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## Odes to Miami

### Sociopoetic Practices in the Urban and Digital Space

#### Abstract

This paper investigates ›Zip Odes‹, a format developed for the *O, Miami* poetry festival, as an example of sociopoetic practices between the urban and digital space. Zip Odes are short poems written by residents that transform their zip code ›into an occasion for place-based, lyrical celebration‹ (festival website). The Zip Ode's composition principle is based on the number in the author's zip code, and it is unlike traditional verse as words rather than syllables are counted. Each year, dozens of poems are displayed in the streets and performed in front of audiences. Further performances take place on the festival's Instagram page, where written odes are animated in serial form or presented as video clips recited by the poets.

After introducing the context of the *O, Miami* poetry festival, the paper will take a sociocultural perspective to discuss the Zip Ode as a popular adaptation of a classical lyrical genre. In the literary tradition, odes are song-like poems expressing strong feelings, particularly admiration, and addressed to sublime nature or an abstract entity. Here, they are directed at a place, a neighborhood, or a city. By performing a textual examination of exemplary Zip Odes, this paper will analyze the form and themes of the genre before discussing its various presentation formats. The paper sets the festival concept and, in particular, this innovative poetry format in relation to the notion of ›lyric address‹ and considers it as a practice of place-making.

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## 1. Introduction: The Context of the *O, Miami* Poetry Festival

The ›Zip Ode‹ is a poetry format developed for Florida's *O, Miami* poetry festival. Since 2011, this multi-site festival has been held in public places every year from April 1 to 30 – US national poetry month – and covers the breadth of Miami-Dade County. In a book coauthored with sociologist Norbert Gestring, I examine *O, Miami* in detail as a poetry event held in

the urban space (Benthien and Gestring 2023<sup>1</sup>). In contrast, here I will focus on one specific format and its concrete poetic, social, and media practices. Like visual art displayed in the public space, poetry can also be an active tool for »place-making« (cf. Benthien and Gestring 2023, 28–32) – a term used in urban research to describe how various formal and informal actors such as urban planners, investors, but also grassroots initiatives and residents produce space (cf. Lossau 2015). It is especially useful for denoting social practices of appropriation and marking, and uses that are connected to the social micro space of specific everyday places. With regard to the poetry festival *O, Miami*, sociopoetic practices include different forms of presenting and commenting on poems as well as the aspect of community building through poetry that addresses one’s own region or neighborhood. In his theory on the »production of space«, Henri Lefebvre distinguishes between three dimensions: »spatial practice«, »representations of space«, and »representational spaces« (Lefebvre 1991, 33). With »spatial practice«, Lefebvre refers both to the material side of space – that is, its structural and physical form – and to its everyday use and perception by inhabitants (cf. Lefebvre 1991, 38). Public poetry can be understood as part of a production process in the Lefebvrian sense: when it is presented, it changes urban spatial practice to varying degrees, and lived space presents itself in new ways, making other uses or attributions of meaning possible (cf. Benthien and Gestring 2023, 17–19).

The city of Miami has 442,000 residents, the county 2.7 million, and the metropolitan area, located on the south of the US east coast, 6.1 million. Miami is a »minority-majority city« – according to census data, 72 percent of its inhabitants are Hispanic, 16 percent Black, and just 12 percent White.<sup>2</sup> People of Cuban origin make up the largest group, with a population share of 34 percent (cf. Portes and Armony 2018, 30). Miami-Dade has »one of the most diverse and populous Spanish-speaking populations in the United States« (Shumow and Pinto 2014, 59). The majority (approx. 55%) of Miami-Dade’s current residents are foreign-born, with the overwhelming majority (more than 90%) of Latin American origin; most of Miami-Dade’s population identifies as Hispanic or Latino (cf. Lynch 2023, 113). While Spanish is spoken in the majority of households across all socioeconomic strata, English is also widely spoken, in particular by »Miami-born second- and third-generation bilinguals« (Lynch 2023, 113). Among the characteristics that constitute Miami’s »radical uniqueness« (Portes and Armony 2018, 1) is its close connection to Latin America. The Miami metropolitan area is, on the one hand, an economic hub for financial flows between the US and Latin America and, on the other hand, a destination for refugees and immigrants from Latin American countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Haiti. Due to its economic function, Miami has become a global city (see Aranda, Hughes and

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1 The general remarks on the festival and on the Miami metropolitan area in this article are taken from Ch. 3.5 of this German-language study, as are a few of the Zip Odes discussed below.

2 Cf. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/miamicityflorida,miamidadecountyflorida/POP060210> (16 December 2023).

Sabogal 2014), but it is also characterized by pronounced social inequality and above-average poverty: more than 20 percent of the population live below the official poverty line.<sup>3</sup> Social inequality, ethnic diversity, and poverty are also reflected in the sociospatial structure of the city (and the area as such): residential segregation is characterized, firstly, by the small-scale coexistence of wealth and poverty and, secondly, by enclaves of minorities, of which Little Haiti and the African-American neighborhood of Overtown are significant examples (cf. Benthien and Gestring 2023, 124–125).

The ambitious goal of the annual poetry festival is for every person in Miami-Dade to encounter a poem in the public space in the month of April. Through site-specific events and poetry actions, *O, Miami* aims to make the voices of the people living in the metropolitan area heard through poetry, to »engage residents in a literary community«, and to enable collective experiences and cultural exchange.<sup>4</sup> The festival staff consists of ten people belonging to different ethnic groups, most of whom have an arts or poetry background.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that the majority of residents speak Spanish, all official communication – during public events, on the website, and on social media – takes place in English. This may have to do with the »general social preference for English« in the area and its »cross-structural influence [...] at all linguistic levels« (Lynch 2023, 113–114).<sup>6</sup> The poetry presented during the festival is multilingual, although English dominates, with Spanish clearly in second place.

