“A tristeza que canta”: The role of *fado* music in women’s culturally mediated resilience

Lisabeth Castro-Smyth
University of California Berkeley

Abstract. This study explores the role of *fado* music participation in women’s coping, expression, and emotional health. Aiming to identify culturally rooted resilience strategies and explore how music interacts with gendered identities, this phenomenological study drew from *fado* house observation, lyrical themes, and participant interviews with women who sing and/or listen to *fado*. Nine semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews were conducted bi-nationally (in Portugal and the United States) between July and December of 2012. Major themes included: 1.) *Fado* has a central role in the expression of deep feelings and the meanings ascribed to them; the music is understood as a cathartic, collective container for passion, sadness, and loss. 2.) *Fado* contains spiritual aspects, including ritual, notions of fate, and acceptance of ‘God’s will.’ 3.) *Fado* exhibits women’s strength and resilience; defiance and power are shown through embodiment, stance, and voice. 4.) *Fado* plays a part in construction of cultural identity, connection to homeland, and self-knowledge. Policy, research and practice implications are also addressed.

Keywords. *Fado*, women, coping, music therapy, culturally relevant, *saudade*

How can one define *fado*—the rich musical form whose name derives from the Latin word for fate, and whose vocalists have been described as ‘crying as they sing’?! In broad terms, *fado* encompasses a form of Portuguese urban folk music typically involving intense emotional expressions of loss, passion, nostalgia, and homesickness. The lyrics are poetic, and the music created by a trinity of voice, guitarra portuguesa, and classic acoustic guitar (Cohen, 2003). *Fado*’s origins are contested, perhaps including the influences of Iberian troubadour poetry, Arab lute, Gypsy rhythms, distinctive Moorish vocal styling, the songs of Portuguese sailors, African musical traditions, and Afro-Brazilian
dance (Barreto, n.d.; Gray, 2007; Nielsen, Soares, & Machado, 2009). Amid debates about hybrid origins and vast global influences, most musicologists agree that fado’s current form was born in the streets and working-class neighborhoods of Lisbon in the 1840s (Cook, 2003).

The cultural significance of fado is strong, with complex and changing meanings over time. Developed in taverns, streets, and brothels, fado may have been a means by which marginalized communities shared joys and sorrows (Nielsen et al., 2009). The music’s history is apparent in the traditional black shawl of mourning worn by fadistas (singers of fado), which some believe to be a tribute to Maria Severa. Severa was a 19th-century gypsy singer whose love affair with the Count of Vimioso crossed the borders of social hierarchy and introduced fado to Portugal’s aristocracy (Cohen, 2003). Later, the Salazar dictatorship censored fado lyrics and aimed to use the music as nationalistic propaganda, leading to complex responses and rejection of the music after the 1974 revolution (Nielsen et al., 2009). Since then, a new generation of fadistas have claimed the music, with a resurgence in Portugal and popularity on the world stage; in 2011 fado was inscribed on UNESCO’s (2011) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and fado’s history is described as a link to paradoxes that capture deep dialectics within Portuguese culture (Nielsen et al., 2009).

Amália Rodrigues, the late melancholic queen of fado, declared, “instead of trying to forget, we feed on our troubles; we encourage ourselves to suffer; we lament” (Foster, 1999, p. 81). Fado’s role in ‘troubles’ and lamentation is where my research interest lies. A fair amount has been written about fado’s importance from a historical and ethno-musicological perspective, including an assertion that the music evokes the ‘soul of Portugal’ (Barreto, n.d.; Cook, 2003; Foster, 1999; Gray, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2009). However, less is known about the role of the music in people’s everyday lives—particularly in relation to resilience and emotional health.

Aiming to contribute to the interdisciplinary fields of social work, music therapy, and community mental health, the purpose of this study is to qualitatively explore the role of this particular musical-cultural form (fado) in the lives and emotional health of women vis-à-vis participants’ self-defined articulations of resilience, gendered forms of resistance, and coping. Sung by both women and men, the central role that female voice holds in Lisbon’s style of the genre (historically and currently) informs my focus on women’s experiences. Since this study encompasses several fields, review of the literature must include research related to resilience and coping, the role of music in healing, culturally rooted interventions, and the relationship between these concepts.

**Literature review**

Coping, resilience, and emotional health are of key concern to social work theory and practice. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that each
year 26.2% of people in the United States suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder, and a recent study found that the emotional health of college freshman has declined to the lowest level since data collection began 25 years ago (Lewin, 2011; National Institute of Mental Health, 2012). Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & and Gruen (1986) defined coping in the context of cognitive appraisal whereby a person evaluates whether a given encounter impacts her (in terms of harm/loss, threat, or challenge), and then assesses if anything can be done to overcome or diminish harm. The relationship between a sense of control and stress is not simple—that is, the belief that an adverse event is outside of one’s control does not necessarily lead to an increase in stress (Folkman, 1984; Folkman et al., 1986). Irrespective of feelings of control (or lack thereof), a later study of women’s narratives explored coping processes that included meaning-making, consistent with research findings that maintenance of sense of meaning can be one form of coping (Marshall & Long, 2010; Mitchell, King, Nazareth, & Wellings, 2011).

Sinha and Watson (2007) review the effects of stress upon psychological and physical illness, highlighting cultural variance in coping strategies, and the need for additional studies on the impact of culture upon coping. Yeh, Arora, and Wu (2006) devised the term, ‘collectivist coping,’ (cited in Sinha & Watson, 2007) to describe a process of resilience involving interdependence and including family support, respect for authority, social activity, and fatalism. This model, like ‘communal mastery’ (Fok, Allen, Henry, & Mohatt, 2012), extends beyond the individualistic cultural lens of many authors in the field by incorporating an emphasis on cultural meanings and interpersonal relations, rather than locating coping solely within the individual. Related to collectivist coping, culturally mediated forms of resilience rooted in shared meaning-making and long-standing cultural practice merit additional study.

