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Towards a Feminist Refiguring of Vulnerability: Deep Securitization and
Becoming in Singapore

By Tsing Ngia Yeo

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Faculty Advisor: Dr Kara Ann Hooser

Preceptor: Dr Max Smith

Abstract

This thesis critically examines the role that the motif of vulnerability plays as a ‘thick signifier’ naturalizing the phenomenon of deep securitization in Singapore. Existing research on the politics of vulnerability in Singapore has failed to account for the gendered logics that undergird this interplay of vulnerability and deep securitization, as well as the significance of the motif of vulnerability at the level of collective meaning-making. To address these gaps, this thesis forwards two interrelated arguments. For one, by interpreting deep securitization as a reflection of Singapore’s endless - but always unsuccessful - pursuit of invulnerability, this thesis draws on the theoretical framework of subject formation to posit that the experience of vulnerability as existential uncertainty is a formative one, resting at the heart of the nation-state’s process of becoming. In other words, even as deep securitization appears to be the only legitimate response to these experiences of vulnerability, it must also continually fail for the nation-state to remain perpetually vulnerable, to *become* over and over.

More than a study of what vulnerability has come to signify in the case of Singapore, this thesis directly takes up the call from feminist scholars to attend to vulnerability differently in our politics. It grapples with normative questions about what it means to be vulnerable and how we could otherwise respond to it, outside of denying or disavowing it, which has led to the naturalization of deep securitization in Singapore. To that end, this thesis draws on the work of feminist theorists and Hannah Arendt and argues for the need to refigure vulnerability as ambiguous and a source of radical potential, to dislodge the ordering work that the motif of vulnerability has long performed, but also envision alternative ways of living and being and generate a more emancipatory mode of politics.

1. Introduction

[Vulnerability] is the inescapable, permanent condition of Singapore as an independent republic... To understand [vulnerability] is to understand Singapore's past and present, and, dare we conjecture, its future too.¹

Singapore is no longer a Third World Country struggling to make it...
[Yet] Singapore is still vulnerable but in a different way.
It requires a narrative with the same theme but different setting, actors and plots.²

The motif of vulnerability, one that is rooted in the prospect of being “confronted continually by the prospects of political extinction” (Leifer 2000, 1), is one that has come to - and continues to - define Singapore as a nation-state and what it means to be a Singaporean. This conception of its own vulnerability as “inherent, permanent and immutable” (Low and Vadaketh 2014, 4) rests at the heart of the story of becoming that it tells itself. For one, it serves as the very condition of possibility for its unique brand of exceptionalism (Barr 2015) - the idea that Singapore has been able to transcend the trauma of existential precarity in its early days as a fledgling nation-state (Leifer 2000) to eventually flourish and even “punch above its weight” economically and geopolitically (Allison 2024; Barr 2015). At the same time, this vulnerability is also that which it needs to overcome in perpetuity (as the quotes at the top of this section underscore). It underpins and naturalizes a normative politics of *deep securitization* (Krishnan 2024), or the organization of socio-political life around the all-encompassing need for security in the face of this “profound existential uncertainty” (Abulof 2014, 396).

¹ Han Fook Kwang et al., *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Straits Times Press, 2011).

² Han Fook Kwang. “Commentary: 10 years after Lee Kuan Yew’s death, have Singaporeans abandoned his staunch belief of Singapore’s vulnerability?” Channel NewsAsia, March 23, 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/lee-kuan-yew-10th-death-anniversary-singapore-nation-building-vulnerability-5015516>

To that end, one might critically read the project of deep securitization in Singapore as a reflection of the nation-state's endless pursuit of *invulnerability*, which discloses its "institutionalized fantasy of mastery" (Butler 2004, 29). Yet, insofar as the rhetoric of vulnerability continues to remain pervasive in the Singaporean imaginary, this suggests that the nation-state's pursuit of invulnerability through deep securitization has persistently failed at securing existential certainty for itself, which hints at the paradox that defines the nation-state's relation to its own vulnerability: indeed, that deep securitization *must continually fail*, and Singapore must remain perpetually vulnerable.

To address these tensions, I propose two interrelated arguments. First, I draw on the theoretical framework of subject formation and posit that this experience of vulnerability as existential uncertainty is a *formative* one, which has become a cardinal aspect of the wider meaning-making processes in Singapore, embedded within and productive of a particular version of reality, complete with specific forms of life and social relations. The motif of vulnerability has thus taken on a particularly crucial role as a 'thick signifier', one that performs a "specific kind of ordering" (Huysmans 1998, 232) within Singapore's socio-political architecture. By performing a discursive analysis of published National Day Rally (NDR) speeches between 2004 and 2024, I contend that the motif of vulnerability has become so intimately associated with the figurative death of the nation-state and an overarching loss of futurity that deep securitization appears to be the only legitimate response in the face of this overwhelming vulnerability. Yet, deep securitization must continually fail and the actualization of invulnerability be endlessly deferred because Singapore relies on this experience of vulnerability as existential uncertainty in order to remake itself recognizably over and over (and not only because of the unavoidable reality that invulnerability, on any account, is impossible to achieve).

Second, I go on to argue that it therefore becomes pivotal to refigure these meanings that have become attached to the motif of vulnerability, challenging its entrenched significations in order to destabilize the ordering work it has long performed and envision alternative ways of living and being. Specifically, I draw on the work of feminist theorists and Hannah Arendt to argue for refiguring vulnerability as ambiguous and a source of radical potential, to generate a more emancipatory politics. In other words, at the heart of my study lies normative questions about what it means to be vulnerable and how we could otherwise respond to the experience of vulnerability outside of denying and disavowing it, which has resulted in the persistence of deep securitization in Singapore.

Indubitably, the notion of impregnability that deep securitization attempts to evoke is very much also intrinsic to the idea of the state and the protection it is imagined to offer (Bendfeldt and Basham 2025), and which feminist scholars have also criticized for engendering constellations of power relations between the state and its citizens that are exploitative, injurious and deeply gendered in nature (Chowdhry and Nair 2013; Young 2003). Yet, the case study of deep securitization in Singapore, I contend, offers especially provocative insights into just how far this discourse of vulnerability might extend to structure and naturalize particular forms of socio-political life, and highlights the significance of attending to the gendered implications of these dynamics to open up space for radical change.

To that end, I first look at how deep securitization has unfolded in Singapore. The section following that reviews the various bodies of scholarship that this thesis engages with: the politics of vulnerability in Singapore, the existing literature on deep securitization within the wider field of security studies, as well as the critical feminist works that have sought to bridge these issues in a multitude of ways. Following that, I offer my theoretical intervention - the reading of vulnerability and

deep securitization in Singapore through the framework of subject formation - and which I substantiate with my close reading of NDR speeches. Finally, I discuss how vulnerability can be refigured as ambiguous and a source of radical potential through engaging with feminist scholarship and the writings of Hannah Arendt in turn, and conclude with how it might be centered differently.

1.1 The Singapore Story

The starting point of this thesis is that Singapore is trapped within a persistent state of deep securitization, whereby most - if not all - state policies are justified in terms of the survival of the nation-state above all else, in the face of this innate existential vulnerability (Krishnan 2024). I go into more detail about the phenomenon of deep securitization later on, but crucial to my argument here is that deep securitization serves as a reflection of how the nation-state seeks to *become invulnerable*, which is necessarily underpinned by a totalizing and antagonistic treatment of vulnerability. Most obviously, this dictates the tenets of its defence and foreign policy approaches, whether vis-a-vis its preferred strategies like hedging, to balance its geopolitical engagements with various larger powers (Lee 2024), or its consistently substantial military spending as a means of deterrence (Zachariah 2024). On the domestic front, numerous facets of public life are also inextricably intertwined with articulations of vulnerability - indeed, the list is endless. For example, Singapore's multiculturalism, for all that it is extensively celebrated as a uniquely defining aspect of the nation-state, is simultaneously treated with caution, insofar as race relations and religious affairs are perceived as potential fault lines that could cause society to implode. In turn, the state has adopted a more coercive approach in cracking down on even the slightest of disruptions and prosecuting any discrimination on such

grounds, especially in the wake of the racial riots that broke out in 1964 and 1969, (Chong and Zaini 2022), and the outbreak of violence in 2013 between South Asian migrants (Greener 2022).

