

出る釘は打たれる: TOMMY KONO'S PERFORMANCES OF STRENGTH AND THE FORMATION OF ASIAN AMERICAN SUBJECTIVITY

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Since 2017, I have been researching at and with the Stark Center, primarily working on my forthcoming book, *Dynamic Tensions: Performing Fitness, Physical Culture, and Masculinities*. The book argues that the origins of fitness lie in the nineteenth and early twentieth century theater, and therefore, ideas of the theater, anti-theatricality, excess, and ornamentation continue to resonate in physical culture's contemporary manifestations, including or perhaps especially in relation to physical culture's construction of certain forms of ideal masculinity. While working on the book, the Stark Center received the papers of Tommy Kono, donated by his widow, Florence, and collected by Professor John Fair. The boxes' contents were totally unorganized and there were over fifty of them. Having written the majority of the manuscript by then I couldn't deal with opening another set of papers. But on my final few days of my trip to Austin in 2018, I took a peek and was struck by a picture of Kono. For all intents and purposes, here was another weightlifter who "looked like me," at least in that racialized way where a Japanese person can "look like" a Chinese-Filipino person. I kept returning to Austin to look at the Kono papers and as I began sifting it became clear how Kono offers a way to explore sporting performances as what Dorinne Kondo calls "racemaking," which, in a way, also gave me the theoretical tools to understand my own practice in weightlifting and bodybuilding as an Asian Canadian person.¹

The subject of this article, then, Tamio "Tommy" Kono, is a figure who will already be famous to readers of *Iron Game History*. But he is, I would suggest, almost unknown in theater and performance studies, my "home" discipline. However, I will argue that Kono is important for both physical culture and sport history as well as theater and performance, because it is only with the intervention of the methods of the latter that we can truly understand his impact on the former. In other words, Kono's importance as not only a sportsman, but as a racialized, Asian American person (a term I will later complicate) can be understood by attending to his sports history as *performance*, or, as I will argue, "minoritarian" performance.

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THE NAIL THAT STANDS OUT

In this photo, we see Tamio "Tommy" Kono in 1956 giving a performance at the Waimea High School gym on the island of Kaua'i, Hawai'i. Kono broke two world records that night: he pressed 300 pounds overhead to best his own world record, and also broke his record for total weight lifted across three lifts, the snatch, clean, and press. According to newspaper reports at the time, Kono "completed his exhibition by driving two nails through a one-inch plank with his hands and blowing up a hot water bottle with his mouth until it burst."² This is not the only time Kono would perform "nail-driving." In 1960, the *Sacramento Bee* reported on a similar exhibition Kono performed in his hometown, where he finished with the same feat. "Try this sometime," the caption reads.³



After setting two world weightlifting records at a meet in Waimea, in 1956, Tommy decided to give the audience something else to add to its memory of that great night and blew up a water bottle until it burst, and then drove a nail through a one-inch board with just his hand.

Strongmen and women since the late Victorian period have performed this feat, which according to circus strongman and physical culture historian Ottley Coulter, is actually quite “easy.” The “trick” is that usually the strongman’s hands are *not* bare, rather the head of the nail is wrapped in a bit of cotton out of sight of the audience. The strongman learns to drive the nail into the board at a perpendicular angle—any deviation will spoil the stunt. Coulter’s advice comes from a book called *Secrets of Strong Man Feats*, but in this case the secret turns out mainly to be technique.⁴ Like pressing 300 pounds overhead, the “trick” is mastery of *techne*, or craft.

Performed by Kono, a *nisei* (second-generation) Japanese American, the performance and documentation exist at the intersection of two histories.⁵ The first is the history of a performance tradition of physical culture that has had enormous influence on modern culture but has been systematically devalued in theatre historiography. The second is a history of Asian American racialization. In 1942, at the age of twelve, Kono and his older brothers, John, Mike, and Frank, and their *issei* parents, Kanichi and Ichini Kono, were relocated from their home in Sacramento, California to Tule Lake War Relocation Center, one of ten concentration camps established under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 on 19 February 1942, spuriously to contain the “security risk” posed by Nikkei after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Tule Lake, notoriously, was one of the most brutal of the camps. In 2002, the photographer Emily Hanako Momohara went to Tule Lake and photographed the remains of the demolished barracks. One photo, a plank of wood studded with several rusted nails, recalls Kono’s nail-driving feat. Momohara titled the photograph “The Nail That Stands the Tallest, Gets Hit the Hardest.” As Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson writes, this contested proverb, “出る釘は打たれる” or *deru kui wa utareru*, is often associated with the camps. Those who “stood out”, that is, resisted were “hammered hardest by being transferred to Tule Lake.”⁶ The proverb is often interpreted, primarily by non-Japanese speakers, as being about cultural homogeneity and assimilation. But Chambers-Letson interprets it as a strategy of survival. He writes: “Some of us do not have the capacity to ‘blend in’ but armed with the knowledge of the hammer’s impending fall, we can at least develop oppositional strategies to dull, escape, or combat the effects of its blunt force.”⁷

What are these oppositional strategies for Kono? In this image I see Kono becoming both hammer and nail. There is a refusal of the terms of the “blunt force” of the state’s production of racial difference through internment, at the same time as there is an acceptance of the possibility of assimilation. The performance, like performance so often does, complicates narratives and frameworks of power and difference by emphasizing the agency and knowledge of the body performing the action.

