Introduction

The Politics of Gender in the Caribbean

The Dominican presidential campaign leading up to the 2012 elections littered the national landscape with political slogans. Among these was the presidential candidate Hipólito Mejía’s ubiquitous “Llegó Papá” (Daddy’s here). This slogan largely overrode more usual political promises, evincing the power of the discourse of masculinity in Dominican politics. The important role that gender plays in constructing citizenship and state power in the Dominican Republic demands a more complex understanding of hegemonic notions of Dominican masculinity, of the conceptions of femininity that they produce, and of their historical emergence. While such evocations of masculinity are usually rationalized as instances of centuries-old “traditional” Latin American patriarchal culture, *Masculinity after Trujillo* argues that today’s hegemonic notions of masculinity were consolidated during the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo (1930–1961) and thus are in many ways a distinctly modern formation. In turn, Trujillo’s own pervasively hypervirile discourse was, at least in part, a strategic response to the imperial and racialized notions of masculinity that accompanied the U.S. presence in the country, especially during the U.S. military occupation (1916–1924). Against the tendency to equate Trujillo’s discourse of masculinity simply with that of a stereotypical Latin American “strongman,” or *caudillo*, I point to the importance of accounting for how transnational and imperialist
forces, including international political discourses of sovereignty and Euro-American racism, also shaped its articulation.

Indeed, the disappointments that postcolonial democratic politics have brought in the Dominican Republic, and in many other parts of the Caribbean, cannot be understood without accounting for how external forces have helped foster exclusionary forms of citizenship and corrupt state practices. In much of the postcolonial Caribbean, political reality appears to be stagnant and is met with citizens’ disenchantment. The Caribbean critic David Scott, for example, speaks of “the acute paralysis of will and sheer vacancy of imagination, the rampant corruption and vicious authoritarianism, the instrumental self-interest and showy self-congratulation” that result in the “bankruptcy of postcolonial regimes” in the region.¹ The multitude of failures by postcolonial states has led many Caribbean citizens to relinquish hopes for political solutions for their societies’ economic and social problems and has driven many toward migration. As the Dominican scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant notes, “although the region gave to the world some of the earliest instances of struggle for freedom and human rights, liberatory projects and discourses here seem to awaken increasingly less enthusiasm as the lives of people appear to revolve primarily around the business of material survival in dependent and declining economies that offer the Antillean person no social guarantee.”²

It is in response to this reality that Torres-Saillant and other critics have expressed reservations about certain tendencies in Caribbean thought and letters of the past decades that are part of what Raphael Dalleo terms the “postmodern turn.” Dalleo traces this postmodern turn, for example, in the later work of such writers and critics as Edouard Glissant and Antonio Benítez-Rojo, and associates it with their and others’ embrace of pan-Caribbean paradigms to capture the region’s specificity. Torres-Saillant critiques how it remains unclear how such pan-Caribbean paradigms (such as “creolization,” “rhizomes,” “rhythms,” or “performance”) contribute to addressing the dire material circumstances of many Caribbean people’s lives and the political shortcomings of Caribbean postcolonial nation-states. Indeed, these pan-Caribbean paradigms are described by Belinda Edmondson as “iconic— clichéd, if you will— tropes of Caribbean discourse.”³ She terms these “Caribbean romances,” because of how such tropes sustain “idealized representations of Caribbean society, of ‘Caribbeanness,’ both in hegemonic European-American discourses and, perhaps more important, in
intra-Caribbean discourses.” These “romances,” Edmondson finds, problematically mystify “concrete ideological-political issues . . . into regional symbols divorced from their ideological context.”

This book contributes to a new wave of scholarship that addresses ideological-political issues and lasting inequalities in the Caribbean in their local contexts. Like other recent studies, such as Deborah Thomas’s *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (2011) and Mimi Sheller’s *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (2012), this study is dedicated to accounting for how inequalities in the region are sustained by current postcolonial Caribbean nation-states, together with the powerfully conditioning and constraining factors of colonial, imperial, and neo-imperial forces. What *Masculinity after Trujillo* shares with these studies is the concern with how local (rather than pan-Caribbean) forms of resistance—explored by Thomas in the form of “embodied citizenship” and by Sheller through the notion of “citizenship from below”—can challenge the political status quo and the hegemonic formations that help to sustain it.

The reference to “citizenship” in both Sheller’s and Thomas’s book titles suggests how national belonging and the nation-state continue to play a fundamental role in circumscribing Caribbean peoples’ lives. While the Caribbean is rightfully looked at as a crossroads of the world that prefigured some of the forms of interconnectedness and mobility now associated with globalization, national imaginaries and states continue to play a decisive role in shaping Caribbean societies and citizens’ lives and need to be an ongoing object of critical scrutiny. Dara Goldman also emphasizes the lasting importance of the literally and figuratively insular national context and insists that “despite the increasing translocality of Caribbean spaces,” the insular nation continues to be a “central mode of self-representation.” In fact,

Hispanic Caribbean self-fashioning offers a compelling case study of local specificity and national persistence in the face of increasing transnationalism, neoliberalism, and geopolitical restructuring. . . . Accordingly, however retrograde it may seem, the attachment to political borders persists. The nation therefore remains highly crucial as the primary space of subject formation even as its precise position is radically redefined in an increasingly globalized world.

Similarly, albeit focusing on the Anglophone Caribbean, Shalini Puri highlights the lasting and crucial importance of the nation in the postcolonial
Caribbean and remarks on the “prematurity of declarations of the demise of the nation-state.”

