

SINGING THE CITY: A LITERARY GEOGRAPHY OF LISBON THROUGH FADO TOPONYMS

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Abstract: Fado is not only music – it is a cartography of emotion, memory, and belonging that transforms the city into a living archive of cultural identity. From its consolidation in Lisbon to its global projection through figures such as Amália Rodrigues, the genre has continuously negotiated the relationship between place, language, and identity. For the listener and reader alike, fado offers an intimate encounter with the city: its streets, neighbourhoods, and riverbanks become emotional anchors that allow individuals to situate personal and collective narratives within shared symbolic landscapes. Through references to neighbourhoods such as Mouraria, Alfama and Bairro Alto, listeners are invited to experience an affective geography where urban space is remembered, imagined, and emotionally inhabited. In this sense, fado operates as what Richard Elliott conceptualises as an “affective geography,” where place names function as repositories of memory and identity. This article reveals, however, something deeper: through systematic toponymic analysis, fado lyrics construct a structured literary geography that can be interpreted through geocriticism, as theorised by Bertrand Westphal. The findings demonstrate that spatial references in fado are not randomly distributed but follow historically grounded spatial patterns centred on neighbourhoods associated with the genre’s origins and performance circuits.

Key words: fado; Lisbon; toponymy; geocriticism; urban identity

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INTRODUCTION

The indissoluble bond between Lisbon and fado is widely acknowledged in the literature (Bay Frydberg, 2012; Belo, 2010; Gasparotto, 2014). Although the origins of fado remain debated, the genre definitively established itself in the late nineteenth century within popular urban areas of

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the city. From these roots, it gradually expanded into bourgeois and intellectual circles, becoming one of the most emblematic expressions of Portuguese culture. By the mid-twentieth century, fado had already crossed national borders, reaching global audiences, particularly through the international recognition achieved by Amália Rodrigues, who is widely regarded as the most iconic performer of the genre. In recent decades, fado has gained renewed international visibility through both traditional interpretations and hybrid musical forms, promoted by a new generation of performers such as Mísia, Cristina Branco, Ana Moura and Mariza, often considered Amália's artistic successor (Sucena, 2008). The inscription of fado on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in November 2011 further reinforced its international projection, strengthening its role in tourism promotion through live performances, thematic tours, and its strategic use as a cultural brand for Lisbon and Portugal.

Despite its national and international diffusion, fado has maintained a strong symbolic and cultural connection with Lisbon, its city of consolidation and dissemination. As noted by Nery (2004), fado represents a form of expression of Lisbon's popular urban identity. In this context, it has been observed that one of the central lyrical themes of fado is the city itself, particularly neighbourhoods historically associated with the genre, such as Mouraria, Alfama and Bairro Alto. As Elliott (2010) highlights, fado lyrics often evoke a "mythology of place," reinforcing the emotional and symbolic relationship between music and urban space. Even a preliminary analysis of fado lyrics reveals the constant presence of Lisbon's neighbourhoods, streets and squares, evoked through a dense and varied toponymy. As previously noted, (Zarrilli, 2022), *o fado é canção bairrista*: fado is fundamentally a neighbourhood song, in which local stories, people, emotions and places – mediated through toponyms – play a central role in the construction of poetic imagery.

Considering that toponyms function as repositories of political, social and cultural meanings embedded within society (Abdikhalikova, 2020), their strong presence in musical lyrics can be interpreted as an additional expression of the relationship between music and place, a field of study of growing importance, at the crossroads between cultural geography and musicology (Bithell & Hill, 2014; Carney, 1998; Connell & Gibson, 2003; Dell'Agnese & Tabusi, 2016; Fernandes, 2013; Gibson & Connell, 2005; Kong, 1995; Leyshon, Matless, & Revill, 1995; Norton & Matsumoto, 2019; Quinn, 1996; Waterman, 2006; Wood et al., 2007). "Music geographies encompass the study of songs both as objects – analysing their lyrics, styles, music videos, or industries – and as lived practices that engage space, body, listening, and emotion. This plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches converges in a heterogeneous field of study that explores imaginary and real places, emphasizing the importance of geographical imagination". (Benetti, 2025)

From this perspective, toponymic analysis offers a valuable methodological lens for exploring spatial representations in cultural production. Accordingly, this article aims to identify and classify the toponyms present in fado lyrics, analysing their frequency of occurrence and spatial distribution to detect spatial patterns relevant to cultural and urban geography. Based on these assumptions, all fado songs listed on the website "Portal do Fado" until 31st January 2026 were analysed, with specific attention given to toponyms associated with the city of Lisbon and its internal spatial divisions.

