

The Black Hero's Journey
A Review of *Colin in Black and White*

Colin in Black and White, created by Ava DuVernay and Colin Kaepernick, ARRAY Filmworks and Netflix, 2021. *Netflix*, netflix.com/title/80244479

In August 2016, Colin Kaepernick, a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers of the National Football League (NFL), protested racial injustice by silently sitting (and later kneeling) during the US National Anthem (Wyche). Kaepernick's demonstration ignited a political firestorm, with some hailing him as a trailblazer for Black freedom, others disparaging him as an ungrateful traitor, and still others insisting that what actually divided Americans was not Kaepernick but the racism he challenged. All the while, Kaepernick remained steadfast to his cause, both on and off the field (kaepernick7). Ultimately, his resolve cost him his job: though no serious student of football doubts that Kaepernick was an NFL-caliber quarterback, by March 2017 he was effectively blackballed from the league (Bois; Lockhart).

By then, Kaepernick was an international icon. Among other accolades, *Time* magazine named him among the world's one hundred most influential people (Harbaugh). At the award ceremony, Kaepernick met another recipient, Ava DuVernay—a filmmaker who has produced many celebrated works, including several that explored the Black experience in America, such as *Selma* and *13th*. After the event, Kaepernick and DuVernay kept in touch. In a November 2017 interview, DuVernay discussed Kaepernick's past, present, and future, noting that he was both "walking history" and seeking new means of shaping the world. Perhaps privy to his plans, she added, "And I believe he'll find a way to do that" (Madison).

Kaepernick did. He founded a media production company and a publishing house, hosted Know Your Rights Camps, became a Nike spokesperson, co-chaired a Special Purpose Acquisition Company, partnered with Scholastic to produce children's books, and with DuVernay co-created a Netflix limited series called *Colin in Black and White* (ravisimedia; kaepernickpublishing; knowyourrightscamp; "Dream

Crazy”; Beaton; “Colin Kaepernick and Scholastic”; “Colin in Black and White”). Consisting of six, approximately thirty-minute episodes, each created by a different combination of writers and directors, the show depicts Kaepernick’s adolescent years, when as a biracial, adopted child of a white couple living in a predominantly white California community, he grappled with issues of identity, culture, class, power, and alienation. The story and its larger significance are conveyed in complex ways: the main storyline portraying young Colin’s experiences is intertwined with brief documentaries, historical reenactments, and narration by the adult Kaepernick, who observes and comments on it all from within a stark room, which DuVernay called “the gallery of his mind” (“Colin in Black and White Q&A”). Thus conceived, *Colin in Black and White* is a Black memoir, and as such, it is a weapon of Black resistance.

For over two hundred years, Black figures have told their life stories to combat white supremacy. Doing so is an exercise in self-actualization, an insistence that one is somebody, a unique and loveable being who has not succumbed to the incessant pressure to accept that they are a worthless, hopeless nobody. One matters. So does their story, which will be told as one wishes, with its own aesthetic, and not necessarily how others deem “the right way.” Black autobiographies and memoirs, in other words, are declarations of personal significance, creative independence, and societal importance. As a student of history, Kaepernick understands their role in the Black freedom struggle. When asked what he hoped viewers, and especially young people, would learn from the series, Kaepernick replied: “The biggest lesson I want to share is you don’t have to accept the status quo You have the power and ability to have an impact and create the change and bring about the future that you want” (Hostin).

