (Patton 92). This colorblind approach makes Randall go through a process of acculturation in regards to his own race: he did not have close Black referents, he did not know anything regarding Black culture such as music or art, he was not involved in any activity that would bring him closer to feeling like he belonged with Black people, people like him. At a certain point in Randall’s childhood, Jack and him have a conversation about his race that is particularly representative of the issue that is being analysed:

JACK. I just ... I don’t... I don’t look at you and see colour. I see my son.

RANDALL. Then you don’t see me, Dad. (“The Club” 25:30 - 25:43)

The fact that Randall’s Blackness was not celebrated and his adoption was merely mentioned, all the while trying to make him feel like he did not stand out, will eventually create serious problems of identity and relatability within himself. Randall needed his race to be acknowledged in a way that allowed him racial affirmation, while helping navigate racism. However, his parents were doing him a disservice by not acknowledging that. If we go back to the very beginning of Randall’s life, we find one of the first actions that marked his path forever. When Randall came into the Pearson’s family, Rebecca followed a young Black man, who stared at them the day they were leaving the hospital to go home after the birth of the triplets. That young man turned out to be William Hill, Randall’s biological father. William was a drug addict, and was not recovered at the time of this meeting and Randall’s birth. Rebecca took the decision to keep William away from Randall, and she made him promise that he would stay away from his biological son, robbing both of them from the possibility of ever sharing a future together. Rebecca kept their meeting a secret and never told a soul about William’s existence.

Nonetheless, there is one thing that needs to be highlighted from this meeting. Rebecca makes a confession to William that she was having trouble bonding with the baby, to which William replied: “Give him his own name” (“Kyle” 30:50). This is a very short but powerful advice. Up to that moment, Randall was not named as such yet, since his given birth name was Kyle: the name that Jack and Rebecca’s third child would have had he lived. This action speaks about a long tradition of silencing, not only the stories of Black people, but also their names and identities. During the years of slavery, Blacks were robbed of their original names and renamed by their White owners. In the 60’s many Black artists started using their

African names to claim agency for their Black identity. An example of this cultural reappropriation would be the case of Amiri Baraka, a poet and artist who participated in the Black Arts Movement and dedicated his work to social matters of racial equality and reclaiming agency. He “. . . changed his name from LeRoi Jones to the Bantu Muslim name Imamu Ameer Baraka (later Amiri Baraka)” (Marcoux) as a way of fulfilling the responsibility he felt as a Black artist towards his community by emphasising his cultural and racial ascendancy. More recently, during the surge of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 upon the murder of George Floyd, the United States’ streets were flooded with signs that read “Say Their Names,” while people chanted the names of the thousands of Blacks violently killed by racists in recent history. Even when this happens, there is a non-acknowledged pain of all of those who were also killed, but no one knows their names; people who did not make the news, but were brutally murdered all the same since the beginning of racist practices. Bearing in mind this tragic history, if William Hill's Black baby had been named after a White child, he would have grown up without his full identity. An identity which would be inevitably racialized, for the colour of his skin and the cultural tradition that his Black biological parents carried with them. Rebecca and Jack raised Randall in a predominantly White culture, causing him to be reluctant to be a part of Black culture events and practices, but on top of that, they also intended to give him the name of who was to be their third biological White child: Kyle. This means that when they lost Kyle, they did not even bother to acknowledge Randall's individuality by giving him a name of his own. Judith Butler presents a compelling view on the importance of names and their effect on people:

We are called names and find ourselves living in a world of categories and descriptions way before we start to sort them critically and endeavour to change or make them on our own. In this way, we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose. (*Rethinking* 14)

In this line of thought, Jack and Rebecca did not acknowledge Randall’s story as a Black individual, causing him to be haunted by a name and life that were not intended for him in the first place. As if Randall suddenly supplanted his identity, the identity of a biological, White baby, which must not be forgotten. They were taking away the possibility of creating his own story from the beginning and making him live in the shadow of a White ghost. It had to come down to the input of a Black male figure, to give insight and allow

Randall to write his own path. Artists like Amiri Baraka fought for their Black voices to be heard. Randall's case also fights for the significance of having a name of one's own, one he can proudly see as his own, and no one else's. Randall was finally named after his biological father's favourite poet: Dudley Randall, a Black poet recognised for his involvement in the Black Arts Movement in the 60's and his prolific poetry collections. So even if he was not aware of it, Randall would carry a piece of his biological father and Black history forever with him.

Throughout his childhood, Randall was painfully aware of his race and his nature as an adoptee, which was either triggered by his own thoughts or other people's. There were moments when this character felt an imperious necessity of feeling connected to his roots and that created a conflict within himself: "My whole childhood, I felt split inside. There are these people that I lived with, and then there were my birth parents, who I had never met. But I thought about them all the time" ("Déjà Vu" 37:09). By reading this confession one sees that Randall felt a separation from his adoptive family and had his biological parents constantly in his mind. This led him to develop confusing feelings that he did not have the tools to navigate properly. Young Randall expresses this complication in the following conversation with his adoptive father:

Kevin's tough, and he got that from you, and I didn't. Dad, the thing is that I know I'm your son, but Kevin is your... son-son, and he got DNA stuff from you that I didn't. You need to teach me. I need to learn how to become a fighter, Dad, if I'm gonna get anywhere in life. ("Kamsahamnida" 29:04)

Randall was anxious to feel a connecting link with his father, which he understood could only be established through genetics. Jack was far more practical and his tastes were quite opposite to Randall's, but in spite of this, Jack managed to convince Randall that not everything that is inherited is genetic. The values and the personality Randall developed would prove to be the greatest legacy his father could have left him. Nevertheless, father and son's relationship would go through even more hurdles. When the primary school teacher Mr. Lawrence came into Randall's life, it proved to be a turning point in the relationship between Jack and Randall. Mr. Lawrence was the first Black teacher that Randall ever had, and they shared hobbies, humour, and taste in plenty of fields. In the study titled "This Is Us: a Case Examination on Black Men in Therapy," it is explored how Mr. Lawrence ". . . provides a safe space for Randall to explore his identity in ways he found difficult with his adoptive

family” (764). They developed a close bond and this provoked Jack's jealousy, as he felt somewhat threatened by Mr. Lawrence’s connection with his son. In relation to the adoptive father’s feeling of displacement, hooks believes that “. . . the presence of biological fathers matters less than the presence of loving black male parental caregivers. These father figures shape the vision children have of who black men are and can be” (*We Real Cool* 96). As it has been mentioned before, Randall’s lack of contact with Black people affected him deeply, so when he met Mr. Lawrence the child felt as if this was the first Black male referent he could really interact with and harbour a rapport. Jack decided then to take matters into his own hands and he invited Mr. Lawrence and his wife to have dinner at the Pearson’s house, and it turned out to be a rather tense gathering for everyone. At the end of this dinner, Jack confesses to Mr. Lawrence that he feels he’s letting Randall down for not being able to meet his expectations when he asks complicated questions about race, Black culture, and everything else that goes into his curious mind. Jack even attempts to tell Mr. Lawrence that he does not know how to teach Randall “to be Black” (“The Dinner and the Date” 36:56). This idea leads to the essentialization of Blackness; being Black can never be limited to a simple experience based on a series of concrete practices. It is an identity, defined by each individual and entails a heritage associated with the social and cultural construction of race. Otherwise, one would be condemning a Black person to be a “man in a box” (Jackson and Moshin). Mr. Lawrence’s answer is to give Jack the collection of poems *The Weary Blues*, by Langston Hughes, one of the most crucial writers and contributors to the artistic creations during the Harlem Renaissance. Father and son share an endearing moment when Randall recites to Jack one of his favourite poems from Hughes: “I too, sing America.” This scene between a White father and a Black son not only helps to strengthen the relationship between them on a personal level, but it also contributes to the representation of the healing process of the intergenerational wounds that the Black community carry, represented in Hughes's heart-wrenching poem. The incorporation of Langston Hughes into Randall’s life is one example of the multiple Black cultural references in the series that allow Black individuals to restore “. . . the link between learning and liberation” (hooks, *We Real Cool* 43), which is the only direction towards creating more diverse and multicultural representations on TV.

One last point that should be mentioned before concluding this section are the consequences of Jack's tragic death. As his father dies in a house fire, seventeen-year-old Randall’s role of the responsible and attentive one was heightened in an instant. His mother, even though she promises to keep their family unchanged, could not maintain her promise. Rebecca was wretched by her husband’s tragic death. On the other hand, his brother Kevin

was relying on drinking, while their sister Kate was absolutely depressed and her eating habits started to aggravate. Randall's situation could be described as "the parentified child," a term originally coined in 1967 ". . . to refer to children who assume parental responsibility in the home as a result of economic and social conditions" (Louise and Delia 165). Randall took on himself the parental leading role in his family, and in order to do this he had to block his emotions about his father's death. In this sense, hooks writes that, "Black boys, more than other group of male children in this society, are asked to surrender their childhoods in order to pursue an elusive patriarchal masculinity" (*We Real Cool* 84). While Randall was not forced by his mother to take on this role, his own character and the particular situation they were in, certainly made him feel responsible for his family. After all, Randall felt like he owed them his strength, for his parents had adopted him and cared for him all his life: "I have been told how grateful I should be and how lucky I should feel my whole life, man" ("Brotherly Love" 26:40). Randall made it his life's work to take care of his family. He tended to his mother at a time when he required care himself. As complicated as these situations are and as different as every family dynamic is, it cannot be ignored that Randall did not have the means, the maturity, or the age to take on such an emotional burden. Randall repressed all his pain in order to help his family, especially his mother. In addition to this, another notable sacrifice he made was to go to a university close to home, turning down Howard University⁴, thus leaving both his academic future and his emotional health on the sidelines in order to help others.