The article is structured into several sections. It begins with an introduction presenting the object and the aim of the study, together with fundamental conceptual elements concerning fado and toponymy. This is followed by a systematic literature review focusing on the relationships between fado, space and toponymy. The subsequent section presents the methodology adopted. The empirical component then presents the results of the analysis of 8,335 fado songs, within which spatial references were identified and mapped. The final section discusses the main conclusions, demonstrating that, through toponymy, fado constructs a literary geography that can be interpreted through geocriticism, as theorised by Bertrand (Westphal, 2011). This analysis reveals recurring spatial patterns that reflect the historical evolution and cultural identity of the genre, reinforcing the centrality of place – particularly Lisbon – in the symbolic universe of fado.

LITERATURE REVISION

The analysis of fado has increasingly established itself as an interdisciplinary field that intersects cultural, musicological, historical and linguistic studies, enabling this genre to be understood as an artistic practice deeply connected to the symbolic construction of Portuguese urban identity, particularly that of the city of Lisbon and, more broadly, the cultural context of Portugal. From pioneering historical approaches to contemporary perspectives focused on heritage-making and cultural globalisation, as argued by Elliott (2010) and Nery (2004) fado has been interpreted as a narrative form that articulates experiences of loss, belonging and *saudade* – a word that is untranslatable into other languages, often described as a feeling of deep, aching nostalgia, a mixture of longing and melancholy, directed at something or someone absent, distant, or lost.

From a historical perspective, studies on fado date back to the early twentieth century. Pimentel (1904) systematised the foundational themes of the genre in the nineteenth century, highlighting the recurring presence of cities, neighbourhoods and streets as central elements of fado narratives. According to this author, spatial reference often emerges through a metaphorical interplay between local pride and nostalgia. This interpretation is later revisited by Nery (2004), who emphasises that fado describes and nostalgically evokes the concrete urban spaces in which it develops, with toponymy sometimes even serving to locate tragic or criminal events.

Also in the early twentieth century, Carvalho (1903) and Pimentel (1904) compiled extensive documentary collections on the history of the genre. Subsequently, Sousa (1912) analysed the ideological orientations associated with fado. In the following decades, research expanded through contributions such as those by Moita (1936), Machado (1937) and Gallop (1936 & 1937), who explored both the social dimension of fado and its relationships with other popular musical traditions.

After a period of reduced scientific production, research regained momentum with studies such as those by Freitas (1969 & 1973) and Barreto (1969), the latter proposing an ideological reading of fado associated with the cultural propaganda of the Estado Novo and the development of tourism. Later, Osório (1974) analysed the genre from the perspective of its political and religious connotations over time. Modern studies consolidated from the 1980s onwards with works such as those by Brito (1983), who analyses fado as an urban phenomenon in transformation, and with biographical and documentary research such as that conducted by Santos (1987), particularly concerning Amália Rodrigues, a central figure in the internationalisation of the genre. At the same time Sucena (1992 & 2008) compiled extensive biographical data on fado performers, while Carvalho (1994) and José Ramos (Tinhorão, 1994) deepened the debate on the historical origins and cultural influences of fado, including possible links to Brazilian musical traditions.

Alongside historiographical development, contemporary cultural approaches have increasingly emphasised the relationship between fado, urban space and identity. Elliott (2010) proposes the notion of “affective geography”, arguing that fado constructs symbolic maps in which streets, neighbourhoods and urban spaces function as anchors of collective memory. This perspective aligns with the idea that fado constitutes a situated discursive practice, in which text, performance and urban space interact to produce cultural meaning.

The recognition of fado as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2011 reinforced this interpretation, stimulating research focused on heritage-making processes, authenticity and the global circulation of the genre. Recent studies highlight tensions between tradition, tourism and identity reconfiguration, demonstrating the need for interdisciplinary approaches integrating language, culture and urban space.

