

Word Dealing *Out* Poetics: Afro-Caribbean Sounds and Resonating Futures in the Works of David Hernández and Pedro Pietri

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the poetics of David Hernández and Pedro Pietri, undisciplined poets who rejected imperialism, coloniality, and capitalist imperatives. Instead, they celebrated Afro-Boricua and Caribbean sounds in Chicago and New York. They draw inspiration from Afro-Caribbean music gatherings to craft unruly poetics emphasizing pleasure, physical closeness, and transformative power. In this piece, we propose a material and social manner of reading/listening to poetry, challenging aesthetics, and singular artistic control: outness. We look at Hernández's 1981 performance of "1951: Puerto Rico" and how it exemplifies a break from Western musical conventions through improvised *descargas*. Additionally, we examine the influence of technology, particularly the telephone, on their poetics, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between embodied sounding and listening. Lastly, we delve into Pietri's poem "Out of Focus Nuyoricans" and his collaboration with visual artist ADÁL to illustrate the critical poetics of futurity and the reclamation of margins. Hernández and Pietri's work challenge traditional notions of poetry and communication by embracing outness and exploring Afro-Caribbean sounds. [Keywords: Out poetics, decolonial poetics, Rican poets, Afro-Caribbean sounds, Afro-Indigenous futurism, recording technologies, relational experimental aesthetics]

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*What do we want? What every human being wants!
 The right to dance la Plena whenever we please
 Like dignified human beings of tropical brilliance
 Who time after time their fine minds have proven
 That you can be in two islands at the same time
 Dancing to supernatural down to earth rhythms from
 Solitary jukeboxes from the past, present and future!*

—Pedro Pietri, “El Puerto Rican Embassy/Manifesto”

*So we can break rules, diets and stereotypes
 for the rebels we have always been
 then be able to stop traffic
 as we shuffle across rush-hour streets
 and momentarily detain progress
 just enough to pay us homage.*

—David Hernández, “My Friend”

I. Intro: Getting in with the Out Ricans/Out Poetics

David Hernández and Pedro Pietri, two Rican (un)disciplinary poets, rejected imperialism, respectability politics, colonial visibility, and consumerism in favor of outness and the celebration of Afro-Caribbean sounds in Chicago and New York.¹ Our article argues that they drew inspiration from Afro-Indigenous music gatherings to craft poetics that emphasize pleasure, physical closeness, and transformative powers. In the mid-twentieth century, the emergence of *descarga*—an improvised jam session characterized by open-ended instrumental “conversations”—represented a break from Western musical conventions (Quintero Rivera 1998, 337). We explore the meanings and possibilities of this break in a 1981 performance of “1951: Puerto Rico” by the poetry *conjunto* David Hernández and Street Sounds. In our reading/listening of the poem-song, we highlight how the open-ended practices of free playing and listening in improvisation generate new collective modes of being, feeling, and creating.

We also examine the telephone as a point of encounter for Hernández and Pietri. Embracing outness, their poetry defied societal and literary norms, emphasizing the relationship between embodied sounding and listening. If Hernández's poetry captured the collaborative and communicative process of assembling and reassembling sensory experiences, informed by his tradition of reciting poems over the telephone with his mother, Pietri's "telephone booth" poems embraced social chaos and reflected the disjointedness of human communication.²

Lastly, we analyze "Out of Focus Nuyoricans," a poem in which Pietri advocates for poetics of futurity. In an artistic collaboration with artist ADÁL, Pietri recognized the challenges faced by Nuyorican *Coconautas*, who sought to overcome exclusion and invisibility resulting from colonialism. Pietri believed that Afro-Caribbean music could recast Puerto Ricans as dynamic creators and social dancers capable of inventing transcendent cultural environments and experiences. He also explored *descarga* by performing a textual improvisation on stages and the page that allows for polyrhythms and saturation of voices.

While Pietri is often associated with the Nuyorican literary movement and Hernández with Rican and performance poetry communities in Chicago, critics have frequently overlooked how their poetics intersect. Their separate geographies overlapped through the years, with Hernández inviting Pietri to poetry workshops and readings in Chicago attended by poets like Eduardo Condes and Salima Rivera.³ Before becoming acquainted with the Nuyoricans as poets, Hernández collaborated with the Chicago Young Lords and would hitch rides with fellow Chicago Ricans to the East Coast to support the New York Young Lords' actions and demonstrations (Hernández 2000, 156). Pietri also emerged in the NYC poetry scene through his involvement in the Young Lords' cultural events, where he famously began performing his landmark poem "Puerto Rican Obituary." Although both Hernández and Pietri would later develop an anarchic practice, separating themselves from political organizations, their commitments to the cause of Puerto Rican decolonization and the well-being of Puerto Rican communities—locally and beyond—continued to influence their poetry. We considered them kindred poets-performers for this reason and for their exploration of outness as poetics.

Living and Theorizing Outness

We want to emphasize Hernández and Pietri's status as performance poets, foregrounding the generative frictions between verbal and nonverbal poetics in their works. Performance as a multivalent framework and operation anchors this analysis (Ruiz 2019, 14). In the context of marginalized and oppressed performers, as poet-performer and theorist Urayoán Noel observes, performance functions "as an essential counter-institutional

gesture" (2014, 34). Noel invites us to consider Pietri precisely as a ludic body traversing the Rican poetic tradition, by foregrounding movement within a civil and communal space. Noel highlights methods of complicating and camouflaging the textual with the paratextual. The poet emerges as an oppositional figure, reveling in the margins. Reading in the interstices of page and body, Noel underscores fractured and refracted performances. In this way, Pietri's mixed theatrical artifacts and embodied eccentric poetics (like Hernández's conjunto free play) challenge the coordinates of the lettered city. His avant-garde improvisational performances reveal a textual crisis coinciding with the body's crisis under a harsh regime (that generates political and substance-driven duress). Pietri's associative movements across the stage and page constructs polyphonic and logic-resisting bodies, excesses that counter most organizing principles, including chronological time (Noel 2015, 557–62). We extend this analysis to Hernández.

In their written and sound works, Pietri and Hernández draw from and enact Afro- and Indigenous-Caribbean sonic forms and rhythms, often to surface "embodied territor[ies]" from which the terms of communication, identification, and incorporation can be interrogated (Noel 2014, 121). Part of our understanding of outness is performance as a counter gesture—or the state of embodiment becoming possible through such a gesture. Through this lens, performance oscillates without fixity in a fluid space and state where political, linguistic, and metaphysical reflections are intertwined. Orality and humor also generate a new mode of thought and being in outness. It reveals poetry within joints of voice, unexpected sounds, textual explosions, and syncopated body movements.

In the introduction to *Tales of the Out & the Gone*, Black Arts Movement giant Amiri Baraka argues that being "out" is not just a condition but a radical orientation encompassing politics, poetics, and a way of being. Those who fought against racism and imperialism, he notes, were often labeled as out, positioned at the margins of society precisely because their visions of liberation were seen as threats to the status quo. Baraka connects this outness to the experimental music of radical Black artists whose work expanded the possibilities of Black sonic and aesthetic traditions. In Baraka's view, out poetics are fueled by imagination, where to imagine fiercely is a subversive act. He aligns this with figures whose poetry and performances were eccentric, profound, wise, and hip (Baraka 2007).

