

# The Power of Silence: Anxiety and Autonomy in TA Labor

Work and Occupations

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Margaret Eby<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

When I took on increasing responsibilities within my university's pedagogical training programs during the pandemic, I expected an increase in collaboration and pedagogical discussion because of the difficult teaching circumstances. Instead, I came to see a silence that kept teaching assistants (TAs) from talking about their labor process either with their instructors or with fellow TAs. In this paper, I theorize this silence both as a defense against anxiety and as protecting autonomy. I draw on my own experiences as a TA, my work as a pedagogy instructor in my department and for the university, and an ethnography of working TAs to investigate how TAs leverage their silence to strategically manage multiple competing interests. Finally, I suggest that TAs first internalize these dual purposes of silence to make sense of their teaching labor and later carry it with them as they go from trainee to professional academic.

## Keywords

teaching assistants, university, education, silence, autonomy

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Margaret Eby, Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94709, USA.

Email: [margaret\\_eby@berkeley.edu](mailto:margaret_eby@berkeley.edu)

It was my first-semester teaching, and I felt way in over my head. Other first-time teaching assistants (TAs) had been assigned to teach an introductory course, while I was assigned to a contemporary theory course I remembered getting a solid B in as an undergraduate. From the beginning, I was afraid that everyone (the instructor, my fellow TAs, and my students) would quickly figure out that I had no clue what I was doing, so I went about my work as secretively as possible. I didn't tell my students it was my first time teaching, afraid that they would take advantage of my obvious inexperience or feel short-changed. When other TAs asked me how things were going, I'd respond with a relatable nonanswer ("Oh, you know, going") and share a deep sigh or eye roll of camaraderie. When the instructor made a passing (complimentary) comment about one of the memes I had made for my students, I worried that he had "found out" my lessons lacked intellectual rigor. Meanwhile, I was furiously studying the major theorists of the course, coming up with new lesson plans each week, and preparing for every possible question a student could ask me.

In all my frenzied concealment, I completely lost track of what other first-time TAs might be up to. Normally we would all be together for a seminar on teaching within our department, but because of a scheduling conflict, I was taking mine across campus in the school of social work. We talked topically about teaching strategies—how to get students to speak up, and organizing office hours—but we had little else in common. I assumed that my silence about what was really going on with my teaching had to do with our different disciplines. I similarly justified concealing my inexperience from my students to protect my authority, avoiding touching base with other TAs to protect my reputation, and secretive lesson planning to keep my instructor from finding out how hard I had to work to learn the material.

But I found that as my experience grew over the next two years, so did my love for teaching. It was a good thing, too—my fellowship required me to teach every semester after my first year in grad school until I reached the dissertation phase. After four semesters as a TA, I was also finding that such consistent teaching was taking a toll on my research. I decided to apply for a departmental pedagogy fellowship that required just 2 hours of instruction per week, rather than usual four, to spend the fall semester coteaching the department's pedagogy course for first-time TAs with a tenured professor.

Three weeks after I found out I had received the fellowship, the campus shut down because of COVID-19. The project ahead of me was suddenly significantly more daunting than I had expected and would take much more than my anecdotal evidence of successful discussion group strategies to pull off. But while I anticipated increased demand for support because of the new terrain of online teaching, I also reckoned that it might provide openings to

share pedagogical experiences and strategies. Early in the pandemic, this seemed likely: a faculty person created an ongoing seminar on teaching remotely for TAs and faculty to collaborate on teaching strategies, the TA Teaching & Resource Center began a Graduate Remote Instruction Innovation Fellowship program, and a feeling of comradeship proliferated among teachers who were forced overnight to pivot from in-person to online instruction. However, by the time the fully remote fall semester began, this wave of public discussion of teaching died down.

Across spaces designed for students to engage publicly and deeply with the difficulties of pedagogy, we stayed silent. Why? I began by thinking through my own silence over the semesters: as a new TA, I had stayed quiet to cover for my own insecurity. As I became more experienced, I shared different reflections about my teaching in different spaces (with friends in the program, with the people I taught with, and with my instructors). When I took on an official role as a pedagogy instructor for the university, I again produced a different narrative about my own teaching and presented it differently to different groups of students.

In this paper, I analyze these silences, from my own first-time teacher training and first semester as a TA to leading these trainings myself. I began a more serious exploration of this silence during the pandemic, when I started to prepare for the pedagogy seminar first by taking a winter course on remote instruction organized by the university's resource center for TAs, which I then led over the summer. At the end of that summer, I recorded a video discussing best practices for the university's Teaching and Resource Center that is still shown to all incoming TAs at the university. A few weeks later, I joined as a seminar coleader for the first-time TA conference, which I led again the next semester, and the next. I perfected presentations on how best to remember students' names and strategies for effective grading. I tried to put new TAs at ease by reminding them that it was ok not to always have an answer for a student's question and encouraged them to find support among their fellow teachers.

