The purpose of this paper is to discuss Brazilian author Bernardo Kucinski’s novel *K.* as a case study for integrating Jewish literature in the broader context of contemporary Brazilian literature. This paper explores how the novel reveals the entangled nature of historical experiences in different parts of the world and how it presents a strong case for teaching global history and literature beyond national frameworks.

Bernardo Kucinski’s first novel *K.*¹ (2011) can be understood as a paradigmatic case study for teaching Jewish literature and Brazilian literature alongside each other as a way of challenging identitarian notions of belonging. Jewish literature and Brazilian literature can hardly be understood apart from their relations to a global context — regardless of the specificity of each. Kucinski’s novel is representative of both literatures, making evident the author’s complex historical perspective: the uniqueness of his protagonists’ historical experience illuminates a collective experience. Kucinski is the son of the prominent Yiddish poet Majer Kucinski, who had to flee Poland to Brazil due to his participation in the Marxist-Zionistic party *Poal’ei Tzion* in the 1930s. Bernardo Kucinski’s novel makes use of the factual story of the enforced disappearance² of his sister Ana Rosa Kucinski Silva and her husband Wilson Silva by agents of the civil-military

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¹ A second edition was published in 2012 and appeared also in the shortlists of the greatest book awards of the Portuguese language: *Portugal Telecom* and *Prêmio São Paulo de Literatura*. A third edition was published by Cosac Naify in 2014 slightly altered and without the drawings by Brazilian artist Ênio Squeff. The title was also changed to *K. Relato de uma busca* [“Report of a search”, in a literal translation]. Since 2016 the book has been published together with other works of the author by Companhia das Letras.

² The concept of enforced disappearance is defined in the International Convention for the Protection of Disappearances (United Nations Convention on Human Rights) as “the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law” (Part 1, Article 2). See https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/ced/pages/conventionced.aspx (3 December 2019).
dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985) to reflect on the consequences of the rise of authoritarian regimes in Europe in the 1930s and Brazil in the 1970s.

For present-day students of Brazilian studies, the novel *K.* offers the opportunity to face not only one of the darkest chapters of Brazilian history but also the crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime, allowing students to recognize similarities and differences between these histories and their own. The novel performs a complex and critical shift – perhaps even a dialectical one – from the autobiographical to the collective experience. It does what literature does so well: combining universal and particular standpoints, national and global issues, personal and public practices. The novel issues a clear warning about the importance of not forgetting the past, in the process demonstrating the critical role of literature as a form of social memory and conscience.

The aim of this paper is to contextualize the publication of the novel and problematize its one-sided reception. Secondly, the paper will analyze the literary techniques used to transform the experience of the author’s father and sister into fiction, beyond the (auto)biographical. Finally, it will reflect on the integration of Jewish immigrants in Brazil’s society and propose a sense of belonging that is multiple.

1 Publication and reception in Brazil and abroad

*K.* was published at a time when the Brazilian government and public were seeking to enlighten the violent acts committed by the Brazilian state during the military regime from 1964 until 1985. In November 2011, exactly a month before the release of the first edition of book, Brazil’s Truth Commission was officially opened by President Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016) in a ceremony in Brasília.³ The Commission emerged from various initiatives since the so-called Redemocratização. The slow transition to democracy in the 1980s was a strategy to avoid

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³ Brazil’s Truth Commission, made up of seven members and fourteen assistants, aimed to investigate the systematic violations of human rights perpetrated by the Brazilian state between 1946 and 1988. Launched by President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (2002–2010), the purpose and tasks of the commission changed dramatically until the beginning of the investigations. At first, the Law for the Establishment of a Truth Commission provided only for the investigation of the civil-military dictatorship in Brazil between 1964 and 1985. However, political pressure from the military led to the expansion of the timeframe to include other moments of Brazilian history. Originally the task of the Commission was to identify crimes and their perpetrators, and lead to a legal judgement. In the end, however, the Commission was only allowed to recommend how the government should deal with the outcome of the investigations.
conflict and keep secret the macabre dimensions of the crimes committed under the previous regime. Essential for the supposedly conflict-free transfer of power to the civil president was the amnesty law passed by the military regime in 1979 and upheld by Brazil’s Supreme Court in 2010: it actually consists of a power of mercy, which absolved both opposition and military agents from criminal convictions, shielding military agents from being judged until today. The late reappraisal of the civil-military dictatorship, only 26 years later, is also a symptom of its aftermath in the Brazilian government.⁴