Anthony Reed's concept of "outfulness" extends Baraka's framing, locating Black experimental writing as a polyvocal practice of freedom, akin to the improvisational space of jazz musicians. Playing "out" in jazz signifies a deliberate violation of harmonic conventions, an expansion of traditional structures that opens novel forms of musical expression and aesthetic competence.⁴ Similarly, for Reed, any "out" destination in writing and performance involves exceeding ideological limits, enacting a self-liberation

from constraining norms by unexpectedly combining aesthetic techniques, genres, and cultural materials. “Outfulness” is thus an exploratory practice that ventures into new areas of thought, feeling, and desire without predetermined effects or outcomes. It marks moments of transformation, where “foreign” elements are imported and repurposed to challenge the audience’s expectations and literary or stage conventions. “Outfulness” responds to a Black demand for restitution, not merely in material terms but in the realm of the unimaginable itself. It insists on another way of thinking and imagining, that is, forging a space where the structures that delimit Black existence are broken, opened, and reconfigured (Reed 2014, 207–9).

Seen through free jazz, the “out” concept was, in many ways, like Hernández and Pietri’s performances, about pushing the boundaries of what was considered acceptable or “in” within jazz or poetic traditions. Free jazz artists sought to break free from preconceived notions about how one should sound, encouraging listeners and co-creators to explore new words and sonic horizons. During the peak period of free jazz, in 1971, Hernández formed the Latin jazz-poetry fusion group David Hernández and Street Sounds, intending to make poetry more accessible to broader audiences, particularly marginalized communities of Chicago (Hernández 2000, 147). Though experimental and improvisational, Street Sounds were sonically more conventional and less out than avant-garde and free jazz compositions. Arguably, *descarga* could be called “less out” than free jazz, especially considering the incorporation of the former within the widely popular genre of salsa in the 1970s. Still, Hernández’s poetics and Street Sounds’ *descargas* “displace and recontextualize” the inside, making space for outsiders and marginalized peoples within the meaning-making process of art, breaking free from the laws governing what is sensible and imaginable (Reed 2021, 147).

Meanwhile, Pietri, often called the “Sun Ra of Puerto Rican Letters,” shares Sun Ra’s approach to counter-narratives through radical sound, mythology, and performance (Center for Puerto Rican Studies 2007, 3). Like Sun Ra, he explored realms beyond societal recognition where inventive art thrives (Reed 2013, 120–21). A frequent performer at venues like the New Rican Village and the Nuyorican Poets Café, Pietri embraced jazz’s improvisatory dynamics, resisting cohesive plot or verse structures.

Word Dealing Outness

As poets who craft words and sounds from altered states, Pietri and Hernández can be rethought as “word dealers,” a title Hernández coined to distinguish himself from elitist notions of the poet. Aware of how poetic communities would regulate their style and thoughts to form regionally/specific “schools” of poetry that were more likely to receive attention from the “academic/avant-garde community,” Hernández defined *word dealers* as

those who “ain’t got no such schooling” and would instead “sneak a poem in a full-moon night and laugh it right out of existence” (Hernández 1983, 1). Word dealers traffic in illicit languages and feelings that upset the culturally conditioned tastes and values of conservative readers. For fugitive, marginalized, and underground audiences, word dealing reclaims poetry as a free expression, communication, and contestation mode.

While resistive to categorization, word dealers represent a continuation of an irreverent, counter-cultural, and counter-poetic tradition that spans the Americas, including figures such as Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989), Julia de Burgos (1914-1953), Nicanor Parra (1914-2018), Sandra María Esteves (b. 1948), and many others.⁵ Word dealing exists within this constellation of poetic practices against the status quo. As word dealers, Pietri⁶ and Hernández⁷ produced literary infrastructures outside and against an organizing (market) logic that might have afforded them wider recognition. Their self-published works feature experimental writing styles, such as stream-of-consciousness prose, collaging, writing on objects, sound recordings, and poetry that may be raw, ungrammatical, and unpolished on purpose.

Hernández’s and Pietri’s out poetics are unschooled, out there evading the groping hands of scholars. We know that many aspects of Pietri and Hernández’s work will always escape us, and we think of their poetics of outness through their fugitivity. We use fugitivity to broadly refer to an escape or evasion from authority or control, whether from a legal, social, cultural, or personal situation. We are also thinking of fugitivity through a Black Studies lens as a strategy and mindset that Black people have employed throughout history to resist slavery, oppression, and exploitation.⁸

Word dealing further subverts the systems of value and forms of analysis that dominated the fields of literature and literary studies during the conservative era of New Criticism by shifting focus from the poem as a singular, autonomous work of art to a fugue, an infinite number of embodied experiences with poetry.⁹ In its connection to the trade of mind-altering substances, word dealing also implies that once a client is hooked, they will keep coming back. Every poem is unfinished, flickering in and out of existence as it engages different audiences. Rethinking out poetics as word dealing brings us an unfinished poetics of the unschooled, a drop-out and burn-out poetics that centers the bodies of marginalized peoples and creates possibilities of escape from subjection in the intoxicating production and consumption of poetry.¹⁰ Pietri and Hernández’s word-dealing out poetics exist in the margins,¹¹ insisting on documenting and experimenting with what is out there, worlds and substances otherwise.

II. “¡Juega!”: Listening and Free Play with David Hernández and Street Sounds

Our focus on musicality and sonority in Hernández’s (and Pietri’s) works demands a methodology for listening. When engaging with a sound work or video, we pause, rewind, and listen for small details that draw and settle us into the performance. As listeners, we do not search for discipline or training but rather for rituals of pleasure: “The sound settles you in, not to discipline you into a model audience, but so you can pour another drink, hang your purse on the back of a chair, nod to someone in the room, get another kiss, make sure the signal is strong” (Vazquez 2013, 1). Literary and performance studies scholar Alexandra T. Vazquez defines listening in detail as an attunement to how “music and the musical reflect—in flashes, moments, sounds—the colonial, racial and geographic past and present of [Puerto Rico]... Listening in detail ignores the accusations of going too far, of giving too much time to a recording of seemingly little significance” (Vazquez 2013, 5). While attempting to grasp some of the significance of sounds in the works of Pietri and Hernández, we avoid foreclosing sonorous meanings. Our method of listening is detailed but also “distracted,” “wavering,” and nearly improvisational, as it exposes gaps without immediately trying to fill and cover them (Fiol-Matta 2017, 9). It is “not interested in possession or clarification” but instead leaves the possibilities of continued listening open (Vazquez 2013, 24). Our resistance to culling the meanings of sound within a text is perhaps a kind of “madness.” However, being “out of our minds” is likely the best method for appreciating Hernández’s out poetics (Vazquez 2013, 25).

Reading one of Hernández’s books can feel like listening to a live performance: some asides directly engage readers, revisions of more popular “hits,” and occasional grammatical and typographical errors. Literary and cultural theorist Marc Zimmerman addressed these features in his foundational research on Chicago Rican literature, claiming that improvisation was not only a mode of performance for Hernández but also an aesthetic category mediating Hernández’s writing (Zimmerman 2011, 98). We do not take this as evidence that Hernández’s poetry should be listened to rather than read. Hernández was a highly intermedial artist insofar as multiple media participated in the signification of his poetry. With that in mind, we focus on improvisation and how it functions between the media of music and literature. More specifically, we examine the resonances between the lyrics and the instrumental descargas in a performance of “1951: Puerto Rico,” recorded in 1981 at the now-closed Chicago bar and venue Gaspar’s and featured in the eponymous record *David Hernández and Street Sounds*. Our analysis will show that Hernández’s out poetics embraced sonic and textual undoneness to make space for spontaneous encounters, collaborations, and future creativity.

