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Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, Volume 39, Number 3, Winter 2021, pp. 181-209 (Article)

Published by Purdue University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.2021.0032>



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Article

Redressing Power Through Hasidic Drag: Julie Weitz in *My Golem as the Great Dominatrix*

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the video dance work of contemporary Jewish performance artist Julie Weitz through analysis of her seven-minute short *The Great Dominatrix* (2018). Inspired by Charlie Chaplin's critique of fascism in *The Dictator* (1940), Weitz mocks modern-day political power in Hassidic drag with Chaplin-esque physicality and layered cultural reference. Curls unfurl from under the fur of a traditional man's hat as golem enters in white tights and leotard, wrapped unorthodoxly in religious tefillin. She mounts a plastic inflatable globe as quick cuts speed through the myriad ways she sexualizes the prop. In one sequence, the artist gesticulates her white-caked face and body with exaggerated expressions of surprise, disgust, and desire while watching iPhone clips of Trump and Chaplin's Hitler playing with his own oversize globe. Satirizing today's rulers and their greed for world domination while libidinizing the sci-fi figure of Jewish folklore, Weitz embodies an ethnogender drag she describes as curiously empowering, if often misunderstood. Prioritizing these multiple mis/identifications as contestatory performance plays in porcelain slip, I argue that the artist deploys competing tropes to dethrone dictatorship while exaggerating antisemitic extremes to sculpt the Modern Jewess in bodily negotiation of (her own) power.

Keywords: Golem, Hasidic, drag, Chaplin, power, dictator, Hitler, Trump

INTRODUCTION

Natural curls unfurl from under the fur of a Hasidic man's hat as a Jewess cyborg adorned in white tights and lace leotard wraps herself unorthodoxly in religious tefillin.¹ This is Los Angeles visual artist Julie Weitz in her video short *The Great Dominatrix* (2018), a silent solo film featuring the artist as updated folk golem dressed in the sexually repurposed Jewish garb of her religious grandfather.² In white-caked makeup that covers face and exposed skin, Weitz remounts themes from Jewish myth and vaudeville alike for a black-and-white exaggeration of antisemitic extremes, playing with self-objectifying tropes as strategies of social and political critique. She dominates a plastic inflatable globe as quick cuts speed through the myriad ways her gesture and expression perverse the prop. Exaggerated surprise, disgust, and desire narrate the golem as she plays with her smartphone, too, mimicking the exhibitionism she watches on screen in clips of Donald Trump's 2016 inaugural speech. Golem as dominatrix is a projection "of our worst fears and greatest desires," who intends—as the short film's tagline explains—"to counteract today's rampant xenophobia."³ This sexy golem and her paradoxes hold a mirror up to a contemporary world out of control—a world, the artist seems to suggest, of our own making. Weitz and her clay-face performance personage offer a reflective projection of this greater contemporary world in crisis.



Figure 1. Julie Weitz in *The Great Dominatrix*. Screenshot taken by author.

Inspired by Charlie Chaplin's critique of fascism in *The Great Dictator* (1940), known for its infamous parody of Adolph Hitler, Weitz mocks modern-day political rulers—Trump most explicitly—through her performance as a power-hungry dominatrix who takes pleasure in mounting an inflatable globe. This golem as great dominatrix, like Chaplin's great dictator, appears as a grown-up child who plays with too much power, epitomizing the adolescent antics of those who wreak havoc through tyrannical rule. In this article I ask how, in reconceiving of Chaplin's comic simpleton charm and political satire, Weitz manipulates her Jewish American gender, sexual, racial, religious, and national identities to stage an embodied satire of presidential power for the screen. Furthermore, as Weitz mocks authoritarianism through sexual imagery that in the artist's own words, "liberates her inner dom"²⁴ ("dom" is short for a dominatrix and the actions she performs), while also donning religious symbols that grant her a "spiritual power," I ask how her golem's layered mimicry dresses and redresses power in competing ways.

To "redress" means to set right, to remedy, to remove the cause of, and to avenge. In the context of costumed caricature, I use the verb liberally to refer to the ways Weitz enacts these action-intentions through visual and embodied symbols. Analyzing Weitz's overt political redress through self-conscious racial atonement and ethnic recuperation of a golem's protective/destructive effect, I ask how the short film implicates the artist's creative hand and self-commenting critique as an exaggerated play on the artist's identity and sense of political responsibility. Moreover, as a study in embodied screen performance, my reading of this short film asks how camera and corporeal negotiations undermine political greed and empower artistic license in the same quick cuts.

MY GOLEM ON THE MOVE: FROM SHAPELESS MASS TO SOCIAL MEDIA

The Great Dominatrix is the first video short of Weitz in character as golem, which began in 2017 as a response to the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, that took place at the University of Virginia in

protest of the removal of Confederate monuments, and resulted in the verbal and physical assault on counter-protesters, including expressly antisemitic and anti-Black motivations.⁵ In lieu of this, “I felt impelled to expose myself,” Weitz told *BOMB Magazine*.⁶ “That might sound strange,” she added. “But historically speaking, Jews hide. It’s an act of survival. In contrast, I started asking myself how I was complicit.” A goal to expose both her whiteness and her Jewishness thus fueled Weitz’s golem project as a stance against white supremacy and Trump-era nationalism. The creation of her humanoid golem character stemmed directly from Weitz’s deep questioning about her role as a member of the white racial majority and Jewish American ethnoreligious minority in a moment that she describes as one of increasing antisemitism and xenophobic treatment of immigrants, exacerbated by ongoing subordination of women and people of color. Inspired by the organizing efforts of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo/Times Up that galvanized the creative and activist potential of social media platforms,⁷ Weitz began investing in opportunities to play provocatively with her own image as a force of social repair.

