



The Other Side of Austin, Texas

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*Despite a booming economy, Austin, Texas, is a city where inequalities persist and grow in the shadow of neoliberal governance. Ethnographer Javier Auyero and his students give us a preview of the book *Invisible in Austin: Life and Labor in an American City*, where they explore the rough and varied lives of the contemporary urban poor.*

Working on the dark side

“There’s a joke: What’s the difference between a cocktail waitress and a stripper? Two weeks.” Raven laughs loudly. “I literally went two weeks, it was my two-week mark after my new cocktail job that I first showed my tits for money. And man, do you make a *lot* more money than being a waitress.” Raven, age 19, began stripping in Austin, Texas, because she couldn’t pay her bills. An aspiring chef, Raven had been working determinedly in two to three waitressing jobs at a time in some of Austin’s most iconic restaurants. And yet, earning between \$5.15 and \$10 an hour made it almost impossible to stay afloat financially.

In this booming city, she hopped from apartment to apartment, chasing lower rent, and from job to job, chasing more hours, income, and bearable working conditions. Raven endured back-to-back shifts, unreliable schedules, sexual harassment from bosses and coworkers, and promises of raises and promotions she never saw. Exhausted and desperate, a man she’d been dating suggested she apply for a cocktail job at a strip club, where tips were much better. Facing an uncertain future with low wages and little autonomy, she applied and was hired on the spot.

Cocktail-waitressing boosted Raven’s wages, but not substantially. Her joke unfolded like a prophecy: 14 days after she began cocktailing, the allure of greater pay fueled Raven to step onstage and strip for the first time. “Once you show your tits to everybody, you’re done... It’s the rule: you can’t be a waitress anymore... Then you’re on the dark side.” Work on the “dark side” came with huge financial gain. She began making \$1,000 dancing four days a week. Suddenly Raven was her own boss, setting her own schedule and working when she pleased. Some days, she loves this job; other days, she’s horrified by it. She enjoys stripping for a married couple who tip generously and treat her well, for example, but cringes recalling the demands for oral sex, groping, and rampant drug use in the clubs.

Although dancing gave her enough to live on, Raven is adamant that this work is temporary. She applied for new jobs on the “reputable” side of the service sector weekly. In 2013, Raven was hired as a secretary at a luxury spa: “my first really stable job!” She is thrilled about this new position: “I get my own desk, and my own computer, and my own phone! I am like a real fuckin’ adult!”

Despite her best efforts, Raven occasionally returns to dancing because she needs the money. One night stripping can mean the difference between making rent or being evicted, or being able to afford gas to drive to her secretary job. In Austin, Raven survives on the perilous edge between low-paid but morally respectable work with little independence, and what some might consider immoral but highly paid work with considerable autonomy.

Homelessness

“I was eligible last Saturday to go back,” says Clarissa. She is referring to the Salvation Army. She continues: “I don’t want to go back. I don’t want to have to walk in a stinky, smelly alley to get in there. It’s like walking a gauntlet. The men just won’t leave you alone.” Clarissa is one of around 2,300 Austinites with no place to call home. A member of the “chronic homeless,” Clarissa has spent roughly the past five years bouncing between the workers’ dorm at the Salvation Army, her storage unit, couches and/or guest beds, and, during the best of times, her own room at an extended-stay motel—accommodations of which none provide the creature comforts, safety, and consistency Clarissa so desperately craves.

Although Clarissa has spent most of her adult life living on the edge, the extent of her vulnerability wasn’t revealed until a car accident that took place in 2009. With no money or health insurance to pay for pricey rehabilitation sessions, Clarissa was left to fend on her own after she left the hospital. Unable to walk unassisted, and thus unable to hold down a job for multiple months post-accident, this decades-long veteran of the food service industry quickly drained her small savings account. In mid-2010, she found herself guarding her belongings on the lawn of her apartment building before abandoning them to travel around the city looking for a shelter that could house her for the night.

Clarissa’s story reveals the lack of a “safety net” for those at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Meanwhile, Clarissa herself reveals a remarkable optimism in the face of what—to most people—seem like insurmountable barriers. “I’m still trying very hard to do what I do,” she says, avoiding government assistance programs in favor of the small, inconsistent paychecks she receives from short-term jobs and occasional support from a local nonprofit. In the meantime, she dreams about a different, brighter future: “My dream job would be to be independently wealthy and to be able to run around and do things for people. Like I want to get people to donate houses for the homeless. For \$10,000, you can get a mobile home for a homeless person. I would love to set up a trailer park that could house people. ’Cause a lot of people complain about [the homeless] coming into your neighborhood but they need a place to live.”

