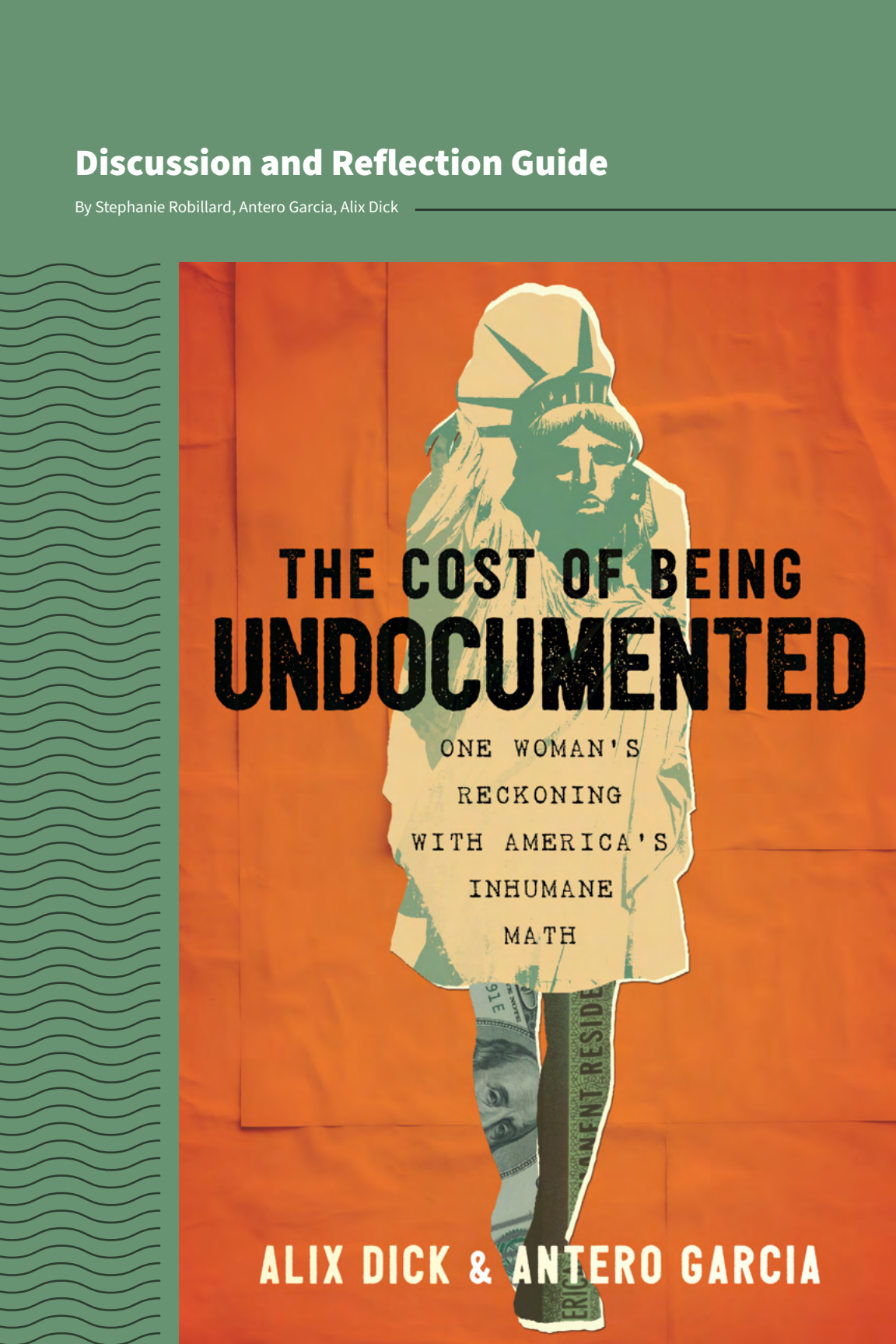


Discussion and Reflection Guide

By Stephanie Robillard, Antero Garcia, Alix Dick



THE COST OF BEING UNDOCUMENTED

ONE WOMAN'S
RECKONING
WITH AMERICA'S
INHUMANE
MATH

ALIX DICK & ANTERO GARCIA

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The Storytelling for Tomorrow Project elevates the lived experiences of those most affected by injustice through qualitative research, revealing hidden narratives that can drive social change and build more just futures.

If you ask me what it's like to move through life as an undocumented person in the United States, I'll tell you it is an exhausting mental game. You have to trick yourself into believing you're going to be okay. Otherwise, how could you even step outside? Legal surveillance is everywhere, and police checkpoints are frequent in Southern California, where I live. Contrary to how you're portrayed in news and media coverage, it's not like you can keep your existence a secret. The IRS, the DMV, the police, they all know you exist. There are records that you surrender to the whims of the government—like proof of address and documentation of your identity—in order to do the simple tasks of living, such as getting a driver's license or receiving your pay.¹ Those records then ensnare you. You are, conspicuously, documented in your process of living “illegally” in this country.

