Sara Warner studies the art of activism. This means that she looks at the ways political actors use performance in programs for social justice and the ways stage actors use the theater as a laboratory for reimagining notions of community, citizenship, power, and responsibility. Sara is deeply committed to the co-creation of knowledge; as she says, she wants to “find ways to work with people to not tell people’s stories for them but to create platforms where people can tell their own story, in their own words, what it means to them.” Sara’s award-winning book Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure examines the role of humor and play in experiments to create a more perfect union. She also publishes cultural criticism in a variety of news outlets, including Time, HowlRound, and Huffington Post, where she has her own column. In 2016, Sara was named a Stephen H. Weiss Junior Fellow, Cornell’s highest teaching honor for a recently tenured faculty member.

As an associate professor in the Department of Performing and Media Arts, Sara conducts research that takes many forms, from collaborating with incarcerated women to researching suffragist pageants. She coproduces a series of “patriot acts,” political performances on national holidays, with the Bad (Hombres) and Nasty (Women) collective—the topic of her contribution to this book. Sara continues her multifarious pedagogical-research-performance-activist work in her current project, a collaboration with climate scientists to dramatize the human impact of global warming in the Finger Lakes. This project has led to Climates of Change and The Next Storm, plays collaboratively
created with Ithaca’s community-based Civic Ensemble. These activities, with their collective genesis and performance, constitute one kind of political resistance through engaged scholarship, which is a relevant model for our times regardless of party or ideological affiliation.

As scholar and a human, I spend a lot of time thinking about and producing political theater. I am interested in the ways social actors use performance in experiments for social justice (from the spectacular pageantry of suffragist demonstrations to the ritualized rage of AIDS die-ins) and the ways stage actors use the theater as a laboratory for creating new worlds. I attended my first protest march in college, wrote a dissertation on prison theater, and recently co-taught a course in which students collaborated with a Cornell climate engineer on community-based plays about the human impact of global warming on our local community. I am drawn to the theater as a mechanism for social change because it dramatizes human relations and in so doing invites us into civic conversations about who we are—as individuals, a people, a nation, and global citizens. Through the magic of performance, people can rehearse solutions to problems big and small. The theater is a space of make believe—an intentional pretending that something fictive is true—but it can also be a place of “make belief”—a liminal realm in which we can make and remake reality, creating the universe as we would like it to be, in a full-scale model! And, if we can dream it and build it, then—perhaps—we can live it, inhabiting this alternative reality outside of the theater. This world-making capacity is performance’s utopian potential.

For the past several years, I have been involved with a collective that on national holidays stages what I call “patriot acts,” political theater designed to catalyze public debate and promote the active participation of citizens in the democratic process. This collective—a loose-knit coalition of artists, academics, media makers, web geeks, and left-of-center progressives—emerged as a response to the 2016 election, in which Hillary Clinton lost the US presidential election to Donald Trump, despite winning the popular vote by almost three million ballots. Because a participatory democracy thrives when everyone in society has an equal vote and an equal voice, we called our group Bad and Nasty as a way to counteract the phobic slurs Trump used to denigrate and disenfranchise Mexicans (“bad hombres”), females (“nasty women”), and other minority groups during the campaign.

We held our first patriot acts on February 20, 2017, under the heading Not My Presidents’ Day. What began as a small group of friends—Holly Hughes, Lois Weaver, Mary Jo Watts, and me—using social media to plot political cabarets in our hometowns soon swelled to more than nineteen hundred participants who staged upwards of sixty protest events across the country and
around the globe. In performances of democracy that reverberated with the Women’s Marches, airport protests against the Muslim travel ban, spirited town halls on the Affordable Care Act, and rallies to denounce immigration raids, members of the Bad and Nasty collective staged ingeniously inventive patriot acts to oppose the discriminatory policies of the Trump administration and to dramatize their visions of a more perfect union.

