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## MY SWEET ORANGE TREE, KOREA, AND THE RELATIONAL IMAGINATION<sup>1</sup>

*O MEU PÉ DE LARANJA LIMA, COREIA E A IMAGINAÇÃO RELACIONAL*

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**Abstract:** *In this essay, I ponder the startling popularity of the José Mauro de Vasconcelos novel *My Sweet Orange Tree in Korea*, first through a historical and political lens then through a cultural one focused on relationality—understood in the sense of Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. Certainly, similarities between Brazil and Korea during their authoritarian years can potentially help explain the work’s initial popularity in Korea, where it remains far and away the most intimately emmeshed work in the country translated from Portuguese. In order to account for its continued prestige in the country over forty years after it was initially translated to Korean, however, I consider it in light of what I posit as a stubborn insistence on relationality and the imagination fundamental to Korean culture in the face of less obvious forms of repression, rigid social stratification, and alienation throughout the country’s long history.*

**Keywords:** *Brazilian literature in Korea. Relational philosophy. Authoritarian regime. Children’s literature*

**Resumo:** Neste ensaio, pondero sobre a surpreendente popularidade do romance de José Mauro de Vasconcelos, *Minha Doce Laranjeira na Coreia*, primeiro por uma lente histórica e política, depois por uma cultural focada na relacionalidade - entendida no sentido da filosofia de diálogo de Martin Buber. Certamente, as semelhanças entre o Brasil e a Coreia durante seus anos autoritários podem potencialmente ajudar a explicar a popularidade inicial da obra na Coreia, onde permanece de longe a obra mais intimamente incorporada no país traduzida do português. Para dar conta de seu prestígio continuado no país mais de quarenta anos depois de ter sido inicialmente traduzido para o coreano, no entanto, considero-o à luz do que chamo de uma insistência teimosa do relacional e da imaginação, fundamentais para a cultura coreana em face de formas menos óbvias de repressão, estratificação social rígida e alienação ao longo da longa história do país.

**Palavras-chave:** *Literatura brasileira na Coreia. Filosofia relacional. Regime autoritário. Literatura infantil.*

<sup>1</sup> An shortened version of this essay was presented at the 2020 Busan International Literature Festival, along with its Korean translation, both of which can be found in the event’s commemorative volume.

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“If someone loves a flower, of which just one single blossom grows in all the millions and millions of stars, it is enough to make him happy just to look at the stars. He can say to himself, ‘Somewhere, my flower is there. ’But if the sheep eats the flower, in one moment all his stars will be darkened. And you think that is not important!”

—Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

When I first came to Korea in the summer of 2014 to teach Brazilian literary and cultural studies, I had never paid much attention to the bittersweet, semi-autobiographical novel *My Sweet Orange Tree*, written by José Mauro de Vasconcelos (1920-1984). I was delighted to find among my new students and colleagues so many passionate readers of the book, first published in Portuguese in Brazil in 1968. Even so, I remained hesitant to read what was generally considered a work of children’s fiction. Instead, I pressed on in what I viewed as more critical, pragmatic research into problems of systemic social exclusion and violence in Brazil’s music, film, and fiction, presuming—wrongly—that Vasconcelos’ short novel had little to say of consequence.

At times, my mind was on Rio de Janeiro’s criminal factions and everyday lives of the residents of the city’s low-income communities, especially the favelas—where I had lived for several years as a researcher and community educator. At others, I thought about social movements aimed at consciousness-raising, social justice, global warming, or the deforestation of Brazilian Amazonia, where my wife had grown up and our family had been living before moving to Seoul. At still others, my thoughts were on subjects like the international relations between Brazil, Korea, and my home country, the United States. Call me an academic snob. Or, as Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince did with the pilot narrator of that tale, call me a “grown-up.” Perhaps, like that pilot, I was too busy fixing my airplane in the desert and concerning myself with other “matters of consequence” to perceive the “warfare between sheep and roses”—or many of the different landscapes of imagination and love around me.<sup>3</sup>

With so many pressing affairs at hand, how could I possibly find the time to stop and eavesdrop on five-year-old Zezé as he talked to his imaginary friend, the citrus tree? When my new friends eventually convinced me to read *My Sweet Orange Tree*, however, I was in store for some major surprises. Besides the astounding following of the book in Korea, I found a compelling connection between love, imagination, and life in the novel that makes for what I consider to be a relational impulse at its core. In an ironic turning of the tables, it had taken moving to Korea for me

<sup>3</sup> Like the quote at the top of this essay, these phrases are from chapter seven of *The Little Prince* (SAINT-EXUPÉRY, 1943, pp. 16-19).

to come across this socially charged yet uniquely intimate, honest, sensitive, and emotionally impacting work of Brazilian fiction. Today, I defend it as a treasure of world literature—children’s or otherwise.