However, silence about the real issues in teaching—how we worked, why we cared—blanketed these pedagogical discussions. Because early TAs were more concerned with the practicalities of running a discussions section than issues of pedagogical orientation or labor, I missed opportunities to talk more openly about what we really did when we taught, from managing our relationships within the teaching team to conceptualizing our labor as a mechanism of reproduction within the university. Even in the pedagogy course within the department, which I had spent so long preparing for, there were limitations to the kinds of discussions we could have around teaching. Even when many of the graduate students began to challenge the orientation of the

course toward developing a love of teaching and debated its importance given diminishing rewards on the job market and detracting effects on research, I bulldozed through the syllabus with my pedagogy blinders firmly in place. I was convinced that if only we could learn to teach well, these questions of silence and exhaustion would resolve.

After all, how could we really be silent about teaching when it happens so publicly, and when we are encouraged to talk about it so much? The proliferation of teaching talk, particularly in the wake of a transition to remote learning during COVID, indicates a desire (at least from university administration and department heads) for us to speak openly and frequently about what we do in the classroom. The renewal of university interest in the structure of teaching during the remote months offers an important opportunity to better understand how and why TAs are often silent about their teaching labor. The disruption of habitualized teaching strategies meant that first-time TAs were not the only ones learning new strategies for managing student learning and evaluation but also other teacher-laborers were forced to rethink their pedagogies, often quite publicly. But despite a proliferation of new spaces for discussing teaching, relative silence persisted: there was no discussion of how we conducted our teaching labor, from prep time to labor games to instructor management to student care (Gepts, this issue; Germain, this issue; Pasquinelli, this issue; Torres Carpio, this issue). The centrality of silence to university teaching labor became clear as opportunities to reject it came and went. Foucault (1978) shows how power often works through the encouragement to divulge; silences, alongside the things that are said, are an integral part of discourses (27). Thus, my investigation of silence became an investigation of the academy as well as the academic, in order to make sense of the machinations that kept silence so firmly cemented in the process of teaching.

I found the space to reckon with these ideas when the graduate-level pedagogy course evolved from a registered class of 13 students to a smaller pedagogy seminar of five in the following semester, which continued to meet through the next summer and finally the next year. We met each week to discuss readings of our choosing and share field notes (the others on their teaching, me on what I observed in our discussions) and subject them to collective analysis. As themes emerged and we began developing our own lenses through which to interpret our data, our focus shifted from pedagogy and the outcomes of our time in front of a class to all the labor that went on before and beyond it. We began to map our work onto the history of the teaching structure and the evolving landscape of higher education, linking theories of the university to our lived experience within it. Two years of weekly meetings facilitated the development of a new account of teaching that indicated the complexity of silence in our labor process.

The result is the following account of TAs' silence around teaching. Here, I draw on the disclosures of TAs willing to overcome these silences to describe two main functions—dealing with anxiety and protecting autonomy—to uncover its roots and repercussions. By grasping resistance ethnographically in depicting disruptions of this silence (Kaminer, 2018), I expand on theories of academic labor beginning with the question of how graduate students adopt this silence as a defense against imposter syndrome, adapt it as a means of protecting autonomy, and might interrogate cases in which it is broken as illustrations of its power. Finally, I explore possibilities for overcoming these silences through broader labor action.

## **Theorizing Silence in the Labor Process**

Although labor scholarship accounts for myriad ways in which workers might strategize to avoid oversight and protect themselves in the process, silence among workers remains an undertheorized element of the labor process. The power of silence lies in strategies of both domination and resistance to control over knowledge of the labor process. Literature analyzing the struggle over this process has focused on silence to the extent of managerial efforts to control knowledge and subsequent worker efforts to retain, and in some cases conceal, their work process from managerial oversight (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979). However, the silences I found in teaching labor existed not only within manager–worker relationships but also across and between workers, often lasting far beyond the teaching appointment. Here, I account for this silence via two mechanisms: a discursive mechanism, through which the university promotes official discourses about teaching, and an instrumental mechanism, through which multiple university constituencies (instructors, students, program milestones) hold TAs accountable to different goals. The discursive mechanism generates anxiety, while the instrumental one creates a need for autonomy: silence manages to address both.

In the first section of the paper, I show the ways in which silence functions as Gill describes it: a screen behind which the injuries of laboring in the neoliberal university are hidden. I also show how what might be described as a silence around teaching is in fact an incitement to discourse, albeit one that organizes and extends institutional models of pedagogy. In the second section, I extend this model of silence as a mechanism for TAs to protect their autonomy in the labor process.

### **Anxiety**

In her analysis of the silence within the neoliberal university, Gill characterizes academics' inability or refusal to talk openly about their work as

obscuring the true cost of the profession. She presents this collective silence as resulting in a number of hidden injuries, from exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, and guilt, to feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence, and fear of exposure within the contemporary academy (Gill, 2016, p. 41). Because Gill's responsibilized (i.e., endlessly self-monitoring, planning, and prioritizing) subject sees their professional failures (real or perceived) as personal (Gill, 2016, p. 42), rather than institutional, their anxiety results in increased productivity and decreased organization with other academic workers.

