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CONTEMPORARY
ART SINGAPORE

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LABOUR.

CAPITAL.

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This script is an adaptation of the live debate on 25 July 2016 held in The Lab as part of Erika Tan's Artist-in-Residency at NTU CCA Singapore. Two motions were put to the house for discussion. The ideas put forward in the debate are not necessarily positions held by the debaters, but used as a process of pushing a discussion forward.

Collaborators and their roles:

Halimah(s): Meiyl Chan, Annabel Tan, Loh An Lin, Abigail Wong, Sera Ng
Moderator: Geetha Creffield
Director: Erika Tan
Assistant Director: Lor Huiyun
Camera: Lor Huiyun, Jasmine Lee
Make-up: Lexi Li
Clapperboard: Shiona Mei Findlay
Curator, Residencies, NTU CCA Singapore: Vera Mey
Audience: Individuals attending the event
Specialist Respondents: Eliza Tan, Nora Taylor, Vera Mey, Kathleen Ditzig
Event and Technical Support: Ianudy Shaik, Chu Hao Pei, Corinne Chan
Cham Loom: Asian Civilisations Museum

HALIMAH-THE-EMPIRE-EXHIBITION-WEAVER- WHO-DIED-WHILST-PERFORMING-HER-CRAFT

REPATRIATING HALIMAH-THE DEBATE

ERIKA TAN

INT. FILM SET WITH PERFORMERS PLACED IN FRONT OF A GREEN-SCREEN BACKDROP.
CAMERA CREW SET UP IN FRONT OF THE AUDIENCE WHO ARE SEATED NEXT TO A
DISASSEMBLED LOOM.

In centre stage, the MODERATOR sits under a spotlight. Offstage a group of DEBATERS (five young Chinese women) sit in a row, each dressed in plain, white shirts with black skirts. The film crew starts the action.

DIRECTOR:

All quiet on set! Camera, rolling!

CAMERAPERSON:

Rolling!

DIRECTOR:

Mark!

The CLAPPERBOARD person claps her hands together in front of the camera.

DIRECTOR:

Action!

MODERATOR:

What do we know? She was born in 1865. She was from Johor, a part of Malaya, a protectorate of the British Empire at that point in time. She was an expert weaver, most probably of textiles. She lived with 19 other Malaysians in a 60-by-20-foot-long ex-army hut placed within the Malayan Pavilion at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in London. She demonstrated her crafts. She sold them and probably other goods to a variety of audiences. She contracted pneumonia and was hospitalised at Willesden Green Hospital, where she died. She was buried on the 7th of May 1924 in the Muslim section of Brockwood Cemetery, UK. She was 60 years old. She had no children. She was Muslim. Her name was Halimah Binti Abdullah.

Before us today is the proposition that this house would actively repatriate excluded artists like Halimah back into the Singapore art canon. As part of this move, a national gallery should collect and incorporate currently

excluded indigenous cultural production such as Halimah's.
I now invite Halimah to speak.

The DEBATERS enter and form a semicircle on the stage.
The MODERATOR sits off centre.
Each character is lit by a single spotlight.

HALIMAH 1:

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Today, the motion speaks of "repatriation". This word means "to return someone to where they were originally from," implying that I already have a legitimate and rightful place in the Singapore art canon.

Secondly, limiting Singapore's art canon to artists and artworks that emerge only in the colonial period or post-independence, within the current geopolitical borders of Singapore, is a myopic move. It artificially distinguishes Singapore as an administrative and bureaucratic entity without recognising the cultural unity that exists between Johor, British Malaya, and Singapore itself. Singapore was part of a larger Malayan world and belongs to *Nusantara*, the maritime, Malay-speaking world that I come from. It is from this cultural consciousness that I participated in the Empire Exhibition in 1924, where I represented Malaya as part of the Malayan Pavilion in London. I was not simply a Malayan, or a Johorean, but a representative of the British Malayan possessions including Singapore. If we understand that Singapore rightfully belongs to a Malay-speaking, Malay-sharing cultural consciousness, then a Singapore art canon cannot exclude artists such as myself who belong to and have produced works emerging from the consciousness of cultural connections.

HALIMAH 2:

I disagree. I'm here to say no. I would not want to be repatriated back into the Singapore art canon.

Look at Singapore today. Singapore is fundamentally different from Malaya today, as it was then. Singapore was a crown colony of London. She was guarded as one of London's most important assets for economic reasons. Singapore's culture is different. Singapore was made up of 75 per cent of immigrants even then, and the Malay culture there is not as big or as similar to the ones throughout the rest of Malaya; and on cultural grounds I do not belong there.