If K.’s reception in Brazil contributed to shaping the public debate on the recent history of the country, its international reception focused on the history of left-wing Jewish exiles in Brazil in the 1930s. The trajectory of Majer Kucinskis, the author’s father, encouraged many international Jewish editors, translators and publishing houses to work together to spread the book.⁵ From this perspective, Brazil’s civil-military dictatorship was not the central issue. However, it is precisely the interrelation between the historical, political and literary contexts that is the key point of the novel. In the book, the character K., whose name gives the book its title, synthesizes this assortment of contexts through his memories and his incessant search for his daughter. He co-founded the Marxist-Zionist party Po’al’ei Tzion in Warsaw in the 1930s, like the actual Majer Kucinski. His daughter A., like the real Ana Rosa Kucinski, was a member of the clandestine revolutionary organization ALN (Ação libertadora nacional) in Brazil in

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⁴ Perry Anderson compares the amnesty laws in Brazil and those in other Latin American states to illustrate how the official discourse has varied since the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2017: “[…] the South American tyrannies of the 1960s and 1970s made an amnesty for their crimes a condition of withdrawing to the barracks. In every other country these were partially or completely annulled once democracy was consolidated. Uniquely, not in Brazil. In every other country, within one to five years a Truth Commission was set up to examine the past. In Brazil it took 23 years for one to be approved by the Chamber of Deputies and no action was taken against the perpetrators it named. Indeed, in 2010 the Supreme Court declared the amnesty law nothing less than a ‘foundation of Brazilian democracy’. Eight years later, in a speech commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the constitution enacted after the generals had left, the president of the Supreme Court, Dias Toffoli […] formally blessed their seizure of power, telling his audience: ‘Today I no longer refer to a coup or a revolution. I refer to the movement of 1964.” Anderson (2019).

⁵ K. relato de uma busca was translated into eight languages: in 2013 by Sue Branford into English, by Sarita Brandt into German under the title K. oder die verschwundene Tochter, by Teresa Matarranz into Spanish under the title Las tres muertes de K., and by Pere Comellas into Catalan under the title Les Tres morts de K. The novel was shortlisted for the International Literature Award in 2014 and for the Impac Dublin Award in 2015. In 2015 the Japanese translation appeared, followed in 2016 by the French translation by Antoine Chareyre and the Italian translation by Vincenzo Barca under the title K. o la figlia desaparecida.
the 1970s. Understanding K.’s and A.’s experiences arising from political activism within an ongoing historical process is a necessary step to grasp one of the richest meanings of the novel: questions of belonging and identity are shaped differently as these characters were involved in a revolutionary struggle.

2 Memory beyond biography

In the literary construction of the novel, these intertwined experiences are likewise inseparable: on the one hand, the polyphony of the narrative voices provides an overview of all those involved in the disappearance of A. On the other hand, the portrayal of K., which is the core of the novel, involves recounting the crimes of the Nazi regime against Jewish population, telling stories of persecution, extermination, flight and immigration as a crucial moment in world history with which Brazilian students should be more closely familiarized. K.’s indefatigable search is the link between the 29 chapters narrated by several voices in the first person and third person, also integrating into the narrative other text forms, such as letters and reports. However, unlike other characters, K.’s story has a unity: it begins with the disappearance of his daughter, it develops in 14 of the 29 chapters, and concludes with the death of K. in the chapter “The meeting at the barracks”. In the plot, while searching for his missing daughter A., K. gains different views of his own past and present: his life in Poland before exile, his arrival in São Paulo and his devotion to Yiddish and then to Hebrew are presented as turning points in the development of his character, binding not only the fragmentary chapters but also different layers of time and experience.

