

# Being an Athlete or Being a Girl: Selective Identities among Fictional Female Athletes Who Play with the Boys

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In February 2018, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) dedicated its annual World Radio Day to the theme of “Radio and Sports” and issued a call for that medium to provide more equal and equitable coverage of women athletes. Thanks to the media package made available to radio stations around the globe, listeners could hear the voices of young women articulating their athletic goals: One young athlete shares her dream of becoming a medal-winning swimmer, describing the hard work and potential sacrifices that she will make to be among the best in the pool. And when she reaches that defining moment of success and finds herself standing on the pedestal, she imagines that *they’ll* say [pause; enter male sportscaster voice]: “Doesn’t she look great in that swimsuit?” Another young athlete tells the story of her passion for high jumping and hopes of competing internationally. She, too, notes the work and sacrifice inherent in this process, and when she reaches her pinnacle moment of athletic pride, she imagines that *they’ll* say [pause; enter male sportscaster voice]: “She owes it all to her trainer.” These ads highlight powerfully how female athletes have been historically positioned by radio and other media and, in response, in our larger society.

We agree that the narrative around girls and women in sport needs to shift away from valuing (or devaluing) female athletes for their physical attributes

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or positioning them as successful only thanks to the influence of their male coaches, fathers, and partners. The stories that we tell matter. To this end, we believe that fiction has the potential to offer counter-narratives that challenge such belittling perspectives of female athletes by presenting empowered and empowering characters who might serve to inspire readers, particularly adolescent readers who are working actively to (re)define themselves and their place in their communities. Fictional narratives can be transformative, shaping how readers understand, navigate, and imagine life in the everyday world. This transformation, however, can be a double-edged sword: fictional narratives can challenge the dominant narrative or reaffirm problematic positionings and do harm. Despite their potential to do so, our analysis reveals that not all novels about girls in sport achieve liberatory aims.

We came to this project with a shared interest in young adult sports fiction that features female protagonists. We take as one starting point Mary Jo Kane's 1998 study, "Fictional Denials of Female Empowerment: A Feminist Analysis of Young Adult Sports Fiction," which briefly addresses the idea of the "lone wolf," or the girl who chooses to participate on a historically male athletic team. While this study includes the analysis of twenty-six young adult titles published prior to 1998 and centers on the relationships between athletes on girls' teams as characterized by a celebration of heterosexual desire rather than solidarity or camaraderie, Kane's mention of a few lone wolf characters proved intriguing. In this article, we explore more deeply the experiences of female protagonists who joined all-male teams in more recently published middle grade and young adult sports fiction by applying two frames of analysis, identity and intersectionality, to examine the following question: How do the female protagonists navigate girlhood identities given their nontraditional sports participation on historically male teams? Findings suggest that, as the fictional female athletes move into male-dominated spaces, they must reconceptualize their identities within either/or binaries that reaffirm gendered expectations and that these binaries ignore the complicated multiplicity of identities and their associated privileges and oppressions.

## **Related Literature**

Few literary scholars have examined middle grade and young adult sports fiction, and even fewer have focused their studies on titles featuring female protagonists. In an analysis of representations of adolescent female athletes in R. R. Knudson's sports fiction, for example, Patricia S. Griffin reports that these representations both challenge and reinforce stereotypical assumptions about sport and gender. LeeAnn Kreigh and Kane examine representations of athletes who identify as lesbian in young adult literature written between 1970 and 1996 and find that the female protagonists are accused of being "freaks" due to their participation in sports and receive more subtle suggestions that female athletes should behave in ultra-feminine ways to avoid being ostracized.

Katherine Mason examines ten young adult titles published from 1993 to 2012 with characters who identify as lesbian to evaluate the presence of counter-narratives that challenge stereotypical representations. And Kane and Kimberly D. Pearce analyze twelve middle grade sports novels published in the 1990s with a focus on race and gender, arguing that the novels obscure race by forwarding a colorblind narrative and reaffirm traditional assumptions of what girls can do, including the perpetuation of the idea that girls, as less physically capable than boys, are likely to encounter injury as a result of participation in sport.

The most recent work in this area centers on whether young adult sports novels encourage or deny female empowerment through sport. Ellen Singleton explores the messages and models about competitive sporting activities in the early twentieth-century Stratemeyer fiction series for young women, the *Girls of Central High*, to argue that “this vintage series” promotes positive values: “young women are entitled to participate in competitive team sport and recreational physical activity; they are entitled to good teaching; and . . . they are entitled to recognition and support from parents, teachers, and friends for their abilities, efforts and successes” (224–25). Erin Whiteside, Marie Hardin, Lauren J. DeCarvalho, Nadia Martinez Carillo, and Alexandra Nutter Smith explore six novels from the *Pretty Tough* and *Dairy Queen* series to engage in an analysis guided by poststructuralist perspectives on identity, specifically the emergence of a girlhood subjectivity. Their analysis invites consideration of how the discourse of empowerment obscures an ideology of sport that undermines girls’ ability to experience sports on their own terms. This latter study lends credence to Perry Nodelman’s argument that literature for young people reflects stories that adults believe young people not only want but also need to hear, and that this literature contains ingrained adult assumptions, knowledge, and experiences designed to enculturate readers into certain normative ways of thinking.