The term “descarga” emerged in musical discourses in the 1940s among Afro-Cuban instrumentalists and composers such as Mario Bauzá, Chano Pozo, and Bebo Valdés to describe the extended jam sessions where improvisers could engage, exchange, and recreate forms and techniques adopted from Black US American and Afro-Cuban and Indigenous musical traditions (Torres 2013, 145–47). Descarga sessions facilitated an open-ended form of collaborative composition, enabling instrumentalists to depart from more conventional music melodies, harmonies, techniques, and temporal structures. In contrast to the market logic of the recording industry, descargas often exceeded five minutes, frequently going beyond ten and fifteen minutes. The extended time of descargas encourages an out or “mad” listening, where attention becomes detailed and fluid, wavering between different instrumental articulations, musical forms, and bodily expressions (Vazquez 2013, 25; Fiol-Matta 2017, 9). This prolonged temporality emerges from the sonic practices and performance modes instituted by enslaved and free(d) Black peoples of the colonial period in the US South and the Caribbean during their limited free time to communicate memories, feelings, and even plans for rebellion. As we will demonstrate, the free time afforded by descarga and other improvisational modes is central to Hernández’s poetics, where listening subjects are refashioned as active agents in producing artistic and social alternatives outside of subjection.

The 1981 set at Gaspar’s opens with a musical variation of “1951: Puerto Rico,” a composition that joins two previously written and published poems by Hernández: “1951: Puerto Rico” (1971) and “Me la buscaré” (1977). The ensemble includes acoustic guitars, violin, electric bass, bongos, and the güiro playing a moderate tempo three-chord progression in two variations of a Puerto Rican *seis*: a *seis de andino* during the lyrical sections and an upbeat *seis chorreao* during the descargas.¹² Sonically, Hernández is framed as a Rican *trovador*—a working-class, non-professional storyteller and musical director. However, Hernández breaks from the traditional *décima* form of the Puerto Rican *trovador* and uses Spanglish free verse to tell the story of an unnamed boy in Puerto Rico who “picks” the leftover food from his neighbors while dreaming of a better life in New York City (Hernández and Karabatsos 1982, Track A1). The Rican youth eventually moves to Chicago, where he dreams of a better life again back in Puerto Rico. In Chicago, the Rican youth is confronted by the continuity of his marginalization and fugitivity—the hunger, the racialized outcasting, the police lineups, and the unending lines at the unemployment and welfare offices. Still, Hernández assures his audience in the second bridge section that “because of you people,” both the audience at Gaspar’s and future audiences listening to the record, the Rican will endure and maintain hope (Hernández and Karabatsos 1982, Track A1). This ambiguous and capacious

“you” implies the existence of an out collective finding community with the young Rican. This community simultaneously exists within and stretches beyond national and city borders.

Together, the poems develop a critique of the “US American Dream” and the exploitative mode of power that makes the so-called dream possible for some at the direct expense of racialized, gendered, and classed *others*. Listeners of “1951: Puerto Rico” might conclude that its critique of the “US American Dream” merely amounts to a nostalgic embrace of life back in Puerto Rico. This conclusion, however, is complicated by the Rican’s nonchalant orientation toward the future in the third section’s refrain:

pero está okay
pero está okay porque uno de estos días me la buscaré
uno de estos días me la buscaré.
(Hernández and Karabatsos 1982, Track A1)

The Rican’s hope in the first section signifies a drive to find and submit to “it” (“la”), “una finca,” to call home, whereas hope for belonging in the third section is deferred. He will look for it one of these days. It is easy to interpret this as hopelessness or indifference, but the delay can alternatively be heard as a production of free time to waver and wander. The Rican does not give up on the future, he will look for it, but “it” is forever undefined and open to diversions, revisioning, and play.

After the lyrical refrain of “Me la buscaré,” Hernández yells slightly off mic: “¡Juega!” (Hernández and Karabatsos 1982, Track A1). On one level, the imperative calls on the ensemble’s improvisers—Richard Nash on violin and Dean Karabatsos and Edgardo Candelario on lead guitars—to commence the *descargas*. However, “juega” can also signify what Black Studies scholar Anthony Reed calls “free play”: the process of “free de- and re-composition” of the fragments of experience without the “requirement of fidelity to a standard outside of its context” (Reed 2021, 146). We note that Reed’s “free playing” discussion is grounded in his listening and analysis of free jazz performance. The Puerto Rican folk arrangement, instrumental *descargas*, and the poetics of Hernández in “1951: Puerto Rico” amount to a less abstract or avant-garde experience than what Reed describes. Still, in the *descargas* of Hernández and Street Sounds, an improvisational “structure” encourages playful de- and re-composition.

As an opening into free time and free play, the *descargas* in “1951: Puerto Rico” model an “agonistic and open-ended search for alternatives” for understanding the self, the other, and the “trace of the other in the self” capable of transcending static conceptualizations of identity (Reed 2021, 146). The *descargas* in “1951: Puerto Rico” can thus be understood as practices in outness that accumulate the unique individual and communal

experiences that exceed identity to collectively imagine new forms of freedom. This challenges the liberal conceptualization of freedom the Rican protagonist anticipated when migrating to the US, surfacing possibilities of Rican forms of freedom beyond the closed, binary choice of living and establishing a community here or there: Puerto Rico or the metropole.

Sociologist Ángel G. Quintero Rivera argued that *descargas* in salsa and Latin jazz are not manifestations of individuality but expressions of individuals in conjoined labor with others (1998, 337–38). As such, *descarga* demands an active and co-creative listening mode that wavers freely to observe and respond to what the other players are playing/saying. This resonates with Licia Fiol-Matta's reformulation of Freud's theorization of a psychoanalytic or "wavering" and "distracted" form of listening, where the meaning of a discourse is "conjointly constructed" by speakers and listeners (2017, 8–9). This conjointment of listeners and players in a *descarga* facilitates a break from Western modes of being and creating; the vision of art as a work or artifact brought to completion through the genius of an individual artist is replaced by a sense of art as the collaborative and open-ended labors of listening and playing. In poetry, this displacement implies a shift from the lyrical "I" to a relational "you and I" or "us." Thus, improvisation and, more broadly, creation are not expressions of a static, enclosed "self" but rather practices of making and doing where the "self" is pressed out or discharged in the embrace of "embodied, sensuous, and non-enclosed" forms of being with others (Reed 2021, 156).

The "outness" of the conjoining labor of improvisation is in the embrace of the erosion of the self (and the erosion of the symbolic rules and codes that make the self legible as a subject) to achieve "higher unities" where senses of the self and community are undone and open to revisioning (Reed 2021, 156). By embracing the Afro-Caribbean musical form of *descarga*, David Hernández and Street Sounds center the embodied feelings in ecstatic encounters between listeners-and-players as they "discharge" or empty the self in the interest of intersubjective encounters that exceed socially conditioned and linguistically coded conceptions of the subject and community authorized by dominant arrangements of power. As word dealers, they invite their audience to lose themselves in the "high" of free listening-and-playing that renders new modalities of being, doing, and feeling possible.

After the set's intermission and before performing one of his signature songs, "Chi-Town Brown," Hernández reports to the audience, "You know, I was just listening back to the tape over here, and when you buy the album, you're going to enjoy it very much" (Hernández and Karabatsos 1982, Track B4). Hernández proceeds by reflecting on the hours of rehearsal that went into the project and how they became a family after so much playing and listening. On the surface, Hernández was merely hyping the album's future release while earning a few laughs for the obvious self-advertisement.

