

# **Athlete as Agitator, Assaulter, and Armor: Sports, Identity, and Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature**

**SHELBY BOEHM**

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

**KATHLEEN COLANTONIO-YURKO**

SUNY BROCKPORT

**KATHLEEN OLMSTEAD**

SUNY BROCKPORT

**HENRY “CODY” MILLER**

SUNY BROCKPORT

*An increasing number of young adult literature features male athletes sexually assaulting female classmates. These books can be generative spaces for examining relationships between athletic identities and sexual violence. This manuscript provides an analysis of six YAL novels addressing sexual assault: Moxie (Mathieu, 2017), The Nowhere Girls (Reed, 2017), The Way I Used to Be (Smith, 2017), Some Boys (Blount, 2014), Asking For It (O’Neill, 2016), All the Rage (Summers, 2015). The authors examine athlete identities and figured worlds in the six titles and then present teaching suggestions to investigate in English classrooms athlete identities and sexual assault.*

There has been an increase in the publication of young adult literature (YAL) that focuses on sexual assault as a key element of the narrative (Altrows, 2019), if not as the central conflict in the literary work. Moore (2018) labels this growing number of texts a “sub-genre of sexual assault narratives” (p. 145) and includes the frequently taught and studied young adult title *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999) as well as newer titles such as *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* by E.K. Johnston (2017).

Within the sub-genre Moore identified lies an even narrower sub-genre in which sexual assault is committed by an athlete, thus exposing the sexual violence often entwined in sports culture and raising questions about the ways athletic identity shapes the aftermath of assault. In this segment of the sub-genre, the identity of an athlete is used to agitate potential victims, assault young women, and then act as armor against potential accountability.

In this paper, we use the term “survivor” for those who have experienced sexual violence in order to uplift and push back against further disempowerment associated with the term “victim” (Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2020).

This surge of sports-related YA novels may be reflective of the increased public awareness of sexual violence perpetrated by male athletes. Perhaps one of the most noted instances was the assault of Chanel Miller by Brock Turner, a celebrated Stanford University swimmer. In her memoir, *Know My Name*, Miller (2019) recounts her publicized sexual assault that took place after she was unconscious at a party. Her case was widely covered by the media, in part because her assailant was a noted collegiate swimmer who only served six months for attacking her. Chanel Miller’s witness statement was read by millions across the country: “How fast Brock swims does not lessen the severity of what happened to me, and should not lessen the severity of his punishment” (Miller, 2019, p. 355). In this article, we consider how male characters in the sub-genre of sexual assault young adult literature often mirror Brock Turner figures, “nice young men” who embody the all-American trope of the “golden boy”—popular, well-liked, athletic White men, whose sports-god status gives them unspoken and spoken power in schooling spaces.

Of course, we are not suggesting that all athletes are assaulters or that sports participation automatically leads to sexual assault. In fact, sociological debates persist about whether participation in male sports causes higher rates of sexual violence (Crosset, 1999; Kimble et. al., 2010; McMahan, 2015). Rather than debating the question, Crosset (1999) suggests scholars who study sports examine how “team members, coaches, or people associated with a team promote behavior that encourages [sexual assault] or how some programs allow potential rapists or batterers to feel comfortable” (p. 249). Such examination provides insight into the systemic ways sports settings breed sexual violence. For instance, less than 50% of students in sports management programs at the university level learn about sexual harassment and sexual assault prevention (Taylor & Hardin, 2017). Working with a small sample, McMahan (2015) found that high school students who participated in sports were more likely to believe rape myths and less willing to speak out against other athletes who assault

women due to the culture of loyalty sports teams breed. Understanding the ways athletic identity and the culture of sports construct how male athletes can perpetuate sexual violence offers new levels of analysis for young adult literature. Instead of questioning *if* athletes in young adult literature commit sexual assault at higher rates than non-athletes, we consider *how* the identity of athlete frames act of sexual violence within school communities presented in the texts we examined.

We also must consider the political climate and space in which this manuscript is written. In May 2020, the United States education secretary Betsy DeVos announced a revised Title IX policy that loosened the requirements for sexual assault reporting for colleges and universities (Negly, 2020). Survivor advocates rapidly and unanimously condemned the amended policy due to the mandates that schools “allow direct cross-examination, as well as a narrower definition of sexual harassment and permission for schools to use a standard of evidence seen as more favorable to those who are accused of harassment or assault” (North, 2020). DeVos claimed the altering was necessary to protect students accused of assault, but feminist lawyers noted that the policy change protects athletes accused of assault as well as coaches and athletic directors; in other words, the policy change “protects everyone but survivors” (Needham, 2020). The new legal landscape we find ourselves in only heightens the importance of analyzing athletic identity in terms of sexual assault.

In the following article, we examine six young adult novels in order to investigate the ways that male sports characters who sexually assault females rely on the constructed identity of athlete and the figured world of school sports to enact sexual violence. Drawing on theories of identity (Gee, 200/2001; Moje & Luke, 2009) and figured worlds (Holland et. al., 1998), we analyze *Moxie* by Jennifer Mathieu (2017), *The Nowhere Girls* by Amy Reed (2017), *The Way I Used to Be* by Amber Smith (2017), *Some Boys* by Patty Blount (2014), *Asking For It* by Louise O’Neill (2016), and *All the Rage* by Courtney Summers (2015). Our research was guided by the following questions: How are athlete identities presented in these texts? And, how do school athletics operate as figured worlds? Finally, we consider classroom implications for teaching these texts in English classrooms.