Furthermore, changing demographic trends - delaying marriages, falling birth rates, smaller families - are characterized as exacerbating Singapore's vulnerability, viewed as further compromising the development of the nation-state's limited human capital, jeopardizing "Singapore's intellectual capacity, economic competitiveness and standards of public administration" - and, in turn, its survival in the long run (Krishnan 2024).

More recently, misinformation, or 'fake news', has become presented as a threat serious enough to "threaten the country's sovereignty, destabilize society and rend social harmony" (Neo 2020), to the extent that it has warranted the passing of new legislation - the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). This increases the amount of regulatory oversight and control that the state possesses vis-a-vis the media and social media platforms, such that it can even unilaterally demand the removal of what it deems to be falsehoods. This has, in turn, worsened the existing curtailment of citizens' civil liberties, including (but not limited to) the delimitation of spaces where protests can legally be organized (Stephens 2025), as well as restricting the freedom of expression to such a degree that punitive action has been taken against particularly outspoken critics - namely, citizen activists or opposition politicians that do not hail from the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) (Abdullah 2020). As Chong argues, this restriction of civil and political liberties is premised on the Hegelian conception of civil society as necessarily "conflict-ridden... unruly and contradictory", and therefore as possessing an inherent "potential for chaos" that threatens public order and the national interest through giving voice to "the emotions, hubris, and fickleness associated with the general public"

(Chong 2006). Moreover, even in the realm of electoral politics, the motif of vulnerability is utilized to sway voters' choices. Voting for opposition parties - and as a corollary, the incumbent PAP losing seats in Parliament - is depicted as inevitably resulting in the decline (and eventual demise) of the country due to the perceived loss of "good governance" (George 2017), premised on the entrenched assertion that "the government must be led by the ablest" for the nation-state to survive (Han 2011).

In this thesis, I bring together vulnerability and deep securitization in my study of Singapore because it is precisely this "simple, reductive and negative" conception of vulnerability as being "susceptible, exposed, at risk, in danger" (Gilson 2011) that makes intelligible this wider pursuit of invulnerability through deep securitization. This, in turn, continually legitimizes the development of "new forms of governmentality, paternalism, or forms of sovereign power" (Petherbridge 2016), or the enactment of certain kinds of violence and coercion on society at large, which is precisely why it becomes so crucial to refigure what vulnerability signifies within the national imagination as a means of disrupting these ingrained cycles of securitization and their injurious consequences.

For instance, deep securitization entails - and in fact, further justifies - the state's "extensive intrusions into [all] aspects of economic, social and human life" (Tan 2012, 70). On the grounds that existential threats can take on a myriad of diverse forms, Singapore's very survival ostensibly depends on practicing "constant vigilance and social discipline of [the] population" (Leifer 2004, 15), in a seemingly reasonable trade-off for social stability and economic progress, among other values deemed integral for the nation-state's security (Chua 2012, 718). However, this deprives Singaporeans of "the same rights and freedoms enjoyed by the citizens of normal democracies" (Low and Vadaketh 2014, 5), limiting the capacity and agency of individual citizens in their relation to the state, and which also

engenders a dangerous degree of political apathy amongst Singaporeans (Tan 2012). Furthermore, the project of deep securitization has also resulted in “increased surveillance and forms of bio-power aimed at the governance of every aspect of embodied and biological life” (Petherbridge 2016, 590), whether in terms of regulating sexual and marital relations between consenting citizens as a means of preserving the institution of the family (Goh and Baharudin 2022), or tracking down and persecuting pro-Palestine activists for “damag[ing] the peace, public order and social harmony” in Singapore after a series of nonviolent public demonstrations (Ng and Wong 2024). This latter example is deeply entangled with the nation-state’s paranoia about the “primordial forces of ethnicity and religion” as having the potential to rend asunder society altogether (Abdullah 2020, 477) and, as such, viewing pro-Palestine activism as a “potential racial-religious fault-line” (Abdullah and Perera 2025, 124), but which is obviously rooted in an essentialist and biologically deterministic view of the category of ‘race’. It becomes evident, therefore, that Singapore’s pursuit of invulnerability through deep securitization is both rooted in, and also further engenders, particular forms of violence against citizens, whether in terms of treating particular communities unjustly or seeking to forcefully quash debate and discussion.

Indeed, one is unable to fully make sense of the overarching reach that the motif of vulnerability possesses vis-a-vis the organization of socio-political life in Singapore without studying it as a signifier and “lay[ing] bare the political work” that goes into what it has come to represent (Huysmans 1998). However, this approach has long been overlooked in favor of examining the “true or false quality of its description” (Huysmans 1998), as the next section will seek to demonstrate. Put differently, rather than ask whether the nation-state is *really* vulnerable, this thesis is more interested in the implications of the fact that Singapore emerged out of these particular experiences of vulnerability

as existential uncertainty at the level of meaning and interpretation, as well as the sorts of significations that have, as a result, become attached to the trope of vulnerability and which naturalize deep securitization as the only legitimate response despite its persistent failure to secure existential certainty.

2. Literature Review

In this section, I delve into the various bodies of scholarship that this thesis is in conversation with: the politics of vulnerability in Singapore, how deep securitization is positioned vis-a-vis the broader field of security studies, as well as critical feminist works that have sought to bring these issues together. Apart from identifying various research gaps that this thesis hopes to address, I also seek to establish the importance of interpreting vulnerability as signifier in the context of Singapore, to trouble its naturalized relation to deep securitization but also lay the groundwork for refiguring it altogether.

2.1 The Politics of Vulnerability in Singapore

Most scholars that have examined the politics of vulnerability in Singapore focus on interrogating the myriad of factors that are said to perpetually disadvantage the nation-state amidst an international system characterized by anarchy and great power politics (Heng 2013). As such, the motif of vulnerability becomes predominantly *descriptive*, associated with the physical, geographical and socio-historical insecurities that constantly confront the nation-state. For instance, Singapore's miniscule size and lack of natural resources are often cited as limiting its self-sufficiency and exacerbating its susceptibility to external shocks, rendering it markedly helpless in a world where size appears to be the best guarantor of survival (Heng 2013) and preservation is made all the more

demanding insofar as “the fate of nations, particularly weak ones ... can change without their choice, [and is] decided in the corridors of power” (Ng 2025). This list of factors has also evolved over time to include more contemporary concerns related to Singapore’s “position as a highly connected urban node in the age of interdependence”, such as its disproportionate exposure to transnational risks like pandemics and financial crises (Heng 2013, 424). At the heart of the oft-repeated story about Singapore’s origins is also this intense and inescapable sense of vulnerability, including its “traumatic experience of an unanticipated separation from Malaysia in August 1965” (Leifer 2000, 4), which forcibly catapulted the island into an independence it was thoroughly unprepared to receive, and other clashes with neighboring states - including, notably, a three-year long conflict with Indonesia (“*Konfrontasi*”), during which at least forty-two acts of terror occurred (Mushahid 2015).

In response, some scholars have sought to problematize the “ontological assumption of givenness” (Weldes et al. 1999, 20) that underpins and reifies this notion of Singapore’s vulnerability as sacrosanct and a factual description of the world and reality at large. In particular, through underscoring the extent to which the discourse on vulnerability is an “interested construction” (Weldes et al. 1999, 16), one that has to be continually reproduced through ongoing processes of meaning-making and masks a normative appeal to a particular mode of politics, these scholars have sought to challenge the interpretive categories that have resulted in the entrenched representation of geographical features and historical events as reflections of the nation-state’s immutable vulnerability. Indeed, this also entails exposing the underlying assumptions, as well as social and power relations, that have established this correlation between structure and meaning, shifting the focus away from the stabilized nexus of the state, to the realm of the intersubjective and how, to varying extents, we

constitute the world we live in. For example, scholars have looked at how the trope of vulnerability is employed to boost the political legitimacy of the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP), allowing the ruling elite to present themselves as “the guarantor[s] of the country's sovereignty”, insofar as they have been able to keep Singapore safe in the face of this acute vulnerability (Lee 2024, 84). Others have pointed out how Singapore's national narrative has required a selective reading of historical events, and demonstrated that interpreting particular events differently could have produced entirely different understandings about contentious issues like race, religion and colonialism, opening up a multitude of possibilities for rewriting the role of vulnerability in Singapore's broader history (Abdullah 2018).