More abstractly, we hear Hernández's deep commitment to listening and his comprehension of the reciprocal relationship between reception and production in creating poetic meanings. From this informal and impromptu aside to the audiences—the ambiguous, plural “you” who gave the Rican hope—we develop an understanding of improvisation as an ongoing accumulation of listening-and-playing that conjoins listeners-and-players in unending cycles of regeneration.

III. Bridge: “Are You There?” Telephone Poetics as Outness

Understanding poetry as “free play”—that is, as an open-ended process of de- and re-assembling the fragments of our embodied, sensorial experience that exceed static, closed forms of identity and community—demands a more detailed and complex theorization of listening. In turn, understanding listening as an active and creative mode of attention, or as an oral/aural form of reading, demands an other, or rather the “trace of the other in the self,” like the ambiguous, capacious, and plural “you” invoked in the lyrical bridge between “1951: Puerto Rico” and “Me la buscaré” (Reed 2021, 144). Hernández's out poetics implies a radically social manner of reading/listening that turns “non-poet” audiences into poets or, better yet, word dealers. Despite the communal dimension to Hernández's out poetics and the unifying ecstasy of the Street Sounds' descargas, it is worth highlighting that we, as listeners, are disconnected from the scene of this performance. We place a record on the platter of a turntable, adjust the tonearm, and let the needle drop as we sit before the speakers. Listening to a record, especially for purposes of critical analysis, can be a solitary activity reminiscent of the kind of privacy and interiority “close reading” is taught to require. Our attention is focused, close, closed, and closing in on whatever words or sounds we find significant; we are out of the present and in the recorded moment (or we try to be, as we regulate and control our attention). While the previous section embraced the unity of players and listeners in the practice of descarga, this section moves toward the disjointedness of relations and communications between the self and others and the possibilities of being out of time and space.

Hernández's commitment to listening was partially informed by a tradition shared with his mother: spontaneously composing and reciting humorous, often biting poems over the telephone. Hernández and his mother called these compositions “occasional poems” (Hernández 2000, 150). Their poems fit into the established tradition of occasional poetry insofar as each was tied to the occasion of speaking over the telephone; however, a Hernández occasional poem was not always tied to a significant or historical day or event. As another example of “free play,” the occasional/telephone poem memorialized the mother and son's everyday experiences—the sights,

sounds, and smells—through improvised poetic communication. Through their occasional/telephone poems, the everyday became an “occasion” or a juncture, conjoining everyday people and experiences. According to his remaining friends and family, Hernández never transcribed these occasional poems, forever evading the forms of consumption the publishing industry values. Nevertheless, we take the occasional/telephone poems to be foundational to his conceptualization of the word dealer: a person entangled in a network of peoples who “carr[ies] the stories of humans and beyond” through the ongoing and interactive processes of looking, smelling, tasting, touching, listening and sounding.

This Puerto Rican signifying practice of writing and reciting poems with and for an intimate other informs telephone poetics or an out (sono)poetics attuned to the symbiotic and regenerative relationship between improvised and embodied sounding and listening. Besides sonority, the “telephone” in “telephone poetics” highlights the mediating influence various technologies, ideologies, and institutions have on forms of meaning-making, communication, and relation. Telephone poetics picks up Urayoán Noel’s call to rethink poetry as revisionism and understands Pietri’s and Hernández’s poetic productions as a series of challenges to the terms of legibility circumscribing conventional modes of being, relating, and communicating (2014, xxii–iii). Telephone poetics also works for us as a bridge between Chicago and New York, between Hernández and Pietri. We could not ignore the connection between Hernández’s telephone listening and oral experiments with his mother, and Pietri’s giant collection of “telephone booth” poems. The telephone becomes a frame, a point of encounter, between these two highly intermedial Rican poets who worked tirelessly to expose and explode the technological, ideological, and institutional constraints on mediated communication.

The notion of out poetics underlying this essay is a broad one. In addition to the somewhat compartmentalized analysis, we propose an overlap between Hernández and Pietri’s poetic praxis. Telephone poetics is a creative route still grounded in outness: both Hernández and Pietri’s telephone poetics are about getting off or out of the page, the tape, and the wax and opening the senses to new modalities of being, playing, and creating with others in under-regulated and open-ended ways.

Pedro Pietri’s “telephone booth” poems were collected over three decades in an unpublished manuscript. *Out of Order* has arrived to readers as a dispersed self-published or partially anthologized assortment reiterating the poet’s and readers’ interconnected freedom of choice. It consists of nearly 3,000 short poetic texts or epigrams with a repeating title, “telephone booth,” and a random number (see Pedro Pietri n.d.). In the self-descriptive poem “telephone booth numero zero,” Pietri calls them “anti prose conversations in non alphabetic impromptu numerical free verse disorder” highlighting a method that takes advantage simultaneously of the pleasures and perhaps freedoms of

conversation but also the technological and relationship breakdowns that come with, in his case and time, public device (Pietri 2015, 97). Pietri wrote these poems without any metric or punctuation marks, and although there are consistent threads, the manuscript emphasizes chaos, saturation, and disarrangement. As the editor of the most extended selection of “telephone booths” to this day, Italian translator and scholar Mario Maffi calls this series “a firework sequence of short circuits, an incessant reversal of existential, cultural, social, and linguistic codes. A belly-up poetry, where the absurd and the grotesque celebrate their triumphs and misdirection rules rather than indirection” (Maffi in Pietri 2001, 17). Pietri’s abjection, dislocation, and reversal of standards highlight his rejection of social scripts. In a panel discussion at Rutgers University in Newark in 1980, Pietri shared an anecdote to explain his massive project: “I made a series of telephone calls in these phone booths that were out of order. One night I was very lonely, and I wanted to speak with a lot of people, and I spent like about twenty dollars in dimes, and on the last dime that I lost, I said: ‘to hell with it, I’ll speak anyway,’ and I wrote like a whole collection of poems” (RUNewark_Dana 2021).

Like in the works of Hernández, there’s a commitment to listening, although many times what Pietri is listening to is how his imagination works. He uncovers how he can transform into the other and how the other can become him. *Out of Order* elevates the art of imagined monologues directed to a fluid “you.” Insisting on speaking his piece, Pietri, like Hernández, spreads poetic insight, bizarre witticisms, humor, and social awareness in many formats. Apart from the different published fragments, Pietri constantly refreshed and revamped these poems into multimedia projects, documenting dark times in his life and New York City. Maybe two of the most recognizable iterations of the “telephone booth” poems are the poetry record *Loose Joints* and the “Condom Poems,” artisanal envelopes Pietri created during the AIDS crisis with typed poems on the outside and condoms on the inside.¹³ Never finding completeness, or more so, always open and in motion, the “telephone booth” poems were jack-of-all-trades poems in which Pietri could work through his outness.

