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Youth Athletes' Activism and Coaches: Representations in Sports-Related Young Adult Literature

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Activism among athletes in school settings has a long history in the United States (US), and it has also been documented in recent years. At the collegiate level, Kylin Hill, an all-conference running back on the Mississippi State University football team, contributed to changing Mississippi's state flag, which until 2020 incorporated a Confederate battle flag, by threatening to sit out the season unless it was changed (Dellenger). Athletes embracing activism can also be seen in high school sports, from Roosevelt High School (IA) baseball players demonstrating in protest of racial injustice (Zdanowicz) to Putnam County High School (WV) volleyball players rallying for the resumption of their sport during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tierney). Such examples are just the latest in a long line of moves activist-athletes have made to stand up and speak out.

As involved in activism and advocacy as athletes have been over time, they are not the lone figures in the sports world to take up such efforts. Coaches at various levels of sport have been documented joining athletes in speaking out for various causes. At the collegiate level, Georgia Tech men's basketball assistant coach Eric Reveno spearheaded the #AllVoteNoPlay campaign, which contributed to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) prohibiting athletic activities for Division I athletes on the federal election day (Sugiura). Pahokee High School (FL) football coach DJ Boldin discusses race and police brutality with players and encourages them to take political actions to improve society (Given). And at the club level, coaches like Rashad Thomas of the Gibbstown Falcons (NJ) have joined players in kneeling during the playing of the US national anthem (Rushing), following the lead of Colin Kaepernick and others who have knelt to protest police violence against Black citizens. In these ways and more, coaches are demonstrating social consciousness and supporting the athletes in their charge.

Familiar with the ways athletes and coaches across the sports world have taken up advocacy and activism over time—and recognizing the prominent role that organized sports play in school settings—we wondered how, if at all, such realities are represented in contemporary works of sports-related young adult literature (YAL). Accordingly, we set out to investigate depictions of activism among youth athletes and coaches in award-winning and recommended works of sports-related YAL published during the last ten years. Specifically, our analysis was guided by the following questions: How is the activism of youth athletes depicted in award-winning works of sports-related YAL? Within these texts, how are coaches depicted in relation to youth athletes' activism?

Critical Media Literacy and Youth Activism

Our exploration of youth athlete activism depicted in selected works of sports-related YAL is framed by critical media literacy and scholarship addressing youth activism.

Critical Media Literacy

As a theoretical frame, critical media literacy (CML) disrupts the notion that media messages offer a clear, unvarnished look at the world as it actually exists. Instead, CML rests upon the understanding that no media message is neutral (Share 130), that all media messages use signs and symbols to present “selective versions of the world” (Buckingham 3) because they are made purposefully within social contexts by individuals or groups advancing one perspective or another. Moreover, the idea that audiences will receive media messages in similar and/or different ways depending on various contextual factors is also a central tenet of CML (Kellner and Share 3). Therefore, when considering media production and consumption through the lens

of CML, it holds that we must read media messages critically if we are to engage responsibly in civic life.

Reading media messages critically involves attending to the “politics of representation” (Kellner and Share 8). One of six conceptual understandings of CML that Kellner and Share outline, the politics of representation reflects the notion that particular perspectives, values, and ideologies will either be depicted in or absent from a given media message. This idea is especially relevant when studying representations of youth athletes, the causes youth athletes take up, and the coaches who hinder or enhance their activism in select works of YAL. As Masterman stresses, media messages are not reflections of reality; rather, they are constructions or representations of it (20). So, depending on how youth athletes, their activism, and the coaches in their lives are depicted, authors of sports-related YAL can either uplift or undermine established power relations, and they can either support or suppress the negative stereotypes so often associated with figures in the sports world.

When accounting for the politics of representation, the critical reading of media messages, including sports-related YAL, can be enhanced by posing questions like the following, which are informed by Hobbs:

- What points of view are not accounted for in this representation?
- How accurate is this depiction?
- How credible is this depiction?
- What might this representation say about the author's perspective or biases? (69)

Such questions informed our thinking as we set out to examine contemporary works of sports-related YAL with the aim of building new understandings about the depictions of youth athletes' activism and advocacy and the coaches who either frustrate them or facilitate their efforts.