This same theme is evident in Dawn Heinecken’s criticism of postfeminist framings that present female athleticism in positive ways but fail to challenge masculine sports hegemony. She argues that while books in the *Pretty Tough* series present unique representations of female athletes in young adult fiction, any advances made are undermined by the series’ focus on female teamwork that fails to disrupt the male dominance of sport because the girls in these titles compete only against each other. Sexual division of sport serves to reinforce the idea that “men’s activities and men’s power are the real thing and women’s are not,” thus reaffirming women’s second-class status (McDonagh and Pappano, qtd. in Heinecken 37). Positioning female athletes as limited to participation in certain kinds of socially sanctioned “girls’ sports” closes off their access to opportunities for engaging in traditionally masculine pursuits—and thereby maintains the existing narrative and reality of power. By presenting “female achievement in a female-only realm, *Pretty Tough Sports*’ celebration of the empowered female athlete reflects a central conceit of postfeminist ideology” (Heinecken 37): that is, the notion that “because women have won the battle for equality there is no need to challenge masculine hegemony” (McRobbie

57). Our work builds upon this research tradition by taking up explicitly the positioning of fictional female athletes in traditionally male athletic spaces.

To select the novels, we identified contemporary young adult and middle grade titles on Alan Brown's *Sports Literacy Blog*, a comprehensive and regularly updated resource considered a standard in studies of young adult literature in the context of education. It is used widely by teachers and librarians as a source of recommendations for classroom use and library collections and thus influences the titles to which young people have access. We reviewed the book lists included for each sport featured on the blog (as of 12 March 2017), focusing on fictional titles that feature girls who play on boys' teams. We omitted titles that feature girls who love sports and/or sports-related statistics but do not engage with sport as a participatory activity, as well as titles that feature girls who play on girls' teams or those that do not address gender tensions explicitly (especially true for individual rather than team sports). Ten novels, all published between 2005 and 2015, were identified and analyzed. Each researcher read each book independently and noted moments in the novels when the female protagonist is being positioned by herself or another according to constructions of gender related to sport. The researchers then worked together to identify themes present across all of the titles. Given our commitment to equity and diversity in literature for adolescents, it is important for us to note that the texts analyzed contain only one protagonist of color, one protagonist who is socioeconomically disadvantaged, and no protagonists who challenge traditional gender binaries. Such limited representation reaffirms the troubling lack of diversity among characters within published sports fiction for adolescent readers and affirms the value in deconstructing these texts to offer critique.

### **Theory of Identity across Contexts**

Our textual analysis was guided by Peter Weinreich's navigational identity theory and the belief that identity is not a singular representation of the self, but a mediation of the totality of experiences and one's responses to those experiences within the context of the world. As Weinreich notes, "how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future" ("Identity" 26). This thinking encouraged us to consider how the move into a male-dominated sporting community might influence the identity construction of the female athletes.

Scholars who draw upon Weinreich's work often do so in the context of international studies with a focus on the experiences of migrant individuals and communities (see Adams, Van de Vijver, De Bruin, and Bueno Torres; Alfonso; and Kharusi). Weinreich describes migration as dependent upon a process of enculturation. He makes a distinction from acculturation, which "typically references migrants' movement towards and adoption of the mainstream 'receiving' culture," and argues that enculturation emphasizes "the agentic indi-

vidual incorporating cultural elements during socialization” (“Enculturation” 125). While we do not conflate the experiences of immigrants with those of the athletes under consideration here, Weinreich’s theory is particularly helpful in examining what might happen when individuals exist in more than one space simultaneously. In other words, applying these ideas to literary study, we might imagine that as characters move into a new community, they exist in a liminal space that invites consideration of who they are and who they might become. They do not consciously choose to accept or reject one identity over another but instead are influenced by elements of both communities when forming their own conceptions of self, conceptions that might comprise multiple, inconsistent understandings and values.

Navigational identity theory recognizes the influence of others as essential to the process of identity construction. When an individual repeatedly experiences incompatibilities with others or “when other people view oneself as a member of a social group in ways that are grossly discrepant from one’s own view of self as a member of that group” (“Enculturation” 125), a threatened identity might result. This disconnect can result in a vulnerability of identity on behalf of the individual who feels unable to reconcile the seemingly incompatible and improper appraisals of self. The individual might accept that another’s view has validity, experience a sense of disconnection and resulting shame, or reject another’s view and advocate for the self, thus defending the individual’s integrity of identity. Navigational identity theory also considers the influence of homeland experiences, particularly those lived during childhood, on constructions of identity. The theory suggests that a person’s early family and community identifications are not inherently stable (Weinreich, “Cross-cultural”) and that those who most successfully navigate multiple spaces take a more questioning stance regarding what they were taught by their parents, guardians, and elders.

