

Out of the Closet and onto the Playing Field: Two Decades of Lesbian Athletes in YA Literature

Using the Identity Formation Model, the author examines the representation of lesbian athletes in young adult literature and suggests that students benefit from reading about characters with a range of sexual and gender identities.

Since the passage of Title IX 40 years ago, ten times as many high school girls and six times as many collegiate women participate in organized school sports (National Coalition). Yet, media coverage of women's sports continues to lag behind the media coverage of men's sports in both quality and quantity. In fact, in the 20 years that the Women's Sports Foundation has been collecting data, coverage of women's events in televised sports news has fluctuated. Women's sports enjoyed an all-time high of 8.7 percent of total coverage in 1999, although this coverage also included degrading sporting events (e.g., naked bungee jumping) and sexualized depictions of female athletes (Messner and Cooky 17). In 2009, televised coverage of women's sports hit an all-time low of 1.6 percent of total sports coverage. And a decade into the 21st century, news coverage now leans toward depictions of women as mothers, wives, and girlfriends—all of whom are straight (Messner and Cooky 25). Often this coverage emphasizes women's attractiveness and femininity before their athletic performance either implicitly (via non-print text/images) or explicitly (via language used within the commentary), even though audiences do not have favorable impressions of athletes—male or female—when attractiveness is the main feature of print coverage (Knight and Giuliano, "He's a Laker").

Connected to these heteronormative depictions is the notion that female athletes should not look, act, or play in ways deemed too masculine,

lest their sexual orientation or biological gender be called into question, as happened to Baylor University's star basketball player Brittney Griner (Leonard). It has been common practice among women's collegiate athletic teams in their recruitment of female athletes to accuse other schools and coaches of "producing lesbians" in an attempt to influence college selection decisions of parents and athletes (Women's Sports Foundation). Griner came out publicly after her career at Baylor ended in 2013 ("Griner"), at which point she went on to play professionally with the Phoenix Mercury and signed with Nike, the first openly gay athlete to do so (Rohlin). In fact, Griner reported that she "kept her sexuality a secret [while playing collegiate ball] because Baylor Coach Kim Mulkey feared it could negatively affect recruiting" at the private Christian university (Rohlin).

Negative recruiting tactics, implied or explicit instruction from coaches to closet lesbian identities, and the emphasis on female athletes as straight wives, girlfriends, and mothers in televised sports coverage render lesbian athletes largely invisible and sometimes disparaged in media today. Young adult literature (YAL) that features lesbian athletes helps fill this void and provides adolescent readers with a more inclusive and accurate picture of who female athletes are and can be. In exploring how these texts might serve as counternarratives to televised media's heteronormative representations of female athletes, I wondered: Do lesbian athletes embody their sexual identity in YAL? Or, more simply, are they out or closeted?

A Framework for Analyzing the Literature

To analyze characters' outness across texts, I employed Vivienne C. Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation Model, which identifies six stages of identity formation: confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis (see Table 1).¹ Although a number of critiques have been leveled against it (Eliason and Schope; Kaufman and Johnson; Orne), Cass's model provides a useful framework for analyzing depictions of characters' outness in young adult literature. Using the descriptors for each stage (summarized in Table 1), I identified when characters exhibited these traits and the stage they reached by the novel's conclusion. Cass's six stages allow for clear representations of a character's coming-out journey and efficient comparisons of characters' outness across texts.

Lesbian Athletes in YAL

During the summer of 2012, I located ten young adult (YA) books that feature lesbian athletes published within the past 20 years (see Table 2). Locating these YA books—mainly via Internet searches of Google, Amazon, and Goodreads—was a challenge. Although many of the texts feature characters who enjoy and/or excel in sports, I found it necessary to expand my definition of

“athlete” to include huntresses, peripheral characters who participate in sports, and characters who attempted a sport and then gave up. The selected texts feature a wide array of sports, including ice hockey, basketball, volleyball, soccer, swimming, running, gymnastics, softball, weightlifting, hunting, cycling, archery, and horseback riding, as well as some characters who participate in multiple sports.