Resilience—evading consensus in the literature but colloquially defined as the ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune and change—can refer to adaptive development in the face of adversity via internal and external protective factors (Torres, 2011). Culturally mediated resilience builds upon theories of culturally mediated instruction: pedagogy that integrates diverse ways of knowing and is relevant to students’ learning styles and cultures (Nieto, 1996). Similarly, culturally mediated resilience may incorporate specific strategies that are grounded in the experiences of a community and are especially relevant to how that cultural group recovers from harm or faces hardship.

The relationships between music, resilience, and health are integral to this study. Research on music and emotional healing began after World War II, when music was seen to improve the condition of shell-shocked veterans; since then, music therapy has shown positive effects with regard to pain perception, stress, and mood (McCraty, Atkinson, Reid, & Watkins, 1996). In one study, participants reported that music increased energy levels and improved mental well-being via expression of emotions (Loue, Mendez, & Sajatovic, 2008).
Music has been found to impact emotional and physiological health: an increase in positive emotion and reduction in systolic blood pressure were found in women who listened to favorite music prior to cesarean section, compared to a control group (Kushnir, Friedman, Ehrenfeld, & Kushnir, 2012).

Music’s healing qualities have been embodied in numerous communities, and knowledge of such culturally rooted, musical coping strategies inform the creation of wellness interventions relevant to communities served. For example, music has been employed by healing programs in various Native health organizations in Vancouver in order to confront forced assimilation, genocide, and trauma, and to support participants’ remembering and nurturing a positive sense of Aboriginal identity (Harrison, 2009). Likewise, the importance of culturally rooted musical expression in healing has been understood and put into praxis by community-based organizations such as Instituto Familiar de la Raza’s (n.d.) ‘La Cultura Cura’ youth programming, and Beats, Rhymes and Life’s (2013) ‘Hip Hop Therapy.’ In these examples, music as therapeutic practice is grounded in community traditions and voice is reified as an expression of heritage and identity. As stated by Dosso (2004),

> The human voice is one way in which we preserve our identity. . . . The voice is an expression of psychological state, a physiological operation and the means by which a person asserts his or her rights within the social order. (p. 66)

Although rooted in a different history, location, and tradition, spirituals and blues music may be seen as analogues to fado in terms of therapeutic performance, culturally mediated resilience, and expression of sorrow. As such, related literature on the blues and spirituals speak to this study’s focus on fado’s cathartic qualities. In contrast to listening to music as a way to ‘feel better’, writing and singing by blues women in the 1920s and 1930s has been analyzed as an expression of sadness and the crucial voicing of violence and abuse, by which women used the music to lament and actively resist victimization (West, 2002). Arthur Jones’s personal and clinical reflections on his experience singing and researching spirituals are particularly relevant; he notes the creation of songs by an enslaved people as an oral holding place for emotions over generations, and posits spirituals’ critical psychological and cultural functions (Jones, 2004). Jones’s analysis details the psychological and coping value of spirituals via soothing repetitive melodies and poetic lyrics. His research notes singer participants’ reporting inner feelings of calm, despite the inherent sadness of the songs (Jones, 2004).

Marcus Garvey declared: “a people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots” (cited in Acosta, 2007, p. 37). Without knowledge of communities’ cultural beliefs and traditions, social work interventions can be similarly ‘rootless.’ Culturally inflected beliefs about wellness and mental health are variable and include a myriad of worldviews, many profoundly different from the medicalized vision of the Diagnostic and
Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM); thus, uncovering diverse coping strategies and beliefs about psychological states strengthens clinicians’ abilities to support their clients’ resilience (James, Navara, Wilfrid, & Clarke, 2006).

Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, and Gao (2008) found the psychological state of ‘nostalgia’ to increase perceptions of social support, and, moreover, proposed nostalgia as a coping strategy. According to Zhou et al.’s (2008) literature review, in four related studies conducted with different age populations and in different parts of China, nostalgia was found to combat loneliness by restoring connectedness; highly resilient participants reported high levels of nostalgia. This research provides an example of data that are rooted in a particular cultural experience and interpretation of a psychological state; in addition, these results may have larger implications for the significance of fado—music that seems to exist, drowned in a sea of nostalgia, or the related emotion, saudade!

My study highlights the possibility that the psychological state of saudade, through fado music, might similarly serve a protective and connecting role for the women who participate in it. Saudade and fado were found to be highly relevant to the participants interviewed, consistent with an ethnographic review of Portuguese-American literature that noted the belief that fado and saudade may exemplify the Portuguese temperament (Silva, 2008). Holton’s (2006) insightful historiography and fieldwork describe saudade as ‘socio-physic glue,’ unifying various narratives of origin, and note that many singers cite the emotion as a necessary precursor to the music. Street-level factors that frame and influence narratives of fado practice will clarify this analysis of culturally rooted praxis and embodiment of the music as a community-driven resilience strategy.

Methods
This is an exploratory study of a cultural phenomenon, its place in the everyday lives of the women who live it, and its potential contribution to culturally relevant wellness programming. As such, this research employs qualitative exploratory methods to provide an in-depth understanding of participants’ opinions about the role of fado in their emotional lives, as well as the impact of participation upon understandings of well-being and strategies of coping (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). This investigation does not claim to be generalizable nor representative; it is, rather, an emic inquiry into the specific experiences of fadistas and appreciators of fado from their own unique (and sometimes shared) perspectives (Triandis, Malpass, & Davidson, 1973). Transnational and comparative themes emerged from data across nation-state boundaries in this phenomenological study centering on the lived experiences of the community connected to and constructing fado (DeLoach & Petersen, 2010).

