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## **Decolonial debates on identity within Kazakh postcolonial reality**

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As is often the case with [hijacked](#) and metaphorized concepts today, decoloniality is a part of reimagining and rethinking [national] identity in postcolonial societies. What we need to show is how decolonial notions expand beyond a school of thought and have real-life implications. There is an element of symbolism for sure, yet coloniality still persists and does directly affect social and economic disparities, continuing to produce hierarchies which require breaking those frames. For countries with top-down nationhood policies and a Soviet past, postcolonial may not be the commonly used term. The notion of “post-Soviet” realities itself is not yet described as a separate concept, and its juxtaposition to postcolonial remains vague (Moore, 2001). In the following paper I will use those terms interchangeably for the context of Kazakhstan, Central Asia and beyond, where decoloniality can be one of those prisms to doubt imposed hierarchies and ways of thinking.

Decoloniality has become a framework for reshaping identity for Kazakhstan, in terms of language, gender, memory and history. Identity is one of those fields which needs more decolonial rethinking. It is not limited to asking questions if the country had a colonial past, but also reflecting on how earlier ambiguous ways to discuss colonialism influenced current societies. Fanon described regaining power via national identity construction for postcolonial societies, which is why national identity might be a part of this debate very often. In this context using the term “decolonization” may not always be accurate. Instead I focus on “decolonial” to describe existing debates within the notion of choice, as described by Madina Tlostanova in 2019. For countries where conventionally there was no “colonialism” in official narrative like in “classic” colonies such as the British Empire, there is a narrow corridor of ideas we have to unravel. In this context I rely on postcolonial theories of Franz Fanon of his “White Skin Black Masks” and Homi Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry,”

and I aim to illustrate existing debates on decoloniality that encapsulate rethinking national identity, gender identity, knowledge production, artistic practices and political activism.

Most importantly, I talk about “tangible” colonialism, which was earlier used as a criticism for metaphorized decoloniality (Tuck and Yang, 2012, ). Despite being a discourse for more than a decade, it was predominantly after the January unrest in Kazakhstan and since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine that narratives began to change further (Atystanbek and Schenk 2022; Kassymbekova and Marat, 2022; Kudaibergenova and Laruelle, 2022).

### **Current context and historical narratives: what makes it difficult to relate our discourse to empires directly?**

Current decolonial narratives can often be confused with national narratives. This also can be related to the old Soviet way of labeling activists - artists, writers, politicians - as “nationalists” in their attempt to reclaim subjectivity. Namely, President Tokayev [recently](#) called out that there should be no monuments for Soviet leaders in Kazakhstan, referring to their mythologized biographies. Yet, recently in Almaty the monument for Prince Alexander Nevsky was presented in Almaty, which was said to have been approved by leadership. What is even more critical is that Russian media still writes the city’s name as “Alma-Ata,” which is also the Sovietized name of the city. Such ambivalence towards creating memories is part of the leadership’s resistance and unreadiness to discuss the colonial/Soviet period. Tlostanova explains such taboos with a potential dismantling of the myth of glorifying the Soviet period. The narrative never included questioning the colonial form of Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union. Alexander Morrison (2016) also relates it to Russia’s own resistance on being positioned as a former colonizing state.

Diana Kudaibergenova (2016) argued that postcolonial statehood as part of Nursultan Nazarbayev’s nationalizing regime is one of the paths to this resistance. She refers to former Soviet practices, when Kazakh Soviet elites were focusing on glorifying the pre-Soviet and pre-imperial past of Kazakhstan to avoid debates on the colonial nature of both periods. Indeed, we still see the continuation of it in mythologizing the monument of commemorating Qantar (January-2022) unrest or while producing state-sponsored historical films about the Queen Tomiris, who is framed as the ancestor of modern Kazakhs.

