Pulling Threads: An Inquiry into Cultural Identity, and Reconnection with Ancestral Knowledge through Art

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Abstract

This thesis paper documents artistic research using a blend of studio-based and scholarly approaches, delving into the history and cultural practices of Azerbaijani people, and the evolution of Azerbaijani culture amidst the backdrop of conquest by the Russian Empire and subsequent influences of the Soviet Union. Combining theories from Homi K. Bhabha with research creation, autoethnographic and decolonizing methodologies, it investigates how culture is affected by imperialism and political powers, and what happens to identity as a result. As an immigrant who lived in the Soviet and Post-Soviet times, and who has now spent over two decades in the West, I explore notions of cultural hybridity and the fragmentation of diasporic experience. This project is aimed at reconciling my multifaceted identity and finding ways enhance a sense of belonging by reconnecting with ancestral knowledges through artmaking.

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Introduction

I was born in the early eighties, in Azerbaijan – a land of Turkic people, but a Soviet Republic at the time. When I was in elementary school, the Soviet rule came to an end and the country gained its independence. The remnants of the Soviet influence on language and culture continued throughout my formative years (and beyond). In the year 2001, still in my teens I moved to this land we call Canada. Being so young I adapted easily and embraced my new home, its language, customs, and norms, and without realising it, integrated aspects of western ideology into my identity. However, growing up in various places and under the influence of clashing cultures (Soviet, Azerbaijani, Russian, Canadian) has created a rift in my sense of cultural identity.

My experience is not unique and many who come from other lands share it. As migrants are immersed into their new environment here in the West, many tend to adopt the new language and customs in an attempt to blend in and be accepted, which often results in the loss of some of the ancestral religious and cultural traditions and even language. This was true for me - some time after arriving in Canada, I stopped celebrating Novruz[1] and started celebrating Thanksgiving. Eventually I stopped speaking the language I grew up speaking (partly because there was no one to speak it with). I did everything I could to avoid being discerned as something other than "from here." But no matter how North American I felt, I did not look it and was constantly reminded that I was from somewhere else, which affected my sense of belonging. As an adult I came to understand the dual, if multifaceted nature of my identity – an Azerbaijani woman/post-Soviet woman and a Canadian woman, and that I do not fit in to either culture

[1] Also spelled Nawruz, this is a holiday celebrated by Kurds, Turkic nations and Iranian peoples. It marks the first day of spring and astronomical spring equinox.

neatly. I also came to realise that I could not ignore or exclude either one of my identity categories. I needed to find a way to reconnect with my ancestral roots, in order to bridge the gap between my past and my present and reconcile my identity. This was a turning point in my art practice. I began to use my art to communicate my experience using a variety of culturally significant materials and practices. My ancestral homeland of Azerbaijan has long been one of major weaving centers in West Asia and The Caucasus. My grandmother practiced this ancient craft and passed some of that knowledge on to me when I was very young. Using woven elements that incorporate traditional Azerbaijani knotting techniques became a way for me to honour and preserve a cultural practice of my ancestors and reconnect with my ancestral past. As social and cultural borders expand beyond geographical ones, and the diaspora moves through time and space, I became interested in understanding how we can use artefacts and cultural practices to hold on to our origin and enhance our sense of belonging. This became the basis of my research. I also ask myself: how can my work honour the cultural practices of my ancestors and support narratives that counter colonialism with consideration of land reciprocity and sustainability?

Land reciprocity is important to many indigenous cultures, including those who lived on the land I come from. Land is a spiritual and physical space that is closely related to culture, identity and ancestral memory. As someone who comes from a land, which over its long history has been conquered and occupied by various formidable empires, whose influences remain and linger, even centuries past, I often grapple with the notion of cultural identity. When land changes hands or when we move from continent to continent, whether forcefully or by choice, what happens to our culture and sense of belonging? Each of us carries a part of ancestral

memory and tradition wherever we go, but when we are assimilated into a different culture, do we lose a part of that identity, or can we find a way to somehow integrate it into our new reality?

Perhaps, we create a liminal place in which to negotiate a new identity – a place post-colonial philosopher Homi K. Bhabha coined "The Third Space of enunciation."[2] According to Bhabha, this liminal space opens the possibility of cultural hybridity and exchange and prevents us from settling into polarities.[3] As such, culture and identity are not static, but fluid entities. In my personal experience, they are also very fragmented. I stand in that liminal space, and in the process of self-exploration, gather pieces in order to re-establish, rebuild and recreate my identity.

Implementing material exploration, theoretical analysis, and autoethnography, this thesis project is aimed at investigating themes such as diasporic living, negotiating identity, intersectionality, ancestral practice/knowledge, land/place/home/belonging, decolonization, and sustainable ways of making.

My research creation is mainly comprised of weaving and other textile work, chosen for the personal and historical connection I have to the craft. Weaving is one of the most significant cultural practices in Azerbaijan, one that is a symbol of national identity, believed by some to be embedded in the DNA of our people. Early weavers in Azerbaijan lived in agrarian society and used natural materials and dyes to create their beautiful rugs and tapestries. In an effort to return to my ancestral past, I delve into natural dyes and pigments, such as indigo, turmeric, sumac,

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[2]Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.
[3] Ibid, 5.

walnut, pomegranate, marigold and others, and develop ways to dye my fibers and fabrics using only sustainable natural ingredients, least harmful to the environment.

The project also includes research into the history of Azerbaijan, the region's cultural practices and linguistic complexities with the purpose of understanding and reconnecting with my own cultural roots, language and history, connecting my cultural past and present, and illuminating my ancestral experience under waves of subjugation. I feel that the part of the world which I come from is underrepresented and is often excluded from much discourse in the west. By bringing it into conversation, I give voice to my people and as such add to the efforts of decolonizing the world of contemporary art. My hope is that it will also resonate with other diasporic groups, and help them in some way, whether by being able to relate or make sense of this notion of culture and cultural hybridity.

Over the following sections of this document, I first go over some of the main concepts in post-colonial studies within Western discourse, followed by an overview of how these concepts can be understood in the Azerbaijani context, expanding on some of the main historical events that shaped the nation. I then unpack aspects of post colonial/post-Soviet identity, and discuss my studio based research and creation informed by my experiences as a diasporic subject, demonstrating how artistic practice may be used as a means of healing, negotiating identity, reconnecting with ancestral knowledge and history and pushing back against preconceived conventions.

Literature Review

Postcolonial studies have profoundly reshaped the discourse on identity, culture, and power in the context of colonial and postcolonial societies. In this section I discuss the works of Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, which remain foundational, and provide conceptual tools to interrogate cultural hybridity, the construction of the "Other," and the agency of the subaltern. Their ideas intersect with broader themes of identity, selfhood, alterity, and diasporic experiences, opening critical pathways for understanding the complexities of modern globalized society. It is important to understand these concepts in order to better investigate diasporic identity.

The Third Space, Hybridity, and Cultural Translation

Homi K. Bhabha's seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994) introduces pivotal concepts such as the Third Space, hybridity, and cultural translation. Bhabha's Third Space represents an interstitial realm where cultural meaning is negotiated and rearticulated, challenging fixed notions of identity and cultural authenticity.[4] This liminal space disrupts binaries like colonizer/colonized and self/Other, instead emphasizing the fluidity and ambivalence of cultural interactions. Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity further elaborates on this interstitiality. He argues that colonial and postcolonial encounters produce hybrid identities that cannot be reduced to their origins.[5] Hybridity, for Bhabha, is both a site of resistance and innovation, subverting colonial narratives and enabling new forms of cultural articulation.

[4] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.
[5] Ibid, 359.

Cultural translation, another critical concept, underscores the process of negotiating meanings across different cultural contexts. Bhabha suggests that translation is not a straightforward transfer but a transformative act that destabilizes dominant narratives.[6] This idea resonates with diasporic experiences, where identities are constantly reimagined in response to shifting cultural landscapes.

Bhabha's concept of the *Third Space* serves as an ambivalent, in-between zone where cultures intersect, creating new meanings and practices. This space destabilizes fixed identities, allowing for resistance against dominant discourses. For example, colonial subjects might mimic their colonizers while subtly subverting their authority, a process Bhabha calls colonial mimicry[7]. The *Third Space* thus enables a rethinking of identity as fluid and contingent.

Orientalism, "The Other," and Imperial Narratives

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains a cornerstone in postcolonial theory, exposing how Western discourses construct the East as the "Other." Said critiques the Orientalist framework for its role in justifying imperial domination by depicting non-Western societies as static, exotic, and inferior.[8] Through this lens, the "Other" becomes a site of projection, reflecting the anxieties and desires of the colonizer. Said demonstrates how Western literature, art, and academic disciplines created a distorted image of the Orient as exotic and backward, legitimizing colonial domination. This process of othering reduces the colonized to a homogenized, voiceless category. Said's critique intersects with Bhabha's notion of hybridity. While Said focuses on the hegemonic construction of the "Other," Bhabha highlights the ways colonized subjects resist and transform these representations.

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[6] Ibid, 325.
[7] Ibid, 127.
[8] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 5.