## OUR POSITIONALITIES

All four authors come from English language arts backgrounds at various levels. Shelby, Kate, and Cody all taught high school English for several years while Kathy taught elementary school. Kate, Kathy, and Cody are all assistant professors at the same college in the northeast while Shelby is a doctoral student in the southeast. Every author is a cisgender White educator with Shelby, Kate, and

Kathy being female and Cody being male. Shelby, Kate, and Kathy identify as heterosexual while Cody is a queer educator.

Our own experiences shape the “biography of the research question[s]” of this article (Fine, 2017, p. vii). As high school teachers, we witnessed the ways athletics can shape power dynamics within a school. We’ve seen how the identities of “golden boy” and “all-American boy” serve as an aegis against accountability for male athletes who cannot respect the boundaries of their fellow classmates. As mothers, Kate and Kathy worry about the social and political landscape in which their daughters have to navigate during their secondary schooling careers. Our identities as educators and parents galvanize us to construct English language arts classrooms as spaces where we can imagine and create a more just world. Like many scholars, we believe young adult literature can serve as a vehicle to facilitate such learning.

## **SEXUAL ASSAULT, SPORTS, AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE**

In the following literature review, we discuss relevant scholarship and writing that has informed our understandings of the representations of athletes in sexual assault literature. Specifically, we situate our work within scholarship that addresses sexual assault in young adult literature and scholarship that attends to the role of sports in YAL. Locating our article at the intersections of those two fields allows us to consider how the identity of athlete operates in perpetuating sexual violence and how that identity often shields athletes from accountability measures. These two fields are both columns in the broader scholarship on English education, which includes teaching suggestions and classroom implications. We attend to such implications in the final section of our article.

### ***SEXUAL ASSAULT YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE***

There exists an emerging body of literature that addresses the sub-genre of sexual assault (Moore, 2018) YAL as an avenue to engage in meaningful literary analysis with students as well as social critique. For example, Alsup (2003) calls for young adult literature and texts such as *Speak* to be widely read in classroom spaces as a way to address adolescence and engage in a critical examination of the text analysis process. Park’s (2012) study of middle school girls reading *Speak* reveals that many adolescents wrestle with their own understandings of sexual violence in young adult literature. Similarly, Pattee (2004) argues for novels like Atkins’ *When Jeff Comes Home* to be considered as it addresses both male and female survivorship in YAL. In the same vein as this scholarship, we argue that teachers and scholars should use YAL in schools to address and

understand sexual violence in texts (Alsup, 2003; Cleveland & Durand, 2014; Colantonio-Yurko, Miller, & Cheveallier, 2018; Jackett, 2007; Malo-Juvera, 2014; Park, 2012; Ulaby, 2016). We expand on existing scholarship by considering the ways athlete identity is addressed in these novels about sexual violence.

### ***YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE, SPORTS, AND THE ADDRESSING OF SOCIAL INEQUITIES***

Sports often replicate the social and cultural inequities of the contexts they are centered in. This reality positions sports as a space ripe for analyzing and addressing socio-cultural inequities. Rodesiler (2017b) argues that sports-based texts have the potential to “fuel critical explorations of issues such as, among others, domestic violence, sexual assault, racism, homo-phobia, and the objectification of women” (p. 39). In fact, Rodesiler (2017a) sees a unique role sports-based texts can play in challenging “inequity-producing power relations by drawing from and reconsidering familiar points of reference” due to their popularity (p. 17). Young adult literature focusing on sports offers opportunities to address racism in mascots and sexism through gender pay inequities and representation, among other topics of social inequity. In other words, the range of social inequities that plague our country are often addressed in sports-oriented young adult literature and can make for critical conversation starters in English classrooms.

Young adult literature that features sports prominently can also be sites to critically analyze gender norms, expression, and sexuality. For instance, Sieben (2016a, 2016b) and Cramer (2016) argue for unearthing heteronormative and gender restrictive ideologies in LGBTQ young adult literature that feature queer athletes. Decades earlier, Kriegh and Kane (1997) suggested that female characters who play sports are marginalized with homophobic taunts and attacks due to the transgressive nature of women playing in the male-dominant arena of sports. Glenn and King-Watkins (2019) found that sports-related young adult titles that center female protagonists who play sports alongside male characters require female characters to separate themselves from other females in order to succeed in the traditional male space of sports. However, this separation does not grant female characters full access to the male spaces. In other words, female characters' existence in male-dominant sports do not change the structure of sports institutions; rather, they require change among the female characters. Conversely, Heinecken (2015) outlines how the young adult series *Pretty Tough* counters stereotypes about girls in sports and offers portrayals of community among young women who play sports. This emerging scholarship offers insight into how

sports-related young adult literature can help us consider ways to challenge gender and sexual inequities.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the past decade, scholars have turned to identity as an analytic lens for the study of young adult literature (Alsup, 2010; Beach, Johnston, & Thein, 2015; Bean & Moni, 2003; Engles & Kory, 2013; Fredricksen et al., 2019; Glenn & King-Watkins, 2019; Hadaway, Young, & Ward, 2012; Thomas, 2011). In this article, we draw on theories of identity to analyze what it means to be an athlete in selected young adult titles in order to consider how characters employ social and political power in certain school-based contexts, namely after being accused of sexual violence or assault. Additionally, we incorporate theories of figured worlds to understand how athlete identity contributes to a greater societal culture of school athletics, which includes sexism and overt sexual harassment in the young adult titles. Taken together, these theoretical frameworks can illuminate how athletes, while accused of sexual violence in the young adult novels, utilize their identity status as a form of protection at the expense of the survivor's personhood.