Finally, the form of the novel problematizes its classification as an “autobiographical” or “testimonial” narrative: the narrator did not live the trauma as K. or A., instead he understands himself as a survivor of the loss of K. and A. The book opens with a warning: “Everything in this book is invented, but almost everything has happened”. Thus, the story unfolds in an interval marked by the subtle distinction between “everything” and “almost everything”. The first edition does provide a longer introductory statement explaining how the novel was written. In the following Brazilian editions as well as in many translations, however, this statement was omitted. In the English translation it appears as a warning “To the reader” at the end of the book, signed by “Bernardo Kucinski” (Kucinski 2013, 169). He states that he “let recollections flow from my memory just as they came.” “Story-telling techniques”, “imagination” and “invention” are presented as literary processes to fill the gaps of what he forgot. In the Brazilian edition, one can read from “physical shock” in order to “exhume the rem-
nants of his memory” (Kucinski 2013, 169). At the end, he explains that the figure K. combines the fragmentary whole into a unity, as it appears at the beginning and end of the narrative.

3 Individual and collective history

K. also challenges the way in which history has been told in Brazil and beyond, showing that beyond apparently isolate events the driving force of history is the struggle against oppression. Considering fascism and its manifestations from a wide-range point of view, the character K. establishes the link between his own prison in Poland and the enforced disappearance of his daughter as products of a continuously victory of regressive historical forces. A complex reflection on the enforced disappearance and the Holocaust can be considered a revealing moment about the inherent correlation between two seemingly different historical moments in which authoritarianism has triumphed. This central statement is repeated in different situations of the book, particularly in K.’s search for his missing daughter. Already in the first chapter, “The vortex”, when K. visits the Institute of Legal Medicine, the narrator says: “Even the Nazis, who’d reduced their victims to ashes, had registered the dead […]. There hadn’t been this agony of uncertainty. These had been mass executions, not people vanishing into thin air” (Kucinski 2013, 14).

The overlapping of these temporal levels toward past and future in K.’s story radically transforms his subjective experience in the present. K.’s growing despair is presented chronologically, but at the same time he dives into his memories. Only by looking into the past does the character understand the issues in his present. However, this explicit use of memory as a basis for fiction results in neither testimonial literature nor autobiography, as already mentioned. In the novel, memory has a powerful capacity to reveal a concealed truth. As in Marcel Proust’s Du côté de chez Swann, in K. a single element of reality triggers the involuntary memory, although, unlike in Proust, it provides only a negative epiphany. K. cannot find peace in his remembrance. His memories sharpen the negative correspondences between past and present, as the narrator explains in the following dialogue between K. and a rabbi: “Avrum had admonished him for comparing what happened to his daughter to the Holocaust. Nothing compared with the Holocaust, he’d said. He’d been so angry he’d got up to go. There’s only one Holocaust, it’s unique, absolute evil. K. agreed with this but said that for him, his daughter’s tragedy was a continuation of the Holocaust” (Kucinski 2013, 69).
4 Language and experience

K.’s description of his youth in Warsaw and his arrival in São Paulo, as well his guilty feelings about the enforced disappearance of his daughter, are associated with shifts between Yiddish, Hebrew and Portuguese. An example of this is K.’s conviction that his devotion to Yiddish literature seemed to be an obstacle to his devotion to his family, so that his daughter’s militancy went unnoticed by him. A different interpretation of K.’s belief is to consider his connection with Yiddish not as a passion but as a political decision, even if unconsciously: to cultivate Yiddish in Brazil in the 1930s under the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas was already a kind of resistance. In this sense, the political struggle of his youth had turned into a literary one. Similarly, in a meta-reflection about the sense of continuing to write literature in Yiddish, K. decides to abandon his task as a Yiddish writer and communicate in Hebrew with his grandchildren in Israel, telling them the story of his experience in Brazil, including his daughter’s disappearance. Portuguese appears in this context as the language of daily life, a language that K. learned for surviving but also for hearing the inspiring stories which people tell him while he is working his first job as a door-to-door salesman. The unique combination of the very personal experiences that characterize K. is also an expression of a collective, shared history. Pursuing the topic of language in the whole book can be a useful strategy to address central issues relating to memory and politics.