Both Said and Bhabha underscore the importance of disrupting Eurocentric frameworks and recognizing the agency of colonized peoples. However, in contrast to Bhabha's emphasis on cultural negotiation, Said foregrounds the structural inequalities that perpetuate cultural misrepresentation. Said's work also anticipates Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), which critiques the silencing of marginalized voices within dominant discourses.

Subalternity, Voice and Representation

Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) raises critical questions about the representation of marginalized groups, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Spivak defines the subaltern as those excluded from hegemonic power structures, whose voices are often co-opted or silenced in dominant discourses.[9] Spivak critiques Western intellectuals for their tendency to "speak for" the subaltern, thereby perpetuating epistemic violence. Instead, she advocates for an ethical approach to representation that acknowledges the limitations of speaking on behalf of others.[10] Her work challenges scholars to critically engage with issues of voice, agency, and the politics of knowledge production.

Spivak critiques how postcolonial theory often fails to account for the most marginalized voices, examining how subaltern women, doubly oppressed by patriarchy and colonialism, are rendered invisible within both Western and indigenous frameworks of power[11]. Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism offers a controversial yet pragmatic approach to representation. While essentialism risks homogenizing diverse identities, Spivak suggests that temporarily adopting

[9] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Estefanía Peñafiel Loaiza, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (London: Afterall Books, 2020), 26, 79?
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid, 102.

essentialist positions can empower marginalized groups to mobilize politically.[12] This strategy resonates with Bhabha's idea of mimicry, where resistance operates through appropriation and subversion.[13]

Identity, Selfhood, and Alterity

The works of Bhabha, Said, and Spivak converge on the theme of identity as a contested and dynamic construct. Bhabha's hybridity and Third Space challenge essentialist notions of identity, while Said's "Other" reveals how identities are shaped through oppositional discourses. Spivak, in turn, emphasizes the silenced agency of the subaltern, complicating simplistic binaries of self/Other.

Other theorists, such as Frantz Fanon and Stuart Hall, provide complementary perspectives. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* examines the psychological effects of colonialism on selfhood, highlighting the internalization of racial hierarchies[14]. Hall's work on cultural identity emphasizes the diasporic condition, where identity is always in flux, shaped by history, memory, and migration[15].

Bhabha and Spivak also engage with the concept of cultural translation, a process that highlights the complexities of negotiating identity across cultures. Bhabha sees translation as a site of ambivalence, where meaning is neither fixed nor fully translatable.[16] This aligns with

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[12] Ibid, 71.
[13] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 125.
[14] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Richard Philcox. First edition, (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 13.

[15] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* edited by Jonathan Rutherford, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 225.
[16] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 227.

Walter Benjamin's view in *The Task of the Translator* (1923) that translation involves transformation rather than mere reproduction.[17] For diasporic communities, cultural translation becomes a means of navigating dual allegiances. Stuart Hall, a key figure in cultural studies, complements Bhabha's ideas by emphasizing the fluidity of diasporic identities. Aligning with Bhabha's notion of the Third Space, in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990) Hall argues that identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming, shaped by historical and cultural contexts.[18]

The theories of Bhabha, Said, Spivak, and their contemporaries offer critical insights into the dynamics of identity, culture, and power in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. By foregrounding concepts such as the Third Space, hybridity, cultural translation, and subalternity, these scholars challenge essentialist and hierarchical frameworks, opening spaces for more inclusive and nuanced understandings of cultural difference. Their work continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of globalization, migration, and intercultural dialogue.

[17] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume I 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 256.
[18] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 225.

Postcolonial Theory and Themes in Azerbaijani Context

Postcolonial studies critically examine the lasting effects of colonialism on identity, culture, and power dynamics. The central figures discussed above – Bhabha, Said, and Spivak – have developed influential concepts like hybridity, the Third Space, the subaltern, and cultural translation. While their work often centers on regions historically colonized by Western empires, their theories are especially relevant to Azerbaijan, a nation shaped by its subjugation under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. In this section I explore postcolonial theories in the context of Azerbaijan, analyzing how its history of domination informs its cultural and artistic expressions.

Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity offers a powerful lens to understand Azerbaijan's historical and cultural development. During its integration into the Russian Empire in the 19th century and later under Soviet rule, Azerbaijan became a site of cultural negotiation between indigenous traditions and imposed colonial ideologies. Bhabha's concepts highlight how such encounters create new, hybrid identities that resist binary distinctions like colonizer/colonized finding resonance in Azerbaijan's artistic and literary heritage. For instance, Azerbaijani literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the works of Mirza Fatali Akhundov, reflects a synthesis of Eastern and Western influences. While Akhundov drew from Persian literary traditions, he also engaged with Enlightenment ideas introduced by Russian intellectuals.[19] This cultural hybridity mirrors Bhabha's argument that colonial encounters produce dynamic and transformative forms of expression rather than simple domination.

[19]Jamil Hasanli, *Foreign Policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan: The Difficult Road to Western Integration, 1918-1920*, (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 20.

Similarly, during the Soviet era, Azerbaijani artists operated in a Bhabha-ian Third Space, navigating the tension between the state-mandated socialist realism and their desire to preserve national identity. The works of Azerbaijani composers like Uzeyir Hajibeyov, who combined Western classical music with traditional mugham, exemplify this negotiation.[20] Such hybrid creations resist the erasure of indigenous culture while also transforming imposed cultural frameworks, aligning with Bhabha's theory of ambivalence and subversion.

Russian/Soviet Orientalism and the Construction of the Other

Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* provides another critical framework for understanding Azerbaijan's experience under Russian and Soviet rule. Said argues that the West constructs the East as the exotic and inferior "other" to legitimize domination.[21] In the case of Azerbaijan, Russian imperial narratives often depicted the region as backward and in need of civilizing, reinforcing the justification for colonial rule.[22] These orientalist constructions were further institutionalized during the Soviet period, where Azerbaijan was portrayed as an exotic yet loyal member of the Soviet family of nations. The imagery of Azerbaijani women in colorful traditional attire, often used in Soviet propaganda, exemplifies the exoticization of Azerbaijani culture while erasing its complex, pre-colonial identity. Said's work also sheds light on the suppression of Azerbaijani intellectuals and writers who resisted colonial narratives. Figures like Jalil Mammadguluzadeh and Ahmad Javad challenged the imposed depictions of their nation, advocating for cultural self-determination. Mammadguluzadeh's satirical journal *Molla*

[20] Frederik Coene, *The Caucasus: An Introduction,* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 206.
[21] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 5.
[22] Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity Under Russian Rule*, (United States: Hoover Institution Press, 2013).

Nasreddin[23] (1906–1931) criticized both Russian imperialism and internal social issues, embodying the resistance Said describes.[24]

Subalternity and Representation

Gayatri Spivak's exploration of subalternity offers a critical perspective on how Azerbaijan's marginalized voices have been silenced by colonial and Soviet systems. Spivak's central question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," resonates deeply with the experiences of Azerbaijani women, peasants, and other oppressed groups whose histories remain largely unrecorded. During both the Russian imperial and Soviet periods, Azerbaijani elites—typically male and educated—often mediated the representation of the broader populace. This dynamic aligns with Spivak's critique that subaltern voices are often co-opted or ignored within dominant discourses. Women's contributions to Azerbaijani culture, for instance, were frequently overlooked or appropriated. Poets like Khurshidbanu Natavan, one of the few prominent female figures, managed to carve a space for expression but remained an exception in a male-dominated literary sphere. Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism is also relevant to Azerbaijan's national movement. In resisting Soviet homogenization, Azerbaijani intellectuals temporarily embraced essentialized notions of national identity to mobilize against cultural erasure. This strategy mirrors Spivak's argument that essentialism, while problematic, can serve as a tool for resistance in specific contexts.

[23] Molla Nasreddin is a folklore character. He is an impious Muslim cleric known as a clever trickster. The name for the satirical journal that promoted social criticism and progressive discourse came from this character.
[24] Janet Afary and Kamran Afary, *Molla Nasreddin: The Making of a Modern Trickster (1906-1911),* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 186.

Cultural Translation, Diasporic Identity and Ethics of Representation

Bhabha's concept of cultural translation is particularly relevant to Azerbaijan's diasporic communities. The Azerbaijani diaspora, scattered across Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the West, constantly negotiates its identity across cultural boundaries. This negotiation is evident in the works of Azerbaijani diaspora writers like Banine, whose memoirs reflect the tensions of navigating between Azerbaijani, French, and Russian cultures.[25]

The concept of alterity, or the recognition of radical difference, further illuminates Azerbaijan's postcolonial experience. Emmanuel Levinas's call for an ethical relationship with the "other" challenges the colonial and Soviet tendency to homogenize Azerbaijani culture.[26] This erasure is evident in the Soviet reconfiguration of Azerbaijani history to fit Marxist narratives, sidelining indigenous perspectives. Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist approach also resonates with the Azerbaijani context. Derrida's critique of binary oppositions mirrors the need to dismantle simplistic distinctions between Russian/Soviet and Azerbaijani identities. Azerbaijani artists and intellectuals who engage in this deconstruction challenge dominant narratives, asserting the multiplicity of their culture.

