

The Pwen of Transnational Haitian Migration



1.1. Little Caterpillar at Farmex labor camp in Tasley, Virginia, July 1985.

Pierre Dioguy's family and close friends call him by his childhood nickname: Little Caterpillar (Ti Chini, pronounced Tee Sheenee) or Caterpillar (Chini), for short. He was a larva-sized baby, one of a triplet birth, the only who survived. The name certainly matched the grown man. Little Caterpillar was compact, wiry, and composed. He was a witty and eloquent master of Creole, the French-derived ver-

nacular spoken by the subordinate masses of Haiti. (Only the educated minority know French.) He was especially adroit in a prized genre of sacred song whose double-entendre renders verses oriented to the spirits into interpersonal weapons of persuasion and authority. He was also known for his command of forms of divination, healing, and worship, and his power to embody and direct the forces of the divine. He had long been expected to succeed his elder brother as the one who “drives” (*kondi*) their lineage’s spirit house.

Little Caterpillar grew up in a peasant homestead in a rural section along the northern coast of the sugar-producing Plain of Léogane, Haiti. Of his parents’ ten children who reached adulthood, he was the youngest son. Six of his siblings are alive today. Three sisters reside in Guadeloupe; a brother and sister live in Léogane. None of them ever had the opportunity, as he says, to “sit on a school bench.” (Caterpillar, who is not literate, marks a cross when required to sign his name.) Most of the adult men in Caterpillar’s settlement farmed or fished; the women marketed. Caterpillar sharecropped several postage-stamp-sized plots. Maxia, his wife, conducted a barely profitable food trade.

In June 1980, when Little Caterpillar was thirty-four, he and twenty cousins and neighbors left for the United States. They embarked to *chache lavi pou fanmi yo*, to “search for a livelihood for their families.” Caterpillar’s group braved the 700 miles of sea in a motorless “canoe” (*anòt*) christened in their best mimesis of the colonial language, “Confiance en Dieu” (Confidence in God). Their voyage was one of a flotilla of boats that transported about 70,000 primarily male, young, peasant Haitian natives to South Florida between 1979 and 1981.

The only “life” opportunity available to Little Caterpillar in the United States was in the lowliest of occupations: migratory farm labor. Caterpillar likened the toil to a losing battle against the fire of the sun: the sun eats up the laborer’s body and turns it into water. Squalid, isolated labor camps, decrepit but expensive tenement houses, crooked crew bosses, worksite accidents, pesticide poisoning, and violent crime are all routine conditions of migratory farmwork. Immediately off the boat in Florida, he embarked on his first migratory farm labor job, which took him by bus to Michigan. The labor contractor abandoned his crew. While walking down a road to look for help, Caterpillar was accosted by a gang of white men spouting an English word he would later recognize as “nigger.” They beat and stabbed him, then left him for dead in a woods.

As he lay there, he saw the image of the beautiful spirit Ezili Freda. She came to him to comfort him and gave him a sign that he would not die. He awoke in a hospital, unable to communicate with the medical staff. A Creole interpreter eventually arrived at his bedside. The mulatto woman’s questioning soon led to the happy discovery that they were from the same locale in Léogane, though

from very distant social places. Her father was a prominent Léogane landowner and proprietor of a mill and distillery. She asked him on behalf of an American official if he wanted to be sent back home to Haiti. He declined, saying he hadn't yet "sent to do" (*voye fè*) anything for his family back home.

Three years later, his index finger was severed between two orange crates, leaving him with chronic nerve pain. Caterpillar nevertheless managed, despite long periods when he could not work, and trifling pay when he could, to "find some life" for his siblings and for his wife. A quarter of the money from his measly workman's compensation claim he sent to them.

I first met Little Caterpillar at a desolate labor camp on the Eastern Shore of Virginia in June 1981. I was serving as an advocate for Peninsula Legal Services' farmworker assistance program between semesters of graduate school, hired to reach out to the new and, therefore, particularly vulnerable Haitian population. Little Caterpillar made sure I knew him among the scores of Haitian cucumber pickers at the Farmex camp. He would stop me, never to ask for my help or counsel, but to quiz me about my interest in Haitian culture and language. He eventually discovered that I had some familiarity with Haitian ritual music. I had studied ritual performance at cult centers in Port-au-Prince, the subject of my undergraduate honors' thesis in anthropology and music.

