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Unravelling bad feelings, weaving trans care: Kacen Callender's *Felix ever after*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the mixed and distressing feelings represented in Kacen Callender's 2020 young adult novel *Felix ever after*, drawing on affect theories to highlight the potential that resignifying negative feelings can have for transgender youth. Along with reflecting on the transformative force of assertively managing bad feelings like anger or fear, the article analyses how the novel underscores the empowering effects that finding resilient care webs can have for young transgender individuals, particularly when confronting transphobia and questioning their identity.

KEYWORDS: Bad feelings, Kacen Callender, resilience, transgender affects, trans care, transphobia, young adult literature

1. INTRODUCTION: THE GOOD SCAR

The cover of *Felix ever after*, the young adult novel published by Kacen Callender in 2020, shows a young, brown-skinned person with a flashy crown of flowers on his head, smirking at the beholder. This person, whose arms display a variety of tattoos, is wearing a loose tank top, and the careful observer can note two scars that appear just above the neckline. Throughout the story, readers learn that the illustration, created by cover artist Alex Cabal, represents one of the self-portraits that Felix Love, the transgender protagonist, paints as he embarks on a healing

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process of self-discovery. Those visible scars speak for both the physical and the psychological wounds that transgender individuals like Felix bear in their personal processes, which are basically aimed at feeling better, and they guide my overall approach to the novel. In *The cultural politics of emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed addresses the idea of feeling better and suggests that we rethink our relation to scars, both emotional and physical, offering an alternative to challenge the truism that a good scar is one that is hard to see: "A good scar is one that sticks out, a lumpy sign on the skin. It's not that the wound is exposed or that the skin is bleeding. But the scar is a sign of the injury: a good scar allows healing, it even covers over, *but the covering always exposes the injury, reminding us of how it shapes the body*" (pp. 201–202). That kind of good scar, she adds, acts as a reminder that recovering from injustice is not about covering over our injuries, "which are effects of that injustice, signs of an unjust contact between our bodies and others" (2004, p. 202). What follows her argumentation is the importance of emotions, of those that work *with* and *on* the wounds, rather than *over* them: for Ahmed, it is through emotions that the past persists on the surface of bodies, shaping lives and worlds in the present and, most importantly, opening up futures, as they involve different orientations to others (2004, p. 202).

As in the cover of the book, the protagonist's scars do stick out in *Felix ever after*, a story narrated in the first person that introduces a seventeen-year-old black transgender boy who navigates issues of gender, race, class, and family, all intermingled with experiencing transphobia and longing to find romantic love. This article engages in identifying and exploring the mixed, distressing feelings represented in the novel, highlighting how Felix's journey becomes one of self-discovery, which includes, amongst other things, his awareness of the importance of caring for himself, and of receiving support and care from others. My reading of the novel focuses on exploring the transformative potential that resignifying negative feelings can have for trans people, while also delving into the deeply political side of care that Callender presents. I am mainly guided by Sara Ahmed's works on the cultural politics of emotion and happiness (2004, 2010) and by Hil Malatino's reflections on trans care and trans bad feelings (2020, 2022). Ahmed's suggestion that, for some people, feeling better might involve expressing feelings of anger, rage, or shame, especially her idea that focusing on how we are moved by emotions often described as negative or destructive can be enabling or creative, seems to be one of Callender's premises (2004, p. 201). Inspired by Ahmed, Hil Malatino has also stated that rage is an orienting affect that moves us, and it is "transformative and worldbuilding, not merely a negative affective force that compromises flourishing and impedes the cultivation of resilience" (2022, p. 107). Malatino's earlier work on trans care, in which he proposes thinking in terms of "aftercare" and emphasizes that care is needed to heal from transformative physical and emotional experiences (2020, pp. 2–3), is also pivotal to my reading of the text. His vindication of resilient care webs, so crucial within trans and queer communities, is helpful to delve into the deeply political side of care that is presented in a novel where gender, race, and class intersect with the young age of the protagonist. My theoretical approach to the novel also draws on the work of critics who, following the lead of Sara Ahmed's works on emotions (2004, 2006) or Brian Massumi's on the circulation of affects (2015), emphasize the importance of affective relationality and explore the transformative and reconstructive potential of queer negativity within the realm of queer and affect theories (Kuriakose & Maragathavel, 2025; Liu, 2020).