Artistic and Cultural Resistance

Postcolonial theories also illuminate how Azerbaijan's artistic fields have resisted subjugation. Traditional art forms like carpet weaving and mugham music, often marginalized by colonial powers, have become symbols of national identity. These forms embody the hybrid

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[25] Shafag Dadashova, "Days in the Caucasus," *Slovo*, Vol. 32, NO. 2, School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, (University College London, 2019), 37.
[26] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 197.

aesthetics, blending local traditions with external influences. The resurgence of Azerbaijani literature, particularly poetry, in the late Soviet era demonstrates the subversive power of cultural production. Poets like Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh used allegory and metaphor to critique Soviet oppression while reaffirming Azerbaijani identity.[27] This aligns with Spivak's call to recover marginalized voices and Bhabha's emphasis on cultural negotiation as resistance.

The theories of Western postcolonial thinkers and philosophers offer valuable insights and a lens to examine Azerbaijan's history of subjugation under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Concepts like the Third Space, hybridity, the subaltern, and cultural translation provide tools to analyze how Azerbaijan navigates its colonial past and asserts its cultural identity. Azerbaijan's artistic and cultural fields reflect a constant negotiation of power and identity, resisting erasure while embracing hybridity. Situating Azerbaijan within postcolonial frameworks, helps deepen understanding of how marginalized nations of the region reclaim agency, challenge hegemonic discourses, and transform imposed narratives into sites of creativity and resistance.

[27] Aida Huseynova. Music of Azerbaijan: From Mugham to Opera. (United States: Indiana University Press, 2016), 41.

Historical Context

In this section I would like to familiarize the reader, with some of the history of the land which I come from and its people, while demonstrating how historical events affected the lives of ethnic Azerbaijanis and cultural production, and namely the weaving practice of the region. One small section of a visual arts MFA paper is not nearly enough to cover all of the history, but here I will go over some of the main events, making note of some of the oppressive structures in place that had a stifling effect on the identities of native Azerbaijanis. I will simultaneously provide a summary of the evolution of the craft of weaving amidst the backdrop of the conquest by the Russian Empire and subsequently the Soviet Union.

Early settlers in the land that is now known as Azerbaijan came from territories of present-day Iran and are believed to have arrived between the 10th and 7th centuries B.C.[28] The land became a province of the Persian Empire and was named "Atropatene," after a Persian Satrap, Atropates.[29] With time, and influence from other surrounding languages, such as Byzantine Greek, Armenian, and Arabic, the name was corrupted into "Azerbaijan." Smaller Iranian empires existed in the area, until the region was invaded by Arab tribes and a forced conversion to Islam occurred. Around the 11th century, Turcic groups started migrating into Azerbaijan, and eventually it became a part of Turkic regional states and was occupied by the

[28] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers of Historical Change: The Azerbaijani Carpet Industry from the Mid-nineteenth to Late Twentieth Century," (University of South Carolina, 2021), 8.
[29] Arthur Upham Pope, "Azerbaijan," *Bulletin of the Iranian Institute*, Vol. 6/7, Vol. 6, nos. 1-4, Vol. 7, no. 1 (December 1946), 61

Ottoman Empire,[30] which resulted in Turkification of most of the population. Over the next several centuries wars and disputes over the territory ensued and involved the Persian, Russian and Ottoman Empires, as well as the neighboring Georgia.[31] In the year 1828 Russia and Persia signed what is known as "The Treaty of Turkmenchai", according to which Azerbaijan was divided into two parts: one (in the north) that became annexed by Russia and the other (in the south), which remained under Persian control.[32]

As one of the world's oldest forms of art, weaving has been practiced in Azerbaijan since the ancient times as well, although the technique and production style went through several transformations in the process of social and industrial development[33]. Living in a rural society, early weavers produced carpets for personal use and not for trade, so there is no written record of when exactly carpets appeared in Azerbaijan, however, there is research showing that "high quality weaving existed [in the territory of present-day Azerbaijan] by the 1st century C.E."[34] Carpets were flat-woven until the advent of scissors and other tools, at which point the pile carpets were developed, implementing the knot-making technique[35] still used today. Prior to the 20th century, carpets were woven by hand from natural materials. It was a community affair that involved men shearing the sheep and the women then turning the wool into fibres and dying them using natural dyes. It was a lengthy and laborious process. The wool first had to be washed and beaten with a pomegranate stick to restore its volume, then immersed repeatedly in the dying solutions, to achieve the desired colour and intensity. The ingredients used for dyeing purposes,

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[30] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 9.
[31] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 9.
[32] Tadeusz Swietochowski, "National Consciousness and Political Orientations in Azerbaijan, 1905-1920," *Transcaucasia: Nationalism and Social Change,* edited by Ronald Grigor Suny, (University of Michigan, 1983), 209.
[33] Latif Kerimov, *Azerbaijan Carpet*, (Gandjlik Publishing House, Baku, 1983), 205.
[34] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 14.
[35] Latif Kerimov, *Azerbaijan Carpet,* 205.

such as pomegranate, walnut, madder plant, indigo, cochineal insects, and others,[36] had to first be harvested, ground, boiled and go through various transformations – all this before weaving could even begin. Weaving is a whole other process on its own – one that, depending on the size of the project, took several months to complete and usually took place over the cold winters. Women were involved in the entire making process described, aside from shearing the sheep, while men only participated in ceremonial preparations and celebrations once weaving was about to begin and once a carpet was completed.[37]

The territory of present-day Azerbaijan had been fought over for centuries by formidable political forces of varying and conflicting cultural and religious backgrounds and ideas, changing hands many times over its long history, resulting in the oppression of its population in the areas of language, religion, and cultural practices. The Arab invasion saw the majority of the population forcefully convert from Zoroastrianism and Christianity to Islam,[38] which remains prevalent in the region today. With that sequence, came imposed rules that impacted local cultural practices, such as weaving, as the new religion "forbade the depiction of people and animals,"[39] which had previously been important motifs. These motifs were preserved and later came back in designs produced under the Ottoman rule,[40] which also changed the spoken language in the region from Persian to a Turkic dialect[41] (still spoken today). Language and religion were the intersecting sites of oppression which affected the entire population as they were forced to conform to foreign ways of being.

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[36] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 11.
[37] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 36.
[38] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 8.
[39] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 9.
[40] Jill Bogs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 9.
[41] Arthur Upham Pope, "Azerbaijan," 61.

Subsequently, the acquisition of the land by the Russian Empire in 1828 brought with it new challenges for the members of local communities in Azerbaijan. Despite attempts to modernize the region and integrate Azerbaijanis into the Russian society, Russia's newly acquired territory maintained its ties to Turkey and Persia, and remained "rural, traditional and unindustrialized,"[42] which resulted in further conflicts and marginalization of its ethnic population. Seeing the Muslim population as a threat, the Russian Empire imposed new rules that prevented the ethnic peoples from being able to vote or be elected to government, and limited their access to education, and by around 1880 only 0.89% of Azerbaijanis were eligible to vote.[43] Russian, Ukrainian and other non-Muslim nationals migrated into the region and by the turn of the century Azerbaijanis made up only 36% of the total population,[44] essentially becoming a marginalized minority on their own land. These newer populations saw Azerbaijanis as uncivilized nomads "best ruled through force, rather than compromise."[45] Most Azerbaijanis became serfs and lost their rights to move across lands.[46] Serfdom introduced yet another category of identity associated with marginalization of the ethnic people – class. Cultural practices did not go unaffected either. As Azerbaijanis were now peasants, bound to lands controlled by Russian lords, weaving was now produced for local nobility or for trade,[47] whereas prior to the Russian acquisition it was meant strictly for personal use within the ethnic communities. The motifs remained mainly unaffected under the Russian rule, as the Russian

[42] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 10.
[43] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 28.
[44] Audrey Altstadt-Mirhadi, "The Azerbaijani Bourgeoisie and the Cultural Enlightenment Movement in Baku: First Steps Toward Nationalism," *Transcaucasia: Nationalism and Social Change,* edited by Ronald Grigor Suny, (University of Michigan, 1983), 197.
[45] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 18.
[46] Ibid, 18.
[47] Ibid, 18.

Empire was not so much interested in the artistic expression or cultural practices, as it was in the oil-rich land it now occupied.[48]

A parallel may be drawn between the events described above and colonial practices in the west. The invasion of one's land, disenfranchisement of local communities, limitation (or lack there of) their rights in the political sphere, limitation of their access to education, extraction of natural resources from the land, economic profit off the said resources and off the culturally produced goods in the community – all align with extractionist practices witnessed in the west in the lands which we now call the Americas. And as we know from numerous sources, and most relevantly, from Leanne Simpson's *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*, "extractivism and assimilation go together" and "colonialism… [is] based on extracting and assimilating."[49] And just as land and culture were seen as resources in the West, Azerbaijan's land and culture was seen as a resource by the Russian Empire, and later the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Intervention

With the rise of communism in the region in the 20th century, there were some perceived benefits for the ethnic nations of the Soviet Union such as Azerbaijan. But upon a closer look, it becomes evident that this was just another imperial power with colonial agendas pretending to be something else. Unlike the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union had more success in its modernization and industrialization efforts in Azerbaijan. Whether progress in this case is a positive or a negative change is arguable, as I think back to Walter Benjamin's "Thesis on the

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[48] Ibid, 18.
[49] Leanne Simpson, "Nishnaabeg Anticapitalism," *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 75.

