

## Translating Trauma: Witnessing *Bom Bali*

Kate Douglas

A reader's involvement with the painful details of another's story entails both the pleasures of the imagination and the defenses of personal boundaries—and these reactions shape the exercise of identification across the borders of the unfamiliar.<sup>1</sup> Accounts of difficult experience set in motion an ambivalent desire to look, to grapple with real suffering, and at the same time to look away—to put the book down. This paper contends that this ambivalent response can be part of creating a community of consciousness. The forging of community is both an arduous and utopian project, but any reader can take a first step toward collective self-consciousness by negotiating pathways of responsiveness and responsibility between what is both strange and familiar, distant and all too close (Miller and Tougaw 20).

In recent years with mass media access, the global community has witnessed repeated civil wars, terrorist attacks, famine, natural disasters, mass murders, and genocide. This witnessing has produced an outpouring of traumatic life narrative texts. These life narrative texts range from popular autobiographies such as Ishmael Beah's now controversial *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, to documentaries such as *Darfur Now*, and do-it-yourself cyber projects such as the countless vblogs and amateur footage found on social networking sites.<sup>2</sup> Life narrative has provided crucial insights into recent political and cultural conflicts.

Life-writing scholarship has focused on the (often graphic, realist) ways trauma is represented and has attended to the potential effects these representations might have on those consuming this material. Scholars and theorists have considered aspects of the effects of witnessing from empathy and mourning, to the transference of trauma, and “wound culture” fetishism.<sup>3</sup> The intellectual investment is such that universities across the world teach courses on trauma and memory. Thousands of scholars and students are being exposed to traumatic narratives each

year. However, there has been little discussion of what happens to these readers within these contexts. This essay seeks to understand the following questions: How do they witness? According to what models? And what are the ethical implications of this exposure?

In order to answer them, I provide a case study: I examine the responses of literature students to a particular text—an Australian documentary titled *Bom Bali* which recounts the events in Kuta on the 12th of October 2002, using the first-person narratives of survivors and the families and friends of victims.<sup>4</sup> I document and explore responses to these narratives via trauma and witness theories. In focusing on these student responses, I explore some of the ways in which traumatic texts are received—particularly the ways in which these respondents come to witness trauma.

### **I. Life Writing, Trauma, and the Second-Person Witness**

Literary and cultural critics embraced trauma studies in the late 1990s and have continued to do so well into the 2000s. These studies have focused primarily on the moral and ethical dimensions of representing trauma, and look, in particular, at the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, and *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History* unleashed a wave of scholarly interest in the links between trauma, memory, history, and literature. Humanities-based trauma studies encourage literary scholars to ask questions about the role that cultural texts play in circulating and interpreting trauma. For example, can literature play a reparative role after trauma? How does literature mediate between trauma and the witness? Trauma has become particularly important in autobiography studies. A plethora of autobiographical narratives recounting trauma emerged during the 1990s and 2000s. Leigh Gilmore argues,

Autobiographical representations of trauma make an invaluable contribution to the study of literature and culture. They offer indispensable eyewitness accounts of large-scale and everyday violence and, through their elaboration of specific scenes of terror and trauma, provide an antidote to universalizing narratives about evil, suffering and history. (367)

Karyn Ball anticipated trauma's "institutional decline" in her editorial to a special issue of *Cultural Critique* on trauma, written in 2000. She cites "the backlash against Holocaust studies" as one of the factors affecting this declining interest in trauma studies (10). It turned out that Ball's predictions were premature. It would have been impossible for her to foresee the new wave of traumatic witnessing that would follow September 11, 2001. Since 2001 there has been a renewed focus on global trauma, and recognition that people are witnessing terrible atrocities every day in unprecedented ways, particularly through media representations. Universities teach courses on trauma which commonly go beyond discussions of the Holocaust towards examinations of more contemporary traumatic events (for example, wars/contemporary conflict, cultural persecution and incarceration, genocides, and terrorism). In other contexts, recreational readers are consuming autobiographies that graphically detail child abuse, domestic violence, illness and injury. Traumatic autobiographies have been a booming commercial product for the past decade and this literary trend shows no sign of abating. Readers are commonly drawn to the life narratives of "vulnerable subjects," to use G. Thomas Couser's term. There has been a range of explanations offered for the high level of reader interest in traumatic narratives. Where some theorists suggest that in consuming traumatic autobiographies, readers are developing empathic relationships with the subjects, others see this literary trend as a form of voyeurism or *schadenfreude*.