In the end, I cannot speak definitively for Korean readers, many of whom are much younger than me besides, as to why the work holds so much resonance for them. After chances to discuss the work with students in and out of class over the years, however, I can offer one or two thoughts. For openers, I agree with José Carvalho Vanzelli and Ji Hyun Park that initially the Korean public’s fascination with the work likely came from taking it as a metaphor for their own country during its authoritarian years of the seventies and eighties. As other have pointed out regarding the Brazilian context, they point to the work’s status as a children’s novel as a strategy on the part of its author to critique Brazilian society while avoiding censorship under the repressive authoritarian regime of the time (CRUZ 2007, pp. 38-40). Despite the appeal of such explanations, however, I believe the work’s enduring popularity in Korea from the 80s until today is rooted in historical and cultural workings running even deeper than period politics.<sup>4</sup>

But first, back to surprise number one. Who would have guessed *My Sweet Orange Tree* would be far and away the most talked about and best-loved work of Brazilian fiction in Korea? Indeed, Vanzelli and Park state that “In South Korea, meanwhile, Vasconcelos enjoys unparalleled prestige.”<sup>5</sup> They go on to add that “... *My Sweet Orange Tree* is not only a popular book, but one can say it is the work in Portuguese with the most intimate relationship with South Korea.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many Korean readers report having read the short book more than once, usually in translation as *Nauí Raimorenjinamu* (나의 라임오렌지나무), but sometimes in English or the original Portuguese, *Meu Pé de Laranja Lima*. Many recognize it as their all-time favorite book, besides—in any language. Or the one that has had the most significant impact on them (KIM, 2016, pp. 11-14). Besides being the most famous Brazilian book in Korea, *My Sweet Orange Tree* is far better known in the country than anywhere outside, perhaps even including Brazil today.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, by contrast, it has been woefully ignored, despite the early initial publication of the work into English in 1970.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Vanzelli and Park make this point in their pioneering essay of 2017, pp. 55-59.

<sup>5</sup> “Na Coreia do Sul, entretanto, Vasconcelos desfrutava de um prestígio ímpar” (VANZELLI and PARK, 2017, p. 55). All translations are my own.

<sup>6</sup> “...O Meu Pé de Laranja Lima não é apenas um livro popular, mas pode-se dizer que é a obra em língua portuguesa que tem relação mais íntima com a Coreia do Sul” (VANZELLI and PARK, 2017, p. 59).

<sup>7</sup> In a *TV Brasil* spot celebrating the fifty-year mark for *My Sweet Orange Tree* publication, Executive Editor Leila Bortolazzi Balistreri, of the Melhoramentos Publishing House, briefly explains the special significance of the work in Korea and how over time it has become even more widely read there than in Brazil (QUINES, 2018, 2:05-2:16).

<sup>8</sup> An English-language version of the book was reissued in 2019, from the US-based Candlewick Press, specializing in children’s and young adults’ literature.

In the Korean context, *My Sweet Orange Tree* beats out other newer Brazilian best-sellers like Paulo Lins' narco-gang war novel *Cidade de Deus (City of God)*, from 1997, and even Paulo Coelho's New Age classic *O Alquimista (The Alchemist)*, from 1988.<sup>9</sup> It sells better than the more colorful, lyrical and often humorous titles like *Dona Flor e Seus Dois Maridos (Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands)*, by Jorge Amado—Brazil's longtime best-selling author before Paulo Coelho. It has garnished more attention in Korea than more experimental and cerebral works like the short stories and novels of Machado de Assis, of the late 19th century. Or twentieth-century greats like João Guimarães Rosa or Clarice Lispector—who was born in the same year as Vasconcelos.<sup>10</sup>