In the context of the fictional titles examined here, as each female athlete moves into a sporting community inhabited solely by males, she exists in a liminal space in which she is an outsider to the existing norms and structures that define how participants are expected to behave. At the same time, however, she brings with her into this space her own gendered identities growing from her existence as both a female and a successful athlete. Applying navigational identity theory as a lens of analysis afforded us the opportunity to think about the movement of the protagonists into these liminal spaces not often open to them and how existing across gendered communities influences the further formation of their identities as athletic females. We can imagine, for example, the roles that other characters, both those who enter the lives of the protagonists upon movement into a new space and those with whom the protagonists share a connection across both spaces, play in shaping the identities of the protagonists. We can imagine, too, the influence of the authors who are creating a story grounded in certain assumptions, biases, and norms connected to the cultural community that they inhabit in the world outside of fiction. This gives rise

to consideration of how institutional structures and ways of doing, thinking, and being can find their way into stories and influence how the protagonists navigate the decisions they make (or deal with those made for them) as they exist between communities.

## **Navigations of Identity in the Novels**

Our work reveals that fictional female athletes, as they move into a male-dominated space, are not able to reconceptualize their identities beyond the realm of either/or binaries. Lisa McDermott examines the concept of “physicality,” asserting that the term has been inherently linked to masculinity and, as a result, to power. The labeling of sports or activities as “masculine” or “feminine” contributes to this masculine connotation of physicality, linking “masculine” sports with physical power and “feminine” sports with more aesthetic criteria. Female sexuality is also entwined with how women are portrayed in sports, and females who engage in historically “masculine” sports often have their sexuality questioned and are labeled as “unfeminine” (McDermott 15). Such labeling is problematic because it perpetuates hegemonic masculinity, which oppresses women and girls. We argue that this societally constructed masculine/feminine binary is evident in the positionings of the female protagonists in these texts. If the protagonists are athletes, they are also expected to be feminists, role models, or pioneers in order to resist this hegemonic masculinity; however, they cannot be feminine and must adhere to traditionally masculine expectations. They have to choose one identity or the other, athlete or female. Even when a choice does not have to be made, the rules of existing across the binary require the athletes to hold identities that fail to challenge gender expectations; when a young woman is permitted to be both an athlete and a girl, there are clear stipulations in place as to how this must be done.

### ***Positioned without Consent***

The protagonists grapple with the perceived and real responsibilities engendered by the decision to transition from one space to the other, responsibilities that they do not seek and accept or reject to varying degrees. The assumption seems to be that when these girls choose to take up the role of females on boys’ sports teams, they simultaneously (wittingly, willingly, or otherwise) take up the role of feminists, pioneers, or role models.

Several protagonists accept this role enthusiastically. Alex, the sixteen-year-old baseball player in Shannon Gibney’s *See No Color*, wants to hit a home run in the majors and do the things that her dad did not have the chance to do (65). DJ, the sixteen-year-old football player in *Dairy Queen* by Catherine Gilbert Murdock, is inspired to work harder when she realizes that she has never heard of a girl football trainer or a girl playing running back on a boys’ team (63, 131). Savannah, the aspiring jockey in Miranda Kenneally’s *Racing Savannah*, learns about the female jockeys who have come before her, and

“[her] heart slams into [her] chest” as she imagines herself in such a desirable position (132). Fran, the thirteen-year-old baseball player in *My Thirteenth Season* by Kristi Roberts, creates an elaborate imaginary world in which she is the first girl to play professional baseball and “already one of the greats” (14). She aspires to “break the sex barrier” in baseball (44), and she looks up to Jackie Robinson, another barrier breaker, as someone she admires and seeks to imitate (55–56). Casey, the seventeen-year-old racecar driver in *The Outside Groove* by Erik E. Eskilsen, enters racing to expose the sport as foolish and easy, to put the “testosterone-crazed idiots” in their place (74), but she uses her position to educate others (in an interview, she highlights the increasing presence of women in racing) and inspire young girls who note that “she kicks butt” (198).

With other protagonists, this automatic positioning as feminist, pioneer, or role model results in confusion, avoidance, or fear. When Tessa, the soon-to-be freshman high school player in Thatcher Heldring’s *The Football Girl*, makes the decision to play on the boys’ team, she names her intention as wanting to take control over her life and not follow the expectations of others. She is not trying to make a statement or be courageous; she just loves the game (185, 110). However, others offer their own explanations for her decisions, speculating that she wants to prove to the boys that she can play football, too. Given the attempts by others to name her intentions, Tessa is unsure about how she feels when she learns that her actions have inspired younger girls to play football. When one of them tells Tessa that she wants to follow in her footsteps, Tessa wonders if she should encourage the girl to “join the swim team or Girl Scouts or anything else besides football” (197). She ultimately accepts the responsibilities of this role and speaks up for girls who want to play. In making this decision, she is portrayed as admirable in her desire not to be the one who tells the girls that they cannot achieve what they want: “I got scared that whatever came out of my mouth now could be with her forever. What if she remembered me asking her *Are you crazy?* every time she wondered if she should try something new. . . . That’s my win” (200). Tessa’s “win” has less to do with her performance on the field than with her willing acceptance of the role bestowed upon her.

Maddie, the twelve-year-old baseball player in *No Cream Puffs* by Karen Day, claims that her novel role as a girl on a boys’ team automatically positions her as a spokesperson for female athletes. This positioning is complicated by the fact that Maddie sees her mother as a feminist, an identity that she does not want for herself (14, 19). She notes explicitly that she does not want to be a “trailblazer” like her mom, who is a lawyer (120–21). Maddie does not want to be known as a “crazy feminist”; she just wants to play (58, 74). In response to a newspaper article, in which she is called a “trailblazer,” she insists again that she “just wants to play baseball” (72). This language is used repeatedly as she discusses her motivation to play (82, 104). In a particularly memorable scene, Maddie’s grandmother explains to her that playing on a boys’ sports team has an inevitable result, whether or not she wants to accept it: “You’re rewriting the rules. And someday this won’t be a big deal, girls playing ball with boys. . .