We can use this tendency to explain why “if the past was colonial” questions emerge. Russian imperial colonialism in the official narratives is rooted back to the end of 18th century. The colonial period started and expanded when Abilkhair Khan asked for help from Anna Ioanovna in 1730, but later on the alliance ended up with occupying territories (Kassenova, 2022, p 16). Unlike that, the Soviet period is not conventionally described as colonial. The Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in the official narrative began in 1936. In her “Atomic Steppe” book Kassenova suggested that the 1917 February revolution was a

precedent that evoked Kazakh people to resist colonial rule, but later on the October revolution was not accepted as widely. She categorized 1917 as an important year when Alash Autonomy consisted of liberal-democrats was formed and later on dismantled, right before Stalinist repressions in 1930's and lasting until the post-Stalinist period.

Overall, this period lacks consensus; philology professor Ainash Mustoyapova suggested during our conversation that it is currently a bottom-up way to decide what can be seen as "colonial." In her recent book "Decolonization of Kazakhstan," like Kassenova, she refers to 1940-1959 cultural repression in which Kazakh academics, writers and musicians like Kanysh Satbayev, Akhmet Zhubanov or Mukhtar Auezov were marginalized by a Soviet government - deprived of their work and opportunities and sentenced to prison. Earlier, millions of Kazakhs died as a result of the collectivization and sedentarization policies of Stalin and Goloshchekin in the 1930s and during Asharshylyq (Famine) in the 1920s. Later on, the 1937-1938 Stalinist repressions of intellectuals became a part of rethinking the colonial past.

Another relevant example of Russification, as part of colonial practice and systemic erasure, is language policies. Kirkwood (1989) noted that since Lenin's korenizatsiya policies up until Brezhnev, the russification of language policies framed Kazakh to be less privileged. As part of the "friendship of people," there was the dominance of one culture and language back then, which considerably influenced current postcolonial trauma.

Here I would shift towards the role of positionality and the author's own voice that is important in presenting decolonial debates. Togzhan Kassenova, whose book was originally written in English, reflects at the very beginning on her own relation to the Soviet era - as a person born and raised in this period, which is an important distinction while talking about positionality in decolonial debates. Likewise, Tlostanova also describes herself as "postcolonial other" and "product of the Russian and Soviet imperial legacies." In this context I have also reflected a lot about my positionality and how it would affect the mapping I have done. Having read the article series of Central Asian female scholars discussing "[When field is your home.](#)" Diana Kudaibergenova, Aizada Arystanbek and others, I realized that my positionality and access is highly important. Being privileged to speak all three languages (Kazakh, Russian and English), I certainly had access to a broader community of actors and collectives. Most importantly, it gave me more of a chance to be emphatic of the positionality of those actors I will mention in the mapping here. Even though conventionally art, academia and related fields are regarded as elitist and exclusive, I mostly reflect on the debates I have encountered over the last 1.5 years after the January unrest and later the Ukraine War. My interview series happened in Spring 2023. In this sense I have to highlight that later mapping is not fixed, nor is it limited to presented actors. Also, it is to evolve and should be observed from time to time.

## **Overview of the current debates: mapping on the actors of current decolonial debate**

Interpreting this collective work, artistic practices, and knowledge production to be decolonial might to some extent be an attempt to narrow down their own positioning. Below I describe current actors, stakeholders of decolonial and postcolonial debates in Kazakhstan from the fields of art, music, activism and memory production. I intentionally do not use “people who work with decolonization” or “decolonizers” as skeptics often critique them. It could also be seen as an attempt to metaphorize decoloniality. By listing them, I do not address them as “research objects” either; I see them as creators and co-creators of this research. I refer to “when your field is your home” works of brilliant scholars from Central Asia while talking about the collective work of those people as an attempt to rethink and reimagine identities.

Besides that, I intentionally avoid “ethnic minorities” from my mapping, as it is very exclusive. In the context where decolonial ideas are tied up with national discourses a lot, ethnicization and racialization are the processes we have to reimagine as a part of our decolonial rethinking of identity. It is only mentioned when creators define their ethnic identity as a core part of their work. Otherwise, we would reproduce the Soviet “nation building” where korenizatsiya was predominantly the instrument for building hierarchies and when ethnic minorities were mostly seen through their “national” costumes, music or cuisine, but not their memory, complex identity, stories and experience (Mustoyapova, 2022).