Secondly, what I was doing wasn't art. Craft without intention cannot be considered art. I may be an expert weaver but I learnt the techniques from my forbears. I am no different from a worker inside one of colonial Britain's textiles factories who learnt how to work the machines to create the weave; and therefore, my "performance" cannot be considered art.

Whilst my "performance" did showcase a way of life, my actions were not imbued with anything other than showing this activity on a pedestal. This was not a performance.

HALIMAH 3:

As an excluded figure from the current art canon, I believe that I should be incorporated because I disagree with the use of artificial borders between Malaya, as Johor, and Singapore itself. Singapore was a commercial hub; it was a trading entrepôt with a lot of fluidity between Malaya and Singapore. In order to be incorporated into an art canon, there is an assumption that one belongs to a certain space. As a person who was shown at the Empire Exhibition as part of Malaya, I believe that my own identity is connected to a Singaporean identity.

Moreover, what is art? The weaving that I contributed to the Empire Exhibition was more than just ordinary textiles. These textiles are now preserved in museums in Britain, and samples were given to the Queen. Regional art was recognised in Malaya at that time, and this form of craftwork was acknowledged as being of high status and ability. It should be recognised as something that is culturally representative not just of Johor, or Singapore, but something that's important, culturally, to the region.

HALIMAH 1:

However, at the Empire Exhibition itself, I was not recognised as an artist. At the Exhibition, there was a hall for Western artists to display their art; in contrast, the work in the Malayan Pavilion was seen as mere handicraft. This was an exclusion of what was considered important in the art canon in Malaya at that point in time. Historically, I exist only as a footnote within the Empire Exhibition because I died of pneumonia. This artificial sense of a Malayan person as a footnote doesn't acknowledge that the art I brought to the world is more important than that.

HALIMAH 2:

I want to object to the idea that there is a historical link between Singapore and Malaya just because we are Malay. We need to distinguish the Malayan Malay from the Singaporean Malay. The Singaporean Malay includes cultural influences from the Javanese and the Balinese. The "pure" Johorean, ethnic-Malay culture is vastly different from that of the Singaporean Malay because of the effects of what the British have already done in the region. The culture I brought to the Empire Exhibition was completely different to that of a Singaporean Malay. After the independence of Singapore from British rule, its status as an entrepôt meant that many of the people coming into Singapore were traders: individuals who brought in different forms of culture, creating a very different kind of milieu.

In terms of my participation as an artist, the way I performed my craft was in keeping with tradition and its continuity. The actions are without personal intention, or variation. My own perception or concept of life does not taint the work. And because of this, I do not consider it as art.

Finally, to celebrate myself as part of Singapore art canon disregards my own history and fetishises my own culture. Singapore has never had a strong presence of craftsmen. To incorporate weaving, which was never a very established practice in Singapore, into its history is an appropriation of Malayan culture, and what Malayan weaving was meant to be.

It assumes that the uniqueness and intricacy of Malayan culture and weaving can take place in a metropolitan Singapore environment. It's a cultural appropriation of identity...

HALIMAH 5:

We need to understand weaving patterns as identifiers, as signifying where we come from, where the cloth comes from, who the weaver is, and where the weaving comes from. If I were to say that there were significant differences between the patterns of Johor and Singapore weaving, I think it would be a bit of a stretch. They are very similar. Geographically, Singapore and Johor are very close; therefore, the patterns would be very, very close. If you wanted to compare, say, a Kedah weaver's textiles versus what a Johor weaver would produce, then yes, you would see significantly more differences.

HALIMAH 4:

But remember, at the Empire Exhibition, the aim was to present or represent art and culture in British Malaya, which were the Federated Malay States as well as the Straits Settlement of Singapore. So there was, perhaps, no sense of a need to distinguish so strongly between where each pattern or each weave came from, but rather, to see it holistically as indigenous cultural production of the British Malaya.

HALIMAH 5:

If we incorporate different peoples into singular classifications, we disregard the culture, history, and the nuances across Southeast Asia. This is harmful to what we are. Let's prevent the British classification of what we are from taking place. Let's not let the Empire strike back.

HALIMAH 3:

But what now, post-independence, is a national canon? The word "national" in front of this canon suggests or necessitates an equal representation of everyone who belongs in this national category. It needs to be representative of everyone, including Malay craftspeople. It needs to encompass the view and perception of

all its people, or it cannot claim to be a national canon. I am insisting that this native, historical, cultural performance needs to be part of the Singapore art canon. Arguing against this means excluding me and my people from the historical and cultural records and from meaningful representation. This would necessitate a political motivation.