There are appalling consequences to Randall's childhood as a transracial adoptee who experienced the loss of a father and the yearning for a biological connection. As will be discussed in subsequent sections of this analysis, these abuses, trauma, sacrifices and micro-aggressions will manifest both physically and psychologically over the course of his life. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that certain episodes in Randall's early life psychologically strained him to a point that he will be fighting these demons even in his adult life. As Sarah Ahmed argues in *The Politics of Affection*, the body keeps thorough memory of the traumatic emotional experiences endured by individuals during their life. Due to this, Randall develops the complex of a parentified child, that made him prematurely overlook his own needs and hurts, and only focus on others so he could feel pleased with himself. Randall always strived for perfection, and his sense of respectability recalls a long tradition related to the need of Blacks of displaying perfection, so nothing could disturb their image. This notion

⁴ Renowned historically black university where Randall was admitted and his friends were already students.

is commonly known as “politics of black respectability” (Gray “Introduction”), a term widely explored by W.E.B DuBois during the Harlem Renaissance, which nowadays “. . . produces truth and crafts subjects through racial recognition and identity politics, the cultural politics of black difference, intense media visibility, a bi-furcated black social class structure, and a racialized carceral state” (Gray “Introduction” 196). In relation to this, Hill Collins argues that, “[g]ender matters in this working class variation of the tension between Black respectability and Black authenticity, between being “decent” and “street” (81). In order to fully comprehend Randall’s own views of his masculinity in relation to Blackness and his mental health, there are multiple factors to take into account. Hereafter, these will be analysed to better understand Randall’s personal journey as well as its nuanced representation as a fictional character in television.

3. The Black Male Identity: Paternal Impact and Mental Health Quest

Randall's performativity of gendered masculinity as a Black man is best understood through the absence of his biological father, as well as his upbringing under a White patriarchal figure. In this way, the appearance of William Hill, Randall's biological father, creates a perfect scenario of interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict that allows one to explore different ways of navigating masculinity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is a social construct which helps to perpetuate the patriarchal ways, where every individual’s gender is an imitation of an imitation and the unattainable phantasmagoric norm is heterosexuality. According to her, humans aim to reach ideas about gender not actual things, since:

. . . the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 141)

Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to see in what ways Randall abides by the hegemonic version of heterosexual Black masculinity frequently represented on TV and its interaction with William’s own expression of masculinity. As it was explained in earlier sections of this dissertation, Randall did not grow up with a Black father figure, so when he

hires a private detective to find his biological father, he is confronted with issues that open interesting conversations regarding race, class and gender. Hill Collins argues that, “[i]n the United States, hegemonic masculinity is installed at the top of hierarchical array of masculinities. All other masculinities, including those of African American men, are evaluated by how closely they approximate dominant social norms” (186). In this case, Randall is rather privileged due to his adoptive family’s economic and social standing, so even though he does not abide by the “. . . stereotyped notion of cool, that denies the history of the ‘real cool,’ . . . ” (hooks, *We Real Cool* 143), patriarchy still holds a grip over certain attitudes and behaviour that he displays in the series. Once Randall meets his biological father, early in the first episode of the series, it sets off a journey of internal discovery as well as physical displacement to explore where William comes from. As Randall stands before his father for the first time in his life, on his 36th birthday, he delivers one of the most poignant monologues of the entire series:

My name is Randall Pearson. I’m your biological son. Thirty-six years ago, you left me at the front door [William approaches him] No, hold on. Let me just say this. Thirty-six years ago, you left me at the front door of a fire station. Now, don’t worry. I’m not here ‘cause I want anything from you. I was raised by two incredible parents, I have a lights-out family of my own, and that car you see parked out in front of your house? Cost 143,000 dollars and I bought it for cash. I bought it for cash because I felt like it, and because I can do stuff like that. Yeah, you see, I turned out pretty all right. Which might surprise a lot of folks, considering the fact that thirty-six years ago, my life started with you leaving me on a fire station doorstep with nothing more than a ratty blanket and a crap-filled diaper. I came here today so I could look you in the eye, say that to you, and then get back in my fancy-ass car and finally prove to myself, and to you, and to my family who loves me that I didn’t need a thing from you, even after I knew who you were. (“Pilot” 18:30)

This speech is by all means a display of wealth, material happiness, fortune and social standing on Randall’s part with a clear intent of showing his biological father he made it to almost the top of the patriarchal social pyramid without his presence. There is an obvious element of Blackness commodification in Randall’s speech based on the premise that, “. . . Black masculinity is a contested terrain, poised at the interstices of patriarchal entitlement and racialized negation. Thus in affirming their Blackness, Black men might assert

patriarchal claims to economic dominance” (Matlon 52). On top of that, Randall’s character is ruled by what Mutua calls “gendered racism,” which “. . . accounts for representations, or stereotypes, and practices directed toward black men because they are both black and men” (18). As it is known, patriarchy creates a misleading idea of success based on strength and economic power which is most attainable by men. Be that as it may, Randall is still a Black man in need of healing from patriarchy, and as hooks puts it:

This leads folks to forget that one can have the outer trappings of material success, even wealth and fame, and still feel an inner emptiness, an ongoing feeling of loss. Until wounded black males are able to confront the emotional abuse in their childhood (abuse is always about abandonment) they will not know emotional well-being. (*We Real Cool* 92)

Randall’s first instinct when he sees his father is to prove his own value as an individual because success is marked and defined by money and successful manhood. In spite of this over-the-top speech, there is an underlying intent and need of getting to know his biological father and healing wounds that Randall might not even be aware of that are in need of healing. It seems clear to me that Randall did not only want to spit his condescending life story and leave to never see his father again; he wanted to be acknowledged by the man who gave him life and then gave him away. The integration of Randall’s Black identity in the series is remarkable and creates opportunities to explore this character’s development in a very specific multicultural scenario. Randall finds it difficult to reconcile his roots and his identity, which seems to be divided by his own Whitewashed experience and the ideal constructed in his head about Black masculinity. He is a multifaceted person: a Black man raised in a White family, who has created a Black family of his own and who maintains continuous contact with the two sides of the same coin. William’s character is the trigger for Randall’s personal journey of healing and self-discovery. He will know himself by getting to really know who his father is, and later in the series, his birth mother. A paramount aspect of meeting William is its candid representation between son and biological father. Patton claims that, “. . . media often portrays reunions as joyous, unproblematic events, but few television versions go beyond the dramatic first meeting . . . in the lives of adoptees the reunion isn’t the end of the story. It’s just the beginning of what is often a profound redefinition of self” (113). While it should be appreciated the care with which this meeting is displayed and how it helps

to redefine their portrayal in the media, it seems even more crucial to pay attention to how the relationship between father and son continues to be explored throughout the series.

In the present of the series timeline, William is now a recovered drug addict who lives in an apartment of only a few square metres in an impoverished multicultural neighbourhood, while Randall resides in a huge family house in a predominantly white suburb in New Jersey. The suburban life is a huge part of the “American Dream,” and this creates a profound gap between Randall and William’s lives expectancies and outcomes. These two Black men encounter two very different ways of going about their masculinity and their Blackness and it presents a challenge for both of them before they find a way to connect with one another. After their meeting, Randall finds out that William has late-stage stomach cancer and unfortunately his life is coming to an end sooner rather than later. While this news is an obvious shock to Randall, it will however help, or rather force, both of them to make the most of the time they have together. William is a tranquil, caring and quiet person who accepts to stay with Randall’s family only to satisfy his son’s wish to offer him the best possible healthcare for the time he has left. The series does not specify William’s age, but taking into account the scarce information given about his life, one could guess at the time of his appearance in the first season he might be around 60 years old. As it was discussed previously in the analysis, William’s character was indeed marked by a stereotypical storyline drug addiction which seems to stick to Black males’ representation in the media. Nonetheless, it is vital to also discuss the ways in which he defies Black male stereotypes.

William’s character depiction in *This Is Us* is a complex reflection of Black masculinity which does not try to idealise or exaggerate the character. He is a bisexual, emotional, well-read Black man with artistic sensibility in his 60’s. That is not a common vision in the media for males in general, and even less for black males specifically. While hegemonic “[r]epresentations of Black gay sexuality operate as further evidence that Black men are ‘weak,’ emasculated, and ‘feminized’ in relation to White men” (Hill Collins 174), *This Is Us* builds a relatable and caring ageing Black male whose interpretation on screen is pioneer in its representation of diverse Black masculinity. In addition to this, as the viewer gets to know William through flashbacks to his past, it is possible to get a good sense of his character and the love he held for his only child. One can see how William recurrently writes poetry, culminating in his unpublished poetry collection: “Poems for my Son” (see Appendix B), hoping that one day it might find its way into Randall's hands. Even though William seems to perpetuate the “Black absent father myth,” it is necessary to remind the reader that William did not participate in Randall’s life as a consequence of Rebecca’s choice. Randall’s

adoptive mother did not want to stand a chance of losing Randall to his biological family, so she actively chose to keep William out of Randall's life, knowing the fatal consequences that this decision would have on her child. However, Mutua argues that "Black men seeing themselves as nurturing fathers is only the beginning of a process in which a progressive black masculine fatherhood can be realized" (274). Taking this into account, *This Is Us* makes it their goal to displace the historical blame put on Black fathers for being absent fathers to their own children and places it directly on a white female character who is the ultimate responsible person for this absence. In the same vein, Randall himself could embody Mutua's "progressive black masculinity" by being himself a feminist, caring, emotional and attentive father to his daughters, and therefore this representation contributes to eliminating from TV limiting archetypes of the "Black absent father" as the norm.

Albeit William's unconditional love for Randall is unquestionable, his presence in Randall's life was an adjustment that made these two Black men confront each other's values, morals and personal beliefs. The fourth episode of the first season, titled "The Pool," contains some of the most revealing dialogue and scenes about Randall and William's lives. Throughout this episode, there are conversations that reveal facts about William that make it necessary for father and son to work through their differences. While having breakfast with his new-found family, William opens up about his past working alongside the Urban League. Tess and Annie, Randall's daughters, ask William about a scar they see on his arm and he replies: "Some people in Pittsburgh were fighting against busing, and I was helping out with that... 86', 87'?" ("The Pool" 3:01). Annie then asks what busing is, and William explains that he was trying to help poor children have access to a better education outside their local school district. The Urban League is a historic civil rights organisation which aims "[t]o help African-Americans and others in underserved communities achieve their highest true social parity, economic self-reliance, power, and civil rights" ("Mission and History"). According to Hill Collins, this organisation, alongside the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) "became crucial elements during the civil rights era that lasted until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawed the racial segregation (70).