Despite these advances, linguistic analysis of fado lyrics remains relatively limited, particularly regarding the semantic-discursive dimension of toponymy. Traditionally associated with geography and historical linguistics, toponymy has progressively been integrated into perspectives from cultural geography and urban linguistics, which emphasise the role of place names in the construction of memory, identity and symbolic power. From this perspective, toponyms are

not merely geographical markers, but cultural signs that reflect historical processes and symbolic disputes.

Urban linguistics, by exploring the relationship between language and social space, offers relevant conceptual tools for analysing fado as urban discourse. Some recent studies suggest that references to Lisbon neighbourhoods function as markers of authenticity and as strategies of emotional evocation, although a systematic approach integrating discourse analysis, music studies and toponymy is still lacking.

The spatial dimension of fado also brings it closer to the Portuguese literary tradition, in which urban space frequently emerges as a symbolic and affective category. As in the poetry of Cesário Verde or Fernando Pessoa, fado constructs an aesthetic of urban intimacy and situated melancholy, transforming the city into a space that is simultaneously real, imagined and emotionally experienced. Within this framework, text linguistics and discourse analysis allow fado lyrics to be examined as culturally situated texts, revealing how toponyms function as structuring elements of lyrical narrative. Space therefore ceases to be merely referential and becomes discursively constructed. This approach directly dialogues with geocriticism, proposed by Bertrand (Westphal, 2011), which advocates a multifocal reading of textual space, and with the concept of literary cartography developed by Tally Jr. (2013), according to which texts produce symbolic maps that orient the cultural experience of the reader – or, in the case of fado, the listener.

The analysis of toponymy in fado lyrics therefore emerges as a promising field for understanding how fado participates in the symbolic construction of the city, transforming urban space into sung memory and living cultural heritage.

METHODOLOGY

Toponyms can be classified according to different criteria, depending on the context and purposes of the analysis (Abdikhlikovna, 2020; Gallia, Muti, & Pecorelli, 2023; Salvucci, Lucchetti, & Abbatini, 2023). If we adopt an ontological criterion, that is, a criterion based on the knowledge of the toponym in itself - which seems to be the most suited to our purposes - we can classify the toponyms that we have identified during our analysis into the following categories: one astionym (name of towns and cities; in our case Lisboa/Lisbon), one hydronym (name of water objects like oceans, seas, lakes and rivers; in our case, the river Tejo/Tagus), urbanonyms (names of urban elements), which, in turn, can be divided into microhoronyms (names of neighbourhoods and areas, such as Alfama, Mouraria etc.), hodonoms (street names) and agoronyms (square names). Having made this clarification, from now on, for convenience of discussion, we will refer to all of them as toponyms.

As mentioned before, we analysed manually the 8.335 songs listed on the website “Portal do Fado” (Portal do Fado, 2025) as of January 31, 2026 (presumably all fado songs composed to that date), looking for toponyms related to Lisbon (the city itself, the river Tagus, neighbourhoods and areas, streets and squares); furthermore, we identified the neighbourhoods and areas with the highest number of occurrences in order to detect spatial patterns, as specified above.

As is obvious, toponyms are present both in the titles and in the lyrics of the songs. In our opinion, a toponym used as a title, or within a title, has a symbolic value and a declarative intent that the same toponym within a text does not necessarily have. Therefore, we analysed titles and lyrics separately. Furthermore, each toponym was counted only once per lyrics, regardless of the number of times it is repeated: This number varies depending on the structure of the song, which in turn varies according to different interpreters, ages of execution and contexts (e.g.: official records; live performances; internet archives, such as “Portal do fado” (Portal do Fado, 2025), from which we got the data used in this analysis). What matters, for our purposes, is the author’s will to use a specific toponym, not the (variable) frequency with which it occurs in the lyrics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most recurrent toponym in the titles of fado songs (figures 1 and 2), as one would expect, is Lisboa, which occurs 203 times. Furthermore, there is one song named Ulissipo, a variant of the word “Olisipo”, the ancient Latin toponym of the city, related to the myth of Ulysses. Tejo (Tagus River) occurs 22 times, while, among the neighbourhoods and the areas of the city, the most mentioned are: Mouraria (49 occurrences), a very central, with a reputation as a difficult, if not dangerous, neighbourhood. It is intrinsically linked to the origins of fado and is also shaping its tourist image around the “fado identity”. There is a further title in which the term Moirama is used, an ancient variant of Mouraria that literally means “group of Moors”. Actually, Mouraria is where the Moors were allowed to live after the Christian reconquest of Lisbon in 1147; Alfama (32 occurrences), one of the most iconic and traditional neighbourhoods of Lisbon, which has undergone a profound process of touristification: It hosts more than half of the fado venues available in Lisbon (Zarrilli, 2022), but almost all of them address a mainly tourist clientele; Bairro Alto (12 occurrences), another very traditional, iconic and central neighbourhood of Lisbon. It is one of the main areas for evening and night entertainment, with many fado venues; the neighbouring Chiado (8 occurrences), a chic and trendy neighbourhood, which has an important historical legacy in terms of fado culture. In the 30’s, the first “casas de fado” – traditional and formal restaurants, where you can dine and listen to fado – were mainly located here; Cais Sodré/Ribeira/Bica (13 occurrences) and Madragoa (10 occurrences), also very central areas, dedicated to nightlife and linked to the culture of fado – especially Madragoa, where Maria Severa Onofriana, a mythical figure of fado and the first singer of this musical genre of which we have any records, was born. Graça and Alcântara (5 occurrences each) close the list: Graça borders Alfama and Mouraria, with which it shares some cultural traits.

