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### TOWARD AN ETHICS OF SILENCE?

#### Negotiating off-the-record events and identity in oral history

Taking two case studies from interviews with German migrants to North America, this thought-provoking piece develops the discussion about silences in interviews to argue that interviewers need not fear silences, but should rather recognise them as a form of interviewee agency and control. Hearing testimonies with the recorder switched off challenges the whole concept of 'the record'. Alexander Freund holds the chair in German-Canadian Studies and is co-director of the Oral History Centre ([www.oralhistorycentre.ca](http://www.oralhistorycentre.ca)) at the University of Winnipeg, Canada. Reprinted from Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 223–38. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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**S**ILENCES ARE A CONSTITUTIVE part of oral history interviews. Silences may express individual or collective forgetting, collaborative remembering, discomfort, reluctance, (self-)censorship, non-compliance, confrontation, reticence, politeness, fear, anger, deceit, taboos, secrets, contemplation, concern for the other, reflection, conformity, or that which need not be told.<sup>1</sup> Some silences are explicit or obvious, others are not. Interviewees' silences may be an effect of oppression or agency. Interviewers may use silence to give narrators space to remember or to make them talk. Silences in an interview may be consensual or express a communicative struggle. This chapter attempts to address, in a preliminary, tentative way, oral historians' troubled and troubling relationship with silences.

The silences I speak of in this piece, more specifically, emerge from some specific dynamics of oral history practices and constitute events that are commonly described as "off-the-record" incidents. Literally everything that happens in an oral history relationship that is not recorded may be considered off the record. An interviewee may ask the interviewer to turn off the recorder to provide this

information; or they may put a written note on the table to communicate without speaking. Off-the-record silences, thus, are not simply absences of voice, acts of non-speaking; rather, they are deferments of voice, relocations from “on” to “off,” from speaking to writing and gesturing.

Several off-the-record incidents from my own practice immediately came to mind when I was invited to write about them.<sup>2</sup> Even though they had happened one or two decades earlier, they were still with me, ever-present in my mind, as intriguing anecdotes harboring secrets that might reveal otherwise unknowable truths about oral history. The two off-the-record incidents I discuss here come from interviews with German women and men who migrated to North America in the second half of the twentieth century; for one study, I explored German migrants’ encounters with the history and memory of World War II and the Holocaust in North America, and, in particular, their relations with Jews (Dirk, the first case); for another study, I conducted interviews to find out about young, single women’s identity constructions as postwar immigrants to Canada (Christel Meisinger, the second case).<sup>3</sup> After presenting the case studies and some preliminary analysis, I discuss the ways that oral historians’ negotiations of off-the-record incidents are shaped by diffuse fears of silence and how our approaches to silence are entangled in negotiations of our professional and personal identities. Silences, oral historians fear, may signify a loss of information, a threat of incompleteness, a breakdown of rapport, a loss of trust, or an interviewer’s ineptness — all constitute threats to our identities as skilled interviewers and people who want to be liked by others. We respond with methods and theories that attempt to contain silences and keep us in control of knowledge about our interviewees. Our conflicted attitudes toward silence pose a fundamental ethical problem: in our emotionally charged quest for a complete and perfect interview, we are insufficiently prepared to accept our interviewees’ silence as a form of agency in the interview situation. Thus, next to methodological and theoretical responses, we need to develop an ethical response to interviewee silence, an ethics of silence, which I attempt to address in my conclusion.

### “Why don’t you turn off the tape recorder?” Difficulties in hearing silences

Silences texture life stories. In her guidebook *Recording Oral History*, Valerie Yow uses a short anecdote to alert novice oral historians to this reality: “Anthropologist John Gwaltney, in his book *Drylongo: A Self-Portrait of Black America*, quotes a narrator who told him, ‘I know you must have sense enough to know that you can’t make me tell you anything I mean to keep to myself.’”<sup>4</sup> We go into interviews knowing we will not get the complete story. Yet, throughout our interviews, we hope and attempt to get, if not the whole story, at least a fully self-contained story. In my own interviewing, based on practices developed by social psychologists and oral historians in Germany, I try to get at life histories in different ways, asking interviewees, in a first phase, to tell me their “life story,” and following up with questions in a second phase, often spread over two or more sessions.<sup>5</sup>

I took this approach in my interview with Dirk (a pseudonym) in New York City on January 17, 2000. The description that follows is taken from my field notes at the time:



I met Dirk through an advertisement for my research that was displayed at the German consulate in New York City. For the interview, we met at his place, a student dorm. Initially, it was easy to break the ice, because the doorman was very strict, which we both found amusing, especially Dirk. Speaking German, we continued to say the formal *Sie* instead of the informal *Du*. While he was only six years older than me, he was already a professor at a German university. We went to a nearby fish restaurant, which was actually too loud for a good taping of the conversation. But as this was the first interview, I agreed. Before and during dinner, we talked mainly about his work in Germany and the United States and a little about my own work.