Taking this information into account, it is clear that William is a Black man depicted as fully aware and committed to the racial justice movement as an active contributor. There are several scenes later on in the episode that depict William's fighting spirit. One of them takes place after their conversation about the Urban League inside the house. Following this, William goes out on a walk around the block only to be stopped by the neighbourhood security guard, who is asking for his ID. William refuses to show the guard any

documentation without a proper reason to do so, and it is at this moment when Randall rushes out of the house and explains that William is staying with him and apologises to the guard. William was reported by the Cosgroves, a White couple who thought he was loitering. This altercation prompts father and son to go shopping for new clothes for William in an attempt to upgrade his appearance, as their neighbours' complaint was based on their prejudice against William's dishevelled appearance. Hill Collins argues that “. . . what ‘Black people should be like’ is being physically Black so that racial integration can be seen but not culturally Black for example, display any of the behaviors of an assumed authentic Blackness” (168), which applies to this exact situation. William is poor and does not fit in the location where his son lives, which is a predominantly white and wealthy suburb. Then, one finds Randall, whose skin is Black, but might not abide by what Hill Collins calls “assumed authentic Blackness” (168). In this situation, Randall is accepted because he does not raise any trouble, he could have confronted the guard or his neighbours in defence of his father, who was peacefully taking a stroll. Instead, he chose to not face the conflict and resolve the problem by making William fit into the standards of his white counterparts. This opens up an enlightening debate about how these two people walk the world as Black men in a White supremacist society. In order to understand Randall's stance on this, it seems essential to add the following speech addressed to William while they are discussing the incident:

And there's that face . . . The one that says ‘I have a scar on my arm from integrating schools.’ And probably blisters on your feet from marching for freedom, but me, because I grew up in a white house, you think I don't live in a Black man's world. Oh, you know the one. The one where the salesman there has been eyeballing us ever since we came in here. Or where that security guard has moved just a little off his mark so he can keep us in his sight. And where they'll definitely ask for an ID with my credit card when I go to pay, even though they haven't asked for anybody else's. Plus a million things every day that I have to choose to let go just so I'm not pissed off all the time. Like I did on the street this morning. Like I have done every day of my life. (“The Pool” 13:10)

With this statement, Randall depicts an important picture about the hurdles faced by Black men on a daily basis, despite their social class or economic power. Intersectionality is thereby a crucial matter to take into account when analysing these interactions. Black men are not only oppressed because of their race, but also because of their gender and social class,

among other issues. Scholars Alvarez and Tulino claim that “. . . a major challenge exists with conveying just how much oppressed people across racial lines have in common and why solidarity is so important to healing from the trauma associated with institutional violence” (1493). These kinds of conversations allow William and Randall to understand and open their eyes to different types of oppression and to learn just how multilayered and rooted racism is. It is only through exercises of vulnerability and solidarity with one another that it is possible to fight for progression and change in regards to racial justice. William and Randall’s way of fighting for racial equality looks quite different and probably uneven (as Randall himself points out in the aforementioned speech), especially in the first seasons of the series. Nonetheless, there is an obvious shift in Randall’s life after he meets William that makes him change many aspects of his life he thought were immovable before knowing him. Getting to know William takes Randall on a journey that pushes him to visit places in his mind that he would never have thought of before. He physically travels to the actual locations where William comes from, providing him with the opportunity to get to know his father's roots in the South: his underprivileged and impoverished neighbourhood, and Memphis, Tennessee, the city where William grew up. This trip allows Randall to put aside his worries about his father's health and offers a bonding experience for both of them just before William's death.

William is a man of soul and music, as hooks puts it “. . . the world of music as a site of possibility, a location where alternative masculinity could be expressed” (*We Real Cool* 22). A very substantial part of the history of the Black community is rooted in music. As hooks states, music allows forms of expression that are repressed for hegemonic masculinity. Even nowadays, jazz is a tool used by Blacks to express communal or individual pain and it is a very present theme in the African American community, among other music genres. Likewise, William turns to the arts: literature and music to foster connections with his son. Although Randall is a very analytical and pragmatic person, he finds that some of the moments he has made the greatest connections with his father have been through art. William's poetry collection appears several times in the series, even after William's death. Similarly, on the trip to Memphis, father and son enjoy musical entertainment as William reunites with his cousin, Ricky, and they play together again as a band. It should be noted that Memphis is a very relevant city in the South of the States regarding Black music history, especially in relation to the blues. In this episode, titled “Memphis,” the emotional depth of the narrative and the actors’ performances are heightened to its maximum levels. As Randall gets a glimpse of what William’s life had been like, there is a flashback to when a younger version of his father and Ricky performed the song “We Can Always Come Back To This”

(Henry), which according to the plot is written by William. This song was actually originally written and produced for the series and it is performed twice in the Memphis episode. The first one, takes place in the flashback aforementioned and it is sung by Brian Tyree Henry, who plays Ricky, and for which he was nominated for the “Primetime Emmy Award Outstanding Guest Actor in a Drama Series” in 2017. The second time the song makes an appearance is at the end of the chapter: it is performed acoustically in a voiceover by Hannah Miller, a White female singer, as William takes his last breaths and there is a display of shots commemorating his life, from its beginning to its end. The underlying message behind the music lies in the freedom of expression, in the link to the feelings and desires of the soul. Bearing this in mind, the choice to use a White voice while displaying a set of shots in honour of William's life, seems disconnected to the show's compromise to the cultural authenticity and honouring of its Black characters. On top of that, these minutes honouring William are a tribute to his life, a life which, has been laid out, was marked by his race. Given the thought put into William's life story, by choosing Memphis as his birthplace and giving him a southern background with multiple references to Black culture, to name a few, the question arises as to whether it would not have been more appropriate to use a Black voice to accompany the end of his life.

The trip to Memphis would be the last memory they will share together, for William's cancer will cause his death before he could return home. It is at this point, after months in which Randall's mental health was beginning to be seriously affected by his father's imminent death, that William offers his son his last piece of advice: “Roll all your windows down, Randall. Crank up the music. Grow out that ‘fro. Let someone else make your bed” (“Memphis” 37:15). These were part of the last words of William Hill on his deathbed, where he encouraged Randall to literally turn up the volume of music in his life, or rather to turn down the background noise, of all those things that are robbing him of his quality of life, and to focus on enjoying what he can, while he still can do it. This piece of advice will become incredibly helpful for Randall's life, because he tries to honour his father by allowing himself to let go; maybe his car bought for cash and his house are not the indicators of his success. Hooks argues that healthy Black males “. . . attain emotional well-being by learning to love themselves and others . . . [and] they do not believe money is the key to happiness” (*We Real Cool* 147). In accordance with this statement, after William's death, Randall decides to quit his corporate job as a weather commodities trader, and comes to the following conclusion: “How do I honour my father's legacy? . . . I honour it by taking what I've learnt from how he lived his life and having it shape the way I go on living mine” (“What Now?” 34:38). Gray

claims that “. . . contemporary images of black masculinity are necessarily engaged in the production of complex intertextual work whose cultural meanings and effects are constantly shifting, open to negotiation, challenge, and rewritings” (404). In the same vein, Randall and William’s characters as well as their interactions challenge one another and create a nuanced story for Black males in a mainstream TV series. They are helping to introduce the image of more complex and plural Black masculinities, whose hegemonic representation is in such a desperate need of reevaluation in the current media.

On another note, Randall’s mental health journey is a most intricate and thorough representation of Black masculine mental health awareness and exploration. In a recent study titled “B(l)ack by Popular Demand: An Analysis of Positive Black Male Characters in Television and Audiences’ Community Cultural Wealth,” Stamps gives examples of Black male characters represented in a positive light. This scholar believes that Randall Pearson enters this category, thus I would claim that this character contributes to deconstructing the stigmatised image of blackness in television. In series like *This Is Us* “Black men are not framed as problematic or threatening but as complex human beings existing, surviving, and thriving in society” (Stamps 101) and moreover it is “. . . one of the few series that intentionally centers and sensitively examines men’s mental health struggles” (Bahr). The evolution of Randall’s character regarding his emotional well-being is one that breaks sturdy barriers built for Black men in reality, and also in fiction. It is a fact that “[p]ublic health messages can reach large or hard-to-access audiences through popular media formats including primetime television drama series” (Henderson 107). While this dissertation’s analysis is written on the basis of this character’s fictional nature, given its large audiences and streaming rankings, its ability to portray Black mental health in a positive light and its effect on the viewers is not to be taken for granted. Randall’s experience with his mental health has been, since his childhood, defined by his anxiety disorder. This distress stems from different roots in Randall’s life, and it is addressed for the first time very early on in the series. In episode two of the first season, Beth, Randall’s wife, sits William down to explain to him how Randall experienced his first mental breakdown:

No, he's not good. He's perfect. Problem is, he stopped sleeping. And then one morning, I was in the bathroom, and he called out to me. And he was confused, you know? He was confused because he couldn't see anything. My husband, my mountain of a man, could literally no longer see things through his eyes. It was as if 28 years of being that perfect had all caught up to him that morning. He pulled himself out of it.

He self-corrected, ‘cause that’s what my man does. Randall is not free of vice, William. His vice is his goodness. It’s his compulsive drive to be perfect. (“The Big Three” 31:14)

This situation that Beth is explaining took place right before the birth of his first daughter, Tess. Randall portrays a role of a nurturer, the one where usually Black men do not fit at all. And while this helps to break barriers of normative representation, in this case, he takes it to an unhealthy level where his needs are secondary to the rest’s. His anxiety has been taking the best of him since he was a child and it is necessary to tackle the source, the triggers and the coping mechanisms that Randall presents throughout the seasons in order to comprehend the development that his character undertakes. The representation of Black mental health is thoroughly depicted, as William also confesses to Beth that he also “had a tell” (“Storybook Love” 23:18), meaning that his anxiety also showed with physical symptoms. This scene takes place on season four, episode five, where these two characters are debating Randall’s mental health. While Randall is one of the main protagonists’ who carry the mental health issue as a main theme on the series, it seems very revealing to also see an older age Black man describe his anxiety: “Back then they didn’t have a name for it. They said I was ‘fragile’ and ‘sensitive.’ But when it was happening to me, I thought I was gonna die” (“Storybook Love” 23:28). This testimony illustrates the precarious reality of Black men in relation to mental well-being: they are always bound to think that having mental issues is equal to being weak as “. . . men’s use of and access to emotional territory has remained largely undertheorized or ignored” (Milette and Travis 127). When this is the situation for Black men, or men in general, one wonders how these men, who are clearly struggling with their mental health, deal with their issues under the pressure of a patriarchal society that prevents them from even acknowledging that they have them in the first place.