While this thesis agrees with and seeks to build upon this focus on intersubjective meaning-making as the basis of a more critical interrogation of the politics of vulnerability in Singapore, I contend that existing scholarship ultimately still leaves unexamined important questions about what it means to be vulnerable and how we might engage more meaningfully with it, which is problematic as these queries rest at the very foundation of the socio-political order in Singapore. For instance, despite recognizing the dangers of Singapore's dogged pursuit of invulnerability, including, somewhat paradoxically, the weakening of the nation-state's political system over time as it becomes more fragile due to issues like “groupthink and ideological rigidity”, Low and Vadaketh do not attend to the question of vulnerability and its attendant uncertainties and complexities, sidestepping it in favor of adopting a “resilience perspective to governance and public policy” (Low and Vadaketh 2014). So long as studies do not go a step further to examine “how the notion of vulnerability has been conceptualized or in what terms it has been evoked” (Petherbridge 2016, 590) and the normative implications of the treatment of vulnerability that underpins our existing socio-political order, so the

notion that vulnerability must be a “problem to be solved through rational security policy or rational moral judgment” (Beattie and Schick 2013, 1) will continue to remain undisputed. Even in works which aver that this sense of vulnerability is, to varying extents, engendered for a multitude of purposes, this predominant association of vulnerability with “weakness, as being prone to injury and harm, or open to attack” (Petherbridge 2016) continues to function as an “uninterrogated background assumption” (Gilson 2011, 310). As a corollary, this leaves intact the naturalized causal link between experiences of vulnerability and the need for (deep) securitization as a means of pursuing invulnerability and impoverishes the generative potential of the otherwise-valuable critiques produced.

2.2 Deep Securitization: A Critical Approach to Securitization Studies

First and foremost, securitization is typically regarded as a discursive act through which security threats are constituted intersubjectively (between securitizing actors and the audiences they address), and which expands the realm of what counts as security in the process of claiming “a need for and a right to treat [these threats] by extraordinary means” (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, 26). In other words, securitization allows for what might originally be considered politically unacceptable or beyond the bounds of regular political procedure to become tenable, on the grounds that these threats are so potentially ruinous that they must be dealt with urgently. To that end, securitization scholars are also normatively concerned with desecuritization, or “the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere” (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, 4).

What happens then, when the exceptional becomes the everyday? For societies “engulfed in profound existential uncertainty about their own survival”, the framework of traditional securitization

is insufficient as an analytical lens because securitization has become entirely routine in these cases (Abulof 2014). Where traditional securitization has tended to focus on how certain issues or objects get designated as threats by securitizing actors, or the ends served by such securitizing moves (Markiewicz 2024), it becomes less useful when we consider societies that have become so preoccupied with ensuring their security that these concerns spill over into all other domains of life, where securitization is made “the rule rather than the exception” (Abulof 2014). Desecuritization as an aspiration is, by and large, impracticable within the logics of deep securitization, insofar as otherwise-exceptionalist security practices have become normalized to the point of being ubiquitous, and there can be no ‘normal’ mode of politics, outside the specter of deep securitization, to return to. It is likely that these societies will continue to be trapped within interminable cycles of securitization, as security becomes the medium through which the public comes to grapple with all sorts of emergent issues (Abulof 2014). To that end, the study of deep securitization expands and deepens what we would consider the grammar of security, challenging, among other issues, the “simplistic conceptualization of the securitization-policy link, in which the application of extraordinary means follows from successful securitizations in a quasi-mechanistic fashion” (Stengel 2019, 3). In other words, it reminds us that such overdetermined causal links limit our understandings of how security dispositifs work and to pay more attention to the “sedimented practices” (Stengel 2019, 10) structuring wider security orders, for the very meaning of security differs between varying contexts.

This is made evident when we examine the framework of deep securitization vis-a-vis other operationally similar concepts focused on the evolution from ‘normal’ politics to the ‘extraordinary’ realm of emergencies, including the concept of securitization creep (Murphy 2018) and the state of

exception (Agamben 2005). Insofar as these phenomena tend toward the expansion of “sovereign control over normally political life by means of executive decision” (Murphy 2018, 3) by allowing the security apparatus of the state to extend its reach into all other domains of life, there are instances in which they are not so neatly demarcable from one another. Yet, there are crucial conceptual differences that render deep securitization uniquely suitable for analyzing the case of Singapore. On one hand, the concept of securitization creep is focused on the momentum of securitization as an ongoing, iterative process, highlighting how securitization moves ever-forward “in a series of individually insufficient moments” (Murphy 2018, 11), whereas Agamben’s state of exception sees “an effective suspension of law, during which period only the sovereign decides on the existence and content of law” (Humphreys 2006, 680), such that all judicial powers can be co-opted in the name of emergency action. Indeed, we see that these concepts are still premised on the recognition of securitization practices as extraordinary even as the realm of the extraordinary expands to blot out the sphere of normal politics altogether.

However, with the ubiquity and normalization of securitization practices under conditions of deep securitization - routinized to the point that securitizing agents refrain from presenting proposed securitization measures as remarkable to avoid disrupting the taken-for-grantedness of these practices (Krishnan 2024; Abulof 2014) - it becomes much less useful to think about the befuddlement of these conventional demarcations of ‘normal’ and ‘extraordinary’ politics. In other words, the signifying articulations and practices, the wider web of relations that exists between them, as well as the sorts of “feasible material practices and actions” that, in turn, become simultaneously opened up or constrained (Wilhelmsen 2017) within these particular orders, have been indelibly shaped by the all-consuming “existential angst arising from death being both certain and undetermined” (Abulof

2014, 403) that engulfs these societies. As such, the meaning-making processes within these societies require more in-depth study, given that deep securitization is impossible to conceive of as a linear process with definable stages, as focusing on securitization as particular acts would entail, nor can we easily fall back on other established categories within securitization studies to make sense of these.

To that end, this thesis also addresses various criticisms about the limitations of the concept of securitization, particularly vis-a-vis the narrowness of the theoretical framework (McDonald 2008). Specifically, because of the disproportionate focus on analyzing “the moment of intervention”, or how processes of securitization unfold and the factors that determine its success, important questions remain unasked and unanswered, including its “problematic normative implications” and effects on political communities (McDonald 2008, 564). In turn, this thesis hopes to offer a means to bridge that gap by demonstrating how entrenched patterns of securitization can become “an affirmative element of political identities” (Kotef 2020, 4) - and in this case, constitutive of a political community altogether.

2.3 Critical Feminist Scholarship on Vulnerability and Securitization

Here, I find that it is important to point out the problematic lack of attention that has been paid to the *gendered* implications of this normative politics of deep securitization. For instance, the particular set of top-down relations between state and citizens that this has cultivated is what Young has referred to as the authoritarian logics of masculinist protection: the persistent feminization, infantilization and consequent subordination of citizens to their leaders in the name of security, and which, more often than not, allow for the unparalleled expansion of state power and (potentially) unchecked violence to unfold (Young 2003). As Young has also pointed out, the failure to recognize

the gendered paradigms underpinning this inherently dangerous relation of the state as benevolent patriarch to its helpless citizens restricts us from imagining alternative models of citizenship (Young 2003). Similarly, Cohn has argued that the question of “reimagining transformed and transformative security practices” remains foreclosed because of the persistent epistemic devaluation and preclusion of “that which is associated with the feminine, or inadequate masculinity” (Cohn 2014, 55) - including the concept of vulnerability. In other words, it is absolutely pivotal to recognize the gendered distortions of the epistemological frames that we rely on, both at the level of political decision-making but also in the quotidian, in order to “rethink both the aims and modes of reasoning that characterize those practices” (Cohn 2014, 50), which is also why this thesis draws on critical feminist scholarship.

As such, at the core of this thesis is a commitment to feminist theorizing, and in particular, I am indebted to the work that feminist scholars have already done in terms of theorizing about “what [vulnerability] may provide in terms of ethical and political provocation” (Murphy 2012). To that end, I approach my work through a critical feminist lens and interweave insights from various feminist scholars throughout this thesis. Even if the question of gender does not explicitly appear to be at the forefront of this thesis, gendered logics inevitably underpin the issues of vulnerability and deep securitization that I discuss. For instance, feminist scholars have already reflected on how the unequal distribution of vulnerability across gendered, racialized and classed lines (among other categories) has led to the predominant association of vulnerability with femininities (and, as a corollary, invulnerability with masculinities) - insofar as vulnerability is cast as weakness, dependency, helplessness, and being hurt by others, and hence disparaged and devalorized (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel 2017; Petherbridge 2016; Shildrick 2000). Moreover, feminist scholars have also long called for

the need to attend to vulnerability differently by moving beyond “rationalist approaches [that] adhere to one-dimensional stories about suffering, security and the good life” (Beattie and Schick 2013, 9), and to take into consideration - rather than deny or disavow - the contingencies of being human (Ruddick 1989; Gilson 2011; Ziarek 2013; Drichel 2013; Cohn 2014). Here, I adopt feminism as a theoretical lens that can “constitute a different frame of reference for thinking politics” (Zerilli 2009), one that starts with the question of gender but certainly goes beyond it to disrupt and dislocate the ways in which our world is structured, especially in terms of what is thinkable, for the implications of gendered logics indubitably “go well beyond its effects on women” (Tickner 2005).