Perspectives on Youth Activism

Youth activism, as defined by Flanagan and Levine, involves thought and action taken up by youth to effect sociopolitical change relating to self-selected issues (168-69). Youth tend to get involved in such practices when they witness or endure inequitable or oppressive social structures, and they then recruit other youth to join their cause. As well, youth who hold strong positive values and views about their identity markers tend to be drawn to activist practices (Preus et al. 73). Youth activism can not only work toward social justice and societal change but also lead to other important outcomes for young adults. It can support students' educational motivation because youth develop an understanding that to effect change they must become knowledgeable about disciplinary concepts and skills (Cammarota 840-41). For instance, it is difficult to work toward improving environmental conditions without understanding related scientific concepts. Youth activism also expands civic engagement since it involves analyzing oppressive social structures and political dialogue with others (Seider et al. 781). Finally, activist practices involve multiple and complex literacies—reading, writing, speaking, and doing—as youth work toward change (Haddix et al. 261). Rombalski also identifies practices of anti-racist youth organizers including the literacies involved with love and resistance, organizing and mobilizing, and the critical teaching of others (358). Essentially, youth activism can lead to well-rounded, productive citizens.

Like any other skill set, activist knowledge and practices must be cultivated (Cammarota 832). Yet, there are differing views on the most effective ways to accomplish this goal. Gordon and Taft argue that youth-led spaces can be more productive for enhancing youth activism than adult-led spaces because of the harmful ways an adult gaze affects young people. For example, they report the feelings of youth activists who indicated that adults using language related to

exceptionalism actually devalues all youth because it implies that young people are inherently disinterested in sociopolitical issues (1511). Moreover, in her study exploring school personnel's views on youth activism, Taines finds that school administrators want more control over youths' activist practices because they worry that these actions could clash with educational goals and routines. These administrators would rather students get involved in institutionally established committees and initiatives (164). She also reports that teachers who stated they supported youth activism included the caveat that students should not disrupt school goals and policies (169). Yet, in their study interviewing youth activists, Preus et al. report that youth wanted school administrators and teachers to intentionally discuss issues with them and support their activism (76). Because youth are probably better equipped to identify activist causes directly related to their own lives, youth activism should remain a grassroots, or bottom-up, endeavor. Still, it also seems that youth deserve and generally want adult support if provided in certain ways. We agree that school personnel should strive to support students' sociopolitical development and their activism, and that employing YAL that includes youth activism in secondary schools can be part of that endeavor.

Identifying Young Adult Selections and Character Analysis

To answer our research questions, we first identified relevant sports-related YAL by reviewing award/honor lists and professional review sites for the last ten years. The lists included the International Literacy Association's Children's and Young Adults' Book Awards, the American Library Association's Book Awards, and the Young Adult Library Services Association's (YALSA) Book Awards and Book Lists. We also noted YAL that earned starred reviews from *Kirkus* and *Booklist*. We used the following criteria while reviewing these lists: 1)

the novel was published in the last ten years, 2010-2019; 2) the story setting reflected contemporary realistic fiction; 3) the selection had earned multiple awards, honor-list recognition, and/or starred reviews; and 4) the story included youth athletes engaged in activism. The first two criteria were meant to narrow our study's scope to focus on stories that more closely reflect current social movements. We included the third criterion because publicly recognized YAL has more exposure to youth and teachers, and the fourth criterion was essential to answer our research questions.

After searching for works of sports-related YAL that met our criteria, we settled on four titles to include in the study: *Leverage* (Cohen), *The Running Dream* (Van Draanen), *All American Boys* (Reynolds and Kiely), and *Here to Stay* (Farizan). The novels include multiple sports—football, gymnastics, track, and basketball. Three of the four stories focus on the experiences of male teenagers, including Black, Iranian Jordanian, and white youth athletes. We recognize multiple limitations with the texts selected, including the depiction of just one female protagonist, minimal LGBTQ+ representation, and the fact that all coaches in the novels are cisgender white men. The next section includes a more complete synopsis for each novel.