Philosophy of History" and his infamous "angel of history" analogy,[50] but the fact remains, the industrialization under the Soviet rule saw an increase in carpet production, as many collective weaving centers were established, and synthetic materials were introduced[51] to speed up the making process.

This put Azerbaijani carpets on the international stage, as foreign interest in the textile increased and weavers took advantage of exporting opportunities.[52] The industry turned heavily market-driven and the implemented motifs drastically changed to include portraits of Lenin and Stalin in order to appease to the markets outside of the region.[53] Women's position as producers improved as they had newly found independence, could work outside their homes, and actively contribute to the economy. All this paints a picture of an ideal environment where the government was supportive of ethnic cultural practices and provided the means for them to flourish, as technical schools dedicated to weaving and a "department studying carpet design at the Azerbaijan ASSR's Institute of Architecture and Art" were established.[54]

But there were other implications that came with the benefits the region and its population reaped. The Soviet government imposed strict rules concerning the motifs that were allowed to go on carpets. Religious motifs traditionally implemented into pre-Soviet designs were removed from the new designs and only secular motifs the Soviets felt conformed to their anti-religious beliefs were permitted.[55] This erasure of any trace of national identity from this cultural practice serves as evidence of oppression and control over ethnic minorities. The

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[50] Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, (New York; Schocken, 1969), 257.
[51] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 22.
[52] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 22.
[53] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 22.
[54] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 25.
[55] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 27.

authenticity of these carpets was jeopardized, as were the weavers' artistic and cultural freedoms. The Soviet state benefitted from exportation of these beautiful "exotic" textiles as they were marketed as Soviet or Caucasian rugs, and featured Soviet symbols and secular designs,[56] further asserting Soviet power.

Language

Although the Soviet government created an environment where the practice could prosper and help boost economy, it was first and foremost boosting the economy of the Soviet government itself and came at the cost of losing aspects of cultural identity, traditional centuries-old designs, and artistic freedom. Even the spoken language was affected once again; I recall from personal experience of growing up during the final years of the Soviet rule and a few years after its demise – those who were educated in the Russian language were considered the elite and superior to those who were not. Russian had been mandatory in elementary schools since 1938. [57]There was a noticeable division of class and those who did not speak Russian were seen as uncivilized villagers and would not get the same opportunities as the Russophones. Under the pretense of "saving" previously exploited states from the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union aimed to demonstrate its support for the cultural practices of its ethnic populations[58], however, its own practices of control, censorship (in the case of removing culturally significant and religious symbolisms) and erasure of signs of national identity align more with characteristics of oppressor rather than savior.

[56] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 32.
[57] Lenore A Grenoble and SpringerLink (Online service), Language Policy in the Soviet Union, Vol. 3 (2003), 54.
[58] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 41.

Centuries before, people who lived on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan, spoke and wrote in Farsi. With the conquest by the Ottomans the area got Turkified and a Turkic dialect took precedence. The use of Arabic script could not adequately express all the sounds of the new Turkic Azerbaijani language. To accommodate the nuanced sounds the alphabet was changed to Latin, with the addition of a few characters. With the Soviet occupation the alphabet was changed to Cyrillic, but although it took some years, after the collapse of the Soviet Union it went back to Latin, which is still in use today. Here we see language, just like culture and craft, affected by the political climate and the ruling powers. Because the territory switched hands so many times, and because of all the changes in the language and alphabet, the nationality and origins of certain poets and philosophers considered to be Azerbaijani are largely disputed. Case in point, Nizami Ganjavi,[59] a renowned poet I grew up knowing as Azerbaijani, lived and worked in Ganja, which is currently a city in Azerbaijan. But in Ganjavi's lifetime, back in the 12th century, Azerbaijan (including Ganja) was an Iranian province.[60] After all, Azerbaijan did not exist as a country till recent history, even though the land and the people had been there for millennia. Evidently, history of language and literature of the area is very convoluted and complex, and surrounded by controversy.

When I was growing up, Russian was considered to be the superior language of the elite. People who did not speak Russian and who only spoke the native Azeri were considered uneducated, unsophisticated, "village people" and were discriminated against. Many children, including myself, were sent to Russian schools and were educated strictly in Russian. Because of this, most children of my and my parents' generation were sent to Russian schools and were

[59] "Nizami" is an Azerbaijani spelling vs. Persian "Nezami." Both refer to the same person.
[60] Siyavash Lornejad and Ali Doostzadeh, "On the Modern Politicization of the Persian Poet Nezami Ganjavi," edited by Victoria Arakelova, Caucasian Centre for Iranian Studies, Yerevan, 2012, p. 9.

educated predominantly in Russian, essentially being raised with Russian/Soviet beliefs, values, traditions and mores. As a result, many of us did not get to learn our native tongue, Azeri. Russian became my first language, and, as embarrassing as it is, to this day, I do not speak the true language of my ancestors. This also created a communication barrier between elder and younger members within the same households. In my case, my grandmother spoke fluent Azeri and broken Russian, and I spoke fluent Russian and broken Azeri, subsequently preventing her from passing down ancestral knowledge and history to me and resulting in the loss of many aspects of my cultural identity.

Russian Orientalism, Internal Colonization and Azerbaijani Identity

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains foundational for understanding how imperial powers construct and dominate their subjects through cultural representation. Said's exploration of the "Orient" as an exotic, inferior Other, essential to the West's self-definition, has been applied to various imperial contexts, including Russia's colonial engagements. Russian Orientalism diverges from its Western European counterpart in significant ways due to the empire's geographic contiguity with its eastern territories and its strategies of internal expansion, unlike Western European colonial powers that projected their authority over geographically distant lands. The Caucasus, and Azerbaijan in particular, became a critical space where Russian Orientalism emerged as a tool of political domination and cultural hegemony. Drawing on Said's *Orientalism* and Alexander Etkind's *Internal Colonization* (2011), this section examines how Russian and later Soviet discourses framed Azerbaijan as a site of "otherness," with particular attention to the role of Azerbaijani weaving and the broader textile industry as both a symbol of cultural identity and an object of imperial exploitation.

Russian Orientalism in Context

In *Orientalism*, Said identifies a binary discourse where the "Orient" is depicted as backward and irrational, contrasted with a rational and progressive West. Russian imperial thought embraced this framework, shaping its expansion into the Caucasus. The Russian Empire constructed Azerbaijan as a liminal space—geographically near but culturally distant—making it a focal point for both cultural imagination and material domination. Azerbaijan's predominantly Turkic and Muslim identity reinforced its image as an "Oriental" frontier. Russian intellectuals

viewed the region through an Orientalist lens, portraying it as both alluring and in need of civilizing. Azerbaijani people were depicted as embodying the exoticism of the East while also serving Russia's geopolitical interests. This duality is evident in Russian literary representations of Azerbaijan, such as in Alexander Pushkin's *Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822) and Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) which romanticized the Caucasus as a space of untamed nature and noble savages. These representations simultaneously celebrated and subordinated the local population, portraying them as both heroic and barbaric. Such depictions echo Said's argument that Orientalist discourse serves to justify domination by constructing the subject as both inferior and intriguing.[61]

Alexander Etkind's concept of internal colonization provides a crucial lens for understanding Russia's approach. Rather than expanding into distant colonies, Russia's imperial model was centered on contiguous territorial expansion, treating its peripheries as both integral and alien.[62] Azerbaijan, formally annexed through the Treaty of Gulistan[63] (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828), exemplified this dynamic. On the one hand, Russian authorities sought to modernize and integrate Azerbaijan through administrative, educational, and cultural reforms. On the other, the region's cultural distinctiveness was exoticized and exploited. This mirrors Said's observation that colonial powers often seek to impose their own narrative and epistemology on their subjects, transforming them into objects of study and control.[64]

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[61] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 3.
[62] Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 18.
[63] Treaty of Gulistan is a peace treaty concluded between the Russian Empire and Qajar Iran in the village of Gulistan on the territory of Azerbaijan. In 1813 at the time of the Treaty Azerbaijan was ruled by Iran.
[64] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 67.

Azerbaijan's oil wealth further heightened its strategic importance. Baku became an industrial hub, symbolizing Russia's economic motivations. The extraction of natural resources from Azerbaijani soil paralleled the cultural extraction described by both Said and Etkind. The cultural appropriation of Azerbaijani traditions, particularly carpet weaving, mirrored this colonial extraction. Renowned for their intricate designs and craftsmanship, Azerbaijani carpets were commodified under Russian rule, recast as luxury goods for European and Russian markets.