Gaining initial attention from friends and curators for golem’s twenty-to sixty-second Instagram performances,⁸ Weitz was commissioned to create one-minute segments introducing the character for a public art project.⁹ The videos played on two adjacent digital billboards along a highly trafficked section of Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood. From there, Weitz was asked by Public Pool Gallery in Encino, California, to film *My Golem Reborn* on site, and exhibit a multichannel video installation in and around the gallery’s pool in September 2018. The artful result was a fourteen-minute mikvah with two male sirens where golem in swim cap and flowing white robe takes a ritual bath. In November of that same year, Weitz collaborated with artist Nancy Baker Cahill on an augmented reality venture to project an enlarged image of golem on the wall of the United Nations headquarters in New York City.¹⁰

Opportunities to develop the project expanded Weitz’s vision for her golem, and she began to conceptualize a series of short films in which the character would address a host of contemporary issues, including but not limited to staging healing rituals in the Mojave Desert and fighting fires in southern California.¹¹ *The Great Dominatrix* is the first of those films,

which I return to here in the wake of the spring 2020 global pandemic and summer 2020 mass protests of police brutality across the United States and worldwide. These events have given new meaning to the artist's ominous warning of a world gone mad and madder due to the chaos of what has become Trump's fatal non-actions on the coronavirus pandemic and his disturbing censure of political unrest in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests across the globe.¹² As the consequences of the president's abuses of power have grown increasingly severe, so too has golem grown more overt in her messaging and less satirical in turn. By summer of 2020, appearing in full costume at a Never Again protest and speaking through a megaphone in the voice of the artist herself,¹³ golem broke her characteristic silence, tying historic Jewish persecution to present-day justice demands with a piercing urgency absent of irony.¹⁴

As golem's activism has developed, so has the figure's physical and metaphysical incorporation of symbolism from the Book of Creation (*Sefer Yetzirah*), a text known to be the earliest book on Jewish mysticism and esotericism appearing sometime between the third and sixth centuries CE.¹⁵ The book argues that God created the world with secret paths of wisdom that are composed of the ten *sefirot*, or godly emanations, and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, both of which inspire costume and movement-based choices Weitz continues to make and adapt for her character.¹⁶ Included are instructions for the Jewish mystic on making a golem from clay by breathing it to life, which the artist returns to as Kabbalist inspiration for the project.

Weitz's golem embodiments for screen and social stage furthermore draw on the history of the figure's popularity in Eastern European Jewish folklore. Protective myths of the golem grew popular in sixteenth-century Prague as legendary monster and metaphor for overpowering incumbent threats.¹⁷ These enormous giants were summoned to defend the Jews from state-ordered violence, often under a pretext of the blood libel, or blood accusation, that, since around the twelfth century, has worried episodically that Jews ritually sacrifice Christian children. Beyond their protective missions, however, golem theorist Elizabeth Baer explains how golems in religious and secular accounts have just as readily defied their creators, exaggerating

the darker, destructive side of creation while wreaking havoc on the innocent and even in perversely antisemitic ways, further enunciating a golem's great power.¹⁸

Golems of contemporary popular culture have picked up on many traditional themes while de-ethnicizing, obscuring, or otherwise burying their roots (think *Terminator* [1984], *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* [2010], and the growing list of Frankenstein movies). Invoking danger and heroism, threat and protective fantasy, the golem personage readily occupies the secular fictive imagination as one who can betray its creator's control, taking on a life of its own as in the murderous protagonist of horror drama *The Golem* (2018). Such renditions warn of what might come if and when technology takes over, imbibing golem tropes with the unknown power of artificial intelligence. To counteract such a move, a golem is often trained to obey, built to tame, and—in the case of those golem-inspired science fiction avatars—brought to half-baked consciousness and in limited spurts, taught only to respond to literal commands. Colloquial connotations follow suit as calling someone a *golem* in modern conversational Hebrew implies that the person can manage only the simplest of requests. A golem's protective and destructive power is thus both almighty and always already domesticated by its inherent dumbness, which, if gone rogue or beyond control, can be resolved by its deactivation.¹⁹ This monstrous agility that pairs with dumbed mutability intensifies and domesticates the golem figure at once. This extremist doubling of possibilities renders a golem's embodiment a riotous experiment that, as if by its very nature, runs the risk of going too far.

Weitz describes her golem as both “alter ego” and a “discursive figure”²⁰ who comes to life through these video embodiments and the conversations they complicate, whether through commissions with high art gallerists, collaborating artists or scholars (like me), or in comments made by friends or antagonists in person or online. Such opportunity to grow and change her golem speaks to the process of the character's ongoing creative evolution as well as its inherent paradoxes as a figure of at least two extremes. This ambiguity likewise frames how the artist deploys what Philip Auslander describes as a central tenet of postmodern political performance, wherein Weitz “recycles and critiques” her own intersectional identity material as Jewish

American white queer cisgender female.²¹ How these identities cohere or collide in each performance of golem reveal the artist's changing approach to political redress and its critical use of role play.

In *The Great Dominatrix*, Weitz's performance satirizes this collision of identities as a core part of the crises she exposes and refuses to resolve. This approach to performance is the artist's full-bodied nod to the beloved late performance scholar José Esteban Muñoz, whose groundbreaking book, *Disidentifications* (1999), has remained on Weitz's desk like another form of scripture throughout the project's development. Following Muñoz, *The Great Dominatrix* ultimately reveals the labor of making identity as a process that takes place at the point of collision of perspectives. Within this performance-inspired collision, as Muñoz teaches us, is "the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation."²² In doing so, "a representational contract is broken," Muñoz writes, where "the social order receives a joke that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable ways."²³ From digital billboards and Instagram feeds to online filmic form and its growing live performance accompaniments, the "representational contract" Weitz breaks is one that intentionally perverts the artist's gender, sexual, and ethnic identities by exaggerating the power they yield or never will. The loud and wide—or local but indispensable—aspects of Weitz's golem arguably lives in the thrust(ing) of these layered provocations. However, in joking, breaking, and reverberating this way, Weitz's "great dominatrix" deliberately confuses any singular or clear punchline. The joke of exaggerated Jewish performance tropes (i.e., what the artist calls "sexy clown,"²⁴ later revised as "sacred clown"²⁵), gendered reversals of sexual behavior (i.e., female domination), and disavowal of political greed (i.e., world takeover) refuse easy resolution. If jokes arrange a power dynamic of tellers, their targets, and those to whom the joke is told,²⁶ who are the joke's hearers here? And who laughs? In other words, for whom and for what purpose does this joke "break" best, or worst?

