

Discussion Questions by Chapter
Invisible in Austin: Life and Labor in an American City

Chapter One. *The Exceptional City in Historical Context*

1. Austin is celebrated for its growth because growth is assumed to be good. In what ways has the city's growth created or exacerbated social inequalities? What measures do you think urban planners should take to prevent these inequalities, if any?
2. The author emphasizes the destruction of the Austin dam as a pivotal point in the city's economic history. Why is this event so important in shaping how Austin developed as a city and what labor issues do you think emerged from this particular history?
3. Like many urban areas, racial and economic segregation were key factors in determining how space was differentially occupied by the city's inhabitants. In what ways are racial and economic segregation still relevant to the social dynamics within the city?
4. Assuming that urban entrepreneurs and planners agreed that Austin could and should become a city with greater shared prosperity and inclusiveness, what changes would you suggest they make in order to work toward that vision?

Chapter Two. *Santos: The Gold Hunter*

1. What does Santos's story teach us about the experience of migration?
2. Why is Santos so obsessed with his lottery ticket?
3. What does Santos contribute to a city like Austin? What does he receive in return?
4. What is the meaning of labor for Santos? How has it changed over time?

Chapter Three. *Clarissa: A Woman Who Fell on Hard Times*

1. What are some main stereotypes of "the homeless?" Does Clarissa challenge these stereotypes? If so, how?
2. How might a stronger "safety net" have changed Clarissa's life trajectory?
3. Why is "presentation of self" so important to Clarissa?

Chapter Four. *Ines: Caught in a Disciplinary Web*

1. What does Ines's story reveal about how poverty is addressed through the punitive state?
2. How does Ines' social position as an undocumented, low-income woman of color, impact her relationship with her employer, the DAEP, and the criminal justice system? Would Ines' experiences have varied if she was situated differently by race, class, gender, and citizenship status?
3. Can you envision an alternative to the DAEP that - rather than submit parents to further punishment or financial penalties - offers a non-punitive source of support

to low-income families whose children are disproportionately impacted by zero-tolerance school policies?

Chapter Five. *Chip: The Cost(s) of Chasing the American Dream*

1. Chip's story is a story about social and economic mobility in the United States. Behind the idea of the "American Dream" is the idea that through hard work and perseverance you can move up in the world. How does Chip's story challenge this idea? Try to identify the ways in which larger social, economic, and institutional forces affect Chip's ability to achieve the American Dream.
2. The nature of Chip's job gives him some "freedom" in how he organizes his workday. But what can be understood as freedoms, are really ways in which companies today place more burdens on their employees. Identify two to three "burdens" Chip must deal with on the day-to-day; these can include financial, personal or job-related. How does he manage them? How do they hinder his ability in achieving the American Dream?
3. How does Chip's story resonate with you? Choose two to three specific examples where you felt his story resonated with you the most and explain why. If his story didn't resonate with you personally, take a moment to step back and think about why that is and explain it.
4. What larger social, economic, personal and institutional forces affect (or help) your ability to achieve the American Dream?

Chapter Six. *Raven: "The difference between a cocktail waitress and a stripper? Two weeks."*

1. Why is it so important to Raven to have a second job aside from stripping?
2. Raven's story spurs us to question how we typically understand "moral" and "immoral" work. To reiterate the question posed in this chapter's conclusion, what makes one job more or less morally troubling than another?
3. Raven expressed dismay that it is legal for an eighteen-year-old to work as an exotic dancer and use a firearm in the U.S., but not to drink alcohol. At eighteen, one may also serve in the military, gamble, and purchase tobacco products. What messages are implied in these laws about autonomy, consent, and danger for men versus women?
4. In some countries, prostitution is a legal and regulated industry (although the degree of regulation varies widely country to country). This means that sex workers may be registered, organize trade unions, be covered by workers' protection laws, and may be required to undergo regular health checks. In what ways might Raven's life have played out differently if this was the case in the United States?

Chapter Seven. *Ethan: A Product of the Service Industry*

1. What is "emotional labor"? How is Ethan required to do this for his job? Does "emotional labor" affect the "craft of service"? Do you think it is more exploitative than other forms of labor?

