

# Mónica de la Torre on “Variation I”

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When selecting work for the anthology *Women in Concrete Poetry, 1959–1979*, I was instantly drawn to the “Leonorana” series by the Porto-born poet, artist, and scholar Ana Hatherly (1929–2015). I couldn’t believe I didn’t know these works existed up until this point. Had Hatherly received the same attention as other concrete poets writing in the Portuguese language (specifically the Brazilian Noigandres group, Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari), my initial understanding of the movement would have been fuller, more expansive. Hatherly’s poems seemed to contain all the answers to my queries about the possibilities of generating constructivist writing also invested in expression, of incorporating the findings of the concrete program while avoiding the technoutopian militancy displayed in the early writings of the Noigandres group. (Some of their views on technology remind me of early discourse around the doom of all things analogue with the advent of the Internet.)

Hatherly’s oeuvre fervently dismantles false dichotomies. For her, a commitment to innovation does not shun tradition, but rather reads it anew, and concrete and conceptual modes of writing do not preclude lyricism. All elements coexist in elegantly analytical, beautifully complex arrangements that are as open-ended as they are rigorous in their exploration of process. They enact a radical politics through their ambiguity, kineticism, and refusal to accept an official view of literary history that failed to acknowledge the experimentation and slipperiness at the heart of Medieval and Baroque writing which engaged visuality, word play, and combinatorial procedures. (Think of rebuses, anagrams, labyrinths.)

Hatherly was a member of Portugal’s PO.EX group of writers and artists in the 1960s, during Salazar’s Estado Novo, and of their relationship to history she writes, “Portuguese experimentalists had to specify their antifascist position by practicing a poetics of denial of a decaying past defended by the system,” and instead they found themselves advocating for an “experimental tradition.” If to some this might sound like an oxymoron, it was a central tenet of the PO.EX movement—they saw themselves as continuing a legacy which the state insisted on denying.

Unfortunately, here I can only share the first poem in the “Leonorana” series of thirty-one variations. Its point of departure is the opening of a rondel by Renaissance poet Luís de Camões, the most celebrated figure in the Portuguese literary pantheon, in part for having produced the first epic in the then emergent Portuguese language, *Os Lusíadas* (1572). How fitting that poetry by a canonical figure credited with fixing the language be set in motion in a series that goes from lush neo-baroque lines to pattern poetry, from a column of neologisms

to a blank page (“absolute distancing from the image”), from an ideogram to starlike clusters of letters on the page, and from gorgeous tapestries of hardly legible handwritten lines to a final double acrostic.

I hope to be able to translate the entire series (we only chose eleven variations for the anthology), in part because I love the way the poems rescue Leonor from the objectifying male gaze in a pastoral poem, but also because having multiple poems in which recurrent elements are reconfigured allows me enough room within the series to compensate for translation’s inevitable compromises. Take, for example, the “verdura” rhyming with “segura” in the Camões, which in the translations I’ve already written appears as *verdure*, *greenery*, and *lushness* depending on what the variation in question most needs. Hatherly does this herself throughout when she uses a range of synonyms, and interestingly also thought of her reinterpretation of traditional texts as an act of translation that has the effect of altering the original. In “Leonorana,” Leonor is also Ana experiencing sensation from within as her body moves through the greenery which is also the lushness of the text. Translation, another “system of communicating vessels,” allows me a similar experience, while ensuring the passage “of the lovely liquid from one vessel to another.”

Read Mónica de la Torre's translation of Ana Hatherly's poem, "Variação I"