Randall experiences his first panic attack when he is just a child. His high academic abilities make him change into a private school, where his own self-demanding personality added to the fact that he is the only Black person at his new school, make him develop an anxiety disorder that stays with him forever. The idea for him to change schools is suggested by a teacher in Randall’s former primary school, who makes clear to Randall’s parents that he could not possibly thrive in the current institution he was enrolled in. The parents worry that the child might end up being racially discriminated against in a private school. Nonetheless, the teacher insists that Randall cannot miss the opportunity of getting a more challenging and adequate education only because his skin colour is Black. Randall ends up going to a private

school, where he faces uncomfortable situations being the only Black student which added pressure to his anxiety and constant desire to blend in. On the other hand, he also prospered in his studies and enjoyed a privileged education. In episode three of the second season of the series, teenage Randall explains to his siblings some of the symptoms of his anxiety: “It’s like a raining in my ears, and uh... It quiets down sometimes, but it can quiet down so much I almost forget it’s there, but then there are some times where it’s so loud, I just feel alone. But, I mean, that doesn’t have anything to do with you guys” (“Déjà Vu” 37:29). Anxiety manifests itself in different shapes and forms, according to the *World Health Organization*, it may include: “. . . feeling irritable, tense or restless, having heart palpitations, sweating, trembling or shaking, trouble sleeping . . .”. All of the mentioned symptoms are part of Randall’s condition; he feels them at different times, for different reasons, but they are always there whenever his anxiety levels spike. In the following dialogue fragment, Randall explains the process that leads him to break, mentally speaking, and also his recurrent coping mechanism:

I’ve had two nervous breakdowns in my life. One right before Tess was born, and one just earlier this year⁵. And they happen when I let myself get stressed out, and it just builds up inside, and then... [Imitates explosion] But, one of the things that helps me when I’m feeling stressed out is running. I run, like every day. Just helps me clear my mind. (“Still There” 31:57)

Running as a way of practising sport is one of Randall’s methods to deal with his extreme anxiety, a technique that was taught to him by his adoptive father, Jack, during his childhood. Alongside running, Jack taught him breathing techniques to comfort him during anxiety episodes, which also helped him to navigate his spikes: “My father kept in in check. Whenever I’d get too in my head, he’d take his hands and put them on both sides of my head, and he’d just say: ‘There you go, breathe with me.’ And we’d just sit there, just breathing together... Until it passed (“Memphis” 7:55). Nonetheless, while these measures are well-intentioned, they seem to be short-term solutions for a problem that runs deep in Randall’s mind. They do not tackle his mental health problems from the root, which is something that can only be done through therapy. Hooks writes that “[a]ll the sources of black male pain and powerlessness must be named if healing is to take place, if black males

⁵ This second mental breakdown was caused by the stress of caregiving his biological father who was suffering from cancer.

are to reclaim their agency” (*We Real Cool* 94). It cannot be denied that Jack “dismissed his anxiety as a non-serious health issue” (Tenzek et al. 8), and never proposed a different, or more clinical and professional course of treatment for his son’s recovery. It is a common assumption in a White supremacist patriarchy that “. . . ‘real’ men exercise control not just over women but also over their own emotions . . .” (Hill Collins 189). While Randall does not abide by the first premise, his mental health journey, which was definitely paved by his parents’ own perception of how mental disorders could be treated, is proof that men do not need to get ahold of their emotions. Instead, males should acknowledge those feelings, and get the necessary help available to them in order to be able to coexist with them while tackling any possible mental issue. In the long run, Randall’s situation turns out to be incompatible with his self-management tactics, limited to his breathing exercises and running. Therefore, the root of his anxiety needs to be exposed and acknowledged by himself, in order to be able to experience a certain kind of recovery.

There are multiple factors that make Randall’s mind spin out of control and take a toll on him, especially right after William’s death. Rebecca’s lie about knowing William; the stress from his decision to run for city council of Philadelphia’s 12th district; Tess’ first anxiety attack; and a breaking in his house by a criminal, are some of the most important events that push Randall to the limit over the seasons. Brewer-Smyth argues that “. . . adverse childhood experiences take an astronomical toll on individuals, their families, and society. Trauma can result in adverse effects throughout the life course of the individual and on to the next generation” (16). With that being said, all of the aforementioned events affect Randall in a deeper way because of his perfectionism and his chronic desire to please people with perfection. In the following piece of dialogue, adult Randall is having a hallucination where he has a conversation with his dead adoptive father. In this scene, they are discussing the consequences of Rebecca’s lie about William as well as Randall’s childhood experience as a transracial adoptee:

And all I was supposed to feel was grateful. I was supposed to just shut up and be thankful that I had these great parents who wanted me when my birth parents didn’t. But the truth is, you never wanted me either . . . I was a replacement for your dead baby . . . I’ve spent my life striving for perfection, and you know why Dad? ‘Cause I live in fear. That if I let up for a moment, I will remember that I am unwanted. And then what’ll happen to me? (...) If I had known that the man who abandoned me

regretted it... That he wanted me back... That would've made all the difference in the world. ("The Trip" 21:07)

It seems reasonable to assume that Randall's inner and most painful life trauma stems from the fact that he is a transracial adoptee as well as the particular context of the adoption and its consequences. His childhood is undoubtedly tied to race and the discrimination that he experienced for being Black in a White family, as well as the question of his origins. In an interview for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Sterling K. Brown, who plays adult Randall, comments that Randall's "... root of a lot of his anxiety, possibly the root of his overachieving mentality, [is] having to prove his love to people rather than just accepting it as being granted" (Brown). Bearing that in mind, Randall developed a very toxic relationship with his perception of self-value in relation to his identity and purpose in the world. In relation to this, in season three of the series, Randall begins to confront issues of identity due to his new goal of getting to be councilman for the district where his father lived. In the context of that very impoverished and left-out community, he faces challenges regarding his background and current life status. In this context, he confessed to his wife Beth how he had always found difficult to know where he belonged:

RANDALL. It's complicated. Stuff's always complicated for me.

BETH. What is?

RANDALL. Just where I fit in. How I come off to certain people. It's either I'm trying too hard or I'm not trying hard enough. I can never get it right. ("A Philadelphia Story" 39:46 - 40:05)

Even though the trauma associated with his identity and race is a common theme throughout the series, it becomes an even more prominent matter of discussion in the last seasons of the show, especially season four and five. According to Brewer-Smyth, "[r]acial trauma has been associated with various psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety" (156), which is consistent with Randall's experience with his race and the discrimination he suffered. His race trauma slowly developed a crisis identity that becomes apparent in season three, as he starts to explore his late father's life and the reality of his predominantly Black and racialized neighbourhood. He has to confront very uncomfortable situations where his ethnicity and cultural implication with his race are challenged by the citizens of the district, and although he comes out of the election campaign victorious,

thereby becoming councilman, this leads to severe anxiety spikes for Randall. When this situation starts to get out of his control, the symptoms that usually lead to him having a mental breakdown begin to emerge. Under these circumstances, Randall turns to one of his usual coping mechanisms, which is running, but it obviously does not prevent him from experiencing further symptoms. As attested by hooks, “. . . the patriarchal thinking the black man embraces is precisely the logic that will keep him mentally enslaved and mentally ill” (*We Real Cool* 130). Up until this point in the series, therapy had not been mentioned as a possible course of treatment for Randall’s anxiety disorder: he was still trapped in the false patriarchal notion that hooks explores in *We Real Cool* that men do not need therapy, since they are supposed to be able to keep their emotions under control. In spite of this, there are several other male characters in the series, both Black and White, who turn to therapy to heal their mental issues, and it is encouraged in the narrative of the script as a very positive tool for men. In line with this, some conversations arise in the series in which Randall discusses mental health and the use of therapy with other Black and White men of which contribute to him realising he should take further steps to tackle his mental issues. One of these takes place in episode three of the third season, where Randall and Toby⁶ have a very enlightening conversation about their own mental health issues, that not only helps them feeling somewhat understood, but it is also a very powerful scene in which mental health is discussed by men:

TOBY. I can’t picture you with anxiety. You know? The way you present.

RANDALL. That’s what we do, right? [He hits his chest with a fist] Man.

TOBY. I take medication for depression. You know, without it, life gets pretty scary.

RANDALL. Never would’ve known.

TOBY. Yeah, well. . . [He hits his head with a fist] Man. (“Katie Girls” 29:53 - 30:21)

There is a remarkably deep social meaning behind this short dialogue, where they are almost confessing that it is in fact men’s job to keep it together in all aspects of life. While they try to hide their mental issues, they are aware of them, and in Toby’s case he acts accordingly by pursuing treatment. Despite the fact that Randall had this conversation in season three, it will not be until season four, episode five, when he finally starts

⁶ Toby is Kate’s husband at this point in the series, in this specific scene they are waiting for Kate to give birth to their first and only child.

contemplating therapy as a real option. This suggestion did, however, come from Beth, not himself. Hooks contends the following regarding Black female's input with reference to mental health:

Individual black males searching for new life strategies utilise in a productive way the visionary work of black women. They embrace enlightened black women as teachers and comrades. Listening to healthy emotionally mature black females is essential to black male self-recovery. (*We Real Cool* 133)

In the same vein, Beth acts in this role of advisor from a Black female perspective, encouraging Randall to pursue further treatment and turn to therapy: "You know, when you had your first breakdown, you thought that was gonna be the only one. All these years of just managing it, making lists, babe... We have resources now and people who are trained to deal with this kind of stuff" ("Storybook Love" 40:13). Beth is shedding light on the fact that Randall's self-management resources are no longer sufficient. In response to Beth's offer of a therapist, Randall openly refuses, arguing that he does not need it. At this point, Randall was closing on the option of getting a therapist, but another crucial conversation will take place in season four, which will be decisive for his final decision on the matter.

