

## **DIALOGUES BETWEEN LITERATURE AND MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE YOUNG ADULT NOVELS**

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**Abstract:** This article provides an analysis of how certain musical references in three contemporary Portuguese young adult novels operate in narrative worlds. The works under analysis, published by Planeta Tangerina, are *O Caderno Vermelho da Rapariga Karateca* (2012), *Irmão Lobo* (2013), and *Pardalita* (2021) – translated respectively as *The Karate Girl's Red Notebook*, *Brother Wolf* and *Pardalita*. In this sense, in this study the aim is to determine whether references to João Gilberto, Johnny Cash and António Variações serve a merely decorative function or whether they play a role in the construction of the narratives by engaging with the characters and themes. In this context, the following research question is posed: how do these musical references, their lyrics and the artistic and biographic identities of the musicians contribute to the selected young adult narratives in terms of meaning making, thematic depth and identity development? To address this question, a qualitative methodology based on close reading is adopted. After identifying the most relevant musical references, the musicians' biographical and artistic contexts are presented in order to relate these elements to the narratives and to specific theoretical frameworks concerning the role of music in adolescence. One of the central contributions of this article is to problematise the status of musical references by examining whether they go beyond a merely decorative function to actively participate in the construction of meaning and in the expansion of the reading experience. The findings demonstrate that, in these three contemporary Portuguese young adult novels, musical references can be elements that intensify characterisation, reinforce thematic complexity and expand the reader's interpretative experience.

**Keywords:** young adult literature, adolescence, music, songs

### 1. Introduction: the potential of music in young adults' universes<sup>1</sup>

The relationship an adolescent develops with the music they discover, choose, and listen to can be intense. Sounds and lyrics manifest themselves in an adolescent's inner and social life in multiple ways. Music may contribute to a young person's construction of an identity – or even of multiple identities – may foster a sense of belonging to a group, may guide a young person along an aesthetic path, and may even help them to understand feelings more fully, to process and express emotions, and to engage in a dialogue with the inner turmoil which is characteristic of this stage of development. It may also support adolescents in their efforts to make sense of the world. The significance of this relationship between music and adolescence has inspired substantial theoretical reflection on the subject (North, Hargreaves, and O'Neill, 2000; Coats, 2012; Miranda, 2013) and will likewise be considered in this analysis, including the ways in which it is represented in the selected young adult novels. In this sense, "music is of central importance in the lives of most young people, fulfilling social and emotional as well as cognitive needs" (North, Hargreaves, and O'Neill, 2000, 269). Given this significance, young adult (YA) literature that incorporates musical references constitutes a productive field for examining how such references interact with narrative elements – such as character construction – and contribute to meaning-making processes. This study therefore addresses the following research question: How do musical references, their lyrics and the artistic and biographic identities of the musicians contribute to YA narratives in terms of meaning construction, thematic depth, character development, and identity formation?

For this research into possible relationships between music and YA literature, three YA novels were selected: *O Caderno Vermelho da Rapariga Karateca* (2012), written by Ana Pessoa and illustrated by Bernardo Carvalho; *Irmão Lobo* (2013), written by Carla Maia de Almeida and illustrated by António Jorge Gonçalves; and *Pardalita* (2021), written and illustrated by Joana Estrela. As previously noted, these titles may be translated as *The Karate Girl's Red Notebook*, *Brother Wolf*, and *Pardalita*.<sup>2</sup> With the exception of *Irmão Lobo*, which has since moved to

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<sup>2</sup> All translations of titles and excerpts from texts into English are the responsibility of the author.

a different publishing house, these works belong to the *Dois Passos e um Salto* collection, the YA series published by Planeta Tangerina, a major Portuguese publishing house, particularly renowned for its work in picturebooks. The novels were selected because they represent three significant new voices in the contemporary Portuguese landscape of children's and YA literature. Although the three works are part of a collection intended for a YA readership, they address a wide age range. In fact, *Irmão Lobo* and *Pardalita* may be considered particularly as crossover narratives that address "a diverse, cross-generational audience" (Beckett, 2009, 3). The collection as a whole is characterized by hybridity and multimodality, as all the books incorporate illustration and other graphic elements into the narrative, thereby challenging artistic boundaries and exploring diverse literary procedures and artistic languages. These books are conceived as integrated artworks, in which even the most discreet element, when carefully examined, may reveal semantic significance. Although Portuguese in origin, they are aligned with some contemporary multimodal narrative strategies commonly employed in the YA segment.