As Gill presents it, this responsibilized academic worker arrives ready-made, with a fixed anxiety about what it means to be successfully exploited. Here, I extend Gill's theory of silence in the labor process by showing how keeping quiet about the labor behind the product bolsters TAs' feeling of competency while instilling in them a preference for isolation and a reluctance to share difficulties. This internalization of moralized labor harkens back to Weber's construction of capitalism arising from what he calls the "Protestant ethic": the endowment of work with moral and spiritual significance. The result is a historically persistent "spirit of capitalism" through which commitment to work, and overwork, proves to oneself and to others divine approval, not dissimilar from Gill's construction of the academic's idea of scholarship as a "noble" calling or vocation (Gill, 2016, p. 45). Gill's academic type is thus inhabited by Weber's protestant, consumed with performing elect to be elect, and adopting various neoliberal strategies of "self-monitoring, flexibility, creativity, and internalization of new forms of auditing and calculating" (Gill, 2016, p. 52; Weber, 1905).

### *Autonomy*

I also find that silence is used as a strategy for the TA to gain the power to work independently and cultivate agency alongside injury. Thus as various silences permeate every level of academic work (Gill, 2016, p. 52; Raaper, 2018), such discrepancies between seen and unseen labor provide cover for workers to carve out professional autonomy. Where Gill suggests disclosure and vulnerability as one strategy to reckon with collective harms and avoid further exploitation, I argue that it is precisely within this silence that tactical avoidance of injury and individual empowerment occurs. Autonomy in the case of the TA might be described as deviance or resistance; with each comes an arrangement of ideological, personal, and professional goals. Deviance within organizations has been theorized as a process through which production pressures become institutionalized (Vaughan, 1996), with workers then experiencing contradictory external workplace regulation as being compatible with their own interests

(Lopez, 2007). TAs might deviate from professional directives when their production of lesson plans, student support, or grades becomes too taxing, while an ideologically taxing directive (no extensions, limited time for student care) might result in a more organized resistance.

Such resistance might consist of both active and passive agendas (Jermier et al., 1994), with silence playing into both categories. But because silence is so difficult to measure, it becomes an unreliable indicator that anything is going on at all. Successful resistance to oversight stays within the private transcript, with the public transcript reflecting seamless compliance with authority (Scott, 2008). Although in one sense the public transcript might describe the year of remote teaching as an expression of resilience, the hidden transcript shows the mass burnout, the mental health and material needs gone unmet, and the growth of disillusionment with the contemporary university. These discrepancies between public and hidden transcripts are not a matter of public record and thus create little impetus to enact change, but Scott writes that the goal of subordinate groups is to escape detection; to the extent that they achieve their goal, such activities do not appear in the archives. In this reading, the minor resistance that TAs do undertake—granting students extensions, spending additional time on exam material, pushing back against overly demanding assignments—is most effective when invisible. As one TA put it during a discussion of this tension, “there’s a political project here, but you also have to survive.”

These minor forms of resistance give the TA a feeling of independence over their teaching work and allow them to maintain their own teaching philosophies independent of their teaching teams. Thus, I theorize silence not only as a mechanism of injury but also as a possible strategy to avoid it. First, I demonstrate one aspect of silence as responding to “power over” insecurities, both defending against the perception of failure and deepening its hold over the lonely labor process of the TA. Next, I demonstrate a second, more strategic deployment of silence giving TAs “power to” organize their teaching labor in such a way that it aligns with their ideologies around pedagogy, research, and their position as graduate students. Finally, I suggest that these dual deployments of silence as protection against both the discursive and instrumental mechanisms of extraction set the course for TAs as they embark on lives in academia: on the one hand, they must maintain their silence in order to pass as part of a qualified and productive elect while organizing strategies for resistance and autonomy; on the other, they are molding themselves into the very subjects the university demands. Analyzing TAs’ accounts of their labor process, from their first encounters in the field through their collective reckoning with what teaching labor is, shows that how silence works is an overlooked mechanism of labor processes.

## Dealing with Anxiety

As I first learned as a new TA, maintaining silence is a means of protection against imposter syndrome. Even in smaller settings—like the teaching meetings between an instructor and their 1–6 TAs—there was pushback against sharing what went on in each person’s discussion sections. Keeping lesson plans close to the chest means that no one can critique them; avoiding talking about discouraging teaching experiences gives the impression that everything is going well in sections. Some TAs might also be inclined to keep lesson plans to themselves because they make them up as they go along. But even as TAs become more experienced, this insecurity persists. Staying silent conceals this from both instructors and other TAs, maintaining TAs’ cover as capable academic workers.