For those Jews whom Weitz posits have historically hidden as a survival strategy—or at least those sympathetic to that premise—golem as dominatrix encourages a layered coming out. It enables sexualized, gendered,

ethnically Othered, and racialized subjects to stand up to injustice (even if it starts by making monstrous, exaggerated fun of it). In this, she takes wardrobe cues from a closet full of references to “dom” fascism and bigotry. For others who find the film untenable, unfunny, or otherwise illegible, as audience comments included below reveal, these references and their revisions likely remain opaque or otherwise off-limits, suggesting that the question of which representational contracts break and for whom remains at the core of the project’s redressive power.

CAPTIONED ACTION AND QUICK-CUT CHOREOGRAPHY

Against the soundscape of synthetic strings, Weitz’s opening frame moves from white pointed fingernails up the length of paint-encrusted fingers, caked in a plaster medium called porcelain slip. The tight shot cuts to what looks like the cracks and fissures of the moon’s crater, but come into truer focus as the back of the figure’s hand. In a slowed rotation, the hand appears to consider its own curvature in an exploratory negotiation of skin and gesture, as thin diagonal shadows cast a film noir feel against the otherworldly limbs coming into view. A text slide interrupts for context in a font meant to mimic Hebrew lettering: “My Golem comes alive in times of crisis/She is a projection of our worst fears and greatest desires.” The bold white writing comes into sharper focus against a spinning globe suspended in black space. An ominous symbol of a world in crisis, and the scary-funny prospect of an artist’s science project come to life, the opening shots announce the hero-villain as a sinister global superpower. The camera moves in on the orbiting globe, the looming image and its open-ended signification tempered only by the visible seams of its plastic exterior.

The figure’s torso fills the frame, contoured in a tight white leotard with a lace midsection. She wraps herself in pious binding, sending black prayer straps around and under legs where they don’t belong. Her flaky fingers reach for the sacred leather tefillin now acting like elastic suspenders, testing out the stretchiness of the black bands and their sinister potential. The next images are quick and choppy displays of the headless bust and hips in motion like the old-fashioned looks of an early stag film. In sped-up

sequences reminiscent of the first black-and-white movies, we get angles of this golem's svelte body as she paces in fast-forward around an abstracted room. The feeling is of a comic robot or "object-machine" coming into consciousness without clear direction of what to do.²⁷

With her back to the camera, she snaps the straps against her backside as if in profane beginnings of a pornographic film. A quick cut shows her draped in a thin muslin prayer shawl on a chair with legs wide open. She displays the fabric's tasseled edge in front of her crotch, outlined in the religious ribbon. We see the creature's clayed face now for the first time, mouth gaping open, eyes stunned wide. The gasp turns to lust and she looks straight to the camera as if seducing someone looking through an invisible webcam. Suiting up for some kind of Sabbath tease, she places an observant man's fur hat atop her light brown curls, feminine stand-ins for the iconic male *payot*.²⁸

The montage that follows fades from frame to frame as golem drapes over her globe, bored and busy with her smartphone. Two lit candles overlay the shot like end-of-week reminders not to work or use electricity, which she betrays by busying herself with her device.²⁹ More contradictions abound as several split-second shots of edited panic suggest golem's disdain at something only she can see on-screen. A second text slide captions the scene, "All alone at night/My Golem warms up/to Her Global Positioning." A series of still shots create the effect of the performer posing for the camera, showcasing the myriad ways she sexualizes the blow-up globe in pin-up-styled tableaux. Spliced bits of super-spiced action add a looping effect as golem's lewd micromovements repeat in edited glitches that manipulate her image for the camera.

Golem invents endless ways to entrap and pleasure the oversized ball, and attempts each idea one after the next. Rapid pelvic thrusts and external stimulation give way to Pilates exercises and other plays with the blown-up global ball, like the game of catch she attempts with herself that forces an unsightly squat and rounded posture. The clownish look becomes a sexy crawl as she walks on hands and knees around the circumference of her mate. Golem's physical antics reveal a wicked imagination as an extended sequence of hurried pelvic thrusting lasts longer than any other section of the film. Another slide narrates the dark realization, "Her one objective: Global domination,"

and cuts quickly back to golem smacking the globe while gazing into the camera, then using the tefillin strap to whip her partner while straddling it between her legs. Bold brass horns of the musical accompaniment build in major cord intensity as our protagonist lifts the globe ceremoniously overhead. As the music comes to climax, so does her full-bodied trust fall land atop the inflatable globe, which receives it with a soft rebound, slowed down for manipulated effect. She gives fully into the ball as her prop rolls out of frame, and golem lies flattened and fulfilled on the floor.

Fast asleep now on the deflated ball skin, she presses her cheek to North America. The world looks like a tired testicle and the United States its host. “My Golem concedes that global domination is pure fantasy,” a silent caption reads, and she wakes up angry in a scene of rage. Madness overtakes the next moves as edits have her stomping on the airless inflatable, then laying her body fully down upon it, beating it down with the pumping force of her pelvis. The next title slide overlays an image of her painted face, fur hat, and far-off gaze that fades one final time to the spinning globe: “And yet/her dreams/of domination /continue . . .”

In the final moments before the film ends, the figure kisses her smartphone with loving repetition, and we catch for an instant a flash of the



Figure 2. The final text offers an ill-fated cliffhanger. Screenshot taken by author.



Figure 3. Tech-obsessed golem kisses her smartphone. Screenshot taken by author.