TRANSFORMATION, INCARCERATION AND RACIALIZATION

The nail-driving performance, I argue, is an example of the complexity of Tommy Kono as a hero of physical

culture and weightlifting in particular; both assimilationist and oppositional, painful and reparative, and a masterful display of technique and craft. As a performance, it begins to intervene in official narratives where sport, nationalism and race intersect. After all, Kono’s story has often been used to obscure the racist violence of the camps. According to his official biography for the 1952 Olympic Games, the camps transformed Kono from a skinny, asthmatic, weak child to a strapping specimen of American masculinity.⁸ In the desert air of Tule Lake, his asthma was cured. Once so skinny that water would collect in the “hollows by [his] clavicles” while he showered, Kono put on weight.⁹ And, the IOC reports, “he found an unexpected form of happiness.”¹⁰ Two other internees, Ben Hara and Tod Fujioka, introduced him to bodybuilding, and then the sport of weightlifting. Upon his release, Kono was drafted by the US Army to fight in the Korean War, however, he was prevented from going when the military discovered his weightlifting prowess.¹¹ Kono went on to become the most celebrated of all American weightlifters, setting records in four weight classes and earning gold at the 1952 and 1956 Summer Olympics, and silver in 1960, as well as winning the World Weightlifting Championships every year from 1953-1959, and the Pan-American Games in 1955, 1959, and 1963. He was also successful in bodybuilding and was named Mr. Universe four times between 1954 and 1961.

The official narrative is a variant of what I have in my research called “The Bodybuilder’s Journey,” a form of *Bildungsroman* narrative popularized by physical culture media and magazines.¹² The Bodybuilder’s Journey tells the story of a young man’s transformation through adversity and the discovery of physical culture from a sickly youth into a model of ideal manhood (Charles Atlas’s famous comic-book advertisements are one example).¹³ In Kono’s racialized version of the narrative, the concentration camps are refracted as a site for self-discovery and struggle against adversity, where the individual body becomes an ideal and even exceptional American citizen, paradoxically, via the *suspension* of citizenship and its attendant rights and freedoms. The “meaning of Kono,” as it has been deployed through official IOC publications, physical culture/fitness media, and even Kono’s own writings, portrays sport and exercise as a practice of survival and overcoming, as well as assimilation and reconciliation.¹⁴ For example, the official USA Weightlifting website’s tribute to Kono after his death in 2016, written by his friend Artie Dreschler, suggests that “Tommy began training religiously, with the very tentative hope that lifting weights might make him more ‘normal.’ Little did he know or dream that his dedication to his newfound sport would lead him to glory on the world’s biggest stage.”¹⁵ Kono’s Bodybuilder’s Journey unites “the prison” and “sport” under the Foucaultian lens of disciplinary apparatuses; consonant with work in critical sports studies that makes a similar claim.¹⁶

It is significant to consider the ideological deployment of Kono’s story because it confirms historical research on the true purpose of the camps, and the role of sport therein. Chambers-Letson argues that the camps

deployed “new juridical and social technologies of racialization that sought to produce Japanese American subjects as willing to accept and perform the simultaneity of citizenship and the suspension of its attendant protections.”¹⁷ The War Relocation Authority, which was in charge of the camps, openly acknowledged that the camps could be training grounds for assimilation; performances of patriotism and allegiance in the camps were part of this technology of racial statecraft. Sport was part of this disciplinary apparatus. As Michael Mullan shows, baseball and its associated rituals functioned as a way to perform American loyalty. He cites an editorial from a 1944 newspaper printed in the Minidoka internment camp that describes a softball exhibition: “Overheard above the continual cheering and chattering were shouts of ‘take out the pitcher,’ ‘come on team,’ ‘we want an ump,’ etc. Yes, these are traits true in any ball field, whether it be at the Yankee Stadium . . . or any sandlot of any normal town, in the good old U.S.A.”¹⁸ The unattributed quotation demonstrates an almost comical overidentification with American-ness (“the good old U.S.A.”) that might cynically be read as satire, but its publication in a camp newspaper, which was subject to editorial control by the W.R.A., shows that there were at least audiences for such utterances, and one was the surveillance state.¹⁹ Sport demonstrates the double-edged nature of panoptic power: while those playing baseball may have incurred numerous benefits (community cohesion, physical exercise, decreased anxiety), the physical practice was also a performance of normative subjectivity.

Chambers-Letson’s research into the scrapbook of a young internee called Moriyuki Shimada shows how photographs from the camps reveal “performances of self-subjection that were ambivalently executed by the incarcerated Nikkei.”²⁰ For example, one of Shimada’s photographs, captioned “L.A. Girls,” shows five young women posing in a normatively feminine way, though in the distance a guard tower can be seen. Chambers-Letson writes, “they stage the fact of being ‘caught up’ in a structure of power that exists independent of them.”²¹ The carceral apparatus surveilles the girls and compels a “normal,” American performance from them, even as they willingly perform for its—and the camera’s—gaze.