Qualitative methods were chosen because they are most apt for in-depth explorations such as this, which delves into complex relationships between musical expression, culture, gender, and emotional well-being. Reflecting
dialogic ethnography, interviews were constructed as conversational exchanges between participants and a self-exposed, openly interpretive interviewer (Sawin, 2004). As a researcher, I disclosed my vantage point (love of the music) and cultural lens (Azorean-American) while exploring the role of cultural production with participants in social milieu—taverns, cafés, and homes. This study drew from grounded theory, with data collection (participant interviews, lyrics, ethnographic observation) followed by coding, analysis, and construction of themes; literature review categories framed the initial organization of data and development of codes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Martin & Turner, 1986).

Convenience sampling methods were used; in Lisbon, I frequented fado houses, museums, taverns, and bookstores in the neighborhoods where fado is sung.8 In California, participants were identified through community events, social media, and personal contacts. Participants were women, ranging in age from early 20s to late 70s, who listened to and/or sang fado, and identified with appreciating the music, or its playing a role in their lives. Participants’ nationalities included: Brazilian (1), Portuguese (4), Mozambican (1), and Portuguese-American of Azorean descent (3).9 Nine one-on-one conversational interviews were conducted between July and December of 2012, six in Portuguese and three in English. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and was audio recorded to capture data and allow for transcription and translation.10

Results
Four major themes were developed and are described in detail in this section. First, participants discussed fado as a way of accessing and expressing emotions. More than a mere pastime or form of entertainment, fado was articulated as a way of accepting and integrating sadness, grief, loss, and other difficult emotions as intrinsic, valuable parts of life. Many study informants considered fado cathartic. Second, in addition to these emotional aspects, several women emphasized spiritual components of the music, including traditional, proscribed rituals that allow singers and audience to participate in particular grounded ways. Lyrical references to ‘acceptance of God’s will’ further articulated solace found in the music’s (religious/cultural) notion of fate.

Third, participants believed that singers exhibit strength through the music, despite voicing lyrics about sorrow and devastation. They assessed that this strength is conveyed through stance, defiance, volume, cultural legitimacy granted to women’s voices by fado, and the positive value ascribed to the release of feeling (versus repression of sadness, or distraction from pain). Fourth, immigrant and first-generation participants in the US reported on the music’s role in the maintenance and transformation of cultural identity and self-knowledge. It is possible that this cultural form provides additional protective factors for immigrant and diaspora communities employing the music to maintain, remember, and adapt cultural heritage.
Fado and the expression of feelings of sadness, grief, and loss

One of the most common themes identified by participants was the extremely emotional nature of the music. Amélia explained: “fado—as you know young lady—is a feeling.” She noted that the music can be an expression of any strong emotion: “the majority of times it is sad, melancholic, but then we can also be content and [start to] cry.” Fado’s connection to feeling was conveyed in descriptions of the music’s emotional nature, as well as the necessity of deep feeling while singing or listening. Andréia recounted:

There was a fadista at Senhor Vinho, who cried as she sang. . . . Ultimately, for me, that is fado. it’s your believing what you’re singing.

Andréia went on to explain the importance of expressing what one has lived in fado. She categorizes this personally lived loss as saudade, and distinguishes it from nostalgia:

Once they told me that fado is nostalgia, but I disagree. For me fado is sadness and saudade . . . Saudade is . . . something that I find more personal, it’s when you’ve lived something and you feel the loss of it daily, during your life. Nostalgia could be something you never had, but that you wish you’d had; nostalgia is not as personal as saudade.

Micaela drew attention to fado’s roots, including historical expression of feelings: “they say that fado began with the Africans, so it was the slave community that was—that went singing in sad moments . . . as a way of saying what they felt in that moment, you see?”

In line with this connection between music and the expression (or release) of feelings, several participants highlighted the connection between fado, crying, and the soul. Lucy said: “It has a lot of soul, the voices have a lot—it’s like they’re pouring out their soul, that’s the fado. And the more they do it, the better the singer. I cry like mad.” Interestingly, this concept of the soul being poured out through the voice while singing is also reflected in lyrics: “E a minha alma faz-se voz, pra contar que as penas das águas serenas que o teu fado quis . . . ” [“My soul turns into voice [song], to tell of the sorrows of serene waters that your fate wanted . . . ”]. Madalena explained, “If it makes me cry, it’s a good one. . . . The whole song is about a feeling; if you don’t communicate that feeling, then it’s not fado to me.” Renata described singing as a wail:

I think that sometimes singing fado is like that for me; it’s like crying . . . it feels like a cry because it’s not staid, it’s not held in. There’s a lot of, you know, ornamentation that just sort of mimics that sound, like a wail or a cry.

Several participants emphasized their belief in the natural and everyday place of profound emotions, while simultaneously focusing on the heightened drama of fado’s extremely sad songs. They placed value on sorrow, stating a
preference for the saddest songs. Lucy exclaimed that “some were, you know, not too bad, and some were sad, but we loved them. I think, the sadder the better!”

Some participants spoke about the theme of leaving and separation, especially in connection to the ocean. Verônica connected the presence of the sea with loss, saying:

There’s many fados . . . that reference that life of the ocean, aren’t there? A strong presence of the sea, and the sea being that which is responsible for that homesickness, that leaving, right? It’s always been that idea of leaving, [those that] stay and the encounter, the waiting. . . .

Others explained fado as expression of the universal grief that no one escapes. Madalena eloquently asserted:

You can express grief and you can survive it. Everybody’s life has grief, and it’s a natural part of life, and you can accept it as part of your life instead of running away from it or being surprised, like Americans, [who say]—Why me? Why me? Why not? . . . You can frame grief, you can control it, you can keep it close; it doesn’t have to destroy you. You can make it something that’s a part of your whole life.

Madalena draws attention to both the inescapable nature of loss, as well as the value to be found in understanding, expressing, and “keeping grief close.” She hints at a form of culturally mediated resilience, in which a collective cultural-musical expression of loss may support coping, shared meaning-making, and the sense that one is ‘not alone’ in grieving. Preparation for loss or death can also be seen in Renata’s favorite fado, “Gaivota,” which sings: “Se ao dizer adeus à vida, As aves todas do céu, Me dessem na despedida O teu olhar derradeiro, Esse olhar que era só teu, Amor que foste o primeiro” (“If, saying goodbye to life, all the birds of the sky gave me your last look as a farewell, that look that was only yours my love, my first love”).