At this point, *My Sweet Orange Tree* has endured in its mega-popularity in Korea for over four decades. It was first translated into Korean 1979 by Park Dong Won in a rough, somewhat candy-coated, unofficial version that emphasized the workings of the imagination of its main character and narrator, five-year-old Zezé.<sup>11</sup> It was published by the Gwang-Min Publishing Company, later closed down by the government, allegedly for attempting to indoctrinate workers (VANZELLI and PARK, 2017, p. 58). In 1986, famed cartoonist Lee Hui Jae put out the first *manhwa*-style comic book version of the book, versions of which have remained popular ever since. Shortly afterward, in 1989, director Lee Sae Ryong loosely adapted the story to the Korean screen under the title *My Friend Zezé*, or *Ne Chingu Jyejyae* (네 친구 제제) (LEE, 1989). It wasn't until relatively recently, however, that definitive, authorized translations emerged.<sup>12</sup> In recent years, Vasconcelos's novel has sometimes been adopted as part of the reading curriculum for elementary school (KYOBO, 2019, QUINES, 2018). The work's theme and title have inspired various examples of popular music, as well, on more than one occasion. One of many cases readily accessible on the Internet, first recorded in 2008, is women's duo LalaSweet's indie ballad for piano, guitar, and voice, "My Old Orange Tree," or *Nau Nalgeun Orenji Namu* (나의 낡은 오렌지 나무). The song later appeared as a bonus track on their aptly titled album, *Bittersweet*, from 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Paulo Coelho is one of the most widely read best-selling authors of all-time anywhere, with numerous monster-sized hit books. He is the number one selling author of books written in Portuguese and is very well-known in Korea (VANZELLI and PARK, 2017, pp. 51-53).

<sup>10</sup> According to Vanzelli and Park, the three most widely translated authors of the Portuguese language in Korea are the worldwide phenomenon Paulo Coelho, Nobel winner José Saramago and José Mauro de Vasconcelos (VANZELLI and PARK, 2017, p. 51).

<sup>11</sup> Such an assessment appears under the entry for the Korean language title of the work on Namuwiki (Namuwiki).

<sup>12</sup> Explaining the extraordinary success of the novel in Korea, Executive Editor Leila Bortolazzi Balistreri, of the Melhoramentos Publishing House, mentions that before Korea's becoming party to the Apostille Convention in 2007 many pirated versions of the novel thrived there (QUINES, 2018, 2:05-2:16).



In late 2015, another song inspired by the novel, titled merely “Zezé,” generated significant controversy in the career of IU (Jieun Kim), one of Korea’s most ubiquitous pop stars. The then twenty-two-year-old singer-songwriter turned actress got herself in hot water when she put out the song on her self-composed EP, *Chat-Shire*. The Korean public—and even some international critics—found the playful sexuality of a song about the five-year-old main character and narrator, Zezé, disturbing (FLOOD, 2015). By reinterpreting him as playfully ambiguous and “sexy,” IU provoked outrage among many fans. The novel’s Korean publisher and some advocates for victims of the sexual exploitation of children in the country also complained. Critics also pointed to the artist’s rendition of Zezé included on the album’s cover, in which he can be seen wearing fishnet stockings as he reclines smiling under an orange tree. In the wake of the controversy, IU quickly offered an extensive apology. Ironically, the beloved work experienced a significant bump in sales in Korea, where, to date, an estimated four million copies of the novel have been sold (KYOBO, 2019).

The next thing that surprised me upon encountering *My Sweet Orange Tree* in Korea is that it is so often classified as children’s literature. Frequently, with fifth and sixth graders in mind, to boot. By way of contrast, in Brazil, the work is often classified as *infantojuvenil*, or “children’s and adolescent literature.” In the US, the new 2019 Candlewick Edition classifies it as young adult fiction, which is perhaps a better fit than children’s fiction.<sup>13</sup> When I first read the work, with its portrayal of systemic racism and rigid class hierarchies, religious and existential questioning, depression, child labor, neglect, and physical abuse, suicide and death, I had trouble grasping how it could be categorized as a book for children. True, this reaction may have been partly due to my limited understanding of that category of fiction. Now that my son is in the sixth grade, I realize that kids his age often read books with serious themes, both at home and in school. Still, without a doubt, Vasconcelos’ novel certainly was a pioneer in bringing children’s literature to the exploration of serious social problems. The upshot is that while it’s dark and deep, it’s still tender and encouraging, making it open to multiple readings and interpretations in the way of other great works of fiction. Additionally, the work simultaneously functions on levels for children and young-minded readers while offering other vistas to adult readers from eighteen to ninety-three. Of course, with Vanzelli, Park and Cruz, mentioned above, it’s worth bearing in mind that children’s literature under authoritarian regimes has often served as an outlet for political and societal critique.