Azerbaijani Weaving – A Cultural and Economic Nexus

The Azerbaijani carpet has long been a symbol of cultural pride and artistic mastery. Historically, the weaving of carpets and textiles in Azerbaijan was a communal and often gendered activity, with women playing a central role in preserving and transmitting this artistic tradition. Carpet motifs carried deep cultural meanings, often tied to religious, historical, or environmental themes. These designs varied by region, with distinctive styles emerging from areas like Shirvan, Karabakh, and Ganja.[65]

Russian Orientalism, however, transformed the meaning and function of Azerbaijani weaving. Carpets, previously integrated into daily life and rituals were recontextualized as artifacts of an "exotic" culture, suitable for collection and display in Russian salons and European museums. This process aligns with Said's observation that Orientalist discourse often strips cultural products of their original context, reinterpreting them to serve imperial narratives.[66] Economically, the weaving industry became a focal point for imperial extraction.

[65] Latif Kerimov, *Azerbaijan Carpet, (Gandjlik* Publishing House, Baku. 1983), 53.
[66] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism,* 67.

Russian authorities encouraged the production of carpets for export, shifting the industry from its traditional artisanal roots to a more industrialized model. This transformation disrupted local practices, prioritizing designs and production methods that catered to foreign tastes rather than indigenous needs. As Etkind notes, internal colonization often involved the economic exploitation of peripheries to sustain the imperial center, a dynamic vividly illustrated in Azerbaijan's textile industry.[67]

The Soviet Era – Continuities and Transformations

The Soviet period introduced new dimensions to Azerbaijani weaving and its broader cultural identity. While the Bolsheviks officially rejected the imperialist practices of their tsarist predecessors, Soviet policies often perpetuated similar dynamics of control and commodification.[68] Azerbaijani carpets were incorporated into the Soviet nationalities policy, presented as symbols of ethnic pride within a socialist framework. State-sponsored workshops and exhibitions celebrated Azerbaijani weaving as part of the USSR's "friendship of peoples," but these initiatives often dictated aesthetic and production standards that aligned with Soviet ideological goals.[69]

Soviet policies also transformed the economic structures of the weaving industry. Traditional, family-based workshops were replaced by state-run factories, where production was standardized and centralized. While this shift increased output and introduced Azerbaijani carpets to global markets, it often came at the expense of local autonomy and traditional practices. This dual process of cultural celebration and economic exploitation reflects the broader

[67] Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization*, 89.
[68] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 22.
[69] Ibid.

dynamics of Soviet Orientalism, which sought to modernize and integrate peripheral cultures while maintaining control over their expression.

Resistance and Reclamation

Azerbaijan's experience of Russian colonization was not passive. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Azerbaijani intellectuals, writers, and political leaders resisted these narratives, seeking to reclaim their identity and assert their agency. Figures such as Mirza Fatali Akhundov, often regarded as the father of modern Azerbaijani literature, promoted a vision of Azerbaijani modernity that was distinct from both Russian and Western models.[70] Despite the pressures it faced, Azerbaijani weaving also persisted as a site of cultural resistance and identity formation. Local artisans and intellectuals worked to preserve traditional techniques and motifs, even as they navigated the demands of Russian and Soviet authorities. Figures like Latif Karimov, a prominent Azerbaijani artist and carpet researcher, played a crucial role in documenting and revitalizing the nation's weaving heritage. His work, some of which is documented in the form of a several-volume book series titled *Azerbaijan Carpet*, underscores the resilience of Azerbaijani culture in the face of imperial appropriation. This resistance complicates the binary of colonizer and colonized that often underpins Orientalist discourse. As Said notes, the subjects of Orientalism are not merely passive recipients of imperial narratives but active participants in negotiating their identities.[71] Similarly, Etkind's concept of internal colonization acknowledges the agency of peripheral populations in shaping their relationship with the imperial center.[72]

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[70] Tamam Bayatly, "Alphabet Transitions", Summer 1997.
[71] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism,* 27.
[72] Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization*, 114.

The concept of Russian Orientalism, as applied to Azerbaijan, reveals the complex interplay of cultural, political, and economic forces that shaped the region's identity and development. Through Said and Etkind, we see how the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union constructed Azerbaijan as both a cultural artifact and an economic resource. The Azerbaijani weaving industry, emblematic of this dynamic, became a site of both exploitation and resistance, reflecting the broader tensions of imperial rule.

By examining these dynamics, I offer a deeper understanding of the legacies of internal colonization under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union not only in Azerbaijan but across the broader post-Soviet space. Azerbaijani weaving, in particular, stands as a testament to the resilience of local traditions in the face of external domination, offering a rich case study for understanding the intersections of culture, economy, and power in imperial contexts.

Postcolonial Identity in Azerbaijani Context – What It Means to be post-Soviet

Postcolonial identity in Azerbaijan reflects a complex negotiation of history, culture, and politics in the aftermath of Soviet rule. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 left Azerbaijan grappling with questions of cultural revival, historical memory, and national sovereignty. In this section I examine the multifaceted nature of Azerbaijani identity, focusing on the lingering effects of Soviet policies and the broader implications of postcolonial theory in a post-Soviet context. Madina Tlostanova's concept of the "post-Soviet" goes beyond political independence, framing it as a profound existential challenge for nations once subsumed within the Soviet system. She argues that the Soviet Union operated as an empire, enforcing a "civilizing mission" that sought to homogenize diverse peoples under a socialist ideology while simultaneously marginalizing local cultures and identities.[73] Azerbaijan, like other Soviet republics, was subjected to this imperialist framework, where its Turkic, Islamic, and local traditions were reconfigured to fit the narrative of a "progressive" Soviet society. For Azerbaijan, being post-Soviet means navigating the remnants of this imposed identity while grappling with a historical amnesia that Soviet cultural policies encouraged. Tlostanova asserts that the post-Soviet condition is marked by "epistemic disobedience," a process of rejecting Soviet epistemologies and reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems and cultural expressions.[74] In the Azerbaijani context, this involves reviving Islamic practices, Turkic heritage, and Persianate literary traditions, all of which were sidelined during Soviet rule.

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[73] Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire,* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2018), 5.
[74] Ibid, 7.

As discussed in previous sections, the Soviet colonial project in Azerbaijan was a double-edged sword. On one hand, the Bolsheviks presented themselves as liberators of oppressed nations, promoting modernization, literacy, and equality. On the other, as Audrey L. Soviet policies were deeply assimilationist, aiming to suppress national consciousness and replace it with Soviet identity.[75] The adoption of the Latin script in the 1920s and its subsequent replacement with Cyrillic in the 1940s were emblematic of this cultural engineering, severing Azerbaijanis from their Ottoman and Islamic intellectual heritage. Language was a particularly potent tool of control. Altstadt notes that by altering the script and centralizing education, the Soviet state sought to "disconnect" the Azerbaijani people from their cultural and linguistic ties with the broader "Turkic and Islamic world."[76] This deliberate fragmentation of linguistic and cultural continuity created a generation of Azerbaijanis disconnected from their pre-Soviet heritage. And this enforced detachment left a legacy of cultural disorientation that persists in the post-Soviet era, as Azerbaijanis attempt to reconcile their pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet identities.

The Soviet Union's approach to culture in Azerbaijan reveals the tension between promoting local traditions and simultaneously undermining them. Altstadt highlights how the Soviet state co-opted Azerbaijani cultural symbols to create a sanitized version of national identity that fit within socialist ideology. For example, the works of Nizami Ganjavi, a 12th-century Persian poet celebrated in Azerbaijan, were reinterpreted to emphasize themes of social justice and anti-feudalism, aligning them with Marxist-Leninist values.[77] This selective appropriation of cultural heritage created a paradoxical identity for Azerbaijanis: one that

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[75]Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan, 1920-40,* (Routledge, London, 2016), 10.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan,* 87.

celebrated their historical achievements while denying the full spectrum of their cultural and religious past. This is Bhabha's hybridized identity, where indigenous traditions are reshaped by the colonizer's narrative, resulting in an identity that is neither wholly indigenous nor fully colonial. In the post-Soviet era, reclaiming this distorted heritage and an identity that is distinct from the Soviet past has become a central aspect of Azerbaijani identity politics. This reclaiming involves the revival of Islamic practices, a renewed emphasis on Turkic heritage, and the restoration of pre-Soviet cultural symbols. However, these efforts are complicated by the deep imprint of Soviet modernity on Azerbaijani society, education, urban planning, and governance. It is a lengthy and difficult process to return to precolonial traditions that takes generations and involves a negotiation of multiple temporalities and identities. Post-Soviet identity oscillates between the modernity inherited from the Soviet Union and a desire to reconnect with a pre-Soviet ancestral culture, and therefore occupying a liminal space, Bhabha's Third Space.