To orient this exploration, this study draws on certain theoretical perspectives and reflections on the connection between music and adolescence (North, Hargreaves, and O'Neill, 2000; Coats, 2012; Miranda, 2013; Frith, 2016). This aids understanding not only of the power of intermedial references (Rajewsky, 2005), but, above all, how the choice or preference for a particular piece of music – and its subsequent inclusion in the narrative, including its lyrics, cultural context, and even the artistic and biographical dimensions of the musicians – can help the reader gain a deeper understanding of the characters and the work's themes, thereby enabling a more profound immersion in the narrative and its meanings. The three novels include excerpts from song lyrics, which may also have an intertextual dimension (Kristeva, 1969).

Using a qualitative methodology that combines theoretical discussion with close reading, this article explores the relationships between musical references and narrative construction, particularly with regard to characterization and other elements. To carry out this research, each musical reference is contextualized within the narratives' thematic structures and processes of character construction, with the aim of identifying meaning-making patterns in the selected YA novels.

To ensure a coherent structure across the three analyses, each section begins with a brief overview of the respective novel, including its plot, principal characters, and the musical references it contains. The

discussion then addresses the potential dialogue between the narrative and the musical references by first outlining key features of the music or musician in question, followed by close readings of how these elements interact with themes, characters, and other relevant narrative components of the YA novel under analysis. By examining musical references in three significant contemporary Portuguese YA novels, this article seeks to highlight the role of music within the literary context of YA literature. As Coats observes,

Young Adult literature of the twenty-first century reflects this new form of self-fashioning in various ways, but positioning music as the centre of the project of a character's identity formation occurs less often in the literature than in real life. (Coats, 2012, 116)

While Coats' observation appears valid, it is the aim of this study to determine whether musical references actively contribute to characterization and identity formation in these three contemporary YA novels, alongside other narrative elements. Taking as a given that "[t]he emphasis on identity construction is perhaps enough of a reason to focus on the place of music in Young Adult literature" (Coats, 2012, 120), this research leads to the conclusion that, in the selected novels, musical references engage not only with the characters but also with themes of construction and exploration of youth identity, while interacting creatively with formal, hybrid, and multimodal narrative strategies.

## **2. Music references as part of narrative universe**

### **2.1. Transforming the form to become a new form and different beings**

The first novel discussed in this study is *O Caderno Vermelho da Rapariga Karateca* (*The Karate Girl's Red Notebook*, 2012), written by Ana Pessoa and illustrated by Bernardo Carvalho. The hybrid narrative, which draws on different literary devices, follows N, a teenage protagonist who practices karate and acquires a notebook in which to record her reflections on daily life, her love for Raul, her friendships, her school experiences, and her family relationships. N challenges conventional gender norms (declaring that she is not a baby girl) and refuses to consider her notebook a traditional diary, thereby questioning form, gender, and social conventions. The notebook thus becomes a transformative place for both its writer and itself, shifting

across forms and genres – a model to which N aspires. According to the English synopsis provided on the Planeta Tangerina website:

This is not a diary. It has no lock, it contains no secrets.

(It does have secrets really.) It also has a will of its own, moving pages, (...) and characters like the wicked witch who wants to learn to be good and the fly that doesn't know what it is.

This is the karate girl's red notebook. N's favorite thing, a pet, a character, a real person. (Planeta Tangerina)<sup>3</sup>

In this narrative, the protagonist challenges conventions of gender and literary form in multiple ways. She asserts that she is neither a girl nor a “baby girl,” but a practitioner of karate (Pessoa, 2012, 9). Similarly, she rejects the classification of her notebook as a diary (Pessoa, 2012, 31) and even claims that the notebook itself transforms into different beings (Pessoa, 2012, 31), reflecting the ways in which she simultaneously reshapes literary form through her writing. This character, who does not aspire to “pretty feet,” prefers to fight (Pessoa, 2012, 62–63) and resists gender stereotypes, and also refuses to confine her notebook to a specific genre or form, in this case, the diary. Consequently, as she writes, the notebook undergoes metamorphoses, assuming the forms of animals or fictional characters, among others. In this context, the protagonist expresses a desire to transform herself in parallel with her notebook, writing: “Sometimes, I would like to be like you: several beings in one, several possibilities, several forms of expression, several contents. A cat, a rabbit, a fly, a character, a person, a red notebook” (Pessoa, 2012, 122).