. But I think that's the way these things happen. People do things because they want to, because they are good. Because, well, because they just should. Then all this happens" (141). Maddie has no choice in the matter, and her grandmother insinuates that turning away from this role would be an abdication of her responsibility.

At the outset of *The Girl Who Threw Butterflies* by Mick Cochrane, Molly, an eighth-grade baseball player, argues that she is not committed to "girl power" and insists that she is choosing to play simply because she likes the game better than she does softball; she is not trying to make a statement (7). Molly's best friend, Celia, however, positions her as a pioneer like Amelia Earhart. Even after Molly rejects the label of pioneer or activist (21–22), Celia persists and introduces her friend to examples of other females in baseball, other trailblazers, that she has found in her research (61, 64). When Molly makes the team and considers what this means for her as a female, she wonders about other women who play baseball and her mom who did not get to participate in sports because of her gender (98); some of these ideas are seeping into her psyche. However, in the end, Molly not only does not want to be another Amelia Earhart, but she is also scared of this label and what it might mean for her. As a result, her fearful positioning presents her as a successful female athlete who remains unwilling to accept the responsibility that comes with challenging gender norms.

Each of these protagonists is forced to negotiate how to respond to being positioned in an unsought and unanticipated role. Although Weinreich might argue that people choose whether and how to incorporate elements of competing communities into their identities within the liminal spaces that they inhabit, we argue that as these protagonists consider the norms, rules, and expectations of the new space they enter, they have no choice but to respond to the forces being brought to bear upon them. They might have agency in terms of how they choose to respond, but none over the placing of these expectations upon them in the first place.

Weinreich speaks, too, of how individuals who inhabit liminal spaces interact with others, who may share the individual's perspectives and values or be more aligned with those of the institutions of the receiving community. We argue that the protagonists of the novels in our study engage with other people whose visions of who they should be in this new space are tied to larger societal norms of who *girls* should be in general. Significantly, those protagonists who are the most willing to accept the roles placed upon them are described as the most admirable; they are confident, self-assured, and unafraid. Although such portrayals could be seen as a celebration of a feminist positioning (these girls are willing to fight for their fellow female athletes), they also can be read as a reminder of the fact that these girls, unlike their male counterparts, are expected to take up these new roles without their own permission. The advocacy of girls in sport is certainly desirable, but in these novels, this comes at the expense of individual choice or honoring of intention.



### **Forced to Choose**

Across all but two of the titles examined here, the female athletes understand themselves as having to make a choice; in order to play, they have to give something up, as they cannot be both athletic and feminine. McDermott conceptualizes physicality as “the physical expression of agency” (19), explaining that it is “through her physical agency that a woman learns to resist (or accommodate) the dominant structural constraints circumscribing her physically active, bodily experiences” (20). The protagonists have varying degrees of agency, and thus some “resist” and some “accommodate” these dominant structural constraints as they enter this new, male territory. Several protagonists give up elements of girlhood in choosing to be athletes. In *The Girl Who Threw Butterflies*, Molly positions herself at the outset of the novel as “just a girl who liked baseball” rather than softball, which she describes as “second class” and “girlish” (6–7). Molly positions herself as a more serious athlete than other girls because of her choosing to play a boys’ game. At a game later in the novel, we see this same commitment to being serious when she asserts herself as strong, shouting to her teammates on the field and no longer worrying about being “ladylike” (127). However, this same commitment to seriousness puts Molly in a position in which she has to choose between being a “real” athlete and a girl. During a game, she stops herself from lining up the bats and helmets because she does not want to be seen as “too domestic” by her teammates (148). She denies her sense of order because it could be negatively equated with so-called women’s work.

In *Catching Jordan* (Kenneally), Jordan, a senior football player, worries that if she starts “acting like a girl” by dating guys, her teammates will not take her seriously (4); that she cannot have pink fingernails or wear a dress out of fear that they will laugh (8, 11); and that she could never cry in front of them, regardless of how much she might be hurting (21). She criticizes herself for being emotional and sounding “like a girl” and wonders if people think there is something wrong with her because she is a female who wants to play football (149, 157). These worries are justified when she travels to a university on a recruiting visit and dons a pair of high-heeled shoes; as she notes, she dresses like a lady to fulfill university expectations (190). When she goes out for a pass in a playful moment with a potential future teammate, she stumbles and embarrasses herself (196–97). As a result of her choice of footwear (and her decision to present in a way deemed traditionally feminine), her athletic performance is compromised, evidencing her inability to hold multiple identities simultaneously.