Memory and Historical Narrative

Memory plays a critical role in shaping post-Soviet identity in Azerbaijan. The Soviet state deliberately erased or reinterpreted historical narratives that conflicted with its ideological goals. For example, the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR), which existed briefly from 1918 to 1920, was portrayed as a bourgeois, reactionary regime in Soviet historiography. Since independence, the ADR has been rehabilitated as a symbol of national sovereignty and democracy, challenging the Soviet-era narrative.[78] This process of reclaiming history is part of a broader decolonial project that seeks to undo the epistemic violence of Soviet rule. Tlostanova

[78] Ibid, 120.

argues that decoloniality involves not only recovering suppressed histories but also creating new frameworks for understanding identity that transcend colonial binaries.[79]

Language has played a crucial role in Azerbaijan's post-Soviet identity politics. The reintroduction of the Latin script in the 1990s was a symbolic rejection of Soviet influence and an effort to reconnect with the Turkic world. However, the decades of Soviet linguistic and educational policies left a lasting impact. Russian remains widely spoken, particularly among the urban elite, and Soviet-era Cyrillic script is still visible in public spaces. This coexistence of linguistic systems reflects the layered nature of Azerbaijani identity, where Soviet legacies persist alongside efforts to revive pre-Soviet traditions. Azerbaijanis today are left with this layered identity, where Soviet, Islamic, and Turkic elements coexist but do not always align harmoniously, creating tension, confusion and frustration. This layered identity reflects the broader struggles of postcolonial nations to reconcile their colonial pasts with their postcolonial futures.

Negotiating Identity in North American Context

As evident from the previous few sections, the post-Soviet Azerbaijani identity is fragmented and complex in itself. My immigrating to Canada and living in the West over the past two decades further complicates my personal sense of selfhood, cultural identity and belonging. When I first arrived in London, Ontario, in the 2000s I was suddenly completely disconnected from my ancestral culture, as there was no Azerbaijani community around. It was tough at first, but I was young and soon I adapted. I tried my best to conform to Anglophone

[79] Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to be Post-Soviet?,* 22.

Canadian identity. While attending the mandatory ESL[80] classes, I concentrated on learning proper pronunciations as well as I could, in an attempt to conceal my accent or where I was from. I worked very hard to turn my "Ze" to "The," and "tank you" to "thank you," which was not easy at first as the sound "th" did not exist in either Russian, or Azeri and was a new concept for me. In my attempt to fit in and belong, I carefully curated aspects of my identity.

In her Huffington Post essay "I Spent Half My Life Feeling Shame for Being Asian in America. Here's What Changed," journalist Allison Lau describes a similar experience of navigating between two cultures (Chinese and American) and leading a double life of sorts. Her account was so relatable to me that it brought tears to my eyes when I first read it. She tells her story of living in a state of constant negotiation in the process of adapting and assimilating into American identity and suppressing her Chinese identity. She sensed a push from her parents and felt that this assimilation was the way to success.[81] In the end she came to the realization that she may not fit in either identity category properly, and learned to reconcile these conflicting elements of her identity into one that lives in a gray area, straddling the line between the two. In my case, there was no outside push, as my parents stayed back and did not join me in Canada, but I felt a pressure nonetheless and pushed myself to become as Canadian as I could, which resulted in my Azerbaijani identity taking a backseat. But in the end, I came to the same conclusion as Lau. No matter how hard I tried I could never fit into either culture perfectly. My Azerbaijani identity is an integral part of my "self", and I cannot leave it out, I have to bring it with me wherever I go. Today, I no longer try to conceal my alterity or where I am from, and

[80] ESL stands for English as a Second Language. It is an English course mandatory for all newcomers – at least it was at the time.
[81] Allison Lau, "I Spent Half My Life Feeling Shame for Being Asian in Amarica. Here's What Changed," (Huffington Post, 2019).

when I am asked “Where are you from? …No, where are you *really* from?” I answer, “I am from Scarborough, but I was born in Azerbaijan,” as such acknowledging both aspects of identity.

This process of reconciling these conflicting sides of my identity which resulted from my lived experience as a Soviet, post-Soviet and Canadian woman, really began around the time I started thinking about graduate school. My art practice and specifically this MFA journey has played a crucial role.

Studio Work and Exhibition

I have always felt disconnected from my true ancestral culture. This disconnection, I believe, was caused by the combination of being brought up under heavy Russian/Soviet influence and spending more than half my life in Canada. My lived experience created some sort of a gap and a sense of fragmentation within my "self," which became more strongly felt as time went on. I became increasingly interested in issues of identity, diasporic experience and belonging. Being an artist, I began to use my art as a way to communicate my experience and as a means to try and bridge that gap. In an attempt to reconnect with my ancestral culture, and to revive my Azerbaijani identity that had been placed on the back burner for years, I felt compelled to research the history of the land on which I was born and the cultural practices of my people. Weaving is one of the most significant such practices in Azerbaijan – a symbol of national identity and a cherished part of our heritage. Growing up in Azerbaijan, carpets were just a part of everyday life, like tables or chairs, not just for me but for many, if not all Azerbaijanis. In every room of my childhood home, at least one carpet hanged on the wall, and at least one would be on the floor. There were a few smaller ones too, covering an occasional ottoman or an old chest. It was the same in every one of my friends' homes – at least in ones I got to visit and still remember. As a child I would play with the rich piles of the carpets and could spend hours examining their elaborate motifs. I was taught to weave around the time I was nine years old. At the time I did not understand, let alone appreciate, the significance of this craft and the many centuries of tradition it reflected. Three decades later and having spent over two of them in Canada, - an ocean away from my ancestral homeland - I found myself longing to reconnect with my ancestral roots. As part of an attempt to do that, and as part of the exploration into my own

cultural identity, I began to think about things that were distinctly Azerbaijani - things that made up the Azerbaijani identity. The intricate designs of seemingly forgotten carpets, woven by my grandmother and which inescapably surrounded my childhood, floated up to the surface of my memory. Thinking back to them as an adult, I recognized the amount of care and physical labour that went into creating these precious forms of textile, and it became clear that they held a much deeper meaning than I gave credit to as a child. It became clear that I would focus a large part of my research and studio exploration on this delicate craft and the art of textile.

Natural Dyes

I knew I wanted to learn more about the weaving process, then experiment with methods and techniques used in traditional Azerbaijani weaving and make a series of woven works to be included in the exhibition. Traditionally, carpets were woven by hand from natural materials. As an homage to my ancestors who practiced this craft for centuries (prior to the industrialization and commodification brought on by the Russian and Soviet Empires), I wanted to stay as true to their ways as my contemporary western environment would allow. In the first part of my graduate journey, I began researching the materials used in Azerbaijani weaving. It all started with raw wool, which first had to be washed and beaten with a stick made from a branch of a pomegranate tree, to restore its volume – a process that I witnessed my grandmother carry out many times. While she could easily buy the wool already processed, and ready for use, she always chose to go out to the country and pick up freshly sheared raw wool from a farm of distant relatives, and prepare it herself, even though our urban high-rise apartment made it physically challenging due to its size. As she is no longer here for me to ask, I can only assume

that she went through all that trouble because the traditional ways of making, passed down through generations, held a special meaning and sentimental value.

Figure 1. Azerbaijani women spinning wool into fiber. Photo credit: M. Rahimv/Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2009)

After the wool was washed and beaten, it was spun into fibre using a special spinning wheel that was unique to the Caucasus region.[82] The next step was the dyeing of the fibres - a process whose complexity I can attest to myself, as I attempted it as part of my research. Traditionally, pomegranate, onion, madder plant, walnut, cochineal insects, indigo and other herbs, and fruits were used to achieve various colours.[83] The process involved grinding of these ingredients into pigment and repeatedly boiling the fibres in a mix of pigment and water. For the purposes of my material research, based on availability, I used some items in their raw form, such as pomegranate, onion skins, walnut, chestnut etc., and some of the ingredients I purchased in pigment form from a natural dye store here in Toronto. The process was lengthy and required many "rinse-and-repeat" cycles in order to get anywhere close to the intensity of colour seen in the authentic Azerbaijani rugs. Some of my experimentations yielded better results than others,

[82] Jill Boggs, "Carpets as Signifiers," 11.
[83] Ibid.

but the process was educational and satisfying, and most importantly it aided in understanding and putting into perspective the amount of labour that goes into traditional ways of making. In a way, it helped me feel more connected to nature and my ancestors.

Figure 2. Naturally dyed fibers. Left to right: Turmeric, Marigold, Turmeric, Turmeric, Chestnut, Sumac, Indigo, Indigo.

Figure 3. Dyeing with indigo.

Figure 4. Dyeing with turmeric.

Loom

Once the fibres were dyed and ready, the weaving could finally begin. Weaving took place on a vertical or horizontal loom. It was a community affair, as depending on the size of the loom, several people could weave together at the same time. Mothers and daughters would weave together. For me, weaving meant time spent with my grandmother. I enjoyed listening to her stories while we wove, more than I enjoyed the weaving itself.

Figure 5. Azerbaijani women engaged in weaving on a traditional vertical loom. Photo credit: R. Taghiyeva/Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2005)

Once I had dyed my fibers, I was ready to start the weaving process, but first I needed a loom. Sustainability is very important to my practice. As a rule, I always try to use natural found or repurposed materials, and I sometimes scavenge the neighbourhood for discarded wood and other things I may be able to use as surface. I had acquired an old broken solid wood coffee table this way, and I decided to use it to build a loom. During my graduate studies I worked between my studio at home and the IAMD studios in the OCAD U's grad building, so I needed the loom

to be small enough and preferably foldable, so it could be easily transported from place to place, if need be. I based the design on a larger loom that my grandmother would use back in Azerbaijan, which I recalled from memory. It was simple, almost primitive, with minimal moving parts. To me it screamed tradition, memory, meaning.