There is a larger truth to this form of ambivalent normative posing for the white gaze, not only Japanese Americans but East Asians of the diaspora more generally, who find ourselves racialized in terms of our supposed proximity to whiteness (the “model minority”) yet simultaneously reminded of our status as what Lee, Wong, and Alvarez call the “perpetual foreigner.”²² It was therefore heart-breaking in my archival work to come across the photos and mementoes from the camps in Kono’s papers that he saved from his older brothers, including end of school yearbook signings, cards for school dances, and programs for plays and talent shows. The teenagers of the camp, thrown into a situation beyond their reckoning, performed a kind of tragic “normal.”

However, by all accounts, Kono’s body is rather extraordinary. Therefore, the assimilationist optic performed by the pictures Chambers-Letson writes about is

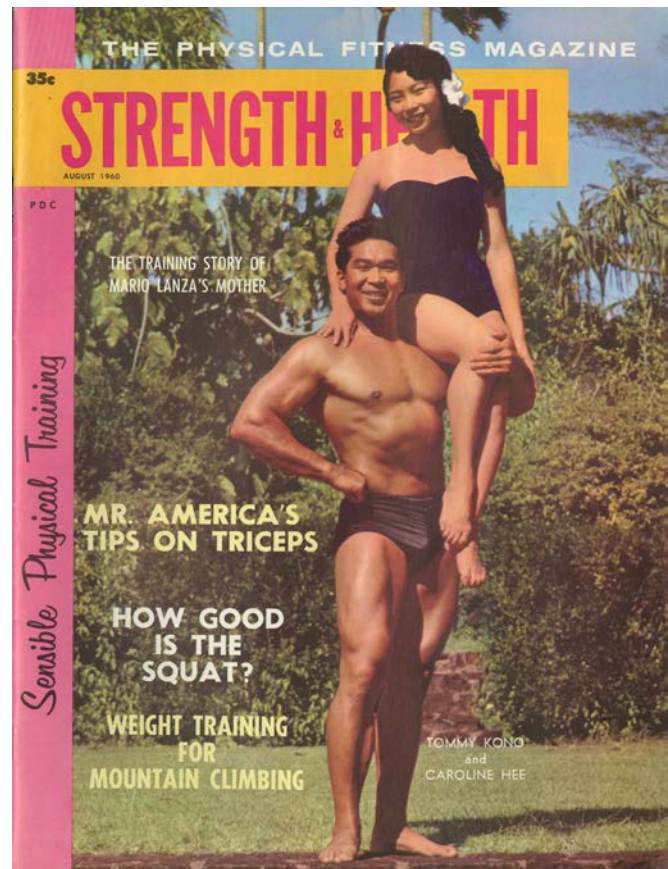
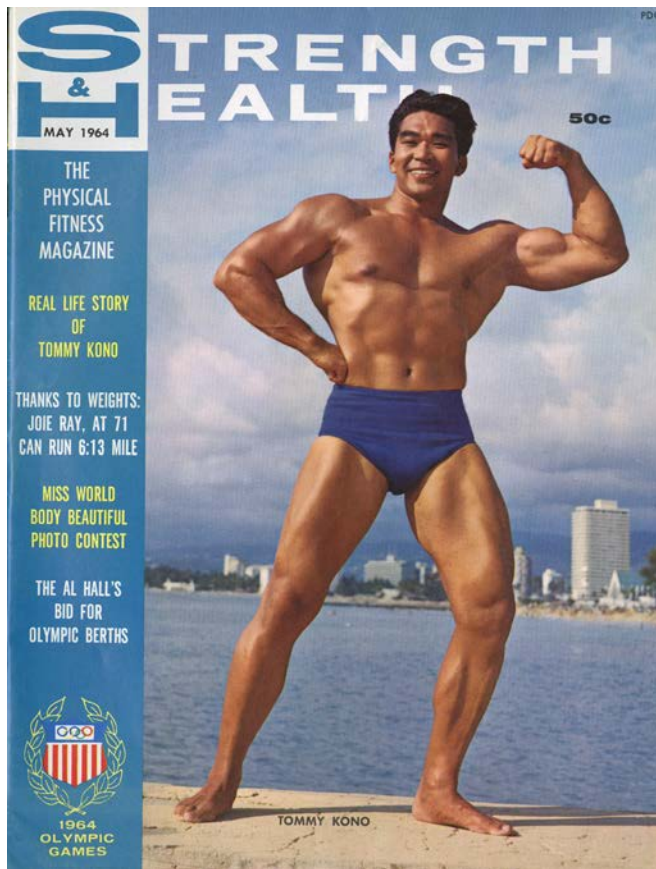
perhaps a bit more complex in his case. Kono’s visible difference from whiteness (he is the nail that stands out) means he was able to represent, on the Olympic stage, the triumph of the liberal American “melting pot.” Yet the triumphalist narrative always risks being ghosted by what Domenico Losurdo refers to as liberalism’s “counter-history,” that is, the “exclusion clauses” that are the foundation of its philosophy of freedom (in Losurdo’s argument, enslaved people, people of colonial origin, and the working poor).²³ Twentieth-century physical culture media leaned hard on positive transformation through childhood hardship, and Kono was no exception. The racial violence of Tule Lake was presented as necessary and even inevitable to transform him from a sickly, asthmatic child (which conjures ideas of immigrant and Yellow Peril “contagion” as well as a stereotyping of Asian American masculinity as effeminate or infantile) into a muscular national sports hero.