In two of the novels, the acceptance of a singular identity takes the form of physical desexualization of the body. In *No Cream Puffs*, Maddie is embarrassed when a male classmate asks her how she can play basketball with her “boobs in the way” (3). In response, Maddie intentionally makes the decision to desexualize herself by minimizing her breasts in her baseball uniform; she does not want her female body to jeopardize her success (or others’ percep-

tions of her abilities) in the sport she has chosen. Throughout the book, there are several mentions of pain resulting from the tight leotard she wears, her decision to switch out the leotard for a bra and baggy t-shirt that conceal her breasts, and her wearing a bathing suit under her uniform for extra support (50, 61–62, 64, 79, 90). Similarly, in *My Thirteenth Season*, Fran is inspired when her aunt tells her a story about Mary Read, a young woman who was raised as a boy, joined the merchant marines in 1700, and signed on as a pirate when her ship was captured (62). As Fran explains, “No one ever told Mary Read she couldn’t be a pirate because she was a girl, because no one ever knew she *was* a girl” (64; orig. emphasis). Fran decides to follow Mary Read’s example and hide her identity in hopes of someday playing professional baseball and no longer having to deal with the harassment that comes with being a girl on a boys’ sports team. She envisions herself as “Frank Cullers” and begins creating a backstory for his character and gathering the items needed for her transformation: “Boy’s jeans, Boy’s T-shirts, Boys’ hat, etc.” (66–67). These protagonists cannot imagine themselves holding identities across two spaces; to achieve one, the other must go.

Conversely, several protagonists feel compelled to compromise their athletic identities so that they can maintain desired elements of girlhood. As they navigate both girlhood and male-dominated spaces, they work to determine an “acceptable” level of femininity for a girl playing on a boys’ sports team and willingly conform to gendered expectations for women and girls, holding to traditional notions of female identity. When Jo in Dawn Fitzgerald’s *Getting in the Game* takes a hard hit on the ice during hockey practice, she wants to continue the drill rather than pause to talk with her coach or take a break (2). She does not want other people to think that she is not strong enough to compete with the boys. However, at a later tournament match, she has the opportunity to make an impressive goal but instead chooses to pass the puck to Derek, her most critical teammate. Although Jo justifies her decision by citing the respect that Derek pays her in response, positioning her as a good teammate, the reality is that she demonstrates deference to a boy when she could have asserted her talents on the ice (70–71).

Maddie, the baseball player in *No Cream Puffs*, and DJ, the football player in *Dairy Queen*, both seem to challenge stereotypes of femininity when it comes to sport. While each is romantically interested in a boy playing the same sport that she is, both insistently defend the belief that girls are as strong and capable as boys when it comes to sport. Maddie declares to Tommy, the boy she likes, that “Girls can be as good as boys on skateboards” (173–74). While training Brian, the football player to whom she is attracted, DJ positions herself as both a faster runner than he is and as generally superior to him in the overall training session (80, 83). However, even though Maddie and DJ make a point of upholding the image of “female as athlete,” the presence of the boys in whom they take a romantic interest creates a desire not only to be seen as feminine off the field, but as attractive and acceptable on the field, in the eyes of these

boys, as well—thus undermining their identities as athletes and as girls. Maddie tries to show Tommy that she is “one of the girls,” and when she is called a tomboy, she wonders whether he can still like her if this is true (173–74). She also worries that if she strikes out Tommy, he will not look at her again, so she decides to throw a slow pitch that he can hit (46). In these instances, it seems that Maddie is under the impression that she cannot be both a strong star athlete and the recipient of a boy’s affection. DJ makes a similar decision when she chooses not to tell Brian about her playing on a rival football team because she does not want to mess up their potentially romantic relationship. Here, DJ assumes that her choice to play a sport will have a negative impact on such a relationship.

Several protagonists take this willingness to conform to gendered expectations to the extreme, quitting the sport that they had chosen to pursue. In *No Cream Puffs*, Maddie worries about the physical strength of the boys as they get older, which serves as a deterrent to her joining the next league up (113, 115). In the end, her passion for playing baseball wanes (208–09). After a particularly tough tackle, Tessa (*The Football Girl*) decides that football is not for her (190). Casey (*The Outside Groove*) puts her family first and lets her brother Wade defeat her so that he can have his dream of victory and pursue his career in auto racing (255). Although she positions the decision as one that frees her up to go to college (255), Casey sacrifices her own well-earned success for a man. And Alex (*See No Color*) chooses not to continue playing baseball because she does not want to; she does not care about the game (181). She describes baseball as an important part of her childhood identity but now that she is getting older, she needs to “let it go” (182). These girls might be allowed to play with the boys, but only temporarily; at some point, the novels suggest, they will need to learn their place and fondly remember the experience as something fun that they did in their youth.