I deliberately focus a lot on female voices and representation as their perspective is one of the major parts of decolonial debates currently. Three decades of independence, and even back to the Soviet period, gendered nationalism (Belafatti, 2019) has created a certain role for women and their representation in history, which is not reimagined yet.

At the same time, there is also an important distinction not to juxtapose which initiative is less decolonial or which is more decolonial ([Narysheva, 2023](#)). Such comparison might lead to creating hierarchies and inequalities. By comparing the extent of “how decolonial this debate/work/point can be,” we might diminish attempts of challenging existing norms and creating new perspectives.

## **Recreating narratives: women, identity, memory and history**

One of the ways of female representation in narratives back then from the Soviet period was museums, as a part of top-down nationhood policy. It was only 1980 when the first female museum of Aliya Moldagulova, a WWII war hero, was opened in Aktobe (Assanova ). Decolonial scholars criticize museums alongside universities to be predominantly the product of coloniality (Tlostanova, 2018). Yet, the first online museum

[“Women of Kazakhstan”](#) launched by historian Dinara Assanova contributes to reframing and reshaping female stories within conventionally postcolonial institutions. Beyond the broader sense of female figures in history there are also ways of reimagining memories of female heritage and their stories in families. It is often male heritage that is presented in family history, which is referred to as “Zheti Ata” (Seven grandfathers). Anthropologist and writer Elmira Kakabayeva’s course [“Family ethnography: how to decolonize your writing”](#) for women was designed to help them frame their stories in literature. It was important for her to narrate stories from within, from people whose own home is their field.

Almaty-based artist and curator Aida Adilbek’s [“Talqan, tary, topyraq”](#) exhibition, in contrast to Elmira, was not initially framed as decolonial. During our conversation Aida reflected that “decolonial” is not the universal lens for all contemporary artists and for her decoloniality should not be over-exploited. Similarly to Aida, contemporary artist Aiganym Mukhamedzhan, the author of the [“Qara Kub”](#) exhibition also shared her views that sometimes an artist positioning herself as “decolonial” might narrow down her work. Yet, Aida’s encapsulation of her female family line “grandmother-mother-daughter” is one of the ways to look beyond the patriarchal model of looking at one’s family heritage and decolonize the imposed views on how to commemorate one’s family line. The way of reimagining identity and its relation to family memory are a substantial part of decolonial debates.

Memory production is taking a decolonial turn, as bottom-up discourse is getting wider. For the last three decades top-down memory production in the 20th century and also in post-independence years in particular was one of the ways for rethinking “one’s own” history produced from within – on a societal level. Memory politics for many post-Soviet states used to be and still is the way to hide the events that were not “suitable” for the official discourse. For Kazakhstan it was predominantly Asharshylyq (The Great Famine where about 5-6 million Kazakhs died), Stalinist repressions, World War II (still referred to by many as the Great Patriotic War) and the Zheltoksan-1986 protests (Researcher Berikbol Dukeyev shared this during her presentation for Terek Story project, which I mention later). And yet, the fact that the 31st of May is marked as a day of Remembrance of Victims of Asharshylyq and Repression, without separating both tragedies, is predominantly a top-down initiative to depersonalize and narrow down the room for debates to be colonial.

The common criticism when we use the terms postcolonial or decolonial in relation to Kazakh society is questioning if the country has even had a colonial past. Lack of bottom-up reflection of the abovementioned events might be one of the reasons. For instance, 27 year old Kazakh film director Aisultan Seitov’s [“Oash”](#) movie was one of such precedents when the period of the famine was brought to a popular media. Even though criticized for being “too young to talk about it,” as Seitov is now a fourth generation removed from those people who died in Asharshylyq, or being not informative enough in relation to the memory of this event, this attempt had contributed to bring up this notion to a wider audience.