Once, when I was standing in the compound besieged by workers all simultaneously soliciting my aid, Caterpillar appeared holding a portable cassette player. Surprising me, he queried in Creole, "Excuse me, Miss Carline, can you identify this rite?" Suddenly all was quiet except for the recorded sounds of multimeter ritual drumming. With all eyes on me, I tried to listen carefully to the esoteric rhythm. Having dabbled in Haitian ritual drumming, I believed I recognized the pattern as one deriving from West Africa, which in Haitian ceremonies is beaten to honor a pantheon of "Guinea" spirits known as Ogoun. I timidly ventured, "It sounds to me like Nago Zepol" (Nago Shoulders Style). Little Caterpillar howled and cavorted and nearly fell down. "The American woman knows Nago Zepol!" he yelled at the growing crowd. "The American woman knows Nago Zepol!" "Nago Zepol," he greeted me, grinning, the next time I entered the labor camp.

After Nago Zepol, Caterpillar and I had our first real chat. He invited me into the cabin he shared with two other men. He again surprised me by not talking at all about ritual music nor grilling me further about my knowledge of his religious traditions. He wanted to tell me, rather, about the people for whom he was "searching for life": his wife, Maxia, his oldest brother and surrogate parent, Se Byen, Adam (Adan) and Eve, his twin brother and sister, his nieces and nephews, and others. All of them, he said, depended upon him. He described in a gratified tone the nice cement and tin-roofed house he was having built back home (in

his absence), financed by his remittances. Erecting such a house was expected of everyone who left, a conspicuous signifier of the migrant's success abroad and the strength of his bonds to the home. Caterpillar did seem to be "living" back home (*lakay*), while just toiling over here. He remained actively involved in his home family's experience, and they in his.

Considering the formidable material, linguistic, and financial barriers to communication between poor, unlettered people in the remote Haitian countryside and their relatives in isolated farm labor camps and slums in the United States, the vitality of their intimacy was remarkable. They maintained their relationship in creative ways that entirely bypassed formal channels of communication. Independent entrepreneurs who specialized in the business of "coming and going" afforded the vital connections between home villages and their satellites abroad. A trusted man named Antoine Edouard traveled biweekly between Caterpillar's village in Léogane and Palm Beach County carrying money, letters, and gifts. While the migrants were away "on contract," between June and September, however, they did not have regular access to Antoine. Apart from the occasional opportunity to send mail through a trusted person who happened to be traveling between "the contract" and Antoine's bases in Palm Beach County, they were obliged to suspend correspondence with their home relatives until they returned to Florida.

Their primary medium of correspondence was audio cassette-tape. Recorded tape offers poor Haitians, whose domination has long been reproduced by illiteracy in the colonial language, a creative way of "writing" in their own beloved vernacular, Kreyòl (Creole). But even if people were literate, the tapes are far more congenial for extending their emphatically oral Creole aesthetic—one that prizes proverbs, figurative language, indirection, antiphony, and fluid shifting between speech and song. Corresponding by cassette has become so normal that the term "to write [a letter]" (*ekri*) means recording a cassette rather than the epistolary form. There is now a distinctive genre of cassette-discourse, including formulaic greetings and salutations. Both recording and listening to a cassette-letter are "performance events" (Bauman [1977] 1984).

Affordable, portable cassette-radios coincidentally appeared in stores around the same time as the Haitians' boats began arriving in Florida. The migrants quickly appropriated them to their long-distance lives. Powered by batteries, the devices afford migrants and their home kin a way to transcend unequal access to electrical current, one of the "patterned differences" in technological development across the world-system.¹ The portable cassette-radio stands as an epitomizing symbol, or "a model of and a model for" their long-distance society (Geertz 1973:93). Likely to be prominently displayed in both the migrants' quar-

ters and the home family's dwelling, the device radiates the vitality of the dispersed family's intimacy and the migrant's success abroad.