The Black Hero’s Journey

Colin in Black and White is literally a heroic tale. The story’s narrative arc closely follows the Hero’s Journey, a seventeen-step plotline identified in 1949 by mythologist Joseph Campbell (Campbell). According to Campbell, great tales from around the world unfold in similar ways, largely because they resonate with humankind’s deepest subconscious needs. They begin, contended Campbell, with the protagonist (i.e., the Hero) residing in his usual world (for Campbell, the prototypical Hero was male). Soon, the Hero begins the multistep process of Departure. The

Hero crosses a threshold, whereupon he endures a long, trying process of Initiation. The Hero ultimately prevails and returns, a wiser and better person, to his previous world. Campbell had his critics, but his typology became a template for movie plotlines, including, most famously, *Star Wars* (1977) (Searson). In 1985, story consultant Christopher Vogler wrote a memo that revised Campbell's scheme into twelve steps and dubbed the Hero's starting and ending points as the Ordinary World and the realm he visits as the Special World (Vogler, "Memo"). Vogler's memo, along with his subsequent book on the subject, became go-to guides for filmmakers (Vogler, *Writer's Journey*). Evidently, among those who may have drawn inspiration from the Hero's Journey are DuVernay and Kaepernick.

Colin in Black and White begins in 2001 in Turlock, California (population: 55,000), where Colin is a thirteen-year-old, biracial eighth grader who lives alone with his adoptive white parents, Teresa and Rick Kaepernick. Colin is bright, polite, confident, and seemingly happy. He's also a bit sheltered and naive: his parents, two transplanted Wisconsinites in their mid-forties, are loving but buttoned-down. Colin has siblings (his parents' two biological children), but they're older and no longer live in the Kaepernick's suburban home. That leaves Colin with two close friends, Eddie (who is Black) and Jake (who is white), and one dream (to play quarterback in the NFL). Colin thus inhabits a typical Ordinary World: he's a likeable but unexceptional person; he lives a principled but humdrum life; he has kin but they're either absent or flawed; and he mistakenly assumes his world is safe and enduring (Safford, "Ordinary World").

Colin's Call to Adventure, the inciting event that initiates the Hero's Journey, is issued by a minor character in an ostensibly innocuous way. One day at school, Ryan, a Black classmate who sports cornrows, genially gives Colin the phone number of Dee Dee, a high school girl who can braid his hair. Colin soon has cornrows. He did not refuse the call. Not yet.

In time, he will, for the eighth-grade protagonist eventually buckles under the pressure to quash his burgeoning Blackness. After getting cornrows, Colin increasingly discovers his ease in Black spaces and affinity for Black culture, much to the displeasure of his appalled baseball coach and dismayed parents. Illustrative of this tension is a scene in which Teresa takes Colin to a professional hairdresser's house to have his fraying cornrows redone. "How long do you think this is gonna last?" she asks. "What, the braids?" replies Colin. "All of it," responds Teresa. Ultimately, the duress proves too much for Colin. Threatened with expulsion from his base-

ball team and reproved by his parents, Colin ditches the braids. The Hero has Refused the Call, and he aches. “After that, I didn’t get braids again for another fourteen years,” reflects Narrator Kaepernick. “I never felt good about it. I knew it wasn’t right. But I didn’t have the knowledge, wisdom, or language to fight back. I couldn’t rebel because I didn’t know how.”

After passing on the Call to Adventure, the Hero usually encounters a wise Mentor. Colin’s path to meeting his Mentor begins during his first year in high school. He outperforms his white competitor, Jordan, during football tryouts, but a white coach nevertheless assigns him to the freshman team and picks Jordan to be the junior varsity squad’s quarterback. Colin is confused and disappointed, and to prove the coach wrong, he commits himself to dominating play on the freshman team. Even so, when the season ends, the coach informs Colin that Jordan will be the varsity team’s quarterback next season. Upon hearing the news, Rick pulls a few strings so that Colin can meet Roger Theder, an old-school quarterback guru who runs a summer football camp. Colin initially does not comprehend the moment’s magnitude, so Rick explains it plainly: if Theder permits Colin to attend his camp, Rick informs his son, “That’s gonna change things for you.”