Through Weinreich’s lens, the protagonists’ responses to concerns about overly feminine positionings reveal how identity construction involves the mediation of the totality of one’s experiences and one’s responses to those experiences in the context of the social world. For those protagonists who reject their feminine identity and position themselves as athletes only and not as girls, one could argue that this represents a form of identity loss; the girls behave in ways that involve denial, compromise, and erasure. In contrast, the decisions made by other protagonists to conform to gendered norms of girlhood in response to the worries of being too feminine could be seen as a form of reversion; the athletes behave in ways that are deferential, sacrificial, and, in some cases, ultimately weak, evoking echoes of traditional femininity. This process of identity construction is particularly noteworthy given the protagonists’ collective pride in being skilled enough to join the all-male teams, that each protagonist finds joy resulting from her embodied athletic identity, and that the quest for personal success and satisfaction serves as a driving force in the decision to play the sport each has chosen, a central conceit in sports fic-

tion that centers on male characters. Like the boys, these girls love to play, but given their ultimate decision to quit in the preservation of girlhood, readers might perceive this as a warning rather than an invitation to pursue their own sport-related passions.<sup>1</sup>

Existing as whole people with complex identities ultimately proves impossible for all of the protagonists presented here. This dilemma aligns with what Weinreich calls negative aspirations, or “shameful or distressing incidents involving oneself in the past, one’s currently unacceptable characteristics and behaviours (sic), and one’s anticipation of future unpalatable possibilities” (“Identity” 23). The protagonists’ inability to reconcile potentially incompatible appraisals of the self results in a vulnerability of identity. They fail to mediate successfully the discomfort that comes from a fragility of identity, making them less able to reject stressors and threats in order to “take appropriate action to defend [their] integrity” (“Identity” 68). These protagonists seem to give up on realizing the full range of who they are and who they could become.

### **Dual Identities, with Conditions**

The protagonists of Kenneally’s *Racing Savannah* and *Catching Jordan* come closer to forging identities that extend beyond an either/or binary. However, although these young women exist as both athletes and girls, this duality is allowed to occur only in romantic contexts and under certain limiting conditions, both of which ultimately reinforce binary thinking. The young women might not have to give up their athleticism or their femininity, but they can only hold on to both simultaneously by demonstrating an attraction to males, thus affirming a valuing of men as ideal relationship partners, and behaving in approved feminine ways centered on attracting and keeping such partners. In this way, they are affirming the connection between a girl’s physicality and her sexuality, which McDermott identifies as problematic. Savannah, a jockey who has a romantic interest in her mount’s owner, Jack, expresses a desire to be seen as both not “too feminine” (and thus athletic) and attractive to Jack in hopes of winning his affection. Early in the text, when Jack offers to escort Savannah to the manor house, she balks at his old-fashioned request and thinks, “How primitive” (6). However, she also expresses hope that he will think of her as desirable. She explains her decision to tell him about the horseshoe tattoo on her hip as growing not only from her attempt “to show him I’m not some little girl that can be pushed around,” but also from her desire for him to see her as “sexy” (80).

After a nasty fall from the horse she is training, Savannah does not want to “look like a complete pansy” and refuses to behave as others expect her to—that is, as a girl who is unable to handle the physical demands of this work (166). She knows that the male riders on the farm will not take her seriously if Jack carries her off the track, and she demands that he let her walk unaided. However, Jack ultimately undermines her independence by coming to her rescue

when Marcus, a wealthy teen whose family owns the local racetrack, attempts to assault her in the stable as she prepares for a race (268–69). When Savannah insists that she has the situation under control, having stomped on her attacker's foot, Jack holds Marcus down and invites her to give him her best shot. She chooses not to strike and instead reaches for Jack's hand, pulls him to his feet, and embraces him in an attempt to stop shuddering while fighting for her breath. Jack's move suggests that he is honoring her strength by inviting her to hurt her attacker, but in the end, what she really needs in this moment is his support. This same need for support extends to the fact that Jack has the power to determine whether or not she can compete in the upcoming race and thus enact her athletic identity. According to this narrative, then, Savannah is allowed to be athletic and feminine if these identities are present in the context of a romantic relationship and if the male continues to be positioned as dominant.

In *Catching Jordan*, Jordan has established her role as the starting quarterback on her school's football team. Despite feelings of attraction to Ty, a new quarterback in town—or in some cases, we argue, *because* of these feelings of attraction—she becomes almost defensive about maintaining her strong reputation as a skilled athlete on the team. She says that she won't allow Ty to control her or the team, “no matter how cute he is” (66). When it comes to Ty, Jordan feels that she cannot show emotion—which she calls “weakness”—because she is worried that he will question her ability on the field (198). However, while she wants Ty to see her as an athlete, she also wants him to think of her as a girl, a potential romantic partner (87). When she is with Ty off the field, she puts herself in the same category in which she puts most women—swooning over the sight of the romantic picnic that he has prepared for her (227). Jordan selectively diminishes her feminine identity while on the field to preserve her reputation as a skilled athlete, but embraces that identity in her interactions with potential suitors off the field. This could suggest that she is able to move across these gendered spaces more successfully than the other female protagonists in the novels analyzed here, but the dichotomy of place that determines where it is acceptable for Jordan to behave in traditionally female ways could also be read as failing to challenge hegemonic masculinities that assume that more female behaviors have no place on the field.

These two protagonists want to be taken seriously as athletes, including (and perhaps especially) by the young men in whom they have a romantic interest, and they also want to present an aura of femininity that encourages boys to notice them as potential romantic partners.