Because I experienced this anxiety most acutely as a new TA, I reasoned that this anxiety might wane as time went on and I gained confidence in the classroom. However, others in the seminar pushed back against this theory. More than one of them described the feelings of professional or even moral failure that accompanied an unsuccessful discussion section two years into teaching; Michael, the tenured faculty member who cotaught the graduate pedagogy course and had been teaching for several decades, confirmed that these feelings never entirely let up for him either. One of the factors we discussed as driving these outsize reactions was this ingrained sense of being part of the academic “elect.” Graduate students’ entry into the department is marked by reminders that they have been chosen, from their initial acceptance to their first-semester proseminar. Michael recalled the general welcome of most department chairs to the incoming cohorts: *some of you might think there’s been a mistake, but I guarantee all of you belong here, and you have been chosen by the admissions committee because of your potential to succeed.* This message might help allay more immediate fears going into the first year of courses, but second-year graduate students might be juggling a full course load, teaching, and service within the department. When one of the balls drops—say, a disengaged section or students’ poor performance on an exam—TAs might question whether they’re cut out for academia. One seminar member noted the isolating effects of this phenomenon: “No one wants to share shame—as far as you know, you’re not the person you thought you were. And that doesn’t go away.”

This process tracks the silent suffering of Gill’s academic, who nurses their hidden injuries privately to avoid public scorn. But as Gill’s account also shows, this silence serves a second purpose of concealing myriad strategies for dealing with an unmanageable workload. She writes of the tremendous thought and emotional labor that academics expend coming up with



individual strategies to manage demands such as journal reviews (Gill, 2016, p. 47). But despite these strategies, the demands of the profession are never-ending, bearing with them not only the threat of professional failure but also one's legitimacy as a scholar. These effects are particularly evident among women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals employed as TAs. Research has shown that they are more likely to receive unfavorable evaluations from their students, have their authority and expertise questioned within their departments, and experience abuse during graduate school (Heffernan, 2022; Miller & Chamberlin, 2000; Walkington, 2017). But even among more privileged graduate students, pressure persists.

One member of the seminar described this pressure to prove one's worthiness as an academic as being "in the water" of graduate school. Even when things are going well, a TA might be driven by a fear of these negative feelings to put more and more into their work. As the group of new TAs went into their second semester of remote teaching due to COVID-19, the impact of being stretched so thin began to show:

"This semester is hard because I can't say no to anything—I haven't looked at my own research in months."

"I wanted to be a 'special' TA who really made an impact, but now I'm just trying to make a frozen meal of a lesson plan for them."

Others went on to report feelings of hopelessness, inadequacy, and invalidation—no matter what they did, fewer and fewer students would turn up to their sections, have their videos on, or respond to discussion prompts. Their students' exhaustion was easily interpreted as their own failure as instructors, and their stress about teaching combined with their own exhaustion to take a toll on their other work.

But of course, not all teaching is such drudgery. Most weeks TAs reported back on some moments of elation and validation when a lesson plan was successful, or spoke about particularly meaningful office hours in which they felt well suited to address a student's needs (Germain, this issue; Torres Carpio, this issue). These moments might be spoken about publicly in teaching team meetings, where TAs could share their successes both to connect with other TAs and to assure instructors that they were doing their jobs well. However, for TAs experiencing fewer "wins," these meetings could be isolating. One TA recalled another TA on their teaching team speaking to them privately about their concerns that something must be wrong with them because their sections weren't going as well as others' seemed to be. Because of

their experience and desire to support their colleague, they then made a point of trying to bring up some of their own teaching difficulties in formal TA meetings to create space for sharing failures, but to limited success. Although one TA might be willing to confide in other select TAs, they are less likely to confess their classes' shortcomings to their instructor.

Although silence protects TAs who are worried about their performance from further scrutiny, it can also hide what could be interpreted as unseemly confidence. A member of the seminar described several instances in which his feelings of relative competence or teaching proficiency kept him from engaging openly in discussions with his teaching team or sharing successful teaching strategies with other TAs. In a teaching team meeting in which he seemed to be the only one whose section quickly caught onto a concept, he decided not to share his anomalous experience for fear of coming off as "pretentious." Keeping quiet would protect other TAs from embarrassment and the confident TA from scrutiny.

