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UNPLUGGED “CARTES BLANCHES”

Staying Unplugged... for the Tumult of the World

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There is such a need for an aesthetics and politics of the unplugged, of letting go of the habitual forms of doing and imagining things, of disconnecting the familiar set-ups and designs of everyday life, of questioning the normal and normalities, of queering' (Steyaert, this issue). Chris' words resonate strongly with the spirit of the unplugged section, even if we haven't always stayed true to it.

Lévi-Strauss (1962) highlighted that the 'science of the concrete' (or savage mind) did not aim at useful knowledge (for impact) but more prosaically the beauty of knowing and an aesthetics of comparison. Usefulness would come later from contingency and would then command skills of bricolage and temporary arrangements for knowing. Unplugged... alternatives may be formed far from the tumult of the world.

We cling to this principle of conversation to develop our research, our articles, above all in search of legitimacy. The world, as it is becoming unlivable, is disconnecting from this endless logorrhea. Lives are more and more unlivable. Staying out of legitimate conversations and deconstructing the frames imposed on research by academic capitalism. Unplugged... alternatives may be formed in the tumult of the world.

Being in the margins does not suggest being like independent cinema: a simple instrument for the renewal of established practices. Margins cannot be only a learning ground or the site of an avant-garde that the crafty researcher would spot before his or her peers. There is an essential relationship between the center and the margins, which is about survival, about radical transformations (hooks, 1984). Unplugged... alternatives may be formed for the tumult of the world.

Words are scary. Words are at the heart of the contemporary struggle. Words are held hostage. But words are resistance. 'Carte blanche' was the very first format of the unplugged section. The last unplugged I deliver is made up of words that we sometimes deny but need to protect, in society and in this academic world that we cherish and that deserves to hear complaints from the margins (Ahmed, 2021).

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What Decolonizing Is Not

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This piece is motivated by the observation that conversations about decolonization in the academy often avoid any engagement with anti-colonial and decolonial ideas, literatures or movements. After sharing this concern on Twitter, I was contacted by colleagues asking for my views on what does or does not constitute decolonization. What follows is a collation of my responses.

Starting point

- (1) Decolonization is *necessary* because colonial, settler-colonial and postcolonial systems of exploitation, extraction and violence continue to exist and are deeply embedded within the economic, political and societal institutions we inhabit, universities included.
- (2) Decolonizing is *unsettling* because it demands that we identify ideological and material manifestations of colonialism, and support anti-colonial and decolonial movements and efforts seeking to abolish, dismantle or transform these.
- (3) Decolonizing is *difficult* because ideologies and material manifestations that enable the persistence of colonialism are normalized (made to appear natural), aggressively protected by those in power, and tied to privileges that both enrol and render us complicit in systems of exclusion, extraction, oppression, and subjugation.
- (4) Decolonizing is *empowering* because it 'evokes the ethical obligation of citizens of the world to stand in solidarity with oppressed people and the understanding that injustice in other geographies is linked to domestic oppression' (Barghouti, 2021, p. 109).

Geopolitics of ideation and action

Different geopolitical settings of colonialism and colonial violence have shaped and continue to inform anti-colonial and decolonial ideas and action. I present four main traditions below based on my reading (see Abdelnour & Abu Moghli, 2021), but there will be others. Though listed separately, they are neither disconnected nor unrelated; just as colonial

violence is enacted and maintained through global infrastructures and systems of actors, ideologies, industries and technologies, anti-colonial and decolonial movements and solidarities are necessarily global, interconnected and intersectional (Barghouti, 2021).