*O, Miami* is a non-profit organization financed by different public funds and foundations, e.g., through the cultural promotion of the different cities and districts involved, in particular the City of Miami and Miami-Dade County cultural authorities. It has received and continues to receive its greatest and most sustained support from the Knight Foundation, a non-profit organization that emerged from a former American newspaper empire that had been headquartered in Miami. The foundation is committed to quality journalism, civic responsibility, and arts projects, and is particularly active in cities where the founders formerly published newspapers. It promotes local social and cultural engagement on site that strives for the equality and inclusion of all residents. Its central vision reads as follows:

We believe an engaged community is one where people are attached to the place where they live and are invested in the community's future. Engagement

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3 Cf. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/miamicityflorida,miamidadecountyflorida/POP060210> (16 December 2023).

4 <https://omiami.org/projects-and-events/all>. All links to the *O, Miami* webpage were checked in June 2023.

5 <https://omiami.org/about-us/about-us-page> (16 December 2023).

6 At the same time, in most workplaces »the demand for Spanish is unequivocal and uncontested; in some, Spanish is a de facto requirement. About half of Miami-Dade County's employed population currently has a service-, sales-, or office-related occupation [...], in which bilingual working abilities are essential« (Lynch 2023, 114).

includes many things, such as choosing to stay in a place, participating in community and civic affairs, voting, volunteering or simply taking part in the social life of the community.<sup>7</sup>

*O, Miami* puts these goals into action and adds one particular impulse: »Mixing site-specific events, community gatherings, and poetry-in-public-places projects, the festival strives to be a celebration of Miami and its people«. <sup>8</sup> As emphasized here, the festival aims to encourage all inhabitants to participate and interact with poetry and each other in the public space: »*O, Miami* builds community around the power of poetry. Through collaborations, projects, events, and publications, we create a platform for amplifying Miamians, investing in a new shared narrative of our city and a more equitable picture of its future«. <sup>9</sup>

The poetry festival encompasses a variety of formats, 25 to 35 of which are realized each year. It has strong connections to the metropolitan region itself because most of the poetry presented is written by authors living in Miami-Dade and, moreover, takes the county, its cities, or neighborhoods as its subject. Many of the formats are low-threshold, and they are essentially proposed and carried out by the population itself. The festival is based on an open call principle and a highly egalitarian understanding of poetry: anyone can apply with a proposal, whether or not they have experience in curating cultural events or writing poems. However, the focus on poetry by residents has only emerged in the course of the festival's history. In an interview, festival founder and Director P. Scott Cunningham remarked:

It shows an important shift in our thinking, because when we started doing the festival, we would often use more canonical poems, famous poems by poets that people might have heard of – Walt Whitman, or whoever. And as we did the festival more, we realized that it would be more meaningful for the poems to come from people in Miami themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Cunningham also acknowledges a second major shift in the festival's concept: »[A]t the beginning, I thought we'd be delivering poetry to Miami, and now I know that we are simply creating opportunities to encounter poetry, because the poetry's already in Miami. It doesn't need to be delivered«. <sup>11</sup> According to the postulate that Miami-Dade County already contains its inherent poetry, the festival aims to reveal those »gems«, and to show and share them with others. This didactic impulse is particularly important as many schools and

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7 <https://knightfoundation.org/programs/communities/> (16 December 2023).

8 <https://omiami.org/poetry-festival/> (16 December 2023).

9 <https://omiami.org/about-us/about-us-page> (16 December 2023).

10 Zoom interview with P. Scott Cunningham by Claudia Benthien and Norbert Gestring, conducted 29 Sept. 2022.

11 <https://lithub.com/p-scott-cunningham-on-miamis-poetry-scene/> (16 December 2023).

other educational institutions participate in the program. There are also readings with and events about well-known poets, but simply designed micro poems by elementary school students and amateurs, for instance, are equally important.

## 2. Zip Odes as a Popular Adaptation of a Traditional Lyrical Genre

Zip Odes are *O, Miami*'s most successful format. Developed in collaboration with the local radio station WLRN, they play a prominent role during the festival because they are a recurring element of the program that is featured on the website, social media, and the radio, and because they are so well known that they have been imitated in other American cities. According to the concept, Zip Odes are five-line poems written by residents, »designed to transform your zip code into an occasion for place-based, lyrical celebration«. <sup>12</sup> Recently, poets have also been allowed to submit poems about Miami-Dade's neighboring counties of Broward, Palm Beach, and Monroe. <sup>13</sup> Since 2015, dozens of Zip Odes have been selected each year by a jury consisting of members of *O, Miami* staff and cultural editors from WLRN radio. The odes are posted in urban space, on public transport, and in shopping malls; they are recited on the radio and performed by authors during a public event held in front of an enthusiastic audience. <sup>14</sup>

Through its title – a wordplay on »code« and »ode« – the poetry format refers to one of the most prestigious poetry genres. In the lyric tradition, odes are song-like poems that express strong feelings, especially admiration. Classical odes consist of a series of stanzas of the same structure with variable form, in which a paradigmatic description is realized, developing a topic according to thematic aspects in a logical and systematic arrangement (cf. Penzenstadler 2016, 398–399). The serious tone of the ode »calls for the use of a heightened diction and enrichment by poetic device« (Fogle and Frey 2012, 971). In earlier eras, poets were often commissioned to write such panegyric poems, and the oral recitation of an ode in front of a live audience by a laureate or other spokesperson was part of ritual events such as competitions or ceremonies (cf. Fogle and Frey 2012, 971). One could say that, in the final public reading of the *O, Miami* festival – called the Zip Ode Finale – this oratory tradition is continued to some extent, though in serial form. In the lyrical tradition, odes are dedicated to the veneration of God or divine creation, to the praise of rulers, or to themes of moral philosophy (e.g., praise of country life), while anacreontic odes are drinking or love songs (cf. Fogle and Frey 2012, 971–972). The poetic praise of cities or landscapes is

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12 <https://omiami.org/pages/zip-odes> (16 December 2023).

13 Cf. <https://www.wlrn.org/write-an-ode-to-your-zip-code> (16 December 2023). Odes from these counties are clearly in the minority so far, as the 2023 statistics show; cf. <https://www.wlrn.org/arts-culture/2023-05-08/omiami-wlrn-zip-ode-finale> (16 December 2023).