Dirk was very concerned about confidentiality. He said if I were to get the full scoop, it would have to be anonymous and the tape could not be deposited in an archive. I agreed to these conditions. The interview began well. After probably half an hour, however, he asked me to turn off the recorder, even though we had agreed to very strict rules of confidentiality. After some back and forth and me finally turning off the recorder, he proceeded to tell me an interesting story – as it turned out, it was the most illuminating story of the interview [at least in terms of my research project, which focused on relations between German migrants and Jewish North Americans].

This, in short, was the story, according to my field notes taken right after the interview:

When he lived in the United States, he had a Jewish lover. Dirk told me that he was gay, but this was not the reason why he did not want me to tape the story, because this was not a secret, he was out of the closet, so to speak. He told me in detail about having sex with this man. If I remember correctly, he said that while the two bodies were rubbing against each other, he thought how strange it was that those were the bodies of a German and a Jew. After sex, he told his friend about it. But his friend could only understand him theoretically, not emotionally. This was so, because for the Jewish friend, Germany had a very different connotation than one (at least as a German) would usually assume. He was from a small mid-western town, where his homosexuality was like a prison for him. He could not come out of the closet in his hometown. But he had been to Germany once, to Frankfurt on the Main. And it was in Frankfurt that he came out of the closet. Thus, for him Germany was the great place of liberty, not the country of the Holocaust. Put crudely, he perceived Germany and Germans not from a Jewish perspective, but from a gay perspective. [. . .]

The evening after [the interview], I talked to [a colleague and friend] about it and he said there were ways of actually using this story in a metaphorical way. I need to talk to him about that and maybe raise this topic in one of our Friday meetings. Fellow oral historians have encouraged me to do this as this seems an important story.

A telephone conversation on January 27, 2000; the following is a translation of my German-language field notes:

Dirk was friendly but unwilling to meet for another interview or to write down his story, which I could not fully understand. I did not sell myself well. We came to the following decisions: 1. I will send him a transcript with all changes regarding anonymization and expect corrections from him and his written consent to deposit the interview at a public archive. 2. I am allowed to include his story about his lover if it is anonymous and I will then send him the excerpt and he will tell me if it is okay.

I have no record of sending Dirk the transcript or of me receiving a corrected transcript. Until now, I have not used his story. In preparation for this chapter, eleven years after the interview, I contacted Dirk, asking permission to use the field notes quoted above. He replied immediately and I emailed him both the text and the transcript of our interview. He replied within one week, asking me to take out details that could be used to identify him, which I did. After further correspondence, I further anonymized the field notes. Thus, although he agreed to my use of anonymized field notes, he continued to be concerned about confidentiality. Dirk's interview, then, is a good example of the multiple negotiations of off-the-record information that shape the dynamics of oral history relationships before, during, and (long) after the interview.

Before the interview began, there was little time to build rapport, a situation familiar to many oral historians, especially those working and traveling on shoestring budgets, always pressed for time, and under pressure to achieve a certain quorum of interviews for a dissertation committee or a funding agency. My life story approach and the professional desire to create an archival record had me concerned about getting the full story. When Dirk asked me to turn off the recorder, I was taken aback. After hearing the story, I became concerned about the integrity, coherence, and completeness of the interview. Dirk's story about his Jewish lover was, it seemed to me, the most important and telling story, and without it there was little of value in the interview itself, because it was both incomplete and incomprehensible. At the same time, I had little understanding or sympathy for my interviewee's silence. He had volunteered to be interviewed, he knew the topic, we had agreed to anonymity and confidentiality, and yet, he still wanted to go off the record. I was frustrated by the loss of control during and after the interview and by the loss of control over information that seemed to be of great value to me. These feelings were only exacerbated by having chosen a "poor" recording location (too noisy) and the wrong language (I had wanted to do the interview in English but then I started and we continued in German), and by Dirk's later decision not to be interviewed again.