These narrative strategies to smooth boundaries between fiction and reality build the bridge between the Jewish literature and the Brazilian literature and allow one to recognize the resonances in the experience of living under authoritarian regimes.

5 Multiples senses of belonging

The sense of a lack of belonging has radically marked Brazil since colonial times, and even the tentative attempt to shape some form of “Brazilianness” was controversial in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Maybe for this reason, the kind of challenges for the Jewish immigrants in Brazil was completely different in comparison to other places where the notion of belonging was a condition for participating in social life. The young, urban generation of 1960s Brazil, deeply involved in emancipatory movements, had its origin in different geographical and cultural backgrounds. As in other countries, its life was strongly influenced by the pressures of the Cold War, although with a perception of historical move-
ments different from that of the youth of central European countries. Helping to shape a new vision of the land, the most progressive part of Brazilian youth was committed to modernizing the country in cultural, economic and social fields. The example of the Cuban Revolution (1959) played a central role: it confirmed that a radical change in existing social conditions was not impossible.

The military coup in Brazil in 1964 interrupted this emancipatory process. The political, economic and cultural constraints of the dictatorial regime should have ensured a modified form of dependency in favor of a pact between Brazilian and international elites, clearly evidenced by the prompt recognition of the coup by the US government, and revealing that other interests were involved beyond the widespread discourse of a “red threat of communism and defense of democracy”.

An opposition to the military regime was then formed by students and workers organized in leftist groups, which were soon forced into illegality. Working against any kind of nationalist reductionism, the historian Beatriz Kushnir states that these persons, many of whom had a Jewish background like Ana Rosa Kucinski, “were involved in the premises of socialism, believing in internationalism. So they lived in diversity: they were Jews, they were Brazilians, they belonged to the world” (Kushnir 2015, 31).

This international approach to the fight for emancipation, which is the lesson the reader takes from K.’s story, is a consequence of the diversity of cultural and geographical backgrounds of the young fighters themselves. Their struggle was the reappearance of the many struggles their ancestors had to fight, as Walter Benjamin brilliantly describes in his essay “On the Concept of History”. In the ninth section, for instance, Benjamin refers to the notion of an ongoing violation placed in a historical continuum: “Where a chain of events appears before us, he [the Angel of History] sees one single catastrophe, which keeps pilling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet” (Benjamin 1942, 392). According to the philosopher Michael Löwy, Benjamin questions here Hegel’s concept of history, according to which every historical collapse is an inevitable event in the progress of Reason. Löwy notes that Benjamin reverses Hegel’s concept of history by not legitimizing and naturalizing oppression, but instead by denouncing what has happened as a “catastrophe”. For Benjamin, “wreckage” are traces of destruction and an eternal repetition of the past. In the eighth section, Benjamin explains how these two contradictory concepts of history relate to fascism (Benjamin 1942, 392): to fight fascism, one has to understand it correctly. For Benjamin, this means writing from the perspective of the oppressed, positioning oneself in their tradition and contrasting the state of exception, which has become a

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6 Headline in the newspaper O Globo on 1. April 1964, date of the military putsch.
normal state of oppression, with a real state of exception: the state in which such a form of domination no longer exists.

In this context, K. would represent not only a literary form of debating the exemplary history of two individuals, Majer Kuckinski and Ana Rosa Kucinski, but also the collective tragedy connecting generations through their common resistance strategies against torture, murder and impunity. Thus, the crimes of fascism and Brazilian civil-military dictatorship acquire a universal dimension: they resonate in the biography of every subject who was a victim of political persecution at different moments in world history.

To conclude, the novel K. allows a paradigmatic integration of Jewish literature and Brazilian literature especially because of its wide range of meanings of belonging and its appeal to emancipation struggles. Jewish writers and intellectuals like Anatol Rosenfeld, Boris Schneiderman, Clarice Lispector, Paul Singer, Michael Löwy, Berta Waldman, to mention only a few names, shaped Brazilian culture in a decisive way. Their importance in the Brazilian literary scene is not questioned, but their relations with Jewish literature and culture should be taught more explicitly.

Bibliography