Through his telephone poetics, Pietri asks that ambiguous and capacious interlocutor, that “you” we also find in Hernández, to suspend the logic “for the time being” and “forget about” any traditional exchange (Pietri 2001, 52). Telephone poetics as outness involves engaging in self-contradiction to dismantle utterances almost immediately after posing them. Pietri presents telephone calls that go nowhere or happen asynchronously. A commitment to the “dissolution and reconstitution of the ‘we’” is aligned with what Anthony Reed calls a Black experimental sound practice (Reed 2021, 2). Conversations are out of sync, but as a speaker, he embraces disjointedness as an inherent part of human (mis)connection. He gives testimony of it:

if I am late
for our date
do not hesitate
to talk to me
until I get there
a week later.
(Pietri 2001, 52)

In another poem, he continues a long conversation with someone “who didn’t / show up for the discussion” (Pietri 2001, 58). Misencounters are the basis of his telephone poetics. Everybody is speaking out of place and out of time. He invites readers to learn how to

drop conversations
in the middle of
a sentence to avoid
becoming influential
& maybe non-spontaneous.
(Pietri 2001, 68)

Pietri’s speaker plays and jokes with the idea that we are speculating on the other as we talk. Even when speaking out of sequence, disrupting the coherence of interaction, the other is needed as a reference and as a trigger for improvisation and descarga, as in decompressing. Anthony Reed calls this experience “voicing as othering, as gift, as what comes from the outside of being... the outside of the subject” (Reed 2021, 29). He also named it the fugitive voice. It is a voice with a phantom reach. It tends to stray and marks a “sign of alterity, of differing and transformation” (Reed 2021, 29). The interlocutor is sometimes desired in the “telephone booth” poems. The person is a friend or a lover the speaker wants to reach out to, but other times, the “you,” in its expansiveness, is somebody odious or annoying. In those cases, the speaker is urged to express his dislike:

I wish you will
call me up right now
that my phone
is disconnected
so I can have the courage
to tell you to get lost!
(Pietri 2001, 58)

Pietri's speaker is resentful of the other yet cannot avoid the jocular interaction. Almost as a manifesto, he follows the thought of a *piragüero* that, consistent with his *pregones*—his public voicing or cries—believes that

what we say
is not important
what is important
is that we say it!
(Pietri 2001, 62)

Pietri proposes an undisciplined listening and voicing practice that goes beyond the logic of coherent communication. He employs a fugitive voice that stands for what is excessive or dissonant in an intertextual performance of collectivity. His telephone poetics results from humor, “work, play, and contestation,” as Reed would put it (2021, 3, 28, 29).

Pietri's telephone poetics are speculative, out of chronology, and require that we attend to the “rhythms of attachment of community de- and re-formation” and the “dis- and re-enchantment with engaging” the other (Reed 2021, 3). Pietri's outness implies an anarchic flow that rejects the constraints of sociopolitical formations and intimate relationships. That flexibility allowed him to circulate in many poetic and artistic ecosystems and to formulate outness as a futurist practice that transgresses time and space, as we analyze below.¹⁴

IV. Time (Sound) Traveling in Pedro Pietri's “Out of Focus Nuyoricans”

As previously highlighted, Pedro Pietri's out aesthetic encompasses a range of creative practices, including textual and vocal experimental techniques. At its core, Pietri's out poetics are mobilized in radical Black poetics and sound works, where sonic codes are transgressed and the outside is claimed as a space of reorientation. To delve deeper into Pietri's work, we will explore his 1990s collaboration with photographer and conceptual artist ADÁL, titled “Out of Focus Nuyoricans.” The poem proposes tactics to escape the subjugation and demolishing drive of the US empire. It works as one of the manifestos of El Puerto Rican Embassy.¹⁵

In line with Afro-Indigenous futurist ideas and El Puerto Rican Embassy, the “Out of Focus Nuyoricans” project challenges colonial temporalities by activating refusal, reinvention, and speculative world-building spaces. Afro-Indigenous futurisms reject linear progress narratives and foreground relational, non-extractive ways of being. These futurisms refuse the settler-colonial imperative to assimilate or disappear, instead imagining alternative temporal and spatial orders where dispossession is not the final

condition but a site of transformation. By positioning itself in obscurity and misrecognition, the poem “Out of Focus Nuyoricans” gestures toward an outness that generates new modalities of collectivity.

Our understanding of outness is deeply entangled with Afro-Caribbean musical traditions, particularly in how they operate through improvisation, call-and-response structures, descargas, and communal listening practices that resist enclosure. Afro-Caribbean musical forms cultivate sonic fugitivity. In his invocations of salsa, bomba, and the experimental sonic textures of the city, Pietri suggests that music functions as a mechanism for transgressing time and space. Improvisation in poetry and music is a practice of adaptation and survival where dispossessed people find ways to reassemble life in the wake of violent disruption. The quotidian soundings of Nuyorican life, composed of street performances, jam sessions, and the sonic environment of the barrios, become forms of counter-cartography, mapping routes of affiliation that elude colonial legibility. The Out of Focus Nuyoricans unsettle fixed identities, embracing distortion, blur, and rhythmic deviation as self-determination strategies. Out poetics attune to collective possibility frequencies outside the state’s gaze.

Pietri’s 1996 poem paints a sounding portrait of the Nuyorican ontology as perpetually out of focus. He posits that this identity emerges from colonial impositions and cultural and linguistic hybridization. It is an identity fraught with opacity, always in motion, and forever ambiguous. Complementing ADÁL’s blurry photographic series “Out of Focus Nuyoricans,” Pietri’s poem elucidates how Nuyoricans are routed in New York while maintaining a connection to their Caribbean archipelago origins. Using sounds, rhythms, rhymes, idioms, and artifacts, they consistently listen to and rebuild variations of their native culture.

Drawing from sound theorist Brandon LaBelle, we contend that Pietri’s textual collaboration with ADÁL “unsettle[s] and exceed[s] arenas of visibility by relating us to the unseen, the non-represented or the not-yet-apparent.” Pietri plays with “the flow and force of particular tonalities and musics, silences and noises [that] transgress certain partitions or borders, expanding the agentive possibilities of the uncounted and the underheard” (LaBelle 2018, 2). In “Out of Focus Nuyoricans,” Pietri employs a stream-of-consciousness technique that resists a palatable reading or listening experience, echoing a discordant jazz tune. His cascade-like prose and trance-inducing performance style were filled with echoes of multiple voices, sound bites, non-sequiturs, and layered analogies. Pietri created a textual descarga—an overflow of thought and rhythmic complexity where different cadences coexist. Pietri’s approach embraces detritus rather than coherence, allowing words to spill over in a flow, much like the pulse of an experimental drum sequence. This cacophony, reminiscent of a marijuana-induced haze, reflects the poet’s role as

a word dealer, where language, like smoke, flows unpredictably, refusing fixed meaning and instead embodying a raw expression of Nuyorican existence.

In “Out of Focus Nuyoricans,” Pietri connects the state of being out of focus with the 100-year history of US colonialism in Puerto Rico. He contends that identifying as Nuyorican is a product of dislocation, signifying membership in a systematically oppressed and dispossessed “tribe,” akin to an “endangered species.” The following excerpt exemplifies these notions:

Congratulations! You’ve been out of focus for one hundred years. To not be figured out and left alone to concentrate on how to keep yourself off the endangered species list on the menu of American history... Manic Nuyorican mental dishwashers want to be free after working hours only because the rent has to be paid and the car needs a new transmission and the children need high tech sneakers on the latest cyber layaway conspiracy plan of Ms Uncle Sam who has no tolerance for out of focus immigrants. (ADÁL and Pietri 2004)

Pietri highlights the fusion, losses, and dispersals resulting from migration, as implied by the noun “Nuyorican,” a term that signals a fractured existence. His language mirrors the often-disorienting reality of diasporic life, where a constant negotiation between cultures, histories, sounds, and geographies shapes embodiments. Through this linguistic fragmentation, Pietri reveals how the collective identity of Nuyoricans is forged through cultural fusion and cycles of poverty, inadequate housing, and systemic neglect. The poem resists coherence like Nuyorican identity resists fixed categorization, instead embracing contradiction and an ever-shifting sense of belonging.