My own female heritage is linked to an important colonial past of Kazakhstan that is not much discussed among post-Soviet spaces. My late maternal grandmother's family was originally from Bukhtarma region, the place in East Kazakhstan with one of the largest artificial reservoirs in the country. They lived in a village called Venera which used to be on the site of Bukhtarma reservoir. But in the late 40s when my grandmother Nurganym (born in 1944) was to start primary school, they were forced to resettle to the Syrdarya region (South Kazakhstan). Thanks to their mother (my great grandmother Turar), they decided not to leave the region and stayed in the neighboring region of Zuryan (currently named Altai, which is also a government attempt to bring Kazakhified toponyms). Thus, as a result of non-voluntary migration, there was infant mortality and the loss of major cultural heritage, which historians like Botakoz Kassymbekova and Aminat Chokobaeva (year) call cultural erasure and displacement.

Earlier on I had never thought of this story in terms of Soviet colonial policies, until I discovered the article in *Esimde "Nemonomif"* journal "[The untold stories of the Toktogul HPP](#)" about the hydroelectric power station in Kyrgyzstan. Involuntary resettlement of people also happened there. The Soviets shaped it as a modernizing policy and a part of industrial development. I realized that the early 1950s-1960s was the same period in which those resettlements happened, and both are related with hydropower (either HPP or reservoirs). Even more surprising and sad was when Asian activists of Russia, whose work towards decolonization is another big chapter, shared similar stories of those reservoirs in North Asia. There is currently no narrative or broad research on telling the story of those resettlements, as the past behind those HPP or reservoirs. Indeed, personal family histories have become the part of decolonizing the past and rethinking common postcolonial narratives.

What I notice is that many initiatives on rethinking memory and identity are made by women, who were deprived of having their subjectivity. [Terek Story](#) is one of such initiatives currently that helps people share their family stories in Kazakhstan. Its team, Inkar Bahetnur and Tulenova, highlighted that they observed more women contributing to preserving family memory. The word "terek" is translated as "tree" from Kazakh. It opens up different narratives of the history of XXth century ([but is not limited to this](#)), where third generation or so-called post-memory holders can narrate the stories from their own families. It was not very common until recently to focus on family histories, whilst for nation building and post-independence identity construction it was mostly the history of "ru" (tribe), but not one's own family and second-or third-generation relatives. Likewise, the Qazaq experimental research initiative "[Babalar Press](#)" curated by Aisha Jandossova and Aida Issakhanqyzy was also one of the opportunities for bottom-up memory construction and bringing stories to the narrative. Participants of this program experience their journey towards ancestors via cuisine, books, ornaments or carpet making. Participants Aigerim Ospan, Mira Lim, Altinzer Acikbaeva, Nazerke Cinarbek, Ansagan Serikqizi and Aida Issakhanqyzy experience their journey back to childhood and their own identities.

On bottom-up identity rethinking via artistic practices I would talk about [Guzel Zakir](#), Almaty-based Uyghur contemporary artist. Her works like "[Monobrow/Oriental Brow](#)"

are based on her rethinking and re-accepting her own Uyghur identity. Having been born and raised in Almaty, Guzel has come through a journey to accept her Uyghur identity. It was not January unrest or the War in Ukraine that was her initial turn, but a move to Qashgar (current China territory, East Turkestan region). This was her journey of being accepted across borders and holding transnational, hybrid identity. The Sovietization of Uyghurs in Kazakhstan, as she notes, has become one of the ways to exoticize them as predominantly performers, musicians or theater workers (as Kazakhstan is the only country in the world where there is an Uyghur theater). Such self-Orientalizing and inferiority might have emerged as a result of decades long mimicry. In her art she attempts to redefine the identity of being Uyghur through acceptance and search for once lost and erased identity via “writing about ourselves and for ourselves.” During our conversation Guzel was also cautious about positioning decolonial thought. What I learnt is that artistic practices often go beyond theories and are way ahead of our attempts to explain them, which Tlostanova [mentioned](#) at La Biennale di Venezia and Kudaibergenova wrote in “Art in Protest” (2022).