Darnell Hodges⁷ is a Black man with a harsh appearance, who has really come through in his personal life, working for a decent future for himself and his family in the district where Randall is councilman. In order to understand the aforementioned conversation between Randall and Darnell, it should be noted that it takes place when Randall is going through a vulnerable time. At this point in the series, Randall is experiencing suffocating anxiety caused by his face-to-face encounter with a home invader who broke into his house. Catching the criminal in his own house triggered Randall's stress to its highest level, and when Darnell asks him about his state, he confesses something that is not only shocking to Randall but it also breaks prejudices about what kind of men should go to therapy. When Darnell admits that therapy has made "... a big difference with [him]" ("A Hell of a Week: Part One" 30:00), he is instantly creating a safe space for Randall and abiding by hooks claim that "... unconventional perspective[s] on masculinity had given black males alternative grounds on which to build healthy selfesteem . . ." (*We Real Cool* 14). Darnell even goes further when he stresses the following statement: "Look bro, I get it. Us men of a certain

⁷ He is a secondary character, whose plot develops throughout the fourth season of the series. He is father to Malik, the boyfriend of one of Randall's daughters.

shade, we're not used to talking. But that's therapy right? Talking. It doesn't always have to be that deep. You can just talk about everyday stuff" ("A Hell of a Week: Part One" 31:32). This is a powerful confession coming from a man who, as he stated in earlier episodes of the fourth season, comes from "the hood." He also makes references to gangsta life in certain dialogues, even claiming that his tattooed body is proof of what he escaped. This idea connects with hooks' explanation that "[p]atriarchal manhood was theory and gangsta culture was its ultimate practice" (hooks, *We Real Cool* 24). Darnell is living proof to Randall that there is no shame in recurring to therapy, no matter how your past or your present look like. According to society's standards, Darnell should be tough, manly and unbothered by emotions. If Darnell is to fit into patriarchy's boundaries, that is what he ought to be. But instead, he is a man who actively chose to use the resources available to him and seek therapy, which is something that somewhat differs from what characters like Darnell usually experience on TV. As attested by Clowes, "[a] shift away from patriarchal authoritarianism towards the more egalitarian versions of masculinity required by gender equity might allow . . . men enhanced opportunities to obtain counselling (and better mental health) without the stigma often attached to requests for help from men" (17). Darnell is a transcendent and promising outline for a TV Black character, a type of character who is generally stereotyped. Randall's own story line is positively affected by the great Black influences around Randall in his adult life. With this, Darnell is trying to normalise the practice of therapy for a man who is clearly reluctant to the idea of being vulnerable about his own issue with a mental health specialist. After this conversation, Randall denies Darnell's offer alleging that running is enough to keep himself mentally stable. This is instantly negated when at the end of the same episode, Randall calls his brother Kevin to break down and finally admit he needs professional help.

On another note, Randall's privilege to have access to these measures should also be addressed. Brown claims that Randall's decision to finally go to therapy allows him to ". . . live an even fuller life when he finds a way to deal with these blind spots. I encourage everyone who has the resources and the desire to push that stigma to the side and recognize that nothing is more important than your own well-being" (Fernandez). Brown makes some excellent points in this fragment which shine a light on the show's commitment to the portrayal of a Black men's mental health journey. This allows one to perceive Black masculinity from an alternative perspective to hegemonic masculinity, while at the same time, considering that Randall Pearson is a very privileged, Black man, who has within his reach the best options available to seek treatment for his anxiety disorder. As reported by the *World*

Health Organization, among the hurdles “. . . to care include lack of awareness that this is a treatable health condition, lack of investment in mental health services, lack of trained health care providers and social stigma”. The cause of these obstacles are primarily monetary investment and education. Randall’s mental health path has always been difficult in relation to societal norms, stigma and expectations regarding masculinity standards, but it should also be highlighted that economic power to pursue medical treatment for his condition was never an issue for him. While this depiction of evolution and personal growth depicts a promising future for fair and positive representations of Black masculinity, it is necessary to also consider the process of therapy. The next chapter of this dissertation delves into the necessary tools in order to evolve and heal from the wounds caused by Randall’s trauma and how therapy helps to guide the character into a more peaceful state of mind.

4. Resistance in Vulnerability: The Journey Towards Healing

The first time Randall Pearson makes the decision to go to therapy he is making a compromise to himself, but mostly to his wife, Beth, based on his commitment to heal from his past. Yet he embarks his first few therapy sessions with a rather sceptical and unwilling spirit. The issue presents itself that he is not connecting with his therapist, a middle aged White woman, who Randall does not seem to be willing to confide in at first. He is resisting vulnerability: by opposing resistance and vulnerability he is only condemning himself to unhappiness. According to Sara Ahmed, [o]bjects become unhappy when they embody the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness” (*The Promise* 159). Randall’s own path of trauma cannot be erased, if anything, it would be alleviated by a process of healing, forgiving and understanding himself and his circumstances. In order for that to happen, “. . . one must willingly journey to places long uninhabited, searching debris of history for traces of the unforgettable, all knowledge of which has been suppressed” (hooks, *killing rage* 41). As it has been discussed in previous sections of this dissertation, this character’s complex life story has been shaped by his parent’s lives too, those he knew, and those he did not. At some point, the therapist points out a pressing matter in Randall’s mind which he has been suppressing for the longest time: “If you think about it, your life has really been defined by your mothers, hasn’t it? The mother you lost at birth, who is barely a footnote in your story, and the mother who lied to you for thirty six years” (“After the Fire” 32:35). Until this moment, Randall’s storyline in the series had been significantly centred around his search for William, his own need of recovering, or rather discovering a father

figure in his life. While Rebecca is also a pivotal figure, Randall's story on screen was evidently missing a key part of his ancestry: his biological mother. After hearing this, Randall realises he still resents his adoptive mother for keeping William's existence a secret all those years, and he has not really forgiven her, as he supposedly had. This moment of enlightenment is the first step towards Randall's path to healing and breaking down all his barriers, it plants the seed of doubt regarding his mental state. From season five onwards, one begins to see real changes in the Pearson family dynamics, partly as a result of Randall beginning therapy. It should not be forgotten that while other characters in the series have their fair share of unique plotlines and traumas that affect the behavioural patterns of the whole family, Randall's trauma as a transracial adopted child is a major topic of conversation that will not only help Randall to heal, but all of them on some level.

In the fifth season of the series, the triplets are now forty years old and facing one of the most challenging times for humanity: the Covid-19 pandemic. With this scenery, the second and last pressure point for Randall takes place when the series follows the true state of the Black Lives Matter movement as it has a major resurgence in the year 2020, due to George Floyd's murder at the hands of a White policeman. The fight against racism as an institutional threat, as well as an intrinsically embedded thinking, unleashed rebellion on the streets of the United States against a corrupt, racist and discriminatory system towards the country's racialized minorities. In *This Is Us*' fifth season there are multiple and repeated depictions of this rebellion. The scenes portray the bombarding of news on TV, Randall's family watching the marches and protests and Kate, Randall's sister wanting to donate to Black organisations and taking to the streets to protest. This time was a turning point for Black history due to the scope that the murder and the marches took in the media and the vulnerable time of the pandemic. Said scenery was the perfect one for Randall to reflect upon his racial identity as a Black man, the oppression his community suffers and the endless traces of violence in diverse forms that they continue to endure. There is a shift in his own perception of what his fight towards racial equality looks like: Randall finds his voice for the first time in his life and he speaks up about his racial trauma, growing up with a level of high exposure to violence against Blacks. Butler defines vulnerability as “ . . . deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment” (*Rethinking* 12), in that sense, Randall starts showing his resistance through an act of vulnerability with another Black male individual. It happens during a conversation in the present time with Malik, the boyfriend of his daughter Deja, when Randall opens up to him:

You know, growing up the way I did... I always felt like when stuff like that happened in the world it always stayed outside the house. There were no walks. Maybe it was too much for them. I don't know. But when Jonny was killed I was older so I watched it on my own. For a kid to be all alone with that... It was a lot. I've never said that out loud to anyone before. ("Forty: Part One" 34:42)

In this excerpt, Randall confesses having deep racial trauma from his childhood, while the show cuts to a scene where 15-year-old Randall is sitting alone in his living room watching the death of Jonny Gammage on TV. Jonny Gammage was an African American young man killed in 1995 in Pittsburgh, the same area where Randall and his family lived. Gammage's death is no different to Floyd's, in fact both murders bear several similarities, but as Randall says, in 1995 that was an issue which did not seem to take a toll on his family, or the whole of society for that matter, like it was happening in 2020. While Randall appreciates the involvement of his family with racial justice movements, he starts realising the pattern that has been shaping his whole life: him comforting others while leaving his own needs in the rear. It has always been difficult for Randall to raise an issue that might compromise his family's feelings, even if he was hurting for their actions. In the following quote Ahmed claims the clear connection between creating conflict and unhappiness:

So much happiness is premised on, and promised by, the concealment of suffering, the freedom to look away from what compromises one's happiness. To revolt can hurt not only because you are proximate to hurt but also because you cause unhappiness by revealing the causes of unhappiness. You become the cause of the unhappiness you reveal. (*The Promise* 196)

In the same vein, when Randall starts confronting his siblings and mother about some aspects of his childhood which were neglected, he is actively creating a conflict and perceiving himself as the cause of unhappiness. What is also true is that it is only through that acknowledgement on his part, and his family's, that they will all resolve their issues and heal. On episode two of the fifth season, Kate raises her concern for Randall and his family in the midst of the Black Lives Matter nationwide protests and marches, and she apologises to him. Upon this apology, Randall calls his sister out for her sudden interest on the matter by stressing that "... this isn't the first Black person to be killed on camera" ("Forty: Part Two" 21:53) and how this issue, while it has always been this hard for him, was never addressed in

their household as they grew up. Sterling K. Brown, Randall's adult actor, argues that despite Randall's battle with racial identity, the overlapping of the current social outrage and his personal circumstances, allows him to embrace his individuality and he believes that "... the world definitely happened to Randall, but I think he was in process already. By virtue of therapy, by virtue of taking that job, by moving his family to Philadelphia, he was putting himself in place to be of value, to be reflected in his community, a community in which he saw shades of himself throughout it, of his father" (Brown). The insight that Brown gives on his character is essential in order to understand the process Randall has gone through in order to be at a point in his life where he puts his own pain as a primary concern in his life. The following continuation of the dialogue between brother and sister is a turning point for Randall's dynamics in his family:

RANDALL. So, growing up, I just had to keep so many things to myself because... I didn't want to make you guys feel bad. I didn't want you to have to worry about saying the wrong thing.