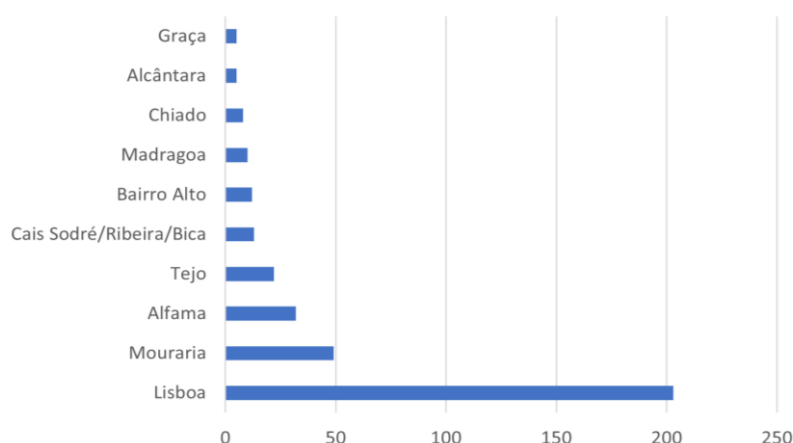


Figure 1. Titles: number of occurrences per neighbourhood/area
(Source: our elaboration on Portal do Fado, 2025)

Therefore, its geographic proximity to these neighbourhoods makes it an area of interest in terms of fado culture. Alcântara is on the western periphery of Lisbon, but it is also the neighbourhood where Amália Rodrigues, universally considered the greatest interpreter of fado, spent her childhood and youth: Actually, she was born in a central area of Lisbon (Santana hill, in the Pena neighbourhood) but later moved to Alcântara. Street and square names are not very recurrent in the titles: It’s just worth mentioning Rua do Capelão in the Mouraria (figure 3), an iconic street for Lisbon’s fado, as Maria Severa Onofriana died there in 1846, and Fernando Maurício, known as the King of Fado of Mouraria, was born there in 1933; Rua da Esperança and Rua do Meio

in Madragoa; Rua da Saudade in the area of the Cathedral (Sé), not far from Alfama, all with two occurrences.

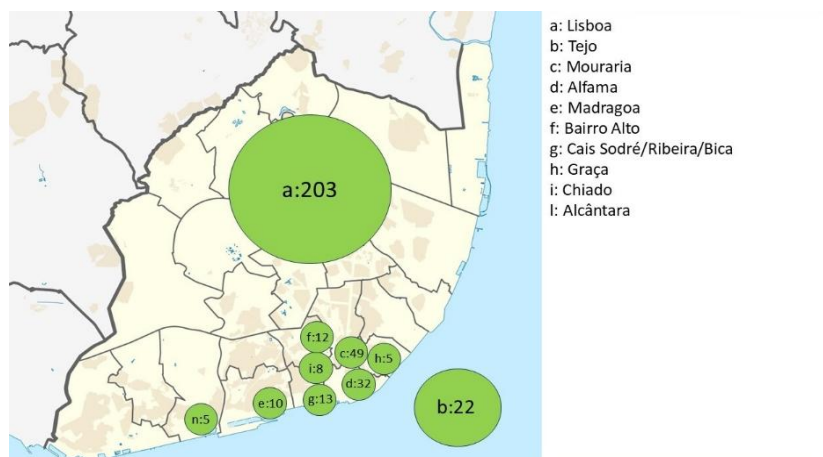


Figure 2. Titles: number of occurrences per neighbourhood/area
(Source: our elaboration on Wikipedia Commons)