The majority of participants referred to the expression of feelings (via singing or listening) as beneficial, in and of itself. Furthermore, informants indicated that this therapeutic aspect of fado is found in the release of emotion. Amélia connected music to crying, and adamantly explained that crying is healthy:

It’s the expulsion of the feelings that we have here outward. A tear is the transmission of a feeling, isn’t it? Of happiness or sorrow. A tear is a feeling; it’s the response to a feeling. Everyone cries. They used to say that it was shameful for a man to cry, but it’s not. We should cry. They say that women are more sensitive, we cry more, but we’re happier because we leave suffering outside [of the body] through tears. Crying is good for you.

The belief that crying is beneficial is reflected in the lyrics of “Foi Deus,” one of Catarina’s favorites: “Mas sei que cantando, Sinto o mesmo quando, Se tem um desgosto, E o pranto no rosto nos deixa melhor” (“I know that singing feels like when I am
heartbroken and tears on the face eases the pain”). Micaela spoke of music as play, and expression of feelings as less painful than holding them in:

It’s playing with sadness. Singing is playing, because if a person silences her sadness, she’ll keep it with her, and I think that hurts much more.21

Speaking on the same theme, second-generation Portuguese-American Renata said:

I feel that cathartic feeling . . . sort of like after the rain comes, everything’s just sort of washed through you, and you feel more relaxed and calm. I don’t want to say it just makes everything better, but there is that sense of release . . .

Perhaps demonstrating enduring cultural connections over time, she went on to echo participants in Portugal who asserted that expression of feelings is good:

I don’t think it’s very healthy to say ‘I feel sad but I’ll just ignore it’ and listen to something happy and pretend that I don’t feel sad. I mean, if you feel sad, you feel sad. . . . I think expressing sadness is different than dwelling on it, because if I’m sad and I sing something it makes me feel better afterwards.

This statement underscores assertions of fado’s embodied expression as emotive, physical, and as such perhaps distinct from cognitive “dwelling” on sadness. Similar to Renata, other women connected singing to resilient feelings such as wholeness and completion. Catarina explained:

[Singing] makes me go without shame, because it’s more important than anything and I love it so much. . . . I feel very complete when I sing, I feel ‘whole’ when I do that. . . . ‘Whole’ means that I wouldn’t trade it for anything. . . . There’s nothing that can fulfill me more than the pleasure of singing.22

Another fadista talked about singing to ease homesickness and other difficult emotions: “sometimes it’s a sense of saudade, sometimes it’s a sense of sadness, sometimes if something bad happens that’s more acute and you’re just like, ‘Oh, I need to express this pain or anger.’” She also said:

I think it can lead to healing, I guess . . . . I don’t know if it could, in and of itself, heal something, like some emotional wound, but I think it could really help, if you respond to music in that way . . . . it’s a good way of getting in touch with how you feel as well, which I feel like is a big step in that.

The theme of fado as expression of emotional wounds led to discussions about whether or not age and life experience are relevant to an understanding of the music. Does one need to have reached a certain stage in life before she can truly understand and transmit the feelings of fado? Participants were divided on this issue. The young Catarina said:
I think age doesn’t determine anything. . . . In a sad song, you look inside yourself for what causes you that sadness. The difference for a 70-year-old person is being able to choose which sorrow she wants to feel in that moment, right? And which is the deepest anguish that she wants to feel? . . . For me, instead of having five hundred sorrows, I have two! People do not live without suffering and without sadness—no matter their age.23

Other participants disagreed, emphasizing the importance of having reached a certain stage in life to truly understand fado. Andréia said:

I think when we’re young it’s different. I think that once you have a certain baggage of life experiences, of—relationships between man and woman, as well as friendships and loss of loved ones—you begin to be more sensitive to some things. . . . So when I first heard fado, it didn’t impact me; now it does. I don’t mean that before I was a less emotional person, because I was always very emotional, but I think that now I carry experiences from life, of things that I’ve lost, gained, lived, what I miss and what I don’t.24

Amélia spoke poetically about life experiences and feeling, with comparisons to calluses and hunger. When asked if you have to be older to understand fado, she said:

You have to have lived. . . . To feel fado we have to live. To create a callus, and the callus is life, the ‘feeling’ of life, is to be able to feel . . . if you don’t feel, you never went through anything. It’s like for a poor woman: how can a rich man ever know what hunger is, if he was never poor and never felt hunger? If a person always has food to eat, he doesn’t know what hunger is. Do you understand the comparison?25

Lastly, as it relates to this section’s theme, participants articulated the comfort found in a collective experience, space and song through which one can be in touch with grief. I conceptualize this in two ways. First, saudade as a cultural construct and shared value includes the continued presence of those we lose through our missing and longing for them. Fado’s enactment of saudade keeps these losses close to the voice and heart. Second, an accepted and common way of voicing loss may make the experience of grieving and homesickness less isolating. When asked about favorite fados, participants included songs of loss and saudade, such as “Barco Negro” and “Por Saudade ou Por Memória.” Describing saudade, Andréia said, “saudade perhaps . . . is the longing for return.”26 Renata laughed:

Okay, the impossible to explain word! For me, the theme has always been a longing, um, and I think that is part of what saudade is: this sense of longing, and longing for something that you used to have that you don’t have anymore, or longing for something that you never had, or longing for something impossible, longing for love. All of those things. . . . I think it always feels like yearning. As much as it is also about, I think, expressing anguish. . . .