“Out of Focus Nuyoricans” by ADÁL addresses various projects belonging to El Puerto Rican Embassy. One of these projects, “Blueprints for the Nation,” involves digitally manipulating NASA’s iconic 1969 moon landing photographs to distort history. ADÁL’s artwork documents an apocryphal mission by Rican Coconautas six years before the moon landing. The altered photographs feature the flag of Puerto Rico instead of the US flag, provoking viewers to question who benefits from space exploration and why marginalized communities on Earth are not receiving the resources invested in space travel. Through the Coconautas’ mission, ADÁL highlights that the US has exploited Puerto Rico as a satellite, much like the moon. Pietri similarly espouses that Puerto Rico is a site of innovation subjugated by US colonial forces.¹⁶

In “Out of Focus Nuyoricans,” Pietri delves into the world of sci-fi poetics through his reference to ADÁL’s Coconautas. Pietri explores the process of Rican transculturation, involving traveling back and forth through time. In his poem, Pietri depicts Nuyoricans as “astronauts who conversed with

coconuts about legendary progressive mermaids who served rice and beans to heads of states for them to be original with their musical instruments,” a portrayal beyond outer space exploration that enters the realms of mythology (ADÁL and Pietri 2004). As Pietri sees them, the Coconautas are mental travelers who are not bound by the constraints of physical travel. Pietri states, “You don’t need exact fare to go anywhere in this ever so green island territory of the authentic definition of planet paradise and eternal life” (ADÁL and Pietri 2004). In Pietri’s view, the island territory is a flexible space that the Coconautas visit at will, leaping from one historical period to another.



Coconauts in Space [Official Space Team of El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico]

The Coconautas engage with alternative temporalities and intimacies at the heart of Black and Indigenous sound, positioning their work within a lineage of sonic experimentation that resists colonial and capitalist structures. Like Hernández, Pietri’s work amplifies listening and bodily engagement forms that, as Reed suggests, “index some other kind of thought” (2021, 22), mapping out a space of counter-formation. Throughout the poem, Pietri’s invocation of Afro-Caribbean musical genres, such as mambo and salsa, signals the embodied histories of Black and Indigenous diasporas, where rhythm and improvisation serve as a form of resistance and remembrance. For instance, in the poem, the coconautas’s conversation opens the imaginative doors for mermaids who foster and feed “the Hunts Point Music Palace Saturday night scene of entire families enjoying their out of focus view of New York City secret insane asylums” (ADÁL and Pietri 2004). Still, this blurriness may serve as a momentary consciousness of their place and significance within the metropolis. This salsa venue is a refuge and safe space for Rican dancers and musicians, providing solace from racism, police brutality, and government-induced displacement. This reference to the Boogie Down Bronx’s social dances of the latter half of the twentieth century gestures toward how queer and trans Rican and Black communities have historically mobilized sound and performance to create alternative spaces of belonging. Pietri’s poetry resists linear political narratives through these sonic and

performative allusions, embracing a fluid temporality. His engagement with sound is a reconfiguration of how diasporic subjects experience and archive history through polyrhythmic beats, fragmented speech and psyche, and an insistence on noise as both disruption and meaning making.

Scholar Frances R. Aparicio argues that the presence of salsa in Nuyorican poetry challenges the definition of literature as an elitist Western paradigm of cult expression, recognizing the crucial role that “native knowledges” and “knowledges of struggles” play on the outskirts of erudite culture (Aparicio 1990, 46). Pietri’s poem and the larger *Out of Focus* project employ these musical intertexts and subtexts, suggesting that listening to music and dancing can provide a means of acquiring knowledge about the barrios of New York and the world.

Aparicio mentions the forms of orality that Nuyorican poetry and salsa music draw on: the everyday speech and musical expressions of working-class communities and Black people in various parts of the world. Nuyorican poetry and salsa

are defined by the urban conditions from which they arise, sharing a violent, raw language. In poetry, this translates into a refusal to follow the lyrical modes of literature; in salsa, the violence and diction of the lyrics, coupled with the harsh sounds of the brass section, challenge the lyrical style of traditional boleros. Both salsa and Nuyorican poetry derive from syncretic forms of orality: the everyday speech and musical expressions of working-class communities. (Aparicio 1990, 44)

This fusion of cultural elements creates a hybrid expression that reflects different Black communities’ historical legacies and ongoing experiences.

The poem extols Nuyorican culture as a “Bomba y Plena Garden of Tropical Vibration directing the traffic of miracles,” favoring rebellious dancing and the appreciation of Caribbean ecologies (ADÁL and Pietri 2004). The poem also looks at a “Puerto Rican Navy” who now “Salsa in submarines in the ocean who discovered the palm trees that discovered the coconuts that heard the poet proclaim, “This is la isla el Encanto!”” (ADÁL and Pietri 2004). Subverting war drills, the Navy becomes a musical force that boycotts “death and goes dancing instead of conspiring to rule the world and shut down botanicas” (ADÁL and Pietri 2004). Pietri thus creates a counternarrative in which the enchantment of Afro-Caribbean music and spiritual practices supplants military destruction.

Pietri offers an incisive perspective on the poem’s deep temporal and geographic entanglements with Rican and Caribbean cultures, foregrounding how their rhythms move through and shape diasporic bodies. He positions the *areítos*—the ritualized musical and performative ceremonies of the Tainos—not as relics of a vanished past but as pulsating forces within contemporary Nuyorican cultural expression. In various texts emerging from El Puerto Rican

Embassy, Pietri refuses the colonial narrative of Taino extinction, insisting on their persistence in the diaspora's sonic, poetic, and kinetic practices. His line, "and you danced all night and drank and made a toast to your favorite Indian ghost," represents an invocation rather than an elegy, framing Taino's presence as spectral, vital, haunting, and generative (ADÁL and Pietri 2004).

Historian Sebastián Robiou Lamarche underscores the significance of Taino areítos, particularly their cyclical and non-linear conception of time. These communal performances that integrated song, storytelling, movement, and intoxication recounted the past and folded myth and reality into a living temporality (Robiou Lamarche 2019, 103–22). In their disjunctive time voyages, the Coconautas extend this lineage, inhabiting and translating the areíto into a new diasporic performance space shaped by salsa's syncretic possibilities. Much like the areíto, the Nuyorican dance floor becomes a space of collective embodiment, where histories are remembered, re-assembled, and re-imagined.

As Frances Aparicio notes, salsa musicians, composers, and vocalists are cultural historians, their music serving as an affective force for Caribbean communities in the US (Aparicio 1990, 48). Pietri expands this vision, proposing that Nuyorican poets and salseros function as healers, akin to the Taino *behiques*, that engage with music and performance as social and spiritual restoration forms. In this framing, poetry, visual arts, and performance constitute an anti-colonial poetics of outness that fractures linear time and embraces transhistorical continuity.

Pietri's syncretic analysis can also be understood through the lens of the Lakota Ghost Dance, a ritual that envisioned the reconstitution of kinship networks severed by colonial violence. Historian Nick Estes, a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, describes the Ghost Dance as an explicitly anti-colonial movement, a collective performance of refusal and world-making. Like the areítos of the Tainos, Ghost Dance ceremonies enabled participants to enter visionary states, reaching across temporal divides to commune with ancestors and glimpse futures beyond the logic of settler colonialism. They were insurgent rehearsals for another world where colonial rule was not simply resisted but rendered obsolete (Estes 2019, 124).