Recent scholarship has explored the position of the "witness" in literature of trauma—such as Holocaust testimony or Stolen Generations testimony in Australia. Shosanna Felman and Dori Laub ask, "how is the act of writing tied up with the act of bearing witness?... Is the act of reading literary texts itself inherently related to the act of facing horror?... And by virtue of what sort of agency is one appointed to bear witness" (2)? The witness may be a person who is present at a traumatic event and gives testimony as a first-hand witness. Alternatively, a witness might be "the second person." The second person reads a testimony in textual form and in this act of reading, the second person sanctions and empowers the testimony. The second person may understand the text as relational—accepting his or her connection to the traumatic event de-

picted.<sup>6</sup> Literary witnessing has traditionally been constructed as a mode of intelligent, informed, and necessarily empathic reading. It reveals the political power of reading: reading can raise awareness, challenge historical knowledge, shift power relationships, and redress inequalities.

Excellent studies (emerging from life writing scholarship) have looked at the ways traumatic texts have been employed in university classrooms as a means of elucidating a particular theoretical discipline. Many of these studies have focused on life writing, post-colonial literature, or memory studies,<sup>7</sup> and stem from a belief in the importance of trauma texts as a means of teaching decolonization or reconciliation. Authors of these articles also share concerns about the ethics of teaching trauma.

Felman and Laub explain that witnessing occurs as a result of identification, transference, and secondary trauma. In other words, the second-person witness develops empathy for the first-person trauma sufferer by experiencing something akin to trauma themselves: “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (57–58). And yet, as Rosanne Kennedy argues, while this model works particularly effectively in Holocaust studies, its application might be limited in other contexts (58). Kennedy argues, for example, that Stolen Generations testimonies “often construct complex subject positions for listeners, who do not necessarily identify with the speaking positions of the person giving testimony. And some of the constructed subject positions, such as ‘perpetrator’ work against identification” (58).

Kennedy considers the classroom as a useful site for research into witnessing:

[Through] an encounter with personal testimony in the semi-private space of the classroom, some students have been able to develop a critique of the discourse of the public sphere in Australia—the celebratory story of Australian nationhood.... If listening to testimony can shock students and teachers into a recognition of their/our subject positions as the inheritors of a colonial legacy, and of the responsibility that entails for making reparations to Indigenous people, then it can be said to contribute to a critique of the discourse of the public sphere.

In Australia today, that discourse is hostile to the idea that Australians who were not directly involved in separation of colonization should take responsibility for events that occurred “in the past.” (63–66)

For Kennedy, the stakes are highly political. Students witnessing testimony can effect post-colonial reconciliation and political action—for reparation through individuals and groups taking responsibility for the past. These are lofty ambitions, but are ambitions I share (along with many colleagues working in the disciplines of life writing, memory and trauma studies and post-colonial studies).

However, teaching trauma texts is fraught with ethical dilemmas. Convincing students that difficult texts are worthwhile is a trial at the best of times. Trauma only complicates the equation. My anecdotal sense of teaching is that many of us are teaching difficult material, so much so that many academics may not even be aware of the associated ethical minefields. A colleague of mine recently told me that when she was teaching a course on contemporary literature, the semester was half over before she realized that all but one of the texts they had studied contained a rape scene. A student made the teacher aware of this, and she confessed to the teacher that she was struggling with these representations.

There is a long-held, perhaps even axiomatic, belief in literary studies that students will find themselves challenged by the literature they read. While this seems a reasonable assumption on some levels, as teachers we need to lead the students through their consumption of cultural texts; we need to prepare them for this journey, and we need to be aware of the consequences of what we are asking students to consume. As Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw argue, literary critics and teachers are prone to putting themselves at the coalface when it comes to reading challenging material:

[we] look to meet if not to match the wounds of others. We demonstrate a willingness to be bruised, to have our indifference challenged. Reading for the extreme is a way to consider the politics of empathy and acknowledge the limits of our civic engagement. (18)

Miller and Tougaw warn against “the dangers we incur by being overly confident that our theories can accommodate all the contingencies our reading practices may encounter” (19). Trauma—its representation and its reception—are extremely dynamic processes. We need to be aware of the shifting contexts affecting the production, circulation and reception of trauma texts. And we must be accommodating of the varied subject positions that students will bring to reading these texts.