On the cover of the May 1964 issue of *Strength & Health*, Kono poses triumphantly on the beachfront in his adopted home of Honolulu, Hawai’i, flexing his left biceps, a broad smile across his face. In the accompanying article, he is positioned as an all-American hero, his weightlifting success consumed by a Cold War era sports narrative: “To the Russians, Kono is a marked man. Until the Red Samsons can defeat him, the Communist claim that the U.S.S.R. is the world’s strongest nation will be open to question.”²⁴ On the cover of the August 1960 issue, he balances an unknown model named Caroline Hee on his shoulder. Hee slants her legs demurely and points her toes, while Kono places his fist on his hip and flares his lats—it is a pose of heteronormative Asian American caricature.

We find other photos and media that perform a similar kind of national recuperative work—signalling that Kono’s otherness has been accepted into the white body politic on the basis of his athletic success. In one photo we see Kono holding up two girls in one-piece swimsuits, one in each arm.²⁵ He smiles broadly at an unseen audience, wearing a white sweatshirt reading “York AC,” or York Athletic Club. In other York photos he can be seen among the diverse USA weightlifting team—the sole Asian, but unexceptional among the other lifters, including African Americans, Latinos, and immigrants of all backgrounds. With the lifters clothed in “USA” or York Barbell Club gear, the team photo is a visual enunciation of the discourse of the American “melting pot.”²⁶

But another photo of Kono, which, judging by his white weightlifting singlet is likely a publicity photo for the Olympic Games, is more complex. Wearing a USA singlet, and standing before a barbell with weight plates clearly bearing the York name, Kono performs a dumbbell snatch with one arm. However, he stands on a patch of dried grass, and in the distance, we can see low hills stretching into the horizon. Only Kono’s torso fills the empty grey space of the upper part of the photo. For anyone familiar with Kono’s story the setting recalls the parched desert of Tule Lake.²⁷

Perhaps weirdest and most representative of the



Kono appeared on many magazine covers during his long career. At left, he is pictured in front of the Honolulu skyline in the lead-up to the 1964 Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo. At right, Kono is pictured holding a previously unknown model named Caroline Hee on the eve of the 1960 Rome Games. Having earned gold medals in 1952 and 1956, and a silver in 1960, Kono was portrayed as an American ideal; the son of immigrants who, through hard work and determination, became the best in the world.

contested role of internment in Kono's *Bodybuilder's Journey* is a Mexican comic book published in 1965 to coincide with Kono's appointment as coach of the Mexican team for the 1968 Olympics. It is perhaps the wildest reinvention of Kono's narrative. The internment camp is entirely ignored—or at least rewritten as the choice of the Konos, who move to Tule Lake on the advice of a doctor to seek “*un clima seco, con un aire mas puro.*”²⁸ In the comics Tule Lake is not an open air prison but a kind of summer camp populated entirely with white people. In one panel, we see a young Kono swimming one day in an outdoor pool, where he is befriended by Richard, a kindly white doctor who teaches him to lift weights. In reality, Richard was a real person, the Korean American Dr Richard You, who was not incarcerated at Tule Lake, but was the physician for the U.S.A. 1956 Olympic Team. Despite “*Estrellas del Deporte's*” total erasure of internment, the history of the camps haunts the pages, as in the “moving van” that takes away the Kono family's possessions, which looks eerily like a military transport vehicle.

The political stakes of this nationalist erasure and recuperation of internment can be seen in a May 1960 article Kono wrote for *Strength & Health* entitled “Lifting Behind the Bamboo Curtain.” It's difficult to know whether the Orientalist aspects of this article are the result of editorial decisions, but as Kono was a prolific writer, it is

unlikely this was ghost-written. The piece starts with language about “Red China” that would be unacceptable today: “For years the western world has heard many stories of Oriental men carrying enormous loads on their backs. Chinese coolies weighing a mere hundred pounds have been known to walk for miles and miles with a heavy pack on their shoulders.”²⁹ He goes on to describe himself as one of only two “Americans” ever to “witness the Chinese lifters in action,” whom he describes in machinic, dehumanizing terms that remain in circulation around Chinese athletes today. Kono, of course, is Japanese, and there is no reason to imagine that he would identify with the Chinese athletes, other than the fact that, within his own circles, he did, with many of his closest friends and weightlifting colleagues being Chinese American. In order then, to write about weightlifting behind the “bamboo curtain” in this way, Kono was required to identify solely with an “American” identity, transcending or obscuring the structural racism he faced as a *nisei*.