The variety of patriot acts on Not My Presidents’ Day astonished us almost as much as the diversity of locations. The most animated responses didn’t come from what we think of as political epicenters of the country or cultural meccas, such as Washington DC or Chicago. They came from Republican outposts in historically red states: South Carolina, Oklahoma, Virginia, and Texas. While many Bad and Nasty cells staged protest marches and demonstrations, several organizers opted for more affirmative, family-centered forms of gatherings. Iowans created a community picnic capped by a conversation between Trump and Abraham Lincoln, represented by balloon puppets, on the steps of the Iowa State Capitol in Des Moines. Organizers in Baltimore also staged activities for adults and children during the day, followed by a political cabaret for mature audiences at night. Columbus, Georgia, held a candlelight vigil for our endangered Constitution, complete with an outdoor reading of the document in a public square.

There was a great deal of discussion among these cells about whether the name Bad and Nasty was too radical for red state constituents (meanwhile denizens in blue states feared it was too tame). Many of our coordinators (we call them Head Groovies) in the South and Midwest felt the moniker was too brazen and risked alienating the very audiences they hoped to attract. One self-described nonconfrontational artist in the Heartland decided that she did not have the luxury of being dignified and polite. The times demanded that she (and we) be angry and loud, Bad and Nasty. Other coordinators—those

Figure 8.1 Bad and Nasty logo, designed by Michael Quanci.
drawn to fierce, campy, in-your-face enactments—not only embraced the appellation, they also pushed the envelope. Take, for example, revelers in the Lone Star State, whose patriot act was titled “Pussyhood Is Powerful,” an evening of lesbian and feminist punk music with Girls in the Nose, Les Nez, MyDolls, and Kegels for Hegel.

New Yorkers had their pick of seven different patriot acts on Not My Presidents’ Day, most of them political cabarets. In the East Village, a historically bohemian section of the city, there were two different events on the same street, one at the WOW Café, the artistic home of Bad and Nasty cofounders Lois Weaver and Holly Hughes, and one a stone’s throw away at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club. Headlining the latter was Karen Finley, one of the famed NEA Four who—alongside Hughes—fought artistic censorship all the way to the Supreme Court in the 1990s. A train ride away in BedStuy, one of the city’s oldest and largest African diasporic neighborhoods, there was a benefit performance for Amnesty International, Anna Asli Suriyah (I Come from Syria), by Sarah Badiyah Sakaan.

Farther afield, bad hombre Brian Herrera hosted a salon and pop-up art exhibit in Princeton, New Jersey, to debut his “Dichos” (“Sayings”), inspiring aphorisms rendered in a stylized form that he calls AcaDoodle (academic doodle). Herrera had doodled one “Dicho” every day since the election for

**Figure 8.2** Performance artist Karen Finley at LaMama in Manhattan. Photo courtesy of Carolina Restrepo Loaiza.
a series titled “#ImWithUs—the 1st 100 Days.” Bad and Nasty cells in Vermont, Bernie Sanders’s home state, produced two events. Marlboro College presented *Two Spirit Resistance* featuring Kuna and Rappahannock Nations performer Muriel Miguel, artistic director of Spiderwoman Theater, the longest-running Indigenous theater company in the United States, on a bill with visual artist Kent Monkman and Canadian dramatist Waawaate Fobister. Meanwhile Flynnspace in Burlington mounted *Trumpuboo Rex (King Turd Revisited)*, an adaptation of Alfred Jarry’s dystopian political allegory *Ubu Roi (King Ubu)*.

The indefatigable Lois Weaver did double duty in Los Angeles, a live performance with her Split Britches collaborator, the “menopausal gentleman” Peggy Shaw, in a cabaret at the Lyric Hyperion, and a virtual performance on Facebook live as her avatar Tammy WhyNot, a country and western singer turned lesbian performance artist who longs to be an internet sensation. For her event in Ann Arbor, Hughes opted for a “not my circus” theme. Flying their freak flag of resistance high were some of the hottest talent in the Midwest, including Erin Markey, Lisa Biggs, and Lola Von Miramar (the drag persona of Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes).

