

Colin Kaepernick's graphic memoir 'Change the Game' pictures mental health for adoptees. Lies, too.

By Korean adoptee and therapist Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC
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SUMMARY: Colin Kaepernick's graphic memoir 'Change the Game' has drawn much criticism from the community. Here I want to celebrate and affirm Kaepernick's activism related to transracial adoption. And explore the connection between adoption and the way people worship themselves and others; on and off the field; in and out of institutionalized child welfare. *Examples, implications, and applications are provided for adoptees and allies.

Key words: adoption, transracial adoption, narcissism, activism, child welfare, mental health

Former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick started taking a knee during the national anthem in 2016 to mark his rejection of racial injustice and police brutality.

As journalist Adriana Diaz of CBS Morning News reported during [her interview with Kaepernick](#), "this single gesture sparked both solidarity and outrage."

After that season, Colin couldn't get hired. It cost him his career.

"We reach out to all 32 teams, every year throughout the year. Because my biggest things is, just let me get on the field. If I'm not good enough, cut me. But, give me the chance to show you what I can do."

Kaepernick recently published his graphic novel [Change the Game](#). He and co-author Eve Ewing talked further with Diaz about his story and why he's interested in telling it.

As an adoptee and licensed clinical counselor, I was encouraged throughout the interview. Here I'd like to offer some of those reactions as they relate to adoption, faith, and activism. Because...

Some of you left church in search of Jesus. Not that he wasn't there. But they made you feel like part of you had to stay home in order for you to meet him.

Football is nothing like church. And Colin Kaepernick isn't Jesus.

And, I want to explore the connection between adoption and the way people worship themselves and others; on and off the field; in and out of institutionalized child welfare.

In 2019 Kaepernick launched his own [publishing company](#) and, as we'll discuss, the steps leading up to this point were not guaranteed, easy, or welcomed:

"Founded by Colin Kaepernick in 2019, Kaepernick Publishing strives to elevate a new generation of writers with diverse views and voices through the creation of powerful works of all genres that can build a better and more just world."

*CONTENT NOTE: adoption, trauma, loss, grief, abuse, death

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LOOK WHO'S TALKING

The stadium probably isn't the most obvious example of overt cult-like devotion to person or principle. Neither is an adoption agency. And that's why it works so well. No one's looking. Why?

Because it's typically adoptive parents and non-adoptees who teach and speak about adoption.

Kaepernick isn't the first and only adoptee to challenge that power dynamic. Also, he isn't waiting for his parents to die in order to tell his story.

That's great news because it means we're allowed to communicate needs to [and about] our caregivers while they're still alive.

In the process of making all things new, what a great thing to be able to participate in that all the way through our senior years.

"I know my parents love me, but there were still very problematic things that I went through. I think it was important to show that, no, this can happen in your own home, and how do we move forward collectively while addressing the racism that is being perpetuated."

New York Post published the headline, "Colin Kaepernick accuses white adoptive parents of 'problematic' upbringing, perpetuating racism"

Twitter users then shared their mutual criticism::

D3fault & @shlobbyknobkins on Mar 10
Replying to @mutohd and @nypost

"Nearly? He's literally the one who injected all this political activism into sporting events for his own image, it's like the equivalent of someone ranting about their wife leaving them at the bar... wrong place and time, and totally foul to people trying to enjoy themselves"

T.J. Moe & @TJMoe28 on Mar 10
Replying to @nypost

"Racist people wouldn't have saved his ungrateful, brainless butt out of an orphanage. This dude is absolutely insufferable."

Sheelagh Blumberg ® @shylove on Mar 10
Replying to @TJMoe28 and @nypost

"Agreed he is beyond ungrateful and should respect the parent who raised him well and gave him opportunities he never would have had being in an orphanage"

The criticism was hackneyed and redundant. And expected. It's what happens when you exchange truth for a lie and call it "adoption."