Madalena’s favorite fado speaks directly to the concept of not being alone in the feeling of sadness; the lyrics sing: “Ó gente da minha terra, Agora é que
eu percebi, Esta tristeza que trago, Foi de vós que a recebi” [“Oh people of my land, it’s only now I understand that this sadness which I bear, it all came from you”]. This notion of shared sadness relates to collectivist coping; participants spoke of strength found in communal experience and the belief that pain is held by the group. Indeed, when asked if she felt sadder after listening to fado, Madalena said:

No, happier. Because you can see, ‘Oh, other people have felt this kind of grief.’ Other people feel this kind of grief, and they survive. There’s many kinds of grief; many people are experiencing it. You’re not alone.

The spiritual aspects of fado

The theme of spirituality in fado, (expressed through lyrics, reverence, and ritualized ways of enacting the music) first emerged from Andréia who mentioned:

The ritual of fado that I’m talking about is . . . during the moment of fado nothing can be served to the tables, the lights are usually dimmed, and I appreciate this type of ritual because I think it’s a sign of respect to the fado singers. . . . And I think it’s beautiful. I think it’s beautiful for a person to know that this is a moment reserved for it and people pay attention to that.27

Jacinta, a Portuguese listener of fado, described the tradition in Lisbon: “The first thing is to become silent [to listen]. ‘Silence, fado is about to be sung!’”28 This assertion of the music’s rituals made me view the fado houses differently, considering them as spiritual spaces rather than mere bars or restaurants. The low lighting, repeated fluctuations between silence and music then sustenance with conversation, singers’ shawls, candles, and most especially the central location given to photos of the late fadista, Amália Rodrigues, (almost shrine-like) in many fado houses, gave me pause, and hinted at the sanctuary that collective expression and song can create in unlikely places. Nielsen et al. (2009) commented on fado’s (ritualized) ambiance and enactment as high context, with information shared implicitly via nonverbal communication such as posture, hand movements, and interpersonal space.

In addition to ritual, the belief that voice is ‘granted by God’ was revealed in the lyrics of “Foi Deus” (a favorite of Catarina), as well as in the attitude of Amélia. She sighed, “I really love [to sing], and I say, ‘Look, I began when God wanted and I will stop when he wishes,’”29 revealing a perhaps fatalistic and comforting sense of destiny in which one’s life and song are in God’s hands. This concept of God’s role in suffering, singing as a response to sadness, and God’s granting voice is revealed in various songs:

*Foi deus*

*Que me pôs no peito*

*Um rosário de penas*

*Que vou desfiando*

*E choro a cantar*
... 
É pós as estrelas no céu 
É fez o espaço sem fim 
Deu o luto as andorinhas 
Ai, e deu-me esta voz a mim!

[“It was God who put a rosary of sorrows in my heart that I unravel as I cry when I sing. And He placed the stars in the heavens, and made space without end. He made the sparrow mourn, Oh, and He gave this voice to me!”]

Strength, resilience, passion, and power in fado

Participants spoke of many elements that can be grouped together under the theme of strength and resilience. Articulated factors connected to resilience include: music for psychological survival, working-class pride in the face of hardship, the bold image of women in the music, feeling strong while singing, and the impact of musical embodiment upon participants.

Micaela spoke about fado’s relationship to resilience in terms of psychological survival:

It was a relief then from sadness. That’s why fado is a little sad—because they were people who were taken from their families . . . it was a form of survival, right?—On a psychological level.31

The emphasis upon singing fado for psychological or emotional motives can also be seen in the way that passion, enjoyment, and full expression are often considered more important than talent or quality of voice. Catarina said: “I really like the music, very, very much—regardless of whether I sing badly or well, regardless!”32 Madalena added:

I love the variety of voices that sing fado and are considered good fado singers. . . . And I love the way that you can have lower class and higher class and everything in between, and they are all legitimate fado singers.

With regard to socioeconomic status, Madalena went on to say:

I can imagine that if it used to be mainly sung by the poor, and yet, obviously the upper classes learned to appreciate it. . . . I would imagine that anything that serves to remind the upper classes that poor people are human is a good thing.

The lyrics of one fado (‘Não é desgraça ser pobre’) [“It is no disgrace to be poor”] further indicate that class-based defiance may well be part of fado’s history. Participants also saw strength conveyed in the way that fadistas embody and express the music. Andréia articulated the combination of vulnerability and strength conveyed:

I think that she feels a little vulnerability when she sings about suffering, but the way that she sings shows that she is strong enough to overcome it. . . . To keep living,
even with all that pain, you know? But I think that it’s more in the way that they sing than in [the words that] they’re saying.33

This was echoed by Jacinta, who said:

The image it gives is of a strong woman . . . this has a lot to do with the voice . . . it’s a strong, powerful, full voice. . . . And many people, even Portuguese people, listen to fado and don’t see the lyrics, they just remain in the feeling that the music transmits, but they don’t pay attention to the lyrics. And her posture can be strong after singing something devastating. . . . It gives an image, yes, of being a strong woman, who’s standing to tell everyone about her suffering, and that she’s enduring the suffering, that she is alive.34

Renata echoed this paradox of defeated words along with powerful stance and voice that make her feel strong while singing:

Maybe this is going against what the words are, because I think that some of the lyrics do sound very defeated, but I think it’s the power of the singing, the tone of it, like I said before, being very loud, it’s not something that you sing with a breathy sort of quiet voice. . . . You’re singing really powerfully, really strongly. And so for me, that always made me feel stronger while I’m singing it.

She also spoke of the empowerment found in the legitimacy given to women’s voicing of pain:

it feels . . . empowering to be able to express those emotions and not have to be embarrassed about, you know, being upset about something, or you know, being emotional. . . . I think that a lot of times—I mean, I guess it is more acceptable for women to express emotions, but it’s also kind of, you know, like: ‘oh that hysterical woman,’ or something that isn’t necessarily taken seriously. So, I think it feels really powerful to be able to express pain through music and have that be sort of legitimate.