Each author read all four selections in order to complete four analytical tasks (Prasad 23-6). First, we classified primary and secondary characters as coaches or youth athletes. The novels include seven youth athletes and five coaches central to the activism aspect of the stories. Second, we coded these characters for descriptors based on their personality traits, perspectives on important plot events, and interpersonal behaviors. Third, we identified key scenes of youth athletes and coaches engaging in various forms of activism, whether positive or negative. Finally, we recorded a general stance toward activism for each character. While completing these analytical steps, we met multiple times to discuss these descriptors and scenes to ensure that we

agreed on our characterization of the fictional youth athletes and coaches. Once all analyses were completed, we then determined themes across all four selections related to our research questions.

Researchers' Positionality

We both identify as white, cisgender males who recognize the role privilege plays in our lives and our scholarship. Throughout our careers as teachers and teacher educators, we have advocated for youth whose voices and worldviews have been marginalized, similar to the ways many of the fictional youth in the YAL included in this project are silenced and/or ignored despite the injustices they endure. As well, we intentionally engage in scholarship that works toward more equitable and socially just educational experiences for all learners, and this project exemplifies this endeavor.

Selected Sport-Related YAL Involving Activism

The four selections we identified during our search for relevant sports-related YAL address differing sociopolitical issues, including advocating for victims of sexual violence, ensuring that individuals with disabilities have equitable access to sports, protesting police brutality, and speaking out against Islamophobia.

Leverage by Joshua C. Cohen tells the story of Kurt Brodsky, a white star football player, and Danny Meehan, a white star gymnast, who attend Oregrove High School but initially live in two different worlds. Kurt has been recruited by Coach Briggs, who paid unsanctioned stipends to his foster mother. He also has a speech impediment that interferes with his ability to engage in schoolwork and make friends. Danny, on the other hand, lives with his father, does well in school, and achieves incredible artistic moves on the high bar. Their worlds collide, however,

when Kurt's teammates sexually assault gymnast Ronnie Gunderson, despite Kurt's attempts to stop them. After Ronnie dies by suicide in response to his pain, Danny and Kurt work together to seek justice for him by revealing the truth of the football players' actions and bringing down Coaches Briggs and Stein along with them. *Leverage* earned a starred review from *Booklist* and was listed on the 2012 YALSA Top Ten Best Fiction for Young Adults.

Wendelin Van Draanen's *The Running Dream* is about Jessica Carlisle, a 16-year-old, white track star whose dreams of continued sprinting success are shattered when one of her legs is amputated following a traffic accident. Jessica initially struggles to regain her confidence and adjust to a new normal. However, she comes to see new possibilities for herself while building a friendship with Rosa, who lives with cerebral palsy, and gaining inspiration from Coach Kyrokowski, who introduces her to the idea of returning to the track with a running prosthesis. As the story progresses, Jessica aims to help others see Rosa and not her condition. Jessica even dedicates herself to pushing the wheelchair-bound Rosa the full length of the 10-mile River Run, making a commitment to help her friend feel the triumph of crossing the finish line. *The Running Dream* received the Schneider Family Book Award, an American Library Association award recognizing stellar portrayals of disability experiences in YAL. The novel was also listed among the 2012 YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults and recognized among the 2013 YALSA Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults Top Ten.

The highly-acclaimed *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely addresses racism and police brutality through the lives of Rashad Butler, a Black ROTC student, and Quinn Collins, a white basketball player. When a police officer mistakenly believes Rashad was robbing a convenience store, he proceeds to beat him so badly during the arrest that he has to be hospitalized. Quinn witnesses the attack and, to complicate matters further, is friends with

the police officer's younger brother. As the story unfolds, Rashad must decide if he wants to be the focal point of community protests over the incident, and Quinn must decide if he is willing to set aside friendships to join the movement. Quinn and his teammates are also pressured by Coach Carney, his basketball coach, to not get involved; Carney threatens to bench anyone who does. Reynolds and Kiely's work was honored with the 2016 Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children's Literature and listed as a 2016 honor selection for the Coretta Scott King Book Awards, among other accolades.

In *Here to Stay* by Sara Farizan, Bijan Majidi, a JV basketball player of Iranian Jordanian heritage, is thrust into the spotlight at the Granger School after making the game-winning basket in a varsity playoff game, extending the Granger Gunners' season. As Bijan's profile rises, he joins a movement to replace the school's mascot with something nonviolent and culturally sensitive. However, things take a dark turn for Bijan when the student body receives an anonymous email with a photoshopped image that makes him look like a terrorist. With rumors swirling, tensions rise between Bijan and his teammates, yet he finds little support from Coach Johnson, who advises him to focus on basketball for the good of the team. *Here to Stay* has received recognition from multiple outlets, including appearances on the 2018 *Booklist* Top 10 Sports Books for Youth, the 2019 Rainbow Book List, and the 2020 YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers.

