

AVG-Carhif Forum
for Belgian Research in the History of Women, Gender and Sexualities

Silence is (not) an option: Re-thinking oral history post-MeToo
Call for Papers

Silence occurs in every oral history interview and comes in many forms. Some silences are striking, others are barely noticeable. Some express comfort, others discomfort. Some signify a refusal to speak, others do not. The meanings of silence are myriad: it may express taboo, trauma, forgetting, reluctance, oppression, deceit, politeness, censorship, secrecy, contemplation, reflection, or simply that there is no need to explain.

Silence may also be the very reason for choosing oral history as a methodology. For decades, oral historians have tried to remedy the absence of certain groups in the archives, such as women or the subaltern. Silences occur in every aspect of oral history, from the research design to the dissemination of research findings. Silences influence the recruitment of participants. Often, oral historians only interview self-selected speakers, who have a personal interest in sharing their perspectives. But if we select our narrators differently, there is another issue at stake: is it ethical to (try to) compel someone to speak?

Historians also use silence in many ways. They might wait in silence, giving their narrators time to remember. They might keep quiet as a way to make their narrators slightly uncomfortable, as a means of encouraging them to expand their answers. Historians often remain blank pages in order to mitigate the effects of their own words on the narration. However, they often struggle themselves to navigate narrators' silences. The wish to record complete stories might lead them to view what remains unspoken as a missed opportunity. Probing the silence is equally complex, particularly if narrators choose to hold their tongues in order to retain some sort of control or check the imbalance of power in an interview.

This symposium will readdress these complexities of silence—a topic that has received new impetus in the wake of the MeToo movement, which has seen a growing number of survivors publicly speak out against perpetrators of sexual violence. **Yet MeToo has also shown that breaking the silence has many meanings, much like silence itself.** For some women, the sharing of stories as part of the MeToo-movement is a symbol of resistance or a sign of solidarity, for others it signifies an unpleasant reminder of a traumatic experience. We are delighted to announce two keynote speakers, **Estelle Freedman (Stanford University)** and **Emily Bridger (University of Exeter)**.

Papers may focus upon the strategies of historical actors who prefer to leave their past unspoken, as well as on the potentially unexpected consequences of breaking silences. We also welcome proposals that reflect on the significance of, and difficulties in, interpreting silence or on the differences between what is said on and off the record. We especially encourage proposals that include subaltern voices and address the history of intimacy, consent and activism, as this event is part of the of the 2021-2023 program of the **AVG-CARHIF Forum for Belgian Research in the History of Women, Gender and Sexualities**, dedicated to the theme 'Consent, ethics and activism: Re-thinking historical practice post-MeToo'.

Practical information:

- The event will take place 17-18 November 2022 in Brussels.
- Please send your proposal (max 300 words) and a short biography (max 100 words) to silence-is-an-option@hotmail.com before 15 May 2022.
- The Scientific Committee will evaluate the proposals and communicate its selection to the authors before 15 June 2022.
- At the conference, papers are presented and then commented upon by a discussant, followed by wider debate. Full draft papers will be required by 1 November 2022 and are then sent to your discussant. They should correspond to 20-minute speaking time; they need not be fully referenced at this stage.

Organisation committee:

Tinne Claes (tinne.claes@kuleuven.be)
Juliette Masquelier (juliette.masquelier@ulb.be)
Marjolein Van Bavel (marjolein.vanbavel@uantwerpen.be)

Scientific committee:

Tinne Claes (KU Leuven)
Juliette Masquelier (Université Libre de Bruxelles)
Marjolein Van Bavel (Antwerp University)
Magaly Rodriguez Garcia (KU Leuven)
Els Flour (AVG-CARHIF)
Selma Leydesdorff (University of Amsterdam)

Calendar:

15 May 2022: deadline for the receipt of proposals
15 June 2022: announcement of the selection of proposals
1 November 2022: sending of draft papers to discussants
17-18 November 2022: symposium

Contact and additional information: silence-is-an-option@hotmail.com