In her study of “teaching trauma” Gilmore highlights the most significant ethical consideration inherent within such projects: how do we ask students to read traumatic texts without running the risk of causing them trauma (368)? Gilmore asks,

What are we asking of them when they undertake this challenge, and how do we prepare them for it? .... Can it be claimed that students risk traumatization by studying representations of trauma? .... Or is it more appropriate to say that students are shocked, saddened, titillated, or repulsed, but not traumatized per se? .... how should we clarify the boundary between the experience of trauma and the experience of learning about trauma? .... what of the less hypothetical risk of retraumatizing students who have previously experienced trauma? (368)

Recent studies of traumatic representations have examined some of the possible adverse effects of witnessing upon the second-person witness. Kirby Farrell suggests that the second person might over-empathize with the traumatic testimony and suffer psychological trauma as well. There is a very fine line between affective witnessing and traumatic transference—between the recipient feeling empathy and becoming vicariously traumatized by the traumatic life narrative they consume (Kaplan 2). Other studies have explored the damaging effects of witnessing on the traumatized subject. Mark Seltzer uses psychoanalytical theory to explain the voyeuristic interest people might take in traumatic events. And for Lauren Berlant, the rampant “use” of traumatic imagery in cultural texts can mute and/or commodify the traumatic subject.

These are important ethical considerations for current research. How do we identify such practices without exploiting or replicating them?

As suggested earlier, my general feeling is that academics and students are consuming traumatic texts on a large scale. What emerges from the previous studies into reading trauma is a sense of the importance of conducting research into the dynamics and ethics of witnessing. However, the previous studies are limited by a lack of precise engagement with what is actually happening in the classroom. This is my intention in analyzing student responses to the documentary *Bom Bali*.

## II. Witnessing *Bom Bali*

*Bom Bali* is an Australian documentary directed by Stephen Westh. The documentary was screened on commercial television in Australia on the 7th of October 2006 to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the Bali Bombings of 2002.<sup>8</sup> Using a variety of texts and discourses—interviews, e-mails, photographs, recreations, and amateur footage—the documentary provides a selection of life narrative testimonies recounting the bombings. These testimonies are simply told, colloquial, and imbued with emotional language and demonstrations of grief. The documentary tells the stories of those who were killed, those who survived, and those who perpetrated the attacks on the Kuta tourist district of Bali on the 12th October 2002.

*Bom Bali* opens with a recreated nightclub scene. The rapid camera work, coloured lights, and dance music emphasize the vibrancy of the Kuta district. These scenes are juxtaposed with somber, deathly quiet scenes showing the bombers planning the attack. One of the documentary's most arresting features is its inclusion of the (translated) testimony of three of the perpetrators of the bombings: Iman Samudra and Amrosi, who have been sentenced to death, and Ali Imron who is currently serving a life sentence. The testimonies of perpetrators are not commonly included in life narratives of trauma. For director Westh the inclusion of this testimony offers hope and possibly some closure:

It offered a bit of a window, especially into Ali Imron (one of the bombers now serving a life sentence) who gives an ultimate recant. I wanted them (the victims and their families) to know that at least one of the bombers had made a full apology. [Ali

Kate Douglas

Imron has indeed apologized to the families of the victims] In that there's an extraordinary sense of hope, that if people can reestablish contact with themselves as human beings, then this kind of activity has a chance of ending, I hope so. (qtd. in Guest)

A case in point is Ali Imron who describes the sadness he feels when hearing about those who have been killed. He empathizes with the parents who have lost their children, comparing it to the trauma he once felt having to take his own child to the hospital, imagining the worst.