Young Adult (YA) literature foregrounds recurring themes, including identity, otherness, acceptance of difference, friendship, love, family dynamics, and bullying (Trupe, 2006). Certainly, YA narratives about transgender youth further contribute to unfolding these prevailing tropes by specifically addressing vulnerability, validation, resilience, self-

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acceptance, and acceptance by family and community in the particular context of transgender subjectivities. In her recent book *In transition: Young adult literature and transgender representation* (2024), Emily Corbett makes a groundbreaking, indispensable analysis of the as-yet few transgender protagonists within the genre, in which she highlights the growing depiction of intersectional characters, and identifies recurring narrative patterns specific to the transgender experience, such as interiorized narration of dysphoria and self-recognition, or the importance of name changes and deadnaming. In the United States, since the publication in 2011 of *I am J*, by Cris Beam, which featured a young transgender male protagonist for the first time, the incorporation of trans leading characters into the field of YA literature has gradually grown. One year later, one of the first novels to feature a transgender girl protagonist was published, *Being Emily* (2012), by Rachel Gold. Worthy of mention amongst novels that center on trans male characters are *Beautiful music for ugly children*, by Kirstin Cronn-Mills (2012), *Cemetery boys* by Aiden Thomas (2020), *Stay gold*, by Tobly McSmith (2020), and the graphic novel *The faint of heart*, by Kerilynn Wilson (2023). All of these delve into the emotional connections of the young main characters, and some present racialised protagonists. Violence, bullying, and bigotry are tackled in most of the stories, but because of the scope of the genre, these negative experiences are to be interpreted as empowering, triggering ordeals that often signal the transformative potential of creativity and relationality for their young protagonists.

Another common feature of many YA narratives about transgender kids is that they close with notes of hope and affirmation, as is the case with *Felix ever after*. This novel undoubtedly opts for the hopeful message, also reinforcing trans affirmability. Yet, because of that intersectional approach, and because bad feelings are not disavowed in the story, I believe that while writing it, Kacen Callender was thinking through something similar to what Cameron Awkward-Rich has defined as trans maladjustment, contending that "we might learn by thinking with, rather than against, the madness and maladjustment that is everywhere evident in trans-antagonistic and trans-affirmative archives alike" (2022, p. 59). Echoing Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism" (2011), in his book *The terrible we: Thinking with trans maladjustment*, Awkward-Rich emphasizes that his interest in maladjustment "is an interest in this sometimes-deadly misfit produced between contemporary discourses of trans affirmability and what it feels like to inhabit them" (2022, p. 147). Awkward-Rich makes clear that he is not trying to offer feeling bad as something good, or as an ethic or a state to aim for: in fact, his approach could be read together with Malatino's ideas on embracing bad feelings as a transformative force within the trans experience. He insists that "much trans[masculine] discourse is structured around a series of disavowals to forms of maladjustment, each disavowal containing within it a familiar body onto which bad feelings are repeatedly pinned, namely, the girl, the disabled or mad person, and the person of color", arguing for a version of trans studies "that can acknowledge and think with a more expansive *we*, terrible though it might feel" (2022, p. 16). *Felix ever after* reinforces trans affirmability, but it also addresses the shadows of trans antagonism, showing that Callender did not disavow bad feelings in their conception of a story that appears to have been thought with an affirmative, while also expansive, *we*.

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2. UNRAVELLING BAD FEELINGS

Felix ever after follows the narrative structure of both the romantic and the detective story, certainly close to the *whodunit* plot, which, in this particular case, consists of finding out who hacked Felix's Instagram account, cruelly exhibiting some of his pre-transition photographs and deadnaming him at the art school he attends in Brooklyn. The person behind the wicked exhibition, furthermore, keeps trolling him, sending transphobic and offensive messages that upset and enrage Felix alike. The novel's subplots include his longing to experience love for the first time, dealing with his father's reluctance to use the right pronouns and to call him by his name, coming to terms with the fact that he and his father were abandoned by his mother when he was ten years old, and fathoming a niggling feeling about his gender identity that hovers around him all the time. All these aspects of the protagonist's life are associated with a variety of feelings persistently described throughout the narration, ranging from rage and anger to numbness, frustration, shame, embarrassment, fear, or guilt.