The case of the Dominican Republic also strongly suggests that despite the ever-increasing impact of outside forces associated with globalization the nation remains a primary determinant of national cultural identity, and the state continues to play a vital role in shaping its citizens’ political and economic realities on the island. For example, the lasting role that the Dominican state plays in the (mis-)distribution of national resources is readily evident to most observers. Despite the notable growth in the country’s gross domestic product since the 1990s, the state has insufficiently helped to ameliorate the inequities and hardships faced by the Dominican people. A cursory look at various World Bank surveys readily reveals the staggering failure of the government, regardless of the party in power, to translate economic growth into better living conditions for the majority of Dominicans. In fact, the Dominican Republic is considered to have “one of the worst performing states in Latin America.”

The growth of the Dominican economy in recent decades has been based mainly on the tourism industry, remittances, and the output of free trade zones, where workers’ rights and protections are minimal. At the same time the number of Dominicans who rely on informal employment to survive has grown exponentially. The percentage of Dominicans with “vulnerable employment,” defined by the World Bank as “unpaid family workers and own-account workers as a percentage of total employment,” hovers in the Dominican Republic around 40 percent. The country also has the highest unemployment rate of all surveyed Latin American countries. In fact, despite consistently high rates of economic growth, the Dominican Republic has one of the region’s highest percentages (50.5 percent) of people living below the poverty line (Bolivia, Honduras, and Guatemala have higher poverty rates, albeit with much smaller economic growth rates). The Dominican state’s health expenditures are one of the lowest in the region, 5.9 percent in 2009 (only Bolivia and Peru spent less), and the country has Latin America’s lowest expenditures on education, 2.3 percent in 2009. These numbers offer a glimpse at how state actions continue to determine in decisive ways the conditions in which Dominican lives unfold. Even as the “wholesale opening up of the economy” resulted in a loss of state capacity to “guide society,” as the Dominican sociologist Wilfredo Lozano puts it, the state remains a “central actor” and a “fundamental instrument.” Understanding how the
nation-state continues to determine the material, social, and political contexts of Caribbean subjects’ lives, and how it can be prodded to work better towards greater economic and social justice thus remains a crucial task.

**Caribbean Cultural Agency and the Postcolonial State**

Given the lasting significance of the Caribbean nation-state, this book hopes to help push Caribbean scholarship to think more consistently and thoroughly about how Caribbean cultural forces, including forces from “below” and in “embodied” forms, may evolve to challenge and reconfigure the political in its more conventional sense, that is, the postcolonial state apparatus and its forms of governance, to better address the needs of its citizens. My insistence on not forsaking the possibility of incisive political change is inspired in part by recent political and social reconfigurations in Latin America, both the so-called turn to the left, and the notable recent decrease in inequality in Latin America, counter to worldwide trends, which has been aided by state actions of both leftist and nonleftist Latin American governments. It is in this context that John Beverley reminds us that, whatever the future of the state, at the current moment “the question of who controls the state—to the extent it means something to control the state—remains crucial to people’s lives.” Serious proposals for social and political transformation then cannot sidestep the question of “how the state itself can be radicalized and modified as a consequence of bringing into it demands, values, experiences from the popular-subalter sector . . . and how, in turn, from the state, society itself can be remade in a more redistributive, egalitarian, culturally diverse way.” Beverley emphasizes here the importance and political significance of the forms that relations between society and the state take. Specifically, he highlights the ways in which popular-subaltern demands can evolve to reconfigure the state and thereby bring it to more broadly effect positive social change.

The pivotal question is, then, what kind of relations help incorporate subaltern and popular demands or demands “from below” into the state to pressure it to work toward redistributive processes and greater egalitarianism. This question has been consistently pursued in the work of Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau, whose work influences also Beverley’s thinking. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), which Laclau coauthored with Chantal Mouffe, and then
in later works, including *Emancipation(s)* (1996) and *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau assigns a key role to the types of relation or linkage that form between the state and the populace, as well as to the relations formed among the populace to express and put forth conjointly shared demands. His prime distinction is between equivalential and differential relations or linkages. Equivalential relations involve the horizontal coming together of peoples’ various unfulfilled demands to articulate a collective will that can bring forth a successful challenge to the existing hegemonic formation. Alternatively, differential relations imply the absorption of demands “each in isolation from the others” by “the institutional system,” for example, through clientelist arrangements.16 According to Laclau, it is through the coming together of popular demands that an effective challenge to a hegemonic formation becomes possible. Such a reconfiguration of existing power relations then can lead to a redistribution not only of political, economic, and cultural resources, but also of less tangible “goods,” including access to spaces of representation and to decision-making processes.

It is these kinds of specific ideological-political questions that the so-called postmodern turn in Caribbean thought has not always addressed. In fact, at times, its “Caribbean romances,” as Edmondson calls these regional metaphors, rely problematically on unacknowledged gendered, sexualized, and racialized notions that reinscribe existing unequal power relations rather than challenge them. For example, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley notes how neither the créolistes nor Glissant’s Caribbean discourse address the gender of the Caribbean landscapes that they repeatedly evoke in their writings. Tinsley asks, “Does the mangrove retain the swamp’s dangerous, sticky femininity? Does Glissant’s frightening sea keep its conventional motherliness?”17 She critiques how “gender and sexuality problematically remain nonissues” in their work, and how “the most renowned theorists of inclusive Creoleness often do not recognize how their very neocolonial rootedness in binary gender and sexual identities undercuts the complexity that they express as fundamental to their project.”18 Similar questions can be raised about the gendered nature of Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s description in *The Repeating Island* of the Caribbean as “aquatic, a sinuous culture . . . [a] realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity,” and references to the Caribbean’s “womb” and “vagina.”19

Indeed, Vera Kutzinski strongly critiques Benítez-Rojo’s unacknowledged gendered, sexualized, racialized, and classed connotations that underlie