Stages 1–3: Identity Confusion, Comparison, and Tolerance in Lesbian Athletes in YAL

Two of the ten books, both published in 2003, feature secondary characters whose sexual identity remains a source of confusion or shame. Both characters are also athletes.

Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* (2003) is about a group of LGBTQ high school students who create a community for themselves under the guise of the school-sanctioned “Geography Club.” Therese, a member of this club, is a soccer player who does not come out beyond her small circle of friends and, consequently, does not

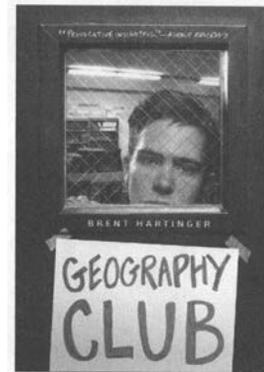


TABLE 1. Vivienne Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation Model

Stage	Description
1 Identity Confusion	Perceives own lesbian or gay identity and questions previously assumed sexual identities (147)
2 Identity Comparison	Experiences feelings of alienation when comparing self to straight community (151)
3 Identity Tolerance	Seeks out company of gay and lesbian people out of necessity Presents self as straight in public; disclosure to straight people is limited (151)
4 Identity Acceptance	Begins developing a network of gay and lesbian friends and selectively discloses gay identity to friends, relatives; maintains a strategic passing strategy, preventing possibility of others' negative reactions to gay identity (151–52)
5 Identity Pride	Exhibits intense loyalty to gay and lesbian community and anger toward heteronormative society; purposefully confronts straight people, who are perceived as “discredited and devalued” (152)
6 Identity Synthesis	Develops positive relationships with straight people; gay/lesbian identity one of many facets of own identity; disclosure is a “non-issue” (152)

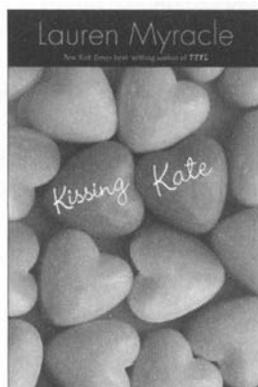
Summarized from Cass, Vivienne C. “Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model.” *The Journal of Sex Research* 20.2 (1984): 143–67. Print.

TABLE 2. YAL with Lesbian Athletes (1993–2012)

Year	Title	Author	Sport(s)	Cass's Identity Stage
1993	<i>The Cat Came Back</i>	Hilary Mullins	Ice hockey	Stage 4: Identity Acceptance
1998	<i>Girl Walking Backwards</i>	Bett Williams	Volleyball	Stage 6: Identity Synthesis
2003	<i>Geography Club</i>	Brent Hartinger	Soccer	Stage 3: Identity Tolerance
	<i>Keeping You a Secret</i>	Julie Anne Peters	Swimming	Stage 6: Identity Acceptance
	<i>Kissing Kate</i>	Lauren Myracle	Gymnastics	Stage 4: Identity Acceptance (Lissa) Stage 1/2: Confusion/Comparison (Kate)
2005	<i>Pretend You Love Me</i>	Julie Anne Peters	Softball Weightlifting	Stage 4: Identity Acceptance (Mike) Stage 6: Identity Synthesis (Jamie)
2009	<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	Hunting	Stage 6: Identity Synthesis (Ash and Kaisa)
2010	<i>A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend</i>	Emily Horner	Cycling	Stage 6: Identity Synthesis
2011	<i>Huntress</i>	Malinda Lo	Knife-throwing Archery	Stage 6: Identity Synthesis (Kaede and Taisin)
2012	<i>The Miseducation of Cameron Post</i>	emily m. danforth	Swimming Running	Stage 6: Identity Synthesis

move past stage 3: identity tolerance. Even though she has sought out the club, she is still focused on passing as a straight, successful athlete, even if it means sacrificing her romantic relationship with Min, another club member, who no longer wants to keep their love secret.