I do remember the hesitation and feeling of impotence when Dirk said, "Why don't you turn it off." Our professional guides advise us to stall and try to convince narrators to continue.<sup>6</sup> Self-doubt about my skills as an interviewer crept in as I remembered the admonition to never stop recording. With trepidation I recalled, as I rested my thumb on the stop button, that Alessandro Portelli's only formal oral history lesson had been, "never turn the tape recorder off."<sup>7</sup> As I closed my eyes and pushed stop, I also remembered Donald Ritchie's words: "An oral history is not a



journalistic interview, so there is little to be gained by hearing a story 'off the record.'<sup>8</sup> All of the compromises I had made bore no fruit. By all methodological standards of our profession, I had failed as an oral historian. As my comment "I did not sell myself well" indicates, I also felt that I had failed as a person who, like most, wants to be liked. Like every interviewing experience, this incident was not just about the narrator's identity; it was also about my own.

My response to Dirk's silences – both his request to go off the record and his refusal to be re-interviewed – was shaped by various emotions: an intellectually indefensible wish to get the full story; the fear of failure; frustration with the narrator. It was also influenced by a complex power relationship. I feared that rapport would diminish if I balked at turning off the recorder. Furthermore, I felt that, being just out of graduate school, I had little leeway in negotiating with Dirk, a professor, and particularly his request to go off the record. His off-the-record story left traces on the rest of the recording. I was flustered, disheartened, and no longer as focused as I wanted to be. Dirk had made very clear to me that this story was not to be repeated or published. I was therefore worried about not asking the wrong questions – questions that might somehow insinuate my knowledge of this story. I also wondered whether this interview was of any value at all if he kept the most interesting stories off the record. Inevitably, my mind was more preoccupied with what had not been recorded than with what had been put on the record.

One result of my emotionally charged response was that I did not "hear" what Dirk told me. Following conventional wisdom that I could not "use" what was not recorded, I had decided to "write off" this specific story. In rushing off to the next on-the-record story, I failed to ask why he wanted to tell me the story in the first place; after all, he could have chosen not to tell the story. I therefore did not realize that Dirk had led me in an interesting direction; I did not hear that he suggested a queering of my approach; and I did not hear Dirk's wish, perhaps even his need, to tell the story. After all, how many people had he been able to tell this story? Thus, because I focused so much on what I wanted "the record" to be and ignored Dirk's concept of "the record,"<sup>9</sup> I perceived a silence where there actually was none.

Yet, I also missed the silence in the room. Deviation from conformity, writes Robyn Fivush, "often leads to *being silenced* . . . Some deviations may be so threatening to the dominant narrative that they simply cannot be heard and so continue to be silenced."<sup>10</sup> Dirk's counter-narrative was not fully silenced (he told me the story), but could also not be fully voiced (he did not go on record and thus tell a larger audience). Failing to pursue his story, I became implicated in his being silenced.

### Pen and paper: written communication in oral history

Perceived silence, and implication in silencing, may be on or off the record in another form: as a written note, as was the case in an interview I did with Christel Meisinger (pseudonym) in Vancouver in 1993. Meisinger was born in 1931 and grew up in Kassel, Germany. She was twenty-one years old when she and her eighteen-year-old girlfriend Helga migrated to Vancouver in 1952 to work as domestic servants in private homes. Meisinger was happy at her place of employment, but her friend Helga was not:

My girlfriend used to cry a lot. So, one day I told [my employer] Mrs. Manning that Helga wasn't too happy there. So she discussed it with her husband and then he said after supper: "Look: you phone Helga to tell her to pack her suitcase and Mr. Manning is going to pick her up, to be in front of the door at seven o'clock to pick her up." Well, the deal was to get her out of there as soon as possible and Mrs. Manning said: "She can stay with you downstairs" in my room and when Thursday came – I don't know what day the week this was – when Thursday came was my day off, then I would go with Helga to the Unemployment, on Robson it was and try to explain the situation there and then they would place her someplace else. And this is what we did.

As she recounted the story, I began to wonder what the cause of the problem might have been. The literature on domestic service in the early 1990s, although not nearly as comprehensive as now, had already told me that sexual harassment was a major threat to female domestic servants, especially those who lived in their employers' homes. I therefore assumed that Helga had experienced some form of sexual assault. Concurrently, I began to anticipate a silence on Meisinger's part. Considering that she felt the need to share the story, without going into details, and following my own ambivalent needs between getting the story and respecting my interviewee's privacy, I asked:

AF: What was the situation that it was so urgent to get her out of there as fast as possible?