So, although the testimonials in *Bom Bali* are dominated by the narratives of Western subjects (Australians, Britons and Americans), the inclusion of the testimonial of one of the bombers is a gesture towards balance—specifically the need for balance in trauma texts. Though in this instance it may seem a little tokenistic (in what is invariably a documentary about Australians for Australians), including these narratives demonstrates that this was not simply a Western tragedy. It positions this documentary as concerned with reconciliation and forgiveness—with repairing relationships between the different groups involved in this trauma.

Thus it is also significant that the film presents the testimonies of local Balinese workers: Aya Sila, an Indonesian waitress who works at one of the clubs and who tells of losing twelve friends in the bombings; Jafar, a young Balinese Muslim man who was involved in the rescue; and Haji Bambang Priyanto, another local Muslim who was also involved in rescue efforts. Both men describe what they witnessed: the smell of burnt bodies, the tears of those who were in pain and already grieving lost friends and family. Jafar talks about the nightmares that have affected him since the rescue and Haji Bambang Priyanto recounts giving testimony against the bombers at the trials. Both of the men speak of the shame they felt (as Muslims) when hearing that it was Muslim extremists who took responsibility for the attacks.

The bulk of the testimony in *Bom Bali* is from interviews with survivors or first-person witnesses—those who were in the Sari Club or Paddy's Bar when the clubs were bombed. There are also those who



cannot tell their story, who are reliant on friends and relatives to tell it for them—the daughter who describes the death of her mother, the fathers who go to Bali to look for their sons, the parents anxiously waiting back in England for word from their daughters.

The survivors narrate their testimony as an interview with an off-camera interviewer. As we do not hear the interviewer's voice, this constructs the narrators as giving meaning to their own experiences.<sup>9</sup> Each tells his or her story chronologically, which is extremely important in soliciting and building empathy on the part of the viewer. The viewer first hears the survivor's narration of his or her reasons for being in Bali nightclubs (a surfing holiday, a holiday with friends, an end-of-year sporting trip, a mother-daughter night out, a work visit) then witnesses the survivor's testimony of the bombing. The overwhelming theme of the pre-bombing narratives is innocence, freedom and camaraderie: from the "lads" and "ladettes" socializing freely and enjoying the party, to the furniture importer who simply stepped into the nightclub for a drink of water. Even in the case of one of the bombers—Ali Imron (who, we are told, came from a poor background and looked to extremist groups for acceptance), each of the narratives is designed to elicit viewers' empathy. Kennedy argues, when intimate stories such as this are told, the ethical demand for "sensitive and involved listening" is intensified (56). The dominant themes of the post-bombing testimonies are pain and loss—bodily trauma and death. But the theme of camaraderie remains through the narratives of resilience and rescue.

As suggested earlier, second-person witnesses to traumatic testimonies are most commonly those who read or view the traumatic text. In this case study, a group of advanced-level English Literature students viewed the documentary as part of their studies in a Post-Colonial Literature course. The primary aim of this course is to consider the political power of cultural texts; what role do (or can) cultural texts play in redressing injustice and effecting social change? The students consume fictional and non-fictional texts (novels, essays, poems, films, television, documentary, and on-line texts) from Africa, Australia, Asia, Europe, North America, South America and the Pacific. By the time they view *Bom*

*Bali*, the topic has established conditions for an “affective community” of witnesses (to borrow Geoffrey Hartman’s term) in that the students have been exposed to a diversity of texts and have explored issues ranging from *The Stolen Generations* to the Sri Lankan civil war (153). Through reading these post-colonial texts, students become aware of the ways certain narratives or “truths” are enabled or disabled within particular contexts. They come to consider literature as a reparative tool that inserts previously marginalized narratives into the public domain. The students are asked to reflect on the important role that they play (as readers and as witnesses), in sanctioning and circulating post-colonial narratives. This background results in some, perhaps many, of the students becoming “ideal witnesses,” or, those who are open to witnessing because of their empathic context (Miller and Tougaw 12).