### *ATHLETE IDENTITY*

By considering identity as socially enacted, the presentation of athlete identity in YAL can be further theorized. In their study of literacy research, Moje and Luke (2009) found three assumptions about the way identity is utilized: (a) identity is socially constructed, (b) identity is not singular, but rather plural as a person develops, and (c) identity is recognized by others. For instance, the athlete is socially constructed through school community acceptance. In fact, athletes often receive public acknowledgment through interactions with school leaders (i.e., administrators, teachers, coaches), school announcements, or newspaper articles that further their individual and collective influence. Although athlete identities are multiple and vary according to the context (e.g., Little League versus professional sports), athletes are often always recognized through outward signifiers (e.g., letterman jackets, jerseys) or by public belonging to an established in-group (i.e., sports team membership).

Gee (2000/2001) defines four ways to view identity in education research: N-Identity (nature), I-Identity (institution), D-Identity (discourse), and A-Identity (affinity). In her study of middle school student identity development during a book club discussion, Scherff (2012) utilized Gee's (2000/2001) concept of identity as a way to analyze student responses. In this article, we think about

the identity of characters positioned as athletes in selected YAL novels using Gee's (2000/2001) identity theory. Like Gee (2000/2001), we view identity as a process of enactment, where individuals employ contrived characteristics as a way to negotiate power in certain contexts.

**TABLE 1**

*Gee's (2000/2001) concept of identity applied to our work*

| PROCESS  | POWER          | SOURCE OF POWER            | EXAMPLE                        |   |
|--|----------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Nature identity:</b> a state                | developed from | forces                     | in nature                      | People are "born athletes" (i.e., a natural athletic talent)  |
| <b>Institution identity:</b> a position        | authorized by  | authorities                | within institutions            | School community leaders (e.g., administrators, teachers, coaches)                                    |
| <b>Discourse identity:</b> an individual trait | recognized in  | the discourse/<br>dialogue | of/with "rational" individuals | Characteristics (e.g. masculine, strong, moral, "all-American"); Dialogue (e.g., gendered harassment) |
| <b>Affinity identity:</b> experiences          | shared in      | the practice               | of "affinity groups"           | Membership in-group (e.g., sports team); Appearance (e.g., letterman jackets, jerseys)                |

Gee (2000/2001) views identity as "a social and political process" of recognition by others (p. 111). In this manner, Gee (2000/2001) argues that "people can accept, contest, and negotiate identities" strategically to determine how society views them (p. 109). Considered in a school community context, individuals may employ athlete discourse as a way of "being recognized as a certain kind of person in a given context" (Gee, 2000/2001, p. 99). For example, athletes capitalize on their positionality when accused of wrongdoings by adult figures in positions of power (e.g., principals, coaches). These moments in the novels often show the athlete characters implying membership to a moral high ground of sports, where a guilty accusation would result in missed sports practice or worse, a negative view of the school community. We adapted Gee's (2000/2001) concept of identity to form reading questions to analyze characters presented as athletes in selected young adult titles. Our analysis of athlete identity is discussed below.

TABLE 2

*Athletes in YAL reading questions based on Gee's (2000/2001) identity domains*

| IDENTITY DOMAIN                                | READING QUESTION  |
|--|---|
| <b>Nature identity:</b> a state                | How are athletes/their talent discussed by peers and adults?  |
| <b>Institution identity:</b> a position        | How do school leaders interact with athletes? How are athletes influential in school community contexts?                                  |
| <b>Discourse identity:</b> an individual trait | What characteristics do athletes possess? How do athletes speak to and interact with other characters (e.g., peers, adults) in the novel? |
| <b>Affinity identity:</b> experiences          | What experiences do athletes share? How do athletes display in-group membership?  |

Ultimately, these individual experiences of athletes contribute to a larger, socially constructed system of identity known as a “figured world” of sports membership in the school (Holland et al., 1998).

### ***SCHOOL ATHLETICS AS A FIGURED WORLD***

When enacting the identity of an athlete, individuals who are recognized as such contribute to a higher-level identity category discussed in identity theory as a “figured world.” These figured worlds are a “socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). Although athletes enact their own unique identities dependent on the context, these identities ultimately contribute to a larger societal construction of what it means to participate in school athletics through an established figured world that “suppl[ies] the contexts of meaning for actions” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 60). Accordingly, individuals within the figured world of school athletics must follow a set of established rules that govern their participation and thus identity recognition and protection as an athlete. For instance, athlete characters accused of sexual assault in the young adult titles we analyzed receive sympathy and credibility from school leadership, who simultaneously question and effectively minimize the lived experiences of survivors (who are also students at the schools). In short, individuals enacting the identity of an athlete often perpetuate and maintain their status by following a culture specific to sports (i.e., the figured world of school athletics). In our analysis below, we look at school athletic spaces as figured worlds.