Figure 4. Golem's browser reads "Trump's Inauguration Speech." Screenshot by author.

screen, a loading browser window titled "Trump's Inauguration Speech." This is the context we have anticipated throughout her tease, and the content of her dominatrix tirade. To dominate the globe remains a threat-fantasy for a femme golem shaped from amorphous mass, whose projection of greed for world power continues beyond the length of the film.

Such is the movement material of *The Great Dominatrix* and the stunt/stint of this exploratory self-discovery. But what to make of this shapeless mass-come-video vixen who flaunts her curves and effeminate curls to dominate a plastic inflatable while “warming up” to her “global positioning”? And why does she do it while dressed in what the artist calls “Hasidic drag”? Aiming to address bigotry and fascism in its overt critique of presidential power, the video short preaches to a progressive viewership aligned with a protest of Trump’s near-imperial rule. Indeed, the very recuperation of Chaplin’s “great” dictator would seem to make coded reference to Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan, popularized in his 2016 presidential campaign. While the only on-screen signal is the loading footage of his inaugural speech, it is clear that golem idolizes the greatness of his image as a master to emulate. Whether she misrecognizes him as her creator or adopts him as a more powerful leader is left unanswered by the film. Either way, the mystical sci-fi creature appears here alone at night, experimenting with her own power through mimicry.

As a creature of artificial intelligence, a golem must be trained by its creator carefully so as to avoid these kinds of impassioned and misguided antics. Just as parents must now filter the web content available at home, what happens when Weitz is purportedly not watching is a child’s exploratory window browsing gone too far. The artist’s golem is funny for this reason: it does what science lab avatars are designed to do—protect and destroy—but toward disastrous ends. One imagines that if this golem is given a chance to mature, she must be trained out of her tech-obsessed tendencies, calmed of manic fits of rage and greed, disciplined to consider her political affinities in more depth, and taught to establish sexual consent as real-life dominatrices might well advise. For fans that followed golem’s social media at the time of this video, such behavior was explained in part by her “tween” age bracket and millennial-mocking Internet addiction. This ill-directed stage of golem’s growing up draws a comic parallel to Trump’s supporters, too, such that unquestioned faith in the president is likened here to a naïve lack of criticality that knows not what it does.³⁰

Drawing on Chaplin’s persona of the idiot savant, Weitz’s golem appears impervious to the effects of her actions. For instance, in *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin plays a Jewish barber that is mistaken for the dictator, but in stepping

up to the platform, delivers a speech about citizenry and the good of humanity. In Weitz's own words, "Perversely, to fight hate, his character must disguise himself as its leading proponent."³¹ Just as perversely, golem impersonates the abuse of authority that she is watching online. But she doesn't take the podium with Chaplin's clever grace. Left alone while her artist-creator sleeps, golem's feverish pursuit of the globe is both an X-rated exaggeration of phallic power and the childish tantrum of Trump's Twitter rages. Her movements appear repetitive and indefatigable, as if without end. Such unfaltering confidence further underscores the link to slapstick male comics of silent film, such as Chaplin, famous for physical intensification of falls that don't actually cause real hurt, and in turn, the threat they fail to truly impose.³²

Compared to Chaplin, the hyperbolic nature of Weitz's impersonations create less sympathetic dissonance. Overt connections between Hitler and Trump as dictators may be obvious to some, and might therefore provide needed comic relief for that reason. But golem's exaggerated Jewish gesture, makeup, and facial expression may cause unforgivable harm or offense for viewers who cannot laugh, even if they otherwise support a general critique of the US president. Indeed, for these viewers, golem's exaggeration of Jewish symbolism may rub too uncomfortably against a mimicry of political greed and totalitarian rule, or appear unjustly antisemitic in its own right. As Sigmund Freud writes of such a case, "We do not laugh at [the naïve comic figure] but are indignant at him."³³

If we, however, return to Muñoz's "representational contract" broken by this "joke," it becomes possible to conceive of a productive destabilization that likely intends to produce both laughter and disdain. That is to say that, in staking claim to a blurred set of familiar identifications and disidentifications, Weitz's work anticipates the raised eyebrows of both the viewer who knows the codes as well as the viewer for whom too much is lost in the meaning of mixed signs. The redressive power produced in the "collision of perspectives" thus necessarily works differently in each case, if such a designation is to be linked to those "in" on the joke or less so. Weitz's provocation appears to have it both ways in this sense, creating caricatured content that challenges viewers to wonder what to make of Golem, while staging a self-critical display that arguably wonders the same about herself.

THE POLITICS OF SELF-CREATION

At the time of the film's creation, Weitz referred to the character as "My Golem," highlighting an ownership relationship and evoking the artist's assumed creative control. Importantly, in performing the role under this auspice, Weitz animates the golem as if it were hers, but not her. As a physical object of her possessive creation and an embodied subject she also becomes, Weitz's golem is both the materialization of the artist's vision and the artist's material body itself.³⁴ And yet, the golem trope, as a citation of the act of creation, foregrounds this self-reimagining as central to the project's provocation. The "My" in "My Golem" thus marks the critical interplay of self and skewed reflection that remains central to the characterization. The "My" also serves to take some responsibility—but, importantly, not all responsibility—for the ways Weitz as the artist might offend or cause the dismay of others, even as the golem she creates appears to act beyond her control.

This is what Weitz loves about drag, she says. "It's a hyperbolic and satiric disguise for self-love and personal freedom."³⁵ Within that disguise is a kind of personal truth not otherwise accessed in the artist's daily life. "As my character, I'm boss," she confirms, effectively reversing the roles of artist and golem.³⁶ In ongoing iterations of the project, Weitz has leaned further into this reversal; since this film, she dropped the prefix. The artist explained to me that the shift makes golem's name easier to write, utter, and potentially book without the possessive noun that may be confusing when not referenced by Weitz directly. Along with the change is increased independence on the part of golem's decision-making power, or what her ongoing evolution in films that follow this one mark as golem's maturation and signal of the character acting more on her own terms. For example, in *Rituals of a Globalist* (2019), Golem escapes to the desert and remains unlocatable by the artist who appears on camera from her car stuck in LA traffic, frantically trying to find her.³⁷

In creating the character, Weitz describes a practice of channeling her Jewish American family, switching on her most familiar cultural choreography of gestural and facial expression to conjure up the people she knew growing up: "It's sort of like code switching for me; I gesture and exaggerate my facial expressions intuitively, in a distinctly Jewish way."

