

Brigitte Stepanov is a PhD candidate in French Studies at Brown University. Her dissertation focuses on representations of cruelty, monstrosity, and atrocity in contemporary Francophone literature from Africa and tackles defining what it means to be human in times of violence while tracing the evolution of warfare in the 20th and 21st centuries. She is additionally interested in conflict mediation and resolution as well as human rights violations. Prior to Brown, she studied French Studies and Mathematics at Queen's University at Kingston. She was a Silas Palmer Fellow in 2017.

Witnessing as Cruelty: Algeria and the Archive

My research focuses on representations of cruelty and monstrosity in French, Algerian, and Rwandan literature and cinema. Archival documents are important to my work as they provide first-hand accounts of the historical events and phenomena represented in the fictional oeuvres that I study. Archival artefacts, moreover, are especially pertinent to a project that is imbued with questions of perspective and a polyphony of denotations concerning the term “cruelty”. Cruelty is not an easily definable concept and finds itself in a network of other terms such as violence, pain, terror, and torture. Jacques Derrida, for instance, in his seminar on the death penalty, mentions how cruelty is not a clear subject to grasp. It is difficult to precisely and concisely define cruelty, or state what it is not. One only has to think of the term “cruel and unusual punishment,” which is oftentimes remarkably difficult to interpret in the sphere of capital punishment. This same ambiguity with respect to cruelty is reproduced in the study of warfare.

How, then, do we define cruelty? And, more importantly, how do we find it, see it, in the archive? This talk will explore how I endeavored to identify instances of cruelty in documents pertaining to Algeria and the conflicts related to its colonization housed in the Hoover Archives. I will explore how my study brought me to an understanding of “witnessing as cruelty,” an expression that encompasses not only the limits of representation, the limits of witnessing, in the face of atrocity, but equally, as I will argue, the necessity to bear witness to cruelty – especially in the archive.