Figure 3. Rua do Capelão: commemorative plaque
(Source: Authors)

Predictably, the toponyms present in the lyrics are much more numerous. A text can contain up to 10 or more different toponyms: For example, the song “Conjugar Lisboa”, which puns on the places of Lisbon, contains 27 toponyms. Also in this case Lisboa is the most frequent one, with 518 occurrences, followed by Tejo, with 231 occurrences. Furthermore, even if strictly speaking they cannot be considered toponyms, the expression “Cidade de Ulisses” is used in one case to indicate Lisbon (for the reasons explained above), while the expression “Mar da Palha” (Straw Sea) is present 8 times: It is a common but unofficial name for the extensive river delta of the Tagus, which widens (at its widest point it reaches 23 km in width) and narrows again before flowing into the Atlantic Ocean, thus forming a kind of open lake. According to the most accredited hypothesis, the origin of

this name lies in the fact that historically a huge amount of straw (coming from agricultural activities along the river) was dragged there and floated, creating the visual impression of a “sea of straw”.

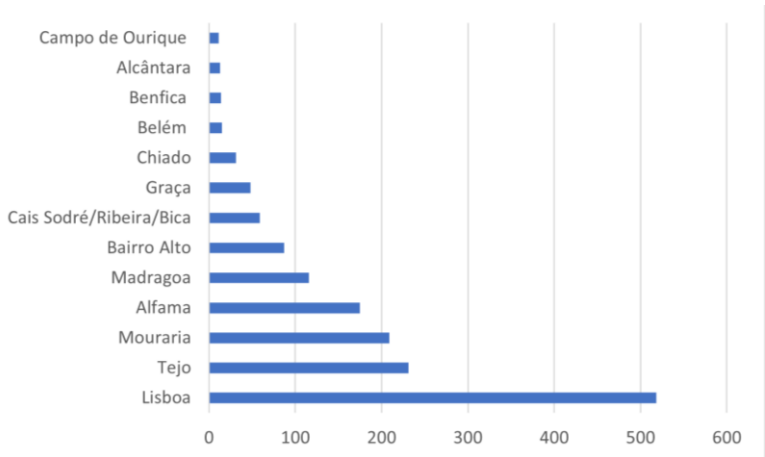


Figure 4. Lyrics: number of occurrences per neighbourhood/area
(Source: our elaboration on Portal do Fado, 2025)

The spatial pattern that was observed in the titles is confirmed in the texts (figures 4 and 5): Mouraria leads the ranking with 209 occurrences (with the ancient variants Moirama and Mourama occurring a further 24 times in total), followed by Alfama (175), Madragoa (116), Bairro Alto (87), Cais Sodré/Ribeira/Bica (59), Graça (48), Chiado (31). Among those with at least 10 occurrences are toponyms of neighbourhoods/areas that were not present in the titles: We are referring to Belem (15 occurrences), which is a peripheral neighbourhood from a strictly geographical point of view, but very central in the city’s iconography (it hosts the Jerónimos Monastery and the Tower of Belem, among other monuments), with a significant historical legacy; Benfica (14), also peripheral but prestigious from both a historical and residential point of view, whose fame is also due to its important football team; the already mentioned Alcântara (13) and Campo de Ourique (11), a semi-central and residential neighbourhood, not far from Alcântara and The Amália Rodrigues House-Museum in Rua de São Bento.