Youth Athletes, Their Coaches, and Activism

Our analysis revealed five themes regarding the representations of youth athletes, their coaches, and their activism across these four novels. Two themes focus on youth athletes, including their initial hesitations to get involved and their ultimate activism. Three themes focus

on the coaches, including coaches contributing to the problem, discouraging youth athletes' activism, and advocating for and supporting youth athlete activism.

Youth Athletes' Hesitations

All eight of the youth athletes in these stories initially do not know if or how they should take action about the injustices and movements occurring around them. Quinn from *All American Boys* is the greatest example of this hesitation, particularly as a white youth unsure of the exact experiences the Black community has with the police. As well, his position as a former protégé of the police officer who beat up Rashad and as a friend to Guzzo, the officer's brother and Quinn's teammate, further complicates his decision about what to think and/or do. Finally, he feels pressure from his teammates and coach to not get involved. As one teammate, Dwyer, tells him: "'Listen man,' [Dwyer] said. 'You've got to fix this. We got to get the team straight. We've got scouts coming, man. This is too big. This is our life, man. Our futures. Don't be a dick about it. Like Coach said. Leave it at the door. All of it, you know?'" (171). At this moment, Quinn is paralyzed about which side to take and what to do about it. Even the team's Black players, particularly English and Shannon, are initially hesitant to act because of the same team-first pressures, despite their friendship with Rashad.

In *Leverage*, Kurt stops the sexual assault on Ronnie by fighting Tom Jankowski and the other football players, thereby saving Danny from a similar attack, but he is then unsure what else he should do. In fact, Kurt and Danny pretend to be sick for a week to avoid school, implying they intend on maintaining their silence. Only Ronnie's suicide pushes them to act. Jessica from *The Running Dream* cannot find the will to act immediately after her accident, which is understandable due to the shock of losing a leg and grappling with the idea that she might never run again. Once she meets Rosa, who expresses her wish to feel what Jessica feels

when she runs, and becomes more comfortable running on her prosthesis, she decides that running for Rosa is the right thing to do. Bijan in *Here to Stay* is the most complex representation of a youth athlete's activism in these novels. He does join the movement to change the school mascot from the "Gunners" to something nonviolent and culturally sensitive (21-3). However, he later admits that he only joined so he could spend more time with his romantic interest, Elle. Later, when faced with Islamophobic aggression, he initially remains silent about how his teammates are treating him, despite the hate making him feel sick (60-1).

These youth athletes' hesitations are resolved through personal reflection and talking with others. For example, Quinn continually contemplates what he saw, how his teammates are responding, and his next steps. We see this internal grappling with Kurt and Danny as they determine ways to find justice for Ronnie, with Jessica as she works to humanize Rosa in others' eyes, and with Bijan as he characterizes his feelings about the prejudicial acts against him. As well, Bijan talks with a teammate, Marcus, about racism and the advice their parents gave them to avoid it (80). Kurt reveals to his newfound friend, Tina, everything that occurred, and she convinces him and Danny to take action (374-79). And Jessica speaks with Gavin, a burgeoning love interest, about her desire to run for Rosa, which he supports (290), and enlists her coach to set a running schedule so she can successfully complete the River Run (300-01). Once these youth athletes decide to take action, their activism is portrayed in two disparate ways.

Youth Athletes' Ultimate Activism

Mostly, these youth athletes employ traditional activist activities to address the sociopolitical issues and oppression present in their lives. Jessica, for example, speaks out when she hears deficit views about Rosa from her friends, declaring, "'She's my *friend* and a math genius,'" after Gavin asked who she is and Fiona whispered, "'She's got cerebral palsy'" (234).

She also raises awareness for cerebral palsy and people with disabilities by pushing Rosa in the River Run. Jessica wants everyone to see Rosa and her as people beyond their conditions.