Is it a coincidence that "Satan" means "accuser" or "adversary" in Hebrew? Kaepernick is demonized for his activism as an adoptee.

Neighbors typically don't react like that when a person in pain asks for medical assessment and support. Can you imagine a picket line in front of a hospital with people yelling, "But look at what you *do* have in your life!! How dare you come in here and ask for help! And don't even think about letting *our* children know they can ask for help, too!"

You'd never. Because part of being human is believing it's ok to ask for help. That's why babies cry during and after birth. Their bodies believe it's ok to ask for help. And the only way they know how is to cry. And when caregivers listen, they respond accordingly with warmth and soothing; going so far as to modify the environment if needed (e.g., it's cold so turn up the heat or put on a sweater; it's loud so turn down the volume; bath is too hot so pour in some cold water, etc). This is what some folks call *attachment*.

Yes there's some science to it. There's also something in our spirit that compels us to reach out and help in any way we can. Education informs our love. Love fuels us to continue learning more about it. It's growth in grace. Should it all stop when we learn to walk and talk? Probably not. Most likely our needs, strengths, and supports evolve.

How can we bring that compassion and common sense into conversations about race, justice, and transracial adoption, especially as it relates to the mental health of current youth who experience foster care and adoption today?

We give adoptees space to transmit their knowledge outward. We ask them to report out. Tell us what that was like. We don't force it, it's not coerced, but when it's offered, we attend to it as a birth of a new universe of possibilities. Their story helps us all do and be better.

FOUL SERVICE

How can we serve others if they're not allowed to share their feedback?

Can you imagine, a system that matches children with different families but never asks, "Hey, how did that work out for you?"

It makes sense for a system of saviorism to not hear from adoptees at all.

But that runs counter to what adoption claims to do in the first place, doesn't it?

You can't serve us by silencing us.

In keeping us quiet you serve yourselves.

One of the major critiques about Kaepernick is that he used his platform as an athlete to address injustice. As the commenter said previously, *"wrong place and time, and totally foul to people trying to enjoy themselves."*

We might not immediately consider adoption a place where people have tried to enjoy themselves, but when you look at the movement and culture of white saviorism along with the way being an adoptive parent is regarded in today's world, it's worth exploring.

"A white savior complex is formed when White people cling to a narrative that people of color need their help in order to have a better life." -Pastor Osheta Moore

People have no problem helping when it suits them with status. Our needs are only valid so long as they benefit those who can meet them. But for those knit beyond their imagination, we are just ungrateful for practicing any kind of lament, labor, asking, or justice. Be saved, but don't be sharpened. Embrace your rescue and the identity that comes with it. Don't think through these things, just fold your arms and enjoy the slumber. Any kind of awakening is too political and divisive. We're just trying to enjoy our football game. We're just trying to enjoy our life as an adoptive family. Why are you bothering us with your existential questions and your grief. You'd still be in an orphanage if it wasn't for us. Or dead.

Submit to authority the way Jesus did; but only the dying part. No giving sight or setting captives free. No singing new songs. No pointing out the specs in our eyes. That's reserved for administrators of adoption to justify their placing children from one family into another.

"The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege." -Teju Cole

The default belief, "Adoption guarantees the child a better life," leaves us with a scarcity of post-adoption services. Meaning, there aren't as many resources to support those adopted individuals later on in their lives. Instead, they were treated like a barcode [case number] sent out to a happily ever after. That's why people are so upset when adoptees ask for help. They assume all we needed was a white family and a roof over our heads. Unless we affirm and serve the white savior narrative and the big emotional experience attached to it, adoptees are reduced to the non-human status in which we they were found.

Humans are allowed to cry out for help. Adoptees are only allowed to cry out in gratitude. That's foul.

What happens when those mediating narratives live unchecked?

I think about the teen adoptee who wishes she could be in a classroom without having to worry about racist comments made about and to her. When she spoke to a teacher about it, they ignored her. The comments persisted, so she pushed back. She's the one who gets sent to the seclusion room.