Weitz writes in her description of the project that this “Jewish way” recalls a history of Eastern European stage entertainers popular in the first decades of the twentieth-century United States, referencing Al Jolson, Ed Cantor, and Fanny Brice, for whom critique of authority came with Yiddish-inflected personifications.³⁸ Grounding the gesture- and facework in a tradition of Jewish female self-referential physical comedy, Weitz situates the project as an extension of Jewish humor popularized in vaudeville and Yiddish theater.

As Jewish dance scholar Rebecca Rossen has argued, a popular practice of that same early twentieth-century history was the performance of Hasidic drag that, like blackface performances of the same era, linked heightened personifications of gender and ethnicity to assimilatory fantasies.³⁹ Jewish impersonators from vaudeville to modern dance played up their ethnic heritage in costumed religious symbols and distinct movement vocabulary, and in doing so, effectively distanced themselves from the old world it represented.⁴⁰ Where Hasidic drag was thus in effect a practice of becoming American for early Jewish stage and screen performers, Weitz’s version a hundred years later pushes on what that might mean. Such linkages to the past raise questions about Jewish performance today: How does Weitz’s performance of Jewishness embody a proximal relationship to Americanness? And to what extent does Weitz’s golem extend or disrupt assimilative fantasies of early twentieth-century performances that played up Jewishness? In what ways might we read Weitz’s ethnic and religious “drag” as a sourcing of Otherness that moves her both toward and away from whiteness, so as to expose a complex relationship to it? In continuing this performance lineage and layered citation, in what sense does golem both “protect” and “destroy” the Jewish American performance tradition she invokes in this regard, disavowing whiteness through exaggerating Jewishness?

In an interview with Jennifer Remenchik for *BOMB Magazine*, Weitz explains that she paints her face and hands as a way “to exaggerate [her] whiteness.”⁴¹ Applying the clay as whiteface makeup, she invokes the blackface makeup of the performance canon she draws upon, while inverting the racial logic of its terms.⁴² Making a monster with this make-up takes on more than one meaning. In Weitz’s explanation, exaggerating her whiteness allows her to externalize an internalized racial superiority complex. This whiteface

allows Weitz an avenue for distancing herself from the racist ideology she admonishes while implicating herself as part of the white majority.

Weitz's performance of Jewishness is thus bound up in a critique of Americanness and of whiteness, its nationalism and its complicity. Jewish costumed and facial-gestural symbols of the artist's drag propose a disidentification of the familiar ethnic assimilation fantasy. It first reverses that aspirational blending in by staking claim to ethnic Otherness and the critical power yielded from this outsider positionality, but does so by foregrounding its conspicuous position in the racial inside. In this rerouting of expectations, the subjects of gender and sexuality, too, become sources of self-questioning political redress for the artist whose liberated alter ego allows her to out otherwise repressed desires. Weitz reflects on how this works: "Perhaps because I've always been self-conscious about performing femininity in real life, my alter-ego allows me to openly express it."⁴³ Painting her face, applying fake nails, strapping on her costume, and zipping up go-go boots are "surprisingly powerful" transformations, she adds.

As Weitz explores strategies of self-creation, this familiar and jokish "Jewish way" of performing, which accompanies an outing of whiteness and a foray into BDSM sex culture, also comes with a desire—and even a reverence—for what she calls the "spiritual power" of male religious symbols: "I also desire costumes that accentuate Jewishness . . . clothing normally worn by religious men. Growing up I watched with envy as teenage boys wrapped leather straps around their arms and heads before prayer. I sat by my grandfather at shul and braided the strings of his tallis. For me, these were articles of spiritual power to which I had limited access. So, there's something titillating and transgressive about wearing stylized replicas of religious clothing."⁴⁴

For the artist, these religious references approximate the observant world of her grandfather wherein she watched as teenage boys wrapped themselves in ritual articles. Wearing these replicas is "titillating" and "transgressive" for Weitz, who finds that the look and feel of these materials offers her a semblance of this "spiritual power" traditionally assigned to men. What exactly constitutes this spiritual power is left unexplained by the artist, as is the full effect it manifests. Even so, sexual and spiritual power would appear to entertain different ideas of authority, different fantasies of access and

control. What more may be understood of an impersonation of power that parodies presidential greed through repurposed religious replicas, and the ways in which phallic symbols of the dominatrix's charge are layered against the near-supernatural power these "spiritual" objects possess?

The artist's comments make clear that the grandfather's world Weitz describes and embodies through costumed use of its religious regalia stands entirely apart from the power-hungry politician Weitz mocks through mimicry. While both sources of masculine power (sexual and spiritual) are titillating, they occupy different places and times in the artist's imagination, and operate as aspects of this identity drag in different ways because of it. Where the masculine power of religious observance here invokes the memory of a paternal figure and the adolescent boys of the artist's youth, it also invokes an orientalist imagination of a far-off place, out of time or touch with the artist's present, and somehow pleasantly so. This appears in stark contrast to the nowness of presidential power, for which there is only feigned or jokish affinity in the film, and more truly only admonition. The costumed nostalgia of Weitz grandfather's world is thus juxtaposed against the mimicked aggression of present-day governance.