AN “ASIAN-AMERICAN” WEIGHTLIFTER?

At this point in my argument, it is necessary to take a brief detour through the formation of “Asian American” as a racialized identity, with a bit of personal history. I do not know if later in his life Kono identified as Asian American. But I do know that in 1960, he almost



Kono's potential "otherness" is smoothed over as he holds up two young women in swimsuits, an embodiment of the heteronormative and transformational narratives described in many physical culture magazines, including *Strength & Health*.

certain would not have, since the term was not in broad circulation until the latter half of the decade, coined by Yuji Ichioka as part of the Asian American movement.

I was born in Vancouver, Canada, and I have mixed Chinese and Filipino ancestry. I have long identified as Asian Canadian, Chinese Canadian, or Filipino Canadian, depending on the circumstances. But when I arrived in the United Kingdom in 2005, I was surprised to discover that I was in fact, not Asian. I was told by white British people that Asian referred to people of South Asian origin, and not "Chinese" people, who were "Oriental." Thankfully, the use of that slur has died out but the racial lacuna remains: "Chinese" remains the only East and Southeast Asian ethnic group that appears on monitoring forms. The only alternative is "Other Asian." It is only in the last few years that the identity ESEA (East and Southeast Asians) or BESEA (British East and Southeast Asians) has gained traction in the UK, largely driven by calls for representation in theatre, film, and television.³⁰

Racial categorization like "Asian," therefore, is always historically contingent, since the term itself encompasses a huge array of ethnic, racial, and national identities. In the case of "Asian

American," it was borne out of political demands for justice. As Karen L. Ishizuka writes in her memoir of the Asian American movement, Chinese, Japanese and Filipino political groups in the 1960s began organizing around shared experiences of discrimination and structural exclusion from power. If the concentration camps marked the suspension of rights and freedoms from the *nisei*, the Chinese Exclusion Act and Filipino Repatriation Act did the same for Chinese and Filipinos. These legislative acts of racial violence functioned in concert with the widespread stereotyping of Asians as cheap and expendable labour, which made them targets of racist violence by whites. This shared backdrop of discrimination was the grounds for the formation of Asian American as a political identity, which furthermore worked in solidarity with Black, Latinx, and Indigenous movements for civil rights. Together, these movements in the 1960s evoked what W.E.B. DuBois called the "dark proletariat," the "dark and vast sea of human labour in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States—that great majority of mankind, on whose bent and broken backs rest today the founding stones of modern industry."³¹ Chambers-Letson adds that the dark proletariat as community is defined "less at the level of identity than through position: by one's proximity to empire, nation, capital, power, and the entanglement of these systems with white supremacy."³²

As the *sansei* anthropologist Dorinne Kondo (whose parents were internees) argues, the historiography of Asian America and the Japanese concentration camps in particular is often viewed through the lens of "resistance."³³ With the publication of John Okada's novel *No-No Boy*,



Bob Hoffman (second row, far right) characterized weightlifting as a meritocracy in which all that mattered was the amount of weight a man could put up. This picture of the U.S. Weightlifting team appears to bear that out, as Kono is pictured with African American lifters Jim Bradford and John Davis, as well as lifters from Polish, Italian, and other ethnic backgrounds.

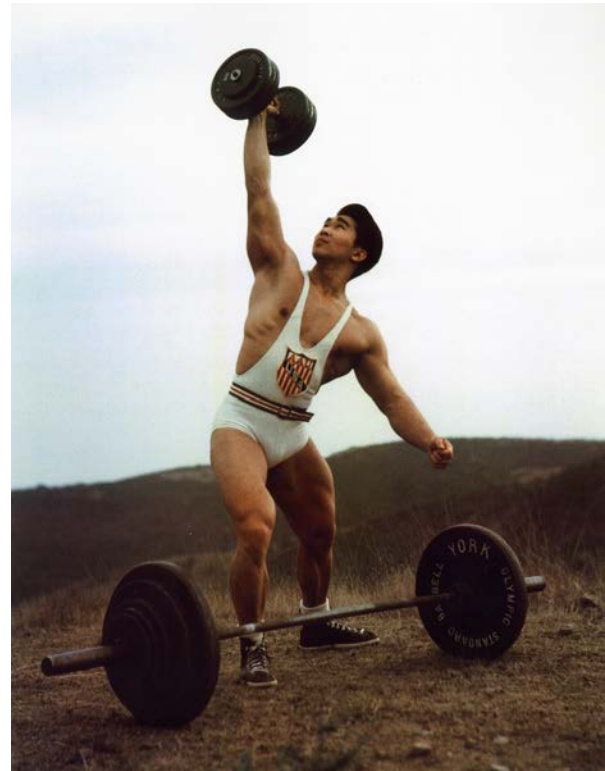
the titular figure became a key discursive trope in how the camps were viewed. A “No-No boy” refers to those who answered “no” to question 27 and 28 of the 1943 test of loyalty for those of draft age in the camps. Question 27 read, “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?” while question 28 asked, “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization?” Those who answered no to both questions were, effectively, “hammered down,” and transferred to Tule Lake as troublemakers. With resistance and protest thus celebrated, performances of allegiance or even everyday survival are at risk of being viewed as compliance or submission.³⁴