It is through writing and the exploration of literary form that transformations and metamorphoses take place. How does the protagonist deform and reshape literary form? Through experimentation, hybridity, and the blending of genres. The narrative employs a variety of literary strategies, including the exploration of the diary and diary-novel forms, the parodic reworking of traditional tales, and entries constructed as scientific homework, in which the scientific method is applied to describe the world – albeit in a distinctly literary manner. This is a narrative that resists confinement to a single literary form or genre, written in a notebook that morphs into animals, characters, and people, by a non-stereotypical girl who likewise seeks to transform herself into new forms or beings, mirroring the notebook she

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.planetatangerina.com/en/loja/the-karate-girls-red-notebook/>

writes. Traditional forms, such as diaries, tales, homework assignments, and gendered expectations serve as foundations from which the narrative creates alternative modes of storytelling, expression, and being. This exemplifies the transformative power of literary writing and, more broadly, the transformative potential of art itself.

In fact, the protagonist and her notebook share a deeply intertwined relationship, engaging with multiple artistic modalities, as reflected in the titles of several entries: “My notebook listening to music” (Pessoa, 2012, 65), “My notebook reading” (Pessoa, 2012, 108), and “My (your) drawings” (Pessoa, 2012, 123). These headings highlight the centrality of music, literature, and visual arts within the narrative. Indeed, illustrations and peritextual elements constitute a significant aspect of the book. While the work is richly illustrated, two visual features are particularly noteworthy: the barcode formatted to resemble a notebook, and a sequence of sixteen double-page illustrations, complemented by two additional illustrated pages, which together create a wordless narrative moment. Focusing specifically on the entry “My notebook listening to music,” attention is drawn to the reference to João Gilberto and the song “Lobo Bobo” (freely translated as “Foolish Wolf”). In the narrative, the protagonist recounts a day spent at home with her notebook:

We [she and her notebook] stayed all day at home (...). We lay down in bed listening to João Gilberto (...) It was Uncle Delfim Eduardo who gave me this CD (...) he told me that I should write my stories to the sound of João Gilberto, because of his voice, between jazz and samba. (...) I’ve never written to the sound of João Gilberto. But one of these days I am going to try. (...) I would like to write songs like the ones João Gilberto sings. *Once upon a time there was a bad wolf who decided to have someone for dinner...* Father says that it wasn’t João Gilberto who wrote Lobo Bobo. Who wrote it then?<sup>4</sup> Tomorrow are you going to be the Foolish Wolf? [she asks the notebook]. (Pessoa, 2012, 65)

This passage illustrates the intimate and interactive relationship between the protagonist and her notebook, as well as the role of music – here represented by João Gilberto – as both inspiration and a model

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<sup>4</sup> Carlos Lyra and Ronaldo Bôscoli wrote this song recorded on João Gilberto’s first album, *Chega de Saudade*, a seminal record in bossa nova.

for creative writing. Thus, the reference to João Gilberto (1931–2019), one of the founders of bossa nova, renowned for radically transforming musical form through his innovative approach to rhythm, represents a reference worthy of attention.

João Gilberto's body of work, distinguished by nuanced integrations of samba and jazz, is commonly seen as a defining moment in Brazilian popular music. Critics have described him as "the providential genius who showed the world something yet to be invented" (Pacheco, 2019, n.p.). Scholars have suggested that bossa nova can be divided into Gilberto's distinctive style and all other variants, both before and after him, which merely share certain elements with his approach (Pianta, 2010, 14). His work represents a unique synthesis, differentiating itself from the earlier and later hybrid forms of samba-jazz or choro-jazz (Pianta, 2010, 15). In this respect, Gilberto's style not only transformed Brazilian popular music but also integrated broader practices from international popular music, particularly from North America (Pianta, 2010, 16). Moreover, his style is described as so characteristic and concentrated that it "practically closes in on itself: either his procedure is copied point by point, or he ends up going back to elements of previous styles" (Pianta, 2010, 15). João Gilberto is also recognized as "an inventor and master of both voice and guitar, and his style is a combination of both" (Pianta, 2010, 98).