When Colin meets with Theder, the latter is not only a prospective Mentor but also what Campbell calls a Threshold Guardian, a figure that the Hero must bypass to enter the Special World. “Why you?” Theder gruffly asks Colin. Colin replies that he’s a hard worker, but an unimpressed Theder cuts him off and grouches that hard workers are everywhere. Rick tries to intervene on Colin’s behalf, but Theder will have none of it. Looking directly at Colin, Theder says, “I’m asking you.” Only Colin can explain why he should enter the Special World. “Being a quarterback,” attests Colin, “isn’t an option for me. It’s in my blood. I’ll get there one way or another. I’ll do whatever it takes to show you.” This answer suffices. Colin can attend Theder’s summer camp. He is about to cross into the Special World.

The threshold to the Special World can be physical or psychological or (as in Colin’s case) both. On a Saturday morning in June, Rick drives Colin to Theder’s quarterback camp, symbolically putting the Ordinary World behind them. They arrive fifteen minutes before practice starts, only to find that the other players are already on the field, as are the coaches, including Theder. Camp hasn’t officially started and Colin is already behind. The fifteen-year-old protagonist has plunged into a new and very different realm.

In Campbell's typology, after crossing the threshold, the Hero enters the Belly of the Whale, where he is symbolically reborn. So it is with Colin, who is treated like a newborn in an environment that prizes physical prowess. Theder hollers that Colin has the arms of a "malnourished infant" and orders him to train with the "baby squad." Laid low, Colin's transformation will be a prolonged process. "One of the first things I learned when I got to work with Roger Theder," remarks Narrator Kaepernick, "was that I had a lot to learn."

Learning is the goal of the next step in the Hero's Journey, a juncture Vogler dubs Tests, Allies, and Enemies. For Colin, it begins at Theder's camp, where eventually he is allowed to practice with "the big boys." The following autumn, Colin, now a sophomore, wins the starting varsity quarterback job over his rival, Jordan. The Hero is progressing, but his training is far from finished.

Colin is taught many hard lessons the summer before his junior year, when as a member of a traveling baseball team, he must pass through a thicket of racist incidents. While his white parents and teammates unself-consciously move about ballparks, highways, and hotels, Colin is besieged by microaggressions, alternately mistrusted, dismissed, and patronized. More terrifyingly, deadly police power is nearly unleashed twice on the unoffending child. Each incident stings, prodding Colin to know his place and to mimic, as Narrator Kaepernick puts it, white people's ideal of the fictional "acceptable Negro."

Colin doesn't have many allies and the handful he has are deficient in some way. His parents' racial blind spots, poor listening skills, and conflict-adverse personalities make them unreliable confidantes. His white friend Jake is attuned to the injustices Colin faces, but he's a fickle fellow. Sometimes he's indifferent to Colin's plight; other times, he blames the victim, shrugging off racist encounters as the inevitable result of Colin's Blackness. The most Jake is willing to do is invoke his own white privilege to intervene on his friend's behalf when serious trouble arises. Jake, in short, acknowledges racism, but is unprepared to dismantle it. One of the few Black individuals that Colin meets during these travails is Dwayne, a fellow baseball player who empathizes with Colin, but who offers the uninspiring advice that one must pick their battles. What does Colin learn from navigating this gauntlet of discrimination? That white supremacy is intentionally and systemically embedded in the United States, yet that is no reason to concede the fight. Employing a sports

metaphor, Narrator Kaepernick observes, "What I learned that summer was they're not always gonna give you a fair call. But you can't let them stop you from playing the game."

Having passed through Tests, Allies, and Enemies, the Hero begins the Approach to the Innermost Cave, a difficult trial that brings him closer to the transformative Ordeal. Colin's Approach starts at the end of his junior year and plays on the fact that he has become a top-notch baseball pitcher courted by well-heeled professional teams and premier college programs, while no university has offered him a football scholarship. Although Colin is relentlessly pressured to pick baseball, he increasingly feels like an "outsider" playing the game and considers it a "backup plan." Already stressed, Colin also feels alienated from Jake, who has grown distant to safeguard his talented friend from his illegal activities. As for Colin's parents, despite their faults, their steadfast presence, financial generosity, and flinty determination help Colin during this difficult time. Yet when Colin's moment of decision arrives, Jake is the only one who tells Colin to follow his dreams. By contrast, Rick and Teresa suggest their son bow to fate and select baseball. "I learned a lot of things that summer . . ." recalls Narrator Kaepernick, "but the one thing I remember most is you gotta play the game that's right for you."