Kono was only thirteen when these tests were being administered, so he could not have had the chance to resist in this way. But I would argue that Kono is not a symbol of Asian American resistance. His career is bound up in the narrative of the American state, in ways that suggest a kind of difficult assimilation. It is therefore painful to see Kono evoke the dehumanising stereotype of “Chinese coolies” in his *Strength & Health* article, just as it is difficult to square his enlisting in the U.S. army with my desire for Kono to be an Asian American role model, a figure of representation for Asian men and Asian weightlifters—like me.

Chambers-Letson writes that “if the dark proletariat has never fully materialized as a politically active force, we still regularly catch a glimpse of it in the realm of the aesthetic, and performance in particular.”³⁵ In the final section of this paper, I want to return to Tommy Kono’s performances as a site where a minoritarian formation of Asian American identity can be glimpsed; one that, while falling outside of political frameworks of resistance and demands for justice, opens up what Dorinne Kondo calls “reparative creativity,” those acts of artistic production, or worldmaking, that attempt to “work through both the destructiveness of structural violence and our own desires for destructive vengeance.”³⁶

ARCHIVAL HYPERTROPHY AND REPARATIVE CREATIVITY

In 1988, Public Law 100-383 apologized for Japanese Internment and offered a cash payment of \$20,000 to survivors. Tommy, the last surviving member of his family, gathered the papers together in a box file called “reparation,” and made a successful application. Kono’s legal demand for reparation prompts, for me, a reparative reading of this archive. In contrast to the broad sweep of his biography and its overlapping historical narrative, how might we see Kono’s *everyday* practice and performances as a weightlifter and bodybuilder as minor acts of repair, on an embodied as well as psychic level? Because it is Kono’s physical, corpo-real, and fleshly *body*—the body that lifts and flexes, breaks down and recovers—that holds together a political apparatus in which citizenship must be performed in a carceral space of its suspension, the prac-



In his team U.S.A singlet, lifting with a barren, parched land in the background, Kono could be interpreted to have overcome his internment in the desert of northern California through weightlifting, and to have remade himself as an American.

tice of building that body, that is, physical culture, should therefore also be thought of as expansive, elastic or dynamic, rather than simply disciplinary.³⁷ Focusing on the training, transformation, breaking down, and building up of the body in a carceral space can shift the optic of Kono’s story away from one of assimilation to a more complex space of tension and negotiation of national ideologies and state-imposed violence. In other words, the gestures and movements of weightlifting and bodybuilding in the context of the camps might be reframed as a kind of minoritarian performance.

Minoritarian performance is largely associated with the work of the late performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz, who, in his book *Disidentifications*, focuses on artists and performers in the margins, who nevertheless negotiate their relation to a dominant culture that has excluded them.³⁸ Muñoz’s thinking developed in train with the work of his mentor Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who built on the psychoanalytic concept of reparation to explore “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has not been to sustain them.”³⁹ Japanese American anthropologist and theater maker Dorinne Kondo (whose parents were themselves internees), goes further to define performance by marginalized artists as “reparative creativity,” processes making, unmaking, and remaking race in relation to historical wounds that prompt both destructive retaliation and the desire for healing.⁴⁰ The “reparative” tendency, in

performance studies, then, seeks to move past tropes of resistance to focus on how marginalized (minoritarian) people and communities sustain themselves and survive.

Adopting a phrase from Nina Simone, Chambers-Letson describes minoritarian performance as “the art of ‘improvisation within a fixed framework,’ working within limited coordinates to make the impossible possible.”⁴¹ In the context of the racial capitalism’s “unjust distribution of death toward, and exploitation of, black and brown life and queer and trans bodies,” performance, he argues, is a “vital means through which the minoritarian subject demands and produces freedom and More Life at the point of the body.”⁴² Kono’s minoritarian performance, then, at the very level of muscle growth, might be seen as a small, sometimes imperceptible movement of freedom within the restrictions of carcerality.

In Kono’s archive, for the most part there is no organization at all. Kono’s reparation documents are filed beside stacks of unopened bank statements. Newspaper clippings (non-chronological, of course) appear alongside a videotape of *Only the Brave* (a film about the 100th/442nd corps of Japanese American soldiers proving their loyalty in WWII), alongside a programme for a celebratory sports banquet in Honolulu. The impression is of both meaninglessness and a surfeit of meaning—the overflow of banality makes everything significant. My relationship with the Stark Center meant I was allowed access to his unprocessed papers during my visits to Austin, which translated to work—sorting family photos from takeout food menus—usually left to family members. I begin to sense the inability of archival practice to contain the expansion of Kono’s life.