There's also the girl who told police she was being abused at home. They didn't believe her. She escaped. They brought her back.

And the adoptee who told their neighbors about their concerns, but ended up missing. And then dead.

One teen adoptee told me they purposefully made friends with a popular white peer at school [who harasses people of color] "for my survival." They said it was the "only way." For them, their coping strategy was to join the perpetrator(s). They were getting into too many fights at school and when this social opportunity came around they noticed significantly less threats on their day-to-day walk through the hallway. They said, "Usually that takes years, I kind of skipped the line."

Their wish was granted. At whose expense? Yes, the victims paid for it; through this peer mocking and assaulting them daily. But also for this adoptee. The internal conflicts they were holding, the personal incongruence was taking a toll on their growing sense of morality, ethics, decision-making skills, and academic functioning. "School" was where their sense of identity was being hammered out, formed, extinguished, erased, expressed, all at the same time. It's also where they wondered if there'd be an atonement for the shame and guilt they felt. What else could they do?

John Hawki... & @johnhawkinsr... on Mar 10
Replying to @nypost

"If your ideology leads you to publicly betray your parents to try get attention, there's something wrong with your ideology."

Transracial adoption is often an inescapable journey of betrayal. Someone will be pushed to the margins. It's usually just a question of who [hint: not white adoptive parents]. It makes sense why many want to abolish it.

WRONG IDEOLOGY

"Role entitlement is an attitude of demanding certain treatment because of your social role. When parents feel entitled to do what they want simply because they're in the role of parent, this is a form of role entitlement. They act as though being a parent exempts them from respecting boundaries or being considerate." -Lindsay Gibson

Role entitlement can bleed into adoptive families, too. The way they speak can heavily influence an adoptee's ability to make or embrace meanings about their story. For some, it can be a struggle to make sense of their origins when their adoptive family constellation (including extended family and friends) are comfortable demonizing, dehumanizing, or objectifying birth family and culture. "Your birth mom was a [fill in the blank] and that's why she couldn't take care of you."

Diaz opened up more of that dialogue with Kaepernick and Ewing during their interview:

"'Oh your hair's not professional' - 'oh you like look a little thug.'"

"Your mom said that to you." Diaz clarified.

"Yeah, and those become spaces where it's like, 'Ok, how do I navigate this situation now?' But it also has informed why I have my hair long today."

Ewing shared, "The grown-up version of Eve wanted to go back in time and give young Colin a lot of hugs... and I was really moved and saddened by the level of the kind of self awareness that he had to develop at a very young age without a lot of guidance."

Role entitlement isn't limited to single actors. It's also systemic. Especially in transracial adoption, there are longstanding inequities that work against communities of color, in the U.S. and around the globe. And it shapes the way some agencies treat some of the children they've placed for adoption. Those power dynamics often marginalize and disrupt families - while the institutional values and patterns that create such hardship operate without accountability. I've felt that in my own search and reunion journey.

ENTITLED TO NARCISSISM

Trauma counselor Dr. Diane Langberg speaks about narcissism in the local church and I wonder how it maps onto this dialogue on the adoption industrial complex and racial reconciliation:

"We adopt the grandiosity of thought as it makes us feel good: we will build, we will grow, we will draw them in. We will care for the poor, we will develop ministries, we will raise money, we will make a difference, and we are seduced into believing the illusion and thinking we are doing it all for God. Along with the narcissist we set ourselves and our system in the center. Christ is on the circumference, as if he were some satellite of a moon, shining brightly for our special group alone."

Narcissism may not be the clinical diagnoses, but I do think of it from time to time as I navigate correspondence with my adoption agency in Korea, the stack of paperwork it has taken just to receive information about my origins, and the ambiguity in messaging as I've requested to meet with my birth mother throughout the past 12 months. It's the vulnerable person's burden to ask for these things. Not the agency's. Because I should just be grateful I'm not still in a Korean orphanage. The great work is done.