Once Quinn decides to attend the community march in protest of police brutality, he makes it known to everyone that he intends to do so. He takes a white t-shirt and writes, “I’M MARCHING” on the front and “ARE YOU?” on the back and wears it to school (249-55). He also calls the police to make a statement about what he saw the day Rashad was beaten (285-86). English and Shannon make several protest statements prior to joining the march. English changes the name of the “Fist” play to “Rashad” during basketball practice to indicate his solidarity (256), and he and Shannon help plan the “die-in,” an act of resistance by lying on the ground at the protest march (281-82). Through this activism, these youth athletes demonstrate their desire to work toward social justice.

Bijan, too, uses traditional activist activities to address the mascot issue and to combat Islamophobia within his team and his school. He joins Stephanie, Elle, and Noah to collect mascot petition signatures to present to school administration (28-9). After a particularly racist incident at a basketball game, Bijan decides to address the entire student body to defend his humanity by explaining who he is—a youth who enjoys playing basketball and reading—and who he is not—a terrorist (243-45). Through his actions against violence-promoting mascots and with his speech, Bijan conveys his views about peace and justice.

Kurt and Danny, however, use more subversive activism to seek justice for Ronnie. Kurt gets in a fight with one of the perpetrators, Mike Studblatz, during football practice, repeating “Ronnie Gunderson” to show he has not forgotten what Studblatz did (284). Danny and a teammate deface the perpetrators’ football lockers with the words “Ronnie Gunderson” and “Murderer!” (289-91). After stopping another attack on the gymnasts, Kurt secretly records the

perpetrators' confession (368-71) and then plays the tape to Coach Brigs and the entire team during the next game's halftime (395-99). Danny helps by bursting into the locker room to confirm the attack on Ronnie, and Kurt announces he will not play if the perpetrators also play in the second half (404-10). What they do not know is that Tina is playing the entire conversation on the stadium Jumbotron so their confrontation is very public. Although their activism begins with subversive acts of resistance, they ultimately find justice for Ronnie.

Coaches Contributing to the Problem

While youth athletes are presented championing various causes across the novels we analyzed, coaches in *Leverage* and *Here to Stay* are depicted contributing to the problems that youth athletes are actively fighting.

Kurt and Danny's pursuit of justice is driven by Kurt's teammates sexually assaulting Ronnie, yet that brutal act itself reflects the toxic masculinity that Coach Brigs promotes. At various points, Brigs encourages violence, hurls homophobic slurs, and wields sexist rhetoric to emasculate players, all of which is displayed in one mid-game tirade: "I don't care if you have to sucker punch those sons of bitches...Step on their feet, or leg-whip someone, but by God, if you keep letting half their defense slip by you, letting them dance past you like swishy faggots...I'm making you wear a dress at Monday practice" (240-41). The coach's negative influence on the field is evident off it, for the players who raped Ronnie use the same homophobic slur while exercising violence in an abhorrent show of power. Further, rather than seek answers regarding his players' involvement in events leading to Ronnie's death, Brigs derides Ronnie as "soft" and calls his suicide "selfish" and "cowardly" (208). In those ways and others, Brigs contributes to the problems that Kurt and Danny are working against.

Coach Nelson, Danny's gymnastics coach, advocates on his athletes' behalf, yet he also unwittingly puts them in harm's way, contributing to the novel's central problem. While advocating for gymnasts to have equal access to the varsity weight room, which most football players oppose, Nelson tricks the football team. Nelson's proposed deal calls for gymnasts to get weight-room access whenever they want if one of them shows greater strength than a football player while completing one lift of Nelson's choosing (41). The football players are confident after selecting the massive Jankowski to represent them against Danny, but Nelson's ace in the hole is the exercise itself: hanging leg lifts, which only the gymnasts do (44). The trick grants gymnasts weight-room access but not without significant costs. Nelson's stunt positions Danny and Ronnie to be ridiculed as weak links by the football players, who openly belittle them as "midget pussies" and "twin needledicks" (43). Subsequently, Danny feels as though Nelson betrayed his trust (44). Additionally, it results in Danny and Ronnie being targeted by Jankowski and other football players, who strike when Nelson leaves the gymnasts unattended, creating an opportunity for the brutal attack on Ronnie.