Buried among the overflow, is evidence of Kono’s internment, the four years of his young life for which I was searching. The main source is a battered box file marked “Tule Lake,” which contains facsimiles of his family’s registration documents, a Ziploc bag of school albums and mementos belonging to his brother Mike, and some correspondence from fellow survivors. Unlike the rest of Kono’s papers, Tule Lake is confined to its restricted space and time. With internment seemingly “filed away,” I was not expecting the most personal of Kono’s Tule Lake documents to appear among the random flow of documents and photos relating to training and weightlifting. Mixed in among clippings from *Strength & Health* and *Muscle & Fitness*, with no indication of its potential significance, I found a small, letter-sized envelope. The envelope contains a mimeographed newspaper clipping and two yellowing sheets of composition paper. The clipping documents a competition between different weightlifting clubs at Tule Lake, though Kono, apparently did not compete. This is actually not surprising. The names in this document are the people who Kono was learning to lift from at the time, a process that the two sheets of rough composition paper documents.

On these documents, it appears that Kono has drawn an outline of a body (his body?) posed in *contra-passo* with the left arm flexing its biceps—a pose drawn from bodybuilding pioneer Eugen Sandow’s repertoire

that would be familiar to any reader of physical culture. Diagrammatic boxes and lines point to each body part, with a measurement. It is possible that one of Kono’s training mentors drew up this chart, but it is more likely that Kono created this “worksheet” himself, judging from childish marking on the third sheet, which reads, “Copy Right [*sic*] 1944 by Tommy Kono & Co.”⁴³ Over a period of sixteen months, the charts detail the expansion of Kono’s body. Chest, expanded, from 32 inches to 37.5 inches. Arm flexed, from 10 inches to 11 inches. Thigh, from 19 inches to 19.5.

The measurement documents, on the one hand, are evidence of Kono’s transformation in the camp, in-line with the official narrative. On the other hand, the probable self-authorship suggests a self-reflective practice that Kono kept up throughout his life, as demonstrated by his training notebooks, distinctive, wire-bound notebooks that document both exercises as well as mental and bodily states when training.

Kono’s writings on physical culture, published much later in 2001, are also uniquely self-reflective. In contrast to other weightlifting or bodybuilding training books, that typically give technical cues and programmes of exercises, Kono’s writing focuses on the connection between mind and muscle—a fundamental principle of both the sport of weightlifting and the aesthetic practice of bodybuilding, but one developed primarily as embodied knowledge. The measurement documents made in 1943-44, then, are the seeds of a process of self-knowing that underpinned Kono’s later career. They mark a minoritarian performance of hypertrophic expansion against the restriction of carcerality as well as the bounded self. Hypertrophy is a medical term that refers to the enlargement of an organ or tissue resulting from an increase in cell size. In bodybuilding, it denotes muscle growth encouraged by purposive strength training and progressive overload. But hypertrophy is always expansion within restriction: the expansion of the muscle is restricted by the fascia or bone structure; the expansion of the body as a whole is restricted by the externality of the organism as an individual in the world. In relation to the history of Japanese internment, then, it is possible to read hypertrophy as an embodied expansion against the normative racial subjectivity that the carceral state compelled *Nikkei* to perform.

To go a bit further, we might say that physical culture, for a racialized person like Kono, was a way of seeing oneself in a dialectic with the stereotype imposed by the dominant culture. Frantz Fanon calls this the distinction between one’s corporeal schema and the “racial epidermal schema.”⁴⁴ Fanon describes an encounter where a child shouts a racial slur at him on the street – in this moment, he says, the corporeal schema, his body-knowledge, is shattered, and replaced by the fixed, racist image.⁴⁵ At the age of 74, Kono gave an interview with Pennsylvania’s *York Daily Record* that seemed to confirm this reading. In it, he describes to the sportswriter Jim Seip his first trip to York to train with Bob Hoffman and the York Barbell Club. “As I walked down the street,” he says, “kids were playing in an open lot and they stopped everything they were doing

own ideological investment in what its behalf is or ought to be (as though the descriptive and the prescriptive were ever separable to begin with)?”⁴⁹ How can I separate my desire to speak with Kono from my desire to speak for him?

On my last visit to Austin, I made it a point to attempt to integrate his writings and guidance into my training. While I could never lift on the level of Kono, I could emulate his training and learn from the knowledge he set down in his two published books. I could try to look like Kono, incorporating bodybuilding into my strength programmes. And yet, in seeking identification *with* Kono in this way, I was affirming the homogenization of the racializing category of “Asian” as well as the way sport seems to reify minor physiological variation into racial difference. I, a five-foot, ten-inch tall, 190-pound Chinese-Filipino could squat like a five-foot, five-inch 149-pound Japanese because of our “Asian hip mobility.” But the broken nature of a racist society that produces our shared racialization simultaneously produces the grounds for a small act of repair. Under a white gaze that would see me, and Tommy, and say we all look the same, I started to think through the relationship of an embodied process of self-making to the arresting gaze of the other. Thus, after the archive closed each evening, I would ride my bike to the Hyde Park Gym on Guadalupe Street and lift weights. I wouldn’t copy Kono’s programme, but I would try to incorporate his cues and advice into my lifting. And after I showered and ate dinner, like Kono, I would write. What I’d like to offer, finally, then is that my speculative historiography might be seen as a way of speaking *with* Tommy, alongside him, of amplifying and celebrating those little scraps of shared experience that make up identity, even despite the greatest chasms of difference.