Our Bad and Nasty website includes a detailed archive of patriot acts staged on Not My Presidents’ Day. In Ithaca, New York, I produced a standing-room-only event with my friend Ross Haarstad, founder and artistic director of Theatre Incognita. In the spirit of community collaboration, we teamed up with a number of local theaters and artistic troupes, including the performing arts departments of both Ithaca College and Cornell University. The Kitchen Theater, which donated their space, was booked on February 20, so we held our cabaret on the eve of Not My Presidents’ Day. Tickets were free, as was a buffet reception after the show (thanks to a grant secured by my colleague and collaborator Debra Castillo, coeditor of this volume), and guests were encouraged to donate to Planned Parenthood of the Finger Lakes and Ithaca Welcomes Refugees. (We raised over $2,000 that night.)

When Ithacans entered the Kitchen, they were greeted by a drag queen and king (Haarstad and Ned Asta) singing show tunes played by a local musician on a baby grand piano. This pre-show entertainment stalled guests while I assembled the performers, who had not rehearsed together, for a quick run-through. Our master of ceremonies, Honey Crawford, was a Prince impersonator who electrified the crowd with a riotous opening number, a lip sync rendition of “Pussy Control.” I took us back to the women’s liberation movement with a staged reading of *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas, one of history’s nastiest women, which I performed with Jayme Kilburn and Mary Jo Watts (Bad and Nasty’s social media coordinator
and my partner of more than twenty years). Saviana Stanescu, an award-winning Romanian-American dramatist, delivered a monologue about her play *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills*, which has been produced to critical acclaim all over the world.

**Figure 8.3** Ithaca master of ceremonies Honey Crawford, as Prince. © Thomas Hoebbel Photography.
Ithaca’s cabaret featured more than thirty patriot actors who riffed on a panoply of topics, from rape and backroom abortions to anti-Semitism and the Arab Spring. An undergraduate trio brought the audience to its feet with “Pantsuit Nation,” a song in homage to Hillary Clinton, but the act that stole the show was a nine-year-old first-time performer who strode on stage in a leather jacket and baby Doc Martins and served up an original spoken word poem titled “Donald Trump Is Not Voldemort.” To close out our cabaret, Chrystyna Dail led the audience in a sing-along of “Freedom Road,” a 1944 antifascist race record with lyrics by Harlem Renaissance poet and dramatist Langston Hughes and music by Josh White. This song, which White intended as rousing plea for democracy, provided a pitch-perfect conclusion to Ithaca’s Not My Presidents’ Day.

Not My Presidents’ Day was Ithaca’s way of enacting, if only fleetingly, our hamlet’s vision of a more perfect union. Admittedly, our inaugural event was staged by liberals for liberals. This kind of preaching to the converted (that political theater so often does) is of vital importance for creating and maintaining community. As a form of “creative survival,” political theater revitalizes activist energies and strengthens social bonds, which in turn provide the necessary conditions for people to collectively imagine political alternatives. The proliferation of patriot acts across the country and around the globe on Not My Presidents’ Day provided a necessary counterweight to the media circus Trump created during the presidential campaign and to
his nefarious use of theater for totalitarian ends. “Performance,” Richard Schechner reminds us, “is as useful to tyrants as to those who practice guerrilla theater.”

We have only to study American history to know this to be true. Theatricality has played an important role in our democratic experiment since the country’s founding, from revolutionaries costumed as Native Americans at the Boston Tea Party to gruesome spectacles of lynching in the Jim Crow South. An understanding of both the progressive and regressive aspects of performance, of who it includes and excludes, is necessary in order to use theater critically in a participatory democracy.

The Greeks, who invented both theater and democracy, used performance to educate audiences through complex dramas that served as privileged sites for reasoned debates about ethics, norms, and laws. Tragic competitions, held in conjunction with annual civic festivals, were rooted in the notion that the struggle to make sense of the world is a duty, a collective obligation that people must undertake together, in full view of one’s compatriots. Greek drama teaches us that democracy requires the active participation of an enlightened and engaged citizenry. Conflict and contestation are not only inevitable parts of the political process, they are also essential to it. Fifth-century Athens was not unlike the contemporary United States insofar as it was hardly a utopian experiment in equality and freedom for all. The civilization that gave birth to the West’s earliest democratic experiment also celebrated art (e.g., The Trojan Women) that justified the oppression and subordination of foreigners, women, and slaves, all of whom were denied citizenship and a formal role in the political structure of the polis. Most Greek tragedies (and more than a few comedies) are concerned with justice; some even stage the revolt of subaltern subjects against tyranny (e.g., Antigone). These dramas have for centuries served as models of patriotic dissent for bad hombres and nasty women everywhere.