Langberg talks about *prey* and you can imagine how it fits for adoptees and birth families:

"A depressed, struggling, hungry system - be it a family, a nation, a church, or an organization - is easy prey for a narcissist. He believes he can deliver the moon, or perhaps believes he is the moon. He seems to bring hope, promise, life, and growth. The faith of the struggling system is placed in him - subtly, not seeing that it is a misplaced hope. Rescue is on the way. A champion has appeared on the horizon. He is a master of words and stirs hearts. The pied piper is playing his

tune, and unwittingly the people follow like sheep without a shepherd. Thinking he is coming to feed them, they do not see that they are going to be food for him.”

You might read something like Bertha Holt’s The Seed from the East and draw connections; you might not. It could feel like betrayal. It could feel shameful to see a forefather of adoption through a non-god-like lens. Wrong place and wrong time, as they say.

When the time is right, though, you could research cases of traffickers who’ve taken advantage of communities in the ways Langberg described, or look into which countries have colluded to establish and maintain these kinds of agreements over time. Some governments admit to them. But what does it take to get to that point? Which ones still need to get there? Who’s still promising the moon?

“What is hidden from view is that those being brought along into this grand vision do not see that ultimately the grand vision is simply the self of the narcissist and not God at all, and those accompanying him are merely supporting actors in his play of self-magnification.” -Dr. Diane Langberg

Because of micro- and macro-level dynamics like Role Entitlement, society typically tends to read a book like Colin’s from the adopter’s point of view. How does it make the adopters feel?

The sense of entitlement is one of the first dominos to fall. It’s not all of the sudden that we deal with narcissism in adoption. It takes decades. Eventually, though, we get to a point where someone reflects on their journey openly and they’re called “insufferable” - sellout - ungrateful.

Law and sociology professor Dr. Dorothy Roberts writes extensively about state-sanctioned entitlement in her books *Shattered Bonds* and *Torn Apart*. In an article for Dissent Magazine, Roberts reported:

“The child welfare system is a powerful state policing apparatus that functions to regulate poor and working-class families – especially those that are Black, Latinx, and Indigenous – by wielding the threat of taking their children from them.”

Along with state entitlement, the general public is an effective line of defense against justice. Kaepernick’s critics help illustrate that. A human shield, ironically, for the system that marginalizes humans. Many adoptees end up having to learn how to get past it all.

GETTING OVER IT: SEARCH & REUNION

The over simplified adoption narrative also shapes birth search and reunion. Dealing with an adoption agency bears resemblance to dealing with an abusive narcissist. Having to feign courtesies to access common courtesies most people take for granted. Like, truth. Or humanization.

Personally in my search, it’s been a theatrical gymnastic routine to gratify or predict the whim of a social worker. Are they in a good mood today? Not sure. Emailed a friendly request for info? Who cares. Are they overloaded with cases like mine? Maybe? Do they have a clue about how deep the malpractice goes? Who knows. Are they just trying to get their paycheck and keep the lights on at home? Who could blame them? My widowed mom tried to make ends meet and ended up having to relinquish her child for adoption. It’s rough out there.

So, and still, it makes sense that some adoptees have resorted to physical force/violence to get their records from across the counter, and why others would bring large “gifts” to show their appreciation just to coax out a little insight about their origins. The line between truth and false teaching got lost in Korean Air when it started escorting children internationally for non-refundable professional fees. Many of us are simply trying to make that word flesh again. Truth. For lies.

Adoption is love? The slogan is the abuser’s best friend walking past the victim on the side of the road. Sure. We’ll take your children. And send them across the world. But you? Judgment and condemnation. Be more like the church. Or, send more of your children to our “forever families.” Don’t even think about asking how we might help you become one yourselves. You’ve been matched. Or...

Just put your baby in this box. That’s not foul. That’s love. Co-create or help cultivate social supports to alleviate the shame and partiality surrounding incredibly personal and complex situations? That’s politics. Why mix the two. Why consider how one might welcome the other. Love and law don’t mix. Sorry. Not sorry.