In Lauren Myracle's *Kissing Kate* (2003), Lissa discovers her attraction to her best friend Kate after a drunken kiss at a party. Kate's athleticism is more prominently featured than Therese's in *Geography Club*, and readers experience her gymnastic abilities through Lissa's eyes, as Lissa admires Kate's strength, grace, and agility. Both characters are depicted at different stages in the model, with Lissa reaching stage 4 acceptance, as she begins to disclose her identity to trusted friends, and Kate remaining in stages 1–2 confusion/comparison, never moving past feelings of alienation and denial.



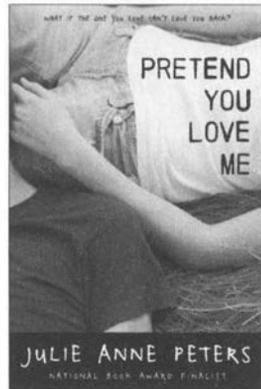
Stages 4–6: Identity Acceptance, Pride, and Synthesis in Lesbian Athletes in YAL

Like Myracle's *Kissing Kate*, the remaining eight books feature protagonists who range from acceptance (2 books) to synthesis (6 books). Unlike Lissa in *Kissing Kate*, protagonists in all of these books engage in athletic pursuits.

In *The Cat Came Back* (1993) by Hilary Mullins, Stephanie (Stevie) Roughgarden is a senior at a private boarding school and a self-described tomboy. She takes her studies seriously and enjoys ice hockey, biking, hiking, running, and basketball. Stevie moves through each of the first three stages, initially struggling and wanting to “get normal” (94) because “girls are not supposed to feel this way about other girls!!!” (95). Ultimately, she moves into stage 4 acceptance as she expresses her love to Andrea and finds support among her teammates and friends.

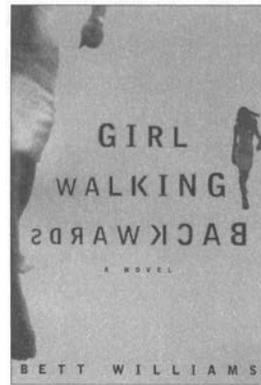
In *Pretend You Love Me* (2005) by Julie Anne Peters, Mary Elizabeth (Mike) Szabo is a junior at Coalton High in Kansas and a star softball player. With no parental support (her father committed suicide; her mother is morbidly obese and severely

depressed), Mike deals with her own pain by working, weightlifting, and playing softball. She relishes the rush of adrenaline and sense of escape fostered by physical activity as well as the camaraderie and competition of softball games. Of all the female athletes in this YAL sample, Mike, who reaches stage



4 acceptance, exhibits the most masculine presentation with her defined body, muscle shirts, and shorn hair. Mike does not like to talk about her sexual identity but admits she is attracted to girls, particularly Xanadu, a beautiful, rebellious girl who moves to Coalton from the big city. For the people of Coalton, Mike's sexual orientation makes no difference. They care about her, they cheer for her at softball games, and they rally around a fundraising effort to send her to a prestigious softball camp. Mike's best friend Jamie is out and proud, and accepted by the community as well.

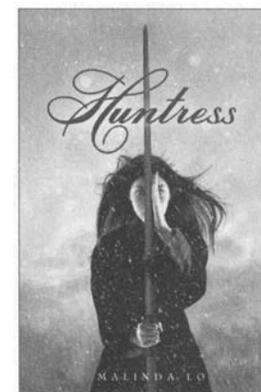
In *Girl Walking Backwards* (1998) by Bett Williams, 16-year-old Skye lives in Southern California where she joined the volleyball team "because the volleyball girls are beautiful" and "nice, too, not snobby like the tennis players" (30). Of all the protagonists, Skye is the least inspiring athlete with her defeatist attitude toward her volleyball performance and poor body image (she binges on chips and quesadillas while watching television and then obsesses about her thighs). She ends up quitting the volleyball team, but she maintains a friendship (and later a relationship) with teammate Lorri. Skye ultimately reaches stage 6 synthesis and is open about her sexuality, stating during a class presentation on contraception, "I'm not heterosexual" (13) and describing her sexuality as "bendable" (18).