14 Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Yhkie-YJb8> (16 December 2023); [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_MJu1nj8fSQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MJu1nj8fSQ) (16 December 2023).

another conventional subject of the ode (cf. Schunck 1990, 14). However, not every Zip Ode is written in praise of an area, a neighborhood, street, building, or other concrete place in the Miami metropolitan area – some poems deal with different topics or thematize local identity only indirectly, for instance, through a mutual language or family ties.

In contrast to classical odes, Zip Odes are neither long nor complex, nor are they based on a metric scheme. Rather, they are short, simple, and based on a profane numerical code. The instructions for composing them read as follows:

Write the numbers of your zip code down the left-hand side of the page. Each number determines the number of words in that line. Note: if you have a zero in your zip code, that line is a wild card! You can leave it blank, insert an emoji or symbol, or use any number of words between 1 and 9.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike in traditional meter, it is not the syllables that are counted in this variant of ode but the words. This requirement is quite contrapuntal for the harmony of rhythm but allows for open, experimental, and more colloquial forms. Furthermore, as it is easier to count words than syllables, the ode variant aims at accessibility. With their combinatorics of codes and verse, Zip Odes address residents themselves because only they are able to recognize ad hoc which postal code stands for which neighborhood or city. Versifying one's own residential area strengthens identity, but this is counterintuitively achieved by means of an abstract numerical code. In an age where people hardly write letters to each other anymore, zip codes have changed functions: they are now essential for the prompt delivery of online orders but also to determine »how we are read by policy-makers, politicians, statisticians, pollsters, insurers, businesses, organizers, and marketers« (Clark 2013). Reflecting the larger scale in the US, most cities and neighborhoods have not grown naturally in Miami-Dade County – on the contrary, their boundaries were set by geometrical lines on the drawing board. Historical, geographical, natural, and geological features hardly played any role in the original demarcation of an area, which is why praising specific features in the present has an important function for social as well as individual identity. Thus, using postal codes in poetry is a form of artistic appropriation that recodes a neighborhood through its residents.

A cultural studies perspective lends itself to looking at short, popular, simple types of poetry like most of the formats in the *O, Miami* festival (cf. Hall 1992). Central aims are to democratize the concept of culture and to eliminate the distinction between »high« and »popular« culture, and this perspective declares all artifacts of cultural expressions to be its object of study (cf. Benthien and Velten 2013, 531, 532–538). Cultural studies research insists on the right to one's own voice, especially that of marginalized groups, which directly corresponds to the poetry festival's aim of giving a voice to those who are not normally

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<sup>15</sup> <https://omiami.org/pages/zip-odes> (16 December 2023).

heard in a region with pronounced social inequality. According to the online photo documentation on <https://omiami.org/>, the majority of (chosen) Zip Odes are written by female authors, including many girls and teenagers, and by people of color. The same holds true for other festival formats, in particular those involving school children. If the central aim of the festival is to make the plural, diverse, and often yet unheard voices of Miamians audible through poetry, this corresponds to the central impulses of cultural studies. In recent discourses on popular culture, however, »the popular is no longer either the culture of the ›lower classes‹ or the inclusion of the ›people‹; rather, »being popular now means getting noticed by many« (Werber et al. 2022, 1), which refers to quantitative parameters such as the number of books sold or followers on Instagram. Since the concept of *O, Miami* is, on the one hand, directed at minorities – in every sense of the word – and, on the other, aims to generate attention by various means, including social media, both notions of the popular seem to apply here.

In *Poetry and Cultural Studies*, Heidi Bean and Mike Chasar define poetry as »not just an aesthetic act, but a site of and for social and aesthetic activities« (Bean and Chasar 2017, 5) and outline the plurality of contemporary poetic forms as

a field that is in the process of reconstituting itself not around a monolithic, capitalized notion of »Poetry«, or around uncomfortable sets of binaries like [...] »mainstream« and »avant-garde«, »literature« and »theory«, or »high« and »low«, but around a wide range of pluralized poetics that tend, if not intend, to make things happen. (Bean and Chasar 2017, 8)

Investigating »poetics« in the plural means not only widening the range of poetic texts but also acknowledging the influence of media, taking recipients and consumers seriously as instances of meaning-making, and considering questions of social engagement as relevant (cf. Bean and Chasar 2017, 9; Harrington 2009, 277). In my view, the *O, Miami* poetry festival and, in particular, the playful Zip Ode format, is a good example of such an undertaking. In its expansion of both authorship and audiences, this public poetry format corresponds to other popular trends from recent decades – such as poetry slams, spoken word, poetry films, and, more recently, social media poetry – that have broadened and transformed traditional notions of the genre and emphasized its status and quality as *Gebrauchslirik* (›functional poetry‹), a term coined by Bertolt Brecht to describe »choices of everyday subject matter and the poems' style of language« (Rustad 2023, 116). For a long time now, poetry in the US has no longer been »necessarily or primarily a private endeavor pursued by trained elite or audiences«, but has been »regularly experienced as part of, or made to be a highlight or centerpiece for, institutionalized social situations and occasions like school classrooms, civic events, religious meetings, bedtime rituals, and girl scout troop meetings« (Chasar 2011, 7, with reference to Rubin 2007). Investigating Zip Odes from the perspective of literary, cultural, and media studies calls for a »shift [of] focus away from

the textual form and content of the poem to the social form of ›poetry‹ as a practice and as a category of understanding« (Harrington 2009, 276). Joseph Harrington understands the notion of the »social form« as its use and in- or exclusion in societal or academic practices, and emphasizes the importance of this category for taking a cultural studies perspective on the genre. I would argue, however, that the ›social form‹ of the Zip Odes and their ›poetic form‹ (and content) are intertwined; I will therefore consider both here.