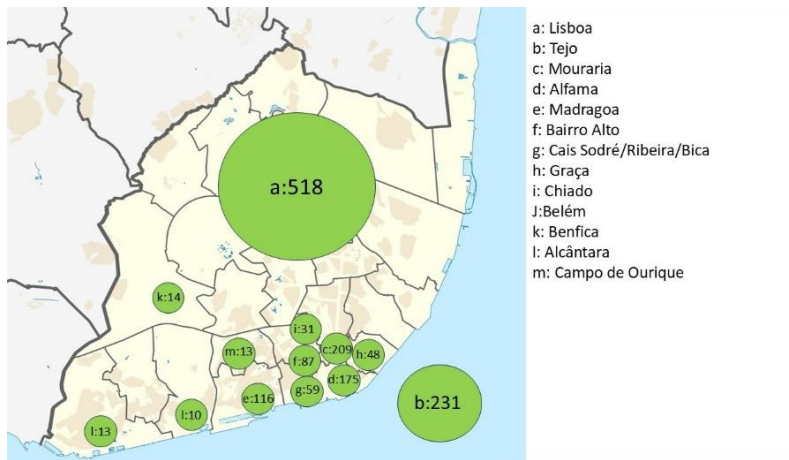


Figure 5. Lyrics: number of occurrences per neighbourhood/area
(Source: our elaboration on Wikipedia Commons)

Among the toponyms relating to streets and squares (figures 6, 7 and 8) the most frequent is Rua do Capelão with 29 occurrences, which confirms its role as an iconic place of fado. Immediately after is the Rossio (official name: Praça Dom Pedro IV, 28 occurrences), one of the most central and well-known squares in Lisbon, located in the so-called Baixa, which can be considered the main hub and the heart of historic Lisbon. With the only further exception of the very central and elegant Avenida da Liberdade (one of the main avenues of Lisbon, built between 1879 and 1882 on the model of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris), all other toponyms with at least 5 occurrences concern streets and squares located in the neighbourhoods and areas already mentioned. From this point of view too, Mouraria leads the ranking, with 4 streets (Rua do Capelão included) among those with at least 5 occurrences, for a total of 56 occurrences (figure 8).

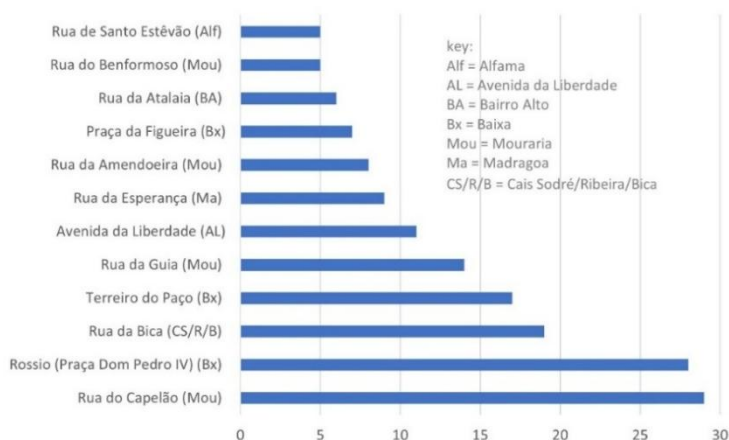


Figure 6. Streets and squares with at least 5 occurrences: number of occurrences
 (Source: our elaboration on Portal do Fado, 2025)

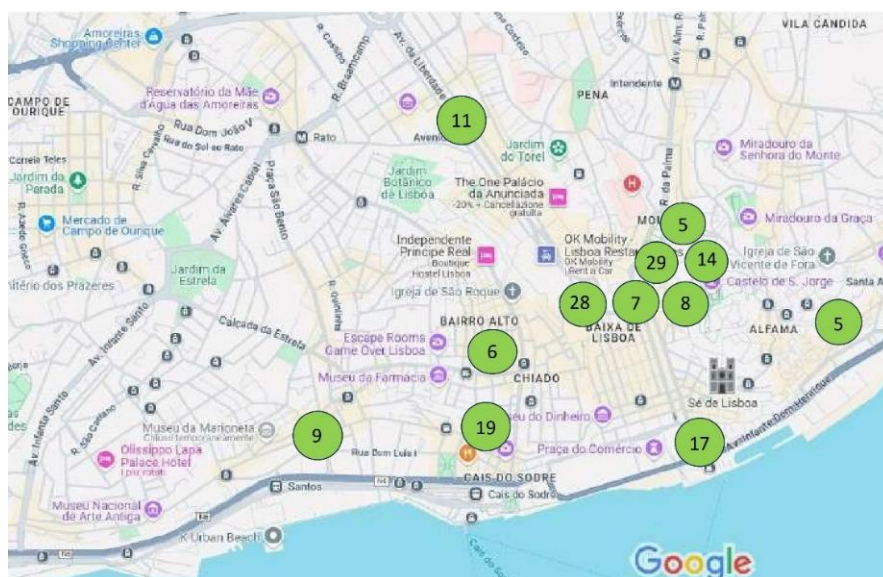


Figure 7. Streets and squares with at least 5 occurrences: number of occurrences
 (Source: our elaboration on Google Maps)