<sup>13</sup> Not too much should be made of such differences, however. These national categories overlap a bit, and one begins where the other ends, especially at the twelve-year-old mark of late elementary school and early middle school.

Now for a final surprise. *My Sweet Orange Tree* is not really about a boy and an orange tree. More precisely, perhaps, I should say that it is about much more than a boy and an orange tree. Or maybe that the orange tree of the book's title takes up relatively few pages. On the cover of nearly every edition I've seen anywhere is an image of protagonist Zezé—who is also the book's narrator and the younger version of the author—under the sweet orange tree of its title. The tree is his imaginary best friend, “Minguinho,” whom the small boy creates as a means of coping with his family's poverty, his father's alcoholic drinking, his mother's absence, and the systematic neglect and child abuse he faces in his troublesome daily life. Indeed, Minguinho—also called “Xururuca” by Zezé—is crucial to the novel, and Zezé's powers of imagination are beautiful and intriguing. In the literal sense, however, the book contains far less of their relationship than one might expect from the title and typical cover art of the work or the synopses publishers typically include on its back cover or jacket.

Instead, the make-believe friendship of Zezé with his orange tree is essentially more of a symbolic, emotional primer for a much deeper relationship at the heart of the novel. In the end, *My Sweet Orange Tree* is really about Zezé's friendship with another main character, Manuel Valadares, whom he calls “Portuga.” The man is an older immigrant from Portugal and a father figure with whom the child forms a redemptive, life-changing, yet tragic friendship. When it comes to book covers and other marketing material, Portuga also sometimes appears, though as more of a background figure. Prioritizing the tree is understandable from a marketing point of view, but it does give the inaccurate impression that Portuga is of lesser importance in the book.

Interestingly, Brazilian director Marcos Bernstein's 2012 film adaptation, *Meu Pé de Laranja Lima*, foregrounds Portuga with Zezé in its poster art. In some versions of the movie's poster, Portuga is seated laughing with Zezé under an orange tree—albeit in a scene that does not take place in the book. In others, their faces can be seen shining through a transparent cutout in the tree's shape. Either way, credit should be given the film for its more nuanced approach at marketing the story, along with the few other odd book publishers that have taken a similar tack in showcasing Portuga.

## FRIEND AND FATHER

Set in Bangu, a working-class neighborhood in the Western Zone of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the 1920s, the novel recounts the story of Zezé as he uses his imagination to cope with poverty, his father's drinking and the terrible child abuse the boy faces. His mother, who must support the family

of eight by herself, is unavailable to provide much intimacy or emotional support for her children. Zezé is close with three of his relatives, including his teenage sister Glória, a surrogate mother to him, his little brother, Luís—or “Rei Luís” (“King Louis”)—and his uncle, Edmundo. Still, Zezé is mostly ignored or harshly criticized for his mischievous behavior by the other members of his family, along with their neighbors, and regularly suffers mental and physical abuse. When he finds a skinny, fruitless orange tree poking through the weeds behind his house, Zezé transforms it into Minguinho, a make-believe confidant and constant companion to both his pretend adventures and his mischievous real-world pranks.

Not long afterward, the boy forms a friendship with a flesh and blood person, Portuga, whom Zezé ends up coming to cherish much more. The two confide in one another while they take rides in Portuga’s much-coveted car and go fishing, and as Portuga gives the boy marbles and Western movie-style cowboy trading cards. Sadly, just as the small boy finally learns how to truly love and be loved, the older man suddenly dies when his car is struck by a train. Around the same time, a city construction project cuts down Minguinho, the orange tree. For days afterward, a delirious Zezé is confined to his bed in a state of shock that nearly claims his life. Family members, who know nothing of the boy’s recent friendship with Portuga, assume Zezé’s misery is from the loss of his fruit tree. When his father gets a new job, the family is finally set to stabilize materially. Zezé realizes, though, that his father’s prior episodes abusing him have forever emotionally separated him from his biological father. Instead, Portuga’s love has made the kindly Portuguese immigrant his true friend and father.