I would also incorporate gender aspects to the national identity’s narrative. Founder of Qazaq Quer present Mutali Moskeu made a film called [“Kvir po kazakhsky”](#) (or “Kazakh Queer”). In this film he tried to rebuild the long-term gendered nationalism, where the role and image of men and women were perceived in a certain way. Considering the USSR’s restrictive policies on marriage, which decolonial feminist Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy notes in this film, such roles and prejudices have a former colonial character. Moskeu demonstrates that the conventional way of imagining gender and national identity gets fragile when we refer to Kazakh mythology where characters like Zhez Tyrnaq (the mythological gender-fluid creature with copper nails), or history where the culture of “sal-seri” (male musicians and travelers) is prevalent. This film is a very new start of reassessing national identity and its future inclusivity towards a Queer community, without post-Soviet narratives imposed on it.

Creating memory “from within” and rethinking history can also be applied to music. During Soviet Kazakhstan theatre, opera and singing were a part of Soviet cultural revolution policies, which were somehow exoticizing and highlighting “national” identity in a way to create a separate field, which catalyzed hierarchical formation. The history of music back then was collected and written by Russian ethnographers like Alexandr Zatayevich. In this context I would mention the narrative podcast [“Baysa,”](#) produced by the Batyrkhan Shukenov Fund and Bulbul Podcast studio, who have created the audio-lecture series on the history of music and are currently working on an encyclopedia of Kazakh pop music. Nargiz Shukenova (Batyr Foundation, director), Kamila Narysheva (Batyr Foundation, manager) and Aisulu Toyshibek (Bulbul studio) work on memory in its decolonial turn, where stories are told for contemporary audience, with caution and respect to those who came before. They comprehend positionality in terms of language and put cultural heritage as the fundamental part of their work. This work helps in rethinking our identity, past and cultural heritage beyond imposed post-Soviet frames.

## **Qantar: collective commemoration, art and literary practices**

Writing about “ourselves” from the inside and rethinking events is a part of current decolonial and postcolonial debates. One of the ways is to reassess and rethink recent events like Qantar (Bloody January, or January unrest) via artistic practices. During my interviews with contemporary artists in Kazakhstan they were quite critical that there are not many broad exhibitions and artworks on Qantar yet. When it comes to rethinking people’s/society’s role in commemoration it is mainly [Saule Suleimenova’s “Biz Qarapaiym Khalykpyz”](#) exhibition (We are ordinary people) which demonstrates the pain and sorrow people felt, in her works like “Sky of Almaty” and others.

At the same time, Qantar has changed and maybe interfered as an inevitable trauma that needs to be processed to some works. Creators shifted their trajectory as “and then January happened.” Born in Oral, Almaty-based contemporary artist Dariya Temirkhan’s exhibition [“Tynys bitti”](#), as an idea, was sparked back in 2021. Yet, her major work was dedicated to her experience and re-imagining pain and sorrow during January unrest. Temirkhan [shared](#) that “it’s like I cannot breathe” was one of the key emotions back in January 2022. Her video-installation was based on the heavy breathing sound of the person followed by poppy field, which took an audience on a journey of experiencing and co-living with pain and trauma.

One of the official narratives commemorating the January unrest is based on a purely symbolic, depersonalized Qantar monument in Almaty. Yet, government attempts are still very delusional and not inclusive, and it does not intend to personalize anything. Recently in Almaty local activists organized an exhibition called [“Mausym Art”](#), where children whose elder family members were shot during those events presented their artworks. Kazakh contemporary artists Moldir Sagyndyqova, Nurbol Nurakhmet, Shattyk Batan, Almas Nurgozhaev, and Arystanbek Shalbayev were their mentors; later on, the 6 to 12-year-old children presented their works. The initiative was followed by an auction, where all money was sent to the children and their families. Apart from being a very thoughtful initiative not only as an artistic and charity project, it was still contained within a very limited circle in Almaty, which might have been even bigger and more influential if presented beyond. Overall, the activists collected about 2 million tenge, which was sent to the families.

