

Introduction

Gendering the History of Dictatorship and Transnational Politics

IN EARLY JUNE 1961 citizens of the Dominican Republic began a process of national mourning and subsequent memory revision that would last into the twenty-first century. Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, the dictator who had reigned with a heavy hand over their country for three decades, was assassinated on May 30. The country's major newspapers—all formerly controlled by Trujillo—immediately reported the news of a citizenry drowning in grief.¹ While many Dominicans secretly rejoiced in the days following the assassination, the period's chaos and conflict underscore the strength of the paternalist model solidified by the Trujillo regime over his thirty-year reign. Having styled himself as a fatherly—even Godlike if also consummately masculine—protector of the Dominican nation and its moral firmament, the loss of Trujillo's physical presence sparked anxiety and confusion for government functionaries and the general populace alike. On June 3 the *New York Times* reported the funereal events being held at the National Palace in Santo Domingo and in Trujillo's hometown of San Cristóbal, noting that thousands had been turned away due to emotions getting “out of hand.”² Women, however, seemed most at fault. One reporter noted, “As the procession passed, some women hurled themselves down at the roadside, shrieking and beating their heads on the ground.” Almost as an afterthought, the reporter added that “many men wept also.”³ The images of thousands of *campesinas* grieving the loss of their beloved “Generalísimo” dominated the many stories about the immediate aftermath of the assassination in the Dominican Republic and beyond. Particularly when viewed from the United States, these stories were accompanied by a scornful tone denigrating the deluded state of such women who wept for a vicious

dictator. And while Dominican papers initially eschewed judgment of the women they described as “in agony,” such crying, grief-stricken, female figures dominated their coverage of the wake, funeral, and interment. Beyond the basic questions of political succession, larger concerns regarding the protection of the Dominican family, home, and nation were at stake in the demise of the self-styled father of the nation. Regardless of tone, the marked presence of women in the process of national mourning points to the strong ties between the regime and the nation’s female population at the time of Trujillo’s *ajusticiamiento*, as Dominicans have widely called the assassination, to the present.⁴

Beyond these immediate media portrayals, later accounts of Dominican public memory of the assassination of Trujillo demonstrate a much more celebratory attitude, even if the continued presence of the Trujillo family often prevented its expression.⁵ Nearly a half century later, activist and writer Grey Coiscou Guzmán recalled her quite public elation upon hearing of the assassination.⁶ Involved in the underground opposition to the regime, she was less than patiently awaiting the dictator’s demise. In fact, by her own accounts she kept a festive, fire-engine-red dress hidden at the back of her closet specifically for the much-hoped-for day. As she recounted, she donned the dress and headed for El Conde, the central thoroughfare in the colonial city. Along with some of her compatriots, Coiscou reported, she sang and danced to the merengue “Mataron el chivo” (They killed the goat).⁷ Coiscou recounted a story not of mourning but of active repudiation. Given the chaotic political conditions that followed the assassination, including a vicious manhunt for the dictator’s killers, most Dominicans kept their celebrations secret. While Coiscou’s memory offers a contrasting depiction of the strong ties between the regime and the protection of women and families that most citizens sought to purge and forget, both sides of the narrative reveal intense links between the dictator and female engagement with the Dominican state.

Whether seen from the perspective of the jubilant dancers or through the eyes of the wailing mourners, the death and funeral of dictator Rafael Trujillo presents a window on women’s diverse engagements with the Dominican state and its paternalist model that lasted from the earliest years of the Trujillo era well through 1978 with the end of the regime of his successor Joaquín Balaguer. For some, the ritualized patriarchy of authoritarianism offered a predictable protection of the traditional family. For others, the

calculated organization of bureaucracy, coupled with the regime's staunch defense of traditional gender roles, provided opportunities for personal political advancement and the establishment of a national women's movement. And for still others, the intense surveillance of everyday life and suppression of political opposition represented a threat to the survival of the Dominican family at large and a reason to join the ranks of the resistance. Regardless of women's individual investments or the practicality of political choices under strict authoritarianism, for nearly half of the twentieth century, dictatorial leaders Rafael Trujillo (1930–1961) and Joaquín Balaguer (1966–1978) mandated the terms of political involvement for the Dominican populace and marshaled thousands of women into the public arena of politics.