As a contemporary, simplified version of the traditional lyrical genre of the ode, Zip Odes contain its originary poeticity. Their brevity, as well as the contingent formal structure imposed by the respective postal codes, can be compared with three other very short verse forms: the haiku, the limerick, and the epigram. The haiku, which originally formed the three introductory lines of the five-line tanka stanza, the main form of Japanese poetry, consists of only three lines with exactly five, seven, and five syllables; it also works very well in the public space (cf. Benthien and Gestring 2023, 198–203). In a haiku, something like a ›flash of thought‹ is expressed and often transformed into a visual metaphor, generating new, unfamiliar perspectives, word combinations, and language play. The limerick is a similar, short form of poetry, invented in England in the eighteenth century – a form of five-line verse, usually humorous and frequently rude, predominantly written in anapestic trimeter with a strict rhyme scheme, in which the first, second, and fifth lines rhyme, while the third and fourth lines share a different rhyme. The third corresponding micro genre is the epigram, popular in the Early Modern period, a short, witty statement, usually written in verse, that conveys a thought or an observation. Epigrams typically end with a punchline or a satirical twist. Such bipolar rhetorical structures are often found in very short poems and in some of the Zip Odes as well (cf. Benthien and Gestring 2023, 135–136). Brevity, pointedness, and a linguistic »excess structuring« (Link 1977, 245) are further features of micro poetry, where every single word or sound gains heightened significance. Unlike the genres mentioned above, most Zip Odes do not rhyme, nor are they subject to meter or extensive word-play; they are therefore more prose-like. One specific poetic feature, however, is the use of code switching or multilingualism, as the following examples will show.

### 3. Exemplary Zip Odes, Addressing the Regional Effects of Climate Change or Local Languages

Many Zip Odes address specific places, such as restaurants, parks, parking lots, or highways – familiar at times only to locals due to the use of colloquial names and abbreviations – and they often praise their neighborhood in an ironic way by mentioning nice but also annoying features, e.g., excessive traffic on the central interstate highway (I-95), construction noise, or unbearable summer heat and extreme humidity. Quite often, they depict bizarre scenes with wild or domesticated animals (crocodiles, tropical birds, dogs) in the



Fig. 1: *O, Miami* Instagram profile (@omiamifestival), design by Topos Graphics, poem by Emily Harwitz, posted on April 26, 2022. © O, Miami, Inc.



urban space. A considerable number of poems deal with the topic of climate change and its effects on their own region, for example, *#ZipOde 33181* by Emily Harwitz (Fig. 1), submitted for the 2022 festival.<sup>16</sup> The poem is built around the humorous, twofold convergence of the five-inch sea level rise with the poem's form: with the five-line poem as a whole and with the central placement of the number, given as a digit instead of being written out. Furthermore, the external shape of the poem with its superimposed lines – presented on a blue background on the Instagram profile @omiamifestival – also visualizes such a rise, and, finally, the line break in verse four poetically prefigures the movement of what will soon be fish sloshing into the yard. But the humor of the tiny poem also has the potential to flip over into horror, considering that sea level rise is one of the most pressing problems for many cities worldwide (cf. Finch 2022, 127).

Raising the issue of the increased frequency of fires in the Everglades, the large swamp area west of Miami, even noticeable in the Coconut Groves neighborhood on the very eastern edge of the city, Cynthia Collins' *#ZipOde 33133* from the same year addresses another serious impact of climate change:

- 3 Everglades on fire
- 3 Ash on cars
- 1 Then
- 3 Mangos in bloom
- 3 Cars turn yellow<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CclpTvKLomr/?hl=de> (16 December 2023).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CclpTvKLomr/?hl=de> (16 December 2023).

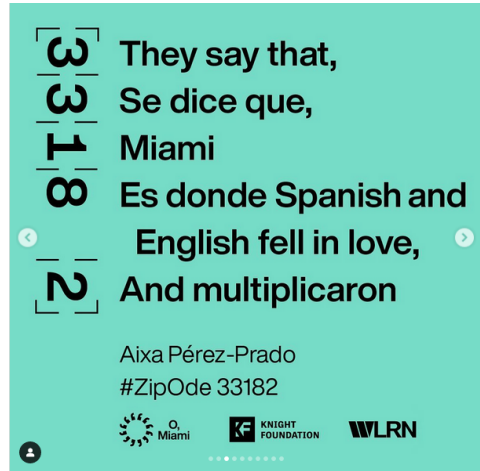


Fig. 2: *O, Miami* Instagram profile (@omiamifestival), design by Topos Graphics, poem by Aixa Pérez-Prado, posted on April 6, 2023. © O, Miami, Inc.

The ode visualizes this natural disaster by means of differently shaded cars: first ash-colored due to the fires, then yellow due to the pollen of the blossoming mango trees – as an only supposedly pacified and beautiful poetic image. The greatest danger for the Everglades and the Miami metropolitan area posed by climate change, however, is again the rising water level: »the sea is slowly reclaiming the peninsula and, most urgently, its southern part« (Portes and Armony 2018, 176). Miami-Dade County will face its own possible extinction in the very near future – a topic that affects and unites all residents – at least those who do not deny climate change, as many Floridian Republicans and right-wing extremists do. Fears about the future of the region builds community and may even bridge cultural differences. Although imagining climate change in South Florida in Zip Odes addresses »particular thematic issues«, it is simultaneously an »attempt to develop aesthetic forms that do justice [...] to the sense that places are inexorably connected to the planet as a whole« (Heise 2008, 64).