- (1) *Decolonizing as anti-settler colonial liberation* (Africa, Asia, and Southwest Asia). Articulated by intellectuals and movements fighting to free their people from (European) settler colonialism, military imperialism, military occupation, and apartheid. Contemporary examples include Palestinian, Sahrawi, and Kashmiri movements.
- (2) *Decolonizing as anti-racism, Black liberation and reparation* (United States and global). Articulated by Black liberation intellectuals and movements fighting for radical equality and freedom from white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and institutionalized anti-Black violence. Contemporary examples include Black Lives Matter and prison abolition movements.
- (3) *Decolonizing as anti-settler colonial, anti-genocide, anti-extractive capitalism, reparation and restitution* (Americas, Oceania, and many other sites of indigenous resistance, survival and renewal). Articulated by First Nations and indigenous intellectuals and movements fighting for liberation and reparation, defending and protecting land, culture and language from white supremacy and violence, as well as corporate-state theft and desecration of lands and resources. Contemporary examples include Land Back, indigenous rights and recognition, and anti-pipeline anti-extraction movements and action.
- (4) *Decolonizing as radical transformation of modern, post-colonial systems of power and violence that produce, valorize and platform elite 'knowledge' at the expense of subjugated peoples, cultures, ideas, theories, and epistemologies* (Americas and global). Articulated by postcolonial and decolonial intellectuals, scholars and movements to challenge systems of Anglo-Eurocentric hegemony, supremacy, and violence, with a goal to liberate, platform and achieve radical equality for colonized, marginalized, and indigenous peoples, cultures

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and knowledge. Contemporary examples include border thinking, First Nations and indigenous epistemological movements and methods.

Working definition

Decolonizing involves actions that: (1) center the epistemic privilege* and political aspirations of colonized and subjugated peoples; (2) identify, dismantle and transform colonial systems and structures that marginalize; (3) advance and achieve the goals of *liberation, repair, and radical equality*.

*In this context, *epistemic privilege* is the idea that victims of settler-colonial violence are best placed to articulate their condition, lived experiences, and paths to realizing their political and liberatory ambitions (see Abdelnour & Abu Moghli, 2021).

What metaphors are not, decolonizing is

Some of the ideas presented here were crowdsourced/vetted via Twitter:

- (1) Decolonization is *not* a metaphor: 'When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym' (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3).
- (2) Efforts to increase inclusion and representation ('centering marginal voices') are not decolonization. Decolonizing involves actions to transform knowledge production in ways that enable radical equality for marginalized ideas and peoples within the marketplace of ideas as well as associated benefits and resources. Anything short of this is not decolonizing.

- (3) Attempts to make technologies (particularly those imbued with racist logics and code) less harmful ('decolonize tech', 'decolonize AI') without disrupting the infrastructures, networks and actors (corporations, state agencies, and militaries) that produce and deploy them in ways that cause harm is whitewashing, not decolonization.
- (4) Concepts rooted in feel-good notions of development or progress ('sustainable development', 'social innovation', 'circular economy', 'green growth') that seek to reduce the harms (or so-called externalities) associated with capitalism while serving to reaffirm its centrality as the dominant economic paradigm are not decolonization. Decolonizing demands an end to the extraction-consumption-growth paradigm that for centuries has enabled Western empires, corporations, countries, and elites to enslave, exploit, destroy, pollute, and profit to the detriment of colonized peoples and the commons.
- (5) Land acknowledgements, apologies, and commemorations of settler-colonial dispossession and genocide are not decolonization. Decolonizing involves the disruption of colonial legacies through systemic transfers of political power, privilege, and control of lands and resources: Land Back, reparations, radical equality, freedom, justice, and return.

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Feminism without Feminists¹

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Given growing interest in both diversity, equity and inclusion research and intellectual activism across many disciplines of management and organization studies (MOS), you might think that the feminist frameworks and thinkers who are foundational to our thinking on these topics would be acknowledged in the writing and voluminous text produced on these very issues. Rather, what I have seen and experienced over the years is a combination of ignorance, performative referencing and willful omission. All resulting in an epistemic erasure of feminist work that is foundational to the core concepts that we claim are important and relevant in contemporary MOS scholarship. I have some theories about why we might be seeing these outcomes.

First, the training doctoral students receive in MOS has become more and more insular and less and less interdisciplinary even though many will claim interdisciplinary approaches are important and welcome in the academy. At least this is the case in the US. The strong enforcement of disciplinary boundaries, quantitative metric-driven legitimacy concerns, and relentless pressure to publish have created scholars that are too narrowly focused on publishing in literally a handful of 'top' journals in a narrow field as if their career depends on it... because it does in the current institutional environment we have created. In this grand calculus, feminist research and writing are not valuable despite the contributions it can make to conceptualizing, addressing, and solving complex socio-economic, political, and technological challenges that organizations and leaders face everyday.