In this narrative, the protagonist listens to "Lobo Bobo" and expresses a desire "to write songs like the ones João Gilberto sings" (Pessoa, 2012, 65). Will the notebook then transform into the Foolish Wolf, as she asks? And will the teenager herself undergo a transformation? In parallel with this ontological experimentation, Ana Pessoa engages in literary experimentation, exploring traditional forms and genres in parodic and humorous ways to destabilize convention and investigate alternative modes of storytelling. For instance, "Lobo Bobo" parodies the "bad wolf" of "Little Red Riding Hood," recounting the tale of a wolf who wishes to eat someone but lacks the means to do so. Similar procedures occur throughout this novel. The tale *A bruxa má, conto infantil dedicado aos intrusos* (freely translated as *The Bad Witch, a Children's Tale Dedicated to Intruders*), which tells the story of a witch who occasionally aspires to goodness (Pessoa, 2012, 13), exemplifies this approach. Additional humorous narratives appear in the text, such as the story of a fly uncertain of its identity and considering the possibility of being a bee (Pessoa, 2012, 33–34), as well as tales of a character who wishes to become a person and a person who wishes to become a character (Pessoa, 2012, 110–115).

More importantly, the narrative foregrounds the protagonist's experimental engagement with multiple literary forms, reflecting her search for new modes of expression. There is a sustained effort to transform form – both literary and ontological – through hybridity, mixing, and creative experimentation, aiming to discover a transformative mode for her writing, her notebook, and herself. Through this process, the protagonist searches for her own literary voice, a pursuit that exerts a profound transformative effect on her life, worldview, and sense of self. Her exploration parallels João Gilberto's innovation in music, as he has been called “the brilliant creator of the beat that gave birth to bossa nova,” a “beat like no one has ever heard,” and is therefore “considered to be the legitimate founder of bossa nova” (Pacheco, 2019, n.p.).

In this context, it can be argued – also in a fusional manner, reflecting the relational dynamic between the writing object and the protagonist in Ana Pessoa's narrative – that João Gilberto “fully represents the style, because he *is* the style” (Pianta, 2010, 94). Similarly, the protagonist of Pessoa's novel aspires to become like the notebook in which she writes, a notebook that transforms into various beings as she composes. This notion of transformation is inherently fusional: as the notebook metamorphoses, it is not solely the object that changes – the protagonist herself also undergoes transformation. For example, immediately following an entry about Easter rabbits, the narrative includes an illustration depicting the girl with a rabbit's head, visually exploring the potential for ontological transformation through literary writing.

When considering how this musical reference interacts with the narrative, it becomes evident that, in a story defined by an intense search for alternative forms and a challenge to normative structures, the reference to João Gilberto is particularly significant. In a context where a teenager asserts that she is not a baby girl and her notebook is not a diary, and where metamorphoses regularly occur, Gilberto's reputation for inventive musical innovation resonates meaningfully, reflecting the transformative power of art. The reference to Gilberto, who reshaped musical form to create a new sound, becomes productive and symbolically rich.

Thus, within this narrative context, the inventive, original, and transformative way in which João Gilberto reinvented music – or, indeed, created a new musical form – echoes, or interacts narratively with, the adolescent protagonist's ambition to subvert and reject all pre-

established forms in order to find a new one. Indeed, perhaps not just one, but many, since she wishes to be multiple, like the notebook in which she writes: “various beings in one, various possibilities, various forms of expression, various contents” (Pessoa, 2012, 122). For this reason, she experiments with diverse literary resources and possibilities, and her notebook does not settle on a single procedure or even a single form, transforming itself, quite surprisingly, into different animals. The girl and her notebook thus resist form and convention, and indeed seek to challenge normative structures, which resonates with João Gilberto’s inventive drive. In this case, music is linked to the adolescent’s explorations of artistic, literary, and ontological form, even if her aspiration, after all, is to embrace multiplicity. This emerges not only in her artistic and literary voice but also at an ontological level, which, in turn, resonates with the idea that “[m]usic is a resource from which adolescents decide to explore possible selves” (Miranda, 2013, 12).