An Appetite for Justice: Baking America Great Again

Based on the success of Not My President’s Day and the increasingly complicated drama unfolding in the White House, many members of Bad and Nasty wanted to continue organizing, staging additional patriot acts on national holidays. The Ithaca cell did not want to produce another cabaret, which has a limited, self-selected audience and does not foster dialogue across the political aisle. After asking ourselves what kinds of patriot acts would play well in rural America, engaging in earnest those with different political views without sacrificing the radical, campy spirit of Bad and Nasty, we came up with the idea for a campaign called “Bake America Great Again”
BAGA), a play on Trump’s campaign slogan: “Make America Great Again.” What follows is an analysis of our community bake sales as a model of “hospitable” political theater, one that provides food for thought, nourishes the social imagination, and provides sustenance for the body politic.11

Ithaca Bad and Nasty held its first BAGA patriot act on Flag Day 2017, June 14, which just so happened to be Trump’s birthday, a perfect confluence of events. Flag Day is a working holiday, which meant we would have a captive audience on our public commons during the lunch hour. Most people who work in Ithaca do not live in the city (Cornell is the largest employer in the county), in part because they cannot afford the inflated rents typical of a college town. The poverty rate (20.1 percent) in our district is considerably higher than the national average (14 percent).12 Many of the rural communities surrounding Ithaca are news deserts and lack high-speed internet. Trump carried Tompkins County, as he did many districts dominated by white, working-class constituents, by double digits. (Ithaca was the only blue spot in an electoral sea of red on the upstate New York map.) Ergo, many people who work in Ithaca voted Republican in 2016. We hoped a bake sale would provide a delicious opportunity to attract and talk with Trump supporters.

To whet people’s appetites, we pitched a canopy decorated with stars and stripes and hung a huge sign proclaiming “Bake America Great Again.” Musicians Andrés Pérez Hernández and Mijail Martínez played guitar and sang, and I donned a spangled top hat to entice passersby. As people approached the tent, they saw rows of delicious treats, which upon closer inspection were politically themed pastries. We had im-peach-mint pies, covfefe cake, (un)ethical wafers, “fudge the truth” brownies, “he’s bananas” muffins, let them eat Ivanka-cakes, Kellyanne Conway nut clusters, Sean Spicer cookies, “may his term be short(bread),” and other cleverly titled delicacies. A handful of people turned away in anger or disgust when they realized this was no ordinary bake sale. Some folks complained about the sneaky tactics of the liberal elite but bought treats anyway (just as some of them held their noses after Trump’s racist and sexist remarks, voting for the tycoon and reality TV star who promised to “drain the swamp” in Washington). Most people, however, laughed at our jokes, purchased a snack, and indulged us in a conversation about politics. A few liberals admitted they were initially reluctant to approach our tent because they thought we were hosting some kind of Republican fund-raiser. We successfully courted confusion on both sides of the political divide, and our first BAGA raised $600 (in four hours) for the Foodbank of the Southern Tier.

Bake sales provide a unique way to gauge the gut reactions of citizens. They also present a casual way to initiate conversations about the
relationship of food to politics, and to immigration in particular. Without being too heavy-handed, we tried to talk with people about the underbelly of upstate New York’s agricultural industry, which relies heavily on immigrant workers, and about the way food production is related to the reproduction of racial, social, and economic inequalities. The hand that bakes a cake can make a fist, a fist that can be raised in protest for oneself and for others whose hands can’t be raised because they are undocumented, digging themselves out of a national disaster, or restrained in handcuffs. Our Bad and Nasty bake sales represent one way of making connections between hands and histories.