Second, there is an unhealthy dose of performative citing taking place whereby individuals will pepper their texts with some well-known researcher's work who has used feminist or feminist ideas to support their own argument to claim they are familiar with a whole body of scholarship. This is feminist adjacent work that does not cite original work in the field to expand, challenge or engage with it. This is scholarly neglect and results in the continued marginalization of feminist ideas and scholarship in the MOS field despite claims from many individuals about the importance of feminist work, even in mainstream management journals.

Finally, perhaps the worst offenders are those who are familiar with feminist work in the areas in which they publish but choose

not to cite feminist scholars or scholarship. These are scholars who make no effort to acknowledge feminist work within MOS that has already made the same argument they are making or has provided scaffolding for the argument. This is intentional epistemic violence targeting the work and ideas of feminist MOS scholars by rendering them silent. It is not a form of scholarship, it is a form of hostility – harsh words to reflect upon the personal and professional reality of feminist scholars who find their work and writing ignored in academic circles and texts.

There will be no solution to these issues until there is a shared understanding among MOS scholars that this is a legitimate problem. And frankly, there is no shared understanding that this is a problem as the status quo benefits many who are in positions of power, decision-making and enjoying the status that comes with being a well-respected scholar. Nonetheless, rather than end on a dismal tone, I offer some signs of hope.

There are dedicated spaces, communities and journals that welcome feminist work. There are generous mid-career and senior feminist scholars who continue to share their wisdom, time and mentorship with emerging feminist researchers. And there are now opportunities to call out these practices and, in some cases, those who engage in them, across various platforms including social media to raise awareness, engage allies and create a more welcoming intellectual community of academics in the years to come. To this end, I end with a quote from Elora Chowdury and Liz Philipose who suggest that we must now engage in:

fostering a transnational analytic of care: one that does not play into the politics of accommodation; is not defensive, or reactionary, or silencing; and is cognizant of 'local' and 'global' processes that create condition of vulnerability for women (and men) and form the uneven and asymmetrical places in which dissident, cross-cultural friendships, alliances, and solidarity practices – particularly within the interpersonal realm – are even more urgent. (Chowdury & Philipose, 2016, p. 5)

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¹ This title is inspired by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's book, *Racism without Racists*.

'People Like You': Hidden Stories

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Mr Bow Tie

I was trembling in my office, in a former university. I was there waiting to hear he was coming into the building to give him the letter in person. Perhaps then I could have concrete evidence of his behavior. I know he will be mad. I was sweating, my heart bouncing and the fear starting to invade me. Finally, I decided not to wait for him, put the letter in the mailbox and left the building as quickly as I could.

A few months earlier, I had been assigned to co-teach with Mr. Bow Tie. He sent me a spreadsheet for the course plan. I filled in some parts. I was excited to be in that course. I had been waiting to teach that course for a year. When we met, he looked at the spreadsheet, threw it in my face and said: 'people like you'. He was annoyed because one line of the spreadsheet was out of alignment. I was paralyzed. I didn't know what to say. A few days later I consulted with the Dean, and his advice was, 'you just have to become another shark, and by the way, I won't support you going for tenure without teaching a [that] core course.' This was just the beginning. The course was taught in three sections, three times a week. As I lectured, I could see Mr. Bow Tie's eyes following me. By the second of the three sections on a given day, I knew exactly when he would get up and repeat a version of 'people like you'. It was usually when I brought up issues of poverty and what he called 'third world issues'. The narrative needed to be changed; economically poor countries needed to be portrayed as riddled with corruption; the negative effects of economic globalization were nothing, but a few independent incidents created by bad a few bad apples. His whiteness and seniority gave weight to his delivering what he thought was the truth. I calmly breathed and waited to continue with the lecture.

Toward the end of the term, he posted a damaging teaching review on the internet, pretending to be a student, containing personal information that students wouldn't know. When the official evaluations arrived, I was pleased. They were really decent, and I asked to meet so we could look at the evaluations and reflect on what worked or not and implement relevant changes for the following year. When we met in his office, he announced to me with some pleasure in his eyes that I was not going to teach

that course anymore and that he was very well aware that I needed that course for tenure. My tears came down, and he laughed. After a pause, he added, 'I am also the associate Dean', just in case, presumably, I wanted to appeal the decision.