In *Keeping You a Secret* (2003) by Julie Anne Peters, high school senior Holland Jaegar competes on the swim team and plays ice hockey for fun. Although she describes herself as a terrible swimmer, who comes in "dead last" (44) in her favorite event at meets, she enjoys the tranquility of the water, often swimming more than the required workouts. Holland moves through all six stages of Cass's model and ultimately reaches synthesis as she and her girlfriend Cece make plans to go to prom together.



In *Ash* (2009) and *Huntress* (2011), both by Malinda Lo, readers are transported to a time and place that does not disparage or even question same-gender relationships, providing space for all characters to reach stage 6 synthesis. In *Ash*, a retelling of *Cinderella*, we view Kaisa, the King's Huntress, through Aisling's (Ash's) admiring eyes. Kaisa is depicted as confident, strong, and open-minded, and her employment as the King's Huntress allows her freedom to travel the woods by horseback, seeking out Ash's home. She is so comfortable on horseback that she offers to teach Ash how to ride, proving to be a patient, strong, and effective teacher. In *Huntress*, Kaede is a perceptive and strong-willed knife-thrower and archer who enjoys being outdoors. At the Academy of Sages, she is appointed to accompany gifted female sage-in-training Taisin on a dangerous journey. During their travels, Kaede and Taisin fall in love with one another



without concern for what others might think but later choose to end their relationship for the sake of Taisin's sage training (she must remain celibate). For Kaede, knife-throwing and archery allow her to be active outdoors and forget about her father's plans for her (marriage to create a political alliance) and the stress of the battles she wages on her journey with Taisin.

In *A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend* (2010) by Emily Horner, Cassandra (Cass) Meyer is a cyclist and self-described Quaker, pacifist, and urban-planning radical who's good at math and physics (76). Throughout the novel, Cass moves from confusion (stage 2) to tolerance (stage 3), and ultimately to synthesis (stage 6). While embarking on a cross-country bike ride to spread her best friend Julia's ashes in the Pacific Ocean, Cass reflects on and acknowledges her feelings for Julia—first to herself, then to her friends, and then “the whole world” (259). Cass derives pleasure from cycling—alone. She often reflects on the exhilaration of being on the open road, but she also uses it as an escape from her friends and the loss of Julia. Cass merges her relationships with her cycling when she allows her girlfriend Heather to ride double with her after performing the play Julia wrote before her death.

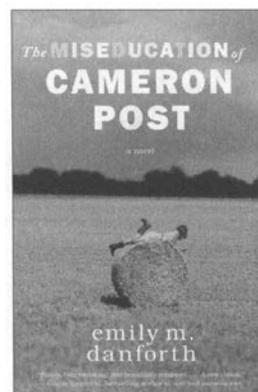
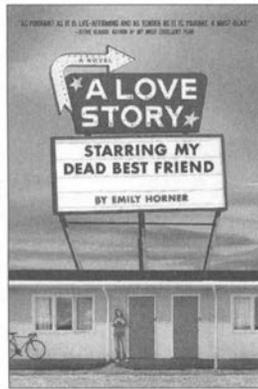
In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) by Emily M. Danforth, Cameron (Cam) is a strong-willed, talented swimmer and runner who experiences five of the stages (all but stage 5 pride) in this coming-of-age novel. She enjoys pushing herself at swim and cross country practices and competing at a high level. After Cam's parents die in a car accident the day that Cam kisses her best friend Irene, Cam feels a sense of guilt and relief that her folks will

never know about her “sin.” Although she comes out to some friends, she is not out to her grandma or ultra-religious Aunt Ruth, until Coley Taylor (with whom Cam has a physical relationship) outs her. When Aunt Ruth sends Cam to God's Promise, a camp for gay and gender variant kids whose families want them to be “turned straight,” she maintains her sense of self and even finds a sense of community among other LGBTQ teens (Cart and Jenkins). There Cam enjoys the fellowship of team sports, and physical activity is a regular part of her day; however, at God's Promise, an interest in sports is blamed for female disciples' lesbian leanings. Only “appropriately gendered” sports are permitted (359), and Cam engages in Christian aerobics and trail-running when the Montana weather permits.