2.4 Bridging Vulnerability and Deep Securitization in Singapore

To my knowledge, the only scholar that has explicitly recognized that Singapore exists within a state of deep securitization is Krishnan, for whom the phenomenon of deep securitization serves as a starting point for analyzing audience resistance within non-democratic contexts (Krishnan 2024),³ although other scholars have also analyzed issues like the attributes of securitizing actors or the instrumental uses of securitization in Singapore (Syed 2020; Neo 2020).

The relation between vulnerability and securitization has been established elsewhere. As Markiewicz points out, successful securitizing acts must “refer to and build on collective vulnerabilit[ies] (real or imagined)” (Markiewicz 2024, 211), insofar as vulnerability animates and

³ It is worth noting that the framework of deep securitization was initially conceptualized in the context of Israel, to analyze how various issues, such as population demographics and Jewish identity, have continually been securitized (Abulof 2014). Singapore has publicly likened itself to being another “Israel in a Malay-Muslim sea”, and scholars have pointed out the extensive similarities in their foreign and defence policies, including the persistent racialization of neighboring states, a fixation with being besieged and extensive militarization as a means of securing their territorial borders (Rahim 2009).

operationalizes the intersubjective dimension of securitization by tapping into how political collectives perceive the world around them. Failing to grapple with this link has led to one-dimensional (and largely mistaken) understandings of securitization as solely a technique of control wielded by political elites and “implemented in a top-down manner” (Markiewicz 2024, 200). This is also what Brown avers vis-a-vis the frenzied building of walls by nation-states. These walls, a conspicuous reminder of how securitization has been made a way of life, are, at least in part, a response to the “psychic-political desires, anxieties, and needs” of communities, including their fear of returning to “an intensely vulnerable and violable condition of existence” amidst a rapidly changing world (Brown 2010).

These works challenge us to think more closely about precisely what makes us feel vulnerable and why certain responses to vulnerability appear more legitimate than others, an area for investigation that remains understudied in the context of Singapore despite the fact that the trope of vulnerability organizes the entirety of its socio-political life. What is it about how Singapore has experienced vulnerability that appears to necessitate deep securitization - the interpreting of all facets of life as existential crises to be defended against - as the only legitimate response? In other words, why and how has vulnerability come to signify what it does, and is it ever possible to respond to it differently?

3. A (Different) Role for Vulnerability in Subject Formation: The Case of Singapore

To address these questions, I propose to consider the motif of vulnerability through the theoretical framework of subject formation, or how Singapore as a nation-state has been constituted and reconstituted as a particular kind of subject through this relation to its vulnerability. In other words, its experience of vulnerability as existential uncertainty is a *formative* one, and so we must

grapple with the possibility that it does not - or cannot - know how to *be* or *become* any differently outside of this relation to its own vulnerability as existential uncertainty, even if it becomes injurious. As such, even as Singapore ostensibly pursues invulnerability through engaging in deep securitization, deep securitization *must repeatedly fail* at securing existential certainty for the nation-state because it must continue to cast itself in this familiar position of being vulnerable. It is impossible to detach this relation from how Singapore understands itself to be an intelligible subject, because this model “provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant 2011, 24), even if it ensnares the nation-state within a double bind as such. To be sure, analyzing Singapore as a particular kind of subject that has been constituted shifts the focus away from the issue of ontology to that of the arrangements of socio-political life on the whole. Whereas the issue of vulnerability is also central to subject formation at the level of the individual, insofar as it is a fundamental aspect of the human condition and that which enables us to be constituted as intelligible subjects in the first place,⁴ the issue of vulnerability this thesis analyzes is markedly different, centered as it is on a particular positionality and set of relations that allows for the possibility of change at the level of collective meaning-making, or how a collective assigns meaning to itself and its place in the world.

To recapitulate, Singapore’s emergence as an independent nation-state was characterized by a tremendous sense of vulnerability, one that stemmed from the existential uncertainty that accompanied being unexpectedly and unceremoniously expelled from the much more well-established

⁴ This vulnerability is corporeal (in that we are embodied beings) but, more importantly, a fact of our sociability, insofar as we are necessarily and indelibly shaped by our dependence on and interactions with others (Butler 2004).

Federation of Malaysia in 1965. That Singapore could overcome (to some extent) this experience of vulnerability in order to dramatically survive against all odds but also experience unparalleled growth in the years that followed “being cast adrift to fend for itself against all expectations” (Leifer 2000, 15) rests at the heart of its national narrative of becoming. As such, one could argue that the nation-state’s constitution as an intelligible subject must be predicated on this relation to its vulnerability as “the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion” (Butler 1997, 14). As a multitude of scholars have pointed out (Berlant 2011; Butler 1997; Brown 1993), the subject grows attached to - even comes to desire - the conditions of its formation in the process of becoming, because it is through “repeat[ing] the norms by which it is produced” (Butler 1997, 28) that the subject is able to mediate its relation to itself and the world, so as to exist coherently as itself. It is precisely the predictability of these interactions with its surroundings that allows the subject to stabilize its identity and reinforce its sense of self. To that end, I posit that it would be particularly productive to interpret deep securitization in Singapore as a mode through which the nation-state as subject seeks to re-enact its formative conditions of vulnerability, re-casting itself in this familiar position of being vulnerable so as to be able to undertake this endless pursuit of invulnerability through deep securitization, even as it can never achieve existential certainty, such that it can recognizably *become* itself over and over. As Butler points out, it is through the reiteration of these formative moments that the subject not only comes to situate itself within the world, but also how it orients its future actions “between the already-there and the yet-to-come”, performing that which is “done over, done again, done anew” (Butler 1997, 18).

Moreover, the framework of subject formation is especially useful because it emphasizes the need to refigure the meanings of vulnerability, as a means of exposing the contingency underlying our

existing socio-political structures and to open up space for reimagining creative ways of living and being together, outside of the sorts of violence or coercion that deep securitization necessarily entails. As Butler insists, it is crucial that the subject alters the “norms by which it is produced” in the process of becoming, as a form of “repetition that risks life - in its current organization”, as a means of enabling the transformation of these “prevailing conditions of existence” (Butler 1997, 29). To that end, the framework of subject formation is productive for grappling with why and how the motif of vulnerability has come to signify what it does, as well as the extensive investment that Singapore-as-subject possesses vis-a-vis understanding itself as vulnerable and in need of deep securitization, but also as a starting point for imagining how the organization of socio-political life in Singapore could look different outside of this all-encompassing need for security. Furthermore, I posit that this approach is also useful for grappling with why Singapore continues to engage in deep securitization despite its considerable economic and political success (Allison 2024), and what differentiates it from other small/weak states that do not engage in deep securitization.

Indeed, I contend that the formative significance of vulnerability as existential uncertainty allows us to make sense of the range of significations that have become attached to the motif of vulnerability within the broader socio-political architecture of the nation-state. Specifically, through performing a discursive analysis of published National Day Rally (NDR) speeches between 2004 and 2024, it becomes evident that the trope has become so intimately associated with the figurative death of the nation-state and an overarching loss of futurity that deep securitization appears to be the only legitimate response in the face of this overwhelming vulnerability. These NDR speeches are given by the Prime Minister and broadcasted during Singapore’s annual independence celebrations. I chose

these as my dataset because of their function as the most publicized “motivational and agenda-setting exercise[s] conducted at the national level” that aim to rally citizens around new and existing policies and institutions (Tan 2007), and within which the trope of vulnerability would be of particular salience in evoking and underpinning “certain imagining[s] of nationhood” (Tan and Cui 2015). Furthermore, insofar as attempts at securitization often occur through the performance of speech acts, or the articulation of specific utterances by securitizing actors before an audience that designate certain issues or objects as existential threats (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998), it stands that these NDR speeches can be read precisely as these securitizing speech acts in and of themselves. As such, I am specifically analyzing my dataset for instances where the motif of vulnerability is both explicitly and indirectly foregrounded (for instance, through the use of figurative language), so as to better grapple with the functions of such evocations and its relation to deep securitization more broadly. Furthermore, as feminist scholars have long pointed out, it is pivotal to pay attention to the ways in which security discourses rely on gendered language to distort, invisibilize and legitimize (Cooke and Woollacott 1993; Cohn 1987), which has also shaped how I approach my analysis below.

