

## History is a ruin, figures 1-8

1. The winter flowers are pretty great right now – violets, daphne, early narcissus (daffodil/ jonquil), japonica, witch-hazel. The white camellias are dropping to the ground, the petals browning, symbols of women's suffrage. Arrangements, bunches of flowers are mute but potent gestures, expressing desires, condolences – they implore, condole, congratulate, apologise, grieve, love. They are vectors of hope, health and forgiveness, these gifts and semantic units. At other times, in other places, they embodied definite signification – a language that might speak the same things as a Victorian fan. Who are these flowers for?

2. These flowers are a digression, an index, a tribute to Lola Montez, an infamous artiste who visited Australia during their gold rush to dance – and posed for the earliest known publicity photograph of a woman smoking. She, who often wore flowers behind her ear, had fled from Europe where her influence as mistress to King Ludwig I of Bavaria (who made her Countess of Landsfeld) evaporated in the Revolutions of 1848. The photographs that make up *An invitation to dance*, originally for a 100m-long work for an exterior wall in Melbourne's Royal Botanical Gardens in late summer 2021, bring together common florist fare with flowers and foliage from plants that have evolved to manage the extremes of Australia's climate – dry heat, wet seasons and even fire.

3. Smoking affirms the living breathing existence of the smoker, the contents of the lungs being plainly visible in front, beyond the face. Photography also describes and affirms, proving existence, vitality or self-ownership. Smoke carries energies upward, like physical prayers for deliverance in the Anthropocene – fragrant deals with the Earth, whose waters are disturbed. Visibility is the link between aesthetics and politics, that is, who is seen or heard, what is perceptible, and by extension, who is considered grievable – for all lives are not valued equally. In her published lectures, Montez began the first, entitled 'Autobiography', with a statement about what it takes to transcend ordinary female life. Interestingly, she wrote this lecture in the third person, as if knowing that fiction/fictioning was a further way to give her wild self a much-needed new reality.<sup>1</sup>

4. Reading Sylvia Federici's *Caliban and the witch: Women, the body, and primitive accumulation*, I am shown that the behaviour of women was limited – their free sexual expression, choice about when and how to have children, and social activism – as a manifestation of early (post-feudal) capitalism. In attempts to heat up economies profiteers look for free labour resources everywhere, including the human resource of women (long considered a frontier of passive, wage-less supporters and breeders). The body becomes a working body only, biopolitical controls having been exercised on women, under men, to make us all finely honed and compliant workers with maximum output per paidhead. The witch (the wise woman) was one who lived on the edge of the community, an intermediary between nature and people, an emissary of Gaia and her powers. Along with the defiant or would-be independent woman she was reframed, vilified, shamed, and burned – literally or by other means. A shameful smoke, a toxic web of controls. Destitution.

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<sup>1</sup> "A woman, like a man of true courage, instinctively prefers to face the public deeds of her life, rather than, by cowardly shifts, to skulk and hide away from her own historical presence. Perhaps the noblest courage, after all, is to dare to meet one's self - to sit down face to face with one's own life, and confront all those deeds which may have influenced the mind or manners of society, for good or evil. As applied to women ... she must have performed some deeds which have left their mark upon society, before she can come within the rule. An inane piece of human wax-work, whose life has consisted merely of powdering, drinking tea, going to the opera, flirting, and sleeping, has had no life to be taken into the count in this connexion. She may have been useful, as a pretty piece of statuary, to fill a nook in a private house, or as a pleasant piece of furniture for a drawing-room; but there are no rules of her moral and social being which can justly be applied to one whose more positive nature forces her out into the mighty field of the world, where the crowd and crush of opposing interests come together in the perpetual battle of life. ... A good tea-drinker — a merely good drawing-room flirt, would make a very sorry shift of it, I fear! She must have a due degree of the force of resistance to be able to stand in those tidal shocks of the world. Alas! for a woman whose circumstances, or whose natural propensities and powers push her forward beyond the line of the ordinary routine of female life, unless she possesses a saving amount of that force of resistance. Many a woman who has had strength to get outside of that line, has not possessed the strength to stand there; and the fatal result has been that she has been swept down into the gulf of irredeemable sin. The great misfortune was that there was too much of her to be held within the prescribed and safe limits allotted to woman; but there was not enough to enable her to stand securely beyond the shelter of conventional rules." Burr, C.C. (ed.), *Autobiography and lectures of Lola Montez*, London: James Blackwood, 1860.

5. The web is fairly played-out shorthand for spooky, but what of the magical beauty of the web, the industry and skill of the spider in feeding itself, or in making nests for its young? Elizabeth Grosz and Theodor Adorno and have both used the web as analogies for writing or theorising, for becoming, in their philosophical work. An essay, a subjective attempt, joins points together like threads spun between points on branches, leaves, buildings, whatever, and is, can only ever be, what it is on the day – we write from where we are, always. The spider's web establishes and denotes, figure a territory; and a territory is where something can be unhinged, and becoming can take place – desire's transformation and the undoing of individualism.

6. *An invitation to dance* is also the title of a work of historical fiction sensationalising Lola Montez' life. Our appetite for history is, like photography, an effect of modernity – we read a succession of facts as they occur, indeterminate artefacts, unshackled from an overarching plot or narrative structure. It is famously written that Montez appeared (August 1855 – May 1856) in the goldfields and in Melbourne performing a spider dance in which she showed she wore no underwear. I am guessing this was her version of the Tarantella – Franz Liszt, with whom she is reputed to have had an affair c.1844, wrote these dances c.1842-4. She danced faster and faster, as if shaking a spider from her skirts, running her hands up and down her legs to a musical climax when she squashed the uninvited guest with her foot. Her contention was that this act was a work of art – she was performing a different femininity – and that it was her critics themselves that were antagonistically licentious.

7. In Lola's stage-action I see anger and female rebellion. Lifting her skirts to miners was surely neither a gesture of nurture, love or kindness, nor good-natured charity for men who danced with each other on buggy-sprung floors. She burned bright I imagine to hurt their eyes, like the magnesium flash in photographers' ateliers, transgressing accepted female behaviour – not meek, passive, absorbing ills, deferring or demure. Julia Kristeva wrote in *Feminine revolt* that we rebel with our bodies, as this is often all we have at our disposal. Ours are the tactics of the tenant – and joining a theatrical troupe was like going to sea for a man. Colette wrote her way out of this, and Lola later penned *The Arts of Beauty, Or, Secrets of a Lady's Toilet: With Hints to Gentlemen on the Art of Fascinating*, as well as publishing her lectures, but ended her life doing rescue work among women, dying of syphilis in 1861, aged 40.

8. When I came to live in Melbourne I was struck by the size and beauty of the spiders that lived in and around our old house. There were huntsmen in the garage off the bluestone laneway, which was enough to mean my partner (as inky blue as a male satin bowerbird) never set foot in there, so afraid of spiders was he. Once, a golden orb spider spun a web across our front path, from one side of the narrow section to the other, between the japonica and kumquat, and over the standard roses that ran either side of the path leading to the front door and veranda. With her egg-sized, shiny, golden abdomen, this beautiful spider's hairless strength was astounding as she sat in the middle of the web she had taken the night to make. Her golden silk is 100x tougher than any synthetic fibre, so strong it could be used to make fine bulletproof clothing or miraculous sutures. But even though she is no more toxic than a bee, he insisted on spraying her with fly-spray after I (in leafy khaki green like the female bowerbird) refused to do it for him. I was revolted and unable to stop him, even offering to relocate her myself. But he was afraid she would come back and bite him, or touch him, or just uncontrollably *be* somewhere near him.

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