HALIMAH 4:

Yes?

HALIMAH 1:

Now, that's a good point. Excluding me as an artist, excluding Malay craftspeople as artists, is going against the very idea of a national gallery in the first place. That would be about a deletion of history.

HALIMAH 5:

I am a weaver, and the importance of weaving is not only the fabric but the entire process of why we weave, and why a certain culture would choose a certain method of weaving. These choices and processes are what each culture is about. My performance in the Malayan Pavilion in London is about my culture; it's not about the fabric, but a representation of the colonial past of my people. For this history to be recorded, it needs to be included in a national gallery as part of the Singapore art canon.

HALIMAH 1:

We have heard that a national canon has political motivations, and that it must be representative. Well, I agree that indigenous cultural productions must be included in the national canon, but I disagree that my historical and cultural productions or those of Malaysians should be placed in a Singapore national gallery or canon. It is simply strange that a Malayan's work should be placed in the canon of an independent country, which has sufficient capital of its own to build a canon that can stand on its own. Singapore is an artificial colony that was re-fashioned into the independent state that it is today. My weaving would not be part of any recognisable Singapore art form or medium at that point in time in colonial Singapore, or indeed even today. We don't need to pull and strain and force representation just for the sake of some kind of variety. There is a rightful place for me but it is not here.

MODERATOR:

So where is Halimah's place?

HALIMAH 2:

Is my culture and my history synonymous with your culture and history? You have to understand that Malays, in general, have a very similar culture and dialect. This dialect and culture hasn't changed over the past years. Even though Singapore was an artificial creation that stemmed out of British Malaya, we took many of the identities and ideals that were within British Malaya. It is very clear that Singapore culture actually takes a lot from Malayan Johor culture and as a Malay individual I see myself as integral in the building of Singaporean indigenous culture, both then and now.

HALIMAH 3:

Madam, can we talk about whether or not I should be incorporated into this national canon and/or national gallery as an artist? Please name a Singaporean artist. Now name a female Singaporean artist. Now try and name a female Singaporean artist who uses alternative media and is also of a minority group...

HALIMAH 2:

Hold on a moment, Madam...

HALIMAH 3:

It's very hard to name such an individual because of what the Singapore national canon or art canon has become. It's very selective...

HALIMAH 4:

I represent a minority voice and, therefore, should be heard. If a national gallery or museum, a large body that considers and is able to define what art is, accepts me into what they consider to be art, then other people who similarly use different mediums and have different voices could also be accepted into this art canon as well.

HALIMAH 2:

This issue goes back to my own time, when artists like myself were castigated and labelled as craftsmen and non-artists. The selectivity of the colonial art scene meant that if you did not conform to what they considered to be art, it meant that you weren't an artist but simply a craftsperson.

HALIMAH 5:

The question is this: How do I want to be remembered? Where is the evidence that there was weaving production in Singapore? Should the idea of a national canon be based on a series of smaller narratives, or through prime examples?

HALIMAH 3:

But Madam, Singapore was once part of British Malaya, and because of that, the culture of Malayan Johor also bleeds into the culture of Singapore.

HALIMAH 5:

Yes, it bleeds. However, although we might want to have excluded figures within the narratives, the national canon should not automatically incorporate diverse views just for the sake of it. Instead, there should be proper evidence for and considerations to what a national canon actually consists of, and if the individual was actually in Singapore or not.

HALIMAH 2:

The idea of a female craftsperson being under-represented in the institutional canon is not just about art being seen traditionally as the highest form of cultural production, but rather it shows that cultural production is something that belongs to the community itself. Something that the community consumes on a daily basis may not need this form of recognition. I would suggest that if you're focusing on things which aren't there, then you're leaving out what actually was in Singapore at that point of time. Once you focus on different narratives, you automatically exclude what the main narratives were in the canon itself. So why include me when you actually have so much more material to focus on? Don't try to artificially obtain more culture when your own culture is rich enough...

MODERATOR (*knocks with the gavel*):

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have come to the end of this particular discourse, may we please give Halimah a round of applause.

Halimah(s) turn(s) to the audience and bows. The audience claps. The crew powers down the lights and start to pack up. The audience quietly leaves the set while Halimah(s) return(s) to the dismantled loom in the corner of the room and begin(s) to fit the pieces slowly together.

DIRECTOR:

CUT!