Importantly, those masculinities are reconceived in complex ways, as Weitz re-genders both male roles as female ones. That is to say that both the personified male dictator and the religious male of nostalgic identification are reconceived as and through the female body of the artist and the femme golem dominatrix she personifies. This doubling of masculinities and their feminization in the film requires further consideration, as what it means to effeminize each masculine image means quite different things. Arguably, in the spiritual power of her grandfather's world, Weitz delves into a realm of Jewish male religiosity long discussed in terms of its effeminacy, whether by way of antisemitic histories of thought or recuperative Jewish scholarship that positions Jewish masculinity as an alternative to Euro-American patriarchal roles for men.⁴⁵ Most evocative of the latter is Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct*, which counters the Western notion of the masculine, aggressive, sexually dominant "hero" with the Jewish ideal of the gentle, receptive male who, since the early rabbis of ancient texts, has been studious and family-oriented. As Weitz effeminizes both men in her political redress,

she “castrates” the president “hero” through becoming herself the sexual dominant, while recovering the always already castrated Jew, purportedly incapable of any such thing. In doing so, she posits the female golem (and herself) as somehow capable of corporealizing both masculinities simultaneously, or at least caricaturizing them at the same time, differently.

Moreover, in performing both men, Weitz enacts an important rejoinder to a religious representational imaginary wherein, as Ann Pellegrini summarizes, “all Jews are womanly but no women are Jews.”⁴⁶ Pellegrini’s point makes clear that the identification of male Jews as “woman” leaves little room for Jewish women. Even as Weitz and her female golem appear to fill in this gap, the artist continues to stage femininity by way of male identities, leaving perhaps only the shape of her female body (and its lack of a penis or any substituting symbol) to indicate a femininity uncircumscribed by maleness. And yet, heeding the artist’s admission that she never felt able to express her femininity until the surprising empowerment of golem’s painted nails and zipped-up go-go boots, it remains curious to think of how the identity categories Weitz plays with (Jew, Dictator, Woman) remain distinct from one another in this formulation, even if performed all at once, and in the same act. It would seem that playing a golem offers opportunity to embody these simultaneous but asymmetrical roles all at once in ways that resonate with Weitz’s own living mismatch.

That is, as part of her performance, characterizations of competing parts of the artist’s self-identity are put on absurdist display. It follows, then, that their dragged effects are not equal. Weitz’s costumed redressings or performance disidentifications cannot function in the same ways, with the same force, or toward the same ends. In the case of *The Great Dominatrix*, the political mockery of Trump is stupidly obscene, and therefore, I would argue, on the nose. The self-referencing commentary is more difficult to decipher, as Weitz evidences a majoritarian racial power that she has but doesn’t want, while co-opting a sexual command that she doesn’t have but wishes for. In this way, Weitz, who performs as golem who performs as dictator-dominatrix, delivers her multipower play of aggressive and submissive control as a war of unresolved tensions and positionalities, seemingly on purpose.

A GOLEM'S POWER AS COLLECTIVE PROJECTION

As Weitz remixes the spiritual power of her grandfather's ritual getup with the phallic power of a sexual dominatrix that is both personal fantasy and mocking political impersonation, she performs the maddening pleasure that results from a collision of identifications. And yet, in the layers of identifications purposefully repurposed, Weitz and her Golem have received a slew of criticisms that suggest the limits of the project's legibility as political satire along divergent party lines. While called out as "Hasidic appropriation" by members of her progressive community and dismissed as such on account of a misrepresentation of religious orthodoxy, Weitz shared with me that others say that they "can't access the work because they are not Jewish," disengaging with the persona due to a lack of cultural understanding.⁴⁷ Finding that neither issue is "my responsibility," Weitz still understands the reception of the work to be as revealing as it is challenging. While not wishing to pander to these audiences, she expressed frustration most of all with the aggression of critics that have found the film plainly antisemitic, and reductively so.

Several such commentators have wondered if the piece is anti-Israel in its personification of a hyper-stereotypical Jewish clown dominating the world. From this view, the very thought of a Jewish dominatrix who tops the world invokes the standpoint that Israel and its lobbyists are controlling international relations in the Middle East. As convincing as some might find such a reading of the work, Weitz made clear in a phone interview with me that a political scapegoating of Jews as global dominators is the opposite of her intention with the work. The artist contends, too, that the film resists a transparent stance on Israel or American Jews who support Israeli politics, bemoaning that there does not exist a conceivable way to perform Jewish content without an assumed tie to Israel.⁴⁸ Weitz's comments speak to the gap that is always present between an artist's intention and her reception, but also raise important questions for contemporary Jewish American identity performance, wherein confusion around an artist's stance on Israel suspends—or otherwise somehow determines—the critical reception of her work.

Other comments from her audiences have been equally revelatory for Weitz. At a live performance of her power-dom golem for a Los Angeles art party, a provocateur yelled, “You could never do that in Germany!” meaning, among many possible things, that the exaggerated rendition of the Jew as hyperfeminine aggressor is too dangerous a play in a country more self-conscious of its antisemitism. Adding on the phone to me that “German women are upset by it,” Weitz described the scene of a “visibly Aryan” woman who came up to her after the show to criticize the performance as irresponsible and then walked away, saying, “she felt dizzy.”⁴⁹ Indeed, in sharing the story with me this way, the artist makes another joke, this one about the moralizing authority of those who think they know what is best for the Jews, which, in the context of “German women,” takes on particular meaning. The vertigo experienced by the viewer in this case—or at least in this retelling of it from one Jewish woman (Weitz) to another Jewish woman (me)—cannot be separated from the embodied effects of German antisemitism and its national shame.

The dizzying nature of golem as Jewish dominatrix-dictator has spun far the other way too; Weitz and her golem have incited online bullying from alt-right antagonists who find the project offensively too Jewish. After Weitz hashtagged a golem Instagram performance as “Globalist”—a moniker known in the news as an antisemitic slur,⁵⁰ and therefore helpful to Weitz’s recuperative effort—one reply from *theguythebestguy* caught her attention. “I am going to have ten aryan children just in spite of this account,” he chided. Posting a screenshot of the comment on her thread with some bravado about her “first anti-Semitic threat on IG,” she circled the slight in red with a quick note to her friends and fans that would disappear after twenty-four hours: “I’m tempted to respond, ENJOY FUCKING!!! But instead I just reported it.”⁵¹

In addition to these comments, Weitz shared with me that plenty of critics in the LA art scene have criticized her dominatrix role. “Well you’re not really dom-ing,” these objectors regularly remind Weitz about her dominatrix impersonations, to which the artist picks and chooses when to answer and how. After expressing annoyance that such comments, which refer also to her so-called Hasidic appropriation above, suggest that viewers are not getting the joke, Weitz added that she is “self-conscious . . . not

wanting to be identified as . . . a culture vulture.” Weitz shared that much of what influenced golem’s personification was a kind of admission of this appropriative impulse and also a deeper investigation of what appropriation means for her self-referencing performances, which borrow from so many aspects of her lived and desired identities.⁵² Rather than avoid cultural appropriation, Weitz regards the generative potential of its heightened exaggeration, staking claim to the performance of fantasy it opens up, at least for this film, wherein problems of representational authority or lack thereof become important aspects of golem’s impact.