## 2.2. Lyrics and characters moved by contradictory forces

Carla Maia de Almeida’s *Irmão Lobo* (*Brother Wolf*, 2013), illustrated by António Jorge Gonçalves, narrates the story of a family grappling with the familial, professional, social, and emotional difficulties triggered by an economic crisis. The mother is compelled to take multiple jobs while the father remains unemployed. The youngest child – who has one sister and one brother – accompanies her father on a road trip to locate an old family house, which is ultimately discovered to be in ruins. During this journey, several pivotal events occur, the most significant and traumatic being the father’s death while attempting to rescue another family from a fire.

The narrative is “based on two different time periods,” structured “alternately from the memories of the teenage narrator (aged 15) about her (...) childhood experience (aged 8), which occurred in the summer of her father’s death” (Ramos and Navas, 2016, 120–121). Illustrations also play a crucial role in the text. As Ramos and Navas (2016, 121–122) observe, graphic design functions as a narrative strategy, visually differentiating the two narrative voices through color schemes and numbering conventions. The alternation of blue and beige backgrounds, alongside the use of Roman and Arabic numerals, signals shifts in perspective, while the black background in chapter 26 symbolizes the father’s disappearance and death (Ramos and Navas, 2016, 121–122).

In *Irmão Lobo*, alongside other musical references present in both verbal and visual elements – such as Nirvana, Shakira, Britney Spears, and Linkin Park – one significant element is the mention of songs by

Johnny Cash (1932–2003), an indispensable figure in the American musical landscape. He is renowned not only for the wide range of musical styles he embraced – spanning, among other genres, country, folk, and rockabilly – but also for his striking personality, at once defiant and indomitable, yet above all deeply immersed in numerous contradictions. Notably, Cash also produced “records within a wide variety of musical genres, ranging from country and rockabilly to blues and gospel” (Askerøi, 2017, 65). Moreover, “Cash and the Tennessee Two gradually developed a distinct sound: the boom-chicka-boom sound. (...) there was something new and different about the sound of this trio” (Askerøi, 2017, 65).

References to Cash in the work appear from the very epigraph, which quotes the lyrics of “Ring of Fire,” and also, for example, when the father sings “Country Trash,” songs that oscillate between themes of love and social commentary. In the epigraph, an excerpt from “Ring of Fire” reads: “The taste of love is sweet / When hearts like ours meet / I fell for you like a child / Oh, but the fire went wild.” By the end of the novel, readers are encouraged to draw intertextual (Kristeva, 1969) connections between the lyrics of this song and the narrative, as the father dies in a fire during a road trip with his child while attempting to rescue another family, in circumstances that remain unclear.

Another significant reference to Cash appears during the family’s road trip to the old family house, when the father sings “his music,” “Country Trash”: “Let the thunder roll and the lightning flash, I’m doing alright for a [sic] country trash...” (Almeida, 2013, 33). This musical reference resonates thematically with the family’s struggles and fragmentation amid economic and social hardship. The father unsuccessfully attempts several ways of providing for the family, including managing a greenhouse (Almeida, 2013, 70) and offering his labor on a family farm (Almeida, 2013, 17). He expresses frustration with “this country that doesn’t move on” (Almeida, 2013, 17) and seeks to resolve the family’s financial difficulties by relocating to an old house in the countryside to live off the land (Almeida, 2013, 95).

Another important aspect of the narrative is the complexity of the father’s character, who is far from a linear figure. If the family members are imagined as islands, the child describes her father as the “most unstable” one: on this island, “in one day, it can be all the seasons”; some areas are “difficult to access but they can be magical landscapes”; “unfortunately, the presence of active volcanoes threatens this patrimony” (Almeida, 2012, 111); and “due to the high explosive index

it is possible that this island will end up sinking into the sea” (Almeida, 2012, 111–112). He is also depicted as deeply emotional: at the conclusion of the road trip with his child, he weeps upon discovering that the family home is in ruins (Almeida, 2013, 99), thereby revealing himself as both a dreamer and a vulnerable individual. Although he may lack the capacity to secure his own well-being or that of his family, the narrative explores his contradictions and ambiguities, culminating in his death in a fire while, apparently, courageously attempting to rescue another family (Almeida, 2013, 220–221).