I understood this tension between being open and preserving social and professional relationships only too well, having experienced this discomfort first as a new TA and again unexpectedly as a co-instructor of the pedagogy course. One strategy Michael and I continued from previous semesters was the designation of the last half hour of class for private discussion between me and the other graduate students. Our logic was that some TAs might not feel comfortable disparaging their instructors or sharing difficult teaching moments with a professor in the room. Although these half-hour talks were generally unmemorable (and sometimes ended early if no one wanted to share anything), I was struck by the difficulty I had in navigating them after the fact. If someone brought up an issue I thought the group would benefit from, should I tell Michael so that we could plan a session around it? In how much detail should I share the account? Or should I assume the TA would bring it up in our next class if they wanted broader input? If our next class covered the same topic, would the other TAs think that I had told Michael what they had shared in confidence? On the other hand, Michael was often curious to know what had gone on in our sections, hoping they would yield more insight into our lesson plans. Should I be vague with him or forthcoming? Having become so consumed by teaching and feeling somewhat rootless in academia (my advisor had recently been appointed to a busy administrative post) I was hungry for validation and direction and felt compelled to share. And as their "confessor," I took their disclosures as fuel to organize future discussions where we would talk about their problems "the right way." In doing so, I lost the possibility of creating a liberatory discourse that fully accounted for the unique demands of teaching labor as they would develop and persist across our careers.

This multiplication of discourses was an exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about our teaching labor, “and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (Foucault, 1978, p. 18). But disinterest in this institutional project, along with the recognition of my mission as a particularly ineffective spy, drove us further into our silence, each preferring to avoid the conflict that might come with disclosure. And so the hidden injuries were nursed behind closed laptops, TAs grappling variously with their own perceived success or failure, isolated in turn by their commitment to, or resentment of, teaching.

Thus, silence has power over the TA. But as the semesters went on, and I continued to amass evidence based on both my own teaching experiences and those of the group, I found that the TA also learns to use silence, rather than simply being used by it.

## **Protecting Autonomy**

Some TAs, I found, adopt and manipulate silences to carve out a space to design and deliver their teaching in ways that might run counter to the institutionally prescribed models. Like fast food workers or care home employees, deviance from plans or rules allows TAs to streamline their work and complete the tasks required of being a graduate student, in addition to being a TA (Leidner, 1993; Lopez, 2010). A frequent topic of discussion in our pedagogy seminar was the difficulty of balancing the demands on our time and the necessity of silence, if not avoidance, to maintain the cover of a successful graduate student. For example, a TA might skip a check-in with their academic advisor rather than tell them they’ve fallen behind or prepare a lesson plan on the bus to campus rather than sacrifice study time the night before. TAs’ unique employment status across contradictory roles necessitates coordination across these roles to adequately prepare for the multiple demands of the profession (Gepts, this issue). As well as protecting their valuable time, silence allowed TAs to organize their labor in alignment with their ideological goals within teaching, regardless of whether they met instructor guidelines. Here, I show how TAs use silence to protect this independent coordination on two fronts—to maintain autonomy from the instructor and from other TAs—while organizing their time and teaching ideologies.

### *From the Instructor*

TAs have sound reasons for keeping their labor process hidden from instructors. To start, even opening a genuine conversation about how teaching is

going in a meeting with the instructor and fellow TAs would introduce conflict to what TAs describe as a relatively perfunctory ceremony. Bringing up a problem would be akin to reminding an elementary school teacher that homework was due as everyone packs up for the day—no one wants to be the one to start problems. If TAs do speak up it usually involves a logistical issue, such as deadlines or extensions, rather than the actual labor process of preparing for or giving lessons. Even if a TA is willing to open up about the labor going on behind the scenes, there is no guarantee that this disclosure will result in meaningful adjustments. On one occasion, a TA reported back on an “awful” GSI meeting—the grading workload had become unmanageable, and every meeting seemed to result in more and more tasks. “The instructor closes off debate as soon as one person says something,” they explained.

However, TAs’ frustration with a lack of meaningful dialogue within the teaching team eventually revealed the possibilities that came with going quietly about their work. They begin silently setting their own course for their sections and strategizing their labor in ways that align with their ideological objectives. As no one managing the public transcript takes much notice of what is going on beneath them, TAs are allowed to take the kind of pedagogical liberties they need to make sense of their jobs, such as exercising discretion in the interest of their students (Torres Carpio, this issue).

One TA shared that they extended a deadline despite instructor rules for a student because they felt that they were better positioned to understand the unique demands under which their student was working. She expressed doubt and anxiety about this move, afraid that it would both disadvantage the student and go against the explicit guidelines of the instructor, but later felt that she had made the right decision. She was able to maintain her values as a teacher and her position as a TA secure through silent adjustments unaccounted for on the public transcript. This strategy indicates the precarity of the TA as they operate between instructor and student—having experienced the strain of being an undergraduate more recently, some TAs are inclined to cut a student more slack than an instructor might and consider this kind of workaround as an ethical component of teaching (Torres Carpio, this issue). Other TAs gave examples of consolidating assignments for students who had fallen behind and disregarding more stringent rubrics when they felt they did not adequately assess student work.

