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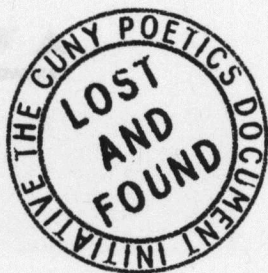
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ONE SIZE FITS ALL

BIOGRAPHICAL

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LIST & POINT

PEDRO PIETRI



Rojo Robles, Editor

Afterword by Cristina Pérez Díaz

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Rev. Pedro Pietri, 1990, Photograph by, ADÁL.

INTRODUCTION

"I CANNOT SAVE YOUR SOUL WITH RELIGION,
I CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE WITH A CONDOM"

REVERENDO PEDRO PIETRI'S
SAFE SEX ADVOCACY WORK

TO EXPLORE THE STILL growing *Pedro Pietri Papers* at the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY, is an awe-inspiring and imposing endeavor. The approximately 80 boxes or 55 cubic feet are far from being only "papers." The repository includes a vast array of materials: traditional manuscripts (handwritten, typed or word-processed), cut-ups and scraps, photographs, reel to reel audio tapes, videotapes, vinyl, cardboard artifacts, sculptures made with found objects, painted briefcases, among many other mutant gadgets. The versatility of the objects in the archive denotes Pietri's complexity and layered embodiments as a poet, playwright, performer, and Reverendo of *La Iglesia de la Madre de los Tomates*. Unfortunately, this wealth of innovative work clearly at the forefront of disciplines such as performance art and assemblage is usually not found or referenced in any leading arts institutions. Even though there is a street named after him on the Lower East Side in New York City ("Reverend Pedro Pietri Way," at East 3rd St.), his name and work remains for the most part, embedded and discussed within his own Puerto Rican community, and by the marginalized scene of late 20th century experimental poets.

To fill these gaps, the *Pedro Pietri Papers* offer inventory and invaluable contextualization for the poet. Interestingly, the 60-page "Guide to the *Pedro Pietri Papers*" begins to lay out the complexities of Pietri's life and work by referencing him as the "Sun Ra of Puerto

Rican letters.”¹ The foundational figure of Afro-futurism, innovative composer, poet, and creator of equations, Sun Ra, just like Pietri, combined extreme sounds, groundbreaking texts, mythology and performance to form counter-narratives to US culture as well as counter-communities. Comparing Pietri to Sun Ra allows for a frame of reference that equates Pietri’s prolific output to that of, as poet Amiri Baraka put it, one of the most “out” artists of the 20th century. It allows us to trace Pietri’s connections to Black radical poetics, and to see him as a futurist creator ahead of his time in many respects.

From his early community-based poetic engagements, to his heyday as a free-form artist, the thorough introduction to his vast production presents Pietri’s cultural, social, political, and biographical backdrop. As is evident in the “Guide,” throughout his life, Pietri was involved in a range of eccentric textual, vocal and corporeal practices. As poet and scholar of Nuyorican poetry, Urayoán Noel argues, Pietri’s work brings together “a number of disparate and seemingly incommensurable personae, forms, voices, and discourses in self-reflexive performances that underscore the interdependence of identities.” From “irreverent downtown anarchism,” to fluid nationalism, to “Dada-surrealism,” Pietri’s “sui generis” and always humorous act played with the “blurred visibility of diaspora.”² His self-sustainable ethos and poetics opened up a discussion about the invisibility of Puerto Rican letters and thus, “towards conceptualist, experimental, and deterritorialized horizons.”³ In retrospect, it is amazing to see how Pietri’s actual practice prefigures so much of what

1 Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños. “Guide to the *Pedro Pietri Papers*.” centopr.hunter.cuny.edu <https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/faids/pdf/Pietri,%20Pedro%20Jul%20202017.pdf>

2 Noel, Urayoán. *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*. University of Iowa Press, 2014.

3 Noel, Urayoán. “On Out of Focus Nuyoricans, Noricuas, and Performance Identities.” liminalities.net. <http://liminalities.net/10-3/nuyorican.pdf>

later becomes theorized in academia and specialized art publications.