It is certainly rage that triggers Felix to react and plot revenge against the person who laid out the exhibition. Convinced that this was Declan Keane, a classmate who used to date Ezra Patel, Felix's best friend, he decides to catfish Declan, creating a fake Instagram account to gain his trust and ultimately reveal his wicked act. Indeed, in his exploration of the bad feelings linked with trans experience, Malatino highlights rage as a key element for their survival, defining it not as a merely negative force that impedes the cultivation of resilience, but as an energy that propels them toward more possible futures: a transformative and worldbuilding force (2022, pp. 106–107). In this case, Felix is not paralyzed in the face of injury and injustice: his rage spurs him to plan revenge even when, quite predictably, his suspicion that it was Declan who organized the exhibition finally proves wrong. Felix's rage slowly turns into guilt as he becomes aware that he is playing with Declan's feelings (Callender, 2020, p. 135), chiefly when Declan confesses to having feelings for him (Callender, 2020, p. 142). He even has to admit to himself that he likes the intimate conversations with Declan, who, at different points in his plan for revenge, uplifts him and gives him advice on overcoming fear (Callender, 2020, pp. 195–197).

Upon reading the first of many harassing anonymous messages he receives after the exhibition, constantly asking why he is "pretending to be a boy", Felix relates feeling a numbness that precedes rage, a "*whoosh*" that goes through him. He has never directly experienced that kind of hate for who he is, even though he certainly knows that hate against transgender people exists:

> I always see it on the news. The ways the government is trying to erase me, the ways politicians try to pretend transgender people don't exist, even though we do exist, and always have, and always will. I see the articles, the stories about transgender people being refused health care, students like me bullied and forced into the wrong bathrooms, teens my own age being kicked out of their homes, adults being fired from their jobs just for being who they are, so many of us attacked and killed just for walking down the street —so many of us deciding to take our own lives because we aren't accepted. (Callender, 2020, p. 124)

This fragment, in which suicide is not denied, and which is followed by Felix's comment that he knows that his life expectancy is in his early thirties as a result of the violence faced by racialised trans people like him every day, recalls Awkward-Rich's vindication of thinking with trans maladjustment, showing that Callender refuses, in Awkward-Rich's words, "to excise maladjustment" from the story (2022, p. 147). Furthermore, at this moment, when the

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protagonist connects the individual hate he receives with the collective hate many people like him receive every day, the I turns into we and, in a way, the "terrible we" advocated by Awkward-Rich (2022) is invoked: the one that contains fractures, holding space for recalling the multiple aggressions endured by the transgender community. Eventually, the numbness initially felt by Felix at the hate displayed by the troller gradually turns into the determination and confidence to confront the situation, as he manages to fight back and assertively transform the mix of emotions he identifies, amongst them anger, unease, rage, fear, and anxiety (Callender, 2020, p. 125, p. 127).

It is after receiving one of those offensive messages that Felix decides to isolate himself in the acrylics classroom, finding solace in painting, and this decision becomes one of the turning points of the story. When she finds Felix in the classroom, Jill, a young, enthusiastic teacher, encourages him to make the most of his qualities as an artist and suggests that he paint self-portraits. She insists on the empowering effect of painting oneself, on how it makes you see yourself in a different way than looking in a mirror, or snapping a picture on your phone: "Painting a self-portrait makes you recognize and accept yourself, both on the outside and within —your beauty, your intricacies, even your flaws" (Callender, 2020, p. 172). Concentrating on painting the real him, Felix overcomes his initial embarrassment and discomfort and begins to work hectically on that project. In the first portraits, he can recognize the fear in his eyes, the dread in confronting himself, in searching for the beauty and admitting to the flaws (Callender, 2020, p. 173). After the first session, he takes a step back from the canvas and rejoices in the beauty of the painting –not his beauty, he makes plain, but that of the overall effect of the unfinished portrait, which looks as though he were on fire: "My eyes hold the same fear, the same dread, but there's a strength, an intensity, a determination I hadn't really noticed" (Callender, 2020, p. 174). Felix's confidence grows throughout the process of completing a series of self-portraits, and his answers to the troll become more and more steadfast: "What do you get out of being a transphobic piece of trash? Does it feel good, to try and belittle someone because of who they are? I guess it must be a rush of power for you, attacking someone and making them feel like they don't belong. But I know who I am. I know that I'm trans" (Callender, 2020, p. 186).