Little Caterpillar and I also corresponded by the universal medium of "letter writing" between families in rural Haiti and their members living abroad. We "wrote" cassettes in between our meetings at this same Virginia Eastern Shore camp during subsequent summers and in South Florida, where the farmworker crews lived and worked between December and June. On his cassette letters to me, Little Caterpillar has defined himself as my teacher—of Creole, of ritual songs, of intercropping sugarcane and sweet potatoes—anything "Haitian." I did not actively try to learn or record what he gave me, though, until more than a year after we met. I thought of myself as an advocate for a better life for Haitian immigrant farm workers, rather than as a student of their experience. I was, in fact, planning to conduct dissertation research among a pastoralist society in East Africa. Once I realized I wanted to research what I had been increasingly lured to defend, I designed a bilateral research project to explore the experience of transnational migration and its relationship to religious change, both for those who left and those who remained behind, beginning with ethnographic research in the home site for 18 months.

Caterpillar was delighted that I wanted to go to his home in Léogane, as were several other Léogane emigrants whom I had tried to help. Among them was a sibling group and their spouses and babies. My partner and I were foster parents for their teen-aged brother. I asked several of the Léogane emigrants to contact their families at home to apprise them of my desire to live in their village. Little Caterpillar told me that he would gladly write to Se Byen (his eldest brother) and his family about me. Caterpillar did eventually record a florid cassette-letter compelling his family to load me with food and other gifts whenever I visited and, if necessary, to go out and buy the presents and send him the bill. But the tape reached Se Byen and his relatives after I did. My arrival was totally unannounced.

In July 1983, I followed Caterpillar's directions to the settlement in Ti Rivyè (Little River) of Ka Piti (Petit's House; Petit was the name of the colonial owner of the plantation). I was accompanied by my partner and a young man from a nearby settlement. We parked our borrowed car on the dirt road and stopped the first person we saw to ask directions to the home of Se Byen Dioguy. He did not respond but summoned another man to talk to us. The second man appeared, dressed in tattered shirt and frayed pants, a hoe balanced on one shoulder. He looked familiar. I asked again for Se Byen Dioguy. I asked for the twins, Adam and Eve Dioguy; I asked for relatives of other young men from the village. The man's face was ice. I said something to the effect that "Little Caterpillar told me that I could find his family here." The ice melted. A friendly, trusting face looked

back and said, “I’m Adam Dioguy, Pierre Dioguy’s brother. Come with me and I’ll introduce you to Se Byen.” Adam led us from the road into a shaded, residential yard. He invited us to sit down under a thatched arbor, which ran the length of a large tangerine colored shrine. Se Byen soon appeared and introduced himself. His sister, Eve, came. Se Byen’s two wives, cousins, nieces and nephews greeted us, one by one engulfing us in an unforgettably tender and warmhearted welcome.

Adam later described our meeting to Little Caterpillar. He “wrote” on a taped letter:

We were sitting here and a car appeared over there. Se Byen wasn’t here. I got up; I was going to work in my garden. I met Yvon who said, “There are two Americans here asking for every single member of the Dioguy family and the first person they asked for was Se Byen Dioguy.” I went to talk to them; then I sent for Se Byen. When the Americans came in they sat under the arbor. They asked us questions about every single one of the men who left here and went to the U.S. They got along well with them over there. They started to mention names, this person, that person. All of the people they asked for—whole families—we had them all come before them. It was a beautiful thing. Everybody saw that it wasn’t a trick because—look, how else could they have known the business about the name, Little Caterpillar? When they came and talked about the business of the name, Little Caterpillar, everyone, truly, saw that you and the Americans must live in the same place. I’m not going to pretend that everybody wasn’t a little worried at first—but then they relaxed.

This beautiful moment was nonetheless sullied by Se Byen and Adam’s baffling accusations against their brother. They felt utterly abandoned by him. Until we got there, they said, they feared that their younger brother might have been dead. Little Caterpillar? The migrant who drudged and endured for the sake of loved ones back home? The migrant who, for all intents and purposes, “lived” back home in Léogane? I had expected his relatives to be singing their hero’s praises. Se Byen declared that he had not heard from Caterpillar for three years. Three years was exactly how long Caterpillar had been away. How could that be? Could Little Caterpillar have been lying to me about his remittances to his home?

Se Byen told me he wanted to “write” to Caterpillar. He requested that I help him record the letter, leading me to believe that he either did not own a radio-cassette player or know where to borrow such an appliance, let alone know how to operate one. I promised to return later that week.

Se Byen was waiting for us when we came back, his ample frame wedged between the narrow bench and the tangerine wall of “the [spirit] House.” He is the