Gilmore suggests that when we teach trauma “we should talk as if someone who had experienced trauma is in the room” (369). Precautions must be taken prior to exposing students to trauma texts. In this case study, the students were given very specific information about the documentary’s subject and content a week in advance in the form of an information sheet. Just before the screening, the students were again warned that the documentary contained life narratives of trauma, and that these narratives might be emotionally challenging. I suggested that if any of the students were finding the film difficult to watch, they should excuse themselves from the screening with the knowledge that there would be no penalties for doing so. However, no one left the screening. While it remains possible that the students felt obliged to watch the documentary, it also possible that their attendance reflects a commitment to witnessing.

There is a multiplicity of factors affecting the ways in which these witnesses might respond to this traumatic text—not all of which can be measured in a small study such as this one. E. Ann Kaplan argues that

[it is difficult to generalize] about trauma and its impact, for, as Freud pointed out long ago, how one reacts to a traumatic event depends on one’s individual psychic history, on memories inevitably mixed with fantasies of prior catastrophes, and

on the particular cultural and political content within which catastrophe takes place, especially how it is ‘managed’ by institutional forces. (1)

Age, gender, cultural background and identities, previous experiences of trauma, and media exposure to global trauma are all part of the respondent’s subject position. Most of the students in this class were Anglo-Australian, with a small handful of overseas students (from Singapore and the United States). The students had previously been immersed in post-colonial texts and theory, which is likely to have had an effect on their response to *Bom Bali*.

It is also important to note some of the features specific to using the classroom as a site for consuming trauma narratives. In placing trauma narratives within the classroom (and university) we are “mediatizing” these narratives (Kaplan 2); the context within which these trauma texts appear is highly significant in determining how viewers will respond to them. Kennedy argues, the classroom is a semi-public space that commonly allows students to speak their minds (64). And the classroom (at least, at the university where I teach) tends to be a liberal space. So, it is possible that students might feel pressure to hold left-wing views, despite the teacher’s encouragement that diverse interpretations are important and welcome.

There were approximately sixty students enrolled in the course, and of these thirty-eight attended the lecture in which the documentary was screened.<sup>10</sup> Each student was given a reflective writing exercise to complete afterwards. The writing exercise asked the students to briefly describe his or her experience of watching *Bom Bali*. Twenty students returned the reflective writing exercise (anonymously) to me. When analyzing these responses I was primarily interested in identifying the type of witnessing that the respondents were engaging in. For example, were the students witnessing according to Felman and Laub’s transference model of witnessing where they felt traumatized by the text? Or were the respondents witnessing according to the relational model—sanctioning and empowering the testimony while accepting complicity in the traumatic event, as Kennedy and Whitlock would propose?

Some common themes emerged in the student responses to *Bom Bali*. There was a strong and recurrent assertion of the injustice of this conflict, and even a sense of Australia's complicity within this tragedy, thus suggesting relational witnessing, for example:

It was gut-wrenching to see all of the innocent people killed, and to see so many others affected by the death of loved ones.

What do terrorists have to gain by killing so many innocent people?

I was disturbed/saddened/horrified at this destruction and the horror of the experience.

How are the Balinese supposed to recover from this? This is what angers me the most.

Events like this affect our freedom.

I felt ashamed to consider the indirect role that the Australian government has played in this tragedy.

I was a little embarrassed/ashamed to see the ways in which Australian tourists behave in Bali. (Anonymous Student Responses n.pag)

These responses also conform to what Dominick La Capra called “empathic unsettlement”—of the witness feeling empathy and being affected by the narrative without necessarily feeling the first-person's trauma (267).

Almost all respondents commented on how important it was to receive the narratives of the Balinese witnesses who were injured in the bombing as well as those who helped in the evacuation:

It is crucial to see every side of an event/argument/tragedy. As a person who resents the Westernisation of Balinese culture, it was important and educational for me to see the tourists' side of the story. However, I was most interested to see the support of the Indonesian people who helped in the tragedy—which I witnessed in the aftermath of the earthquake this year.

I really liked that the documentary didn't just tell the Australian view of events. It was important to see how many Balinese were affected, and how many lives and livelihoods were lost.

[The documentary] helps break down the misconceptions people have about Muslim people. The documentary offered a positive view of Muslim people by showing the narratives of those who were involved in the rescue.

*Bom Bali* wasn't just a Western story.

It will be so difficult (economically) for many Balinese to rebuild their lives.