On various occasions, Felix wonders why he does not block the trolling account, why instead he needs to stand up for himself and answer the more and more aggressive messages he keeps receiving. This becomes especially apparent when the troll wickedly mentions that he and his father were abandoned by his mother: upon receiving that cruel message, he describes the pain he feels as "a physical thing, filling my heart and spreading through me beneath my skin" (Callender, 2020, p. 265); then, the pain sparks into anger, and he flings his phone across the room. His relieving decision to delete the Instagram account from his phone and receive no more hateful notifications comes later in the story, after a healing conversation in which his father advises him to focus on himself and tells him how, sometimes, it is easier to accept hurt and pain than love and acceptance (Callender, 2020, pp. 287–288). After following his father's suggestion, the anxiety and stress he is experiencing disappear, replaced by excitement. Furthermore, it is when he decides to move on, to stop looking for the person who is trolling him, that he discovers it was Austin, a white, gay boy from the school, who has just had a relationship with Ezra. When he accidentally finds out, Felix can barely make sense of his feelings, of the "confusion, the shock, the anger" that spills through him (Callender, 2020, p. 319). Austin apologizes again and again, trying to explain himself, firstly by saying that he was jealous of Ezra and Felix's relationship. Yet, the darkest reason surfaces when, without uttering the word 'trans,' he suggests that gays now have to deal with people like Felix, "taking our identity, taking our space" (Callender, 2020, p. 321). Austin also admits that it annoys him that Felix is openly transgender and always flaunting it, while he has not dared come out to his

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family. Felix's answer is as assertive as he has learned to be throughout his coming-of-age process: "I'm not flaunting anything. I'm just existing. This is me. I can't hide myself. I can't disappear. And even if I could, I don't fucking want to. I have the same right to be here. I have the same right to exist" (Callender, 2020, p. 321).

Felix realizes that his rage is dissolving as he comes to understand that Austin is just an ignorant person who lives in a bubble of privilege and does not want to understand the world around him because it is too scary and challenging for him. What is more, he connects this realization with a discussion he had heard at the gender-identity group he attends at the LGBT Community Center, one that highlighted the "quilt of identities" that ties "all of us together" (Callender, 2020, p. 323). He feels sorry for Austin, who will never be able to meet and love those people, to learn from them, and states, "I don't want this anger inside me, eating me up from the inside out" (Callender, 2020, p. 323). Felix's determination and resilience are reinforced precisely when he realizes that lacking the privilege that Austin enjoys can be beneficial for him. And he believes Austin is truly sorry, even if only because he was caught, but he is also aware that "it's my choice to not accept his apology. To not forgive him" (Callender, 2020, pp. 323–324). This episode ends when Felix heads to the Dean's office to denounce Austin, and readers learn that his harassing troll is eventually thrown out of the school.

This disturbing situation, which lies at the core of the plot, is not the only one that Felix has to confront. Throughout the story, it remains clear that he has not come to terms with the fact that his mother abandoned him, starting a new family while completely neglecting him. The closest he gets to looking at himself before he starts the self-portraits project is through writing numerous emails he never sends to her, after she never responded to the one where he came out to her as a trans man. The exercise eventually becomes an efficient tool for Felix to understand his fear of being rejected and his pervading idea that he is unworthy of love. Probably because he knows that the addressee is never going to receive the messages, Felix is utterly honest with himself in these letters, while openly asking his mother whether she still loves him, and why she stopped loving him (Callender, 2020, p. 19; p. 59; p. 179). It is in one of these messages that he dares to put into written words what he describes as a feeling in his gut that something is not right: he knows that he is not a girl, but he is not sure if he is "actually" a guy, either (Callender, 2020, p. 58). Throughout the story, Felix makes frequent references to that feeling that he describes as "niggling", and which, for a long time, he does not share with anyone. He explains how he feels when besieged by doubts: "Those questions begin to pull on this thread of anxiety, and I'm afraid if I pull too hard, I'll unweave and become completely undone. Maybe that's why I hate my dad deadnaming me, more than anything else. It makes me wonder if I really am *Felix*, no matter how loud I shout that name" (Callender, 2020, p. 26).