## MEU PÉ DE LARANAJA LIMA IN BRAZIL

José Mauro de Vasconcelos published *My Sweet Orange Tree* in 1968, during the most repressive phase of the military dictatorship in his native Brazil. Yes, its local flavor and neo-realist bent place it in step with other great works of Brazilian literature of Vasconcelos day. The work is comparable to the Northeastern regionalism of the thirties and forties by memorialists like Raquel de Queirós, Amando Fontes, Graciliano Ramos, and Jorge Amado. José Lins do Rego was one of Vasconcelos’ favorite authors. The novel conveys something, too, of João Cabral de Melo Neto’s sorrowful, yet spiritualized epic poem of backlands violence and poverty, *Morte e Vida Severina*, from 1955 (*Death and Life of a Severino*). One can say the same in comparison with Ariano Suassuna’s Catholic comic morality play, *Auto da Compadecida* (*A Dog’s Will*), from that same year.

It also leans toward that same spirit of consciousness-raising in other areas of Brazilian society of the 1960s, like Cinema Novo, Liberation Theology, and the revolutionary critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Astoundingly, it manages to do so while still approaching something of the psychological realism of Clarice Lispector, too, one of the great novelists and writers of short stories of modern world literature. Though far less experimental in form and more colloquially in tone, Vasconcelos' work similarly involved the tensions and contradictions of the human need for intimacy and our internal suffering and epiphanies in scenes of everyday life. In this way, Vasconcelos's diminutive novel straddled the two major currents of Brazilian intellectual life of his day. It is introspective, intimate, and personal side, on the one hand—foregrounding the more philosophical and psychological dimensions of art. On the other, it is political and socially charged in ways that emphasize awareness and the awakening of revolutionary consciousness.

Perhaps the ambiguous complexity of José Mauro de Vasconcelos' career as a writer, compared to the vast majority of the authors and cultural icons of his day, was due in part from his unusually diverse personal trajectory. For starters, among Brazilian intellectuals of his day, he was relatively unique in his working-class origins. Indeed, Zezé is the author as a child. The name Zezé is a diminutive for José, like Joe and Joey for Joseph, in English. Throughout his life, the author followed an eclectic and varied path that allowed him to live and work in several areas of Brazil in career paths associated with multiple social classes. At times he was a commercial fisherman. At others, he loaded bananas. For a while, he was a student at medical school, a track he abandoned after two years. He worked as a boxing trainer, a waiter, elementary school teacher, occasional model, plastic artist, and actor. And a best-selling author. His works, which numbered some twenty-two novels, were marked by a regionalist inflection and a straightforward style of storytelling that made them accessible to the public. However, the Brazilian literary establishment mostly disdained them (*O Liberal*, 2018). José Mauro de Vasconcelos, who was never honored with admission into the Brazilian Academy of Letters, has often been considered a lightweight writer by his intellectual countrymen.

In 1970, Aurélio Teixeira directed the first adaptation of the work to screen, *Meu Pé de Laranja Lima*. It was adapted as a telenovela the same year, by TV Tupi, then again in 1980 and 1998 by the Bandeirantes network. More recently, Marcos Bernstein's updated film version came out in 2012. The novel has also been adapted for the theater. Over the years, it is estimated that *My Sweet Orange Tree* has sold some two million copies in Brazil—roughly half its estimated sales in Korea. Currently, the book continues to be a much-loved favorite of the Brazilian public and is often used in



schools, as it is in Korea. This year in Brazil, to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of Vasconcelos' birth, the publishing house Melhoramentos is reissuing new editions of his complete works. One can only hope it will generate greater interest in the work in the country and greater scholarly recognition.

## IMAGINING RELATIONALLY

Whether in Brazil, Korea, or anywhere else, it's certainly possible to interpret *My Sweet Orange Tree* view as a bleak and depressing work of fiction, especially for a so-called children's novel. Indeed, Vasconcelos' original 1968 subtitle was "A Story of a Little Boy Who One Day Discovered Pain..." Indeed, it eschews predictable storylines, clichés, and pat answers for life's toughest questions—such as those often associated with literature for younger children. For me, however, even though the novel deals with painful themes, in the end, the story of Zezé and his friend Portuga remains one of healing and hope. The boy's redemptive relationship with his older friend turns out to be the incarnation of the love and intimacy he craved with his parents and acted out with Minguinho, allowing for even greater emotional healing, self-discovery, and growth. Yes, the boy "discovers pain," as the work's subtitle clearly states. But the ellipsis following the word pain—the dot-dot-dot—opens up infinite possibilities for what has been left to say, feel, and live in the boy's story. Though Zezé discovers pain, through his relational imagination, he also finds love.