Within this narrative, the character of the father engages in a subtle dialogue with traits associated with Johnny Cash, with discreet allusions evident when a friend calls him Johnny (his given name being João Miguel) (Almeida, 2013, 40, 47–48). Both the father and Cash are defined by the tension arising from contradictory forces – courage and vulnerability, light and shadow, rebellion and convention. The father oscillates between selfishness and bravery, between a luminous and a darker side, defying stereotypical expectations in a manner reminiscent of Cash, who has been described as a “saint and sinner, family man and rambler” (Edwards, 2009, 13). Edwards (2009, 13) emphasizes that Cash’s identity is shaped not by the reconciliation of contradictions, but by the continued coexistence of opposing traits, which are actively developed and held in tension, giving rise to a complex artistic identity. This description of Cash similarly applies to the father, who, in the eyes of his young child, can embody both Black Elk and Ice Man – the first representing a “protector father, loyal and warm,” and the second “the cold, distant and aggressive one” (Ramos and Navas, 2016, 124). The narrative further subverts traditional masculine and paternal ideals: familial strength is concentrated in the female sphere, while vulnerability is associated with the male. The mother, described as “a force of nature” (Almeida, 2013, 51), sustains the family through multiple jobs. The father acknowledges her centrality, attributing to her “the miracle of the multiplication of bread” (Almeida, 2013, 51).

In *Irmão Lobo*, music functions not only as a thematic element but also as a tool for character construction. The artistic identity associated with the personality traits of the musician known as Cash allows for the establishment of points of contact, functioning almost as a mirror in which the character of the father in this story – equally complex, dual, and full of contradictions – is reflected. References to Johnny Cash – including his artistic profile, musical sonorities, and lyrics – create a distinctive soundscape within the narrative, which dialogues with thematic concerns while simultaneously shaping the psychological

depth of the father's character. The father listens to "his music" (Almeida, 2013, 33), suggesting that Cash's work forms part of his own identity. Although he is an adult, Frith's observation remains pertinent: "the most significant pop songs for all generations (not just for rock generations) are those they heard as adolescents" (Frith, 2016, 267). Consequently, this musical reference contributes both to the development of narrative themes and to the psychological complexity of the father.

### **2.3. How to be multiple in literature and music**

Joana Estrela's *Pardalita* is a hybrid, multimodal and graphic novel that combines prose, poetic passages, diary entries, and visual storytelling. The work employs a variety of illustrative techniques, from full-page drawings to cartoon panels, creating a richly layered narrative that integrates dramatic, poetic, and narrative modes. The story follows a teenage girl dealing with friendship and family life, as she falls in love with a female friend, Pardalita.

Although *Pardalita* contains other intermedial references (Rajewsky, 2005), the musical reference to António Variações (1944–1984) is of particular significance. Several considerations could be made regarding António Variações, an indispensable figure in the Portuguese artistic and musical landscape who is remarkable from various perspectives: from the standpoint of the hybridity that characterizes his music, combining different sonorities and bridging past and future; and from the perspective of his artistic performance, which challenges gender norms and conventions, while affirming sexual and identity liberation and emancipation. Variações' work is characterized by extensive hybridization, combining tradition and innovation, the familiar and the experimental, while foregrounding sexual emancipation and self-affirmation. Indeed,

Variações emerges as one of the most important figures in the history of Portuguese music because of the discourse on identity and social condition present in his work and life, always navigating between past and future, tradition and modernity, local and global, echoing Pessoa's expression: "Be plural like the universe" (Guerra, 2017, n.p.).

Beyond his "new musicality," Variações was also a "promoter of a queer identity in Portugal" (Guerra, 2017, s/p). Drawing on the work of Featherstone and Turner (1995), Guerra (2007) emphasizes that:

This disruptive sense of the song is reinforced through the equally disruptive aesthetics and bodily performances of (...) Variações, who, with his homoerotic charge (...) subverts the notion of gender, considering it far from being stable and natural, through performative acts (...) took to the point of calling into question, through their subversive performances, the division between man/woman. (Guerra, 2017, n.p.)