Discussion

Generally speaking, the more recently published YA texts feature characters who exhibit characteristics of the later stages of identity development in Cass's model. Only two of the five books published within the first decade (1993–2003) feature characters who reach identity synthesis (stage 6), while between 2004 and 2012, all five books feature characters who reach the final stage in Cass's model. It is important to note that, with the exception of Malinda Lo's books, the other texts allow us to observe characters moving through various stages of Cass's model, from confusion to synthesis. Lo's books distinguish themselves by being set in a time and place that does not disparage queer identities, allowing protagonists and secondary characters to acknowledge their attractions without fear of negative consequences related to heteronormative stances.

Interestingly, protagonists in all ten texts appear to have reached at least stage 4 identity acceptance by the book's end, with just two characters (not protagonists) falling somewhere in stages 1–3. And, with the exception of Skye in *Girl Walking Backwards* in the collection of books that depict acceptance, pride, and synthesis, each of the protagonists in the remaining seven books embodies a healthy attitude toward and commitment to athletics as a means of challenging themselves mentally and physically, relieving stress, setting and accomplishing goals, and finding a sense of community. Since depictions of women athletes performing



their sport triggers less self-objectification in female viewers than images of sexualized athletes (Daniels), it seems logical to encourage young adults to read books that feature female athletes who take pride or find satisfaction in physical activity. In fact, since homophobia and heteronormativity continue to permeate sport culture, it seems likely that continued exposure to athletes who represent all sexual orientations may help the public to develop an understanding of and appreciation for the athletic abilities and performance of all athletes (Knight and Giuliano, “Blood, Sweat, and Jeers” 281), particularly lesbian athletes.

Bringing This Discussion—and These Texts—into the Classroom

In a secondary English language arts classroom, studying YAL that features lesbian athletes would not likely occur as its own unit of study—nor would I recommend it. However, this use of YAL might occur in the context of a sports-themed literature unit with an emphasis on how athletes are depicted and how we perceive them. Such a unit might begin with a visual analysis of the ways athletes are depicted in the media, followed by the reading of a self-selected sports-themed YA text. This prereading activity might center on the following essential questions:

1. How are male and female athletes depicted in media?
2. Does it help or harm the sport when athletes are known for something other than their athletic abilities (e.g., physical appearance, life outside athletics)?

My preservice English teachers engaged in just such a visual analysis of athlete images recently. Prior to locating and reading the images, they brainstormed a list of words or phrases they associate with female athletes, male athletes, and athletes in general and shared them in small groups and then with the whole class. They reported several similarities between male and female athletes (being in shape, good work ethic, attractive, high skill levels, etc.). However, they also reported that female athletes are often viewed as sex symbols who are not as talented as their male counterparts. They noted that while there seem to be fewer scandals associated with

female athletes, women’s sports typically generate less revenue and less media coverage as well. And in spite of the media’s efforts to feminize and sexualize female athletes—and depict them as straight—my students reported that female athletes still face the stereotype of being gay, while male athletes are automatically assumed to be straight.

My students then performed a Google image search for one female athlete and one male athlete of their choosing. I didn’t put any restrictions on whom they chose, except that the athletes must be current, rather than historical, figures. Some simply selected their favorite athletes, others selected pairs of athletes at approximately the same ranking in the same sport, and others selected athletes who seem to have similar celebrity appeal. With a few exceptions (Venus Williams, Serena Williams, and Gabby Douglas, who were each selected twice, and Anna Kournikova, who was selected three times), every student in the class selected a different athlete. They searched for the athlete by name only and then reviewed only the first five images that appeared in the Google search, analyzing them based on the type of shot (head or full body) and whether the athlete is posed (e.g., for a photo shoot) or unposed (e.g., performing his or her sport or participating in an interview/press conference).

After searching for depictions of male and female athletes regardless of sexual orientation, students discussed their findings in small groups, sharing and comparing their notes from the visual text analysis. They then generalized their findings for a whole-class discussion that focused on differences and similarities in the ways that athletes are depicted online, the prominence of each athlete’s sport in those images, student questions/concerns raised by the images, and comparison to students’ initial impressions of female and male athletes.