3.1 The Significance of Vulnerability in Singapore’s National Day Rally Speeches

That the condition of being vulnerable categorically precipitates the political decline and eventual extinction of the nation-state is a theme that frequently occurs throughout all the NDR speeches I looked at, as we can observe from the examples listed below:

Decades ago, when I was studying at Michigan in America, I learnt about one of the most famous ghost towns in the state. Oddly enough, it was called Singapore. It was founded in the 1830s and it became a busy lumber and ship-building town. No one

really knows the origins of its name. But it was very likely inspired by a British port in the exotic Far East founded in 1819. The town lasted for about 50 years, before it was swallowed up by shifting sand dunes. And today, only a signboard remains as a marker of its existence.⁵

A small country like Singapore has zero margin for error. Not just Singapore's continued success, but our very survival, depends on us on having the right leaders... We cannot afford any compromise on this.⁶

And Singapore has to stay special because if we are just a dull little spot on the map, a smudge, we are going to count for nothing. We have to be a shining red dot. If we are soft and flabby, we are going to be eaten up. We have to be rugged and we have to have that steel in us.⁷

This “violent slide” (Ahmed 2004, 80) between the experience of vulnerability and the demise of the nation-state is particularly fascinating, both because it does an enormous amount of work to justify these claims that the nation-state has to constantly work to stave off its own ruination again and again through deep securitization, but also for the mechanisms that it relies upon. For instance, the use of figurative language is clearly evident throughout, including the evocation of the image of a once-lively American town - indeed, one that is all the more foreboding for being the nation-state's namesake - that has been reduced to but a spectral presence, which serves as a particularly ominous warning of the ramifications of being vulnerable. It also involves objectifying and locating the primordial fear and anxiety that typically surrounds the idea of death within particular bodies and social forms - for instance, Ahmed situates this vis-a-vis immigrants and asylum seekers being classified as dangerous terrorists - and produces these tropes as “fetish object[s] that then acquires a life of [their]

⁵ Lawrence Wong. “A Singapore Where We Realize Our Dreams” National Day Rally 2024, August 9, 2024, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2024>

⁶ Lee Hsien Loong. National Day Rally 2022, August 9, 2022, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2022-English>

⁷ Lee Hsien Loong. National Day Rally 2015, August 9, 2015, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/national-day-rally-2015>

own” (Ahmed 2004, 77). This produces vulnerability as an object of this same fear and anxiety; when these encounters with the concept are repeated continually over time, the trope of vulnerability becomes a *sticky* one, “saturated with affect, as [a site] of personal and social tension” (Ahmed 2004, 11). In other words, these affective responses to the trope of vulnerability become ingrained and habitual as we encounter its association with death over and over again, and which makes it impossible to grapple with the possibility that the notion of vulnerability can come to signify anything outside of the bleakness of death. Furthermore, this presentation of vulnerability also performs what Ahmed refers to as the act of “‘collecting together’ through fear” (Ahmed 2004, 77) - the figurative death of the nation-state comes to symbolize how the bodies of Singaporeans are also placed in mortal peril by these experiences of vulnerability. When citizens are addressed directly through the use of first-person plurals (‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’), it not only reproduces the collective itself as a performative utterance that draws it into existence, but also portrays the life and security of individual citizens as being inextricably intertwined with that of the nation-state’s. Individual Singaporeans are also ‘going to count for nothing’ should the country fail to ‘stay special’ and succumb to its existential precariousness.

Indeed, one could also read this process through which vulnerability comes to signify Singapore’s demise and demand deep securitization in response as what Huysmans designates to be a ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ mediation of death (Huysmans 1998). Where the former refers to how we concretize death in the form of objects that we can reasonably understand and control (to some extent), the latter denotes how we then come to interact with these objects and our primal aspiration to “postpone death as long as possible” (Huysmans 1998, 238). In the case of Singapore, insofar as vulnerability becomes the object upon which death is displaced, the causal link between the

nation-state becoming vulnerable and pursuing invulnerability through deep securitization as the only means to forestall its (figurative) death becomes entirely naturalized and regarded as sacrosanct, even if such a pursuit is impossible, injurious and ultimately more detrimental than truly productive.

What I also find particularly interesting here is the metaphorical juxtaposition of ‘soft and flabby’ vis-a-vis needing to be ‘rugged’ and ‘have that steel’ in order to avoid being ‘eaten up’, which clearly reflects the gendered logics that I have argued underpin the nation-state’s endless pursuit of invulnerability through deep securitization. For one, it highlights the continued denigration of what it means to be vulnerable through implicitly denoting it as feminine, which is a form of cognitive policing that deters us from even considering what this ‘softness’ might entail, devaluing and delegitimizing it by coding it according to these gendered dichotomies (Cohn 1993). Furthermore, insofar as ‘having the right leaders’ is also foregrounded as indispensable for Singapore’s survival, the authoritarian masculinist logics of protection (Young 2003) undergirding deep securitization become once again reinforced - even extolled, to some degree - as the ideal bargain between state and citizens, which also highlights the ways in which language can position its users differently (Cohn 1993).

Indeed, the NDR speeches also temporalize the condition of vulnerability as deterministic, or a limiting characteristic that induces distinctively *rigid* relations to time, precisely because the role of vulnerability is so central to the process of becoming the nation-state undertakes again and again. In other words, Singapore sees its future as ever only being “another instantiation of the past” (Drichel 2013, 61), rooted in this endless striving to overcome its immutable vulnerability through deep securitization. The trope of vulnerability comes to signify an overarching loss of futurity within this temporal fiction that governs how the nation-state organizes its relation to time and its future, or what

I take here to be the possibility of the unknown that the future holds insofar as we have yet to experience - and hence *cannot* know - it. This endless pursuit of invulnerability through deep securitization, insofar as it has been central to how the nation-state has come to be, closes off the potential for the future - in terms of how the nation-state might respond to this sense of its own vulnerability - to be any different than its past. In generating a particularly static set of temporal relations, this overdetermination of the future “perversely immunizes the self against the future itself” (Drichel 2013, 63), paralyzing it in the face of change and debilitating its decision-making ability.

We see this play out in a few ways within the NDR speeches, as seen below:

The Singapore story has been an unlikely one from the start. Our nation is still young, and we will always be tiny. We will forever be an unlikely nation, created out of the sheer collective will of our people.⁸

Each generation will wonder, as their parents and grandparents did: Will we survive? Will Singapore prevail? Will Singaporeans stay together as one people?⁹

But please remember, even in the cyber age, some things do not change. In 50 years’ time, Singapore will still be a little red dot. To thrive as a nation, we will still need the cohesion to stay united, the ability to outperform others and the will to survive and excel and occasionally, win medals.¹⁰

To make sense of these, I believe Kleinberg’s concept of *defuturization* would be particularly helpful. For Kleinberg, defuturization serves as a delimiting condition that reduces “the openness of a present future” and obstructs us from grasping that there are other possible futures, or that the future could be any different than the past or present, and so we end up “rehears[ing] well-known and

⁸ Lee Hsien Loong. “A Better Home, A Brighter Future,” National Day Rally 2023, August 9, 2023, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2023>

⁹ Lee Hsien Loong. National Day Rally 2021, August 9, 2021, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2021-English>

¹⁰ Lee Hsien Loong. National Day Rally 2008, August 9, 2008, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2008>

familiar futures over and over again” (Kleinberg 2024). In particular, defuturization stems from a simultaneous “winnowing of what we imagine to have been possible” - put differently, mistakenly assuming that there has only ever been one singular past and ignoring that the past might differ from what we presume we know (Kleinberg 2024, 156). Indeed, this serves as an opening into different approaches to studying the politics of vulnerability in Singapore, particularly through examining the existence of different pasts - I am reminded, for example, of Abdullah’s work on the selective interpretation of historical events by Singapore’s political elites so as to emphasize specifically “the racial and/or religious nature of threats to the nation-state’s stability” (Abdullah 2018, 474).