## THE BOOKS

We draw on feminist philosopher Kate Manne's (2017) work defining misogyny, where she discusses what she calls "herasure"—the erasure of the female experience of sexual violence, which further silences and oppresses female survivors (p. 209). With this in mind, we aimed to center the experiences of female protagonists in selected YA novels for this article. Therefore, all the novels we include in this manuscript are narrated through the eyes of the protagonists who are survivors of sexual violence or harassment—none of the texts are written from the point of view of the athlete. In each of these texts, the survivors are often middle class, White, cisgender females from suburban communities. The perpetrators in the novels are all White, cisgender, male athletes who have social power and clout because of their affiliations with sports in school settings. Additionally, many of them embody the all-American athlete persona and are well-liked in school. In our focused search for relevant literature for our analysis, we looked for novels that included the following criteria: a key component of the plot addressed sexual violence; the school community setting addressed sports culture; and the sexual offenders were athletes. Our criteria and search resulted in the following young adult titles: *Moxie* (Mathieu, 2017), *The Nowhere Girls* (Reed, 2017), *The Way I Used to Be* (Smith, 2017), *Some Boys* (Blount, 2014), *Asking for It* (O'Neill, 2016), and *All the Rage* (Summers, 2015). The novels are summarized below.

### ***MOXIE***

Vivian attends high school in East Rockport, a Texas town that revolves around football. It seems the football players can do no wrong—not when they wear offensive T-shirts, not when they sexually harass and assault girls in the hallways of the school, and not when they attempt to rape girls at weekend parties. The school principal's son is the main offender, and complaints about his assault go uninvestigated. Vivian decides to create a girls' club, Moxie, dedicated to equality and fair treatment. The Moxie girls take action and use social media to fight back and stand up to their sexist principal and school community.

### ***THE NOWHERE GIRLS***

Three unlikely friends join forces to become the Nowhere Girls, a group of anonymous teenagers who band together to take a stand against the sexist culture at their local high school. The book's narrative weaves in the online writings of a highly sexist figure, AlphaGuy451. In one passage, AlphaGuy451 writes, "Have they ever stopped to think that maybe if they say no all the time, guys

will stop taking no for an answer?" (Reed, 2017, p. 292). Fed up, the Nowhere Girls vow to fight back against such sexist thinking and rhetoric that permeates their school and community. One of the novel's protagonists, Grace, learns that her new home was once inhabited by Lucy Moynihan. She is outraged to learn that Lucy was run out of town after she was raped at a party. Together with the Nowhere Girls, Grace works to bring justice to Lucy.

### ***THE WAY I USED TO BE***

Eden has always been the shy younger sister of basketball star Caelin. On and off the court, Caelin and his best friend and teammate Kevin are inseparable. During winter break of Eden's freshman year, Kevin enters her bedroom uninvited, rapes Eden, and threatens her into silence by promising that he will kill her if she tells anyone. As Kevin leaves her room, he tells her no one would ever believe her anyway. The book follows the aftermath of the violent assault across Eden's four years of high school, where she struggles with victim-blaming, substance abuse, and dysfunctional relationships as a result of her attack.

### ***SOME BOYS***

High school student Grace attends a party with some friends from school one night. Everyone is drinking and having a good time until Grace is found unconscious in a field, bleeding and saying that Zac raped her. Later that night, Zac begins damage control by uploading a video of Grace from that night to counteract the accusation. Throughout the novel, Zac continues to perpetuate rape culture through his interactions with Grace and treatment of other female characters. She is ostracized by her classmates: "There's the look I was waiting for, the look that never let me forget what I am. Loser. Liar. Slut" (Blount, 2014, p. 64).

### ***ASKING FOR IT***

Emma O'Donovan is a beautiful and popular girl at her school in her small Irish town. Like her peers, she enjoys going to parties, flirting, and socializing with her friends. One evening Emma drinks a lot of alcohol and is encouraged by a group of male classmates to take pills. The last thing Emma remembers after she takes the drug is a boy Dylan saying, "Did someone say something about another party?" (O'Neill, 2016, p. 105). When Emma wakes up on her parents' lawn, she is sunburned, bruised, and has no recollection of how she ended up dumped outside while passed out. Slowly it is revealed that Emma was raped and assaulted by multiple boys in her class, some the very children she grew up with. Her assault is posted on social media for the entire town to see. The reader must bear witness to Emma's trauma, social isolation, and vilification in the media.

### ***ALL THE RAGE***

High school student Romy Grey is tortured by classmates after she is raped by the son of the town sheriff, who is known as a *nice* boy on the football team. Romy is tormented both by girls who scorn her as a liar and attention seeker and by boys who insist she wants it, assaulting her both physically and verbally with taunts like, “This too close for you Romy...gonna cry rape?” (Summers, 2015, p. 46). The novel follows Romy as she struggles through repeated acts of dehumanization by the school athletes and their fans.

## **EMBEDDED IDENTITIES: EXAMINING ATHLETE REPRESENTATION IN SEXUAL ASSAULT NOVELS**

As we deconstructed the six young adult novels described above, we first worked to answer the question: How are athlete identities presented in these texts? Our analysis revealed three distinct but related athlete identities: the *athlete as agitator*, the *athlete as assaulter*, and the *athlete as armor*. We elaborate on our analysis below.