Weinreich considers the influence of one's childhood experiences on the process of identity development, arguing that those who are more inclined to question what they were taught by their parents, guardians, and elders and who are more situationalist in their framing of reality are better able to navigate liminal spaces. Although we do not know the full range of the childhood experiences of these two protagonists, we do know that as young people they attended school in the United States and are thus members of a cultural com-

munity significantly influenced by gender norms. As Mollie V. Blackburn and Jill M. Smith suggest,

Perhaps the most foundational way that schools enforce the institution of heteronormativity is through their establishment of rigid gender roles. From the time they enter school, students are systemically calibrated with “normal” characterizations of one of the two gender assignments, male or female. (627)

Blackburn and Smith go on to note that “gender segregation in schools can (and usually does) escape notice” (627). With this in mind, we could make the argument that these two female athletes continue to hold on to rather than question their feminine positioning in the society in which they live. They might adapt more successfully as they move from one community to another, but because of their failing to question the conditions that come with this shift, their success is defined by dominant norms and values.

### **Beyond Dualities to Intersectionalities**

As the female athletes in these novels move into male-dominated spaces, they are forced to reconceptualize their identities within either/or binaries that ultimately maintain gendered expectations and masculine connotations associated with the concept of physicality. They are positioned without their consent or forced to choose between being an athlete or being a girl; when any form of duality is allowed to exist, it is affirmed only under certain conditions. Being both an athlete and a girl is rendered nearly impossible, unless the female athlete is willing to play by the rules that align with privileged masculinities.

As we considered these findings resulting from the application of navigational identity theory, we began to think about how the persistence of the either/or binary across these texts suggests an oversimplification that fails to recognize the complexity of identity and the external forces that can validate or devalue the identities that people hold. To more fully understand the potential implications of these findings, we turn to work in intersectionality, which according to Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall originally focused attention on the “vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics. It exposed how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice” (787). Pioneering scholars such as Crenshaw have argued that people and bodies experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously that cannot be fully understood by examining each form singularly. Considering the intersection of racism and sexism in the lives of women of color, for example, cannot be fully understood by analyzing racism and sexism separately, as it is through these intersections (and those that include class, gender, sexuality, language) that we experience social, economic, and cultural expectations and regulations (Crenshaw 1242–43).

Although Crenshaw advances a theory that helps to capture the complexity of identity, especially as it relates to power and privilege, her work moves beyond analysis to action and includes attention to both uncovering and addressing oppression with the aim of praxis:

The goal was not simply to understand social relations of power, nor to limit intersectionality's gaze to the relations that were interrogated therein, but to bring the often hidden dynamics forward in order to transform them. . . . by interrogating the inter-locking ways in which social structures produce and entrench power and marginalization and by drawing attention to the ways that existing paradigms that produce knowledge and politics often function to normalize these dynamics. (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, and Tomlinson 311–12)

We argue that the novels analyzed here provide little, if any, consideration of intersectionality and thus reaffirm rather than explore, potentially critique, or offer alternatives to structures that contribute to the oppression of people who hold multiply marginalized identities. The protagonists hold class, gender, and racial identities that privilege them and that go unnamed and unquestioned, thus making the either/or binary easier to maintain. As a collective, the novels privilege whiteness by not naming it, privilege class by not unpacking the fact that these athletes have access to financial resources that allow them to participate in whatever sport they would like, and privilege heterosexual norms by suggesting that attraction to a heterosexual male is the only option.

Two of the novels, Gibney's *See No Color* and Kenneally's *Racing Savannah*, have the capacity to serve as potential exceptions in that they name more than one identity in positioning their respective female protagonists as black and as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Although both novels raise these identity markers as viewed by society through a deficit lens, race and class are explained away or diminished in importance by the end of each novel. In *See No Color*, Alex articulates that she chooses to stop playing baseball simply because she has grown up. However, at earlier points in the novel, we see her struggling to understand her identities as an adopted black child in a white, affluent family whose physical body (and related athletic performance) is changing as she matures. The rationale that underpins her decision to stop playing seems simplistic and disconnected from Alex as we have come to know her over the duration of the story. Similarly, Savannah, at several points in her story, expresses both frustration at not having the financial resources that seem to make life easier for others, particularly those she meets while living on the ranch where her father works, and pride in her hard-working father and appreciation for an upbringing that values a seeming simplicity. However, these complications are forgotten when, as noted above, she is rescued by Jack, the wealthy son of the ranch owner; the fairy-tale ending asserts his role as a provider upon whom she can depend, thus altering her class status and explaining away any lingering concerns about money. In the end, the protagonists must choose—girl or

athlete. Erasing the complications that come with intersecting identities makes this choice seem easy.

The lack of intersectionality across these titles affirms the acceptance of normalcy and silencing that can come with the existence of a hegemony that resists discourse. Although the female protagonists take great pride in their athletic identities and ability to compete with the boys, they continue to be positioned in ways that minimize their success if they hold to their girlhood subjectivities. The females who either accept their positioning or give up some element of their athletic identities in a move to be more feminine are rendered more positive in their representation, thus reaffirming the idea that good girls remain quiet and do what they are told. In her intersectional analysis of maternity across several contemporary young adult dystopian novels, Meghan Gilbert-Hickey argues that the fictional girls, when they become mothers, “have only one option: to enact the kind of white, middle class heteronormative maternity that renders them culturally safe via silent passivity” (i). The female athletes in the novels we discuss generally meet dominant norms—all but one are white, all but one are socioeconomically privileged, and all are cisgender and straight. These norms go unnamed and serve to affirm the membership of these girls in the community of power. Given this privileged identity and the assumption that those in power wish to stay in power, the choice to accept their assigned positioning as girls rather than as athletes does not feel misguided, and they are, in fact, rewarded for this expected, conforming behavior. Their decision to comply reflects their own “silent passivity.”