The *Pedro Pietri Papers* require resourceful researchers and as many engagements as possible. This edition, for instance, was made possible thanks to two distinct *Lost & Found* research efforts, the first one by friend, poet, playwright, and editor of the *Puerto Rico Review*, Cristina Pérez Díaz. In a recent exchange, Pérez Díaz told me that in the archive, she looked at letters, pamphlets, booklets, and inimitable manuscripts. She was interested in Pietri as a figure that emerged as an autodidact from a desk job at Columbia University's Butler Library and that his readings, writing experimentations and travels linked multiple poetic avant-garde groups in Puerto Rico and New York.⁴ She underscored that despite the range of literary and affectionate friendships displayed in the archive to writers such as Ted Joans, Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Quincy Troupe, June Jordan, Ntozake Shange, and Jayne Cortez—along with a wide range of theaters and cultural institutions—Pietri's work remains largely in the archive, and the cultural memory of those with whom he was closely associated. While Pérez Díaz could not participate in the second phase of the research (the selection of texts) due to other scholarly obligations, she inspired an excellent research path to follow and provided an Afterword to this project, written and presented in Spanish.

Among the Pietri projects Pérez Díaz was most interested in were a series of manila envelopes with typed poems on them and condoms inside. She felt impacted by the gesture of extending the notion of sexual protection to poems and proposing a life-saving purpose to both. As a fellow Puerto Rican writer, long time Pedro Pietri reader and collector, and scholar and instructor of Caribbean and Latino Literature, I was very keen on continuing Pérez Díaz's investigation. I wanted to explore the richness of Pietri's archive and pursue a

4 Pérez Díaz, Cristina. "Desde un teléfono público, Pedro Pietri." *The Puerto Rico Review* No. 1 junio 2017. Topos Press, 2017.

detailed inquiry into those famous envelopes. When I started my own research, I decided to limit myself to the “Condom Poems” artifacts, and the hundreds of pages of the *Out of Order* manuscript, also known as “telephone booth poems” (the main source Pietri used to create his condom packets.) This crucial work he did during the AIDS crisis stood out to me as a noteworthy aspect of his archive that needed to be exposed and brought to a larger audience. One of the very first artifacts I examined was a series of paper “window” sculptures with typed and written poems on them. I noticed that a thematic pattern could be discerned. The poems were about raunchy sexual dynamics and bohemianism, substance use, alcoholic deliriums, and critiques of US capitalism. Although Pietri did not seem interested in marking these divisions, I decided to compile the poems here based on these flexible and juxtaposed categories.

The “Condom Poems” derive initially from an ever-evolving *Rent-a-Coffin* (1969-onwards) performance in which Pietri, as an undertaker, reflected on mortality based on his painful Vietnam War experiences as a soldier and those of combatants’ families dealing with lost ones. In this performance as in other poems and plays, Pietri’s conception of time is not linear but cyclical; hence, he boldly claimed that sex overcomes death.

I started Renting Coffins back in 1968 because I felt I could help out society by reducing the financial burden individuals Are confronted with when a loved one dies. And because I sincerely Believe that there is SEX after DEATH, all the coffins I rent come with free condoms compatible to your complexion [...] the material is as unpredictable as death. I have been polishing up my coffins for Over 15 years now—everyone feels good about dying after my performance. And immediately go home to try out the condoms with their companion. [Sic]

His undertaker routine of spoken-word poems and interactions with the audience was partly memorized and partly improvised and it was always open for changes. As Urayoán Noel points out, this performance took on an uncanny dimension during the AIDS crisis.⁵ As was very common with Pietri, his ideas on safe sex crossed over from one project to the other, including the aforementioned manuscript *Out of Order*.

In effect, what I call here the “Condom Poems,” were a set of conceptual performances derived for the most part from *Out of Order*, also known as “telephone booth poems” that played with visual elements, spoken-word, the renting of coffins, and the creation and distribution of prized envelopes with texts and prophylactics. During my work in the archive, I noticed how Pietri constantly branched out the content to all sorts of formats from live presentations to radio and cabaret shows at downtown bars. It was truly an elastic concept that allowed Pietri to employ his interdisciplinary intuition and powers. This *Lost & Found* edition, through a small, unpublished selection, and an envelope of visual works from the archive, offers an entry point into his boundless production, and into this specific iteration of his sex advocacy activism. Its purpose is also to invite others to join in on the conversation. For me, *Condom Poems 4 Sale One Size Fits All* underlines the importance of spreading the goods of the Puerto Rican Archive and, of course, the ways Pietri manifested with street-wise humor the pleasures and confusion of mind-altering experiences and sexual terrors.