KATE. Well, you're right. I mean, we never talked about it as kids. Mom and Dad did the best they could, I guess, but... But I didn't get involved, I didn't even...

RANDALL. See, I hate this, Kate. I hate seeing you upset. And normally I would hug you, and I would tell you that you did all the right things. I would try to make it all okay for you. But if I did that Kate... If I made things better for you, then where does that leave me? I'm sorry but I can't do that. That has been my pattern all my life. And honestly Kate, it is exhausting. I'm exhausted. And all I wanna do right now is go home be with my wife and my girls. ("Forty: Part Two" 22:39 - 23:55)

In the wake of this intense conversation, it feels imperative to bring up Lauren Berlant's claim that "[a] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Randall experiences this so-called "cruel optimism" because he constantly has the need to comfort and nurture others, despite his own pain, he is severely conditioned by the pressure to be happy. By breaking this familiar pattern he is setting the tone for future interactions: he will no longer remain a "happy object" (Ahmed) by virtue of deteriorating his own mental health. From this moment on, Randall is prioritising his needs and also making others acknowledge their part in his suffering. It shows real growth of character on Randall's part that even though he still feels the need to comfort his sister, because of his progress in therapy, he is now able to tackle the situation with

assertiveness while at the same time putting the responsibility of people's acts directly on them.

In the aftermath of this conversation and the emotional effect of the Black Lives Matter movement, the suggestion made by Randall's therapist earlier in season four, starts making sense to him. He feels he has unresolved business regarding his identity and his past, so his next step is to seek more specialised therapeutic support. In order to do that, he starts seeing a Black male therapist, specialised in transracial adoptees, as he himself is also one. The choice to look for a therapist with these specific characteristics shows that Randall is truthfully willing to dive into whatever shall be needed to heal. A positive outlook if one is to compare his experience with his first therapist, with whom he eventually connected even though he felt she could not grasp the totality of his mental issues. Dr. Vance employs in his practice what hooks names "constructive resistance," which ". . . names the problems, affirms the ways folks are victimized and hurt, while also mapping strategies for healing" (*We Real Cool* 93). By doing that, Dr. Vance makes Randall look deeper into the root of his anxiety issues, his racial trauma and the relevance of his biological mother in his life.

On episode five of the fifth season, Randall accidentally has a personal video of himself in his councilman office gone viral. This incident triggers the views and reach of the video, taking it to Hai Lang, a man who knew Randall's biological mother, Laurel Dubois, and who will completely overturn the story that Randall had been told so far about her life⁸. As Hai reaches out to Randall and sends him a picture of Laurel and William together, he faces the question whether he should pursue this and explore his mother's past, or if he should let it go. Hooks claims that, ". . . wounded black males must do the work of reclaiming their past in order to live fully in the present" (*We Real Cool* 104). Likewise, in the aftermath of Hai's appearance, Dr. Vance suggests to Randall that he grants himself the opportunity to get to know his mother's story: "You're already in the journey, Randall. Why not be in-in it?" ("A Long Road Home" 30:57). In the sixth chapter of the fifth season titled "Birth Mother," Randall and Beth go to New Orleans to visit the place where his mother was brought up and where she spent the last years of her life. He finds out that Laurel spent five years in prison after she gave birth to him, and as a result, came home, deeply ashamed, depressed and alone. Laurel felt like she had forfeited the right to be Randall's mother, so she simply never looked for him and died of cancer in 2015. Knowing Laurel's story allows

⁸Randall believed that Laurel died shortly after giving birth to him, because that is what William had told him. After contacting Hai, he informs Randall that, from his understanding, William truthfully believed that Laurel had died in their apartment and never knew anything else about her.

Randall to grieve her in a way that he had never done before. As Brown argues, in Randall's eyes now "[s]he has a story, and her story is important in and of itself, not just how it relates to him. And I think that's really the only way that he thought about her" (Brown). In order to go through this process of assimilation Randall needs to see happiness as "end oriented" (Ahmed), which is the aspiring to happiness with ". . . a specific kind of intentionality . . . It is not that we can be happy about something, as a feeling in the present, but some things become happy for us, if we imagine they will bring happiness to us" (*The Promise* 26). His conversations with his siblings and him travelling to know his birth mother's story are complex situations in his life that do not bring him immediate happiness or ease. On the contrary, these events make him relive his trauma in order to heal from it. It will be hard before it gets easy, and that is exactly Ahmed's claim on happiness being "end oriented," there needs to be intentionality of getting to a better place and a strong belief that even though these are life-changing and deeply sad experiences for Randall, they will eventually become happy memories about his life story, where he is grateful to his old self for pursuing healing despite the pain and trauma.

While in New Orleans, Randall also finds out he has inherited his mother's farmhouse, which has views to a splendid lake, where Hai tells him his mother experienced some of the most important moments of her life. It should also be highlighted the choice made by the writers of the series to appoint Memphis and New Orleans the places of origin of Randall's biological parents, as they are very crucial areas for the history of the Black community in the United States. These Southern territories played a significant role in slavery times, but they are also prominent areas for Black cultural development, such as the musical jazz scene. Moreover, at this point in the series Randall has experienced the possibility of touching the same ground her mother and father came from, it is a way of connecting with the people who gave life to him, the mother and father he could have had if their life had been different. Coming back to New Orleans, the lake in Laurel's farmhouse plays a paramount role in her life, it is where she met Hai, the love of her life and where she shouted and cried, mourning the loss of her baby, among other things. In the present time, Randall goes bare naked into the lake and hears Laurel's laugh while she appears to him and says: "My baby" ("Birth Mother" 38:17). It cannot not go unnoticed the choice of using the purifying symbology of the water in the precise moment where Randall is connecting with his birth mother for the first time, as if their shared pain melted into the waters of the lake when they looked into each other's eyes. Randall experiences a profound catharsis in this scene: the images, the mystic ambience, and emotionality make it one of the most spiritual and

meaningful scenes of the whole series. Mother and son have a conversation where Laurel encourages Randall to free himself of the heavy burden he carries: “You need to let the pain go” (“Birth Mother” 39:22). According to Ahmed “. . . even when the experience of pain is described as private, that privacy is linked to the experience of being with others” (*The Cultural* 29), so only when Randall looks to his mother’s ghost eyes is he able to express his pain and see his feelings being acknowledged, for the first time, by the person who was the source of so much hurt for him. But bearing in mind the “end-oriented” (Ahmed) mentality of happiness, now Laurel is the person who is allowing him to free himself of his past; she has brought him peace and comfort through a journey of hurt and trauma that required faith in healing and ease. At the end of the scene, Randall utters the most heart-wrenching and piercing scream he can possibly muster in the middle of the lake. Consequently, the shot shows him and his mother floating, as the music becomes more lighthearted, and Randall seems to breathe; he is born again. The New Orleans trip allows him to heal in the most meaningful way possible, as he confesses to his wife: “I know my birth story, Beth. And it’s not just getting left at a fire station. It’s two people. Two imperfect people . . . that loved me . . . I don’t want to hold on to the bad stuff anymore. I want to let it all go” (“Birth Mother” 41:15). From this moment, Randall feels liberated from the hurt created by his birth story as a transracial adoptee.

With this being said, there are still certain parts of Randall’s life that still affect his mental state. He has a pending conversation with his brother Kevin, who shares with Randall one the most controversial relationships in their family. Ahmed argues that, “[t]he family also becomes a pressure point, as being necessary for good or a happy life” (*The Promise* 46). As it has been argued in previous sections, Kevin contributed a great deal to Randall’s feeling of displacement in his own family as well as the increase of his racial trauma. Bearing in mind Ahmed’s take on the role that family plays regarding happiness, it is to be expected that Randall wishes to let go of the pain that they also might have caused him. Now, at the age of forty years old, the brothers have come to a turning point, where their mother’s health is at stake and they need to be a united front, rather than be pitted against each other. Rebecca’s Alzheimer’s took a toll on the Pearson’s family, creating an argument that confronted Randall and Kevin in previous seasons and made them attack each other fiercely. Since then, the brothers have not made peace with one another or had a conversation to get past it. After Randall’s trip to New Orleans, he is now ready to tackle his issues with his brother, because as hooks claims: “. . . the Western notion of individual healing . . . is a vision of healing that invites us to consider that a human being may be broke in some fundamental way that does

not enable them to mend without healing interventions” (*We Real Cool* 151). Instead of abiding by this notion, the characters should acknowledge the interplay of their emotions with others, and once they do, they will find a way towards personal and general evolution and healing that forges a path of progress.

In the critically acclaimed episode titled “Brotherly Love,” Kevin and Randall spend the whole day together, trying to confront their issues upfront and without filter for the first time in their lives. Kevin proceeds to begin his apology based on the hypothesis that Randall could have been psychologically hurt by Kevin in some way. In that manner, Kevin is formulating his argument from the possibility of distressing Randall during their childhood, rather than actively acknowledging the pain he inflicted and basing his apology from a done deed. Randall, by virtue of his self-awareness and personal growth, is now ready not to accept that kind of misleading apology, as he might have done in the past. In fact, he claims agency from his brother when he accuses Kevin of having “. . . racial blind spots” (“Brotherly Love” 17:49). Butler insists that, “[o]nce we understand the way vulnerability enters into agency, then our understanding of both terms can change, and the binary opposition between them can become undone” (*Rethinking* 16). It is in fact impossible for the brothers to find a common understanding if Kevin does not show vulnerability to his brother, and admit the controversial racial dynamic that they shared, not only in their brotherly relationship, but because of it, which affected Randall as a Black child who grew up beside a White brother who constantly used his race against him: “It was never just that I was a nerd. You had to call me Carlton. It was never just that I-I didn’t know cool music. You had to call me out for not knowing rap lyrics. What if I was White? Would we have the same relationship?” (“Brotherly Love” 24:39). Scholars Alvarez and Tulino agree that even though “[n]umerous conflicts exist between the oppressor and the oppressed, . . . avoiding race conversations within these hegemonic blocs prolongs and contributes to human suffering (1489). Therefore, the fact that Kevin and Randall are having this conversation is a step in the right direction, so they can get to the bottom of their life-long rivalry, always keeping in mind their goal: healing. Eventually, Kevin starts caving and admits his jealousy towards Randall, but he assures him “. . . it had nothing to do with [Randall] being Black, it had to do with my envy” (“Brotherly Love” 25:07). This confession is still tone deaf and insufficient for a relationship that was clearly damaged by notions of race and White supremacy together with the fact that Kevin had always felt inferior to Randall in many aspects of their personalities and lives. At this point of the conversation, it feels imperative to bring up Ahmed’s argument about relational/solitary pain:

We can see that the impossibility of inhabiting the other's body creates a desire to know 'what it feels like.' To turn this around, it is because no one can know what it feels like to have my pain that I want loved others to acknowledge how I feel. The solitariness of pain is intimately tied up with its implication in relationship to others. (*The Cultural* 29)

Randall embodies this statement when he tells Kevin: "I want you to acknowledge that you've always resented the fact that I'm Black. And not just as kids, man. Last year you told me, to my face, that the worst thing that ever happened to you was me being brought home to your family" ("Brotherly Love" 24:39). According to Butler, there's resistance in vulnerability. By being vulnerable, and opening up about his childhood trauma with his brother, a Black man like Randall is resisting the main principle for a male in a patriarchal society, which refrains men from showing emotion. Butler insists that "[i]t would seem that without being able to think about vulnerability, we cannot think about resistance, and that by thinking about resistance, we are already underway, dismantling the resistance to vulnerability in order precisely to resist" (*Rethinking* 18 - 19). There is a path towards healing and power in community and emotional connection with others, which is what Randall tries to get across in the conversation. In order to make Kevin acknowledge his pain, Randall tries a different approach and tells his brother about the transracial adoptee support group he had just started attending. In these meetings, the term "Ghost Kingdom" was introduced and used as an exercise in the support group. Betty Jean Lifton provides an insightful approach to the concept of "Ghost Kingdoms" in the following quote:

To help all members of the adoption triad, therapists must be able to see the ghosts that accompany them. These ghosts spring from the depths of the unresolved grief, loss, and trauma that everyone has experienced. They represent the lost babies, the parents who lost them, and the parents who found them. Too dangerous to be allowed into consciousness, they are consigned to a spectral place I call the Ghost Kingdom. Search and reunion is an attempt by adoptees to reconnect with the ghost mother and father, and live the alternate life (Lifton 71).

In the series, Randall confesses that even in his mature age he still visits his Ghost Kingdom in his dreams. Even though most adoptees let go of them as they grow up, Randall

holds on to his, which speaks of his deep desire to know his past and the consequences of his trauma as a transracial adoptee. His Ghost Kingdom has another peculiarity, which is that it always brings the same spectral fantasy: “I imagined that the nice librarian from the neighbourhood library and the Black meteorologist on the local news were my parents . . . They were the only two adults that I consistently saw that looked like me” (“Brotherly Love” 32:15). The White suburb where Randall lived as a child provided him with very few Black role models. This had such a psychological impact on Randall that his version of a phantasmagoric family remained the same all his life. Randall continues to explain to Kevin how he felt guilty for doing this, even though imagining a fantasy place is something most children do. His Ghost Kingdom was not completely his own, like some other adoptees could say. Because of Randall’s unique circumstance of adoption, race and role in his family he felt deeply grateful to them, and as a consequence, he was not even able to picture a ghost family without his adoptive family. This outpour of emotion and honesty on Randall’s part is the turning point for his and Kevin’s relationship. This moment of vulnerability among brothers contributes to building up their emotional connection and to portraying a healthy development of a male relationship, since “. . . the reduced physical, psychic and emotional violence that is central to gender equity would mean substantial benefits for men’s physical well-being as well as for their psychic and emotional health” (Clowes 16). Kevin exercises his vulnerability and takes full responsibility for his actions by saying: “I’m sorry there were things I didn’t see when we were growing up. And I’m sorry there are things I...I still don’t see. You are my brother. And I love you” (“Brotherly Love” 34:51). His apology takes even a greater stance when he delivers the following speech:

You’re not just my smart, successful brother, Randall. You’re my Black, smart, successful brother. And I think maybe I did resent that. And maybe I thought you getting special treatment was mixed up with... with you being Black. And I wanted to take you down a notch, and I... I overlooked things that I shouldn’t have. And I took shots at you that I shouldn’t have taken. And I was more jealous of you than I should’ve been. (“Brotherly Love” 39:21)

With this acknowledgment of accountability and cause of pain, Kevin is allowing both his brother and himself to heal from their childhood wounds that only kept them apart throughout their lives. In a similar manner, Ahmed claims that “[t]o recognize suffering by recognizing the cause of suffering is thus part of the revolutionary cause” (*The Promise* 168).

Kevin's words are definitely revolutionary in terms of the history of their relationship, and it is the first time that he voices out loud his pride for his Black brother. In this situation, Randall also needs to understand that, "[i]n addition to forgiving others, we also need to forgive situations out of control, forgive ourselves, and ask for forgiveness from others rather than harboring guilt, shame, and other negative emotions" (Brewer-Smyth 252). Randall felt a poignant guilt throughout his entire childhood for not being enough in so many aspects of his family and personal life due to his childhood trauma. He even felt guilt for imagining a Ghost Kingdom when, as it has been discussed, it is a common psychological resource to cope with the feeling of the unknown and the yearning for a sense of belonging. At the end of this episode, Randall dreams about his true Ghost Kingdom, but this time it is William and Laurel who are with him. This is a way of coming to terms with the reality of his childhood, and Randall finally also forgives his little old self, which was probably the toughest act of (self)love that he has ever had to make. "Brotherly Love" is a critical and revolutionary episode not only within the storyline of *This Is Us*, but it also contributes to the inclusion of race-themed dialogues, contemporary social issues and the inclusion of minorities in the television industry, based on the premise that "... social change can be approached more effectively when interracial dialogues occur as an ongoing practice that can develop momentum over time" (Alvarez and Tulino 1492).

So as to reconcile himself with his family, Randall has only one pending conversation that continues to haunt him about his past. His adoptive mother, Rebecca, never really explained or tried to justify her lie about William's existence, even though she met him almost from the moment that Randall became a part of the Pearson family. Rebecca's lie was to Randall the greatest betrayal of his life, made by the person he most loved and cared for in the entire world, a parental figure who was supposed to be his role model, took away from him the opportunity of knowing his birth father. Despite the fact that Rebecca tried to apologise multiple times, she never really explained her motives to Randall. The last episode of the fifth season, includes one of Rebecca's most honest and heart-breaking speeches. As she finds out Randall is avoiding telling her about his trip to New Orleans, where he discovered his birth mother's story, she approaches him and says:

I remember you looking at us, more than a few times. And I wondered if you were thinking about them. Your parents. And still, I didn't go there. And I avoided it. I... I rationalised that I took you home when I was still grieving, I... They were addicts. But I never... I never gave you the forum to talk about it. Not as a little boy, not as a

teenager. Not now as a grown man. And I knew things. And I hid them. And I'm... I'm very ashamed. I know it is way too late to say this, but I need to say it to you very clearly. I am so sorry. You are my entire world, You can tell me how I've hurt you. And if that doesn't come easy, you can tell me about your journey. And if I cry, it's 'cause I know what I robbed from my favourite person, it's not because I'm jealous or hurt, okay? Tell me about your mother. (“The Adirondacks” 28:29)

In the light of this piercing statement, Randall replies: “She’s my birth mother” (“The Adirondacks” 30:12), and just like that he is able to bring together the people who belonged in the story of his birth and those who are in his actual life. Randall finally comprehends it is all part of the same path, and even though these are important parts of him, there is no reason for him to separate his story in terms of simple dichotomies: Black and White, biological or adopted. There is one last moment of cathartic truth on Rebecca’s part, which takes place in season six, as she and Randall go on a road trip together in episode ten. At this moment in time, Rebecca is becoming aware of the daunting prognosis of her illness by the minute, and she tries to gather as many memories as possible while she can. As a means to do this in the most honest way, she feels the need to address one last pending matter with Randall about his childhood. Rebecca finally acknowledges the excessive role of caretaker Randall took up for his family when Jack died: “You took care of me. Which... Yes, it is the natural course for parents and children. Eventually, but not that soon. It was a lot to ask of you. It was too much” (“Every Version of You” 28:59). Randall was indeed a “parentified child” (Louise and Delia), and for the first time, Rebecca is addressing and regretting, at the same time, that Randall had to go through that unrequited role at such an early age. Rebecca’s words are the last missing piece of Randall’s puzzle to get to a better mental state, and to let go of his traumatic burdens, because “[t]he family becomes a happy object through the work that must be done to keep it together” (Ahmed, *The Promise* 46).

As the series comes to an end in season six, there are two major events for the Pearsons. Rebecca perishes from her Alzheimer’s, and Deja, one of Randall’s daughters, announces her pregnancy to her father. Life and death come together and bring the series to a climax of sadness and hope for the future. The baby will be named William, in honour of Randall’s father. It all feels like the end of a chapter for Randall, but it is also the beginning of another bright one. The news of the baby makes him recall memories of William talking about him being a grandfather, which is clear evidence that Randall carries his biological father with him: his memory, his words and his deeds. There is no better legacy of William

Hill's life than Randall himself, who took the better parts of him, as well as of the rest of his parents. In Ahmed's words, ". . . happiness is imagined as what allows subjects to embrace futurity, to leave the past behind them . . . in becoming an individual, you acquire a sense of freedom" (*The Promise* 137). At this point in Randall's life, he feels freed from the burden that weighed him down, and this improved mental health allows him to pursue a future where his past is present. One of the things that differentiate the Randall of the end of the series from the one in the beginning is that, even though he has let go of his past pain, he is now able to visit his memories, taking the happiness and lessons from them, rather than the guilt or the hurt. It seems only reasonable to finish this discussion by bringing up a speech delivered by Randall on Kate's first wedding, back in season two, where he offers almost a premonitory view of his future life:

It's taken me 37 years to accept the fact that there's absolutely zero point in trying to control the future. Cause nobody knows where we'll be. Not even a year from now. But, what we can control are the people we choose. Choosing our people is the closest thing we come to controlling our destiny. Because while everything else may change, if you choose right, your people will stay the same. Whether that's tonight or a year from now, or ten years from now. ("The Wedding" 39:26)

This speech is proof of the emotional catharsis that this show offers to the audience, as they dive into the nuanced lives of a multicultural, racially diverse, complex and loving family. As the show closes its storylines, the future becomes an open slate for Randall and the rest of the characters, and they choose their future paths next to one another. This fleeting feeling of the possibility of a future, but uncontrollable happiness is better explained by a quote from the original song "The Forever Now," sang by Mandy Moore, who plays Rebecca in the series: "All we have is a forever now" (2:30). Said song was specifically composed for the series, and nowadays is one of the most iconic pieces of art that stems from this show. *This Is Us* encapsulates the human spirit in its episodes and carefully addresses issues of race, social class, adoption, mental health and an intersectional representation of masculinity by virtue of introducing the character of Randall Pearson. A successful Black man, transracial adoptee, loving father, husband and son who undertakes a most revealing journey of personal transformation through the development of the seasons in this series, showing that it is indeed possible to acquire tools to evolve as a Black male in our society.