In *Here to Stay*, Bijan is forced to advocate for himself when he becomes the subject of rumors and the butt of jokes about his heritage, and his basketball coach only alienates him further. Throughout the story, Coach Johnson calls Bijan "B" instead of his full name; it is a microaggression that Bijan feels compelled to address mid-game after enduring Islamophobic taunts from the crowd. Bijan tells Johnson he will continue playing only if the coach says his name: "You haven't said my name since I've started playing for you. I don't know if you're embarrassed that you won't pronounce it right or if I'm another anonymous cog in your basketball machine, but I'd like you to say my name before I go out there" (230). Bijan's

teammates Marcus and Drew stand beside him, forcing Johnson to say Bijan's name. So, though Bijan's coach contributes to his feelings of oppression, he finds allies in that moment.

Coaches Discouraging Youth Athlete Activism

Multiple coaches in these novels are also depicted actively discouraging activism among youth athletes. That includes Coach Carney in *All American Boys* and Coach Johnson in *Here to Stay*. They suggest that any attention paid to sociopolitical issues distracts from the team's goal of winning basketball games. It is a stance they are privileged to take.

Carney, Quinn's basketball coach, prioritizes winning over confronting the issues tearing apart the team, school, and community. Following the assault on Rashad, Carney tells the team, "There's all kinds of pressure going on out there, at school, in your lives back home. You leave it all at the door of this gym. In this gym we're only Falcons, you hear me?" (138). According to English, Carney threatens to use playing time as a cudgel against those discussing the assault: "Coach Carney won't let us talk about it... Says we gotta focus on the team and our season, and that's it, and to leave all this stuff at the door. Said he'd bench anybody who brought it on the court" (158). Carney forbids players from even talking about police violence, so it is no surprise that he outlaws protests, too, closing practice by warning the team, "No parties, and no protests, you hear me?" (224). Categorizing parties and protests as equally troubling behavior only underscores Carney's negative view of youth activism.

Johnson expresses similar views when he invites Bijan to join the varsity basketball team for the season's final games. The first sign of his resistance toward Bijan's activism related to changing the school mascot comes when he declines Stephanie's invitation to sign their petition (37). Johnson's negative view of Bijan's activism becomes clearer when he advises him, "We're going to need you to focus. Best not to waste your time on any political movements or whatever

is going on over there” (38). Stressing the need to focus, he suggests that engaging in activism is not only detrimental to the team but a waste of Bijan’s time. Johnson’s outright dismissal of youth activism in the name of team success is not unlike Carney’s approach.

Carney and Johnson are white, and both are dismissive of youth activism that opposes racism, a threat to the well-being of the players they serve. As white men in the United States, they are more likely to get the benefit of the doubt from a police officer than a Black teen like Rashad in *All American Boys*, and they are less likely to be stereotyped as terrorists than Bijan, an Iranian Jordanian teen, in *Here to Stay*. Their whiteness affords them the privilege of focusing narrowly on winning basketball games rather than standing in solidarity with youth athletes fighting the scourge of racism in their respective communities. Ultimately, though, despite Carney and Johnson’s discouragement, youth athletes in both novels opt to stand against racism.

Coaches Advocating for and Supporting Youth Athlete Activism

Not all of the coaches in these novels are depicted obstructing the activism of youth athletes. Coach Nelson is shown advocating for youth athletes in *Leverage* as described previously, yet Coach Kyrokowski (aka Kyro), Jessica’s track coach in *The Running Dream*, is the only one who does so without repercussions. By actively advocating for Jessica to return to the track and be part of the team as she recovers from her amputation, Kyro is represented as a model of activism for Jessica, who goes on to advocate for Rosa, hoping others will see her friend and not her friend’s condition. He supports her in that endeavor as well.

Kyro’s own activism is most evident following Jessica’s return to school after surgery. He shows Jessica videos of successful sprinters who have relied on prostheses, helping her imagine running again (143). He organizes the “Help Jessica Run” campaign, complete with four committees dedicated to raising funds for a prosthesis Jessica can use on the track (144). He

defends Jessica's attendance at a track meet when an opponent calls her "a distraction" (173). He also helps draw attention to Jessica's story and the fundraising campaign by contributing to media coverage from the local newspaper (198) and television station (239). In those ways, Kyro is depicted engaging in activism and advocacy that stand as models for Jessica, whose advocacy on behalf of Rosa follows a similar trajectory, from speaking out to challenge people focused on Rosa's condition (234) to participating in awareness-raising media coverage (306).