The dispersed self-published, or partially anthologized assortment (the 2001 Italian edition by Mario Maffi is the most extensive and cleverly organized), consists of close to 3,000 short poetic texts, or epigrams. In the self-descriptive poem titled “telephone booth numero

5 Pietri, Pedro (qtd. in Noel), “Dear Mr. Joseph Papp.” *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*. University of Iowa Press, 2014.

zero," Pietri calls them "anti prose conversations in non alphabetic impromptu numerical free verse disorder."⁶ Indeed, the poems were written without any metric or punctuation marks and although there are clear threads, the manuscript emphasizes chaos, saturation, and disarrangement. Photographer, poet and Latin American Studies Professor at Wagner College, Marilyn Kiss, lucidly understands Pietri's writing techniques from the perspective of a "trickster" aesthetic. She conceptualizes him as an artist who tricks you out of your default settings, posing a threat to mainstream thinking:

He was belligerently ungrammatical and refused to change the street language he heard around him into something polished, edited and more acceptable to mainstream publishing houses. He was a true activist in proclaiming the legitimacy of Spanglish as the national language of the Nuyorican [...] He left in the scatological comments and all the expletives. His legacy includes a wealth of poems typed onto envelopes or individual sheets, mimeographed, photocopied and distributed through unconventional means.⁷

The "unconventional" *Out of Order* collection elevates the art of imagined monologues recorded in the spur of the moment. Using concise formats such as the telephone voice-message, the tape-recorded "notes to self," and bizarre witticisms, Pietri spread poetic insight, humor, and social awareness in many formats, while documenting dark times in New York City. Just like the poems and the public telephone booths of the 1970s and '80s, the city was out-of-order, crime-ridden, and on the brink of bankruptcy.

In the course of my research, I had the opportunity to speak

6 Pietri, Pedro. "telephone booth numero zero." *Selected Poetry*. Juan Flores and Pedro López Adorno, Eds. City Lights Books, 2015.

7 Kiss, Marilyn. "The Trickster Among Us: Pedro Pietri's Urban Aesthetic." Tribes.org <https://www.tribes.org/web/2010/11/08/the-trickster-among-us-pedro-pietris-urban-aesthetic?rq=Pietri>

with three of Pietri's closest living associates, poet, playwright, and life-long collaborator Jesús Papoleto Meléndez; Puerto Rican photographer, conceptual artist, and comrade in creativity ADÁL; and award-winning poet, educator and activist, María Teresa "Mariposa" Fernández. When I asked Papoleto about the nature of Pietri's collection, he told me that it reflected Pietri's habit of calling friends and lovers late at night to encourage long conversations or encounters.⁸ He also recalls that Pietri integrated the "telephone booth poems" to a marijuana advocacy performance, defending open access to the plant. This is made very clear in the poem, "Free Grass For the Working Class," where Pietri proposes cannabis as a medicine against nine-to-five exploitation, bill collectors and media manipulation. In his view, grass permits us to live a "thousand years" in "interplanetary time" and in "the house of inner feelings."⁹ As Papoleto emphasized, Pietri saw marijuana as a direct confrontation to capitalist corruption and as a way to obtain mental health and creativity. Although many "telephone booth poems" kept framing the curative powers of cannabis and the potential mental expansion of its use, with the AIDS outbreak, Pietri changed and expanded the content of the poems and the envelopes—from joints to condoms.

In conversation with ADÁL, he explained to me that Pietri would sell "condoms inside a small manila envelope for \$1 with the poem written on it to those interested." In some performances, entitled "Safe Poetry," he also "carried a condom cross to parks, public and private spaces where he would set up, remove a condom from its package, place it around the head of a microphone and proceed to read his poems. After the reading, he'd throw out condoms to the audience."¹⁰

8 Meléndez, Jesús Papoleto. Personal interview. 26 April 2019.

9 Pietri, Pedro. "Free Grass For the Working Class." *Selected Poetry*. Juan Flores and Pedro López Adorno, Eds. City Lights Books, 2015.

10 ADÁL. Personal interview. 20 November 2018.

In 1990, based on the ideas of poet and cultural promoter Eddie Figueroa, ADÁL, along with Pietri, re-established *El Puerto Rican Embassy*, a still active mobile platform and space of resistance for Puerto Rican artists.¹¹ The conceptual *Embassy* encourages cultural self-determination because, historically, Puerto Rico has been denied a self-sufficient and autonomous political identity. One of the main concepts/acts/artifacts of the *Embassy* is “El Puerto Rican Passport Project.” Through it, a literal Puerto Rican passport with a text by Pietri was created to question the assumed or bestowed US citizenship and to affirm the construction of symbolic, non-territorial and emancipated identities. For *El Puerto Rican Embassy*, ADÁL created a portrait of the poet dressed in a fake tuxedo beside his condom cross. Eventually, this photo became a postcard and the online cover of the *Pedro Pietri Papers* (and we are again using it as a postcard for this edition.) I consider this photograph a reminder of the need to centralize the “Condom Poems” within Pietri’s long poetic and artistic career. The picture also provides an example of how Puerto Rican artists and activists were deeply involved in the fight for healthcare and sexual education during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

María Teresa “Mariposa” Fernández, for example, recounted to me that the primary motivation of “Safe Poetry” was to raise consciousness about HIV/AIDS during a time when few people in the Puerto Rican and Latino community were doing so.