Trump’s first eighteen months in office offered progressives a taste of the bitter banquet the nation would be forced to consume, but few among us were prepared for the family detention crisis at the border that erupted in the summer of 2018. In response to this national tragedy, Ithaca’s Bad and Nasty staged a patriot act in collaboration with the Immigrant Rights Coalition of
Tompkins County and the Cornell Farm Worker Program at our community Fourth of July fireworks celebration. We called this event an ICE Scream Social, and it featured a snow cone fund-raiser alongside a number of performance art installations. We erected a cage furnished with space blankets (a mirror of the structures erected by the government in makeshift tent cities along the border). Inside stood cardboard figures with cut-out faces. The cage sat near a cardboard wall on which people could write messages to the families at the border and to ICE agents. Forming a perimeter around the art installation were dozens of black umbrellas, representing our mourning and rage at the way our fellow humans were being treated. The umbrellas were stenciled with various verbs: “Resist,” “Vote,” “Impeach.” Periodically a group of people would pick up the umbrellas and proceed around the park in an improvised routine inspired by choreographer Pina Bausch’s 1982 public performance “Nelken Line.” This procession was coordinated by multimedia artist Leeny Sack, a member of the internationally renowned avant-garde collective The Performance Group, in collaboration with Sierra Carrere, an Ithaca native and a devotee of anticapitalist political theater troupe the Church of Stop Shopping, led by Reverend Billy (the artistic avatar of Billy Talen). Community members were invited to take part in the procession, to come together under the same umbrella, share a snow cone, and talk about immigration, asylum, and family detentions.

We did not create these bake sales from scratch. Our BAGA events are based on recipes we have inherited from different movements for social justice, from the Black Panther Party’s free lunch program to lesbian separatist potlucks. Food-based activism has a long history in this country because America is the great melting pot, though it has fed and nourished certain bodies at the expense of others. Patriotism, like the ICE Scream cones we served on the Fourth of July, comes in many flavors: chocolate, vanilla, dulce de leche, and rainbow swirl. If our policies are not intersectional, if they are racist and xenophobic, they can leave a very bad taste in one’s mouth. Second-wave feminist adage “the personal is political” reminds us that staging bake sales can be a form of political labor. Like the struggle for social justice, baking is a job that never ends; it must be practiced daily to ensure our survival.

Political work includes domestic and reproductive labor, both the labor of reproducing life and the labor of reproducing the conditions that make life possible. Being freed from the labor of feeding ourselves (including the kinds of back-breaking agricultural labor that many migrants perform) should not be confused with freedom, as this simply means that someone else is providing this labor for us. An “other” pays the price of our liberty. To engage in
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collective activism is to acknowledge our complicity in a system that feeds some citizens well while starving others—and the hungry often find themselves fighting with their neighbors for scraps, too busy with basic survival to combat effectively the ones with their bellies bloated from consuming more than their fair share. Baking, like all forms of political labor, is messy work; it is dirty work. It can also bring us tremendous joy and pleasure, feeding our bodies and our souls.

One of the greatest joys is breaking bread together. Our Bake America Great Again campaign strives to create spaces that are hospitable and open (though not devoid of conflict), where people can share both the work of political organizing and the fruits of our labor. I have milked this alimentary metaphor long enough, but I hope my wordplay is instructive in thinking about the kind of change progressive activists hunger for. In our bake sales, we strive to make a place for everyone at the table while at the same time serving up a biting critique of discrimination and oppression. Our decidedly domestic patriot acts promote collectivism and caring in a moment epitomized by narcissistic individualism, offering rich alternatives for a common good.

Notes

6. Lois Weaver was a founding member of Spiderwoman Theater.
7. Bad and Nasty, http://badandnasty.com/. You can also find us on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media platforms.
11. Bad and Nasty cofounder Lois Weaver has developed a number of performance strategies for creating “hospitable” conversations about controversial topics. Her models (e.g., the Long Table and Porch Sitting) and her Public Service Announcement (PSA) project have greatly influenced our conception and staging of the BAGA campaign. See Lois Weaver and Jen Harvie, _The Only Way Home Is through the Show: Performance Work of Lois Weaver_ (London: Intellect Live, 2016).