Variações' artistic persona and performative practices therefore challenge normative conceptions of gender, emphasizing fluidity and demonstrating art's capacity to destabilize entrenched social conventions. António Variações was, in fact, the author of disruptive crossovers between tradition and innovation, reshaping established conventions. As Guerra (2017, n.p.) observes, and as Variações himself explained, even the choice of his artistic name – Variações, which can be freely translated into English as Variations – reflects his pursuit of mixing, hybridization, and liminal spaces. In the artist's own words:

Variações [Variations, as noted above, in a free translation] is an extremely elastic word, Portuguese, and that doesn't leave me limited to a musical area. It's the right name to escape routine, it's a name that doesn't enslave me and doesn't leave me committed to labels, which for me is excellent. (Abreu, 2009, 66)

This notion resonates with the teenage protagonist of *Pardalita*, who, at a certain moment while dressing, observes that nothing fits her – or, as she adds, that she herself does not fit (Estrela, 2021, s/p). Variações' artistic output recreates “composite representations of aesthetic, cultural, artistic, social and spatial hybridisms (and antagonisms)” (Guerra, 2017, n.p.). Within this context, it is important to emphasize “the eclecticism and stylistic transience of [Variações'] music, along with the imagery as a representation of his identity – queer, somewhere between kitsch and camp,” which “constitute fundamental elements of that demarcation and dialogue between tradition and modernity” (Guerra, 2017, n.p.). This logic of hybridity finds an echo in the graphic novel's own visual and narrative construction, for example in the rehearsal space described as follows: “It's clear that the furniture is second-hand and comes from completely different places. It's a strange but pleasant combination” (Estrela, 2021, n.p.).

By the end of the book, the characters perform Variações' “Erva Daninha a Alastrar” (freely translated as “Weed Run Wild.”) This song –

the narrative includes excerpts of the lyrics – is about something that grows uncontrollably, something untamed and untreated, and which finds resonance in the transformation experienced by the protagonist, in her discovery of being in love with a female friend, as well as of her own identity. Considering that “it is the highly individual nature of the relationship between a teenager and their music that marks it as an important part of the identity formation process” and that “the particular type of music preferred by a young person is related to their history and their future, their self-perception, and their internal emotional state” (McFerran, 2012, 105), a clear dialogue emerges between the reference to *Variações* and the protagonist(s) of this YA novel. Indeed, “[t]eenagers use music (...) to regulate and alter their moods, establish and consolidate both core and tribal identities, (...) generate courage for new endeavours, affirm their values and beliefs” (Coats, 2012, 111). The broad themes explored in the narrative, including emancipation, freedom, and fluid identities, resonate closely with both the music and biography of *Variações*.

The dialogue between music and narrative extends beyond thematic concerns to formal considerations: both *Variações*’ work and *Pardalita* are structured through multiplicity, experimentation, and the convergence of diverse artistic procedures. Indeed, just as *Variações*’ artistic universe is hybrid and draws on diverse sources, the narrative of *Pardalita* is constructed in a hybrid and multimodal manner, combining different literary modes, techniques, and artistic languages. In this context, music reinforces the narrative’s engagement with multiplicity, artistic hybridism and identity formation.

### **3. Conclusion**

In these contemporary Portuguese YA novels, musical references are not simply decorative soundtracks; rather, they actively participate in the construction of meaning and interpretation, engaging in dialogue with characters, themes, and narrative form. Thus, attentive engagement with all the elements integrated into the book and its narrative can enhance the depth and quality of the reading experience, and musical references such as those discussed here should not be an exception, as they can indeed enable readers to explore the narrative more profoundly, immersing themselves in its thematic concerns, characters, and overall universe.

If “music can influence key aspects of adolescent development – for instance, aesthetics; identity; socialization; emotion regulation and

coping; personality and motivation; gender roles; and positive youth development” (Miranda, 2013, 18), then it warrants careful consideration when analyzing themes, characters, and motivations in YA narratives. This article aims to stress the importance of paying attention to musical references in YA narratives, because they can serve as significant vehicles of meaning.