The events in Kuta will negatively affect relationships between the different cultures and religions living in Bali. (Anonymous Student Responses n.pag)

Many respondents emphasized how "important" this documentary is, and how they were glad to have been able to watch it. Such acknowledgements are crucial to second-person witnessing as they confirm that this trauma is communal—not individual. For Mieke Bal, this is an essential component of witnessing:

the need for a second-person to act as confirming witness to a painfully elusive past confirms a notion of memory that is not confined to the individual psyche, but is constituted in the culture in which the traumatized subject lives ... this "second-personhood" of witnessing and facilitating memory is an active choice, just as much as the act of memorizing that it facilitates. The acts of memory thus become an exchange between first and second person that sets in motion the emergence of narrative. (x)

The trauma story cannot achieve its full potency without the witness. The exchange, which reflects acknowledgement and understanding, becomes part of the trauma narrative.

Kate Douglas

There was a strong reaction to the documentary's testimonial format, and the relationship it establishes between those giving testimony and those receiving the testimony:

*Bom Bali* gives us a human perspective on the tragedy. Puts a human face on it, from all accounts.

Challenges people's views/preconceptions of Indonesia/ Indonesian people.

Made me really think about the different people's responses to the tragedy, and to consider my own reaction.

The people being interviewed were so honest and so raw. I really felt for them and what they'd been through.

It's really important that we are able to hear the human story, told in first person. For me, that's the best way to understand what has really happened. (Anonymous Student Responses n. pag)

Roughly half of the respondents suggested that *Bom Bali* gave them a sense of hope, particularly in relation to the cultural work accomplished by such documentaries but also in relation to the complex and yet ultimately affirming way in which humanity is represented. About a third of respondents suggested that the documentary would influence them to take some form of political action, for example:

Documentaries like *Bom Bali* are so important in telling us the stories we don't hear in the news.

I feel as though I understand this tragedy so much better now, having "met" some of the people affected.

I was heartened by the courage, determination and compassion of many of the victims and bystanders who helped both the tourists and the locals.

I will discuss *Bom Bali* with family and friends and urge them to watch it.

I will continue to visit Indonesia and support its people and culture.

I definitely want to visit Bali to pay my respects.

The Balinese seem to be a strong and resilient people. And I believe that the tourists will keep going to Bali as an act of defiance. (Anonymous Student Responses n.pag)

The respondents understand the power of testimony to circulate marginalized narratives and offer alternative truths to those that appear in the mainstream media.

These student responses reflect the relational model of witnessing whereby the respondents sanction and empower the testimony by understanding their relationship to it. They satisfy Kaplan's assessment of what constitutes "ethical witnessing," which she describes as a form of reconciliation:

People can move beyond sharing trauma and engage in witnessing, which is a new level of responsibility. It differs from vicarious trauma, from voyeurism/sensationalism, and from melodramatic attempts to close the wound as in Hollywood treatments of historical trauma. Rather, I suggest that "witnessing" happens when a text aims to move the viewer emotionally but without sensationalizing or overwhelming her with feeling that makes understanding impossible. "Witnessing" involves not just empathy and motivation to help, but understanding the structure of injustice—that an injustice has taken place—rather than focusing on a specific case. Once this happens one may feel obligated to take responsibility for specific injustices. Art that invites us to bear witness to injustice goes beyond moving us to identify with and help a specific individual, and prepares us to take responsibility for preventing future occurrence. (23)

But beyond this "taking responsibility" for trauma, ethical witnessing must involve a larger degree of freedom and empowerment for the wit-

ness that allows the witness to respond in ways that are not anticipated by the text or by wider prescriptions of witnessing. The process of witnessing must be dynamic and shifting insofar as it depends on the reader/viewer, the text and subject, and the context. Gilmore argues, when we bring trauma into the classroom, we want to “initiate an inquiry that does not specify in advance of foreclose the intensities of its engagement” (369).