This tension between maintaining values and adhering to instructor mandates was made only more visible during unsettled times, which increased the university’s dependence on both this silence and workers’ longing for autonomy. As instructors scrambled to organize a return to in-person teaching after COVID-19 put most courses online in the spring of 2020, few guidelines about how exactly this should be done—and which precautions were

feasible—were available. Instead, individual teaching teams had these conversations amongst themselves, sometimes strategizing silence to mask diverging opinions and plans. A member of the seminar recounted one such conversation in which his instructor addressed COVID-19 plans as a part of semester preparation: the university expected students to be back in person, but the TA worried that canceling the section every time someone was out sick would make the semester completely remote. He listened quietly as other TAs talked about the possibility of canceling sections in various circumstances—a positive test, a possible exposure, or rising rates on campus. Although he too worried about COVID transmission within his sections, he quietly shared a link to the university’s formal policy on COVID—that having a student test positive is not necessarily a reason to cancel the class or make it remote—and saw the conversation stop short of standardizing COVID cancellations.

In this case, an experienced TA strategically employed silence to ensure an outcome he agreed with when it came to COVID risk and exposure. By posting the official university FAQ in the Zoom chat, he not only kept quiet without giving up his perspective but also mobilized the official transcript to support his private one. Although his main objective was to keep the instructor from devising a plan that ran counter to his interests, he also kept in mind his status as part of the group, stating that he didn’t want to “go against” them so early in the semester. In the next section, I explore the silences between TAs as another strategy for preserving autonomy.

### *From Other TAs*

Although most TAs are given advice either in their pedagogical training or by their instructor to collaborate on lesson plans with their fellow TAs to save time and effort, very few describe using this as a strategy to conserve resources. Instead, they preferred to stay silent about what went on in their sections even in casual conversation with their fellow TAs. One reason was that taking additional time to coordinate among TAs to discuss the course or lesson plans places an additional administrative burden on those who try to organize within their teaching teams: as one TA of several semesters recounted toward the end of the term, while she had initially tried to organize such collaborations, she soon stopped attending planning meetings because she preferred to go it alone. Another TA recalled a time early in the semester when his instructor had broached the idea of dividing up lessons among the TAs so that each would only be responsible for developing a fraction of the section plans. This suggestion was met with such an uncomfortable silence that the idea was never brought up again. This TA noted that a

majority of the TAs present had taught multiple times before, interpreting the silence as the rejection of a collaborative system that would constrain autonomy and make them beholden to the ideas of another TA. Despite having the same job description, different TAs usually prioritize different investments (e.g., time spent lesson planning vs time spent on personal research) and different outcomes (strong relationships with students vs. strong relationship with instructor), making collaboration difficult (Gepts, this issue; Torres Carpio, this issue).

Other TAs found that intentional collaborations resulted in unreasonable demands on their time, the transgression of personal boundaries, or increased inter-TA policing of teaching strategies. A member of the seminar recounted that early in the semester she had had difficulty reconciling the pace and standards to which she was asked to hold her students. She saw drastic inequalities across students as courses met virtually through COVID, with some joining from their private apartments while others dialed in from their shifts at work. More broadly, she had difficulty reconciling the work of teaching sociology at a major public university with the daily needs of her students. She saw care as a necessary part of teaching, often spending additional time doing late-night office hours and extending deadlines for students who needed it. This invisible, unrewarded labor only increased during COVID, but the only possible outcome of revealing the toll it took on her would be sanctions on how she spent her time. Keeping quiet about this additional labor prevented instructors or other TAs from trying to dissuade her from this practice.

When silence is the norm, trying to break it is a question of not just logistics, but cultural adjustment. TAs are so unaccustomed to talking to each other or with other educators that when the chance presents itself, they either avoid it or extend their silence in the space. In an attempt to create some teaching community within the department, Michael tried to organize a workshop that met weekly during the pandemic. Although a few graduate students came to the initial meetings, they rarely contributed and eventually, the group became largely made up of lecturers and ladder faculty. The potential advantages of teaching transparency or the public airing of teaching grievances did not emerge as possible incentives for TAs.

## **From Breaking to Overcoming**

Despite TAs' general reluctance to speak openly about their teaching, there are of course instances in which this informal practice of silence is challenged. In this final section, I analyze accounts of TAs or instructors breaking this silence, either intentionally or because they have not yet picked up on its necessity. These cases tend to fall into one of three categories: lack of TA

experience/ignorance of the tradition of silence, disclosure to avoid constraint, and intentional inter- and intratranscript exchanges.

Because each course might have between two and six TAs leading discussion sections, a TA who attempts to be transparent about their teaching and their labor process risks inviting feedback and standardization (here described as increased constraints) for the entire group. One TA, at this point several semesters into teaching, recalled a time when a student asking for an extension included the instructor in an email reply. The instructor, realizing that they were likely being left out of the loop on student extension requests, sent an email to all their TAs requiring them to direct all extension requests to the instructor rather than dealing with them themselves. The TA whose student had initiated this process found themselves apologizing privately to their fellow TAs for bringing such increased scrutiny and instructor involvement into their relationships with their students.