2. Define “aesthetic labor”. Give an example of how Ethan had to do this in at least two of his jobs. In your opinion, is aesthetic labor “work”?
3. How is service work a “lifestyle” for Ethan? Why does this matter?
4. How is luxury service work precarious? Give three examples from the text: these can include financial, personal or job-related factors.
5. Why does Ethan explain his addiction as “a product of the service industry”?

Eight. Kumar: *Driving in the Nighttime*

1. What does Kumar mean when he says he was like a fish in water in Nepal, but in the US he is instead like a fish in a fishbowl?
2. Kumar creates moral boundaries between himself and many of the people he interacts with on the job, some of his past neighbors, and in how he sees different neighborhoods in Austin. Why does he do this? What purpose does it serve? What do these moral boundaries accomplish for him and how he sees his place in America? Do we see boundary-making work in other chapters as well? In what ways do we also engage in these practices in our own lives? Why might that be the case?
3. Please reflect on your own experiences taking taxis, if you have any. Have you ever asked your taxi driver questions? Have you ever taken a taxi drunk? Does reading about Kumar’s experiences change the way you understand those past interactions? Will it affect how you interact with cabdrivers in the future? If so, why and how so?
4. How did getting an attorney and legal aid change the course of Kumar’s application for asylum? What does that suggest about how the asylum-screening process works in the US?
5. What does it mean to be “mentally hurt”? How might certain jobs open people up to more mental hurt than others?

Chapter Nine. Keith: *The Music at the Margins*

1. In Keith’s opinion, what has changed about Austin from the 1980s to today?
2. What does Keith mean when he refers to his work as a “hustle”?
3. Why is being seen as a great songwriter important to Keith?
4. Would you consider Keith’s musical career a “success?” Why and/or why not? What does “success” mean to you?

Chapter Ten. Ella: *Fighting to Save a Few*

1. How have Ella’s experiences shaped her understanding of herself and her community? What do you think it would have been like to grow up in and/or live in the neighborhood she describes?
2. What kinds of obstacles did Ella encounter as the only black female in her workplace?
3. How does Ella see her neighborhood today? What issues is she most concerned with? Why?

4. Ella takes a skeptical view of involvement in “politics”, but her actions as a neighborhood leader may be seen as political or social activism in the sense that they involve attempts to resolve social problems. Have you ever participated in a group or organization whose goal was to address a social issue? How did that experience make you feel? What challenges did you encounter?

Chapter Eleven. *Xiomara: Working towards Home*

1. What does it mean to say that the narrative of Xiomara’s life can be “constructed around houses”? How does the home function as a symbol in her life? In American life?
2. Jobs like domestic work and construction are often described as “precarious” work. What is it that makes them precarious? How does a worker cooperative address (or not) issues of work precarity?
3. How does Xiomara’s story compare with what you have heard from the popular media about undocumented immigration? What does it mean to be a citizen?
4. Xiomara’s experience could be described in terms of empowerment. What does empowerment mean and how would you relate the term to her life? Talk about the relationship between individual empowerment and structural oppression.

Chapter Twelve. *Manuel: The Luxury of Defending Yourself*

1. Manuel has struggled all his life to have some control over his future. Think of your own experiences: what obstacles have you faced in your life? What social forces influence these obstacles? Have you overcome some of them? How?
2. Manuel is a good student, a hard-working person, and an active member of his community. However, some people think he should not be allowed to live in the United States. What does it mean to belong to a society? What gives people rights to live in a particular country?
3. There are over ten million undocumented immigrants in the United States. Every year, hundreds of people die while trying to enter the country. What are the causes of this situation? Which policies do you think can help address this problem? What are weaknesses and strengths of different approaches to solve this problem?
4. We usually say that the United States is a “Nation of Immigrants”, and a “Melting pot of cultures”. What do stories like Manuel’s tell us about these phrases? What makes a person “American”?
5. Have you ever participated in a demonstration or social movement? In which ways were your experiences similar or different to Manuel’s? How has activism influenced other aspects of your life?