CM: [At this moment, Mrs. Meisinger hesitated, remembering that the cassette-tape recorder was on, got up to get a piece of paper and pen, wrote down something and gave me the note. It had one word written on it: "Juden" ("Jews"). She made clear with her gestures that this topic was off the record and I was not to probe any further during the interview. As she was doing all of that, she continued to talk:] Uhh . . . Anyways, so that's what we did, Mr. Manning put me in the Cadillac and, and . . . Mr. Manning put me in the Cadillac and there was Helga with her suitcase and we put her in and she stayed with me for two weeks and they placed her almost across from me. Mr. Manning ate in the dining room, the kids and I ate in the kitchen. I don't know where Helga . . . and she had this great big room and one cheap little fold-away cot in the basement, not really privacy or anything, it was just so cold, the whole situation, the way they treated her and that was the way she couldn't handle it. So, Mr. Manning, I told him that and he pulled her out and they gave her that job. And I was always the one . . . she is younger than me, two years.

The written note continued to lie on the table between the two of us, and it served as a reference again later in the interview, when Meisinger recounted her own disappointment about domestic work in other employment situations: "Spring cleaning, washing walls, and, you know, and I did this for – few times, you know, for, uhm – [points to the word *Juden* on the note] you know, and hey, they



wanted work done, you know, five, six hours washing the kitchen, washing the hallway, washing and, you know, it's hard work."<sup>11</sup> Here we have a silence that is both on and off the record. The tape was running, it recorded a person getting up and scribbling on a piece of paper. But it did not record the important information, which was captured only by my mind's eye. The silence this creates in the archival document is the same as the one in the interview with Dirk. Yet, it is a different kind of silence. Unlike Dirk's, it was not premeditated. It was a decision of the moment, in the flow of the narrative, within the dynamics of storytelling. It surprised Meisinger as much as me. During this interview sequence, Meisinger sounds flustered and her heartbeat must have quickened as she realized that she had talked herself into a situation that was difficult to escape.

My own emotions, in the span of just a few minutes, ran rampant. This was a great story, and every great story comes with an adrenaline rush. It was both secretive and taboo. There was, as in Dirk's case, the narrator's wish to tell me something she did not dare tell, a secret from her life. Dirk's and Meisinger's stories were confessions. How, I wondered, should I react to this? Should I read it out loud to get it on tape? Should I turn off the recorder to see whether she wants to talk about it? Neither seemed possible. Reading it out loud would have been a clear breach of confidence and probably the end of the interview or at least quickly diminishing rapport. Turning off the recorder might have broken the flow of the story.

This was no longer a story about female labor migrants; it was now about *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – German society's emotionally charged attempt to "come to terms" with the Nazi past.<sup>12</sup> Out of the blue, it seemed to me at the time, Christel Meisinger, who had invited me into her home, fed me, and generously told her life story to a stranger, exposed a darker side of herself.<sup>13</sup> Yet, my attitude to her did not change. My main motivation for interviewing has always been curiosity. Every story I hear is new, strange (in its anthropological meaning: unfamiliar), and intriguing, and so this was yet another facet of an increasingly complex and fascinating person. The off-the-record note nevertheless affected the rest of the interview, because until we stopped the recording my mind continually wandered back to this note, as I was trying to figure out what it meant and how to mention it on the recording. Even though I was younger and much less experienced as an interviewer than when I interviewed Dirk seven years later, I was more willing to entertain the idea of getting this on the record. The more comfortable atmosphere – in someone's home rather than in a public place – and a much less pronounced hierarchical interviewer–interviewee relationship contributed to this attitude. Yet, I did not touch the topic, and this had to do with the broader context of the interview.

This particular context was convoluted. Much was negotiated before the interview with Meisinger. In the early 1990s, oral historians and Canadian universities were just beginning to work with national and university ethics guidelines and, as a new graduate student, I had no personal experience with research ethics formalities. If memory and my records serve me right, I sent a one-page description of my interview proposal to a person in charge of research ethics. Upon request, I provided a detailed list of questions. I agreed to anonymize all interviews. For reasons that I can no longer recall, it came to be assumed (by whomever, but eventually by me) that I could not ask my interviewees why they had left Germany because it would somehow insinuate that they had committed crimes during the war or that I would appear to hold them somehow responsible for the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> I had in part been

alerted to the idea that German immigrants may be sensitive when speaking about “the war,” because I had received a few anonymous messages telling me to stop wallowing in “the past,” and, specifically, to abstain from researching German immigrants’ Nazi activities (which I was explicitly not doing). My own upbringing in Germany made me sensitive to the idea of talking with Germans who had lived through the Third Reich. Since the late 1960s, there had been a general consensus among the postwar generations that the older generations had utterly failed in coming to terms with the past and had been complicit, to say the least, in forgetting and silencing the past after the war. At the time Meisinger put the note on the table, the months-long sensitization to potential ethical concerns about postwar Germans’ presumed Nazi sympathies had made me particularly impressionable to such an incident.