As a painter, I had never attempted to build anything out of wood, other than canvas stretchers and cradled wood panels, so this was a great opportunity to learn new skills in the woodshop and use new tools. I made a cardboard prototype, and once I had an idea of what I wanted, I proceeded to cut and assemble the wooden version. The wooden version proved to be way more challenging than the cardboard one, but with the help of my amazing professors and the knowledgeable technicians at our studios I completed the project.

Figure 6. Discarded coffee table.

*Figure 7***.** Using a drill press to cut holes for horizontal bars

Figure 8. Installing hinges

Figure 9. Close-up of hinges

It is important to note that my father was a woodworker and a metalworker – he could make anything out of wood or metal. When I left Azerbaijan, he made me a model ship as a parting gift and as something to remember him by. I never saw him again as he left this world a few years later. That ship, which I have kept to this day, is the only thing I have left of him and is one of the most precious objects I own. Working with wood on the loom project was therefore an act of reconnection and care as well. Although woodworking is not a craft that is specific or limited to Azerbaijan, for me it is a familial tie and a reconnection with memory and holds a special meaning.

Figure 10. Loom made from recycled wood.

Over the course of the remaining months of the program I used the finished loom as a tool to produce a number of woven tapestries for the final exhibition. However, because process is an important part of my work, this tool had to be included in the exhibition as well. It would also add a performative aspect to the show as it would allow me to continue to work in the space, demonstrating my process live.

Weaving Techniques

There are three main weaving techniques used in Azerbaijan that I was taught. *Kilim* is a basic technique that involves interweaving weft (the horizontal yarn) and warp (vertical fibers) and produces flat pileless textiles (Fig. 10).

Figure 11. Garagoyunlu Kilim, early 20th century, Gazakh, Azerbaijan. Photo credit: Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum

Figure 12. A detail of a piece woven by the artist implementing the kilim technique

Sumakh is another flatwoven technique where weft and warp are interwoven with an additional step of wrapping the weft around each warp. It produces a flat pileless textile with a pattern that resembles a knitted fabric.

Figure 13. Sumakh, c. 1930, Guba, Azerbaijan. Photo credit: Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum.

Figure 14. Sumakh technique. In this piece woven by the artist the sumakh technique can be seen incorporated in the lower right, resembling braids or knitted fabric.

The third technique that I am familiar with is the *Turkish Knot* technique, which produces piled carpets and involves knotting the weft around two warps and cutting the remaining weft with a specialized knife (Fig. 16). This leaves long piles. Once the whole row is completed, the piles are trimmed with special scissors to ensure they are all the same length (Fig. 17).

Figure 15. Gonagkand piled carpet, early 20th century, Guba Azerbaijan. Photo credit: Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum.

Figure 16. The artist using the Turkish Knot technique.

Figure 17. Trimming the piles.

When I first learned how to weave, my father made me my own weaving tools, and I was so proud to have tools handmade by my father. They felt very special. When I moved to Canada, I left them behind, and unfortunately, they have been since lost. The tools pictured above are also handmade but were acquired from a local artisan after a long and exhaustive search all over the Greater Toronto Area.

I set out to make a series of woven works using these three techniques. Traditionally, only one of these techniques is used to complete a single rug. Finished rugs are either flatwoven or piled. However, I decided to use a combination of two or all three of these techniques in each piece (Fig. 18). Furthermore, I incorporate different materials in each piece. In contrast to traditional Azerbaijani textiles where the entire piece is either wool, cotton, or silk, mine consist of a combination of wool, cotton, jute, and beeswax – all natural materials that were used by, produced by, and available to my ancestors and are still used, produced and available today, but

in these works they interact closely with one another and serve as fragments of a whole (Fig. 18). This deliberate choice speaks of Bhabha's concept of hybridity.

Figure 18. One of the pieces woven by the artist incorporating a combination of materials and techniques.

Pulling Threads

Figure 19. Pulling Threads, 2025.

Pulling Threads is an installation consisting of a number of woven pieces discussed in the last section. They each incorporate various natural materials and one to three of the traditional Azerbaijani weaving and knotting techniques. Even at first glance, what becomes undeniably obvious is that aesthetically they look drastically different from the traditional rugs, carpets and other textiles woven in Azerbaijan, such as pictured in Figures 11, 13 and 15. They lack the distinctively Eastern motifs. This is a conscious choice, in part, because beautiful intricate designs of Azerbaijani textiles do not come naturally to me. As a diasporic subject, I am neither completely Azerbaijani, nor completely Western. I find myself in-between. These works are a reflection of me – neither fully Azerbaijani, nor Canadian, they straddle the line between the two, just like I do. It is not exactly clear what culture they belong to – there is an ambivalence about them. This ambivalence resists the binary between one culture and the other, situating the work in a "liminal space, in-between the designations of identity."[84] In a way, the work serves as a connective tissue between my past and my present, between my originary culture and the culture I came into. This in betweenness is an "interstitial space that opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity,"[85] which is not a combination of existing elements, but rather a new product entirely, one resulting from continuous negotiation. I chose not to copy the authentically traditional motifs, also because they already exist – they are still being implemented by artisans who are more Azerbaijani than me. I am not interested in imitating their designs, rather I use the traditional techniques I was taught as a language to say something different, something new, something in the contemporary western context that I now occupy.

[84] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* 5.
[85] Ibid.

Parts of me wonder what my Azerbaijani grandmother would have thought or said at the sight of these objects. I like to think she would be proud, because I did not allow myself to forget or abandon the knowledge she passed down to me. But perhaps she would be outraged, because these creations are so far removed from the precious Azerbaijani carpets and completely depart from tradition, while implementing certain aspects of it. After all, everything she did was rooted in tradition – from cooking to weaving, sowing and weaving. I have a great respect and admiration for tradition and traditional ways of production. But to me, it is important to show that culture and identity are not static, but fluid entities. My work has to challenge the idea of a binary between cultural categories and situate itself in that third space of in-betweenness.

The choice to install these pieces suspended from the ceiling further reiterates that same state of being in-between. Situated between the six sides of the white cube, it also rejects the colonial European tradition of the gallery. Although historically woven textiles in Azerbaijan often hanged on walls, laid on floors or other surfaces, there they served a function – creating warmth and comfort. Here, hanging them on walls of a white gallery space would be decontextualizing them. Instead, they unapologetically occupy the same space as the viewer, creating an opportunity for interaction and an embodied experience.

Evidently, although this work derives from my originary culture by implementing traditional materials and techniques, it also largely departs from it, as such extending beyond the confines of Azerbaijani distinction and into contemporary Western context.

Metalwork

Metalworking is another ancient craft that has been prevalent in my ancestral homeland. Azerbaijan has a rich tradition of copperware production that dates back centuries, reflecting the

country's deep artistic and cultural heritage. Same as with woven textiles, copper products were initially made for household use. Their popularity as functional objects decreased overtime, with the development of other more affordable and less laborious materials and modes of production, and today they are mainly used in ceremonial occasions and as souvenirs[86]. Nonetheless, this ancient craft is still practiced in the country, and many Azerbaijani artisans continue to produce handmade copper items. Lahij – a small mountainous town in the Ismailli region, is renowned for its skilled coppersmiths who have preserved centuries-old techniques. The town remains a major center for handmade copper, attracting tourists and collectors from around the world.[87]

Figure 20. Lahij Coppersmith Workshop. Photo credit: M. Rahimov, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2010)

When metalsmith, sculptor and OCAD University alumna Mary McIntyre was offering a workshop on copper to graduate students in the IAMD program in the summer 2023 term, I could not pass up the opportunity to try a new material and learn new skills. When I witnessed the various stages of transformation this material goes through in the process of being made into something, I felt some kind of connection to it. We as people, our culture, our identity, all go

[86] Ayten A. Abdullayeva, *Lahij Coppersmith Art,* Graduate Thesis, Azerbaijan State Academy of Arts, (Baku, 2024), 4.
[87] Ibid.

through transformations shaped by our experiences. I saw this material as a metaphor for my experience, and I knew I had to include it in my work.

In our contemporary context, commercially available copper comes in thin rectangular sheets that are shiny and clean, seemingly untouched. Then it is annealed[88] and transformed into something dark, seemingly traumatized. The next step is to wash away traces of fire and debris to reveal a new finish and form it into something else. It becomes different from what it started out as. It goes through a process of damage and stress, and in the end, it comes out much stronger, more resilient and, in my opinion, more beautiful. Then of course there are various processes to achieve a certain patina, which transforms it even further, and it continues to change with time. I feel this process is similar to the human experience. It is a way to communicate the passage of time and the impact of time and environment on the material, but it is also a metaphor of change and the impact of time and environment on our bodies, cultures and identities.