In another case, a TA's revelation to their instructor that they diverged heavily from the lecture materials in section resulted in required transparency that subtracted from other TAs autonomy (lesson plans became increasingly standardized) and incursions into their planning time (these lesson plans were developed in all-hands meetings). As a member of the seminar recounted, making daily calls on a case-by-case basis about whether the instructor should or should not be brought in made her feel unintentionally "sneaky." On the one hand, she owed it to her students to give them the clearest line to the instructor, but the process could become logistically overwhelming. It might also put other TAs' autonomy at risk: an unplanned intrusion on the public transcript, like the disclosure that discussion sections were running contrary to the instructor's expectations, might upset not only one TA's divergent teaching strategy but also set the entire teaching team up for a kind of "teaching audit" that could reveal other divergent strategies from grading to attendance policies.

Such scenarios might require TAs to break their silence in order to maintain minimal constraints on their teaching labor. When a teaching meeting turned into a discussion of how to best standardize extension requests, a member of the seminar recalled his compulsion to speak up and share his own strategies to push the new standard closer to the policy he already had in place. Later, he reflected on how he felt being confronted with this unanticipated silence-breaking and the relationship management he had to do as a result: "Maybe it's just because I was in a bad mood, but I found all this back and forth frustrating, especially from a labor process/autonomy standpoint. Aside from one TA, everyone else figured out a way to manage dealing with extension requests in a way that doesn't take up significant work time." He went on to express annoyance that rather than silently figuring

out a solution for themselves, they put everyone else under surveillance by the instructor. But he went on to suggest another contributing factor to this breakdown of the silence—because the TAs on this teaching team had not established communication amongst themselves, there was no precedent for other TAs to share their strategies for dealing with extension requests before taking it to the instructor. The failure of a collective private transcript meant the public transcript was the only option for seeking solutions, but, as the TA recounted, “as soon as the potential for a standardized extension request was brought up, I felt threatened and nervous because there was a chance my own labor process would be constrained for a problem I’m not even experiencing.”

The flexibility around COVID clearly weighed heavily on incoming TAs, who lacked the experience and informal support to try and make decisions at the beginning of the semester. When I taught a day-long training for a group of these first-time TAs a week before the semester began, I had hardly finished introducing myself before the questions about COVID began to pour in through Zoom’s chat function. “What do I do if I get sick?” asked one attendee. “What if my student gets sick?” added another, then “What if my instructor gets sick?”. Hypotheticals kept coming—what if a student in my section has a confirmed exposure, but doesn’t have their test back yet? What if someone won’t wear their mask? If I get symptoms of long COVID, will I lose my job? If another TA gets long COVID, will I be forced to take over their work? The official policy line for TAs—at least at the university level—was tactical silence. The only new information the first-time TA training packet had included was a reminder that TAs could not ask about students’ vaccination status or require the use of masks beyond university policy. I struggled to respond. I readily admitted that the university’s policies were unclear and unhelpful but tried to remind students that this was an issue that would ultimately be resolved within their teaching team. I felt at a loss for how to describe the intricacies of these negotiations—how do you teach silence outside the prescribed discourses of pedagogical training?

Although Gill describes the breaking of academic silence as one possible means of resistance against the encroaching demands of the university, I argue that these instances show how it is by maintaining the silence that TAs can most immediately avoid increased control over their labor process. Foucault accounts for this paradox by describing silence as a shelter both for power, “anchoring its prohibitions,” and a place where this power loosens its holds (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). Thus, the seminar that emerged from the pedagogy course presented an opportunity for intentionally challenging the silence not in a last-ditch attempt to preserve our isolation, but to assemble our private transcripts in search of our shared process.



Overcoming the silence was a slow process, helped by small numbers and preexisting social relationships. It took vulnerability to begin to share our shortcomings as teachers alongside our successes, as well as our initial reactions to the patterns we saw around us. I initially grappled with my anxiety about watching my colleagues watch themselves, and telling them what I saw, but came to enjoy mulling over our debates on the merits of varying pedagogical approaches as I wrote up my notes. When we realized that what had emerged spontaneously over these months had superseded an analysis of TA pedagogy and become a difficult reckoning with our own labor conditions, it also took courage to subject our own personal and professional sites to such scrutiny.

As the weeks went on and remote teaching went into its second semester, I noticed more failures coming up in our check-ins, like a section that went poorly, a week on Zoom with no cameras on, a discouraging disagreement with an instructor. This openness highlighted exactly what we miss when we are silent—the ongoing, mutual slog that is learning to teach. I also heard of more covert operations, more strategic silences, which protected TAs' time, autonomy, and beliefs about who they were as academics. This process of revealing oneself and one's practices to others did not result in catastrophe. Rather it allowed us to compare notes on what can often be an isolating experience and discern for ourselves what we were up to with silence, and what silence was up to with us.

