

AMERICAN CONTRADICTION

During the 2016 National Football League (NFL) preseason, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick started sitting during the national anthem as a protest of racial injustice, specifically against police brutality. Eventually, he began kneeling during the anthem, prompting other players across the NFL to do so. The U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, so, in theory, no one should have scoffed at Kaepernick following his conscience and silently protesting. However, even though the United States champions freedom of speech, expression, and assembly, public outrage threatened to boycott NFL games. President Donald J. Trump weighed in, suggesting NFL owners—the team owners employing predominantly African American players—should fire those who kneeled during the anthem and fans should “leave the stadium” to stop player protests.⁴ The outrage against Kaepernick’s protest might have contributed to his not being signed after being cut from the San Francisco 49ers. In February 2019, Kaepernick, along with former teammate and fellow protestor Eric Reid, settled out of court with the NFL. Their cases alleged the NFL colluded against the two players, essentially blacklisting them from being signed by other teams. Although this case does not directly deal with video games, it exposes a pervasive contradiction in American culture: regardless of rights afforded American citizens in the Constitution, citizens often advocate against the logic of liberty, equality, and freedom when counter protesting. The rhetoric of “freedom,” a pervasive value in American culture, supports both the players who kneel and the angry fans who believe the *anthem* represents *freedom*.

Kaepernick’s ordeal exposes absurdist rhetoric citizens use to denigrate groups—often minorities—expressing rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. It is difficult to claim Americans champion freedom when history shows tremendous examples of oppression. Even the national anthem, written in 1814, proclaims “the land of the free” when slavery was legal in the southern United States.⁵ This obvious contradiction conditions the American psyche, but chauvinism, nationalism, and, paradoxically, collective individualism provide mental models for maintaining reproduction after reproduction of this contradiction. Instead of claiming Americans support freedom, equality, free press, etc., we should claim Americans espouse the rhetoric of freedom and equality (when convenient), allowing them an uncanny ability to *cafeteriarize* logics of individualized, rationalized oppression. Such a worldview helps us understand the American penchant for Orwellian values of doublethink—holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously.

—Toscano, Aaron. *Video Games and American Culture: How Ideology Influences Virtual Worlds*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020, p. 9.

Notes (on p. 24)

4. Sophie Tatum, “Trump: NFL Owners Should Fire Players Who Protest the National Anthem,” CNN.com, September 23, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/22/politics/donald-trump-alabama-nfl/index.html>.

5. In 1931, the U.S. Congress removed the original third verse of the national anthem, which states, “no refuge shall save, the hireling and slave, from the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave.” Marc Ferris, commenting on the NFL kneeling protests, argues “no evidence supports the contention that the reference to ‘slave’ means African-Americans in bondage” in Marc Ferris, “National Anthem’s Third Verse Stirs Passions, but the Reading is Erroneous,” *Star Tribune*, February 2, 2018. <http://www.startribune.com/national-anthem-s-third-verse-stirs-passions-but-the-reading-is-erroneous/472246073/>. Another work by Ferris analyzes the anthem in *Star-Spangled Banner: The Unlikely Story of America’s National Anthem*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Regardless of F. Scott Key’s intentions, however, slavery was the law of the land, and Key himself owned slaves. Claiming “slave” does not refer to the millions enslaved during the history of the United States continues white supremacist values of ignoring both the oppression and contributions of a group whose ancestors experience racism to this day.