Facing routine violence

“The way of life is not like a straight line,” Kumar says one day. “It is like the way a snake moves.” In 2006, after attending a rally for multi-party democracy, a cadre chased him down and beat him with bamboo sticks. One ordered him killed. He escaped but with lacerations and swelling all over his body. “It was really a very hard time for me.” In his home country of Nepal, Kumar endured torture and three years in prison for his political activism. That year he fled to the US.

In Nepal, Kumar was an attorney and a political science professor. In Austin, he works as a taxi driver. He works the 12-hour night shift, from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Kumar at work



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Kumar deals with a particularly “uncivilized”—a term he uses frequently—version of Austin by working at night. His passengers are so drunk, he says, that they forget their names and addresses. They also vomit. When a customer vomits in his cab, Kumar loses the rest of the night’s earnings because he can’t pick up new passengers. Once when he asked for \$50 to cover the cost of cleaning, the passenger yelled back, “But this is your job! You can clean it up, why should I pay for that?”

Taxi work also offers Kumar up as an object of intrigue and inquisition to his passengers. Kumar is always ducking and dodging questions. Sometimes he asks if they’re going to pay him to answer their questions. Far more than any other, passengers ask: Where are you from? Kumar makes a game of it, giving hints after each wrong guess of his nationality. Why does Kumar play the game? “Throw some piece of bone to the dog so that it cannot come to bite you,” he says.

Documented incidents



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Not all of Kumar’s experiences as a taxi driver are so innocuous. He has been punched in the face while driving. He has been strangled with his seatbelt during a robbery. While Kumar’s life in Nepal was marked by torture because of his belief in democracy, now in the US violence is an unresolvable occupational risk. In spite of the tricks he has learned on the job—to not pick up passengers that make him feel uneasy, to ask for the fare at the beginning, to get an exact address—there are no sure tricks to protect him from the mental and physical abuses of driving at night.

“That is a part of our life.” “It happens in the night-time. Mostly in the night-time.”

Pushed to the margin and used up by unrewarding work

“I figure I probably won’t retire. I mean, just the way things are now. I don’t know how that’s going to work out,” says Chip. Despite working for decades as a copy-machine technician for Copy Co., his hard work has not translated into a secure financial future. He was priced out of Austin more than a decade ago. Chip and his wife of 30 years now live in a 17-year-old double-wide trailer in the town of Cowboy Ridge, just south of the city limits, and he now drives more than 80 miles a day in a city rated as having the third worst traffic in the nation.

Chip’s home



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Cowboy Ridge lacks city services for sewage, gas, and trash. Residents have septic tanks and gas is provided through large propane tanks. Clogging and overflows of tanks and poor heating are major problems in their settlement. Predictably, do-it-yourself housing maintenance is the rule. Chip has hundreds of stories about “something I have to fix,” as well as the mounting costs these fixes require not only in his house (a water line that snapped within his wall flooding his home, his refrigerator, etc.), but also on his and his wife’s timeworn 200,000-mile cars on which they depend to commute to work (“an entire weekend and \$1,500 in parts” doing a “mini-rebuild” of the engine).

Fixing



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But having to constantly fix the things in his life never seems to overwhelm or surprise Chip; for him, it is “just one of those things that happen[s].”

Long commutes take a toll on Chip’s dilapidated van. Decades of long walks from office to office, and countless hours spent kneeling to repair copy machines slowly but inexorably injure his body. “They hurt. They pop,” he says about his aching knees, which have required three operations so far. “Getting up and down you can actually hear it pop: pop! Or if I squat down all of a sudden it’ll catch and it’s like, ‘Oh no,’ and then all of a sudden, snap! [He snaps his fingers.] And then it’s like having a knife stabbed in your knee and then you stand up, stretch out,” he says, “It’s OK, and then you go on.” And yet retiring remains a financial impossibility: “I don’t know, I think when they close the lid on that box and put me into the ground,” he says, “that’s when I’m retired. That’s the way I feel sometimes.”

Discussing the invisible lives at the bottom of the social structure

When someone moves out of the city center because s/he cannot pay for increasing rental prices or property taxes, or someone else dwells with her few belongings in a storage space or is pushed into homelessness, the increasingly exclusionary features of a city’s housing market are made visible. When someone’s job submits them to unwanted advances, physical insecurity, and seemingly innocuous but demeaning and degrading behaviors, from which no amount of savvy or skill can protect or shield them, the unseen exploitative particularities of those jobs deemed most unprestigious and undesirable are felt acutely.