Here, however, I am more interested in the socio-political implications of defuturization as it unfolds at the level of the nation-state, including the stifling of “growth, change, or redemption” that accompanies this inability to envisage other futures (Kleinberg 2024, 152). It is indeed evident that how Singapore apprehends its past - one that is haunted by this experience of vulnerability as existential uncertainty - has foreclosed its “horizon of expectations” (Koselleck 2004, 267), and so it can only envision its future in terms of this endless striving for invulnerability (which, of course, also aligns with the parallel discourse of exceptionalism and needing to ‘stay special, or ‘survive and excel’). This reflects how the “anticipatory practices” and “interpretive tools” (Simon and Tamm 2021, 5-6) that the nation-state makes use of to grapple with its relation to its future are largely delimited by these simplistic understandings of vulnerability. This is most keenly reflected in the nation-state’s perception of itself as this ‘unlikely nation’ across all time, and that it will always be so innately vulnerable that this “existential angst” (Abulof 2014, 403) will be reproduced across generations. This does not preclude the fact that the lived temporalities and speculative practices of individual citizens might be

experienced differently, and even contest or undermine how the nation-state has come to represent its relation to time. Of course, these multiple temporalities coexist and overlap, but I am especially interested in this temporal fiction, which underwrites the overall organization of socio-political life in Singapore, as it is especially revealing of how the nation-state makes sense of its own vulnerability.

To summarize, I have argued that it is crucial to consider the significations that have become attached to the motif of vulnerability within the wider socio-political imaginary in the face of its *formative* significance, and more meaningfully grapple with the phenomenon of deep securitization in Singapore. Indeed, this section has looked at two dominant themes within the nation-state's discourse on vulnerability: the fantasy of mastery that underpins the unequivocal objectification of vulnerability as death, and the temporal fiction that the future must be the same as our past and present, rooted in this endless striving towards invulnerability in the face of an immutable existential uncertainty. To that end, it allows us to make sense of how this interplay of vulnerability and deep securitization is central to the process of becoming that the nation-state undertakes over and over. Yet, these logics are also reductionist insofar as they are rooted in certain forms of epistemic and ethical *closure* (Gilson 2011), an issue that I address in greater detail in the next section. While I do not go so far as Gilson as to label this closure a sort of "willful ignorance" (Gilson 2011, 318), given that my main contention is that Singapore might not know how to *be* or *become* any differently,¹¹ I do agree that the issue stems from the simplistic, inaccurate and unfair reification of vulnerability as a solely negative attribute that must be overcome or avoided, which demands that we turn to the question of what it otherwise is, or can be.

¹¹ Of course, it is entirely plausible that this approach to vulnerability is an entirely strategic one, particularly for the maintenance of state control, but I do feel that this is not incompatible with my investigation of how vulnerability is enmeshed within wider meaning-making processes within the nation-state. If anything, it further substantiates the argument I am trying to make, insofar as no choice of political strategy is ever entirely arbitrary either.

4. Refiguring Vulnerability

I have argued that there is a need to refigure the meanings of vulnerability in the case of Singapore because of the troubling significations that being vulnerable has come to take on. This is due to its formative experiences of vulnerability as existential uncertainty that instil deep securitization as a norm that it continues to reenact in the process of becoming. However, what exactly does this refiguring of vulnerability entail? How does it unfold at the level of collective meaning-making? In turn, how could it fundamentally reshape how socio-political life is organized in Singapore? In this section, I address these questions and posit that vulnerability must be refigured as a quality that is ultimately ambiguous, insofar as it is neither inherently negative or positive, but also a source of radical potential, one that can profoundly alter established ways of living and being, and generate a more emancipatory mode of politics. I substantiate these arguments through engaging with existing feminist scholarship, as well as through an analysis of the significance of vulnerability in the writings of Hannah Arendt, focusing, in particular on her conceptions of *action* and *freedom*. Moreover, since these theorists mainly discuss vulnerability at the level of the individual, or how it exists as a fundamentally ineradicable aspect of the human condition, I also go on to postulate how refiguring vulnerability in the context of Singapore offers up a broader and more effective range of responses to the unavoidable reality of socio-political insecurities and other crises that can never be fully averted. Though this section is largely intended to serve as a theoretical intervention, meant as an avenue to raise different sorts of questions rather than provide answers in the form of policy propositions, I do hope that it can emphasize the importance of theorizing as a catalyst for enacting more concrete change.

4.1 Vulnerability as Ambiguous

That vulnerability has conventionally been conceived of rather reductively - for instance, as “a shortcoming, an impending failure” that invites assumptions of “both moral and material failure” and which has become irrevocably symptomatic of the monstrous body (Shildrick 2000, 217), or a dangerous “exposure to threat and violation” (Drichel 2013, 5) that requires intervention - is an issue that is well-established in feminist scholarship. To that end, critical feminist scholars have argued that our vulnerability is that which makes us human - indeed, “an inalienable condition of becoming” (Shildrick 2000, 226) and an “ontological truism for any embodied being” (Murphy 2012, 71), one that cannot be denied or effaced quite so neatly. On that account, it becomes crucial that vulnerability is not simply treated as a “de facto negative state”, but is understood more broadly as an “openness to being affected and affecting in turn”, or “a condition of potential” that limits and enables us simultaneously (Gilson 2011, 310). Even though being vulnerable indubitably exposes us to possible injury and dispossession, it also makes it possible for us to form bonds with others, to learn and grow, as well as to “take pleasure and find comfort” (Gilson 2011, 310). Of course, the question that begets, therefore, is what this recognition of vulnerability as fundamentally ambivalent entails *prescriptively*.

This understanding of vulnerability as ambiguous is absolutely pivotal, because its provocations lie precisely in the fact that it can be “both jubilant and terrifying” (Murphy 2012, 72). For instance, Butler has previously proposed that this recognition of vulnerability as a shared human condition could elicit feelings of “generosity, empathy [and] tolerance” (Murphy 2012, 6) towards others and can therefore serve as the grounds for a broader ethics of non-violence as a different sort of

“normative aspiration” for individuals and communities to take up in the face of their experiences of vulnerability, instead of resorting to techniques of violence such as war (Butler 2004). Yet, other scholars have criticized this proposal for failing to grapple with how vulnerability is politicized and distributed unevenly as an experiential reality (Shulman 2011; Cole 2016), and for presuming, somewhat naively, that the relationship between ontology and ethics is a linear one, or that this recognition of vulnerability as crucial to our embodiment must inevitably generate an ethos of non-violence more broadly (Murphy 2012). Put differently, without recognizing that vulnerability is necessarily ambiguous and incorporating this ambivalence into future analyses, one runs the risk of, once more, generalizing and totalizing what it means to be vulnerable, albeit to the other extreme.

For Murphy, what is genuinely ethically provocative about the motif of vulnerability is this sense of ambiguity, which “neither sanctions nor forbids violence” in and of itself, but prompts us to think about how to “assum[e] responsibility in the face of ethical ambiguities” (Murphy 2012, 66). Indeed, what sorts of normative claims can we forward when the possibility for any moral certainty has been foreclosed and we can no longer definitively claim that our practices, in the face of varying forms of vulnerability, are the right ones? The only one that remains available to us is that of *responsibility*, which commits us to “responding well to [others]” (Thiem 2008, 6) even in the face of incomplete knowledge. I find Thiem’s conceptualization of responsibility - one in which the focus shifts from being “held accountable according to a set of norms” to the question of our relationality, or how we address and are, in turn, addressed by others (Thiem 2008, 3) - to be especially helpful here. In particular, it foregrounds how demands for responsibility that are centered on particular sets of social and cultural norms or practices are ultimately problematically parochial and allows us to “rethink at an

angle to social normalization” (Thiem 2008, 6), to consider what alternative responses might be more suitable. It also necessitates that we take into account the effects of our actions on those around us.

A word of caution here: I am not looking to indiscriminately transpose these alternative articulations of vulnerability as ambiguous, premised as they are on vulnerability as an ontological reality of our embodiment and sociality as individuals, to the fundamentally different case of deep securitization in Singapore more broadly, even if I am examining the nation-state as a particular kind of subject. Yet, I do believe that bringing these two discourses together is important for dislocating and denaturalizing entrenched assumptions about vulnerability in the Singaporean context. For instance, insofar as the politics of deep securitization has consistently been forwarded as a normative response in the face of its persistent sense of vulnerability, refiguring vulnerability as ambiguous allows us to rethink its place within a genuinely responsible engagement with our vulnerability.