Another recurring and also politically charged theme in many Zip Odes involves questions of identity, home, and belonging, often negotiated through ethnic or linguistic differences and multilingualism. One good example, chosen for the 2023 finals, (Fig. 2) is *#ZipOde 33182* by Aixa Pérez-Prado, a writer, book illustrator, translator, and university professor who was born in Buenos Aires and grew up between Argentina and the US. The zip code 33182 stands for a middle-class neighborhood that covers parts of western Miami, as well as areas of Doral, Sweetwater, and Tamiami. Pérez-Prado's poem does not deal with a specific quarter but with the Miami metropolitan area as such and its constitutive bilingualism. English and Spanish – which are also the languages the authors speaks and uses in her professional career – are personified and depicted as two lovers who merge into one another until something new, a surplus, is generated (»and multiplicaron«), a process that is also realized in the poem itself, which mixes both languages with ease. Other Zip Odes in the same compilation deal with code-switching and multilingualism, including

one ode that describes someone biking home in the summer rain, culminating in a witty verse about a dog that »barks in Spanglish«, and another poem that quotes a series of local greeting lines in various languages, including Cuban Spanish and Haitian Creole French (»asere | ›what's up‹ | ›bojou‹, ›què bola‹, | ›kòman ou ye Miami?«).<sup>18</sup> A final example is #ZipOde 33176 by Edda Isabel León, which was chosen for the 2022 selection and deals with her sense of place in a quarter at the edge of Miami:

3 I think I  
 3 miss where I'm  
 1 from  
 7 pero el tequeño y los buenos días  
 6 me hacen sentir just like home

The author, a writer and digital creator born in Venezuela and living in Miami, comments on her Zip Ode as follows: »este poema fue inspirado en mi migración. puedo pensar muchas cosas de miami, pero algo que es cierto es que el calorcito latino me hace olvidar de que vivo en un país que no es mío«. <sup>19</sup> Here she describes how she draws consolation for her life in exile from South Florida's ›little Latin heat‹. The bilingual poem itself is more differentiated than the comment as it reveals two incidences of doubt (»I think«, »me hacen sentir«) about those feelings of place: that not only the good weather but also the availability of Venezuelan fried bread sticks filled with queso blanco (›tequeño‹) could help her to feel at home in Miami. Again, it is the ease of code-switching between the two languages as well as the matter-of-fact mentioning of a popular imported ›local‹ dish that gives the poem its everyday touch.

#### 4. Performing Zip Odes in Public Events, on Instagram, and in the Urban Space

Discussing the form and content of Zip Odes and employing »textualist methods of analysis« (Harrison 2009, 277) alone seems deficient as their mediality and social practice are just as relevant. It would therefore be expedient to take a look at their live performance and social media presentation as well as the activities and commentaries surrounding these different performances.

Each year at the end of April, the festival hosts a live event in cooperation with radio station WLRN, where finalists read their Zip Odes aloud, followed by a reception and further activities (readings of original poetry by local college students, garden tours, a

18 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqyNPUjLnv2/?hl=de> (16 December 2023).

19 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CrYs3hSulw7/?hl=de> (16 December 2023).



**Fig. 3a:** *O, Miami* website (<https://omiami.org/>), photo by Gesi Schilling, poet: Aja Monet, Zip Odes Finale, April 24, 2019 at Vizcaya Museum & Gardens. © O, Miami, Inc.

poetry award ceremony). Every Friday in April preceding this final event, the radio station announces the »top ten poems of the week«, and all chosen poets are invited to read their Zip Odes in the finale. Since 2018, it has been a public open air event held at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, »on the water at one of South Florida’s most striking cultural gems«,<sup>20</sup> the former villa and estate of a rich businessman in the Coconut Grove neighborhood of Miami. Its awe-inspiring gardens and architecture were influenced by Veneto and Tuscan Renaissance models and designed in the Mediterranean Revival architecture style with Baroque elements. Since 1952, the property has been owned by Miami-Dade County and has been open to the public. At the Zip Odes finale, the poets perform at a lectern in front of Biscayne Bay, while the audience sits in rows of chairs or on the stairs of the main building (Fig. 3a & b). The event is characterized by a friendly, supportive atmosphere and an obvious celebration of the beauty of this »Mediterranean« location with its breezy seaside atmosphere. The extensive photo documentation on the website of the radio station illustrates the value and importance of this shared experience in co-presence, giving the mostly unknown, amateur poets »the chance to read their work out loud before a live audience« (Payne 2023) that is centered on the performances and the prize ceremony but also on the informal exchange surrounding it.<sup>21</sup>

20 <https://omiami.org/projects-and-events/zip-odes-finale> (16 December 2023).

21 <https://www.wlrn.org/arts-culture/2023-05-08/o-miami-wlrn-zip-ode-finale> (16 December 2023).



**Fig. 3b:** *O, Miami* website (<https://omiami.org/>), photo by Gesi Schilling, Zip Odes Finale, April 24, 2019 at Vizcaya Museum & Gardens. © *O, Miami*, Inc.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 and 2021 festivals took place mostly online in an extremely reduced form and without the Zip Ode competition. In the 2022 edition, the finals were live streamed on YouTube and Facebook.<sup>22</sup> Correspondingly, the 2023 finale was advertised as »an evening to celebrate the return of in-person Zip Odes« on the *O, Miami* website,<sup>23</sup> and documentation of the event on the WLRN website reads: »For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic, we gathered together in one place to read poetry and celebrate all of the poets who shared their odes to home with us and the *O, Miami* Poetry Festival«.<sup>24</sup> As these diverse formats makes obvious, it is necessary to distinguish between different types of liveness and co-presence. I would not go so far as Henrik Wehmeier in claiming that »as a result of digitalization, liveness is no longer conceived of as [...] presence between living human beings; instead, liveness is based on the feedback loops between humans and technology« (Wehmeier 2025, with reference to Auslander 2012, 6); rather, I would insist on a specific quality of a corporeal co-presence (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38–74).

This distinctiveness becomes obvious when we compare the photo documentation of the 2023 Zip Odes finale at Vizcaya with the live stream of the 2022 online Zip Odes finale. The moderator of the latter was WLRN journalist Alicia Zuckerman. In this edition of the finale,

22 <https://omiami.org/projects-and-events/zip-odes-finale-2022> (16 December 2023).

23 <https://omiami.org/projects-and-events/zipodesfinale-2023> (16 December 2023).

24 <https://www.wlrn.org/arts-culture/2023-05-08/o-miami-wlrn-zip-ode-finale> (16 December 2023).