Like the areíto and the Coconauta's rhythmic experiments, the Ghost Dance enacted a poetics of futurity in which time was unsettled, folded, and ruptured to create new conditions of being in movement and collectivity. Participants in the Ghost Dance were transported to a world where the social structures of the colonial present no longer held. They projected a utopian horizon where the dead and the living coexisted in an unbroken continuum. In this sense, it offers an embodied theory of time in which the future is both a return and a radical departure. Upon awakening, dancers were thrust back into the brutalities of settler rule. Yet, the memory of those visions, the knowledge that life need not always be this way, sustained the possibility of its unraveling.

Pietri's engagement with collective dance gestures toward a similar out-temporality, in which movement—through poetry, music, and performance—disrupts colonial linearity and reorients diasporic bodies toward alternative modes of relationality. The Coconautas, like the dancers of the Ghost Dance and the areíto, perform a fugitive choreography that collapses the divide between history and possibility. They traverse diasporic and Indigenous pasts and the speculative spaces of what could come next in their time voyages.

As a group of dancers, Pietri and ADÁL's Coconautas engage rhythm, performance, and movement as forms of anti-colonial resistance and as gestures that unsettle fixed notions of political agency and liberation. Their embodied performances generate alternative worlds, not as endpoints but as fugitive spatialities that evade capture within liberal frameworks of freedom. Pietri envisions the future of the Coconautas not in spaces of legibility or institutional recognition but in "dark alleys outside nightclubs" and on "Panic Planets" (ADÁL and Pietri 2004). These sites signal estrangement and possibility. Here, dancing also means temporal and psychic dislocation, a practice that sidesteps the dialectic of oppression and liberation. These journeys into the mind do not resolve into a singular notion of freedom but gesture toward out spatialities where colonialism's reach is neither totalizing nor absolute. In this sense, Pietri's vision of corporeal and conceptual tropical movement suggests that outness lies in an improvisational refusal to be fully contained within colonial terms.

V. Outro: "We Out"

Hernández and Pietri rejected imperialism, state surveillance, imperial economic interests, and consumerism in their work. Instead, they advocated for outness, which they argued was preferable to the subjugation of attempting to conform to whiteness and the white-led publishing industries. These two Rican poets celebrated the profound emotional, physical, and spiritual impact of the sounds created by Afro-Ricans in Chicago and New York. Drawing on the fugitive voices and bodies in Afro-Caribbean music gatherings, Hernández and Pietri crafted a poetics that champions pleasure and the Afro-Indigenous sounds that enable time travel and new ways of perceiving the world. The Afro-Caribbean practice of *descarga* represents a break from Western modes of music-making, facilitating open-ended conversations among the musicians, between *el conjunto* and the audience, and merging seemingly distinct musical forms and traditions. The outness of *descarga* is not the expression of a self but rather expressions of reciprocal relations and sensually attuned bodies.

In the 1981 performance of "1951: Puerto Rico," Hernández cautiously approached the Rican desire for a better life here or there, delinking the future from defined and regulated spaces like the imperial nation-state or the

colony. Instead of a place or location, a plural and capacious “you” sustained the Rican protagonist’s hopes, dreams, and imaginings. In performance, this relational orientation towards hope and futurity is enacted through the open-ended, non-teleological practice of *descarga*. *Descarga* breaks down static and overregulated conceptions of the self, community, and the “work” of art. In *descarga*, the “work” of art is the accumulation of ongoing efforts—listening, playing, and rehearsing—that conjoin player-listeners and their different manners of being, making, and doing. Through improvised modes of communication, Hernández and Street Sounds recast listening subjects as active agents in producing artistic and social alternatives.

The poetics of Pietri and Hernández are attuned to the symbiotic relationship between embodied sounding and listening and find a point of encounter in the telephone. The coexistence of multiple media in the poetry of Hernández and Pietri works to expose and undermine the economic, technological, ideological, and institutional constraints on mediated communication. Hernández’s tradition of spontaneously writing telephone poems with his mother became an informal and collaborative form for poeticizing and memorializing his everyday experiences, capable of evading the valued forms of capitalist production and consumption in publishing. Pietri’s “telephone booth” poems embody our formulation of telephone poetics by refusing coherence and standardization in poetry and communication, instead embracing chaos, disarrangement, and (mis)encounters. Through his work, Pietri demonstrates a willingness to dismantle utterances and conversations to capture the inherent disjointness of human communication. Ultimately, Pietri’s telephone poetics function as a practice of multivocality and overlapping sound and meaning creation in the face of technological and societal limitations.

Lastly, in “Out of Focus Nuyoricans,” Pietri advocates for critical poetics of futurity. He contends that the Coconautas are challenging the prevailing conditions of exclusion, neglect, and invisibility resulting from colonialism. Pietri believes Coconautas reflect on their universal rhythms, particularly those linked to Afro-indigeneity in interplanetary spaces. His poem portrays Afro-Caribbean music to time travel and envisions Puerto Ricans as musical creators and social dancers capable of inventing transcendent cultural environments that resist the empire-colony binary and the propositions of Western progress.

Hernández’s imperative, “¡Juega!” serves as a rallying cry for players and listeners to escape that binary and join *el conjunto* as word dealers. By embracing play and improvisation, Hernández and Pietri released their fugitive voices, celebrated their bodies’ creative potential without excessive regulation or scrutiny, and empowered others to do the same. As traffickers, they remained in constant motion, equipped as community poets, ready to go wherever needed. Word dealing, to us, signifies a way of existence and creation in outness, taking place in the streets, parks, and alleys in

collaboration with others. It involves remaining on the move and attuned to the physical and psychological needs of those who will listen. Once the audience is captivated, they will return time and again as poems come alive and resonate with different readers and listeners.

These dealt words, constantly in flux and fading in and out of existence, can be heard, seized, and reimagined by future word dealers. Chicago Ricans like artist-educator Edmee Cappas-Acosta and muralist John Vergara exemplify this practice of ongoing revisioning, incorporating lines from Hernández's poem "Why I Deal Words" into the "Legends" (2018) mural at West Pierce and St. Louis Avenues (**Figure 1**). The mural's editorialization of the poem offers a glimpse into Hernández's socially engaged poetic style while also establishing a connection to the initially planned "Word Dealers" mural, which would have united Pietri and Hernández with feminist Rican poet Julia de Burgos and Chicago's Salima Rivera. Several obstacles hindered the "Word Dealers" project: limited funding (a perennial struggle for public art) and the fact that Gamaliel Ramirez—the mural's lead artist, Hernández's friend, and Vergara's mentor—resided in Puerto Rico, not Chicago. Despite the geographic distance, Ramirez, Cappas-Costa, local artists, and community members worked tirelessly to secure permits and funding. However, in May of 2018, in the wake of Hurricane María, Ramirez was unable to access necessary health care for ongoing health conditions and passed away. The "Legends" wall, which features portraits of Hernández, Rivera, Burgos, and Ramirez, represents how Hernández and Pietri's word dealing practice lives on in our imaginations, inspiring a continuous flow of out poetics, community engagement, and cultural evolution for future generations of Rican poets and artists.



Figure 1: "Legends" mural wall. Reproduced with permission from the lead artist, John Vergara. Assistant artists were Alisa M. Scott, Patricia Perez, John Pitman, and Jelani Davis.

NOTES

¹We use *Rican*—as opposed to *Puerto Rican*, *Diasporican*, or *Boricua*—to refer generally to Puerto Ricans on the archipelago and in the diaspora. We find that the term is sufficiently open to both the commonalities and the critical differences among Ricans. This choice also situates our readings of Hernández and Pietri beside Sandra Ruiz’s inquiry into Rican subjectivity in *Ricanness*. Understanding Ricanness as a continual performance of endurance against a “looping colonialism,” as an expression of the “duality between excess time and no time,” we similarly aspire towards a way of “reading with and through unwantedness” (or through and with outness) that leaves futures open (Ruiz 2019, 25).