Pedro illuminated a disease that was (and is) threatening our community. Hunt’s Point, which remains one of the areas with the largest concentrations of Puerto Ricans in NYC today, is ground zero for teenage HIV and AIDS. Check the statistics. We need to be throwing condoms at audiences today! Pedro was using his humor and his performance art to combat the

11 See elpuertoricanembassy.org

provincialism that still keeps us silent on the need for safe sex practices. I was a 20-year-old freshman at NYU when I first saw Pedro perform. He threw condoms at us, something our school administrators should have been doing. I thought it was genius.¹²

Indeed, as Mariposa suggests, the statistics were (and still are) devastating. In 1991, when Pietri was actively performing, “the AIDS case rates for Hispanic adolescents, adults and children were 2.5 to 7.5 times higher than rates for comparable groups of non-Hispanic Whites,” as a study by Theresa Diaz demonstrates. The study shows that between Latino people, the predominant exposure was unprotected sex, but, specifically among Puerto Ricans, the predominant mode of transmission was injection drug use.¹³ Content-wise, Pietri weighed in on these matters and his “telephone booth poems” make a call, pun intended, to acknowledge widespread patterns of self-destruction.

In the selection here, sex, death, mind-trips and isolation are intertwined. He warns that “socializing can be fatal,” and that it “is no longer safe to screw every place.” He says that to avoid the danger perhaps it is better to get a VCR, to masturbate, to imagine love escapades, and especially to wear a condom. Along with the observations about risky (although many times funny) sexual behaviors, the poems also shed light, without moralizing, on the abuse of alcohol and drugs. For example, in “telephone booth number 423,” he portrays heroin as a portal towards darkness, paranoia, and madness:

the night is strangled
by the madness of silent needles
neurotic cartoons appear

12 Fernández, María Teresa “Mariposa.” Personal interview. 23 April 2019.

13 Diaz, Theresa, et al. “AIDS Trends among Hispanics in the United States.” Alpha publications.org. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.83.4.504>

you lose your mind forever
all the dark alleys of your feelings
chase you outside of your skin¹⁴

In another poem, "Ode to Skid Road," the winos are also losing their minds but, in this case, alcoholic oblivion helps them forget their "financial binds and dislocated spines" due to exploitation in factories.¹⁵ In the poems reunited here, it is notable how Pietri understands substance consumption and HIV/AIDS as a corollary of widespread inequality and systemic mistreatment.

Although the government's responses have changed through time, during the '80s, the official "war" against AIDS was articulated by attaching the disease to alien "others." The illness was demonized as well as the patients and their community. The "war" on AIDS is a war against the individual and the "dangers" he or she represents within mainstream US society. The ill are put into a "risk group" or community of outcasts. Moreover, they are exposed to harassment, persecution or plain desertion. As a member of the Nuyorican and bohemian poets fellowship, Pietri was not unaware of the otherization of the "at risk" communities he belonged to or moved through. It is also important to note here the exclusionary mechanisms that have removed Pietri's multifaceted oeuvre from the cultural and art discourses of which it should form an inherent part. Why is Pietri not historicized as a pioneering performance or conceptual artist? Why is his work so appreciated within the Puerto Rican and Latino community and so atomized outside of it? These questions, of course, require a deep analysis of the publishing and art market and its formation within class, race, and US exceptionalist structures that rule what is made generally available in our cultural life.

¹⁴ Pietri, Pedro. *Out of Order*. The *Pedro Pietri Papers*. Hunter College, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, box 19, folders 6-9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Regardless of the invisibility of his work vis-à-vis mainstream culture (an inconspicuousness he loved to joke around with, especially in his blank page booklet from 1979, *Invisible Poetry*), and the difficulties of accessing Pietri's largely out-of-print books, Reverend Pedro's vision has permeated the way contemporary poets remember him. On April 6, 2019, I saw how Pietri's spirit was called forth in video format at the Nuyorican Poets Café to inaugurate *El Puerto Rican Embassy's* tribute to the late African American poet, novelist, playwright and Puerto Rican ally, Ntozake Shange.¹⁶ The evening consisted of a set of short performances, readings from Ntozake's books and testimonies by poets, musicians, and artists of the Nuyorican movement who were friends with her or direct collaborators like Pietri. The event opened with Mariposa, author of *Born Bronxña: Poems on Identity, Love & Survival*, performing Pietri's "El Spanglish National Anthem," a sing-along poem about the pains of migration, racism and the desire for decolonization.¹⁷ Joining Ntozake's impactful feminist texts, Pietri's son, Speedo Juan, performed the last section of the canonical "Puerto Rican Obituary" where Pietri designs a mental space of nationalist dialogue, Afro-Caribbean joy and love to confront cycles of labor oppression and discrimination against Puerto Ricans.¹⁸ Speedo also performed

16 Shange was a regular performer at the Nuyorican Poets Café. A selection of her work was included in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*. Henry Holt and Company, 1994.