If you are a woman, non-white and have a different point of view, the chances are that you will hear openly or thinly veiled some version of 'people like you...' during your academic life. This hangs over your head, providing a rationale for exclusion. In the weeks to follow, Mr. Bow Tie spread a narrative that people like me were not team players. He never answered my letter.

Months later, another associate dean loudly declared in a faculty council 'we want to hire people like us'. About a week later, an Asian female junior faculty came to my office. The same person who announced the preference for hiring people like him had been annoyed with her because she added one point to one of the slides he provided to her for class teaching. I learned that he gave her a set of slides for each class with the implicit expectation that she would regurgitate them exactly. I was surprised when she said to me that she was grateful to him and 'admitted' that she should not have changed the slide. I tried to encourage her to do so by saying, 'I believe that the students would benefit if you bring your own experiences into the classroom. It makes theories real.' She didn't seem convinced. I said to myself, 'yeah, minority women already face all kind of challenges and pressures to conform, and they conform, and I understand it.'

Unfortunately, the attempt to mold and shape process in this way isn't confined to the political right in the academic community. As Di Angelo points out in *White Fragility*, it happens among white progressives as well. There is an expectation as well of how one ought to behave or think. There is a standard of 'normality' or a mold framed by white progressives, sometimes, ironically, in their attempts to be anti-racist. For a non-white woman, the impacts are similar. When one does not fulfill the model constructed for them, one is discarded and excluded as a non-team player. In this case, no one tells you, but you know it. It is all beneath the surface. No efforts are there to really hear different opinions; the label is already there. In the middle of it all, we praise diversity.

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The politics of silencing diverse voices: The emotional burden

The emotional consequences are a heavy tax for minority faculty members. The feeling of loneliness, marginalization, unfitness, and outsider status is real. Over time, one's voice starts getting weaker. One's confidence decreases as you have an accent and a colleague shouts, 'I don't understand what you are saying', or four or five white males start monopolizing the meeting and saying to each other 'you know me, we have talked about this, you know what I think about X', which often signals that the conversation has already happened and one has to play catch-up. So even if you are (were?) cheerful and vivacious, you might end up joining the many minority women and men who decide early on to participate minimally to get along in those meetings as a way of protecting themselves. It seems that either one becomes invisible or one is made invisible. It is a kind of implicit social punishment. The more one cares, the more one can get hurt. These are some of the realities that are at the roots of our challenges in decolonizing curriculum. The failure to recognize and value diversity in universities is not only hurting Indigenous and minority women but the entire mission of the university

Spaces of collective resistance

Over 20 years, I have benefitted from the solidarity of progressive and activist women on campus. It has been a joy and work of love to be part of the foundations and evolution of solidarity women's organizations. As the 'usual suspects', these women and their organizations participate actively in equity and diversity committees and meetings. These meetings and committees seem to go nowhere as the rules of the game are shaped by the administration, and the sense of just being 'managed' and being played out increases at the end of each meeting. Nevertheless, these activist women keep providing feedback and putting forward proposals to remind the administration of their obligation to provide a welcoming environment for diversity every day.

An Open Forum Against Racism (OFAR) coalition emerged as a response to explicit and coded acts of white supremacy in a university setting in 2017. For some of us, this coalition constitutes a space of agency and resistance toward institutional attempts to shape our individual and collective identities. As an umbrella, OFAR allows us the possibility of mobilizing diverse relevant organizations (unions, students, instructors and staff, organizations and associations) and resources.

OFAR has also been a space of learning to work with each other; recognizing that we are not a homogenous group, and we are ready to discover and encourage different patterns of cooperation and participation.

Queering Salzburg, Perhaps?

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There is such a need for an aesthetics and politics of the unplugged, of letting go of the habitual forms of doing and imagining things, of dis-connecting the familiar set-ups and designs of everyday life, of questioning the normal and normalities, of queering.

Salzburg has joined the bandwagon of cities that promote themselves as queer-friendly, illustrated by a gay guide 'for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex (LGBTQI)-community' that I regularly get in my mail. Everything for tourism, even if the queer community visits Salzburg anyhow during its yearly music, opera and theatre festival, the *Salzburger Festspiele*.