Felix's niggling feeling speaks of the durability of negativity that Malatino associates with the transgender experience, which informs the bad feelings that persist before, during, and after the moments of euphoria experienced by transitioning, "the bad feelings that aren't ameliorated by such euphoria, the bad feelings that transition doesn't, can't possibly, eliminate" (2022, p. 2). Engaged in the discussion of queer negative affects, Wen Liu (2020) has explored discomfort and shame, concluding that they are not signs of negativity or injury, but can rather be understood as new forms of sociality and opening up. Resorting to psychological studies that confirm that shame can be fathomed as a social process that allows for a reparative analysis of queer vulnerability, she specifically states that shame must be examined as a formative element of queer identity. In the novel, the specific bad feeling that appears because he is

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questioning his identity after transitioning makes Felix feel ashamed, guilty, and embarrassed, and it is reinforced by the troll's harassing remarks that he is a fraud. Doing research online, he eventually finds a term that seems to suit what he feels about his identity: that he is a demiboy, a person who mostly or partly identifies as male "but may also identify as nonbinary some of the time, or even as a girl" (Callender, 2020, p. 278). Felix recounts that when reading about this term, the niggling in him begins to mobilize, spreading from the back of his head, down his neck, and into his chest: it is the confidence that spreads through him because "there's a word that explains exactly how I feel, that takes away all of my confusion and questioning and hesitation —a word that lets me know there are others out there who feel exactly the same way that I do" (Callender, 2020, p. 278). Therefore, the discomfort and shame finally lead him not only to find a term that better explains himself, but also to learn that he is not the only person in the world who is unfolding himself in a revealing way. At the end of the story, after having gained that confidence, Felix finds new forms of opening and reparation by finally deciding to delete the almost five hundred drafts he has written to his mother, feeling a "lightening" as the anger, hurt, and pain start to fade away. He comes to understand the reason why he kept writing them altogether: the negative feelings he had for his mother were also a reflection of his incapacity to understand himself and his refusal to "let go" (Callender, 2020, p. 327). Eventually, Felix's shame transforms into a more comforting feeling (Liu, 2020) and, rephrasing the words of Hil Malatino, his rage at his mother orients him towards a more self-assured future, becoming an energy that encourages him to break a relationship that does not sustain him, one that does not support his flourishing (2022, p. 106). So far, my analysis has mainly focused on Felix's personal process of unravelling bad feelings, emphasizing how his rage, shame, and fear transform into determination and self-assurance as he begins to concentrate on himself. Guided by Ahmed and Malatino, I have explored how the protagonist reshapes his life by assertively managing and negotiating his emotions, thereby opening up to new possibilities and orienting himself to others. It has to be added that the process is also tiresome: there are moments when he feels exhausted by the drama and by the anger, as he confesses after he finally confronts a girl he briefly dated, who accused him of being a misogynist for refusing to be a woman (Callender, 2020, p. 209). Indeed, Ahmed tackles the complexities of reducing injustice to the realm of the personal, stating that when emotions are seen "as only personal, or about the person and how they feel, then the systematic nature of their effects is concealed" (2004, p. 198). In all certainty, Callender's focus in the novel is not to conceal, but to reveal the effects of transphobia exerted on Felix by different characters, and the moral of the story points beyond the merely personal. It echoes the widely accepted idea that the personal is political, accurately rephrased by Ahmed when she states that "any person may embody more than the personal, and the personal embody more than the person", which returns us "to the 'promise' of community" (2004, p. 198). The following section addresses the emphasis placed on the webs of care presented in the novel, and my reading is especially guided by Malatino's conception of care as a deeply political tool (2020, p. 9).

3. WEAVING TRANS CARE

Invoking trans aftercare, Malatino provides what he calls a minimal definition of community: "folks who are reweaving" (2020, p. 4). Such a simple and illustrative definition resembles what Callender depicts in the novel, for, in disentangling his bad feelings, Felix discovers that self-care also involves being cared and supported by others, and readers can witness his healing process of reweaving. The idea is explored both through his tumultuous relationship with his