### ***THE ATHLETE AS AGITATOR***

Throughout the texts we examined, we noticed a pattern of athlete portrayal that may best be described as the *athlete as agitator*: a figure who actively engages in sexual harassment and verbal abuse aimed at the young women in the agitator’s world. Sometimes this harassment is public. For example in the book *Moxie* (Mathieu, 2017), when a girl gives her opinion in class, she is greeted with a hostile environment where a boy yells out, “Make me a sandwich,” (p. 2) prompting other males to snicker. Vivian, the main character, reflects on the interaction: “...it’s Mitchell Wilson being an asshole, cheered on by his douchebag football friends” (p. 2). Later, frustrated, Vivian explains this to her grandparents, “It’s just like this stupid joke the boys use to try to say girls belong in the kitchen and they shouldn’t have opinions” (p. 14). This is an example of Gee’s (2000/2001) D-Identity (discourse), as the athletes participate in gendered harassment affirmed by the in-group. Vivian also recounts agitator athletes, the football players in this case, frequently wearing denigrating t-shirts to class like “*Great Legs—When Do They Open?*” (p. 28) and “*Free Breathalyzer Test Blow Here*” (p. 91) with a big red arrow pointing to the wearer’s “junk” (p. 91). These t-shirts display public belonging through A-Identity (affinity), as the athletes share a common experience of agitating peers by wearing sexist discourse.

At other times, the athlete agitator harasses his victims outside of class, in private or even anonymously by using intimidation tactics and threats to instill fear. For example in Summers' (2015) *All the Rage*, "Slit" is graffitied on Romy's car. Romy reflects she was branded *Slit*, "Because slut was too humanizing...a slit's not even a person" (p. 38). Similarly, in the novel *Some Boys* (Blount, 2014), the protagonist Grace is raped by the most popular lacrosse player, Zac. She laments that it does not matter what she says or that Zac has posted a doctored video of her assault, "All that matters is *Zac said Grace is a slut*" (p. 41). He perpetuates his role as athlete as agitator by accusing Grace of bothering *him* and harassing *him* as another form of his harassment and instigation. Classmates follow Zac's "agitator" cues by calling Grace names and shunning her. Grace is routinely verbally harassed, at one point cornered by other lacrosse players and pushed around, and even physically intimidated. Grace notes that Zac wants "disciples" and through his power as a leader, Zac is able to embody the athlete as "agitator" identity by becoming someone who engages in sexual violence while encouraging his peers to engage in verbal and sexual harassment, as well as physical intimidation. In both of these novels, the athlete characters are given credibility through their I-Identity (institution), where their school communities have positioned athletes as characters of lawful good. For example, even after football players face multiple allegations of sexual violence, the football coach in *The Nowhere Girls* (2017) states: "These girls are accusing them of awful things, stuff I know my guys wouldn't do. These are good guys" (p. 371). The survivor's narrative is disregarded as a result of the athlete's institutional power.

### ***THE ATHLETE AS ASSAULTER***

In these YA sexual assault novels, we see that harassment and verbal abuse often escalates into physical and sexual violence perpetuated by the *athlete assaulters*. For example in *Moxie* (Mathieu, 2017), the athlete assaulters play "bump and grab," which is purposefully assaulting girls in the hallways of the school by grabbing asses, snapping bras, or fondling breasts without consent. This shared experience of physical assault and harassment represents the athlete's A-Identity (affinity). Similarly, violence takes center stage in *All the Rage* (Summers, 2015), where Romy is raped by the athlete assaulter, Kellan Turner, the sheriff's son. She becomes an outcast at school, shunned by the collective social and political power of the athletes because she "makes trouble" for the athlete assaulter. The assaulter's identity as an athlete affirms his actions as a result of institutional power (I-Identity) that refuses to question or condemn the attack. Later that year, the athlete's teammates and friends continue their abuse. They drug Romy with GHB, humiliate her by taking

photos of her passed out with “RAPE ME” scrawled on her stomach, and post the photos with the tag “#dumbdrunkbitches” (p. 138). Finally, Romy is dumped half-naked, battered and delirious as if her very existence is inconsequential to the athlete assaulters. She is found by police, lying in a gravel street, hours after her family reports her missing.

In *Asking for It* (O’Neill, 2016), Emma’s assault by a group of popular athletes in her small town becomes a public event ripe for commentary and critique. Unfortunately, due in part to the assaulters’ positionality as athletes with power in the school community (I-identity) and thus credibility, Emma is blamed for her own rape because of her appearance and personality (i.e., flirtatious, attractive, fun to party with). Whereas her assaulter becomes more visible and virtually admired for the way he navigates the accusations, Emma becomes invisible within her school community as a result of emotional and physical abuse after the rape.

### ***THE ATHLETE AS ARMOR***

The third identity we uncovered in the texts was that of the *athlete as armor*, in which the identity of athletes shields athletes from the repercussions of their actions. The notion that athlete status makes one both infallible and untouchable permeates the narratives of the sexual assault novels we reviewed. All of the athlete agitators and assaulters seem to get away with their atrocities due to the power of belonging to the athletic group. When the young women fight for accountability and justice they are often personally attacked, resulting in victimization again.