When it comes to his creative powers, Zezé's imagination is not the sort that leads to isolation or objectification of the world and others around him. Though his imaginary world provides him with respite and refuge from his travails, it is not mere escapist fantasy. At its core is a relational posture enabling the small child to be in the world and with other people in a spirit of connection, togetherness, presence, love, and life. Whenever Zezé plays in the novel, he turns what others might see as objects into people and friends—like Minguinho, the orange tree, or the backyard bat the boy names "Luciano." Zezé's powers of imagination are unusually augmented by his suffering, on the one hand, and his sensitivity and rare intelligence, on the other—as a gifted child who taught himself to read (VASCONCELOS, 2019, pp. 16-17).

Zezé's tremendous sensitivity gives him a decidedly relational soul. He does not use his creative powers to fantasize in some object-driven way or to imagine power, recognition, and control, as do many of us. Nor does he use them to judge and condemn. Zezé is less interested in soothing himself in solitude than in turning toward others in the fullness of his being. To follow the lead from

Martin Buber, the pioneer of relational philosophy—or the philosophy of dialogue—Zezé seeks to encounter other persons, in “presence,” more than merely to experience things as “content” (BUBER, 2010, p. 110). In this way, Zezé’s relationality allows him to be playful and present, to dialogue with those around him, and be in community lightheartedly.

During the narrative, when his pain and suffering become too intense, Zezé suddenly loses his ability to imagine. Such is because raw imagination, even one as fertile as his, is not enough to protect oneself from the harshest moments of life. Only love can bring it back to him, like in his relationship with Portuga. In Chapter Four of Part Two of the novel, “Two Memorable Beatings,” Zezé’s father hears his small son cheerfully singing an off-color tango about a naked lady. It’s one the boy has learned working with Mr. Ariovaldo, a wandering street merchant who sells sheet music for popular sambas and other songs and with whom Zezé had worked for a while earlier in the novel. Imagining his son is purposely disrespecting him, Zezé’s father begins to beat the child severely while daring him to repeat the suggestive verses. At first, misinterpreting his father’s response as a command, the boy repeats them. When his father yells at him angrily, he keeps repeating the verses as an act of defiance.

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After suffering several full-force blows, the five-year-old explodes at his father, yelling, “Murderer! Just go ahead and kill me! Prison will avenge me!” (VASCONCELOS, 2009, p. 137).<sup>14</sup> His father loses his head even more completely, takes off his belt, and beats his son to a bloody pulp. Zezé’s older sister and surrogate mother, Glória, leaps in and saves her little brother, covering him with her own body and pleading for her father to beat her instead. At the end of the chapter, Zezé tells his mother he wishes he’d never been born. After reassuring her little son that everyone should have been born, she blames him as a victim, telling him that he brought his father’s violence upon himself with his naughty ways.

During his recovery from the extreme beating, Zezé’s powers of imagination recede. He can barely talk, much less play. He does not seek out his orange tree, Minguinho. He instead eventually confides in Portuga his vague plans for taking his own life by throwing himself under the train to Mangaratiba (VASCONCELOS, 2009, p. 145). When he comes to bid farewell to his friends, Zezé tells Portuga that Minguinho is no longer a person to him, but “...just an orange tree that doesn’t even know how to bloom a single flower” (VASCONCELOS, 2009, p. 145).<sup>15</sup> It is only after Portuga has lovingly lifted Zezé back up from the pits of his hellish anguish that the boy begins to imagine and

<sup>14</sup> “Assassino! Mate de uma vez. A cadeia está aí para me vingar.”

<sup>15</sup> “...é uma simples laranjeira que nem sequer sabe dar uma flor.”

play again. Through Portuga's friendship, openness and transparency, through spending time with Zezé, hearing him, seeing him, dreaming with him, and sharing with him, the kindly older man rescues Zezé at his darkest hour.