From the ascendancy of Rafael Trujillo in the late 1920s to the conclusion of Joaquín Balaguer's three presidential terms in the late 1970s, Dominican women engaged in local and national politics, operated within complex inter-American relations, and employed the most current global political discourse to further their diverse personal and political agendas. Not only were they invested in the social and civic well-being of the nation and often particularly the status of female citizens, but they employed a transnational model of political activism to pursue their goals. In this book I argue that women's engagement across the political spectrum proved a vital component in the successes and failures of twentieth-century Dominican authoritarian regimes. Through conservative political circles and the maternalist discourse they engendered, many women created viable avenues to formal participation at national and international levels, paving the way for a more active female population and, consequently, a more stable national regime.

During this process, Dominican women also demonstrated the fragility of traditional gender expectations and the strength wielded by those who could point out a regime's failure to maintain the link between expected standards of behavior and national security. Not content to operate on merely a local or even national platform, women became part of a larger discourse about the nature of citizenship, national sovereignty, and global engagement. By the end of the 1960s various groups began to selectively import ideas of feminism from western models and reformulate their own relations with existing political parties and the state. As a result, by the mid-1970s a uniquely Dominican feminist movement emerged that cannot be understood without a fully dissected analysis of the years of dictatorship

and resistance that preceded it. From the years preceding the Trujillo era through the end of Balaguer's regime in 1978, during multiple periods of rule and of transition, women were central to the politics of authoritarianism and political opposition through public displays of support and displeasure, active interventions into the discourse of nation and family, and inter-American discussion and debate on the role of the female citizen. In this book I examine the practices of women in national and transnational political arenas and the gendered nature of the politics of dictatorship and transnationalism in the twentieth century. I analyze the ways in which authoritarian politics relied on certain gendered ideals of participation and how a relatively select group of middle- to upper-class Dominican women served as the central actors in a prolonged political drama.⁸ While I make no claims on any significant class or racial diversity among them, I argue that it is nonetheless important to focus on their words and deeds through these difficult periods of authoritarianism, regime transition, and U.S. intervention because they ultimately formed the foundations of a late twentieth-century feminist movement, helped stabilize and destabilize authoritarian regimes, and established the terms of transnational feminist activism.

In *The Paradox of Paternalism* I offer a model for understanding women's political mobilization and the paths to twentieth-century feminist activism through authoritarianism. This study demonstrates that in working through dictatorial regimes and transnational networks, Dominican women built the foundations of a solid and practical women's movement. In addition to contributing to the longevity of authoritarian leadership as well as its eventual demise, their efforts situate squarely the rise of women's liberation throughout the global South in the complex networks of inter-American activism and the maternalist politics of conservative rule. Throughout the study I argue two main points. First, as a result of the Trujillo and Balaguer regimes' efforts to uphold the Dominican Republic's international reputation as stable and to project an image of a progressive and progressing nation, women found and expanded spaces of global and transnational activism that advanced basic political rights and paved the way for the feminist movement. Second, while the paternal constructs of rule upheld by Trujillo and Balaguer did advance women's roles in certain arenas of society and politics, they also paradoxically enforced a superstructure that maintained a traditional understanding of women's innate abilities as maternal public

figures. Both of these narrative strands are central to the development of a distinct feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s as well as to the hurdles women activists continue to face as they confront a highly patriarchal and conservative Dominican state.

Just as the regimes of Trujillo and Balaguer cemented certain gendered practices in the Dominican state, many women were active participants in the discussion that dictated such constructs. Throughout this half century in Dominican history, women of various political proclivities undertook a complicated performance of female citizenship that centered on several authoritarian tenets of the time: democracy, anticommunism, progress, and national sovereignty. Knowing full well the shifting international demands on a small island nation in the so-called American lake, they successfully demonstrated their ability to perform as proper citizens who understood and interacted with the demands of twentieth-century modernity. They carefully negotiated the paradox that Maja Horn points out relative to the regimes' construction of a "starkly hierarchical organization of Dominican society and politics that was overwritten by an emphatically egalitarian discourse" and ultimately undergirded by an extremely masculinized language of rule.⁹ While most certainly the constraints on public discourse limited the terms of discussion, many women maintained a commitment to what it meant to be a cosmopolitan female citizen. Although their end goals ranged widely, their efforts explain much about the structure and function of authoritarian rule, the on-the-ground realities of democratic and anticommunist image-making during the Cold War, and the problems and possibilities of feminist transnational and solidarity work.