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father and through his slow but eye-opening awareness of the importance of the webs of support within the LGBTQIA+ community. Malatino understands aftercare as a trans concept, stating that for many transgender people, surviving their processes means committing to forms of healing that are unthinkable without care webs (2020, p. 3). As has already been mentioned, throughout the novel, Felix describes his anger and frustration because his father does not call him by his name, uses the wrong pronouns, and even deadnames him sometimes. These feelings are also mixed with guilt, for he is aware that his father certainly cares for him and willfully supported his transition, something for which he feels gratitude. Eventually, he comes to understand the important role his father plays in his life, despite his slowness in understanding everything that happens to his trans adolescent child. One of the pivotal moments is described when Felix finds the courage to tell his father about the recurring feeling that bothers him: after the hormones and the top surgery, he keeps questioning his identity. Frustration rises in him again at his father's confused look, as he admits to not understanding this new situation. Their conversation becomes more intense, and Felix's unpleasant comments hurt his father, who nevertheless apologizes for being slow, insisting that he loves him, above all, and wants to understand what happens to him. Naming, that paramount aspect of their experience that exposes transgender individuals to vulnerability from an early age (Butler, 2016, pp. 17–18), is revealed as the most hurtful obstacle to their relationship. What becomes the ultimate healing episode between father and son is described as follows:

> "If you love me, why won't you say my name? My real name?"
>
> He closes his mouth, swallowing. Then, "Felix."
>
> Hearing my name with my dad's voice, coming from my dad's mouth, is like a shock through my chest, my heart, vibrating through me.
>
> "I've had an idea of who you are —who you were supposed to be," my dad tells me. "And your name's been the last piece of you I wasn't ready to let go of —I just wasn't ready." He's nodding. "But I know you're Felix. Your name is Felix."
>
> Tears are building in me. I wipe my eyes fast. "Sorry. That's embarrassing." (Callender, 2020, pp. 330–331)

The intimacy between father and son described in this fragment also calls for a close reading of the representation of gender roles, especially of masculinities. Callender's decision to devise the story of a female-to-male transgender character around the figure of an absent mother is compelling and, positively, not a haphazard choice, especially when the novel is addressed to a young audience. Parental care in this family is the sole responsibility of a man, and the positive outcome of his caring, the lessons of love and self-care his demiboy learns from him, despite his obvious vacillations, offer a constructive vision of fatherhood. This episode ends with the father repeating Felix's name again and again, reassuring him that his name fits him, adding: "You weren't happy, and now you are, and that's all I could ever want for you. That's all I could ever ask. You're happy. And brave. You've been so courageous, just by being yourself, even knowing that the world won't always accept you for who you are. You refuse to be anything but yourself, no matter what. I look up to that. I admire that" (Callender, 2020, p. 331). Felix's name, which he chose in the belief that it means "lucky", also means "happy" in Latin, as he learns in the closing episode of the novel; therefore, the fact that his father not only says his name out loud, but also declares that it fits him, reinforces the happiness implied in the very name he has chosen for himself.

Care webs are woven into Felix's life in parallel progression, embracing self-care, parental care, friends' care, health care, and the care of queer support groups. Callen Lorde, the clinic he attends, is one of the few centers in NYC specializing in LGBTQIA+ people, so it is

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usually full, but he had been lucky enough to get an appointment at the age of 15. Each time he is there waiting to get his testosterone shot, looking at the diverse people who attend the clinic, he feels a connection: "I never get tired of seeing the patients who come here. So many different sorts of people, all of us connected by this one thing, our one queer identity. I'm a little bit in awe, I guess" (Callender, 2020, p. 146). Yet, watching those people who are older than him, he also feels jealous, as he believes that because they have had so many years to figure themselves out, they probably no longer question anything about their identity. And the "annoying *niggling* thoughts" (Callender, 2020, p. 146) resurface, while he wonders how they managed to figure out their answers. One day, with embarrassment, he finally finds the courage to ask the nurse who cares for him at the center if she has had any patients who know they are trans but are still questioning their identity. She suggests that he can get an appointment with the youth counselor, or contact a group that speaks about identity, but perceiving his reluctance to do so, she finally breaks her rule of not making comments to her patients about their identity, saying: "I think that it's fine to keep questioning your identity. You don't owe anyone any answers", adding, "I'm sure you're not the only person who's ever questioned after they started transitioning" (Callender, 2020, p. 149).