All three narratives incorporate musical references to artists who challenged conventions and experimented with form to create innovative sonorities, and these ideas resonate with the protagonists’ own ontological explorations. In *O Caderno Vermelho da Rapariga Karateca*, for instance, the teenager resists gender norms and literary form, asserting that she is not a baby girl and that her notebook is not a diary, while seeking to transform both herself and the notebook into other forms or beings. In this context, the reference to João Gilberto – an artist who transformed musical form – becomes significant. Here, music is associated with processes of formal, artistic, and ontological transformation, reinforcing the protagonist’s exploration of alternative modes of being and expression.

Regarding *Pardalita*, it should be emphasized that this graphic novel is strongly characterized by multimodality and hybridity, pushing artistic boundaries through the blending of diverse artistic languages and literary procedures. Thus, in a narrative about a young girl’s love for her female friend, the reference to António Variações – an artist associated with sexual emancipation and musical hybridity – becomes especially meaningful. Here, music relates to free self-discovery, expression, affirmation, and hybridity, aligning with the idea that, within the juvenile universe, “music becomes an important code for social and individual identity formation” (Coats, 2012, 112) and can play a role “in creating and sustaining an identity” (Coats, 2012, 119).

In this sense, musical references contribute to the psychological construction of characters. This is particularly evident in *Irmão Lobo*, where, although the father is not a teenager, he listens to “his music” (Almeida, 2013, 33), indicating that these are not ephemeral songs of the moment but music that has become part of his identity. As Frith observes,

people’s heaviest personal investment in popular music is when they are teenagers and young adults – music then ties into a particular kind of emotional turbulence, when issues of individual identity and social place (...) are at a premium. (Frith, 2016, 266–267)

Moreover, despite being an adult, this father does not conform to conventional age-based or parental roles, once again subverting normative models and stereotypes.

To conclude, by evoking João Gilberto, the creator of a singular bossa nova style; Johnny Cash, propelled by the rhythm of the boom-chicka-boom sound; and António Variações, whose work embodies disruptive crossovers between tradition and innovation, these narratives establish productive intersections between literature and music, enriching the reading experience and underscoring the active role of music – including lyrics – in meaning-making. Beyond engaging with the works' multimodal and hybrid structures, these musical references create distinctive soundscapes that resonate with the novels' themes, formal strategies, and the characters' explorations of identity.

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#### DIALOGOS ENTRE LITERATURA E MUSICA EM ROMANCES JUVENIS PORTUGUESES CONTEMPORANEOS

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar o papel que certas referências musicais têm nos universos narrativos de três romances juvenis, contemporâneos e portugueses. As obras em análise, publicadas pela editora Planeta Tangerina, são *O Caderno Vermelho da Rapariga Karateca* (2012), *Irmão Lobo* (2013) e *Pardalita* (2021). Neste sentido, este estudo procura determinar se as referências a João Gilberto, Johnny Cash e António Variações têm uma função meramente decorativa ou se, pelo contrário, desempenham um papel nas narrativas, dialogando com personagens e temas. Para tal, colocou-se a seguinte questão: como é que as referências musicais, incluindo as letras e a identidade artística e até biográfica dos músicos em causa, contribuem para as narrativas juvenis selecionadas, em termos de construção de significado, profundidade temática e desenvolvimento e caracterização das personagens? Adotando uma metodologia qualitativa baseada na leitura das obras, procedeu-se à identificação das referências musicais mais relevantes, verificando-se, também, os contextos biográficos e artísticos dos músicos, procurando relacionar esses elementos com as narrativas e com algumas reflexões teóricas sobre o papel da música na adolescência. Uma das principais contribuições deste artigo é a de procurar problematizar o estatuto das referências musicais, percebendo de que forma podem participar ativamente na construção de significado e na expansão da experiência leitora, em vez de

exercer uma função apenas decorativa. A análise mostrou que, nestes três romances juvenis, as referências musicais podem ser elementos que intensificam a caracterização e a procura ontológica das personagens, reforçando, ainda, a complexidade temática e expandindo a experiência interpretativa do leitor.

**Keywords:** Literatura juvenil, adolescência, música, canções