This year I had a chance to take part, for the first time, in three operas with a female story in focus: 'Aida', Pamina in the 'Magic flute' and 'Katja Kabanova'. Respectively in the three main festival locations: *Das grosse Festspielhaus*, *das Haus für Mozart* and *die Felsenreitschule*, the former summer riding school often used for more experimental adaptations. Three languages also – Italian, even if Aida plays in Africa, 'das Singspiel' in German to combine dialogue with singing in an often-comical form, and Czech, for Janacek to develop an own musical language and style. Three creation periods: 1870/1871 when Aida premièred in Cairo just after the Suez Canal had opened (to give passage to colonialists); 1791, the year Mozart would die and 1921, a post-World War I time and a year after the Salzburg festival was created, even if Janacek would be first programmed in the 1990s by the then Intendant Gerard Mortier, something which was then received as a provocation.

Most importantly, these three operas are produced by three feminist-queer inspired teams at work while a war rages through Europe and the world. Verdi's Aida brings us to the war between the domineering Egyptians and the underdog Ethiopian people – easily to be projected on the current war. Even if the link to nowadays situation is so obvious, staging Aida is no sinecure as historically around it not only claims of racism and fascism linger but it also formed Said's (1979) inspiration for his concept of 'orientalism'. The direction was in the hands of the visual artist and filmmaker Shirin

Neshat, herself like Aida living in exile from Iran. Neshat's visual world is one which is ritualist and symbolic, giving the staging a slow and static aura that underlines the power of the military and religious elite. Simultaneously, Neshat tells a parallel story with her poetic images that show the (old) faces of men and women that are the losers in wars and the with-ink overwritten feet of the dead which – who else? – the women must bury. Through this doubling of staging/imagining, Neshat makes us experience the opposites in which we live, such as black/white, masculine/feminine, violent/mystical, visible/veiled, and so on. Against the world of war, brutality and violence which is advocated by the belligerent religious authorities, there is the love rivalry between the Ethiopian Aida and the royal Amneris, who both long for the love of Radamès who directs the Egyptian army. While Aida and Radamès who gives up his status as war hero and chooses (to flight with) Aida, will die, it is Amneris – even if or just because she loses out on the love of Radamès, condemns the religious and political systems and curses the priests, opening up for the possibility of peace.

In Mozart's 'Magic flute', similar dualisms appear between darkness and light, strong and weak, masculine and feminine, realist and magic, and so on. In this staging, an almost complete female production team – with (rare as this still may be) the vivid and magistral conductor Joana Mallwitz – opts for a post-dual world and undermines the Enlightenment's clarity and hierarchy of these dualisms. Their most radical innovation is that they tell the story from the perspective of the three children as they are read *Die Zauberflöte* as a bedtime-story by their grandfather, and together they imagine that the whole opera is taking place in the rooms of their house and the members of their family and village turn out to be the characters of the opera. The children – together with the narrating grandpa – stay almost through the whole play on stage and increasingly take over the course of the opera, giving them the night of their life. This interpretation makes this 'Magic Flute' truly magical as the opera with its dragon and animals, turns 'naturally' into a funny fairy tale where everything is possible and paintings and

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mirrors show moving figures. However, director Lidia Steier situates the play at the time of WWI and shows that the power-play of Sarastro and his all-male crew (dressed in suits and bowler hats) does not lead to the victory of the light (as the second act is often interpreted) but to a bloody confrontation with the cruelty of war, as video-images of WWI are projected over the scenery. While men are fighting to pass the tests of their leader, women are veiled and silent while they – who else? – nurse the war's victims. The children's dream-like night turns increasingly into a nightmare, where it not that Pamina (a princess in the story but also their mother) increasingly questions the power-games of the dominant establishment and offers the children a new image of their mother as daring to resist, while the misogynist (and racial) tones in Mozart's libretto are wiped out. In the program-book, the dramaturgical team refers to Virginia Woolf's (2006/1938) essay 'Three guineas', her insisting plea against the war while wishing for (educational) spaces where women can develop a different kind of (learning to) living together. If Woolf asked for experimental colleges that avoid the teaching of domination and dominance, this is exactly the kind of adventurous schooling the children experience that night. The opera therefore not ends with a victorious choir, but we see the children exhausted and slightly traumatized sneak into bed, where the portrait of their (grand)mother wakes over them.