In Campbell's original formulation, the Hero, before engaging in the Ordeal, has an Atonement with the Father. The Hero must either overcome or reconcile with a paternal figure. Colin does so: the night before his Ordeal, he eschews his father's final counsel. "[I]t's your decision," Rick tells his son. "But sometimes in life, the decisions are already made for you." "And sometimes," follows Narrator Kaepernick, "you make the decision for yourself."

Colin's Ordeal takes place on Signing Day in the office of Coach Schott, who more than any other figure has been importuning Colin to pick the sport he coaches: baseball. Colin has been there twice before. Back in spring, he had expressed to Schott that he "wanted to keep his options open" with football. On a second visit, he was more affirmative, informing Schott, "I wanna be a quarterback." Now, when Colin ventures into Schott's office for a third and final time, the coach assumes Colin, who still has no football scholarships in hand, has finally accepted his destiny and will play baseball. "So, which school? You made your decision?" asks Schott. A resolute Colin knows a different future awaits, declaring, "I'm gonna be a quarterback."

Colin's triumphant Ordeal in Schott's office changes him, a transformation that Campbell calls Apotheosis. The word derives from the Greek *apos* and *theo*, and it connotes the attainment of godliness. Indeed, Colin has achieved a transcendent state. When an outraged Schott asks him, "The hell you thinking?" Narrator Kaepernick answers: "I was thinking that what you start out as is not necessarily what you become." The divine power of transfiguration resides within oneself.

Like other Heroes who emerge from their Ordeals victorious and achieve Apotheosis, Colin is given a Reward. In his case, the prize is not a football scholarship but perhaps the next best thing: he learns that a program is considering offering him one. Colin has hope. Yet Heroes' rewards are not always what they seem. They often prove wanting in some fashion (Safford, "Road Back"). Colin's is a case in point. The prospect of a football scholarship fails to materialize into an actual offer. This disappointment initiates Colin's difficult return to the Ordinary World, a trek Vogler labels the Road Back.

Colin's Road Back is especially challenging because he has not figured out his relationship with Blackness. This unresolved matter comes to the fore when Colin begins a romantic relationship with a dark-skinned Black classmate, Crystal. Colin's Black friend Eddie displays his own biases by questioning Colin's interest in a "blue Black" girl, especially when a conventionally attractive white classmate, Hailey, is practically throwing herself at Colin (thus playing Campbell's role of Woman as Temptress). Colin's parents are also perplexed and ashamed of their son's love interest. Colin tries to stand his ground, telling Eddie and Jake, "I don't care what anybody else thinks. She's pretty to me." Yet Colin doesn't prioritize his relationship with Crystal, so it falls apart. Only then does Colin realize his folly. Colin can't undo the past, but he does apologize to Crystal, acknowledging, "You deserve my respect. You deserve my time." Narrator Kaepernick steps in to explain the significance of this painful lesson in colorism and the exaltation of white beauty standards that undergirds it: "Maybe they didn't want us to see our beauty, because they knew if we did, if we controlled our own narrative, we'd be unstoppable."

Having reached the end of the Road Back, the Hero reenters the Ordinary World and begins what Vogler calls the Resurrection, the most perilous point on the Journey. Colin is near his nadir. He is ridiculed for foregoing fame and fortune playing baseball; he doesn't have a football scholarship and with his senior season finished there's no reason to ex-

pect he'll get one; his relationship with Crystal is over; and Jake and Eddie deride their friend's self-pitying gloominess. In a symbolic gesture, one night Colin comes across a football and heaves it into the darkness. When it seems Colin can sink no lower, he gets violently ill before a school basketball game. Even so, Colin being Colin, he competes hard in the contest, outplaying a highly touted basketball prospect on the opposing team. As it turns out, a University of Nevada football coach is at the game. Impressed with Colin's outing, he immediately contacts his head coach, who previously had seen Colin's decent tryout at Nevada's facilities. Soon thereafter, Nevada offers Colin a football scholarship. A jubilant Colin rejoices, "I'm gonna be a QB!"