NOTES:

1. Dorinne Kondo, *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
2. Hank Sobeleski, “Island History: Tommy Kono’s Weightlifting Exhibition on Kaua’i in 1956,” *The Garden Island*, 17 June 2012.
3. *Sacramento Bee*, 22 May 1960, D6. Clipping in Tommy Kono Papers, H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, University of Texas at Austin. Future references abbreviated to “Tommy Kono Collection.”
4. Ottley R. Coulter, *Secrets of Strong Man Feats* (New York: Knickerbocker Publishing, 1942), n.p.
5. Japanese Americans in the twentieth century self-identified numerically by generation: *issei*, *nisei*, *sansei*.
6. Joshua Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 133.
7. Chambers-Letson, *A Race*, 135.
8. International Olympic Committee (IOC), “Tommy Kono—Weightlifting”, 3 August 1952, republished on <https://www.olympic.org/news/tommy-kono-weightlifting>.
9. Osmo “John” Kiiha, “Tommy Kono,” *The Iron Master*, 1990, newsletter in Tommy Kono Collection, Stark Center.
10. IOC, “Tommy Kono—Weightlifting.”
11. See Roy Tomizawa, “Tommy Kono: Out of an Internment Camp Rises Arguably the Greatest Weightlifter of All Time,” *The Olympians*, 22 February 2016, viewed at: <https://theolympians.co/2016/02/22/tommy-kono-out-of-an-internment-camp-rises-arguably-the-greatest-weightlifter-of-all-time/>.
12. *Bildungsroman* narratives are coming of age stories based on the idea of a young person overcoming unfortunate circumstances to grow

into a successful and moral person.

13. Broderick D.V. Chow, “Sculpting Masculinities in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Physical Culture: The Practiced Life of Stanley Rothwell,” *TDR: The Drama Review*, 63, no. 2 (2019): 34-56.
14. See, for example, Tommy Kono, *Weightlifting, Olympic Style* (Honolulu: HKC, 2001).
15. Artie Dreschler, “A Tribute to Tommy Kono” *TeamUSA.org/USA Weightlifting*, 27 April 2016, viewed at: <https://www.teamusa.org/USA-Weightlifting/Features/2016/April/27/A-tribute-to-Tommy-Kono>.
16. Jennifer Hargreaves and Patricia Vertinsky, *Physical Culture, Power and the Body* (London: Routledge, 2006); Pirkko Markula-Denison and Richard Pringle, *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self* (London: Routledge, 2006); C.L. Cole, Michael Giardina, and David L. Andrews, “Michel Foucault, Studies of Power and Sport,” in Richard Giulianotti, *Sport and Modern Social Theorists* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 207-223.
17. Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different*, 99.
18. *Minidoka Irrigator*, 8 July 1944, cited in Michael L. Mullan, “Sport, Ethnicity and the Reconstruction of the Self: Baseball in America’s Internment Camps,” *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 16, no. 1 (1999):1-21.
19. The contested history of camp newspapers is provided by “Newspapers in Camp,” *Densho Encyclopedia*, 2019, viewed at: http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Newspapers_in_camp_
20. Chambers-Letson, *A Race*, 156.
21. Chambers-Letson, *A Race*, 163.
22. Stacey J. Lee, Nga-Wing Angela Wong, and Alvin N. Alvarez, “The Model Minority and the Perpetual Foreigner: Stereotypes of Asian Americans,” in N. Tewari and A.N. Alvarez (eds.), *Asian American Psychology: Current Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 69-84.
23. Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (London: Verso, 2011).
24. “Real Life Story of Tommy Kono,” *Strength & Health* (May 1964): 14.
25. Photograph, Tommy Kono Collection.
26. Photographs, Tommy Kono Collection.
27. Photograph, Tommy Kono Collection.
28. Unknown author, “Estrellas del Deporte,” Tommy Kono Collection.
29. Tommy Kono, “Lifting Behind the ‘Bamboo Curtain,’” *Strength & Health* (May 1960): 24-25, 50.
30. See, for example the organization *besean.n* (“Be Seen”) viewed at: <https://www.besean.co.uk/>.
31. W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934[1995]), 16.
32. Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 16.
33. Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 227.
34. Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 226-7.
35. Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 17
36. Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 34
37. Chambers-Letson, *A Race*.
38. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
39. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 150-51.
40. Kondo, *Worldmaking*.
41. Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 4.
42. Ibid.
43. Measurements, Tommy Kono Collection.
44. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112.
45. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.
46. Jim Seip, “Greatest Olympic Lifter Found Strength in York,” *York Daily Record*, 30 April 2016.
47. Seip, “Greatest Olympic Lifter.”
48. Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 11.
49. Carolyn Laubender, “Beyond Repair: Interpretation, Reparation, and Melanie Klein’s Clinical Play-Technique,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (2019): 51-67.