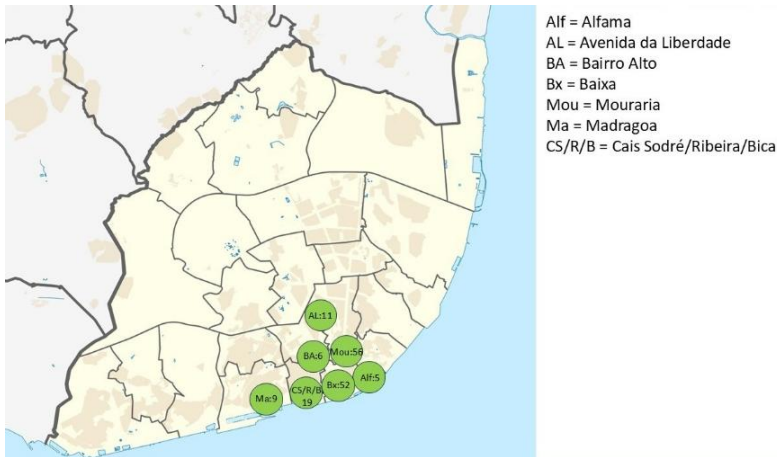


Figure 8. Streets and squares with at least 5 occurrences: number of occurrences
 (Source: our elaboration on Wikipedia Common)

CONCLUSIONS

Fado, thanks to its capacity to represent the experiences of daily life with an inspiration that is both local and universal, can reveal the interactions between language, identity, and urban space. From its nineteenth century origins in the popular areas of Lisbon to its consecration in major venues and international circuits, fado has preserved an essential trait: its territorial anchoring in a concrete space that is simultaneously geographical and symbolic.

Among the many elements that make up the universe of fado – the voice, the guitar, the gesture – the lyrics assume a central role in the construction and transmission of its poetic imagery. Fado lyrics function as a linguistic and emotional archive of the city, where urban space becomes memory, character, and metaphor. In this context, toponymy acts as referential marker, situating the poetic action in a recognizable space: Alfama, Mouraria, Madragoa, or Bairro Alto are not abstractions, but concrete places with their own history, architecture, and sociability.

Another relevant data point reveals that, in some ways, toponymy in fado lyrics fits into what (Westphal, 2011) calls “geocriticism”, that is, a reading of texts based on the interaction between real space, textual space, and imaginary space. From this perspective, it is possible to observe how fado lyrics construct a literary geography of Lisbon in which the latter – also aided by its inseparable attribute, the Tagus – emerges as a constant presence, while the various neighbourhoods, streets, and squares form recurring sceneries within which it is possible to identify a clear spatial pattern: toponyms show a high concentration – in terms of number of occurrences – in the neighbourhoods and areas of the city linked to the history, production and performance of this musical genre.

From this point of view, Mouraria mainly, but also Alfama, see their role as cradles and places of choice of fado confirmed, while all other neighbourhoods and areas with a significant number of occurrences have links with one or more aspects of its history and culture. Similar considerations can be made for the names of streets and squares, among which Rua do Capelão undoubtedly stands out. To be more precise, our investigation clearly states that the epicentre of fado in Lisbon is Mouraria and within Mouraria neighbourhood, the heart of fado being exactly Rua do Capelão.

Further research could be developed in several directions: first, the purely taxonomic aspect could be explored in greater depth, extending the analysis to the names of elements of material heritage, such as churches, monuments, theatres, infrastructure, and means of transport, to see if additional occurrences confirm the above-mentioned spatial pattern. Moreover, a textual analysis could be developed on a sample of particularly representative songs to verify how places are described and perceived in the lyrics, whether the same place carries different meanings in different

songs and how toponyms interact with emotions such as love, saudade, loss, pride, or marginality. Finally, the same type of methodology could be applied to other musical genres with strong territorial roots, such as Neapolitan song, Rio de Janeiro's bossa nova and Corsican polyphony.

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