Another way of rethinking initiatives related to the Qantar protests was the [“Qantar. Jazylyu”](#) (here the word “jaz” means writing, and in the giving from “jazylu” can also be interpreted as healing) open call. It was initiated as a collective writing practice to help the people of Kazakhstan process their collective trauma after January 2022 via texts and poems. As a case of artistic and literature-based projects, it also implies reassessment of political values and sentiments of people. This independent collective consisted of writer Elmira Kakabayeva, journalists Danel Khodjaeva and Aissana Nurkadyr, and multidisciplinary artist Aida Adilbek, who aimed at including people’s voices in writing about collective trauma and processing it via writing. As a result, 43 texts, 37 of which were in Russian and 6 in Kazakh, were published.



## Language activism as a form of “tangible” decolonial discourse

The abovementioned russification policies during the Soviet times provided some of the reasons for language to persist up until 32 years beyond the post-independence period. Language debates are currently one of the most sensitive discourses when we talk about decoloniality. For many, talking about decolonial/decolonization in “colonizer’s language” is nonsense, whilst others call for more inclusion where the Russian language is not labeled as such because of its relevance to many people across the post-Soviet bloc. Tlostanova, for instance, categorized criticism such as that there was “no need to talk about decoloniality in colonial Russian language” as more postcolonial discourse, rather than decolonial.

Language activism is a very significant part of this mapping, as it is one of the additional or most tangible frameworks for everything we try to frame as decolonial. There are language activists such as [QazaqGrammar](#), who promote the Latin alphabet, providing different translations of common words in Social media. Its founders Nursultan Bagidolla and Maksat Arzaman are sometimes criticized as “natspat” (national patriots in a negative connotation) or are accused of being too radical. Yet, they significantly contribute to promoting the translation of movies and subtitles, and have recently launched the “Tildes” speaking club. Earlier they also posted about the necessity of “derussifying” last names by eliminating the ov/ova/ev/eva endings, which is still a big part of discussion and alongside linguistic debates go hand in hand when discussing de-russification and decolonization processes. There is also [KazakBubble](#), run by linguist Bibarys Seitay, which does language factchecking and discusses social issues alongside language and the [Qazaq Lab](#) telegram channel launched by activist Hadisha Hamzabek, that usually produces content related to grammar. A movement of [“Kalka Stop”](#), directed by philologist Nazgul Kozhabek via a telegram channel, advocates for no direct translation from Russian, but a genuine way of translating in Kazakh is the significant part of this community. Most language activists note that Kazakh over the last three decades has become the “language of translations,” where original text is often produced in Russian, yet later on translated to Kazakh. Despite being criticized they have changed the narrative and the discourse in the last few years. They gained more publicity after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For instance, Qazaq Grammar released information-notes for Russian relocants, which explained why an imperial mindset and Orientalization of the Kazakh community is wrong. Yet, it was not only February 2022 when they started this activism. It was the beginning of 2022 which made more demands on them, so they were some of the changemakers contributing to decolonial debates a lot.

What is important is that language activism is not limited to Kazakh language, but to more vulnerable languages like tatar. Activist [“Tatar Prince”](#) (AKA Marsel Rafail Ganeyev), born in South Kazakhstan and originally speaking Kazakh, came to Astana to study and experienced russification. Currently he is running the “Qara Magan” podcast. Marsel, being an ethnic Tatar, explores his roots and language via juxtaposing into Kazakh and building dialogues with an inclusive community not limited to tatars.