²Our counterpoint interest in merging the sections on Hernández and Pietri led us to conceptualize the middle section as a bridge for listening, connecting the gap between the two parts, and providing musical contrast and variation in dynamics, texture, and rhythm. The bridge directly links Hernández and Pietri’s viewpoints through a particular exercise of outness: the telephone poem. Hernández and his mother shared a practice of spontaneously “writing” and reciting humorous and often insulting poems back and forth over the telephone. Meanwhile, Pietri used the “telephone booth” poems to explore writing and performance from the 1970s until his death, engaging in short speculative conversations with members of his cultural circle and beyond. Both techniques manifested the writers’ conception of a decentered subjectivity and their intention of positioning themselves fluidly outside.

³Eduardo Figueroa Condes in discussion with authors, February 13, 2023.

⁴Following Baraka’s and Reed’s exploration of outness through jazz aesthetics, we think through the homonymous albums by jazz musician Eric Dolphy, who created a trilogy centered on outness. “Out” in Dolphy’s context refers to the use of dissonance, unconventional harmony, and chord progressions in his compositions and improvisations. Dolphy’s approach involved all musicians in the ensemble freely improvising and responding to one another without harmonic or rhythmic constraints. This method created a sense of tension and unpredictability in his performances further emphasizing the “out” aesthetic.

⁵Walt Whitman, often regarded as “the father of free verse,” defied the aristocratic sensibilities of his time by documenting the everyday lives and feelings of the US working class. Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén challenged elitist and Eurocentric literary standards by incorporating Afro-Cuban rhythms and themes in works like *Motivos de son* (1930). Julia de Burgos, a proto-feminist Puerto Rican poet, critiqued colonial and patriarchal structures and violence, embodying hope and the spirit of rebellion in her work. Chilean physicist and poet Nicanor Parra, critiquing state censorship and the co-option of literature and other modes of expression, redefined himself as an “antipoet” and his poems as “antipoems,” deploying direct and piercing language to both politically and sensorially affect—or incite—readers. Sandra María Esteves, a Nuyorican poet, activist, and visual artist, seamlessly fuses poetry, mark-making, music, and coalition building in her highly intermedial and recuperative poetry and performance.

⁶In the case of Pietri, he created The Latin Insomniacs M.C.W.C. (Motorcycle Club Without Motorcycles) along with his (real) brother, Dr. Willie Pietri, and his (street) brother, Jesús “Papoletto” Meléndez. With the Latin Insomniacs, Pietri created a self-sustainable publishing house, a theater and film writing crew, and a playwriting collective during the 70s and early 80s that pushed artistic boundaries and encouraged radical experimental directions. In the 90s, in collaboration with ADÁL and María Teresa “Mariposa” Hernández, he co-founded the mobile platform and space of resistance El Puerto Rican Embassy. The Embassy was a radical speculative project connecting poetry, soundworks, visual arts, web archives, and decolonial aesthetics. The conceptual and sometimes physical Embassy encouraged cultural, thus imaginative self-determination. These two collectives show Pietri and his collaborators valuing creative freedom, literal word dealing, anarchic aesthetics, and rejecting mainstream cultural norms.

⁷Like Pietri, Hernández emphasized personal expression, authenticity, and a DIY approach to creativity. As a community poet, communications director for La Gente Organization, and co-founder of El Taller Workshop, Hernández sought to engage Chicago Rican communities with and through the arts. He and his band Street Sounds also reached non-traditional audiences by performing and organizing readings and jams/descargas at bars and nocturne venues.

⁸We are interested in highlighting how fugitivity disrupts the systems of power and control that have been used to subjugate Black people. By choosing to run away, hide, or rebel against these systems, Black people have been able to create spaces of freedom and autonomy, even if only temporarily. Fugitivity is also a way to assert one’s humanity and dignity in the face of dehumanization and degradation. By refusing to be captured or controlled, Black people have reclaimed agency and power over their own lives and bodies.

⁹New Criticism is a formalist literary movement that was dominant from the 1930s through the 1960s and remains highly influential today. The New Critics emphasized close reading practices and treated literary texts as autonomous objects, often disregarding historical, material, and cultural contexts of a text’s production, distribution, and reception. Key figures associated with the school of New Criticism include T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and John Crowe Ransom.

¹⁰Pietri and Hernández highlighted consistently how Puerto Rican culture is illegible to US Americans. Through complementing poetics, Pietri and Hernández invite readers, watchers, and audiences to instrumentalize outness. Bringing the works of two poets who resisted transparency, translation, and incorporation into focus puts us in a difficult position. However, we maintain that engaging with the outness of each is generative towards new modes of being from the margins of society.

¹¹Feminist cultural critic and theorist bell hooks thinks of marginality as a site that offers much more than deprivation. Interpolating hooks’s Black feminist-centered notion of the margins, we argue that they operate in a space of radical openness. This site is a “central location for producing a counter-hegemonic discourse not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (hooks 1990, 149–50). As hooks alludes, Pietri and Hernández operated from this marginality because it nourished their capacity for resistance.

¹² The Puerto Rican seis has multiple regional variations, and often serves as the instrumental accompaniment to the lyrical/poetic form of the *décima* performed by working class trovadores.

¹³ To expand on the “Condom Poems,” see the introduction and the Afterword of Pedro Pietri’s *Condom Poems 4 Sale One Size Fits All* (2019), edited by Rojo Robles.

¹⁴ It is important to reiterate that Pietri took a divergent route in publishing. In addition to navigating a neglectful industry vis-à-vis poetry and Puerto Rican writers, he preferred autonomy and editing control (or maybe the absence of editing). He embodied diffusion and experimentation over polished subjection. Pietri privileged his freedom of movement and undetained expression over belonging even within Puerto Rican cultural groups.

¹⁵ El Puerto Rican Embassy is a mobile platform, pop-up, and digital space for Puerto Rican artists that emerged as a concept in the 1970s in the Lower East Side of Manhattan but was fully developed by ADÁL and Pietri in the 1990s. The name “El Embassy” identifies a collective of Nuyorican artists that encourages cultural and imaginative self-determination and responds to the lack of diplomatic and cultural politics organized around the needs and voices of the diaspora, which is due to the historical denial of Puerto Rico’s self-sufficient and autonomous political identity by Spain and the US. El Puerto Rican Embassy invites audiences, readers, and travelers to reflect on the colonial condition and its philosophical and aesthetic implications for Puerto Ricans in the US. It serves as a space for Puerto Rican artists to gather their thoughts and works, creating an imaginative, self-governing space for creative minds.

¹⁶ ADÁL evokes the arbitrariness of colonialism and the fraudulent victories, rhetoric, and mediations that come with it. He re-stages a celebrated moment in technological innovation and US nationalism. He imagines what would have happened if the colonized Rican astronauts had been the first to reach the moon. The change of flag and actors requires audiences to think about the moon landing from the perspective of colonialism. The moon becomes another territory to claim. The colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico is underneath the photo series. Is the moon landing the expansion of US colonialism to outer space? What happens if the colonized is the one claiming space? Are the Coconautas decolonial heroes? Are they giving consent to the US empire? Once assimilated, does the colonized become an imperialist? The series uses an iconic moment that US mainstream media and politicians represent and normalize as a human victory. See El Puerto Rican Embassy website to expand on the various interconnected projects of the collective.

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