The US government is aware that you are working because, although you lack a Social Security number, you are assigned a personal identification number that you use to pay taxes each year. They know how to find you because of your proof of address. If they have a reason to come get you, they will. The smallest traffic infraction or an altercation at a grocery store could be enough to incite your deportation. But if they don't have a reason, they're going to take advantage of you instead. Even though we work, we are denied the basic forms of help that most Americans can depend upon; no access to consistent healthcare in most parts of the country and no 401(k) or other retirement benefits are just two examples. Because—and this is the crux of how my physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being have been taken away from me—the presence of undocumented immigrants is convenient for the United States. Your time, your labor, your ingenuity: this country extracts these from you cheaply, with no safety net proffered in return.

The scars of the past hardships that brought me to this country intermingle with my fear of Border Patrol—a fear that is triggered by even the most banal of activities. From showing my driver's license at a bar to getting on the freeway to go to work, each public act feels like stepping on thin ice.

In 2011, I fled my home country, Mexico, and landed in the United States in a daze of loss, clutching the hand of my little brother, AC. We were seeking refuge from a war—a war of drug cartels—that the US refuses to acknowledge, meaning the government will not allow us to claim refugee status. I do everything in my control to live in accordance with the legal system in this country. Despite the label I've been assigned, there isn't anything “illegal” about me.

From the introduction of *The Cost of Being Undocumented: One Woman's Reckoning with America's Inhumane Math*

Overview and How to Use this Guide

In the opening pages of *The Cost of Being Undocumented: One Woman's Reckoning with America's Inhumane Math*, Alix Dick reminds readers that the label placed on her and on millions of individuals in the U.S. today, “undocumented,” is a label of convenience for the country. It is an easy shorthand that ignores or glosses over their many contributions as the injustices they endure. By detailing the various ways that her life is enclosed and shaped by U.S. immigration policy, Alix reveals how the physical, emotional, and spiritual costs of undocumented survival take their toll on individuals. Centered around the experiences of one individual, Alix, *The Cost of Being Undocumented* is intended as a personal glimpse into the ongoing impacts of labels and societal biases as well as the opportunities for individual and collective organizing.

This discussion and reflection guide is intended to invite you, the reader, to connect the narrative of *The Cost of Being Undocumented* to your own perspectives, experiences, and (if you'd like) writing. This guide doesn't follow the book linearly. Rather, we offer several broad thematic areas you might explore in more depth. For each section of this guide, we offer a handful of discussion questions and a writing prompt. We've also provided a bit of space for you to add your own questions. Following these sections, you'll find a few preliminary resources that might aid you in your own work supporting the rights of all individuals in the U.S. and to elevate the narratives of immigrant and historically marginalized communities.

An Invitation

As noted in *The Cost of Being Undocumented*, this book was written in parallel with the ongoing writing that takes place at *La Cuenta* (LaCuenta.substack.com). If you are interested in sharing your writing, your reflections, or your questions related to *The Cost of Being Undocumented*, please connect with the editorial team of *La Cuenta*.

Thank you for reading, supporting, and learning alongside this text. We are so excited for the idea and dreams you share to help brighten this world.

Some Guiding Topics To Explore in the Book



Immigrant Experiences in the United States



Labor, Class, and Exploitation



Girlhood, Ethnicity, and Language



Wholeness and Well-Being



Vulnerability and Personal Voice



Research, Authorship, and Imagination



Immigrant Experiences in the United States

At the heart of this book is Alix's experiences adapting to life in the U.S., after moving with her family from Mexico. The border between the U.S. and Mexico distances Alix from dangerous threats awaiting her in her hometown in Sinaloa, Mexico while also separating Alix from the opportunities that would allow her to thrive and pursue her interests in the U.S. Instead of centering a perspective that sees Alix and other immigrants as outsiders begrudgingly tolerated in the United States, *The Cost of Being Undocumented* asks readers to reflect on how immigrants are treated, supported, or excluded throughout all aspects of society.

Questions for discussion and reflection around immigrant experiences in the United States:

- How did you first learn about immigration? Was it discussed in schools? In your family? Reflect on what lessons you learned through being taught and what learned through the messages shared in the news and in your family.
- Are there people in your family, neighborhood, or local community that are immigrants? What stories can they share with you about their experience coming to the United States? What do they remember? How do their stories shape your understanding of immigration?
- The U.S.-Mexico border shapes much of where and how Alix lives today, from isolating her from family to keeping her distanced from violent threats in Mexico. How do borders shape your own experiences today?
- Besides a national border between different countries, are there other borders you encounter?

What questions or thoughts do you have related to immigration after reading this book?

Writing Invitation

Interview a family member, neighbor, or community member about their experiences immigrating to the United States. After you’ve finished talking to this individual, write them a letter reflecting on what you learned and what their words meant to you. (Bonus points if you share this letter with them!)