English took center stage as the lingua franca; words in Spanish or other languages spoken in the Miami metropolitan area were hardly heard at all.<sup>25</sup> The moderator asked the poets to talk about where they live and to state their respective zip codes, followed by a reading of their Zip Ode plus a short informal exchange on where the author found the inspiration to write it. Despite the enthusiasm and attentiveness of the lively moderator, the sequence of approximately forty ode presentations in the same manner is rather dreary. In this example, it becomes evident that events can be distinguished by different types of co-presence – here only temporal, but in physical isolation – which create entirely different experiences, in particular when it comes to community building. When the *O, Miami* team announced at the height of the pandemic in December 2020 the possible next festival on Instagram with a photo of the abandoned sculptures of the *O, Miami* letters that usually stand behind the poet-performers at the finale, together with the encouraging statement, »We're here for an audience of 1 or 1,000,000«,<sup>26</sup> it illustrated the relevance of live audience support.

Aside from these approaches, which make Zip Odes spoken by their authors audible in the public space and in shared corporeal and/or temporal presence, there are growing efforts to present them in digital formats. Thus, for the animated Instagram version of the poems, the festival team has created a layout using a scrolling numerical code and kinetic writing,<sup>27</sup> taking the affordances of the medium into account (cf. Penke 2019, 457), for example the square format and the prevalence of an appealing visual aesthetic. This serial format, which consists of ten poems per week each April, was introduced in the second spring of the pandemic in 2021, when the festival took place in online formats only. The previous visual design for presenting Zip Odes online had already included modes such as the color and logos typical of Instapoetry (cf. Korecka 2023, 130) but had lacked the scrolling vertical numbers, the kinetic script, and the background music.<sup>28</sup> The aim of the new multimodal design seems to be to substitute the lively act of performing odes in public spaces as it brings the verses themselves to life: as soon as you click on one of the Zip Odes posts, the numbers in the first line start running down like a vertical countdown. The words then appear in motion on the horizontal axis, line by line at a reading pace, from left to right. If your curiosity is aroused by this hip, contemporary layout, which is highly suitable for the »age of scrolling literature« (McElwee 2017), you might click on the following pages, which contain another nine Zip Odes, usually in the form of non-animated script images in the same layout. Seriality is suggested by the story format with a mutual background color, but the compiled poems are not related in terms of their content and thus do not seem like the »stanzas« of a longer ode. Unlike Instapoetry, where authors curate their

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25 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Yhkie-YJb8> (16 December 2023).

26 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Clx9A5CLNni/?hl=de> (16 December 2023).

27 Cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CrWQD7QLNZ6/?hl=de> (16 December 2023).

28 Cf. <https://omiami.org/projects-and-events/zip-odes-2015> (16 December 2023).



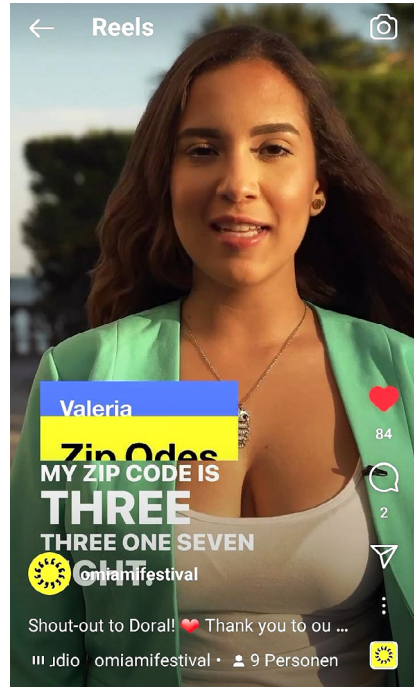


Fig. 4: *O, Miami* Instagram profile (@omiamifestival), video by Jorge Graupera Films, poet: Valeria Chirinos, posted on Jan 31, 2023. © O, Miami, Inc.

own profiles and poems, often alternating them with selfies and further photos (cf. Pâquet 2019; Penke 2019), here there is no pronounced personal interaction with followers. The comment section mainly contains statements by festival staff and individuals sharing their approval of the texts, sometimes also their view on a shared neighborhood. Nevertheless, the Instagram format contributes at least conceptually to establishing the odes as a communal form of exchange and place-making.

Since 2023 *O, Miami*'s Instagram channel has also featured several short videos with individual authors performing their Zip Odes in front of the camera.<sup>29</sup> As they introduce themselves and recite their zip code and their poem, the spoken text is simultaneously displayed in written form to heighten accessibility, but without taking orthography and versification into account. One such example is #ZipOde33178 by Valeria Chirinos<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 4): the author stands in the evening sunlight, performing her ode radiantly with people passing by in the background, while we hear not only some indeterminate xylophone sounds but also the rather loud background noise of people talking – the video was presumably shot at a Zip

29 However, it is very likely that both videos discussed below were already filmed at the Zip Odes finale on April 24, 2019 at Vizcaya Museum & Gardens. According to the photo series in the online documentation, both poets were finalists, performing in the same outfits they wear in the videos. Cf. <https://omiami.org/projects-and-events/zip-odes-finale-2> (16 December 2023).

30 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CoFeDgoLDRT/?hl=de> (16 December 2023).

Ode finale. The clip has received only one sober comment from one of the festival program's directors: »That was one of my childhood zip codes too«. A second example is #ZipOde33172 by Sandeep, who does not share his surname and is also filmed standing outside at the open-air venue of Vizcaya Gardens. A small audience has gathered around him while he is being filmed, only partly visible but audible after his concluding »thank you«.

3 City of Sweetwater,  
 3 Between Doral and  
 1 Westchester.  
 7 There is really not much to say  
 2 About it.<sup>31</sup>

These young »poet-performers« (Novak 2011, 62) are typical representatives of the multi-ethnic Miami metropolitan area. Both have a slight accent in English, indicating that it may not be their first or family language. In her Zip Ode, Valeria addresses the fact that it was against his will that her father, upon his arrival – presumably from a Latin American country – liked their new home, the city of Doral, and the Floridian landscape. Sandeep's poem is more of an anti-ode: he can think of nothing at all to say about his place of residence, Sweetwater, other than naming its geographical location between two other suburbs.