Together, these vignettes highlight the subjective experience of socially and politically produced suffering that we, along with nine other colleagues, inspect in *Invisible in Austin: Life and Labor in an American City*. The seeds of our book were planted four years ago in a seminar room in the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. There, a group of graduate students, many of them future members of the newly established Urban Ethnography Lab,¹ first expressed their discomfort with portrayals of the urban poor dominant in social science literature. Although in agreement with diagnoses about the economic and political sources of dispossession, students of the seminar “Poverty and Marginality in the Americas” were uncomfortable—distrustful and, on more than one occasion, angry—with the ways in which many a text represents the lives of those living at

¹ See: <http://sites.utexas.edu/ethnolab>.

the bottom of the socio-symbolic ladder, including their daily predicament, their beliefs, their hopes. Oftentimes, entire, and quite diverse, categories (the urban poor, young poor men, poor women) were reduced to one or two salient portrayals (single mother, welfare recipient, sex worker, drug dealer, gang member); other times, the complex and changing character of their lives was truncated in order to make (more or less sophisticated) social-scientific arguments. That general discomfort slowly metamorphosed into the incredible, expansive, collective energy that lies at the root of our joint intellectual enterprise—a book that, modeled on Pierre Bourdieu’s now classic study of social suffering in contemporary France, *The Weight of the World*, relies on life-history interviews and ethnographic observation to portray the lives of those working at the bottom of the social structure in the city we call our home: house cleaners, office-machine repairers, cab drivers, restaurant cooks and dishwashers, exotic dancers, musicians, and roofers among them.

Even in a surface reading of newspapers, online news sources, or monthly magazines about Austin, one cannot fail to notice a set of parallel (though hardly contradictory) images and trends. Glowing descriptions of a fast-growing city, a city for the “young and creative,” a “cool” place to live and raise a family, and a city of internationally famous events like the South by Southwest Music Festival and Formula 1, compete with (more or less concerned, depending on political orientations) portrayals of increasing socio-economic inequality and residential class, racial, and ethnic segregation. As seen in many other American cities and metropolitan areas, wealth and poverty, material abundance and penury are booming right alongside one another in contemporary Austin—a thriving, highly unequal *technopolis*. As elsewhere, the sharpening of social inequality magnifies the effects of social insecurity (from job instability and precarity to fears of downward social mobility), and reconfigures the cityscape. Rich and poor residents are increasingly separated from each other, in low- and high-income neighborhoods, with little mobility in between. New exclusive areas of prosperity emerge, while deprivation forces others to the urban margins where environmental risks and poor quality of housing, schools and public services prevail.

The social sciences, and sociology in particular, are on relatively secure ground when it comes to describing and explaining objective inequalities of class, race, and gender, and the mechanisms that generate them. They are on less certain terrain when it comes to understanding the many ways in which individuals, alone or in groups, make sense of and cope with these inequalities. These experiences matter because they oftentimes do the cultural work necessary to perpetuate the social order, but at other times serve as the basis for challenging it. *Invisible in Austin* scrutinizes this more subjective dimension of inequality by zooming in on the lives of 12 individuals—folks like Chip, Raven, Kumar, and Clarissa—who dwell on the “other side” of a booming, increasingly inequitable, and segregated urban area.

The study of social suffering takes a particular relevance (and urgency) in the context of neoliberal governance in the United States under which most previous forms of protection are being swiftly dismantled (i.e. welfare benefits, employer-provided health-care coverage, traditionally defined retirement pensions, etc.) and where the penal state has expanded exponentially in order to manage the effects of growing inequality at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In neoliberal times (and especially in the context of “neoliberalism on steroids,” as we could call the particular climate in Texas at present), socially produced forms of suffering take on exceptionally alarming features. Our collective work seeks to bring these experiences to light so that they can be the subject of public debate.

Further reading

Invisible in Austin: Life and Labor in an American City (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), edited by Javier Auyero, with an afterword by Loïc Wacquant. Photos by Julia Robinson and Eva Hershaw.

Read more about the book at: www.othersidesofaustin.com.

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Katherine Jensen is a graduate student in the Sociology Department and a Graduate Fellow of the Urban Ethnography Lab at the University of Texas at Austin. She specializes in race/racism, the state, and immigration. Her work has been published in the academic journals *Contexts* and *The Latin Americanist*, as well as the scholarly blogs *Racism Review* and *Public Books*.

Kristine Kilanski is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and a Graduate Fellow in the Urban Ethnography Lab. Her research can be found in *Gender & Society* and *Work & Occupations*.

Javier Auyero is the Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Endowed Professor in Latin American Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and director of the Urban Ethnography Lab. His main areas of research, writing and teaching are poverty and marginality, political ethnography, and urban violence. He is the author of several books, among them *Poor People's Politics* and *Patients of the State*. With Débora Swistun, he co-authored *Flammable. Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*. And with María Fernanda Berti, he co-authored the forthcoming *In Harm's Way. The Uses and Forms of Interpersonal Violence at the Urban Margins*.

To quote this article:

Caitlin Collins, Katherine Jensen, Kristine Kilanski & Javier Auyero, "The Other Side of Austin, Texas", *Metropolitiques*, 2 March 2015. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-Other-Side-of-Austin-Texas.html>.