Colin thus arrives at the final stage of the Hero's Journey, the Return with the Elixir. The Elixir is something derived from the venture that benefits the Ordinary World. In this case, the Elixir is a notebook that Narrator Kaepernick has been carrying since Colin's journey began. Crossing the literal and cinematic barrier that normally separates the two, Narrator Kaepernick enters Colin's bedroom unnoticed as the latter prepares to move to Nevada. Sitting down, Narrator Kaepernick opens the notebook and pens a final entry, a letter to Colin in which he offers counsel drawn from the journey that is now concluding. Narrator Kaepernick then places the notebook in Colin's duffle bag. While heading out of town on his way to Nevada, Colin discovers the notebook and reads the letter, which concludes, "Trust your power. Love your Blackness. You will know who you are."

Is it True?

There are several ways of evaluating the show's veracity. Let's put aside the obvious but unhelpful critique that the series is untrue because it is by definition a recreation (e.g., even Narrator Kaepernick is a character, who happens to be played by Colin Kaepernick); likewise, let's not nitpick the insignificant anachronisms and inaccuracies that slipped into the production (e.g., in 2001, Colin owns an Allen Iverson poster that was made in 2004; the creators changed the team colors of Colin's Pitman High School to—of all things—those of its rival, Turlock High School); finally, let's acknowledge that some scenes are not literally true (they do not precisely replicate events) but they may be figuratively true (they are dramatized re-

workings that make for better viewing without changing the story's gist). In short, let's remember that *Colin in Black and White* is not an inerrant reproduction of the past.

The show's principal plot points verifiably occurred: Colin got cornrows in junior high (Klemko); he trained with Theder (K. Wilson); he was racially profiled in hotels; he was a much-coveted pitcher whose tremendous baseball prospects gave pause to the few coaches who expressed interest in him as a football player (Ostler, "From Turlock"); his family mailed highlight reels to scores of universities to no avail (Ostler, "Turlock trip"); and the toughness Colin displayed while playing basketball despite being very ill is what convinced Nevada to finally offer him a football scholarship (Adelson). As DuVernay remarked, Kaepernick "was a stickler for [the show] being as close to his real experience as possible" (Seth).

Even so, memoir involves spotlighting some things while leaving others in the shadows. If there is one thing noticeably missing from the series, it is Colin's Christian faith. The Kaepernicks were devout people (Massei). Yet in certain scenes, their religiosity seems to be highlighted for comedic effect. On road trips, for example, Rick annoyingly plays the same Christian rock ballad. In other instances, white people's piety seems to be showcased as critical commentary. For instance, a hotel worker who learns that Colin is an adoptee remarks that her church has a foster kids program, she's considered "getting one of them," and that the Kaepernicks are doing the Lord's work. Likewise, when Colin reluctantly takes a white girl to the Winter Formal, Christian items like a large crucifix are prominently displayed in her house. As for Colin, his only religious expression may be his repeated (and unfruitful) requests for Rick to change the music while driving (though this may be more about irritation than religion). In truth, Colin surely was a devout individual during his high school days (Jacobs). Rick Kaepernick noted that his son "was baptized Methodist [and] confirmed Lutheran." When Colin left home for Nevada, he attended a Baptist church and got the first of what would be many Biblically inspired tattoos (Ostler, "From Turlock"). Given his tribulations and triumphs, it may be no surprise that he was inked with Psalm 18:39: "You armed me with strength for battle; you made my adversaries bow at my feet" (Dalton).