Although most students reported that this exercise confirmed their predictions, some students expressed surprise regarding the seeming disproportionate number of posed, full-body shots of female athletes, in comparison to their male counterparts who were more often featured in un-posed headshots or full body shots competing in their respective sports (Holste). As one female student wrote, “Holy crap, we oversexualize our women. We are more focused on the attractiveness of a female than her ability to play a sport.”

Students also mentioned that depictions of female athletes as sexy or talented might depend on how their attractiveness is perceived by the media and society and/or how they represent themselves in public (what they choose to wear, what photo shoots they decide to participate in, etc.). One male student who chose to analyze images of Brittney Griner commented that less attractive female athletes are depicted with a focus on the sport instead of their sex appeal. This perspective prompted conversation about who or what defines beauty and whether or not our perceptions of beauty are too narrow or restrictive.

Once students have had a chance to consider how athletes are portrayed in the media today, they are ready to select a literary text (see Alan Brown's Sports Literacy Blog at <http://sportsliteracy.wordpress.com/>). Book talks or a book pass would be appropriate avenues for allowing students to preview multiple texts before making a final selection, throughout their reading of which they can return to essential questions such as the following:

1. Do print texts confirm or challenge depictions of athletes in nonprint media? Which depiction seems more accurate, palatable, and/or laudable?
2. How do these depictions of athletes challenge or validate my experience, observations, and perceptions?

Such a unit of study might even inspire students to analyze and evaluate the ways in which their school culture depicts, celebrates, or marginalizes its male and female athletes, perhaps even causing students to question or critique the position of sports in schools, as compared to academics and other extracurricular opportunities. C. J. Pascoe explored how schools support heteronormative activities (e.g., pep assembly skits, school dances, and yearbook photos), some of which are sexually suggestive and even obscene, while simultaneously forbidding even the slightest hint of gay or gender variant interactions, displays, or embodiments.

Conclusion

The stakes can be high when gay and lesbian athletes choose to embody their sexual identities,

particularly in contact sports such as football (Kenney). In fact, Frank Hagler notes that “[c]oming out as a gay male athlete in a contact sport can directly impact one’s livelihood,” while “coming out as a gay female contact sport athlete can serve to reinforce misconceptions and stereotypes of the female athlete.” Even coming out in a non-contact sport can bring harsh judgment from fellow athletes (Kenney 98), as Cameron Post discovers in *Miseducation* when she and fellow competitor Lindsey step out of a changing stall in the women’s locker room after a swim meet, confronting some of Lindsey’s teammates: “Their faces were masks of disapproval, sneering mouths and squinty eyes. My first reaction was to try to believe that they must have been looking beyond us, or were going to fill us in as to just what was so disgusting. Linds and I were high pointers, top-scoring swimmers, and that had always afforded us some status. It only took one glance behind me to realize my mistake” (danforth 102). The shame that Cameron feels as she retreats from the locker room and onto the pool deck is something that no one, particularly a young adult, should have to experience.

Regardless of the sport itself, adolescents need to see themselves and others in the texts they view and read. With the surge in the number of girls and women participating in sports in the last 40 years, it’s surprising that televised sports news coverage and other nonprint media coverage have not kept pace. Female athletes do not and should not have to conform to the straight, sexy, feminine model that is so commonplace in sports coverage. With this inaccurate, limited coverage, young adult literature has an important role to play in showing adolescents who female athletes are and can be. Additionally, as Pascoe argues, “[i]ncluding a range of sexual and gender identities in school rituals and curricula will indicate to both GLBT and non-normatively gendered students as well as straight and normatively gendered students that school authorities don’t tolerate gender- and sexuality-based harassment and violence” (169). 

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Wichita State University’s College of Education for the 2012 research grant that paid for the purchase of the young adult literature, as well as a summer stipend.

Note

1. With thanks to Dr. David Pegram who recommended Cass's model in his presentation "Role Players: Gay Athletes in YA Fiction" at the 2012 NCTE Annual Convention.

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