Further, in terms of resilience, she explained: “Yeah, it seems more defiant. It’s almost like saying, I’m really upset but I’m defying the world with my unhappiness, you know? Instead of being crushed by it. It’s a powerful way of expressing that.” Andréia agreed that fadistas’ strength is seen in the ability to overcome hardship; understanding and voicing of loss are part of this fortitude.

I never thought that fado was a sign of depression. I believe they’re people who are strong enough to be able to get past the terrible moment. I think they’re strong, you know? I think they’re strong enough to be able to overcome. I think they know what they felt, what they lost.35

Indeed, strength and power can be found in fadistas’ abilities to simultaneously voice and elicit deep feelings in themselves and others. As emotional conjurers, fadistas create conditions for catharsis. One singer described the comforting ways in which she balances her performance to create emotional relief rather than extreme sadness:
What’s hard for me . . . if a person is very sad, and I’m still going to sing something even sadder, will she feel sadder? . . . I feel that they feel my pain, then they’re hurting and I have to soothe it, I’m going to try to soothe them with a word, a gesture, some affection . . . and I try to soothe what I see.36

Related to the strength and defiance of fado’s posture, participants spoke about the music’s physicality. Highlighting the importance of the physical dimensions of live performance, Jacinta said: “at home, I can see fado on the television, but in person it’s a whole different thing. . . . It’s special.”37 Madalena agreed: “On a record you couldn’t really get the beauty and passion like you can when you see a real woman singing it.” Renata spoke about the passion and pride that she sees in the stance of fado:

There’s a very interesting way that a lot of them . . . stand, which is almost tossing their heads back, and you know, very open chest, kind of lifted head, which you know, usually people say when you’re singing you should have your chin down because otherwise you’ll strain the throat, or something. But they don’t do that. And that feels very, like, almost proud, I guess.

As a singer, Renata also relayed how this ‘whole-body’ physicality feels to her:

It’s a way of singing that’s very loud. You can’t really sing it quietly, and you have to use your whole body to do that, you know? And just with the breathing, and the whole physicality of singing, it does make it feel very physical and visceral. And I guess too, the way that it’s performed, I mean, obviously you’re not dancing around, but I think there’s this very physical presence of just sort of standing your ground and belting out this very emotional music.

The concept of feeling the music viscerally—the somatics of fado—was also expressed by women who listen to the music. Participants discussed their own physicality while listening to fado, often connected to crying and catharsis. When I asked Lucy how she could tell that a singer was a good one, she replied: “When it hits me, you know? It has to touch a thing. . . . When he sings that song, I live it. You know what I mean? I feel it. I feel it in my bones, in my soul, and for that reason, I cry.” This shared articulation of feeling fado deeply (“in my soul”), by both singers and listeners, is reminiscent of the assertion painted on a tile in Lisbon: “É tão fadista quem canta como quem sabe escutar!” [“She who knows how to listen is as much a fadista as the one who sings!”].

Fado and cultural identity, connection to homeland, and self-knowledge

Catarina spoke about fado as a means of knowing one’s self: “what’s most beautiful is being able to sing the poem, and being able to know one more part of ourselves.”38 In addition to understanding self and emotions, participants identified fado as a practice through which women express, adapt, and construct cultural identity. Mentioning her favorite song (“Ó Gente da Minha Terra”), Verônica explained pleasure found in sadness as a cultural phenomenon rooted in the Portuguese language:
it represents that sadness, that love of being sad, that I think is very difficult for people from other cultures to understand, but I think that for the cultures of the Portuguese language . . . [it exists]. I think it's really hard to explain. How can one enjoy being sad? And I think that fado really represents this idea of a type of sadness—it's not an extreme sadness, it's not extreme hopelessness—that feeds the feeling of . . . accepting that sad side [and] embracing that state of the soul.39

This embracing of “that state of the soul” through a musical tradition that accepts, mitigates, and perhaps even celebrates sadness can be seen as culturally mediated resilience, as well as shared meaning-making which creates connection between people. In this case, sadness is considered a satisfactory, important, even enjoyable psychological (soul) state, one that coping strategies (i.e., singing) may therefore aim to preserve, as outlined in Snyder and Pulvers’s (2001) definition of coping.

Immigrant, first- and second-generation Portuguese American participants, spoke of the ways in which fado connects them to being Portuguese and preserves cultural heritage. Lucy said: “it’s very nostalgic too, to listen to that stuff . . . ’cuz it brings back your background, your Portuguese.” Madalena, born in the United States after her mother and siblings emigrated from the Azores, said:

I liked it because it made me think of the Azores, and Portugal. . . . So it was mostly about reminding me. And also it made me feel like if I could understand it and appreciate it, then I could be closer to my sisters. . . . It made me feel like I could connect to their experiences. Fado for me was a way for me to go, ‘Oh, I can, as an adult, connect to this art form that everyone says is like an essential part of the Portuguese soul, culture, and I can grok40 it, so if I can grok it then even though I’ve been separated from this culture, I can still feel Portuguese-American.’

Thus fado can be seen as a means by which Madalena constructs her own identity as a Portuguese-American woman; she also highlights the music’s use by immigrants as a coping strategy and a way to stay connected to homeland:

The music is a way for them to be able to cope, and not completely separate, so the music helps them stay connected to back home even when they’re splattered around the continents. I’m sure there are other things too . . . but nothing as obvious to me as the music. . . . And then it also shows that you can combine with other folks, and alter your ways wherever you are, but it doesn’t mean that you’ve lost your identity.

As a singer, Renata demonstrated the music’s naturalness to her in connection with heritage:

It felt like something more personal that I was sharing because it was cultural, it wasn’t just singing any song, it was like saying ‘this is part of my heritage.’ And also I find, I don’t know if I can explain this, but I find it like strangely, I don’t want to say ‘easy’ to sing fado (because it’s technically difficult) but, it feels very natural to me.

She discussed the music as her personal form of self-expression:
Sometimes it does feel like almost a secret thing because I don’t know many people who know the music or who sing it . . . it’s sort of like my own private way of expressing myself because it just feels very personal in that way.