Along with keeping subjects out of sight, memoirists can make other characters mystifying. In the case of *Colin in Black and White*, the audience knows that Colin eventually will become an exhilarating

professional quarterback. Why couldn't any of the 119 Division I schools see his potential? The show provides a few nonracial clues: Colin's fondness for junk food does little to fill out his lean frame; he throws a football as one would pitch a baseball; impressing coaches in camps is no substitute for wowing them in games. The problem was that, in reality, Colin was not always wondrous on the gridiron. He was not the team's star (in the series, Eddie once boasts that he's the squad's best player, but little else is made of the matter). Moreover, while Colin had a great arm, he did not run the ball, which is what later made him an especially dynamic quarterback (Adelson). While the audience has the benefit of hindsight, Theder summarized well what football coaches thought of Colin at the time. "He was a young beanpole, and they didn't do much with him at the high school," Theder said of his former pupil, "but he had a great work ethic, and he wanted to be a good player" (Klemko)

Memoirists can raise questions, but they don't have to answer them. Consider, for example, Colin's penchant for Blackness. He could "see himself" at Dee Dee's apartment; the Urban Exchange where he had his cornrows done professionally "felt like" him; he habitually seasons Teresa's bland midwestern fare and instantly relishes soul food at the home of the Black hairdresser, Erica (Reid); and he revels in Crystal's large, joyous family. As reviewer Eric Deggans observed, for Colin, Blackness seems "a natural thing," even if for other racially mixed individuals, including Barack Obama, "self-identifying as a Black man can be an affirmative choice." In an increasingly multiracial society, added Deggans, more people will be navigating the issue, and given that the show addresses "race so directly, it's odd that this isn't talked about more."

Memoir is also about perspective, about how events appear differently over time. In the early 2010s, when Kaepernick's football exploits had launched him to stardom, he and his parents gave countless interviews, many of which concerned their family's racial dynamics. At the time, the trio usually echoed one another when describing Colin's childhood (that Colin's white birth mother had expressed an interest in meeting him may have reinforced the family's tendency to recall their shared and harmonious experiences) (Reilly). When asked about his upbringing, Kaepernick would say that when he was a child, his parents talked openly about the adoption, their racial differences, and their willingness to discuss these matters with him. Even so, reflected Kaepernick, their words had sailed over his head. For example, he spoke of an episode in elementary school when, having become aware of his Blackness, he drew his family, coloring

his white relatives with a yellow crayon and himself with a brown one. He knew he was different, Kaepernick said of his childhood, but “I never really understood what it meant when I was young” (King).

As time passed, Kaepernick may have ruminated more deeply about racial aspects of his youth (Pham). Such reflections may have stemmed from how race continued shaping his life. In college, he joined a Black fraternity, studied Black history, and had an unprovoked, potentially lethal encounter with police officers (Branch). When Kaepernick took the NFL by storm, some commentators discussed him in thinly veiled racial codes (R. Wilson). Within this context, Kaepernick could understand old experiences in new ways. For example, while he had previously mentioned his difficulties in hotels, by 2015 he was recounting those episodes more grimly (Sun; Corsello). Amid this personal awakening and national debates about police brutality, in fall 2016 Kaepernick famously knelt to protest racial injustice. The following year, he met DuVernay, and in time the two launched a project concerning his adolescent years. As that project progressed, Kaepernick continued evolving. A year before the series aired, he abandoned the notion of reforming police work and prison systems, and he embraced more broad-sweeping ideas that seek the “complete abolition of the carceral state” (Kaepernick). Thus, in *Colin in Black and White* we see multiple truths: the teenager’s racialized coming-of-age as well as the adult’s deliberate retrospection, both conveyed in an essentially nonfictional version of what Campbell believed to be the universal story of the Hero’s Journey.

The Hero’s Journey is cyclical. After completing one journey, the Hero may begin another. So it was with young Colin, who as a grown-up ventured again, embarking on his now-iconic crusade against racism. He returned, as Heroes do, with something to benefit the world. This time, his Elixir was *Colin in Black and White*, which closes with a dedication and exhortation to would-be Heroes: “To the underestimated, the overlooked and the outcast, trust your power.”

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