Just let them go. When they grow up they’ll praise God for the work He’s done in their lives. How could He possibly work in their life right now? Or yours? Besides, they might even come back and join a Korean church. A testimony to the way God so loved the world that he gave...

God keeps, too, by the way. Isn’t it possible?

Not when adoption is god. We become what we worship. And we destroy everything else that stands in our way. Langberg describes it clearly:

“...unwittingly the people follow like sheep without a shepherd. Thinking he is coming to bring hope and change and growth to them, they fail to see that if they do not deliver such goods to him, he will be enraged and lay the blame at their feet accusing them of not wanting to do right, not being submissive to God, not having enough understanding and so they have become the obstacle to all the greatness or good he could have brought.”

The adoption industrial complex is one of the great seductions of our times. Previous, too.

And Kaepernick seems to be an obstacle to all that greatness (along with many others, myself included).

But how many adoption agencies have led families to the slaughter in the name of God? And what's it like for adoptees to have to learn how to interact with those systems and the ones who operate them? Just to get our records - and maybe even meet the people who are a part of them.

“Hi! Just wanted to check in again about that possible meeting with birth family!... [that I asked about two months ago, and again last month, no response] Thanks for all of your hard work and dedication to adoptees and families!”

For me, it's been exhausting. But what other option do we have? It's either the smiley-face saturated correspondence or we risk becoming the “angry adoptee.” Wrong place wrong time. Foul. Beyond ungrateful. And it's a dilemma for all ages.

For agency staff and nearly anyone else observing this public discourse, there's no other choice. Some people are already reading this thinking, “This feels a little angry, he must be dealing with something. Our family's case is different. Our adoption agency would never do that. Our church would never.”

ENDGAME

We tend to center the adopters because we've always tended to center the adopters. That's what white saviorism does. And it feels betrayed when others speak. Or when our words turn from white-affirmative to Word-oriented.

But Kaepernick challenges that.

He wants us to consider a different point of view.

Diaz asked, “Why did you choose that day, and to protest in that way?”

“That's actually something we're gonna dive deep into with the doc that's coming this fall. But as it relates to the book, people may look at that moment and be like, ‘Oh, you must have been this person all along.’ It's like no, there's growth that has to happen.”

People can and should grow! But too often in mental health settings the emphasis is about what behavior the adoptee/teen can change. What could it look like to address the environment, too? That seems to be a major question Kaepernick seeks to ask with his story.

Kaepernick's ongoing ban from the NFL illustrates the process of adoptees challenging the zeitgeist of institutionalized adoption; save that fact that many of us are not trying to join the system. For example, you might foster or adopt because you were adopted, too (along with many other reasons). You also might not adopt, because you were adopted (along with many other reasons).

Diaz provided a mini commentary for us through her question, “Colin, what is it like for you all these years later to be pushing, and still not getting a yes?”

“Very similar to the messaging of the book is, I don't have control over all of the situations. But, I control how I respond to it. I control how I prepare for it. I'm a believer that, in doing that, good things will happen.”

Diaz asked, “In 2020 what did it feel like for you to see almost everyone wake up?”

Ewing answered, “In thinking about what impact looks like, it's so much bigger than changing one system or one league. What does it mean for all of us to be faced as we invariably are with really tough decisions about what it means to do good in the world. And how do we inspire one another to make different decisions when that time arises.”

Colin added:

“Part of the goal in telling the story is to take pride in your blackness, take pride in your culture, my hope is, young people and readers, walk away, and they seize their power.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADOPTEES

Diaz asked Kaepernick why he pursued football instead of baseball.

“There were a lot more Black people in football and I was like, ‘I’ve found some community here.’”

Scripture is full of people leaving their home in order to meet Jesus face to face.

Where do you need to go this season to find these parts of your story represented? Where the fullness of your personhood can be seen by others; by many or even by one person who is able and willing. What difference could it make for you?