Concerns about the completeness or coherence of the story and fears of failing as an interviewer or human being were not immediate, as the extensive description in the transcript documents: for me, the specific incident was not off the record. It was only many years later, when I began to write about this particular episode, that these concerns crept up. For a long time I wondered whether and how I could use this information, which I now understood to be off the record. I came to the conclusion that anonymity was sufficient protection for the interviewee. Yet, this did not address several questions. Why had Meisinger decided to start a story that she knew would likely end up the way it did? Narrative coherence is a powerful communicative force; once a story is begun, a narrator is no longer fully in control of it. It develops its own dynamic. It demands to be told and finished. What is our responsibility when we detect such dynamics? Experienced orators, like politicians and celebrities, know how to steer a story into safe havens. Many others, who, like Meisinger, tell a private story in public for the first time, do not.

At the same time, as I listened again to the interview and read the transcript, it is clear that I accepted Meisinger’s “off-the-record” request, because I did not pursue the topic. The literature on sexual abuse in domestic service had prepared me to pursue one line of questioning, but the ethical concerns about German migrants’ relationship to the Nazi past – concerns that lingered for eight years, until I began interviewing for a project that focused on just these encounters with the Nazi past – had closed off another line of questioning, implicating me in the postwar silence about the Nazi past that my generation and that of my parents had so vehemently rejected. There were no silences where I perceived them, and there were silences where I did not see them.

### **Oral historians’ irrational but understandable fear of silence**

These off-the-record incidents tell us something about our troubled and troubling relationships with silence. We are faced with a dilemma. Intellectually, we know that there will always be silences in our interviews and that such silences are telling; we can write papers and books about them. Emotionally, however, we fear silence. Silences signal more than a loss of information. They signal a loss of control and a resistance to our wish to know, explain, and understand.<sup>15</sup> They constitute an attack on our professional and personal identity.



An oral history interview is a “conversational narrative”<sup>16</sup> that is the product of the moment and a specific situation. Our interviewees perform narratives in interaction with us; their lives are narrative constructions, their memories shaped by social and cultural conventions. Intellectually, we know that there is not one true story out there, enclosed in a container called memory that can be excavated with the right tools. Yet, we do everything in our power to learn and use the right tools so that we may avoid silences. The better the interviewer (the better his handling/knowledge/development of the right tools), our guides tell us, the fewer silences there will be. I do not wish to discard this sentiment as positivist method, but I am perplexed by the disconnection between our documentary method and our constructivist understanding of life stories. Do we use positivist methods in our interviews to arrive at postmodern truths in our books?

Oral historians have developed a methodological apparatus that, through sophisticated interrogation techniques and capturing technologies, aims to record and archive people’s memories in a finite form: an analog or digital medium stored in a warehouse. Our guidebooks tell us to buy the best equipment we can afford, and on the listserv H-OralHist we discuss whether we should use audio or video recording, because we wonder which of these technologies captures more information. According to those standards, recordings ideally are uncompressed, not just in digital format but also in content – we want people’s memories in WAV, not in MP3. All of these aspects of the apparatus insinuate that the final product is complete; it has a beginning and an end – it is secured in a container.

Oral historians have also developed a theoretical apparatus, one that tells us that the data we captured are far from fixed, finite, or complete. Memories are fleeting, products of encounters between interviewers and interviewees, effects of social discourses and narrative conventions, and only residually and indirectly connected to lived experiences. We draw on this apparatus as we write our own stories about the captured memory fragments, we use bits and pieces – fragments of fragments – and we draw on our memories and notes of everything that happened off the record, to explain the incompleteness of the ostensibly complete, archived record.

Emotionally, however, silence is difficult for us on several levels. As people interacting with others, we find that “silences are particularly disturbing if they disrupt the conversational flow.” What is at stake here are “feelings of belonging, self-esteem, and social validation.” Even a brief silence can result in “negative emotions and feelings of rejection.”<sup>17</sup> We are comfortable with silences in interviews only as long as we control them.

Silence troubles us also as professionals. There is little that oral historians – just like other researchers in the humanities, social sciences, and even natural sciences – fear more. What happens if our sources, our informants, our lab experiments do not speak (to us), or at least not in a way that we can share with other researchers? Silences call into question our identity as good and successful researchers.

Silence is a double-edged sword.<sup>18</sup> It is a symbol and tool of oppression. Those who are silent are so because they have been silenced (oppressed, subjugated, and discriminated against), not because they chose to remain silent. By giving the silenced an opportunity to interrupt this silence, to fill this silence with words, to give voice, to speak up and out, they can be liberated. Our conviction that oral history is a tool to overcome oppressive silence, to liberate through speaking, to democratize history by giving people a forum for their testimonies provides motivation and drives much

of our work. When our interviewees fall silent, we are troubled: Did we silence them? Why do they reject our generous offer of a public forum for their voices?