17 Pietri, Pedro. "El Spanglish National Anthem." *Selected Poetry*. Juan Flores and Pedro López Adorno, Eds. City Lights Books, 2015.

18 On June 12, 2019, theater director Rosa Luisa Márquez, multidisciplinary artist Antonio Martorell, dancers/performers Javier Cardona and Awilda Sterling, and the dance company Andanza staged "Puerto Rican Obituary" at the *Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico* (MACPR). The performance reflected on, and connected to the colonial impasses between Puerto Rico and the United States, and the federal and local neglect after hurricane Maria. To this day the poem and, moreover, Pietri's work, is also a fixture of the island experimental theater scene.

“telephone booth number 905 ½,” a poem about feeling so good in your body and soul that you decide to strike and skip work:

woke up this morning
feeling excellent,
picked up the telephone
dialed the number of
my equal opportunity employer
to inform him I will not
be into work today
Are you feeling sick?
the boss asked me
No Sir I replied:
I am feeling too good
to report to work today,
if I feel sick tomorrow
I will come in early¹⁹

Fellow Latin Insomniac, Jesús Papoleto Meléndez, also mentioned that when Pietri got sick with stomach cancer in 2003, “number 905 ½” was selected to publicly ask for monetary help. In the beginning, people thought the Insomniacs were joking, as usual.²⁰ It later became a poem that represented everlasting humor, even when facing death—something Pietri had been doing since his days in the Vietnam War, and that the “Condom Poems” so fiercely reiterated.

Aware of the process of social obliteration and artistic marginalization he was embedded in, Pietri always acknowledged his responsibility to his people and the importance of owning a voice and spreading the word of those “out of” or made invisible by the

19 Pietri, Pedro. “telephone booth number 905 ½.” *Selected Poetry*. Juan Flores and Pedro López Adorno, Eds. City Lights Books, 2015.

20 Meléndez, Jesús Papoleto. Personal interview. 26 April 2019.

state. As he self-analyzes in the poem that opens this collection, "We all know that," Reverend Pedro's poems and plays:

are all poignant and pricking
his social satire is substantial and sticking
his perspective is pithy and funny and gritty
his outlooks audacious, defiant, and witty²¹

El Reverendo Pedro, his poetic persona, was a modern prophet figure who spoke truth to power. He portrayed what was happening around him, the word on the street, and helped his audience and readers take far-reaching mind journeys. As ADÁL puts it, Pietri blessed and baptized anyone interested in becoming a citizen of El Spirit Republic of Puerto Rico.

You see in most religions in order to attain spiritual awareness a person has to die to old ideas and be re-born into a new consciousness. That was the purpose of Rev. Pedro's baptisms. As a result of this baptism, you die to the programming and conditioning of the State and are reborn to a new consciousness.²²

Pietri promoted mental transformation and represented a guardian figure in various senses. He occasionally sold but mostly gave condoms away to promote sexual health and the prolongation of life. He self-published his poems for cultural well-being and performed as El Reverendo Pedro for the spiritual enrichment of Puerto Ricans and anyone open to the experience. For Pietri, all of this came together as a unified whole.

In "El Puerto Rico Embassy/Manifesto," Pietri wrote that defending your dreams signifies having the courage to make your

²¹ Pietri, Pedro. *Out of Order*. The *Pedro Pietri Papers*. Hunter College, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, box 19, folders 6-9.

²² ADÁL. Personal interview. 20 November 2018.

dreams come true, and once your dreams come true there is no need to worry about death. Imagination allows reaching to the other side and communicating with the departed and escorting them back to life.²³ I understand the “Condom Poems” and Reverend Pedro’s performances as a similar project of protecting the living and their dreams, while recognizing ancestors and those dear ones lately gone.

—Rojo Robles

23 Pietri, Pedro. “El Puerto Rico Embassy/Manifesto,” *Selected Poetry*. Juan Flores and Pedro López Adorno, Eds. City Lights Books, 2015.