While this most certainly “takes risk prevention and protection seriously” (Ziarek 2013, 82), it must also entail, for instance, grounding our attempts to apprehend our own vulnerability in “an awareness of the damages (to self and other) created by the attempt to make invulnerable that which simply can never be made perfectly safe” (Cohn 2014, 57). In particular, it seeks to elicit a greater recognition of the injurious nature of Singapore’s endless pursuit of invulnerability through deep securitization, the effects of which I have detailed earlier. More broadly, however, any responsible engagement with vulnerability must also involve taking seriously the possibility that vulnerability can simultaneously be enabling and that there are more productive responses that we could explore in the face of this persistent sense of vulnerability that do not involve deep securitization, that open up when the focus shifts from *reducing* or *overcoming* this persistent sense of vulnerability to *tempering* or

simply *living* with it. For now, it is enough to note that refiguring vulnerability as ambiguous is especially critical as it makes “both strange and new” (Cohn 2014, 65) the various significations that have become attached to the motif of vulnerability in the context of Singapore. By highlighting the ambivalence and fluidity that underpins what being vulnerable means, it opens up the space for Singapore as a polity to make sense of it differently at the level of collective meaning-making and, as a result, makes possible the broader reorganization of socio-political life around alternative principles that currently lie outside of this seemingly self-evident and all-encompassing need for security.

4.2 Vulnerability as a Source of Radical Potential

In this section, I explicate the too-often-overlooked significance of vulnerability in the writings of Hannah Arendt to argue for the need to refigure vulnerability as a source of radical potential, by foregrounding its productive, generative dimension in terms of how the conceptions of action and freedom in Arendt’s political thought emerge as the corollary of experiencing vulnerability. As a prelude, it must be said that Hannah Arendt remains a controversial figure among feminist scholars, given her notorious aversion to discussing issues of gender - and yet, as Honig puts it, turning to her “agonal and performative politics might stand a feminist politics in good stead” (Honig 1995, 136). Arendt’s vision of politics remains a valuable resource to be tapped on here, both for enriching existing feminist theorizations of vulnerability and for the aims of this thesis. Though Arendt never explicitly identifies it as such, I contend that vulnerability permeates her discussions on action and freedom, serving as the “paradoxical condition of political transformation” (Ziarek 2013, 81).

First and foremost, I delineate how the experience of vulnerability *enables* our capacity for action, and how action is characterized as a vulnerable endeavor in and of itself. On one hand, it is only through allowing ourselves to become vulnerable that we can partake in speech and action to begin with, insofar as we have to enter the public realm and disclose ourselves before other individuals sharing this space with us, an appearance that, Arendt posits, leaves us uncomfortably exposed. This is because action “is never possible in isolation” - it requires the condition of human plurality to be actualized, or that we act *in front of* and *alongside* others who are equal to and distinct from us (Arendt 1958, 188). As such, Arendt likens this entrance into the realm of the intersubjective to a “second birth” (Arendt 1958, 176), harkening back to the moment of our *physical* birth to emphasize two interrelated points. For one, we are forced to grapple with, once more, “the naked fact of our original physical appearance” as newcomers (albeit of a slightly different sort) when we “reveal actively [our] unique personal identities” in our insertion into the realm of the intersubjective through our actions, foregrounding the tremendous vulnerability underpinning this process (Arendt 1958, 176). Furthermore, Arendt uses this analogy to emphasize that our entry into this common world, which “lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together”, is equally as definitive of the human condition insofar as this self-disclosure is the first time we appear to one another “*qua men*”, or the instance of our shifting from being *something* to *someone* (Arendt 1958, 176). In other words, this experience of vulnerability necessarily precedes and encapsulates what it means to become human.

Action itself is also presented as an innately vulnerable endeavor, constituted as it is by its boundlessness, unpredictability and ephemerality. Yet, Arendt does not portray these as limitations, but rather as ineluctable outcomes of the vast potentialities immanent within our actions, and which

make our capacity for action the most distinctive human faculty, as I explicate in more detail later on. For instance, every action sets in motion a seemingly ceaseless sequence of events, within which each event also inevitably sparks its own chain reaction, such that our actions “never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners” (Arendt 1958, 190). In its boundlessness and inexhaustibility, action also continually transgresses the “limited, graspable framework of circumstances” we impose as a means of trying to order and stabilize it (Arendt 1958, 190), a reflection of how uncontrollable action really is. Furthermore, action is inherently unpredictable insofar as it can only be fully judged in retrospect, revealing itself in its entirety, especially in terms of its effects and consequences, solely “to the backward glance of the historian” (Arendt 1958, 192). As *actors*, we are unable to thoroughly make sense of how our actions are inextricably intertwined, rooted as we are in our own partial perspectives, and so must take the risk of acting upon our limited and incomplete outlooks. Moreover, because our actions always transpire within an “already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” (Arendt 1958, 184), so its effects can never be entirely foreseeable or determinable, because our actions never occur mechanistically as a result of our intentions, entangled as they are with what other individuals disclose in their words and deeds. Finally, the stage upon which action unfolds, or the “space of appearance [that] comes into being wherever men are together”, is one that is immanently evanescent and frail, because it dissipates with the dispersal of individual actors and their activities and so does not “survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being” in the first place (Arendt 1958, 199).

To that end, this uncertainty, which characterizes “all affairs that go on between men directly” (Arendt 1958, 182), casts action as an innately vulnerable endeavor, insofar as it is inherently

contingent, fleeting and therefore seemingly impossible fragile. This is made all the more evident when we juxtapose Arendt's conception of action vis-a-vis how she conceives of *labor* and *work*, the other two categories of her notion of the *vita activa*, or the activities that make up the human condition. On one hand, labor is firmly set within the realm of biological determinism, the production of the necessities that sustain the life process itself, and therefore necessarily tied to "nature's cyclical movement", or that "unceasing, indefatigable cycle" of birth and death, growth and decay (Arendt 1958, 97). As a result, to labor is "to be enslaved by necessity" (Arendt 1958, 83), insofar as we are prevented from breaking out of the monotonous, recurring cycles of the natural processes of life itself, and labor itself is a means to an end for our survival. On the other hand, work, or the task of fabricating and producing human artifacts that are durable and permanent, "consists in reification" (Arendt 1958, 139). Put differently, to work is to progress towards a "definite, predictable end" (the making of the object at hand) based on a set of established parameters, or to be engaged in a linear process that is couched in a relentless automatism insofar as it can unfold mechanically over and over without "wilful and purposeful interference" on the part of individual workers (Arendt 1958, 143).

In stark contrast, the vulnerability that enables and comes to characterize action in turn - in its contingency, fragility and ephemerality - is what also makes possible the actualization of the human condition of natality and making the experience of freedom "a worldly, tangible reality" through our action (Arendt 1958, 153). In other words, it is precisely this vulnerability that "enables the creation of a new beginning in history" (Ziarek 2013, 81) by engendering creative and constructive possibilities and arrangements in our socio-political life through our collective action, and hence that which makes action - rather than our ability to labor or work - the faculty that most defines the human condition.

Here, vulnerability is not a problem to be solved or a limitation to be overcome - in fact, it opens up the possibility for action in concert with others and serves as a source of radical potential, in contrast to the fixed, enduring nature of labor and work that remains impervious to human intervention.

My argument that vulnerability can generate a more emancipatory form of politics is very much rooted in the Arendtian conceptions of freedom and natality, as introduced above. Put simply, the condition of natality, as Arendt understands it, refers to our ability to begin *anew*, introducing that which is new into the world we share through acting with others; indeed, “perform[ing] what is infinitely improbable” in doing so by countering the determinism that underpins the realms of labor and work (Arendt 1958, 178). Setting into motion these new processes and initiatives through our action “interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life” (Arendt 1958, 246) and allows us to transcend the fatalism, powerlessness and repetition that would otherwise characterize the human condition. In turn, it makes possible the experience of freedom that, for Arendt, is located exclusively within the political realm because it “emerges from our relations with others” (Ziarek 2013, 78); indeed, stems from acting in concert with others as such. Insofar as Arendt sought to challenge the dominant portrayal of freedom within the history of (Western) political thought as a subject-centered condition, located within “an inward domain, the will” (Arendt 1961, 135) and positioned as a desirable quality that one could come to acquire in the form of “uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastery” (Arendt 1958, 234), we see that freedom can only ever exist as the corollary of vulnerability because it exists between individuals in the public realm. In Arendt’s vision of politics, to be free meant to create alongside one’s equals, to be able to perform the miraculous over and over

again, interrupting and dislodging that which otherwise appears deterministic by starting anew, none of which would be possible without considering the experience of vulnerability that underpins it.