For the subaltern, however, silence may also be a powerful weapon, and often it is their only one: "Lies, secrets, silences and deflections of all sorts are routes taken by voices or messages not granted full legitimacy in order not to be altogether lost."<sup>19</sup> Both Dirk and Meisinger revealed secrets and taboos. By speaking off the record, they ensured their experiences did not become "altogether lost."

We fight silence with silence. Ritchie suggests combating interviewees' silences with silence itself. If an interviewee's answers are short and perfunctory, he advises, the interviewer may need to keep quiet: "Silence indicates that an interviewer expects more. Ten seconds can seem excruciatingly long if neither party is speaking, but can encourage the interviewee to give a more detailed response."<sup>20</sup> Valerie Yow counsels that the length of interviewer silences depends on the "narrator's pacing." She also mentions the ten-second pause, but warns that long pauses may disaffect the interviewee.<sup>21</sup> For Ritchie and Yow, interviewer silence is legitimate as long as it does not diminish rapport.

Even if our interviewees choose to remain silent, we often do not let them. We make our interviewees speak through theory.<sup>22</sup> Now trained to "listen to silences," oral historians, Luise White charges, have turned silence into "another site of interpretation." This, she argues, "got out of hand . . . Anyone whose voice was not included had been silenced, and any number of interviews were interpreted for what was unsaid, rather than what was said. This gave interviewers much more power than they would admit wielding . . . Not speaking was not seen as resistance but as oppression."<sup>23</sup> We have then developed methodological and theoretical responses to our interviewees' silences. But we have not developed ethical responses. An ethical response will have to balance two concepts that are at times in conflict with each other, as Yow explains: "protection of the well-being of the persons studied and truth in publication."<sup>24</sup>

### Toward an ethics of silence

What may an ethics of silence entail? The following are tentative and hesitant suggestions that use my own, limited off-the-record experiences as a springboard. First, simply accepting interviewee silence seems to be neither constructive nor responsible, at least not if we accept Portelli's claim that a good interview is hard work for both interviewer and interviewee and should leave both parties changed.<sup>25</sup> Silences may be the most uncomfortable spaces in our interviews, for both, interviewee and interviewer. Luisa Passerini, Kathryn Anderson, and Dana C. Jack focused in their interviews on the difficult choices their female narrators had to make in their lives.<sup>26</sup> Tracy E. K'Meyer and A. Glenn Crothers "pushed [their interviewee] to talk about topics we considered more important than she did."<sup>27</sup> Accepting silence may implicate the interviewer in the narrator's silence (Meisinger) or silencing (Dirk). Persistence in asking questions about silences can be positive if we keep in mind not only our own interests, but also those of the interviewee.

Indeed, we should talk about silences during our interviews, not just afterwards. Writing about reticence in oral history interviews, Lenore Layman states: "I do push against reticence within an individual interview if only to be certain that the narrator



is definite about it."<sup>28</sup> But is leaving it at that and moving on to the next topic the best interviewing strategy? In my interviews with Meisinger and Dirk, I should have taken the time to address these silences. In my interview with Dirk, leaving the tape recorder off, I could have asked questions after he told me the story. In my interview with Christel Meisinger, I could have continued the interview and, at the very end, asked questions about it, on or off the record. There are many questions to ask about silence: Why did they feel this was an important story? Why did they believe they could not say this on record? What would have to change to have them talk about it on record? And finally, what part or version of the story, if any, would they consider saying on the record? Such questions may encourage narrators to reflect further on their decision to go off the record. This probing leads to "thick dialogue"<sup>29</sup> that transcends "a rehearsal of comfortable and conventional formulas"<sup>30</sup> and gets at "the story behind the story."<sup>31</sup> Responding to silence during interviews means learning more about different kinds of silences and attempting to find out what exactly our interviewees are expressing through their silences.

Second, we need not worry about silence as being destructive of "the record" if, instead, we broaden our own concept of a "complete archival record" to include our interviewee's concept of "the record." From an archival perspective, silence connotes a loss of information. But silence includes both verbal and nonverbal communication.<sup>32</sup> Narrators, as Julie Cruikshank and Tatiana Argounova-Low, point out, have their own concept of "the record" in mind and it may include more than one version.<sup>33</sup> Dirk and Meisinger had different ideas about the record they wished to leave for me and a broader audience. Narrators are aware "that they speak through their interviewers to a larger audience,"<sup>34</sup> but they nevertheless draw a distinction between the stories they tell us and those they tell an anonymous audience.