When Felix, determined to focus on himself, finally finds the courage to attend the gender identity discussion group at the LGBT Community Center, not only do some of his uncertainties gradually dissipate, but he also becomes aware of the powerful weight of the community. The intergenerational and interracial makeup of the group allows him to listen to varied opinions about gender roles, labels, transphobia, racism, anti-queerness, and the demand for the recognition of identities both within and outside the LGBTQIA+ community. Discussing queer pride, a few weeks before the Pride march, one member of the group confesses that in the face of the rejection he finds in society, he sometimes wonders whether the best option is to create his own bubble and forget about the rest of the world. Tom, the eldest person in the group, readily responds, asserting that not everyone has the privilege, or the ability, to create that bubble. He suggests that their energy should be first spent in loving, accepting, and celebrating themselves, "creating our own world, not just for ourselves in our bubble, but one that can spread to those who need it most —one filled with our stories, our history, our love and pride" (Callender, 2020, p. 275). Tom's words resonate through Felix, who has already been encouraged by his father and Jill to focus on himself. Thus, his reweaving occurs thanks to the care of the community, but fundamentally because their care makes him realize the importance of loving and accepting himself above all. The two definitions of aftercare offered by Malatino put forward that it is "what needs to be provided in order to help a subject heal in the wake of massive upheaval and transformation, and it is what facilitates and supports emergence into a radically recalibrated experience of both bodymind and the world it encounters" (2020, p. 3). Felix begins to heal because he receives aftercare from his father and the healthcare system during and after his transition, but that healing is certainly recalibrated through the support of a diverse and resilient web of care that helps him encounter an oftentimes hostile world.

4. CONCLUSION: JUST REPARATION

The 'happily ever after' episode of Felix's romantic story with Ezra becomes a sparkling reminder of their comforting connection with the queer community: their reconciliation takes place during Pride Parade, and glitter is sprinkled on the streets, on both of them, and on the many people who surround them when they finally meet. The juxtaposition of feelings Felix

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describes at watching the march reflects the process of unravelling and weaving that readers have witnessed throughout the story: "I'm screaming with joy. I'm screaming with pain. I'm screaming with the awe that I'm here, that we're all here, and that we're here because of the people before us, the people who couldn't be here, and I'm screaming for myself, too" (p. 335). Yet, once the amorous tangle has been lightheartedly solved, in order to feel better and heal his wound, Felix needs one more thing: to reclaim the space where he was hurt, the lobby of the school where the shameful exhibiting of his leaked photos had taken place. At the end-of-summer gallery, a dozen of his self-portraits are finally exhibited, and the title of each painting has his real name on it. Reclaiming the lobby is his chance "to put up one giant middle finger to anyone else in the world who doesn't think I deserve to be there —to exist— right alongside them" (Callender, 2020, p. 347). He has the opportunity to give a speech at the gallery opening and, in front of his teachers and classmates, recalls the gallery that made him feel hurt and obsessed with revenge, explaining that working on his self-portraits became an empowering way to confront the painful situation, and: "to put up these paintings I created, of who I know I am, instead of what someone else sees me as. I am Felix. No one else gets to define who I am. Only me" (p. 350). His concluding remarks reinforce the illuminating results of his journey: "It could've been easy to say I was hurt because I'm trans, because someone singled me out for my identity, but there's something weird about that —something off, about suggesting that my identity is the thing that brought me any sort of pain. It's the opposite. Being trans brings me love. It brings me happiness. It gives me power" (pp. 350–351). All in all, Felix's personal journey of self-knowledge is not portrayed by Callender as one that results in suffering, but as a revealing path towards self-assertion. Furthermore, the effect that his public, healing act of resistance has on the protagonist only reinforces what affect theorists have widely discussed about emotions: that they are relational and transcend individual feelings, being socially and bodily situated (Ahmed, 2004; Kuriakose & Maragathavel, 2025; Massumi, 2015).

Considering the relation between emotions and (in)justice, Sara Ahmed poses the following question: "How do emotions work through texts not only to 'show' the effects of injustice, in the form of wounds and injury, but also to open up the possibility of restoration, repair, healing and recovery?" (2004, p. 191). She suggests that emotions can be regarded as "just" personal, but, more interestingly, that they can also be understood as "just" or "unjust" (2004). The end of the novel shows how Felix's emotions are not just personal; rather, they lead to the *just reparation* of his injury, turning the healing of his wound into a political act. His scars will remain as a sign of the injury, and, at that point in the story, readers know that they are good scars. If feeling better can be the effect of telling one's story, or of attaining the recognition of an injury (Ahmed, 2004, p. 201), Felix's description of some of his self-portraits, when he glimpses them in the crowded lobby, attests that he has managed to feel better: "The strength in my eyes, even when it looks like I'm lost underwater. The power in my stare as I watch the viewer, my skin on fire. The crown of flowers on my head as I smile, knowing for a fact that I'm worthy of love and respect" (p. 349). Malatino also vindicates the significance of repair when he states:

> Repair is essential to an infrapolitical ethics of care. It is crucial that we support practices of healing and accountability as we move through and beyond breaks and aid one another in the process of envisioning and inhabiting more livable lives. Situating ethics infrapolitically and collectively, as something that happens between friends and parallel to, outside of, or beyond institutions, means that we assume responsibility for each other's lives. It means that our support in the context of a break should remain present in the aftermath of one; that we do our best to recognize, simultaneously, the possibilities that breaks enable and the vulnerability and precarity that is often exaggerated in their aftermath. (2022, pp. 120–121)

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I have nothing to add to this powerful defense of repair within a trans-oriented ethics of care, for Malatino's words speak for themselves, and his reflections on transgender care and feelings have certainly been pivotal to my analysis of Callender's novel. But I want to highlight Kelly Gawel's idea that Malatino's work on care can indeed be read as such a caring *after*, for it shows how he cares for the wounds and contradictions within care itself: "*Trans Care* is a work of t4t love, a loving presentation of life-saving bonds painstakingly, exhaustingly, joyfully, woven by and for trans people" (2023, p. 5). Undoubtedly, the ethics of care has been developed by feminist scholars (Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984) and queer and disability justice activists (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018) for several decades now; in the same way, affect theories have been circulating for a considerable time, with valuable contributions for the reading of queer texts (Ahmed, 2004, 2006, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Massumi, 2015, Ngai, 2005). But it is the focus on the transgender experience that makes Malatino's and Awkward-Rich's ideas so relevant for academic readings of trans texts. Their rethinking of previous works specifically addressing trans experiences is indeed a commanding addition. The polyphony that resonates within their work, as within *Felix ever after*, brings two particular voices to mind that have inspiringly accompanied my reading of the text: Audre Lorde's and Susan Stryker's. Lorde's straightforward, clear-cut idea that self-care is warfare, that caring for oneself is not an act of self-indulgence, but of self-preservation (1988), has been whispering throughout.

As for Stryker, it is her enraged words to Victor Frankenstein (1994) that have been bellowing in my ears, those that defend the possibility of meaningful agency and action for transsexuals and end in this powerful benediction: "May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world" (p. 251). Stryker's benediction reverberates in *Felix ever after*, where readers witness how the protagonist experiences the power of darkness within himself and how his rage decidedly transforms him and his world. This is a novel addressed to young adults, one where transgender characters and their concerns are represented in all their shades of light and shadow. Not so long ago, in 2013, Antero Garcia had pointed out that LGBTQI books were an underrepresented sub-genre within YA novels, adding that they tended to primarily focus on gay, white men, while leaving aside the remaining letters in the acronym. He understood this lack of representation as a microaggression and questioning of racialised women and men, bisexual teens, and transgender individuals, who did not have many options to read about characters who were like them in terms of sexuality, and he asserted that while YA texts do not usually validate the experiences or feelings of these individuals, at least they could offer a view of diversity for the broad audience of readers (p. 90). As discussed above, since 2011, YA literature in the USA has gradually begun to include transgender protagonists, and in 2020, Kacen Callender published their novel, aimed primarily at validating the experiences and feelings of a racialised, young transgender boy, thus contributing to enlarging the archive of YA transgender literature. At the end of the book, in an author's note, Callender briefly narrates their own journey of discovering their identity, unfolding their expectations about the novel: "I hope that readers took away a lot after reading *Felix Ever After*: laughs and tears; a roller coaster ride of a romance, empowerment, and validation; and a story they thoroughly enjoyed. But above all else, I hope Felix can do for even just one reader what Adam [one of the characters in *Degrassi: The next generation*] did for me: that a reader picks up *Felix Ever After* and learns more about themselves and their identity, and that becoming who they truly are is a possibility" (p. 357). This book allows its young readers to learn about themselves and to feel validated, and it also allows them to know that there are ways to feel better and even happy. The ending of the novel, like its title, is certainly hopeful and positive: Callender seems to be following Sara Ahmed's

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suggestion that "reading about characters who are happily queer in the face of a world that is unhappy with queer lives and loves can be energizing, can give us hope" (2010, p.118).

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