In Arendt's writings, vulnerability serves as a cornerstone of her conceptions of action and freedom, and as such, becomes entirely integral to the human condition. In fact, this vulnerability cannot be eradicated without completely "destroy[ing] the substance of human relationships" (Arendt 1958, 195), and with that, the common world that comes into existence between us and as a result of what we do. Here, I wish to draw attention to the fact that, for Arendt, it is precisely our inherent relationality that "provide[s] stability in the ocean of future uncertainty where the unpredictable may break in from all sides" (Arendt 1990, 175), in the form of our faculty to make and keep promises. In other words, insofar as our capacity to promise does not guarantee that individuals will necessarily abide by or be able to fulfill the promises they have made, such that these promises might best be depicted as only "little islands of stability in the radical contingency of the public realm" (Honig 2023, 88) at best, their binding power rests in the notion of reciprocity that they evoke. On this account, our innate relationality both engenders a sense of vulnerability but also offers some means of tempering it.

As I have earlier argued, reading Arendt keenly demonstrates how vulnerability serves as a source of radical potential, since it is only through letting ourselves be vulnerable that we can act in concert with others to introduce all sorts of new beginnings into our world. That we are not wedded to what *is* or what *has been*, that we can transcend these forces of determinism and start anew again and again, rests at the core of what Arendt avers being free entails. This speaks directly to the defuturization that I have argued occurs as a result of Singapore interpreting its vulnerability as deterministic, or a restricting condition, one that requires the interminable repetition of deep securitization in response,

delimiting the modes of living and being available to the nation-state more broadly, and therefore highlights how refiguring vulnerability as a source of radical potential can be unfettering.

Indeed, I contend that the radical potential that vulnerability holds is largely rooted in how it can cultivate “multidimensional forms of relation” (Cohn 2014, 60), building on the centrality of our inherent relationality to Arendt’s political thought. In other words, I am arguing that refiguring its relation to its own vulnerability allows Singapore to formulate differently its relations with its own citizens and with other countries, as part of a more responsible engagement with vulnerability but also as attempts at new answers to the problematic of living well with others. For instance, consider the politics of mutual aid, which takes the issue of vulnerability as an entirely different starting point for engendering distinctive relations of solidarity between individuals and communities. As Spade puts it, mutual aid is about “choos[ing] to help each other out, share things, and put time and resources into caring for the most vulnerable” in the face of wider structures and institutions that are ineffective at best and actively hostile at worst (Spade 2020, 14). Indeed, the example of mutual aid stands in stark contrast to the forms of closure and solipsism that have more often than not accompanied the question of what it means to be vulnerable and underpinned the pursuit of invulnerability through the creation of impermeable boundaries (Shildrick 2000; Drichel 2013). If anything, the motif of vulnerability serves as an opening to build richer, more complex connections and stronger communities.

How might this unfold at the level of the nation-state? On one hand, this might entail going beyond only “thinking about military and diplomatic alliances” (Cohn 2014, 60) and calls upon us to purposefully work towards nurturing different kinds of relations at the international level, especially ones that might revolve around coming together in solidarity, in the vein of mutual aid, to mitigate and

resolve common crises. For instance, this might include strengthening efforts to counter the destructive effects of climate change across Southeast Asia on the whole, which, as Gogoi and Sarmah have pointed out, are lacking because of the lack of “mutual trust and interest” (Gogoi and Sarmah 265) between countries in the region, despite the fact that the region is particularly at risk in terms of geographic location. As Weatherill puts it, successful climate change efforts must “disrupt the idea of states and places as separate islands of (in)vulnerability”, one that she argues is rooted in fantasies of isolation and independence, and instead center the building of global solidarities (Weatherill 2025, 49).

Furthermore, refiguring vulnerability as such would also serve as a starting point for improving and deepening relations with neighboring countries Malaysia and Indonesia, which have been positioned as perpetually “harbor[ing] ill-intentions towards the nation’s survival” (Abdullah 2020, 476). This deeply-rooted paranoia about the “primordial forces of ethnicity and religion” is one that has been heightened by historical hostilities between these countries, and continues to contribute extensively to Singapore’s sense of its own vulnerability (Abdullah 2020, 477). Yet, the refiguring of vulnerability opens up the space for considering, among other things, shared “cultures, practices, forms of life” (Beattie and Schick 2013, 27), and the ways in which these histories are intertwined, as well as focusing on the ways in which these different polities might be able to come together more productively.

With the case of Singapore, insofar as I have argued that its sense of its own vulnerability has been - and remains - integral to its becoming, one might come to interpret the motif of vulnerability in Arendtian terms as the foundation upon which Singapore as a body politic has been formed, that which comes to imbue governing structures and institutions with political authority. It must be noted that Arendt is specifically discussing this in the context of the American Revolution, insofar as the

Founding Fathers sought to “build a new house where freedom can dwell” (Arendt 1990, 35) by way of the founding of a new republic, codified in the form of the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. However, it is vis-a-vis the reification of these moments of founding, or how these foundations become treated as self-evident, unchanging absolutes in and of themselves (Honig 2023), that the parallels between Arendt’s critique of the failures of the American Revolution and the significance of the politics of vulnerability in Singapore become particularly insightful. For Arendt, this “all-pervasive preoccupation with permanence” resulted in the overarching failure of representative democracy to provide spaces in which freedom could be actualized by the people themselves by “incorporat[ing] the townships and the town-hall meetings, the original springs of all political activity in the country” into the wider structures of governance post-Revolution (Arendt 1990). With the case of Singapore, the reification of vulnerability as existential uncertainty and the corresponding fixation with its origins as transcendently authoritative in nature has given rise to an extremely limited form of becoming, in which the nation-state is bound to repeat these same injurious patterns over and over, “invariably clos[ing] political spaces and engender[ing] coercive and exclusionary political practices” (Honig 2023, 77). To that end, just as Arendt advocates for “amend[ing] and augment[ing]” the Constitution, to preserve the authority that inheres within it as the foundation of the American republic but also allow for change and reinvigoration (Arendt 1990, 202), so refiguring vulnerability in the context of Singapore is crucial for destabilizing and unsettling what has become entrenched, but also allow for citizens to come together and participate directly in its continuous refounding, giving rise to “an activist, democratic politics of contest, resistance and amendment” (Honig 2023, 77).

5. Conclusion

To summarize, this thesis has argued that the motif of vulnerability is of such formative significance that this ongoing interplay of vulnerability and deep securitization - treated here as the nation-state's ceaseless but always-unsuccessful pursuit of invulnerability- rests at the very heart of its becoming. As such, even as the nation-state engages in deep securitization as a response to its persistent sense of existential uncertainty, it must remain perpetually vulnerable in order to remake itself as an intelligible subject over and over, a paradigm that I have argued relies upon reductive understandings of what being vulnerable entails. As a result, refiguring what vulnerability has come to signify - as ambiguous and a source of radical potential - becomes all the more important for unsettling existing patterns of deep securitization and envisioning different ways of living and being. To that end, this thesis has served as somewhat of a thought-experiment, insofar as I have tried to hold up against one another extremely different forms of thinking and reasoning - securitization practices in Singapore, on one hand, and feminist theorizing, as well as the writings of Hannah Arendt, on the other - and sought to articulate what might emerge or become visible from bringing them together.

To some extent, this thesis has also attempted to demonstrate how the motif of vulnerability is one that has long been deeply maligned. As feminist scholars have long asserted, being vulnerable necessarily accompanies life itself - it is, after all, what allows us to encounter one another, and how we are imprinted upon and indelibly shaped in the process of becoming, integral to what it means to be human. In trying to do away with this constitutive vulnerability in our politics, whether by denying, disavowing or displacing it altogether, we have, for too long, exacerbated this particular vulnerability for others, and caused more harm and destruction than attending thoughtfully to this vulnerability

might have otherwise engendered. Rather than banish this vulnerability, how might we foreground it as a more productive starting point for reorganizing socio-political life and imagining creative solutions to the most pressing issues that plague our world today? If we can never become truly invulnerable, perhaps we might abide by - even embrace - our vulnerability as the first step towards a radically different mode of politics, one that is far richer and more generative in its unabashed humanness.

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