Third, we need to acknowledge the power of silence as a rhetorical tool, and we have to study how we and our narrators use it in oral history projects. For Donald Ritchie, who interviews savvy politicians, it makes sense not to go off the record. But going off the record may also be the only means an interviewee has of asserting agency. Ritchie must be read against Dwight Conquergood, who writes that "subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted."<sup>35</sup> Different relations of power in interviews create different regimes of silence.

Fourth, in our theoretical approach to silence, we need to negotiate a dilemma posed by Luise White: How should we write about silences? Is our writing a colonization of our interviewees' silences? Does our listening to and writing about silences construct a Benthamian panopticon around our narrators? White argues for a return to Michel Foucault's notion of silence as a discursive strategy.<sup>36</sup> In his exploration of the excessive discourse about sex in the Victorian period, Foucault found that it was important not only to locate what was and was not said, but also how the speakers and the silent were "distributed" in society and which discourses were "authorized."<sup>37</sup>

Finally, and this is connected to the first point, silence shapes our interviewees' identities as well as our own. Giving narrators time to reflect instead of rushing in with the next question makes us skilled interviewers; as the narrator tells a story, questions come to us, but we must remain silent and enjoy its fruit when most of our unasked questions are eventually answered. Conversely, however, if we lose

control over our interviewees' silences, they threaten our identity. When an interviewee asks us to stop recording or begins to communicate via paper scraps, there is a break – often unexpected – in the conversation. Such “severe breaches of conversational and interview etiquette . . . also implicate the interviewer by suggesting implicitly that the question was inappropriate.”<sup>38</sup> It is quite understandable that we fear, in such situations, that there may also be a rupture of rapport or even a break of trust. We cannot help but react emotionally, we cannot help but take this personally, we cannot help but doubt ourselves at such moments. As we attempt to control these situations, we often wonder, “What did I do wrong?” Going off the record and other silences are assaults on our identities as both oral historians and human beings who wish to be liked. But going off the record is not always an outright refusal to answer. Both Dirk and Meisinger wanted to tell me a story, as a lecture and as a confession. This was their use of the interview, their agenda. In sharing authority with the interviewee, the interviewer accepts that oral history is not just “history-telling,”<sup>39</sup> but an interactive communication guided in part by the interviewee's objectives. If we fail to listen to and probe these silences, we may become complicit in perpetuating them.

Perhaps, understanding silences, both our own and our interviewees', as constructive rather than destructive may be a first step toward an ethics of silence. “Patient listening”<sup>40</sup> must be combined with a more active engagement and questioning of silences that may resist understanding by both interviewer and interviewee. Accepting silences may be the most beneficial way forward after we have collaboratively, with our interviewees, probed the deeper meanings of such silences. Only then will we find a balance between protecting the well-being of our interviewees and “truth in publication.”<sup>41</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Mary Jo Maynes *et al.*, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 9–10, 109–10, 119; Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler, “The reluctant respondent,” in James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (eds), *Inside Interviewing: New Lenses, New Concerns*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003, pp. 153–73; Lenore Layman, “Reticence in oral history interviews,” *Oral History Review*, vol. 2, Summer/Fall 2009, pp. 207–30; Tracy E. K'Meyer and A. Glenn Crothers, “‘If I see some of this in writing, I’m going to shoot you’: reluctant narrators, taboo topics, and the ethical dilemmas of the oral historian,” *Oral History Review*, vol. 34, no. 1, Winter/Spring 2007, pp. 71–93; Werner Enninger, “Focus on silences across cultures,” *Intercultural Communication Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1991, pp. 1–38; Namkje Koudenburg, Tom Postmes, and Ernestine H. Gordijn, “Disrupting the flow: how brief silences in group conversations affect social needs,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2011, pp. 512–15; on a family's collaborative remembering through “empty speaking,” see Alexander Freund, “A Canadian family talks about Oma's life in Nazi Germany: three-generational interviews and communicative memory,” *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, vol. 29, Special Issue: Remembering Family, Analyzing Home: Oral History and the Family, 2009, pp. 1–26; on conformity, see Robyn Fivush, “Speaking silence: the social construction of silence in autobiographical and cultural narratives,” *Memory*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 88–98.