One of the main tasks of adolescence and adulthood is to differentiate from our immediate family constellation. This means there’s a life stage in which it’s appropriate to individuate, separate, and become independent from family, while simultaneously remaining connected to some degree. Consciousness isn’t always comfortable, though. How have you managed that process and any expectations that have come along with it?

Especially if your transracially adoptive parents insist race doesn’t matter. In “Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging,” sociologist Eleana J. Kim writes:

“This crucial stage in the adoptee journey is one marked by disidentification in which they recognize that they fit neither the dominant mono-racial constructions of America as white nor ethnocentric constructions of Koreanness, whether among South Koreans or Korean Americans.”

Does any part of that process resonate with yours right now?

As adoptees, we are allowed to carve meaning into our stories so that we can feel confident, satisfied, and hopeful about who we are and where we belong in the world, from womb to tomb. That need can be expressed in a thousand different ways, behaviors, tones, and intensities.

Kaepernick is doing it through publishing and film. He can’t and shouldn’t be the final word on it, though, lest we risk recapitulating the notion that one size fits all. Your story matters likewise whether you present it publicly or work it out privately through your personhood.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ALLIES & SUPPORTERS

Whether or not transracial adoption is wrong is an entire public discourse. Here, I believe demonizing adoptees who speak out about it is wrong. Love doesn’t lie. [Colin, if you’re reading this, thanks for giving us pictures of what that looks like for adoption]

Colin Kaepernick shouldn’t have to feel grateful for the racism he experienced through transracial adoption. He shouldn’t have to stay silent about it either.

Kaepernick has done his best to give us more nuanced pictures of what has historically been reduced to a letter-board “adopt me!” announcement.

In other words, truth revealed through Kaepernick’s story is an expression of what’s already written in our hearts. He’s simply proclaiming it through the context of his lived experience and personal access to resources.

The crime would be to lie and remain complicit in what he already knows to be wrong. Namely, to force young children to silently enter relationships outside of their families, and call us ungrateful for sharing stories about what that looks and feels like.

Kaepernick’s story isn’t everyone’s. But it’s gonna give a lot of adoptees hope that we’re allowed to talk about the parts of adoption that don’t feel like love. Game-changer indeed.

And maybe it’s not solely about “what’s wrong with church.” But what’s right about Christ. And what’s true and noble and loving. What’s anti-racist. What isn’t. And where do we get all that. What’s keeping us from it? Who’s helping us through it? What dominos of restoration could we initiate together?

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Is the goal to parent in a way our kids won’t need to heal from?

I’ve already failed.

Is the goal to remain open to hearing about it, reconciling when possible, that we could return to our gift at the altar?

Love is patient enough and kind enough, and it would take whatever fears come up for us and replace them with Truth. That’s a Way that leads to Life.

We all want a good life for our kids, don't we? The unfair trade would be to keep our children silent to serve our own reputations. I'll need to account for this someday. The Constructive Displeasure of Mercy allows us to say, "I'm against that" while simultaneously pursuing what we were all made for. Mutual delight. Milk and honey. Streams of living water for all those who thirst, neighbor and kin alike. You might find that in the church pew; and you might need to leave the stadium and meet one another in the streets and city gates. Tear something down, even. Wherever it is, isn't it Wisdom who calls us from afar and within? From the highest point along the way, where paths meet, near the entrance, crying aloud; could this be where our intersectionalities come to life?

When adoptees speak, please don't submit to your own fears and defensiveness. Instead, ask how Word and Truth are working in and through the speaker and their message. There's an opposition that comes for the proud, just as favor is already conspiring to bless the humble. Could a plan like that change the world?

And how much will it cost the adoptee community to not find out? Place and time are important, certainly. But not at the expense of people; many of whom could still be alive today had their communities been more open to a kingdom beyond their own.

Dear Colin, I'm cheering for you. Thanks for being you and inviting us to be just as honest. For families today and future generations. -Cam

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