As Jessica prepares for her most intense display of activism—pushing a wheelchair-bound Rosa the length of the River Run—Kyro supports her efforts. Arguably his greatest contribution comes in the form of helping her train for the grueling race, accounting for her cardiovascular training, her weight training, and her diet (302). Then on race day, Jessica reveals that she and others, including cross-country volunteers, are wearing "TEAM ROSA" T-shirts, which Kyro helped to design in another show of advocacy (320). So, rather than contributing to the othering of people with (dis)abilities or discouraging Jessica's activism, Kyro is an ally who helps her see her activism through and cheers her on every step of the way.

Discussion and Recommendations

Across these four YA novels, there are youth athletes taking a stand against important sociopolitical issues present in their lives, schools, and sports, but there are athletic coaches impeding their progress toward making a difference. These fictional youth athletes are portrayed in positive ways as they grapple with how best to respond to social injustice and ultimately take action. Most—including Bijan; Quinn, English, and Shannon; and Jessica—are careful to choose productive methods, such as distributing petitions, marching in protests, and raising awareness. Although initially Kurt uses violence and Danny uses vandalism, they also eventually use

subversive recordings to reveal their teammates' crimes. Additionally, the horrific nature of the issue and its tragic outcome in *Leverage* could explain why Kurt and Danny react disparately from other youth athletes in these stories. Relatedly, there are youth athletes engaging in violence and racism in these stories too, which should not be overlooked, and asking students to engage in such stories with a CML stance can help them identify both positive and negative representations of youth in sports-related YAL. Yet, it is important for readers to witness fictional youth athletes engaged in youth activism to encourage their own activism. These portrayals provide new possibilities for how youth might work toward social justice in their own communities.

For the coaches, other than Kyro, their behavior could be explained in two ways. First, it is common for depictions of fictional coaches to rely upon stereotypical perspectives, namely that coaches solely care about winning and will compromise any principles to achieve that goal (Rodesiler and Lewis 35). Brigs, Carney, and Johnson are all portrayed in this manner, with whiteness affording the basketball coaches the privilege of dismissing acts of racism in favor of pursuing victories. Recognizing that protagonists need antagonists, it seems problematic that coaches are more often portrayed as villains, or at least obstacles, to youth activism in these novels. As part of a CML analysis, therefore, readers should question such representations in terms of their accuracy and credibility to the coaches in their own lives (Hobbs). Second, adults continue to have deficit-based views of youth and these views seep into sports-related YAL (Lewis and Rodesiler 135). Part of the motivation for these coaches to discourage youth activism seems to be that they do not trust youth athletes to engage in activism and play sports at a high level. This perspective maps onto educational scholarship reporting that educators do not completely expect youth to engage in activism in productive ways (Taines 164-69). From a CML perspective, it is vital to disrupt such deficit-based views of youth, which is why Kyro is an

important character in sports-related YAL. Youth have indicated that they want adults to support their activism (Preus et al. 76), so having an asset-based representation of how that could be accomplished provides a model for burgeoning youth activists and their educators.

Using sports-related YAL that includes youth activism can support students' educational and civic engagement. We believe both English language arts and social studies teachers could include such stories in their curriculum to discuss sociopolitical issues, how those issues are presented in the media, and the ways youth can get involved. It is particularly important to include all students in such conversations on social justice and civic engagement, so students with diverse backgrounds can share and listen to divergent perspectives (Gordon and Taft 1508). Additionally, there is a great need to increase the opportunities for youth and teachers to engage in civic education to build a positive school climate for youth activism (Preus et al. 80).

Authors of YAL should not overly rely on stereotypical representations of coaches. As indicated in our introduction, there are actual coaches doing this work, yet that is not what we saw in our selected texts. There is some verisimilitude in these fictional coaches, but youth deserve to read about a wide range of coaches they might encounter in secondary schools to disrupt such stereotypes. Finally, athletic coaches should be supportive of youth athlete activists to advance the goals of raising students' educational and civic engagement. They are often viewed as role models by youth and the larger community, so they have a responsibility to provide guidance for youth and their activism.

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