Weitz’s self-made/self-making golem thus stands in for inwardly and outwardly facing projects at once, where any empowered plays are also vexed ones that ping between both private and public identities. And yet, as Muñoz argues and Weitz well knows, “The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects.”⁵³ Weitz’s whiteness thus affords her privileged access to this type of opaque play. As she entangles her racial privilege in questions of sexual liberation, a freed inner dominatrix, and ethnic exaggeration with moralizing ambiguity, the artist maneuvers toward the possibility of representing, and breaking, all her contracts at once.

CONCLUSION

In Julie Weitz’s *The Great Dominatrix*, Golem crosses a host of sacred, national, and sexual boundaries as embodied renditions of a world she is meant to protect but instead, and mostly on purpose, helps terribly to destroy. The thrill of watching is less about the sex appeal suggested in its title than about the figuring of a Jewish American political critique by way of remixed signs. Refashioning herself as a femme dominatrix in repurposed religious garb and exaggerated Jewish signifiers, the artist revises constructions of the folk golem figure. Performance of golem in this film materializes a protective fantasy that inflates the dictatorship of political rule in the hopes of deflating it through ridicule. Ethnic exaggerations, gender inequality, sexual fantasy, and the dangers of artificial intelligence get caught in the complex moralisms of contemporary power. The film asks, through the subtext of

captioned action, who has this power? Who wants it? Who needs it? And what amount of it is good?

Painted head to toe in unfired white clay, her suggestive skin renders her performance a crackling material conceptualization of hypervisual Jewish and feminine signification. The pairing of painted skin with *payot*, *shtreimel*, *tzitzit*, and *tefillin*, accompanied with go-go boots, tights, and lace creates a look that leans into confusion rather than away from it. Her contestable mix of identities and signs raise questions about the work of redressing Jewish female representation as it opts for certain power moves at the expense of others. In these choices are the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of golem's characterization and also the bounds of its performance humor. Through these choices, Weitz draws important lines of support or disdain for her growing range of online viewers. In dialogical relationship with these fans, she continues the project's ongoing iterations.

As the caked plaster dries out within the frame of this short film, as in each of the others that follow, its cracks function as thick fault lines of the performance fantasy, horrible wrinkles that humanize the golem ruse, betraying its artificial nature. The play of fantasy is exposed as the human face seeps through the cracks, and the artist herself becomes more visible in the act of self-creation. This, like any mask coming off or failure of technology, reveals the artist at work as she negotiates uneasy stances on Jewishness, Americanness, whiteness, and femininity by upsetting their controls. Suggestive of cracks and fissures in the totality of power too, the visible disintegration of golem's clay-caked face offers its own material critique of a constructed spectacular power that can and must come undone.

NOTES

1. *Tefillin* refer to the black leather strap and phylacteries that religious Jewish men wrap around their arms in daily prayer.
2. In October 2018, Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND) commissioned Golem's first live performance and screened *My Golem as The Great Dominatrix*, hosting the film short online. The artist has since shortened the film title to *The Great Dominatrix*.

3. Julie Weitz, www.Julieweitz.com.
4. Remenchik, "A Jewish Myth Reimagined."
5. At the Charlottesville Rally of 2017, hundreds of white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, gathered to protest the removal of Confederate monuments. The torchlit march, which included chants such as "The Jews will not replace us!" led to the killing of thirty-two-year-old Heather Hayer and the beating of DeAndre Harris. President Trump condemned the violence, but created national controversy when he said two days later at a press conference held at Trump Tower that the protestors were "not all bad." The anniversary of the event the following year was known as "Unite the Right."
6. Remenchik, "A Jewish Myth Reimagined."
7. The Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements are arguably the two biggest activist movements of the second decade of the twenty-first century in the United States, although their presence and momentum extends globally. Both movements galvanized unprecedented public attention to race and gender justice through use of social media platforms, expanding the practical capacity of apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to blur peer-to-peer networking and overt political organizing. See background information and ongoing actions of each movement here: <https://blacklivesmatter.com> and <https://metoomvmt.org>.
8. Weitz posted all video content to social media Instagram account My Golem_Is_Here.
9. Los Angeles curator Jessica Rich commissioned Weitz to make the work for The Rich Picture project, the tagline of which is "Time based digital media in the public sphere." See images and description of the project on the curator's project website at <https://www.therichpic.com/9039-sunset>.
10. Through use of the 4th Wall app, viewers could see the performer lifting an inflatable globe in an enormous projected image scaled to fit the length and width of the skyscraper's wall.
11. See <http://www.Julieweitz.com> for photographic and video documentation of these performance rituals and actions.
12. At the time of this writing, the death toll in the United States is the highest in any country in the world at over 700,000 COVID-19-related deaths due to the failure of federal government to impose recommended health guidance of the scientific community.