Paternalism and the Gendered Politics of Authoritarianism

When Trujillo came to power in 1930 and solidified a model of paternalist politics, he at once justified his oppressive tactics for the good of the populace while he concurrently moralized his role as protective father figure. The Trujillo state constructed a relation to its constituents that was at once based on binds of "protection and obedience" but also grounded in unequal "hierarchies of gender."¹⁰ Mary Renda's argument regarding U.S. paternalism over Haiti during the occupation applies to the Dominican context during dictatorship. She insists that such paternalism must not be dismissed by scholars as mere rhetoric but rather understood as a regime's

“assertion of authority, superiority, and control expressed in the metaphor of a father’s relationship with his children.”¹¹ Trujillo, the self-proclaimed “Father of the New Fatherland,” served as the “disciplinary father” yet actively engaged Dominican women in what historian Lauren Derby terms the “vernacular politics” or everyday incursions of the state into civil society by the regime.¹² In contrast to the women who appeared in the regime’s official displays of paternal authority as a foil to the dictator’s masculinity, many active female politicians adhered to traditional gender norms within the household yet maintained complex careers in multiple levels of the regime’s bureaucratic structure of paternal control.¹³ As Trujillo actively asserted, these women were acceptably modern precisely because they fused their maternal duties to their commitment to his vision of the democratic (and later anticommunist) Dominican state. In the years that followed the end of the Trujillo era, or Trujillato, women continued to assume roles in politics through the model of paternal protections even as it became more and more counterproductive to their goals of full political and social equity.

The use of maternalism—as a complement to the regime’s paternalism—to scaffold conservative regimes is far from a new concept, and as research on Nicaragua and Chile illustrates, Latin American authoritarian regimes actively recruited women to solidify a number of crucial “mother-centric” national projects in the early to mid-twentieth century.¹⁴ Maternalism, as both political approach and public discourse, focuses on the social needs of women and children and creates spaces for women to participate in the construction of state programs and policies.¹⁵ The engagement of women in the public arena of politics through programs aimed at assisting children and families was a tactic of the Trujillato and other Latin American regimes, and it often led to suffrage and various concrete advancements by feminist movements across the region.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, from its earliest years, the Trujillo machinery dedicated significant effort to promoting and expanding the stable home and family through these programs, and it enlisted women to do much of the heavy labor involved in this project.¹⁷ The patterns of paternalism and maternalism established by the regime were intended to reassure the peasantry that it would be cared for, and they were accompanied by no small dose of compulsion. However, the argument that only Trujillo knew what was best for the Dominican people created a unique relation between the nation’s leader and its female population. While Trujillo ostensibly sought to implement policies and pro-

grams suitable to protect Dominican women and guard them from harm, many women responded by interacting with regime politics and inserting themselves into ongoing public debate. The corresponding paradox of Trujillo's—and later Balaguer's—style of paternalism is twofold: in these exchanges over the proper protections for families and mothers, women became important and visible players in the public arena of politics; and as the messengers for maternalist policies, the *feministas trujillistas* and later *balagueristas* served to reproduce the regime's paternalism in their small towns and provinces, on the national stage, and even in some international arenas.

Following the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, the shifting political ground gave way to several years of crisis and ultimately, armed U.S. intervention. The political lessons learned by women on both sides of the dictatorship proved vital during the period of transition as they actively engaged in debates over the best direction for the newly liberated nation-state, and many even physically intervened in defense of its sovereignty. In the half decade that followed the demise of Trujillo, women continued to challenge the state—either understood as the occupying United States in 1965 or the revolutionary and transitional governments in between—that constructed its role as the paternal protector of women and children. While there were exceptions, many activist women during the U.S. occupation realized that male militants expected them to concurrently contribute to the struggle and maintain their traditional domestic duties in the theater of civil strife. Concurrently, more conservative female political activists viewed their most valuable contributions to the struggling state through their maternal roles as caretakers, nurses, and educators.

In 1966 Joaquín Balaguer, Trujillo's former speechwriter, titular leader (1960–1961), and closest aide, assumed the presidency and proceeded to rule the nation for the next twelve years. Balaguer's period of rule, often dubbed the *doce años* (twelve years), demonstrated many of the same hallmarks of the Trujillato, as the label *continuismo* indicates. While not the same kind of father figure styled by Trujillo, Balaguer served as a purportedly progressive protector seeking to shepherd the Dominican nation into a more modern period. In focusing on the peace he could bring the mothers of the nation, Balaguer brought women even more predominantly into official political spaces. Specifically, he made the unprecedented decision to appoint exclusively women to the posts of provincial governor. Yet while