Pamina's resistance to the patriarchal power can be fruitfully compared with the heartbreaking destiny of Kát'a ('Katja') Kabanová, an opera by Leoš Janáček. In Katja's case, she has not only to resist the matriarchal despotism of her heartless mother-in-law and the impotent lovelessness of her alcoholic husband, but especially the oppressive norm expectations of a religious village, which is brilliantly staged by an immense group of anonymous puppet people who stand with their back to Katja (and the audience). It is their silent and scary presence that suffocates Katja's desires to imagine herself as a free and in-love woman that takes pleasure in her dreams. These rows of lifelike puppets on the bare 40 m-broad scene are moved between various scenes enclosing increasingly the action; later they are joined by two dozen of faceless figurants who encircle Katja in a threatening way. All her hope to re-imagine what it means to be a young female melts, and seeing no way out, Katja jumps in the Volga with its siren-like force. As her only escape was to the border of the river, Katja is staged in turmoil as she several times runs to the edge of the scene, as if she would jump in the orchestra pit. Each time, the moving singing and acting of Corinne Winters just in front of me, reminded me of the opening scene of 'The Hours' where Virginia Woolf is seen drowning herself. The queer director Barrie Kosky, who presented this production as he was finishing his 10 year long tenure as intendant and chief director of the 'Komische

Oper' in Berlin, to which he was appointed by the first gay mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, underlines that this claustrophobic oppression is not outdated, but may be part today of many orthodox Christian, Islam or Jewish communities. The day I saw this performance, the news was broken that Serbia would cancel the Euro-pride as the LGBTQI-community would – dixit a Serbian bishop – 'desacralize' Serbia and its people. In Kosky's view, Katja's choice is a form of resistance, as she is abandoned by the badly damaged men, also by her lover Boris who is not able to stand up to the social and familial pressures. Such devastating abandonment is not something Aida has to experience (as Radamès follows her), even if at some point before she considers to drown herself in the Nile.

Away from the old town, across the river Salzach, is the *Landestheater*, the state and city theatre of Salzburg that offers the whole year opera, theatre and musicals. In their programming, they pick up new possibilities where the Festspiele currently seem to 'stop' as the State Theatre, for instance, shows contemporary-written operas that address queer themes and characters (and not just feminist and queer interpretations). For instance, some years ago I could see their adoption of *Brokeback Mountain*, an opera composed by Charles Wuorinen following a libretto by Annie Proulx who also wrote the short story upon which the more famous movie by Ang Lee is known. In fact, the opera was commissioned by Gerard Mortier as he was preparing to become the director of the New York City Opera (NYCO), often called the 'people's opera'. Due to the financial crisis, Mortier stayed in Europe and created the opera instead in Madrid in 2014, a month before he would pass away. The intendant of the 'Landestheater' who was Mortier's assistant during his term at the Festspiele in the 1990s, cooperated with the NYCO, to stage *Brokeback Mountain* both in Salzburg (2016) and New York (2018). They similarly co-produced the staging of the operatic version of 'Angels in America', composed by the Hungarian composer Peter Eötvös, who was present during one of this year's performances in Salzburg, and counter-signaling the homophobia of the current Hungarian government. The NYCO stages these operas during pride-month in New York and made it into a trilogy by commissioning Iain Bell to compose the opera *Stonewall* for the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, which premiered during the World Pride in 2019. It is more likely that this opera might be shown at the *Landestheater* than at the *Festspiele* that notwithstanding the feminist-queer interpretations it might offer so now and then, remains an elitist event which will not so quickly unplug opera.

The weekend after the *Festspiele* have finished and when the festival tourists have left town, Salzburg holds its yearly pride-weekend. Most probably the villagers of Salzburg will not turn their back on them, as now happens in Serbia, Poland, Hungary, instigated by all those religious and political

fundamentalists that install gay-free zones and education in their cities and schools. These recurring forms of oppression force LGBTQ people to flee, to closet themselves, and, like Katja or Virginia, to suicide. Therefore, artistic and activist practices of unplugging are so needed, more than ever; for tolerance, for peace as both Amneris and Pamina plea.

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