On top of these recent performative enhancements to the odes' social media presence as animated clips or short videos, the *O, Miami* team has also introduced a format that has been gaining heightened attention in the public space: for the festival held in April 2023, a large billboard was rented at the corner of North East 8th Street and Biscayne Boulevard in downtown Miami, on which one selected poem was plastered over an golden orange background, with white flowers and black text.<sup>32</sup> The campaign drew considerable attention to the Zip Odes as such – with nearly 2,500 submissions, the number of poems entered more than doubled compared to the previous year.<sup>33</sup> The jury chose this one:

3 My name came  
 3 from my abuela  
 1 and  
 2 she said  
 5 we can share it forever.

31 [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cnz\\_v10D-7W/?hl=de](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cnz_v10D-7W/?hl=de) (16 December 2023).

32 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cp3BN9fjySU/> (16 December 2023). Using billboards for poetry is a strategy that British poet and conceptual artist Robert Montgomery makes prominent use of (cf. Benthien/Gestring 2023, Ch. 3.8).

33 Cf. <https://www.wlrn.org/arts-culture/2023-05-08/o-miami-wlrn-zip-ode-finale> (16 December 2023).



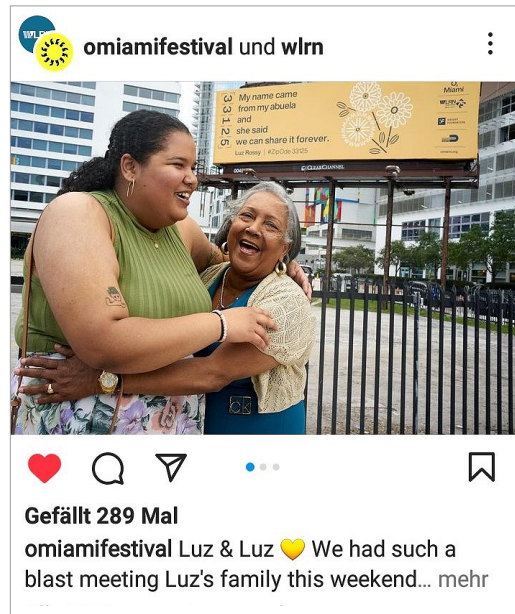


Fig. 5: *O, Miami* Instagram profile (@omiamifestival), photo by Chantal Lawrie, poet: Luz Elena Rossy, posted on Jan 24, 2023. © *O, Miami*, Inc.

On the festival Instagram page, we read about winner Luz Elena Rossy and her #*Zip Ode* 33125, which uses one of the five zip codes of Little Havana: »Her poem is an homage to both her grandmothers. Her first name comes from her grandmother Luz, while her middle name comes from her grandmother Elena«. <sup>34</sup> In fact, the poem narrates the genealogical relationship of a young woman to only one of her grandmothers, Luz, whom she naturally addresses using the Spanish word *abuela*. The very private realm – the origin of an inherited first name – is communicated here in billboard size to the entire metropolitan region. Luz Rossy is a library assistant at Westchester Regional Library, her self-description on Instagram adds »Freelance Poetry & Content Writer« as well as »Creator and Host of Library Poetry Society«. <sup>35</sup>

Her poem can be interpreted only indirectly as an ode to Miami-Dade, for unlike most *Zip Odes*, no specific place or quarter is addressed (except for the zip code). Luz Rossy's featured ode does not conform to the format specifications as it is not ›place-based‹ at first glance. A resident of the Cuban enclave Little Havana, she is quoted as saying that when she »sat down to write a poem about the place she calls home, she decided to write about her *abuela*«. <sup>36</sup> The poet's Spanish first name Luz (›light‹) relates her to her grandmother, who was raised in the town of Cevicos in the Dominican Republic and came to Miami in the 1980s with

34 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cqs8f0ULQfy/?hl=de> (16 December 2023).

35 [https://www.instagram.com/movingon\\_lucy/?hl=de](https://www.instagram.com/movingon_lucy/?hl=de) (16 December 2023).

36 <https://www.wlrn.org/education/2023-04-07/a-story-worth-writing-about-poet-luz-rossy-on-miami-the-struggle-and-her-abuela> (16 December 2023).

several children. According to her grandchild, she struggled significantly in a Miami rather hostile to Latinos back then: »It did not always feel like home«.<sup>37</sup> Rossey's Zip Ode receives its social grounding through such biographical contexts, e.g., a moving photo of the author in an intimate embrace with her grandmother in front of the billboard posted on Instagram, (Fig. 5) together with a comment from the festival team emphasizing how great it was for them to recently meet Luz's family and suggesting followers »tune in« to the afternoon radio show »All Things Considered«, where »their story is being featured TODAY«.<sup>38</sup> Again, it is the personal exchange and physical encounter between people that is foregrounded.

## 5. *O, Miami, Zip Odes, and Lyric Address*

Most Zip Odes, which invoke, praise, or merely describe the features of a certain neighborhood or specific incidents that its residents have experienced there, conceptually seek to implement the basic impulse of the entire festival *in nuce*. Thus, the »About us« section of the Instagram page @omiamifestival until very recently contained a poetic explanation of the festival title: »O« is a direct | address of the | beloved. || »Miami« is our | beloved.«.<sup>39</sup> The importance of this apostrophe for the poetry format's concept is indicated by the fact that the comma after the »O« functions, partly in serial form, as the festival logo. The caesura between the »O« and »Miami« stands for the affective sigh of admiring address, represented by this non-finite punctuation mark.