In *All the Rage* (Summers, 2015), the athlete as armor identity protects Kellan, the rapist. For example, Brock, a friend of the athlete assaulter, acts in solidarity to harm Romy by drugging her and dumping her as described above. When Romy’s female friend comes to her defense, she is also violently attacked. Even female peers express sympathy with one of the athlete assaulters and lie for him because, “He said he couldn’t tell them what he’d done or he’d lose his place on the football team” (p. 311). In the novel, we see that even after the horror of these events leads to the murder of a young woman, where the media works to absolve responsibility for the athletes. On T.V. coverage of the murder, Romy hears snippets like, “We are so eager to point fingers at this boy—and I wish people would stop calling him a young man, because he is a boy—but how much of the blame truly falls on him?” (p. 309). The press continues to express sympathy for the murderer by stating, “We need to talk about how this is a very promising boy who is now facing second degree murder charges. His life is ruined and I barely have a sense of who he is. I want to know his story” (p. 313). Again, the athlete identity promotes compassion for horrendous acts while the survivors

are labeled as “trouble.” In this manner, athletes are protected through their D-Identity (discourse), where their supposed-innocence is tied to developed status as a “golden boy” in part through their participation in sports. Indeed, we see this penchant for absolution of perpetrator-blame in the other texts as well. In *The Way I Used to Be* (Smith, 2017), Kevin, the athlete assaulter, rapes the protagonist Eden, which gets brushed aside as “a bit of trouble... that’s going to get straightened out soon enough” (p. 312).

In *Asking for It* (O’Neill, 2016), Emma is raped by boys from the football team (American soccer). The public is enraged, and Emma internalizes her blame by stating that she ruined their lives. In one passage she imagines the trial and how she will be blamed for her own rape in open court: “Mr. O’Brien--an upstanding citizen and exceptional athlete, who was on track to play football for Cork senior team--you’re tryin to tell us he gave you Class A drugs?” (p. 212). In Emma’s mind (thoughts confirmed at school, by the news, and in the community), the boys’ lives are worth more than hers. Their athletic prowess, their future potential success, and their “good boy” personas are worth more than Emma’s. Thus, their athletic identities act as armor, as a shield to protect them from the fact that they gathered in a room and videotaped Emma’s rape at their hands.

## THE FIGURED WORLDS OF SCHOOL ATHLETICS

After identifying three main athlete identities which are common in all the texts we reviewed, we investigated the ways that school athletics operate as figured worlds in these young adult novels. As a figured world, school athletics within these texts consider athletes as “golden boys” (i.e., moral, admired, unquestioned individuals who can do no wrong) while simultaneously minimizing or even completely disregarding the experiences of survivors. Of particular concern was the way that school-related adults such as teachers, coaches and administrators responded to the verbal, physical, and sexual violence inflicted upon the young women throughout the novels. These figured worlds include adults, whom we label as “oblivious adults,” who support and perpetuate the athlete as infallible in schooling spaces.

### ***THE OBLIVIOUS ADULT, AN ENABLER OF HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN***

The *oblivious adult* is one who seemingly doesn't notice but often blatantly disregards the athlete agitators' and athlete assaulters' actions and behavior. The malignant actions of the oblivious adult (often a teacher, administrator or coach) enable negative and harmful cultures to fester in the school environment as seen in the examples below.

#### ***The Coach***

For example, the coach in the novel *Some Boys* (Blount, 2014) is depicted as someone who has high expectations for his players' behavior but does not do enough to protect the female protagonist, Grace. In one passage told from the perspective of a male character and lacrosse player, Ian, Grace's father comes to the lacrosse practice to confront some of the male players about physically assaulting Grace at school. Grace's father says to the coach, “They cornered her today. Touched her, called her names” (p. 192). The coach appears to come down hard on a student, Matt, who takes the blame for calling Grace a slut, but does not punish players Kyle and Jeremy for assaulting his daughter. By giving inconsistent consequences and at times, ignoring sexual assault and harassment all together, the coaches in the selected YA novels construct a figured world of school athletics where athletes are not held responsible for their actions. In other words, the only consequences of assault often involve the survivors themselves, who experience an abundance of issues as a result of their attacks.

#### ***The Administrator***

Similarly, in the novel *Nowhere Girls* (Reed, 2017), a group of girls gather and share their experiences with male harassment at school. In one instance, a female student shared her

experiences with a well-known male athlete at school: “He totally groped me in the photography darkroom freshman year... I told Principal Slattery, but she basically told me it was my fault and I shouldn’t put myself in compromising positions” (p. 118). When pressed as to why the student did not share it with any other adults on campus, the female student remarked, “She’s in charge. There was no one else to tell” (p. 118). Principal Slattery clearly acted as the oblivious adult, turning her back on a student who needed help and ignoring the bad behavior of the athlete assaulter, essentially sanctioning sexual harassment and assault in her school.

More examples of the oblivious adult are found in the novel *Some Boys* (Blount, 2014) when the principal ignores the abuse inflicted upon protagonist Grace. At one point, Grace comes to school prepared to engage in a protest after she is called slut and whore on a daily basis. As a result, Grace becomes fed up and decides to educate her peers on the concepts of rape culture, the problematic dress code (which administrators note distracts male students) and victim blaming. In one passage, Grace argues with many students on the lacrosse team about how they treat women. A male student Jeremy says, “Hey, if you don’t like being called a slut, maybe you shouldn’t cry rape” (p. 261). The male lacrosse students raise their voices, taunt her, and call her crazy. Still, the principal, Mr. Jordan only reprimands Grace and requests to see her after school, after dismissing the crowd. Instead of getting to the bottom of understanding Grace’s actions or addressing the foreboding crowd that surrounds her, the oblivious principal scolds only Grace and allows the male lacrosse team to return to class without further discussion. When administrators, who hold institutional power over faculty and students, refuse to act on accusations of sexual violence and harassment, they contribute to a figured world that ultimately dismisses and thus silences the experiences of survivors.

