From WikiLeaks, whistleblowers, documentary exposés, and personal testimonies, to reality television, consumer databases, and social media, we are all increasingly caught up in a ‘confessional mode’ where going public is the rule more than the exception. The confessional mode appears in academic writing across the humanities, social sciences, and fine arts, marking a shift towards self-reflexivity, personal scholarship, and auto-ethnography. For growing numbers of us, Facebook, Linked-in, and FaceTime encourage us to connect, network, post, blog, text, and tweet even the most intimate details of our personal lives. Meanwhile, this information – about our ‘likes,’ personal consumption habits, and moment-to-moment movement – is ‘mined’ and sold from databases linked to our social media, our cell phones, and our bank cards.

At its most profane, the privileging of the personal gives rise to narrow self-interest and what Richard Sennett (1977) characterized as the ‘tyrannies of intimacy’ – a narcissistic state where an ‘ethics of autonomy’ exerts hegemony over an ‘ethics of community’ (Haidt, 2012, pp. 105–6). More altruistically, the confessional mode provides marginalized people with a way to assert themselves politically in the public sphere. Sharing life-stories may even be ‘one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims’ (Schaffer and Smith, 2004, p. 2). First-person accounts ‘communicate what history means to human beings’ (Portelli, 1997, p. 42), and their immediacy ‘burns through the “cold storage” of history’ (Hartman, 1995, p. 5). But once these stories are in global circulation, who stands most to benefit? As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (2004, p. 5) remind us, ‘[a]ll stories emerge in the midst of complex and uneven relationships of power, prompting certain questions about production:

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Who tells the stories and who doesn’t? To whom are they told and under what circumstances? The dangers are many. We live in a ‘search-engine world’ where it is ‘simply too seductively easy to snag something on the run’ (Frisch, 2008, p. 224). More ominously, Julie Salverson (1996, p. 182) warns that ‘[t]houghtlessly soliciting autobiography may reproduce a form of cultural colonialism that is at the very least voyeuristic.’

In response, verbatim and documentary theatre forms appeal to ‘legitimacy’ through their defining characteristics – authenticated personal interviews, direct experience, and documented research. Derek Paget (2010) first coined the term ‘verbatim theatre’ in 1987 to describe documentary theatre constructed ‘verbatim’ from oral history interviews. As Paget (2010, p. 173) subsequently observed in 2010, the documentary mode ‘tends to come to the fore in troubled times.’ Today, in the aftermath of ‘the most violent century in human history’ (Golding, 1992 cited in Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 1), our troubles include a persistent ‘crisis of legitimacy’ (Habermas, 1975) fuelled by endless wars, violence, and human rights abuses; escalating corporate corruption and governmental collusion; a vertically organized mainstream media characterized by ‘celebrity worship and corporate fawning’ (McQuaig, 2011, p. 1); and high levels of anxiety about rapidly increasing social and economic inequity. This is fertile ground for interdisciplinary alliances and partnerships between artists, researchers, and community organizations interested in using oral history performance to effect political and social change. Jenny Hughes (2007, p. 152) cites Mark Espiner’s suggestion that the recent ‘prominence of verbatim theatre can be explained as an attempt to establish authentic or reliable frames of reference for thought, feeling and action in a highly mediatised society,’ that in an era of theatricality, theatre is rediscovering its ‘true role’ – to expose the truth. As Hughes points out war and terrorism also seize the public imagination through ‘theatrical acts,’ and so, not surprisingly, the emerging field of oral history performance – and its natural ally in community-based theatre – tends to focus extensively on ethical issues concerned with the ownership of stories; transparency, accountability, and sustainability in process; and negotiated representation and ‘truth’ in public presentation and discourse. Here, Michael Frisch’s ethical foundation of ‘shared authority’ in oral history – found in the dialogic of the interview itself – meets ‘cultural democracy’ in theatre—direct grassroots ‘participation in the production of a living culture’ (Kelly, 1984, p. 100). Yet this too is contested ground:

Furthermore, and specific to verbatim theatre, the recent ‘intrusion’ of ethical concerns is perceived by some to be based on a naive