Besides that, language activism is not only limited to promoting language itself, but an attempt to derussify intellectual space which has been perceived to be mainly Russian speaking for a while. In this context I would mention the collective "[Erkin Adamdar](#)" (Free people), a volunteer group who initially gathered in Almaty. They aim at expanding the Kazakh-speaking community by organizing a weekly event "[Tangy shai](#)," when a guest-expert gives an open lecture during breakfast, followed up by discussion. It is worth mentioning that Erkin Adamdar, consisting of journalists, political activists and others were also some of those who organized the above mentioned Mausym Art exhibition. Importantly, they have expanded their network beyond Almaty; there is now Tangy Shai in Astana and Shymkent.

Indeed, the mere reality that there is still a need for "language activists" who promote Kazakh language in Kazakhstan demonstrates this postcolonial reality. They are seen by many as "nationalists" or "radicals" who demonstrate this self-exoticization and an inferiority syndrome as a result of harsh russification policies in the post-Leninist period. The Russian language became official back then in 1938 and yet the consequences of this remain an issue (Kirkwood, 1989). Language polarization is indeed the most "tangible" decolonial debate that goes beyond identity, but implies economic disparities, information access and marginalization in society.

The necessity of bringing language debates to current decolonial and postcolonial discourse is related to pre-independence language policies following protests in the 1980s. William Fireman (1989) argued that the language resolution in 1987 on improving the study of Kazakh language was a response to the December 1986 protests, and described the Communist party's attempt to support peaceful ethnic relations. Yet, after more than three decades activism is still often linked to language and nationality. The fact that the Zheltoksan protests in Kazakhstan were some of the first ones across the Soviet Union back then, later on speaks volumes.

## **Political activism, protest commemoration and subjectivity**

Zheltoksan-1986 was then-State Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's response to former Party secretary Dinmukhamed Konayev. Zheltoksan can also be seen as anti-colonial resistance, as later on many participants would be blamed as "nationalists." I consider this event overlooked, while discussing decolonial activism (yet, here we might confuse anticolonial and decolonial). Still, the state top-down commemoration of Zheltoksan is often mythologized and impersonalized. At the same time, I find memories of Zheltoksan to influence how activists of "[Oyan Qazaqstan](#)" (Translated as - Wake up, Kazakhstan! An Almaty-based group which formed as a movement in 2019 in response to power transit, often marginalized by critics as "[hipsters](#)") and other individual activists are perceived by the public. There is still a transgenerational trauma of protests per se, as repressive methods of using violence against them roots back into the Soviet way of suppressing peaceful protests of not only Oyan Qazaqstan's activists, but many others.

This initiative is often associated with repressed Kazakh poet and member of Alash Orda Mirzhakyp Dulatov, as “Oyan Qazastan” is a reference to his poem “Oyan Qazaq.” Dulatov’s poem was a call to Kazakh people living under Tsarist rule to wake up and fight for their freedoms and subjectivity, which is a symbolic connection between them and activists. A journalist, screenwriter, and member of Oyan shared during our conversations that there was an intention for using this reference. I found it important to have it confirmed, as our interpretations sometimes might go beyond the original ideas of activists. Groups like Oyan, often criticized as “hipsters,” are also referred to as the major benefactors of their current neoliberal economy (Isaacs, 2023). At the same time, they are still a very minor part of the society, similar to Alash Orda members back then, which really reimagined some parallel lines between.

I intentionally finish this mapping and narrative with political activism, as the very substantial debate of decoloniality. Current postcolonial conditions often presume a lack of subjectivity, whilst decolonial turns are a way to reclaim this subjectivity via bottom-up commemoration, rethinking identity, language activism and political activism. Civil society is still living in a post-Soviet realm, where reclaiming one’s rights and freedoms is a long-term journey. Considering art as a form of protest, but also contestation and contemplation, we see how collectives or independent artists change the decolonial discourse today. This mapping is not limited to visual art, but expands towards public discussions, media dialogues that help us rethink on decolonizing one’s national gender identity. It is worth mentioning that above I illustrate the list of actors of this decolonial debate as of Summer 2023, and yet local and regional changes might bring some changes, so we have to see this debate as flexible, evolving and changeable.

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