### *The Teacher*

In a period of 36 days, Grace has gone from someone with many friends and a promising school career on the school newspaper to a social pariah. Her friends have turned on her and she is called a slut every time she enters the hallway. In one passage, Grace participates in a newspaper class when her former friend makes a dramatic show of using hand sanitizer after Grace has used the class computer, other students in the class laugh and Grace notes, “Mrs. Weir says nothing” (Blount, 2014, p. 36). Later in the class, Grace is kept after the period ends to discuss the blurry pictures she took at the lacrosse game. Grace shares with Mrs. Weir that she does not want to get close to Zac, her rapist, and so she will only take long shot images of the games. Mrs. Weir says,

“Regardless of what you think Zac McMahon did--” to which Grace replies, “I don’t think he did anything” (p. 37). The implication here being that the teacher refuses to acknowledge Grace’s trauma and her daily harassment in class, ultimately contributing to a figured world where adults in positions of power refuse to believe survivors. Mrs. Weir thus embodies the oblivious adult by skipping over the deeply disturbing culture of her class. By understanding how sexual violence is dismissed in fictional classroom spaces, we might be able to understand how studying these narratives in real classroom spaces lends itself to disrupting the silencing of survivors and dismissing sexual violence in school settings. Stemming from our analysis, we offer implications for English classrooms.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

Beach, Johnston, and Thein (2015) argue that secondary English classrooms are “always already a space for identity work” due to the ways identities are mediated through “language, narrative, discourse, embodied performances, and digital forms of communication” (p. 6). It is important for us to consider how our analysis in the article can inform secondary English classroom practice as former English teachers who work with teacher candidates in our current jobs. While our work focuses specifically on the identities of athletes and the world of sports, the suggestions can be transferred to other domains as students deepen their ability to understand identity construction. We outline activities for analyzing athletic identity through young adult literature and nonfiction texts in the remainder of this section.

This work has the potential to address and challenge the logics that undermine sexual assault, especially in high schools. We add our voice to the chorus of scholars who have called for positioning young adult literature as a medium to facilitate conversations about sexual assault and violence (Alsup, 2003; Cleveland & Durand, 2014; Colantonio-Yurko, Miller & Cheveallier, 2018); Jackett, 2007; Malo-Juvera, 2014; Park, 2012; Ulaby, 2016). From our experiences, students often lacked the language to describe experiences of assault and harassment. We believe a crucial aspect of this work is naming features of the system of sexual assault and harassment so that students may recognize and unearth characteristics often intentionally hidden or made to seem “normal” and thus acceptable.

### *ANALYZING IDENTITY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE*

We believe there are multiple activities and strategies teachers can draw on to analyze identity within young adult titles. For instance, “Identity Mapping,” as conceptualized by Ahmed (2018), allows teachers and students to understand themselves in the context of their schools and communities, and can be applied to characters in texts. We suggest that students engage in identity mapping as a way to examine the tensions, privilege, and power that male athletes have in these novels. Additionally, students could build character maps around the identities mentioned above. Beach, Johnston, and Thein (2015) use Gee’s four domains to look at identity in text. We advocate this approach with students. In this piece, we developed questions by looking expressly at athlete identities, some questions students could be asked include:

- What does it mean for an athlete to have power in the text?
- What words are used by students, educators, and community members to describe athletes in the text?
- How do athletes influence the decisions of students, educators, and community members within the texts?
- How do athletes justify their own status within schools and communities in the texts?
- When are athletes’ status challenged in the text? Why is their status challenged in the text?
- What experiences do athletes share? How do athletes display in-group membership?
- How do other identities athletes hold (e.g., race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, ability) shape their experiences as athletes?

These questions can also be used in what Christensen (2017) calls a “Theme and Evidence Wall” (p. 202). Teachers and students can use the above questions as a way to guide and frame their understandings of identity in these novels. As students read the texts, they can post notes, quotes, and evidence to these interactive spaces to build their analysis of identity developed in these novels. These interactive spaces can then be used as building blocks for essays (Christensen, 2017). Subsequently, students can discuss athletic identity across texts, including other young adult titles and nonfiction texts, to develop themes of how athletic identity is constructed.

### *INVESTIGATING FIGURED WORLDS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE*

Just as we suggested above, teachers can use a variety of approaches and strategies to engage students in an investigation of figured worlds in YAL. One such idea is to engage students in structured discussions that allow them to focus on the ways figured worlds exist in these novels. In

our analysis, we investigated school athletics and how they operate as figured worlds. Students can be assigned different aspects of how figured worlds get constructed and then consider how such worlds are created in their texts. For instance, some questions to pose to students include:

- How is a figured world different from a physical setting in the text? How do figured worlds expand beyond a single setting in the text?
- How are rules and expectations created and enforced in the figured world?
- What roles do different identities play in the figured world?
- Who has power in the figured world? Why?
- How is power maintained in the figured world? How is power challenged in the figured world?
- Whose experiences are believed in the figured world? Whose experiences are questioned in the figured world? Why does this difference exist?