13. Founded in 2016, Never Again is a human and civil rights organization dedicated to genocide remembrance and awareness: <https://www.neveragain.com>.
14. Calling herself “A Diasporic Humanoid Called to Action,” Weitz as Golem gets on the megaphone in a May 2020 Instagram video post to read from her iPhone, now with entirely earnest aims to recite her unfunny demands that join the calls of progressive Jewish organization Never Again to yoke the Holocaust remembrance to the plights of black and brown peoples in the United States: “When I say Never Again, I mean Close the Camps! When I say Never Again, I mean Free them All,” Weitz as Golem proclaims, expressing Jewish solidarity against ICE detainments as all prisoners stuck in unsafe conditions during a global pandemic. As Golem speaks out loud for the first time, she heeds the oft-repeated “silence is violence” slogan of this protest era: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAvqWpmljKA/?igshid=skxkisqxkylv>
15. Weitz, “My Golem Description.”
16. After the making of *The Great Dominatrix*, Weitz redesigns the bodice of her costume to adorn the tefillin-inspired straps across her torso with the ten sefirot, so as to mimic the placement of those emanations on the body as depicted in sephirot diagrams included in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The letters of the Hebrew alphabet become inspiration for the artist’s movement vocabulary in the early summer of 2020 when she posted a video of herself out of costume for “Movement Meditations inspired by @tamarackbotanicals who guided me through an embodied awareness rooted in the Hebrew letters (and corresponding natural elements) for making a Golem: Aleph + Mem + Shin” on May 24, 2020.
17. For a comprehensive account of golem representations and their variations, see Baer, *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction*.
18. Baer, 13.
19. In traditional Jewish depictions, the genderless golem has a Hebrew word inscribed on its head: *Emet*. The first letter, *aleph*, is added on or taken off the front of the word to activate or deactivate the blob’s body accordingly. A golem powered on or off is the difference of a single a letter, instilling the creator with godly power to decide on his dominion’s fate. And yet, when left alone at night, as is Weitz’s Golem in this film, she behaves badly without recourse like the unchecked child in legislative power that she mocks.

20. Phone interview with the artist, May 21, 2019.
21. See Auslander's *From Acting to Performance* for a foundational discussion of this theme as it pertains to the politics of the body in postmodern performance.
22. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 6.
23. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 6.
24. Weitz, "My Golem"
25. Phone interview with the artist, September 30, 2019.
26. For rich discussions of the power dynamics at play in joke-telling, see Heller's "Joke Culture and Transformations of the Public Sphere" in *Aesthetics and Modernity*. The author returns to Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, adding key insights into the stakes of laughter or its absence.
27. Paul Flaig refers to Harpo Marx as the "object-machine" in "Lacan's Harpo." This premise of the risible linked to machination of the body's movement is argued most famously noted by Henri Bergson in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, originally published in 1900.
28. *Payot* refer to sideburns left uncut according to religious law.
29. Sabbath law indicates that total rest includes refraining from all work, including turning lights on and off.
30. Freud offers a rich description of the naïve and its relation to the comical in chapter 7 of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, positing that the producer of the naïve remark or action lifts inhibition for the hearer once understood as such, overriding the effect of what would otherwise cause indignation.
31. Remenchik, "A Jewish Myth Reimagined."
32. On this theme, see Zupančič's *Odd One In*, Critchley's "Das Ding: Lacan and Levinas," and Flaig's "Lacan's Harpo," who all return to Lacan's discussion of Harpo Marx as a mute comic figure whose slapstick is an apparatus for undoing the repression of sense itself and making it hypervisible through a practice of nonsense.
33. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 226.
34. Richard Schechner's oft-cited argument from *Between Theater and Anthropology* applies here: that the actor is not themselves, but not not themselves either.
35. Remenchik, "A Jewish Myth Reimagined."
36. Remenchik, "A Jewish Myth Reimagined."
37. See *Rituals of a Globalist* at <http://www.julieweitz.com>.

38. Weitz, “My Golem.” Fun to note is that Weitz attributes the biggest influence of these entertainers to her own family’s Cousin Club, which met each year to perform a talent show since the 1950s. Most often, these included funny, costumed impersonations. In a photo the artist shared with me, her father is portrayed with uncles dressed in homemade Raggedy Ann wigs and sewn costumes made to look like the popular cloth dolls. While not “Jewish” dolls in any way, the sustained practice of comic impersonation as annual family tradition was an amateur entry for the artist into a cultural performance history that imagined itself in context of a broader Jewish entertainment past.
39. Hasidic drag offered but one of many characters that Jewish women could become in a single night. In the early 1930s performer Pauline Koner, Rossen writes, “Aided by an array of vibrant costumes, the American-born soloist could effortlessly morph over the course of an evening into an array of foreign types—a Hindu goddess, a Javanese temple dancer, an Andalusian maiden, an Italian signorina, and a moor with ‘gypsy blood’” (*Dancing Jewish*, 27). The golem personification offers an ideal performance role, as the folklore trope both draws on Eastern European Jewish culture while lending itself to an ever-expanding practice of “effortless morphing” (as dominatrix, for instance), which Rossen documents was ubiquitous for Jewish stage and screen women of the early twentieth century.
40. Rossen, *Dancing Jewish*.
41. Remenchik, “A Jewish Myth Reimagined.”
42. For more reading on the history of Jewish blackface performance, see Lott’s *Love and Theft*; Rogin’s *Blackface, White Noise*; and Harrison-Kahan’s *White Negress*.
43. Remenchik, “A Jewish Myth Reimagined.”
44. Remenchik, “A Jewish Myth Reimagined.”
45. See, for instance, Gilman’s *Freud, Race, and Gender*, Boyarin’s “Homotopia,” and Garber’s *Vested Interests*.
46. Pellegrini, “Whiteface Performances: Race, Gender and Jewish Bodies,” 109.
47. Phone interview with the artist, November 30, 2018.
48. Phone interview with the artist, November 30, 2018.
49. Phone interview with the artist, November 30, 2018.
50. See, for instance, Sommer, “How Did the Term Globalist Become an

Anti-Semitic Slur? Blame Bannon.” For another source on Trump’s charged usage of the term, see Campoy’s “The Real Definitions of ‘Nationalist’ and ‘Globalist.’”

51. Phone interview with the artist, May 21, 2019.
52. Phone interview with the artist, May 21, 2019.
53. Muñoz, 6.

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