For the few female protagonists in our sample who are given greater space in which to be both athletes and girls, their success remains contingent on their willingness (witting or not) to conform to certain ways of being both athletic and female. When such duality is allowed to exist, it is affirmed only under certain conditions. Because the protagonists exist as members of the dominant culture, they exist within the parameters of expectation. Such conditions or parameters or checks on the limits of their influence keep the protagonists “culturally safe” and stifled in their ability to challenge inequities (Gilbert-Hickey i). Namely, in the move to this new space, the female athlete is held captive to gendered norms and expectations in that her athleticism is permitted only if she remains attractive to heterosexual men (see Aapola, Gonick, and Harris; Dworkin and Messner; and Gill)—and, we add, if she seeks out heterosexual men. We agree with Michael D. Giardina and Jennifer L. Metz that “the post-modern female athlete who is both ‘girly and feminine’ can thus be read as ‘obeying’ those in power by meeting a kind of sanctioned athletic femininity, compatible with a commercial media system that privileges girls and women who stay within heteronormative boundaries” (qtd. in Whiteside, Hardin, and DeCarvalho 419). The protagonists are granted permission to participate in this new gendered space but are denied agency over the terms of agreement, thus affirming and maintaining the existing power structure. The expectation, according to Heinecken, “seems to be that girls can be competitive on the court,



but they need to model traditional femininity off the court” (34). They can play as long as they continue to know and accept their place.

In their 2017 analysis of young adult dystopias, Lisa Manter and Lauren Francis posed the following question: “If ‘dystopian fiction has excellent tools for social commentary,’ as Paolo Bacigalupi observes in his article ‘Straight-Laced Dystopias,’ then why does romance remain off the table as part of the social critique?” (285–86). We could pose a similar question given the fact that the young adult sports fiction analyzed here features girls who challenge existing barriers erected to keep females from participating in sports historically reserved for male athletes, yet, despite the potential for social critique that could come from this structural positioning of girls in boys’ spaces, such critique is largely absent. Intersectional thinking around this contradiction makes us wonder about not only what is gained but also what could be jeopardized when intersecting identity elements become uncovered and potentially implicated in novels read by adolescent readers, how these texts’ tendency to avoid naming intersecting identities in the development of character reflects a pervasive normalizing of dominant culture, and what impact this might have on the young people who engage with these stories.

We agree with Jasmine Z. Lester’s claim that “One way to understand societal problems is to critically interrogate the ways certain systems of oppression are perpetuated. Examining means of cultural communication, such as media and literature, can help shed light on the ways certain discourses are upheld or challenged. Problems are most solvable when they are critically analyzed and understood” (261). And we agree that such analysis requires the “unlearning of certain socialized beliefs that assign normative identities (white, able-bodied, upper middle class, heterosexual, procreative, cisgender, male) the most value to the serious detriment of nonnormative identities” (261). Giving readers novels that purport to allow them to see strong and subversive young women, but which also privilege other elements of their fictional identities, paints an unrealistic picture that caters to dominant values. By not unpacking the privileges and oppressions associated with the protagonists’ intersecting identities, institutional structures of power remain reinscribed and thus go unchanged.

As Rosalind Gill argues, young adult literature “is dominated by heterosexual white characters and stories that placate the middle class and enforce dominant culture” (80). Given the lack of diverse representation of characters across the titles that we have analyzed, girls without money, girls of color, and LGBTQ+ girls do not get invited to play the game; their intersectional identities ban them from the field, court, stadium, or racetrack. As evidenced in our analysis, even titles that seem to possess the promise of an alternative view fail to fully implicate dominant cultural norms; these novels lure readers with the promise of pushing bounded gender norms when, in fact, they actually serve to reinforce them, particularly through the failure to identify and consider intersecting identity elements.

Given that our analysis reveals that not every novel about girls in sport achieves liberatory aims, we invite consideration of what the fictional validation of either/or thinking around constructions of identity might mean for adolescent readers. While exposure to stories that feature girls who strive to navigate traditionally male athletic spaces—and who possess the requisite skills for doing so—could be seen as fundamentally valuable in an attempt to shift the narrative around what is possible for girls in the world of sport, exposure is not enough. At first blush, the novels under consideration here are seemingly powerful in their suggestion that girls can do anything that boys can, but the reality—in these stories and in the world of readers—is that this is just not true given the existing structures of power. By not complicating this reality and challenging these structures, the novels give a false sense of what is possible but fail to open spaces for active critique and consideration of how this might be changed. Readers deserve books that show them not only what is but what could be, especially when these books attempt to situate characters in unexpected roles that have the capacity to challenge norms in deeply felt ways that extend well beyond the page and invite critical examination of other media and the lived experiences of youth athletes.

## Notes

1. For more on how these protagonists, in the authorial construction of their identities, struggle to navigate the male world of sport because they are unable to avoid internalizing the perspectives of those in positions of power, please see Glenn and King-Watkins, “Fictional Girls Who Play with the Boys.”

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