These discussion questions can then allow students to engage in an understanding of how the established identities operate in figured worlds that have their own rules and set of expectations. Some activities to facilitate these conversations include “Dialogue Journals” (Christensen, 2017), which allow students the opportunity to “talk back” or hold conversations with the text, author, or piece of writing (p. 215). Students could engage in journals that focus on the questions above to actively engage with tracking and making sense of figured worlds. Additionally, fishbowl discussions are helpful ways for a whole class to engage in meaningful dialogue and analysis of specific topics and ideas. We draw on Brozo’s (2017) approach to the fishbowl discussion, where students on the outside engage in critique of the inner group’s conversation. This would allow for a focused whole-class discussion on the difficult topic of investigating athletics as figured worlds in schooling spaces. Students could also map figured worlds by using graphic organizers to address or consider how figured worlds operate within these novels.

### ***CONNECTING IDEAS ACROSS YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND NONFICTION TEXTS***

Nonfiction texts focusing on sports can be paired with literary texts to facilitate critical literacy development with students (Rodesiler, 2017a, 2017b). Students can compare how language in nonfiction texts, both print and non-print, establish the identities of athletes in ways that are similar and different from young adult titles. Students can analyze how context shapes an audience’s understanding of athletic identity. For instance, how do profiles of athletes in magazines like *Sports Illustrated* and podcasts like *Barstool Sports* discuss athlete life on and outside of the field? How are

athletes' lives on and off the field discussed and understood in young adult titles? Students can consider how fictional accounts reflect current trends in sports media and how literary accounts differ from nonfiction writing.

### ***CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN TEACHER EDUCATION METHODS COURSES***

Teacher candidates need to understand how identity is formulated in schools to consider the various and dynamic ways students' construct their own identities and have identities constructed for them. There are a number of activities teacher candidates can engage in to reflect back on their own high school experiences. For instance, teacher candidates can review their own high school yearbooks and analyze how language in the yearbook constructs athletic identity as well as other identities. Teachers can use their school observations to understand how identities are constructed in schools. Such questions to guide these observations include:

- How do students signify identity in the school (think clothes, language, groups, hobbies)?
- How do students have autonomy in constructing their identities?
- How do schools place identities on students? How do teachers place identities on students?
- Which identities have power in the school? Which do not? Why? How is this power based on space and place?
- What places in schools do students have the power to construct their own identities? What places do students lack power to construct their own identities?

Additionally, teacher candidates can read young adult literature and use those texts to facilitate conversations about identity construction and figured worlds. Teacher candidates can also be asked to compare how their classroom observation notes compare to the narratives in young adult titles in terms of how students' identities are constructed, how figured worlds are created and maintained, and how identities map out across power dynamics.

## **CONCLUSION**

In 2003 sports journalists Tom Weir and Erik Brady completed a review of court cases involving professional athletes accused of sexual violence. The title of the piece, "In Sexual Assault Cases, Athletes Usually Walk Away" (Weir & Brady, 2003), spoke to the findings in stark terms: professional athletes typically walk away from assault charges untouched. Thirteen years later, the nation watched as convicted rapist Brock Turner continued to be positioned in the media as a "Stanford swimmer," despite becoming a household name for the crime he committed against

Chanel Miller (LaChance, 2016). As noted in the opening, the United States education secretary Betsy DeVos has sought to create a policy landscape in which innocence becomes detachable from the institutional identity of “athlete.” These social, cultural, and political moments all rely on the identity construction of “athlete” that we see privileged in the six young adult literature titles we analyzed. As Chanel Miller (2019) notes in her memoir, “My pain was never more valuable than his [Brock Turner] potential” (p. 241). While the discussion of sexual violence in this paragraph relates to professional and college-level athletics, the athlete identity and figured world of sports that protect athletes in our selected YAL novels from accountability permeate high schools as well.

In the novels discussed throughout this article, the male athletes’ identities allow them to engage in reprehensible acts that are protected by their schooling worlds. Their golden boy image and ability to perform on the field supersedes the autonomy and dignity of their peers and classmates. We believe English classrooms are spaces where teachers and students can strive to work to disrupt the perpetuation of sexual assault by examining how these ideas manifest in young adult literature. By investigating the ways that these schooling spaces act as figured worlds and by examining the different identities portrayed by male athlete characters, teachers and students can strive to understand how these fictional spaces protect violent athlete antagonists. Critiquing athlete identities and figured worlds can lead students to challenge not only the texts, but their own lived experiences and educational spaces.

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**SHELBY BOEHM** is a doctoral student at the University of Florida. Prior to entering graduate school, Shelby taught high school English. She can be reached at [sboehm@ufl.edu](mailto:sboehm@ufl.edu).

**KATHLEEN COLANTONIO-YURKO** is an assistant professor of literacy education at SUNY Brockport. Before becoming a teacher educator, Kate taught high school English in Florida. Her research interests include young adult literature, third culture kids, and adolescent literacy. She can be reached at [kyurko@brockport.edu](mailto:kyurko@brockport.edu).

**KATHLEEN OLMSTEAD** is an Assistant Professor of Literacy at SUNY Brockport. Before becoming a teacher educator, Kathy was a longtime elementary school teacher and literacy specialist. She can be reached at [kolmstea@brockport.edu](mailto:kolmstea@brockport.edu).

**HENRY "CODY" MILLER** is an assistant professor of English education at SUNY Brockport. Prior to that role, he taught high school English for seven years in Florida. He can be reached at [hmiller@brockport.edu](mailto:hmiller@brockport.edu).