The apostrophe is a rhetorical device often used in traditional poetry, for example in hymns and odes: the immediate, direct address or solemn invocation of figures, things, or abstracts (cf. Culler 2015, 212): »[T]he fundamental gesture of apostrophe is to make something which cannot normally be addressed into an addressee, treating it as a subject capable of hearing, and thus in principle capable of acting and responding« (Culler 2015, 232). In addition, the poetic apostrophe »foregrounds the temporal dimension of »voicing,« that is, of the text's act of enunciation, and gives priority to the now-ness of its reiteration through the reader« (Zetzelmann 2017, 192), which is relevant for a performative understanding of speaking or even reading a poem. Thus, Miami is personified through the festival title and conceptually addressed by every single articulating voice in the *hic et nunc* of the festival events. With the apostrophe addressing the abstract entity of a city – or, even less tangibly: to a county consisting of thirty-four municipalities! – the respective addressee is communicatively brought to life.

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37 <https://www.wlrn.org/education/2023-04-07/a-story-worth-writing-about-poet-luz-rossy-on-miami-the-struggle-and-her-abuela> (16 December 2023).

38 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CrRNngGWr9ok/> (16 December 2023).

39 Those lines could be found until May 2023 in the »About« section of the *O, Miami* festival Instagram profile.

A poem can evoke an »interpersonal relation« (Culler 2015, 24) resembling a romantic relationship: »Love poems, addressed to a beloved, named or unnamed, real or imagined, accessible or inaccessible, are the primary example of poems ostentatiously addressed to another individual that indirectly address an audience« (Culler 2015, 206). If one takes the programmatic statement about the ›O‹ as a »direct address of the beloved« and the assertion that Miami is »our beloved« seriously, then the address is that of a collective love affair. Other residents who hear or read *O, Miami* poems in the urban or digital space during the festival run are thus also appealed to through this »triangular address« (Culler 2015, 186), in particular if their own postal code is called upon in a specific Zip Ode.

The dual impetus of the festival – awarding a city prize and activating the community – was presented on Instagram in 2022 in a few words, formatted like poems in the ›highlights‹ section and configured in animated type: »We believe | that Miami is a | poem we write | together« and »We believe in a | Miami where all | residents are | empowered to | share their | stories through | poetry«. <sup>40</sup> Firstly, the festival wants to encourage residents to participate, and secondly, poetry is to be used as a practice of expressing one’s own personal experiences and stories. Accordingly, a reciprocal approach was chosen, which in 2022 read as follows: »O, Miami collects poems from students and residents. Then we create | public art | projects that broadcast those | poems back to | the communities | they came from«. <sup>41</sup> The festival team sets itself the task of making this poetry audible and visible. Cunningham has suggested in this context the metaphor of an »ecosystem«: gathering poems from Miamians through the year and in April broadcasting them back to the city, to the same neighborhoods they came from (Cunningham in Benthien and Gestring 2023, 128). This process of collecting and disseminating fits very well with the presentation formats between the digital and urban space, between animated writing and spoken word performance. Although many individual Zip Odes do not contain an explicit poetic address – often they are mere descriptions rather than rhetorical invocations – the format as such and its communicative impulse, transported through the title and the diverse slogans, is a poetic translation of the main festival’s aim. Writing and performing a Zip Ode to a specific city or quarter immediately activates the ›triangular address‹ in that other people identifying with this area – who live or have previously lived there, who have friends or family with this postal code, etc. – feel connected and engaged, as the example of Luz Rossy’s poem shows.

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40 In the meantime, the phrases have changed to, e.g., »We believe Miami is the most poetic city in the world«. <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17939694424858771/?hl=de> (16 December 2023).

41 <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17939694424858771/?hl=de> (16 December 2023). The text has since been modified slightly, its message, however, remains identical.

## 6. Conclusion: Place-Making as a Socio-Poetical Practice

At the opening of the 2023 *O, Miami* poetry festival in the Historic Lyrical Theater, Kamila Pritchett, Executive Director of the Black Archives in Overtown, Miami, emphasized that, even though this neighborhood was a cultural hotspot in the early twentieth century like Harlem in New York City, it was still »excluded from the community at large«, which led her to emphasize that »cultural activities forge a sense of space« and that a »sense of place [is] cultivated by artistic expression«. <sup>42</sup> These remarks can be applied to the format of the Zip Ode: despite the innovations that have been made in social media, such as the visually animated, hip-looking poems and the video clips with poet-performers, the established broadcasting of poems on WLRN, and their presentation on banners and screens in the urban space – the odes' essential presentation format remains the collective, public event. This is evident, for example, in the fact that the live streams of the Zip Odes finale, introduced during the pandemic, were abandoned in 2023 in favor of an in-person event at the Vizcaya mansion, with more than 300 people in attendance. And it is also evident in the public's rather poor commenting activity, for example, on Instagram.

This discussion of exemplary Zip Odes, including the neighborhoods they refer to as well as their authors has revealed that praise for one's own neighborhood is not always central in the texts. The panegyric tradition of the ode, then, is not necessarily taken as the basis for the composition of these short, place-based poems, even though it is rudimentarily implied in both the concept of the festival – through the address in the title *O, Miami* – and that of the Zip Odes (»place-based, lyrical celebration«). The triangular lyric address suggests an interaction with a concrete neighborhood, street, building, or other place in the Miami metropolitan area that includes other residents from the same respective zip code as well. Over the years that the format has existed, it has gradually developed its own genre tradition and sociopoetic practice, recognizable by the mutual themes and rhetoric devices in the five-line micro poems: »Poetry is constituted by a practice, which is grounded in convention-governed expectations among poets and readers. To write a poem is to engage the practice and invite (one hopes also reward) certain kinds of interests and responses among readers [...]« (Lamarque 2015, 33). The *O, Miami* team intends to actively rouse and promote attention and curiosity, as well as various forms of interaction between the participants. As mentioned, central elements of the annual festival include »community gatherings, and poetry-in-public-places projects«, which are clearly social practices that take place with and through poetry. The Zip Ode as a literary format in the public sphere also constitutes a »spatial practice« in the Lefebvrian sense because it influences the perception and practice of space in the everyday life of Miami-Dade's inhabitants: it is an element of place-making.

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42 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mHUNjESHJQ> (16 December 2023).

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