



*Vigilant Citizenship: Legal Imaginaries and Political Subjectivity in Miami*  
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## Summary

In his hit song “Miami” (1997), Will Smith mentions several attractive characteristics of the city. Miami’s climate, beach, and nightlife attract Will and many residents and tourists of all ages and from across the world to the South Florida city, and to South Beach in particular. In addition, Miami is renowned for its multicultural status, or as Will puts it, a “salsa merengue melting pot”. In the song, he is welcomed in Spanish, and indeed, the majority of Miamians speak Spanish and many have affiliations with Latin American and Caribbean countries. In particular, Miami has been a place of refuge for Cubans, who chose or were forced to leave their home country. Will and many others, including local residents, musicians, and producers of videogames, see these combined elements as making Miami a unique place – a city that is different than any other in the US, or even in the world. Although over twenty years old, Will Smith’s “Miami” both reflects and reproduces Miami’s reputation as an exceptional space, a reputation that remains dominant in both contemporary popular culture and academic research on Miami.

This dissertation provides a more nuanced analysis of everyday life in Miami, a city strongly characterized by growing inequality and suspicion, which primarily affects ethnic minorities. The incidental, exciting, and often absurdist character of violence and crime that Miami is known for is much more systemic and racially skewed than popular culture might suggest. My research shows that Miami can best be understood in relation to historical and more recent political developments in the US. Similar to other US cities, Miami was created in a time of racial apartheid and has increasingly been designed, spatially and economically, for individual profit. It is a city in which private gun ownership, gated communities, imaginaries of legality, and state and police violence play an important role in shaping everyday life. In other words, Miami is a typical example of US neoliberalization, in which state agencies privatize public services and assign responsibility to local residents under the guise of “freedom”.

This is particularly visible in the realm of security provision, which (from a European standpoint) has traditionally been seen as a concern of the state. In Miami, commercial security services are increasingly popular, local governments and police departments support active neighborhood watches, and private gun ownership is both legal and widespread. Although supporters of neoliberal policies emphasize the positive side of diminished state interference, it results in a more violent, uncertain, and more unequal reality in practice, exemplified by the case of George Zimmerman, captain of a local neighborhood watch, who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African-American and seventeen year-old boy in Sanford, Florida in 2012. Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges on the basis of “Stand Your Ground” legislation, which makes self-defense legal.

In this dissertation I explain how we can understand the relationships and interactions that characterize everyday security provision in Miami, emphasizing that feelings of insecurity have to be understood in terms of individual experience, rather than analyzed a priori through the categories of police officer and citizen.

I examine this in terms of citizenship: the experiences and enactments of rights, responsibilities, and political membership. As an analytical and theoretical framework, citizenship can advance our understanding of how people relate and interact with each other in the context of security provision, of the meaning and implications of social and political developments, and of the processes of inclusion and exclusion in an urban environment. The title of the dissertation, “Vigilant Citizenship”, refers to the ideal type of citizenship that is demonstrated within the urban and national context of this research. It is an idealized representation of citizenship in which Miamians are depicted as rational and self-sufficient subjects, capable of using certain assets and avoiding liabilities. In short, a vigilant citizen is a person with a heightened sense of awareness, who accepts her responsibilities to intervene in threatening situations, while still acting in accordance with the

law. In this dissertation I provide concrete examples of how this ideal type of citizenship shapes the use of guns, cameras, and secrets.

The most important contribution of my research is found in my analysis of why, but especially how, Miamians experience and enact citizenship in everyday security provision. In this analysis, I develop the concept of “legal imaginaries”, a concept that refers to shared understandings of the law. These imaginaries captures the interpretation of a relationship between legality (actions in accordance with the law), and legitimacy (broader social norms regarding what is and/or *should* be legal). What is legal does not necessarily have to be legitimate and vice versa. In Miami, a particular legal imaginary has developed in which legality has become the dominant frame through which people interpret their agency. This means that Miamians’ sense of morality is expressed primarily through notions of legality, in terms of the law, and to a lesser extent through notions of social legitimacy. As a result, it becomes difficult to think outside this legal imaginary and to deal with issues such as police violence in ways go beyond litigation. Legal imaginaries are partly based on how local residents interpret and articulate laws in everyday life, including legislation surrounding private gun ownership and the use of firearms.