In Figure 21 demonstrates three different states of copper, before any shaping/reshaping can even begin – shiny and clean, post annealing, and post washing with dish soap. Figure 22 shows the material shaped into rounded pieces through hammering. In Figure 23 each of the pieces shown have gone through different patina processes yielding varying colorations. Salt and hydrogen peroxide and boiled eggs turn the material orange/brown. The dark blue is achieved by dipping the material in a mixture of liver of sulfur and water. The turquoise spots are the result of spraying the material with a mixture of salt, vinegar and baking soda.

[88] Annealing is the process of heating the copper to a high temperature with a torch, which softens it. It can then be easily bent and shaped.

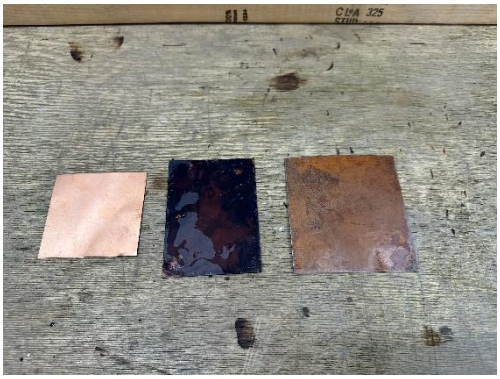

Figure 21. Various stages of copper

Figure 22. Copper pieces hammered into various shapes

Figure 23. Various patina

I felt compelled to include these objects in my final exhibition to stand as metaphors for both, fragments of culture and diasporic identity and for embodied human experience of change. As I mentioned in an earlier section, my father also worked in metal, therefore it felt like a way to connect to his memory as well. Although he never thought of himself as an artisan or a

designer. He produced necessary functional objects and tools – mostly industrial. I was impressed when he made weaving tools for me, but aside from that I never much thought about what he did. Having the opportunity to work with copper allowed me to gain a new appreciation for the labour that this material entails and for the work that my father did.

I decided to weave these pieces into a large tapestry using an organic material, namely hemp (Figures 24 and 25). The rigidity of metal juxtaposed against the soft fibers is aimed at highlighting the contrast between clashing cultures and the tensions between various aspects of the human, and particularly diasporic experience. It speaks of transformation and change, but also of fragmentation.

Figure 24. Experimentation with copper and hemp I

Figure 25. Experimentation with copper and hemp II

Figure 26. Entwined, 2025. 8’x5’. Copper, hemp cord.

Entwined (Fig. 26) is a finished work that resulted from the studio experimentations involving copper which I discuss above. It is comprised of pieces of copper of various shapes and sizes held together by a net made from hemp cord. The woven hemp represents a sort of sieve that has captured these fragments of identity and is reconnecting them together making them whole again. Reminiscent of nautical netting it is also an allusion to voyage, conquest, migration, and a reference to the seafaring history of my ancestral homeland. The work is suspended from the ceiling to communicate a sense of in-betweenness and detachment, often experienced by members of diasporic communities.

Natural Pigments

Figure 27. Turmeric powder

Figure 28. Grinding cochineal Insects and linseed oil

A large part of my studio research over the course of this MFA program focused on searching for natural and sustainable materials, which included pigments. I was determined to find easily accessible natural ingredients that could be used as pigments for oil paints or inks. I began experimenting with spices found in my kitchen. For many, food is closely associated with home, comfort, belonging; cooking is a process of care and food is a way of offering, healing, sharing, celebrating. I felt ingredients that came from my kitchen would be fitting materials to use in production of works that explore themes of diaspora, home, belonging and celebration of ancestral culture. Turmeric, chestnut and sumakh are particularly significant to me, as they throw me back to my childhood home, where cooking for a special occasion was a community affair and would bring together my grandmother and her two sisters and three sisters-in-law – the

matriarchs and experts of traditional cuisine. Shabalid Govurma – a stew made with lamb and chestnuts was, as odd as it may sound, one of my favourite dishes. I would pick and eat the chestnuts first – they had a sweet taste that, no surprise, especially appealed to a child. The dish also had a strong scent of turmeric, but then again, most things my grandmother cooked did.

So, of course, I tested turmeric (Fig. 27), sumakh, and chestnut, as well as some non-edible natural ingredients like madder, indigo and cochineal insects (Fig. 28) by mixing them into linseed oil. There were many failed attempts. In some cases, there were issues with texture, consistency, lightfastness, or saturation. For instance, turmeric came out too grainy and chestnut would not adhere to surfaces very well, although both yielded beautiful colours. I also tried using these ingredients as fabric dyes (Fig. 29) and making them into handmade crayons (Fig. 30). Natural and sustainable pigments is an area of research that greatly interests me and that I plan on carrying on in my general practice, however, for the purposes of this graduate thesis, my experimentations ended there, as I had to move on to production/creation phase.

Figure 29. Canvas painting surface dyed with turmeric

Figure 30. Crayons made from indigo and turmeric

At the end of this material exploration, it became clear that these ingredients (which I successfully used for dyeing fibers for my weaving project discussed in a previous section), worked better as a dry medium (i.e. crayons) than oil paint. The crayons which are pictured in Figure 29 were made by mixing together different ratios of pigment and natural wax, namely beeswax. The blue was achieved from the indigo pigment and the turmeric yielded the tan, almost brown colour seen in the image, but was bright yellow when applied onto a surface.

This research was made possible by the Sustainable Colour Lab that launched at OCAD University in 2024. Co-led by the amazingly talented associate professor and my secondary advisor Nicole Collins, the Sustainable Colour Lab is a space for artists and designers to conduct research and share knowledge pertaining to material and colour. Artistic and studio-based research, unfortunately, is often overlooked and is not held in the sane regard as other types of research, so it is very important and necessary to have a space where artistic research is not only recognized but also encouraged. I am grateful to Nicole for introducing me to this space and for sharing her expertise in material colour, and for the work we did together in this space.

These handmade crayons were then used to create a frottage or rubbings of my woven pieces. I opted for a 10 ft. by 6 ft. raw linen as my surface and proceeded to make marks by randomly placing various of my small woven tapestries under the fabric and rubbing it with the crayons. I worked intuitively, as I often do, without a particular design or vision in mind. All I knew was I wanted to cover the whole surface of the linen with these marks, or impressions of my woven tapestries. To me these were traces or indexical marks of those fragments of my identity that I carried over with me from my ancestral land, some aspects of which have faded away over the years, like a distant memory. They were faint in places but perhaps if I pressed hard enough, and if I layered them over and over, I could somehow hang on to them and keep

them from disappearing completely. The finished work that resulted from this studio exploration is titled *Threaded Echoes of the Past* (Fig. 31).

Figure 31. Threaded Echoes of the Past. 10'x6.' Indigo and turmeric on linen.

Conclusion

This thesis project is an homage to my ancestors and a reflection of my journey in the diaspora, scrambling for and negotiating of an identity that is whole. My studio work departs from my originary culture, but by implementing techniques and materials traditionally used in my ancestral homeland, it also encompasses elements of it, as well as elements from my current context. As such, these works are hybridized objects, both materially and culturally.

There is an evolutionary line from the first work, *Pulling Threads*, to *Threaded Echoes of the Past.* The title *Pulling Threads* suggests an investigation – knotting and unknotting, building and rebuilding, unravelling and weaving together – literally and metaphorically. The work consists of many fragments scattered about the space they occupy, reflecting the fracturing of my sense of identity as a result of growing up under various cultural influences. The second piece, *Entwined*, is fragmented, but here fragments are connected by a net, suggesting a sort of negotiation, of putting them back together in an attempt at a new whole. And finally, the last piece, *Threaded Echoes of the Past*, is a complete whole. It contains remnants of the fragments, but it is yet one piece.

This is why I designed the exhibition in such manner that the viewer may be guided through the space and experiences the artworks in that specific succession. As they move through the space, and in-between the textile installations, they also come across footage documenting the act of creating these objects, and other items that were involved in the process of making, such as the loom, the weaving tools, the spices used in dyeing the fibers, the crayons used for the frottage. Process is of utmost importance in my work, as I am not so concerned with the final

product, as I am with the act of making. The slow process of weaving is an act of care, it is a celebration of labour, the body, traditional ways of making and the materials that come from the land. Bringing my ancestral craft and the female dominated practice of weaving to the forefront is an act of resistance that challenges the distinctions between art and craft, or high and low art, which are colonial concept in themselves, as traditionally in Azerbaijan and many other non-European cultures these distinctions do not exist.

This journey may or may not have answered questions I started out with, but it has deepened my understanding and appreciation of my own history and experience. I have been able to use my artistic practice to mend cracks in my sense of identity and bridge gaps between my past and my present and reconnect with my ancestral roots. My journey does not end with the completion of this MFA – it is a continuous process of negotiating and reconciling. This is not an exact science and there is no concrete solutions here, but if nothing else, writing this thesis and sharing my experience I add to the general knowledge in post-colonial and cultural studies by offering a discussion of post-colonial concepts from a post-Soviet and Azerbaijani perspectives which are often left out of the general Western discourse on colonialism, imperial domination and decolonial efforts. I aim to amplify the experiences and the voices of underrepresented communities and hope that my art may help create environments where others like me may feel a little less subaltern and a little more whole.

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