In the Portuguese-American diaspora, some participants identified the music as collective and connecting, while others found it deeply personal and individual in a national context in which ‘not many people know the music.’ The isolation of fadistas in the United States, and fado’s connecting of diaspora members across space is very different from the reality of Lisbon where fado’s societal presence looms large and dense, with shared understandings of the music connecting people daily. These differing meanings of the music could be explored in a larger transnational study.

Discussion
This study investigated women’s lived experiences and the impact of fado participation upon coping, expression, and culturally mediated resilience, including the nature of the support, strength, and catharsis found in the music. From analysis of the data, four major themes emerged: 1.) Fado has a central role in the expression of deep feelings and the meanings ascribed to them; the music is understood as a cathartic, collective container for passion, sadness, and loss. 2.) Fado contains spiritual aspects, including ritual, notions of fate, and acceptance of ‘God’s will.’ 3.) Fado exhibits women’s strength and resilience; defiance and power are shown through embodiment, stance, and voice. 4.) Fado plays a part in construction of cultural identity, connection to homeland, and self-knowledge.

Findings point to a strong association between the art form and culturally mediated resilience via catharsis, pride, somatic expression, and collective meaning-making. This is consistent with previous research in which participants reported that music improved mental well-being through the expression of emotions (Loue et al., 2008). In addition, this study pointed to collective conceptions of “shared sadness” and protective fatalism. This theme supports the finding that believing that an adverse event is outside of one’s control does not necessarily lead to an increase in stress (Folkman, 1984). The strength found in fado may be closely connected to collectivist coping models that include family support, respect for authority, social activity, and fatalism (Yeh et al., 2006, as cited in Sinha & Watson, 2007). Moreover, fado’s reinforcement of cultural identity, a belief in destiny, and the understanding of sadness and grief as part of the human condition, may all contribute to coping through their establishment of a strong sense of meaning (Marshall & Long, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2011).

The implications of this study for policy and practice include: practitioners ought to prioritize an understanding of clients’ cultural traditions and incorporate diverse forms of art, resilience, and mental/spiritual health care into community wellness and mental health services provided. While the
academy may stress the importance of “evidence-based practice,” community-driven work understands that many practices and bodies of cultural knowledge have not been researched and are therefore not part of the institutional canon and curriculum. Nevertheless, these practices have contributed to well-being for generations, and as such should be valued as relevant ‘practice-based evidence’ (Barkham et al., 2001). This research calls for the following initiatives:

- Promotion of diverse and culturally relevant clinical practices, pedagogy, and community programming.
- Community-based participatory research on the role of culturally rooted art forms in the maintenance of health, intergenerational ties, resilience, and social integration.
- Fully funded public education and recruitment of culturally diverse and multilingual students so as to educate clinician and social worker populations that reflect communities served.
- Increased funding for collective, group-based, and culturally relevant mental health modalities. Training of clinician leadership to advocate for the billing of such services.

The impact of music, collective expressive forms, and spirituality upon emotional well-being is not limited to the population of Portuguese-speaking women interviewed in this study. Research, practice, and policy implications should expand to encompass and support the role of music and cultural practices in diverse communities’ wellness traditions. Culturally relevant social work should be attuned to and create programs that build upon community strengths and culturally mediated resilience strategies.

Notes
1 “Chora a cantar.”
2 Distinctive Portuguese guitar with 12 steel strings, a unique sound, and history dating back to the 13th century.
3 Amália (1920–1999), perhaps Portugal’s most famous artist and beloved singer; born to a very poor family, she earned fado international fame with a 55-year career.
4 Arthur Jones is a clinical professor of psychology and founder of The Spirituals Project.
5 Exemplified by the song, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” in which the use of the word ‘sometimes’ implies moments of reprieve while simultaneously giving voice to grief.
6 Jamaican political leader, publisher, journalist, and founder of the UNIA-ACL.
7 Fado houses are typically small restaurants or bars where fado is performed live; often fado is given central importance and the serving of food is paused during the singing.
8 Specifically, the neighborhoods of Alfama, Mouraria, and Bairro Alto.
9 Men were excluded from this study. Women who did not understand Portuguese were excluded since they would have been unequipped to answer study questions connected to lyrical themes. There were no exclusion criteria regarding ethnicity or nationality. Efforts were made to minimize potential harm and inconvenience to participants. Questions were open-ended such that they engaged and generally followed the lead of participants without explicitly probing overly personal matters. Institutional Review Board approval was not required for this study, however the proposal for the portion conducted in Portugal was approved and funded by the Portuguese Studies Program of UC Berkeley. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy; neither participants’ real names nor any other identifying information appears in research results. Participants were informed that the article produced would be submitted to educational centers,
prior to interviews, informed consent was obtained, and language preference, nationality, approximate age, and whether the participant sings or listens to the music were assessed. Conversations included: the role of the music in their lives, fado’s history, themes and expression, connection to emotions and well-being, and the impact of fado on feelings, sadness, suffering, and the body. I believe that my similarities to participants as a researcher (in terms of gender, love of the music, and shared cultural background in the case of some participants) may have increased participants’ ease and willingness to disclose. However, I am also aware that my lack of fluency hampered the depth of Portuguese-language interviews. Participants whom I already knew were not excluded from the study, as there was no indication that prior relationship would impact study results. Translation was required; I wrote and translated all study materials, which were reviewed and corrected by a native Portuguese-speaker prior to use.

Nine women were interviewed; I completed all transcription, coding, and analysis, making error or bias in interpretation more likely than if a team conducted the study. Only participants who identified fado as having an important role in their life were included, which excluded the responses of women who do not like or identify with the music. Interview transcripts, field notes, and song lyrics (identified by participants as their favorite fado songs) were coded and analyzed for themes using ATLAS.ti software.

All names are pseudonyms to protect participants’ anonymity.