5. Conclusion

In the wake of the discussion proposed hitherto, it has been proved that *This Is Us* offers a revolutionary and thorough approach to Black masculinity and its representation on TV, especially through Randall Pearson's portrayal and character development. At the beginning of the Pearson's story, Randall is portrayed as an emotionally wounded character who carries throughout his adulthood traumas of race, transracial adoption, abandonment and a chronic anxiety disorder. Once the series reaches its end, Randall has undergone a transversal change through work of therapy, self-awareness and emotional vulnerability with himself and others. The discussion of this dissertation provides insight into the critique of social and racial stereotypes in *This is Us*, and how the series gives visibility to these underrepresented issues in the television industry. By means of a thorough analysis of the character, it has been proved how Randall breaks with the clichés of Black men across the six seasons of the series. Randall's adult actor, Sterling K. Brown, as well as his other younger actors, offer an enriching performance of a psychologically complex Black man who helps to rewrite the normative depictions of Black masculinity in television through an impressive personal evolution, in which he shows his commitment to his own emotions, mental health and interest in improving social causes. Undoubtedly, these are traits that should be recognised and are a far cry from the normative depiction of Black men on television. As much as it cannot be forgotten that the series makes use of certain stereotypical elements in Randall's life story, by a process of character examination, it has been exposed the respect and care with which the show treats its Black stories. After finalising this work, it is possible to confirm one of the premises of this dissertation, which argued that the elements of oppression or stereotyping are rigorously addressed and critiqued in plenty of dialogues concerning themes of race, social class, gender, body issues or mental health. *This Is Us* offers a platform for Black male stories to be heard, and it does not discriminate its characters' plotlines for the colour of their skin. It seems essential to also stress the significance of the barriers that Randall transgresses, as it has a fulminant social and vindicatory importance.

While Randall Pearson exists only in the television universe, in the real world there are also thousands of Black men who may have seen themselves identified with some aspects of his story for the first time ever on a screen (see Kimble and Racha-Penrice). Given the wide scope of this television series, it is more than reasonable to say that, by giving space to characters such as Randall, it is giving name and voice to realities that have been largely

ignored in mainstream media representation. This series has marked a turning point on television and in popular culture, breaking the stereotypical perspective historically assigned to Black, or transracial, fictional families, and will continue to transcend barriers as a result of works of research that create new knowledge, such as this one. Throughout this dissertation, the analysis of characters has been narrowed to those that better represent Randall's progress, with the only aim to underline the relevant interventions regarding Randall's journey in the series. This in-depth analysis only opens the field of work towards a broader research of this series unlimited potential. Within the series itself, the rest of Black and White masculinities that are displayed and how they interact with each other, can be further explored in order to make an intersectional gender study that addresses other perspectives and stereotypes so as to provide a more general overview of the use of representation in the series. Likewise the path is also open to discussion and to studies dealing with death and grief, body-image issues, such as obesity or fatphobia, in relation to female identities in TV representations, to mention just a few. Given the large scope and influence of the series even after its emission and the endless possibilities of research that it entails, it seems only fitting that scientific work should be carried out to analyse the construction of its characters, who are so treasured by the audience.

It is difficult to determine to what extent this series affects the population on a deeper level, but what is clear is that it has a significant impact on the audience, a fact that is evinced in the streaming data and series popularity: the audiences are substantial to its success. What is displayed in its episodes has repercussions and there is an active responsibility to deliver messages that help society to move forward, rather than the opposite. One could enter into the debate of "art for art's sake" which might also be a valid point, but given the nature of this series, and the on-going testimonies of actors, producers, writers of this television production, I believe it is more than clear that *This Is Us* is intended to send a statement that goes beyond the aesthetic component: the message of social advancement. There is a compromise with the storytelling of a Black man with a difficult and traumatic past that is implicit in its narrative of events. They have managed to present very intricate racial conflicts in a way that also allows the series to ensure a loyal audience, while telling the story of a dysfunctional family, like any other, with common issues, usually disregarded in the television drama field.

The ultimate aim of this dissertation lies in a profound interest to enable conversations and actual change in the representation of Black masculinities, as they take front focus of scientific research. The value of this work also lies in its conclusions, which point to the way towards social and racial inclusion in the TV industry, merging academia and popular culture.

Through the production of an intersectional and transversal academic response to a product of the popular TV culture, the goal is to broaden these fields of study, allowing future research to provide references to the unique story of the beloved character of Randall Pearson.

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Appendix

Appendix A:

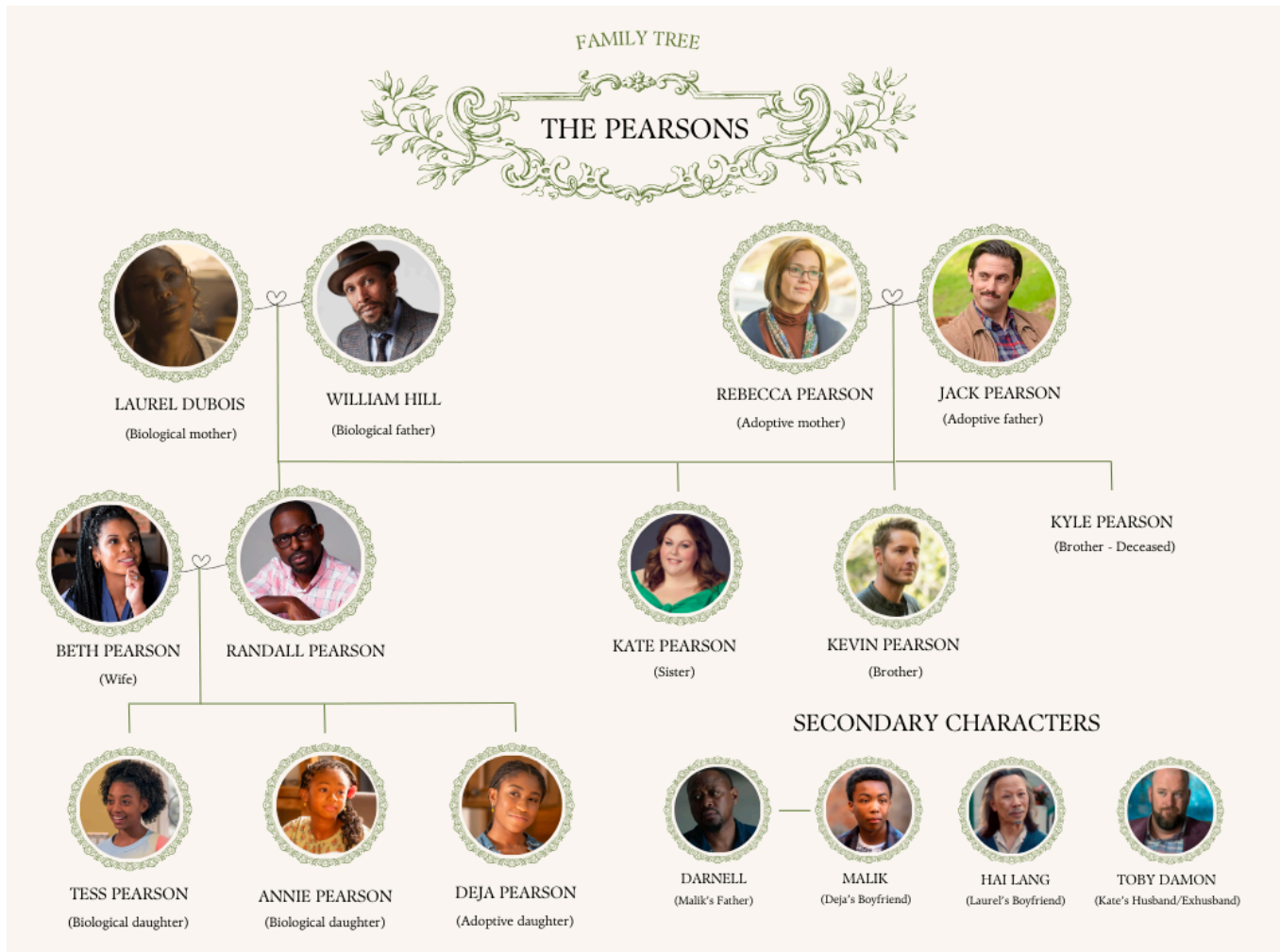


Figure 1: Randall's family tree.

Appendix B:

Things not said,
advice not given,
envelopes unstamped,
regrets enveloping me.
Is it easier there? I wonder.
I ponder, I guess.
yes.
I guess, yes.
Do you think of me as I do, my son?
My son.
My... son.
The things you'll do, I'll never know.
The pain.
The secrets.
Oh, to be given a chance,
a start. A restart,
the fresh start.
Will love come for you,
as it did for me?
Find you, wreck you, save you,
change you?
And if life breaks for you
the way it would not break for me,
if love hunts you,
finds you,
captures you,
will you hold it tight,
nurture it,
protect it?
I hope you will.
I hope you can.
This father's advice is not required,

it has no call.

So instead, I'll share some from another.

It's better to have loved and lost,

than to never have loved at all.

And now an addendum to my earlier advice, if I'm so lucky as to still have your ear.

I loved you, I lost you.

And I advise you, 'twas better

than to never having had loved at all.

But now, with more years,

with more time, more perspective,

I see things in a slightly new way.

So here, my good son,

is a father's advice, updated and recalled.

It's better to have loved and lost, surely...

... but try not to lose it at all.

Figure 2: Transcription of one of the poems in William Hill's "Poems for my Son" poetry collection. This was the only poem out of all the collection narrated in the series.