The legal imaginaries I identified in Miami inform *individual* experiences and enactments of rights and responsibilities. Residents see themselves are responsible for figuring out what is legal and what is not, and for adapting their behavior accordingly. This also illustrates the workings of vigilant citizenship, in which individual responsibility and accountability are key. An example: a police officer asks himself if he can shoot a drunken man who is waving a rubber hammer. He wonders: is this legal? The drunken man is disturbing the public, is brandishing what is in legal terms a weapon, and is not obeying the officer’s instructions. The police officer analyzes his own agency through a specific legal imaginary, to assess what he is and is not allowed to do in the given context. His explicit framing of this encounter in terms of legality illustrates the importance of legal imaginaries, in particular in contrast to alternative normative frameworks that emphasize social justice or other ethical concerns.

In these pages I write about the stories and experiences of Lux, Sarah, Darius, Olaf, Marcus and Fenix. They are the main protagonists in this ethnography. In this dissertation we follow these protagonists at home, in their neighborhood, during work and in various meetings and interactions that form part of their everyday experiences with security provision. I contextualize and expand these stories with information derived from riding with police officers through the city and joining neighborhood watch patrols. The six main protagonists live in different Miami neighborhoods, have different ethnic and racial backgrounds and work in different institutional settings. Lux, for example, is a police officer, who works in the neighborhood where Marcus and Fenix work in a barbershop and experience the presence of police officers as a burden. Because I was able to build relationships with different residents, and experience and participate in a diversity of situations with them, I am able to demonstrate how Miamians encounter various forms of insecurity even as their interpretations and reactions show many similarities. All six have a firearm license and own one or more guns, use cameras to record violence or intimidation, and value having secrets. Darius, for instance, secretly carried a weapon with him during work even though this was prohibited. Sarah had knowledge of her neighbor’s involvement in the local drug trade, but was unable to share this with others without endangering herself. The main part of this dissertation describes and analyzes the actions and experiences of these protagonists. I show how they deal with legality, and what they feel their own role should be in relation to the ideal type of vigilant citizenship.

In spite of the growing number of examples that illustrate the gap between the law and justice, my research suggests that this does not directly affect a general confidence in the capacity of the law to address complex and systemic violence. In 1991, Los Angeles police officers almost killed Rodney King. Their violence was recorded, but the police officers were acquitted or received a light punishment as a result. Today, it seems as if everyone uses mobile cameras to challenge injustice.

This indicates the extent to which visual material is still interpreted as valuable legal evidence, even though there have been many cases of (police) violence that suggest the contrary. Taser, the influential corporation that produced of the “non-lethal” electronic weapon, propagates the use of cameras for both police officers and private security guards. Different police departments in Miami have begun to experiment with body cameras – small cameras that are attached to the chests of the police officers. According to producers and political supporters, this practice will improve security, and assist officers in dealing with false accusations, or at least make justice possible in a court of law. This dissertation, in particular Chapter Four, suggests that cameras do not bring any noteworthy changes to racialized and unequal security provision. Cameras allow us to quite literally zoom in on individual behavior, and in so doing reduce for example police violence, an issue of structural nature, to individual transgressions. A widespread faith in the capacity of technology to visualize and solve injustice gives rise to the legal gaze, through which social and political attention shifts towards which laws have been violated and by whom. How violence and inequality are produced and shaped through larger forces becomes of lesser importance. With this dissertation, I hope to have underlined that forms of neoliberal freedom actually increase uncertainty, duties, and tensions for everyone – an outcome that perpetually increases the need for more “security”.