### III. Conclusion

I teach trauma studies across three literature courses and work with trauma theory in my research. Earlier, I trained and worked as a social worker. I have been immersed in trauma studies for some years. And yet I carry a sense of guilt when faced with a student who tells me that he or she is struggling with the course content, or wanted to put down a book that was making him or her feel uncomfortable. Trauma narratives need a witness to sanction the narrative, and in these situations, the “greater good” imperative is strong. Humanities professors involved in post-colonial and/or memory studies commonly believe that it is important, even essential, to bring trauma into the classroom. Teaching trauma is both a pedagogical and political gesture. However, I contend that trauma narratives are difficult to hear, so are too often ignored. Teaching testimonies is an important way to ensure that testimonies find listeners beyond those conducting the initial interviews (Kennedy 62). These narratives are crucial in offering insights into trauma and injustice. Those teaching within the Humanities have a responsibility to take up trauma narratives because these narratives are part of public debate. Kennedy asserts “in a post/colonial context, listening is a political as well as an ethical act; it is a means of redress” (52–56). In other words, it is a means of sharing the trauma, of taking the trauma away from the individual and inserting in into communal consciousness.

It is important that Humanities scholars bring complex trauma texts into the classroom—avoiding texts that are exploitative and/or gratuitous. Teaching trauma must involve looking at texts that offer challenging representations and that avoid simplistic or absolute representations of good and evil, right and wrong. We should look to texts that break



down simple binaries of victim and perpetrator, texts that offer alternatives to mainstream media representations of people and events. We should study texts that are narratively complex and rewarding for the students beyond their political worth—texts that inform, that offer diverse insights and experiences through a range of narrative devices and/or technologies.

The role that students and academics play in processes of witnessing is an important one. Bal argues that witnessing is particularly vital if it is a “critical reader” or “artist” who is witnessing (x). Such witnesses are in a position to reflect back upon the narrative in their own work, mediating the trauma, circulating their responses to it as a gesture of solidarity and, thus, contributing another level of interpretation to the narrative (Bal x). In these instances, scholars are able to “translate” trauma (Kaplan 19), to make meaning out of catastrophic events, and to make the experiences and narratives of these events more widely accessible and communally owned. For Kaplan, art is one of the most significant means for translating trauma (19). Thus education (which uses art as stimulus) is an essential component in this translation process.

The present study is necessarily limited. I can only show and discuss a snapshot of the data it generated and can only discuss some of the implications of the responses I gathered. However, what does seem clear is the strong capacity of students to act as relational witnesses to trauma. And this case study reveals the important role that supportive educational contexts can play in facilitating this witnessing. It is clear that more qualitative research needs to be completed on trauma witnessing. I believe that this case study (which uses students as sample readers) might lead to studies of more general readerships and their responses to traumatic texts. Such studies will further illuminate the myriad ways in which trauma texts circulate and the diverse, yet potentially highly productive ways in which these texts are ethically witnessed.

### Notes

- 1 Thank you to the students who participated so willingly in this research, and to the Special Issue editors for their helpful comments on this article.

- 2 Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* recounts his time as a child soldier in Sierra Leone. The book was heralded by critics and authors, and celebrated by journalists and television talk-show hosts. It has since been suggested that there are several incongruities in Beah's work, particularly relating to the dates he spent in the Sierra Leone army, and how old he was when he was in the army. See Gare and Wilson.
- 3 See Felman and Laub; Gilmore; Kennedy; Seltzer; Whitlock.
- 4 This project was carried out with the approval of the Flinders University Social and Behavioral Sciences Ethics Committee. All students who participated in this research gave informed consent for their responses to be used in this research paper.
- 5 See LaCapra; Bernard-Donals and Glejzer; Felman and Laub.
- 6 See Kennedy; Whitlock.
- 7 See Felman and Laub; Gilmore; Kennedy.
- 8 The Bali bombings of 2002 killed 202 people (164 of these were foreign nationals; 38 were Indonesian citizens). Over 200 people were injured in the attacks. It was the worst act of terrorism to affect Indonesia. See "Bali Anniversary."
- 9 Kennedy 57. Kennedy is describing Stolen Generations testimony, but this description seems highly appropriate for these Bali bombing testimonies.
- 10 An attendance rate of 38 out of 60 students roughly represents the lecture attendance for all lectures given in the course. Lecture attendance is not compulsory as students commonly report clashes in their lecture schedules.

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Translating Trauma: Witnessing *Bom Bali*

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