The two go together to the man's secret fishing spot, where they sit under Portuga's favorite tree, the voiceless but majestic "Rainha Carlota" ("Queen Carlota"). All the while, they make plans for a life together as dearest friends. Only then is Zezé's ability to imagine restored—as part of his newfound ability to truly love, trust someone, and have a relationship. As a result, Zezé is soon back conversing with Minguinho (VASCONCELOS, 2009, pp. 159-163). When Portuga dies, Zezé discovers a new level of emotional hurt far more painful than the poverty, humiliation, and abuse he had suffered earlier. Still, the close relationship with a safe, trustworthy friend and father figure helped him developmentally as a human being. Despite his misery, he walks away with some healing and a higher capacity to connect deeply with others, something he will carry for the rest of his life. He also has hope that he can love and live in the way of Portuga, who is now an essential part of him. Finally, Zezé is capable of truly intimate relationships, with the pain and joy they entail.

## WHY KOREA?

Why is Korea the country with the highest numbers of readers of *My Sweet Orange Tree*, outshining even Vasconcelos' native Brazil in this respect? Why has it had an even more significant impact there than in other Latin American countries, the US or other countries where the book was translated, like Turkey, China, and Japan? For starters, one might consider the sort of similarities between Korea and Brazil in the seventies and eighties when Vasconcelos' novel first began gaining a following in Korea. Early on, in the seventies, there were many similarities between Korea and Brazil. Both experienced authoritarian rule, widespread poverty, the legacies of colonialism, and rigid social hierarchies and stratification. Both were undergoing massive social upheaval as vast portions of the population migrated to urban centers. They were modernizing at breakneck speed. The two countries were allies with the United States and depended heavily upon the United States culturally and politically.<sup>16</sup> In this light, it is easy to understand the argument put forth by Vanzelli and Park that "...in the 80s, Vasconcelos' book was read as a literary metaphor for understanding the period lived in Korea."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For a similar argument, see Kim 2016 (pp. 13-14).

<sup>17</sup> "...nos anos 80, o livro do Vasconcelos foi lido como metáfora literária para se compreender o período vivido na Coreia" (VANZELLI and PARK, 2017, p. 59).

Still, my hunch is that there is some deeper connection between the Korean public and the work, however, one that persists even as Korea has pulled away from Brazil in its economic prosperity. After all, the work's popularity has outlived the similarities between Brazil and South Korea of earlier decades. The anti-authoritarian explanation does little to explain its continuing prestige today in a country greatly changed and prosperous. I suspect that it has something to do with the novel's relational aspect, which I have been calling the relational imagination. Korean society has a relational soul. Korean people generally value relationships highly, often to the point of formalisms and scripted interactions designed to guarantee they are well cultivated and respected. Sometimes, honor and filial piety come into play. Others, there is simply a great tenderness that comes from collective struggle. At the same time, however, there are many impediments to the happy realization of those relationships. Sometimes, these arise from overly rigid implementations of traditional behaviors and hierarchical structures, sexism, class, and ethnic struggles. At others, problems may arise from the acceleration of life, loss of community, and hyper-competitiveness. Or from the dizzyingly rapid process of modernization and urbanization the country has undergone in only a few short generations.

In the end, one mark of great literary works is their openness to multiple interpretations. Or as a Korean graduate student recently told me, "The popularity of *My Sweet Orange Tree* in Korea may be due to the fact that this book is well-written enough to affect many people in various ways."<sup>18</sup> Adding to any historical similarities between Korea and Brazil, or any universal psychological aspects that might attract readers anywhere to the novel, I can't help but compare *My Sweet Orange Tree* with the many Korean television series I've seen over the past years.<sup>19</sup> K-Dramas are full of themes of bullying, childhood traumas, abuse of power, the injustices people suffer, and the alienation they experience from social hierarchies holding them in their places. And their struggles against dehumanizing pressures, competition, sibling rivalries, and overwhelming expectations.

Are Koreans especially vulnerable to forms of abuse in some ways similar to the invisibility suffered by Zezé, especially in their younger years? Do they crave the same sort of relational solutions? Perhaps the diminutive Zezé is a hero to lovers of *My Sweet Orange Tree* in Korea—in his insistence to keep dreaming, hoping, reaching out, and loving. I cannot say for sure. What I can say is that he is a hero for me, one that reminds me that even as we address the wounds of society around

<sup>18</sup> I thank Sulim Kim, doctoral student in Modern Korean History at the University of Hawaii, for this comment in her feedback to me on my thinking on this topic from August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Yun offers a universal psychological explanation (YUN, 2016).



us, we also need to find the sort of restoration within that only comes through being present in the moment with others—and love.

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