## Conclusion

In November of 2022, 48,000 academic workers across the University of California system began the largest academic strike in US history. Among those striking were 19,000 TAs, who sought increased wages, improved benefits, and a cost-of-living adjustment in one of the most expensive places in the world. This action precipitated a larger discussion about what exactly teaching labor entails, and how it is valued by the university. Much of the organizing that went into such a mass movement happened between and among academic workers as they recognized the labor they performed and the ways in which they were being exploited. The successful launching of such transformative action is, regardless of the outcome or internal disagreements, indicative of the power of overcoming the silence around academic labor.

The strike also presented an opportunity for a revelation of the two mechanisms of silence—the discursive and the instrumental—and an attempt to reconcile them. It should be noted that the strategies by which academic workers attempted to put pressure on the university were revocations of the teaching

labor (grading, lesson preparation) that goes so under-analyzed outside of strike action. Although the strike challenges institutional discourses around teaching, its labor, and its value, this special issue helps to establish the various accountabilities that work alongside these discourses to preserve silence. Each author here tries to balance the university's account of their job with what they see as competing demands: Elizabeth Torres Carpio on accountability to students, Natalie Pasquinelli on accountability to faculty, Thomas Gepts on accountability to research relationships, and Justin Germain on accountability to the self. Not surprisingly, each of these authors held leadership roles in organizing the strike within our department.

In disentangling official discourses about teaching and these competing demands, I have tried to show the multiple and contradictory uses of silence in the labor process of the TA: first, to wield power over them, providing protection in exchange for isolation; and second, to grant them the power to carve out autonomy on the teaching terrain. As Sennett and Cobb find in their 1973 analysis of the hidden injuries of class, the workers I encountered had a powerful and complicated sense of mission in their lives: they were determined that if their circumstances had limited their freedom, they would create freedom for themselves. They were "resolved to shape actions open to them, so that in their own minds, they felt they had acted from choice rather than necessity" (Sennett & Cobb, 1993, p. 121). As Burawoy (1979) and later Sallaz (2002) find, management might find that conceding some worker autonomy for increased worker consent and effort is a fair exchange.

The result of this shaping is the simultaneous contention of hidden injuries with hidden triumphs. The TAs studied here first learn to use silence as a means of defense, then as a tool to carve out their own space between forces that conspire to overwhelm them, ultimately adopting the silence as a way of academic life. All the while this silence obscures the demands of an institution that requires their experience, professional expertise, and isolation to operate. I hope that in extending Gill's critique of silence in academia to include the paradoxical empowerment that silence offers, I have also broadened this account of silence as a strategy to subvert such domination. In addition to the cost this silence exacts on TAs, I have also attempted to propose a theory of silence in the labor process more broadly. In workplaces that rely on competitive self-management to extract labor, such as tech firms, the silence between and among workers compels employees to structure their work in response to perceptions of manager expectations (Sharone, 2004). Silence as a strategy to protect against anxiety and defend autonomy might also hide bad behavior in the workplace and engender professional norms that endanger workers (Bosk, 2011).

When I transitioned from keeping my own silence to interrogating the silence of my colleagues, I did not expect to find it both so widespread and so invisible to its practitioners. I was surprised by the extent to which this silence hid TA labor from instructors, but even more so by the extent to which it hid TA labor from other TAs. The mystery only unraveled when I was able to juxtapose my assumptions about how others worked and memories of being a TA with the unfolding accounts of the TAs whose work also appears here. I discovered that the silence hides not only the injuries of our work but also our resistance. This finding was only made possible through the disclosures of other TAs with whom I could go behind the curtain to show just how silent labor is performed. Studying TAs as workers rather than teachers revealed a replicable and calculated logic that entrenches a sense of independence and belonging alongside hidden injuries. Further evidence is the necessity of silence to each of them realizing their projects: negotiating with instructor management, caring for students, organizing competing projects, and designing creative pedagogies.

These types of labor processes engender silence among their workers, isolating them by disincentivizing the collectivization of a private transcript, rendering management increasingly unreachable, and creating space for autonomy only in secret. These strategies serve to keep these responsabilized workers invested in the framework within which they labor while creating little room for any definition of resistance. Future research should endeavor to reckon with definitions of worker resistance and differentiate theories of individual vs. collective strategies for increased autonomy.

TAs' silences around their work are a crucial part of what makes their independence valuable to the university as well as to themselves. As trainee academics are inculcated with the sensibilities and strategies by which they might make their way successfully through the university, they also create the conditions for their own isolation. I am not so optimistic as to call for an end or even an institutionalized disruption to this silence, but I do propose a reckoning with this silence that holds it accountable for its potential as well as its harms. It is through the movement of strategic overcoming that the mechanisms of silence can be maneuvered, publicly and privately, to defend against injury.

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### ORCID iD

Margaret Eby  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1004-5934>

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## Author Biography

**Margaret Eby** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Their research focuses on the legitimization of expertise, from historical eugenics to direct-to-consumer genetic testing and artificial intelligence.