“O fado, como a menina sabe, é um sentimento.”

“A maioria das vezes é triste, a pessoa está triste, melancólica, mas pronto nós também podíamos estar satisfeitas é [começar] a chorar.”

“Tinha uma fadista, no Senhor Vinho, que ela chorava cantando. . . . Em fim, para mim o fado é isso: é você acreditar no que você esta cantado.”

Saudade is a unique word, considered untranslatable by some, which conveys a complex mixture of emotions including nostalgia, love, yearning, grief, and longing for those departed or left behind (Vernon, 1998).

“A cada vez disseram para mim que o fado é nostalgia, mas eu não concordo, para mim o fado é tristeza e saudade. . . . Saudade é . . . é uma coisa acho mais pessoal, é quando você viveu aquilo e sente falta de aquilo no seu dia a dia, durante a sua vida. A nostalgia pode ser uma coisa que você gostaria de ter tido que não teve, mas que é mais imprescindível a nostalgia do que a saudade.”

“Dizem que o fado começou com os Africanos, portanto foi a comunidade escrava que foi, ia cantando nos momentos tristes . . . como forma dizendo o que sentiam naquele momento, não?”

Lyrics of “Terra D’água.”

“Há muitos fados que tem . . . que fazem referencia precisamente a essa vida do mar, não é? Uma forte presença do mar, e o mar como sendo aquele que responda por essa saudade, por essa partida, não é? Sempre tem sido esta ideia de partida, ficar e o encontro, da espera. . . .”

“É a expulsão para fora dos sentimentos nós temos cá. A lágrima é transmissão do sentimento, não é? Da alegria ou da tristeza . . . é um sentimento a lágrima, é a resposta a um sentimento. . . . Todo mundo chora. Antes diziam que era vergonha para o homem chorar, mas não é. Nos devemos chorar. Dizem que a mulher é mais sensível, chora mais, mas é mais feliz . . . porque deita a sua magoa fora a traves da lágrima. Chorar faz bem.”

“É brincar com a tristeza. O cantar é brincar, porque se essa pessoa cala a sua tristeza, vai guardando consigo e eu acho que dói muito mais.”

“[E aquilo que] me faz ir sem vergonha, porque é mais importante de tudo e eu quero tanto. . . . Sinto-me muito completo quando canto. Sinto-me inteira quando faço aquilo. . . . Inteira é, é não trocaria aquilo por nada. . . . Não há nada mais que me pode preencher mais do que o prazer de cantar.”

“Acho que a idade não determina nada. . . . Numa canção triste, tu procuras dentro de ti aquilo que te causa aquela tristeza. A diferença duma pessoa de sessenta é puder escolher que tristeza ela quer sentir naquele momento, né? E qual é a magoa mais profunda que ela quer sentir? . . . Eu em vez de ter quinhentas tristezas, tenho duas! . . . As pessoas não vivem sem sofrimento e sem alegria—independentemente da idade.”

“Acho que quando a gente é jovem é diferente. . . . Eu acho que depois que você tem uma certa bagagem de experiências da vida, de—tanto em relacionamentos homem-mulher como amizades,
e perdas de pessoas queridas—você começa ser mais sensível a algumas coisas. Então, fado na época em que eu conheci não teve impacto, e agora tem. Não quero dizer que antes eu era uma pessoa menos emotiva, porque sempre era muito emotiva, mas eu acho que isso, e que eu carregava hoje em dia de experiências de vida, de coisas que já perdi, ganhei, vivi, sinto saudades ou não.”

“A pessoa tem que ser vivida. Nós para sentir o fado temos que viver. Criar calo, o calo é vida, o ‘feeling’ da vida, é poder sentir . . . se não sentes, não passou por nada. E como a pobreza: como é que o rico pode saber o que é fome, se nunca foi pobre para passar o fome? Se a pessoa tem sempre para comer, não sabe o que é fome. Estas a perceber a comparação?”

“Saudade talvez . . . é a vontade de que volte.”

“A imagem que da é que é uma mulher forte . . . tem muito que ver com a voz . . . é uma voz poderosa, forte, cheia . . . E muita gente, mesmo portuguesa, estão ouvindo fado e não vêem a letra, ficam só no sentimento que transmite a música, mas não prestam atenção a letra. É a postura dela que a pessoa tem sempre para comer, não sabe o que é fome. Estas a perceber a comparação?”

“Eu gosto muito dessa musica, muito, muito—canto bem ou mal, canto bem ou mal!”

“Eu acho que ela passa um pouco de vulnerabilidade quando ela canta sobre o sofrimento, mas a forma em que ela canta mostra que ela é forte suficiente para superar aquilo. Para conseguir continuar vivendo mesmo com aquela dor, sabe? Mas eu acho que é mais pela forma com que elas cantam do que estão dizendo.”

“Difícil para mim . . . se fica uma pessoa muito triste, se eu ainda vou cantar uma coisa mais triste, ainda vai ficar mais triste? . . . Sinto que eles sentirem a minha dor, então estão doridas então tem que aliviar, vou tentar aliviar-lhe com uma palavra, um gesto, um carinho . . . e tentar aliviar alguma coisa que eu vejo.”

“Em casa, sou capaz de ver fado na televisão, mais em pessoa é outra coisa. É especial.”

References


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**Lisabeth Castro-Smyth** received a Master of Social Work degree from the University of California Berkeley in 2013, with a thesis entitled, *A Tristeza Que Canta: The Role of Fado Music in Women’s Culturally Mediated Resilience*. Her Bachelor’s degree is in Spanish with a minor in Feminist Studies from Stanford University. She has worked in the fields of education and community health, and was recognized with the UCSF Chancellor’s Award for GLBT Leadership in 2008. Born in California to a family of Azorean and Irish heritage, she has followed in her avó’s footsteps with poetry published in *Sinister Wisdom, The Portuguese Tribune*, and *Rascunho: O jornal de literatura do Brasil*. 