- 2 I thank Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki for inviting me to speak at the "Off the Record" workshop.
- 3 Alexander Freund and Laura Quilici, "Exploring myths in women's narratives: Italian and German immigrant women in Vancouver, 1947–1961," *BC Studies*, nos. 105–6, Spring/Summer 1995, pp. 159–82; Alexander Freund, "Troubling memories in nation-building: World War II – memories and Germans' interethnic encounters in Canada after 1945," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, vol. 39, no. 77, May 2006, pp. 129–55.
- 4 Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Sciences*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994, p. 136; Adler and Adler, "Reluctant respondent," p. 153.
- 5 Alexander von Plato, "Contemporary witnesses and the historical profession: remembrance, communicative transmission, and collective memory in qualitative history," trans. Edith Burley, *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, vol. 29, 2009, pp. 1–27; Alexander V. Plato, trans. Christoph Tonfeld (ed.), Alexander Freund, "Interview guidelines," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, vol. 29, 2009, pp. 1–5; Almut Leh, "Ethical problems in research involving contemporary witnesses," trans. Edith Burley, *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, vol. 29, 2009, pp. 1–14.
- 6 Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, second edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; Yow, *Recording Oral History*.
- 7 Betsy Brinson, "Crossing cultures: an interview with Alessandro Portelli," *Oral History Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, Winter/Spring 2001, pp. 87–113; for an expanded and more widely circulating version of this story, see Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, pp. 183–98, 186.
- 8 Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 98.
- 9 See Julie Cruikshank and Tatiana Argounova-Low, "'On' and 'off' the record in shifting times and circumstances," in Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 43–58.
- 10 Fivush, "Speaking silence," p. 96 (emphasis in original).
- 11 Christel Meisinger (pseudonym), interview by author, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada, December 1, 1993.
- 12 Freund, "Canadian family"; Freund, "A German post-1945 diaspora? German migrants' encounters with the Nazi past," in Mathias Schulze et al. (eds), *German Diasporic Experiences: Identity, Migration, and Loss*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008, pp. 467–78; Freund, "Troubling memories."
- 13 Alexander Freund, "'How come they're nice to me?' Deutsche und Juden nach dem Holocaust in Nordamerika," in Christiane Harzig (ed.), *Migration und Erinnerung. Reflexionen über Wanderungserfahrungen in Europa und Nordamerika*, Göttingen: v&r unipress, 2006, pp. 143–56.
- 14 On some of the negative effects of formalized ethics requirements, see Adler and Adler, "Reluctant respondent," pp. 154–6; Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, pp. 55–71, 56.
- 15 Maggie MacLure, Rachel Holmes, Liz Jones and Christina MacRae, "Silence as resistance to analysis: or, on not opening one's mouth properly," *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 6, 2010, pp. 492–500.
- 16 Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, second revised and expanded edition, Chicago, IL: Precedent Publishing, 1985, p. 136.
- 17 Koudenburg et al., "Disrupting the flow," p. 512.
- 18 Fivush, "Speaking silence," p. 88.

- 19 B. Johnson, *A World of Difference*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1987, p. 31, quoted in MacLure *et al.*, "Silence as resistance," p. 497.
- 20 Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 94.
- 21 Yow, *Recording Oral History*, pp. 98–9.
- 22 Smith, "Analytic strategies," p. 348.
- 23 White, *Speaking with Vampires*, p. 75.
- 24 Yow, *Recording Oral History*, p. 130.
- 25 Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, pp. 55–71. Also see his afterword in this collection.
- 26 Cited in Richard Candida Smith, "Analytic strategies for oral history interviews," in James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (eds), *Inside Interviewing: New Lenses, New Concerns*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003, pp. 347–67, 353.
- 27 K'Meyer and Crothers, "If I see some of this in writing," p. 90.
- 28 Layman, "Reticence," p. 226.
- 29 Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, p. 11.
- 30 Smith, "Analytic strategies," p. 364.
- 31 K'Meyer and Crothers, "If I see some of this in writing," p. 91.
- 32 Michal Ephratt, "Linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic speech and silence," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 43, no. 9, 2011, pp. 2286–307.
- 33 See Cruikshank and Argounova-Low, "'On' and 'off' the record in shifting times and circumstances."
- 34 Smith, "Analytic strategies," p. 363.
- 35 Dwight Conquergood, "Performance studies: interventions and radical research," in H. Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 311–22, 312, quoted in MacLure *et al.*, "Silence as resistance," p. 498.
- 36 White, *Speaking with Vampires*, p. 77.
- 37 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1978] p. 27.
- 38 Eva M. McMahon, "A conversation analytic approach to oral history interviewing," in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (eds), *Handbook of Oral History*, Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2006, p. 353.
- 39 Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, pp. 24–39.
- 40 As recommended by MacLure *et al.*, "Silence as resistance," p. 498.
- 41 Yow, *Recording Oral History*, p. 130.