Labor, Class, and Exploitation

Throughout the book, Alix names how her time is exploited because it is “convenient” for the United States. As she notes early in the book, the narrowed options in her life close off her past, present, and future:

“First, racist policies steal our futures, making it impossible for us to benefit from the systems of social welfare that we pay into. Second, we are often separated from our past by borders that we cannot cross. This past is, instead, a debt we pay through grief. My constant fear of assassins is rooted in my past. Finally, racist cultural orientations of time—the capitalist workweek that pushes my life forward, and tropes like ‘colored people time’—assume an inferiority in how we live in the present.”

From where she can work to how she seeks healthcare, nearly every aspect of Alix’s life is shaped by the interests of others.

Questions for discussion and reflection around labor, class, and exploitation:

- Is there a time that you’ve felt that your time or knowledge was used unfairly by someone else? How did you respond? What did you learn from this experience?
- Alongside legal status, language played a big role in how Alix’s options in the U.S. were limited. What does Alix’s process of learning English look like in this book? Who are her primary teachers? What barriers did she face?
- How would you compare Alix’s journey learning a new language or finding work to your own experiences?
- Just like Alix names the aspects of society that shape her past, present, and future, what are the defining social factors that are impacting your life today? What policies or cultural trends might improve or impede your future?

What questions or thoughts do you have related to labor and exploitation after reading this book?

Writing Invitation

Imagine you were an elected official in the U.S. and wanted to make society more “convenient” for someone labeled undocumented in this country. Write down a list of changes you would make. For each of these items, consider writing a sentence or two about the biggest current barriers we face to make these changes a reality.



Girlhood, Ethnicity, and Language

Throughout the book, experiences related to gender, ethnicity, and language continually shape Alix's life on both sides of the US-Mexico border. For instance, in Ch. 2, Alix describes shrinking herself for the approval of others:

"I started to realize that the smaller I made myself, the more people approved of me. The quieter I was—the easier I was to be around—the better. I felt like I was born a square, but I had to mutilate my edges to become the circle that the world expected me to be."

The intersecting aspects of Alix's identity make her—and many other immigrants—feel like she may not fit into the boundaries of this country.

Questions for discussion and reflection around identity:

- Like the quote above, what are other ways that Alix shrinks herself, both in Mexico and in the United States?
- What is the cost of shrinking oneself?
- What is required to have room to live fully, as opposed to shrinking?
- Have you ever felt like your identity—based on your gender, ethnicity, language, or other characteristics—made you feel out of place? How did you adapt or change as a result of this feeling?

What questions or thoughts do you have related to identity after reading this book?

Writing Invitation

Write about an experience where you have found yourself shrinking back or observed someone shrinking back in order to fit in or fit others' expectations.



Wholeness and Well-Being

Throughout the book, Alix's mental and spiritual well-being are stretched to their limits. In Chapter 8, she writes:

"The extreme costs of my mental health have been a constant presence in every chapter of this book. Every moment of shame or abuse or exploitation weaves a new layer of trauma. I believe that anything is possible when you swim through life. Radical imagination and possibility are always right next to the floating debris of the modern atrocities thrown upon the undocumented community. However, treading water is not something we are built to do for long periods of time. Depression hits differently when you're already exhausted by the waves of a cruel society."

While she mentions that she is buoyed by possibility and imagination, much of Alix's day-to-day experiences in the book often feel like drowning.

Questions for discussion and reflection around wholeness and well-being:

- "Treading water is not something we are built to do for long periods of time" - Unpack this metaphor of swimming versus treading water. Both have a purpose. How are they alike and how do they differ? When might treading water be useful?
- Are there times in Alix's narrative that you might classify as swimming versus treading water? What is unique about those moments? What characteristics describe them?
- How would you define radical imagination? What is needed for radical imagination to flourish? How does depression impede it?

What questions or thoughts do you have related to well-being after reading this book?

Writing Invitation

Write about a time you have shifted from treading water to swimming. What people (including yourself) and/or resources helped you begin to move forward? Was this process of moving forward a linear progression or were there times when you returned to “treading water”?



Vulnerability and Personal Voice

Rather than centering data about millions of individuals labeled undocumented in this country, this book's focus on one individual. It offers a kind of closer, more personal voice to the discussions about immigration. This writing decision required immense vulnerability from Alix, someone who describes herself as a deeply private individual. Broadening beyond the topic of immigration, this book encourages readers to consider their own voices and ways vulnerability can sometimes bring us closer together.

Questions for discussion and reflection around vulnerability and voice:

- Whose immigration stories are elevated in film and television? How do these accounts shape the U.S. narrative around who is a “good” immigrant and who is not.
- A common refrain in political commentary is that the U.S. is a “nation of immigrants.” This idea belies certain facts about the country. How has immigration status changed over the course of the history of the United States?
- Is there a time when someone's story (maybe even yours) helped change people's minds around you? What was it about the story or the experience that made an impact?

What questions or thoughts do you have related to voice and vulnerability after reading this book?

Writing Invitation

Near the end of Chapter 1, the text suggests that, “Our lives are divided into a series of before and afters—moments that irrevocably alter the terrain of where we’ll go and who we’ll become.” Using the line below, can you identify key pivotal moments when your life that altered who you were? For each item reflect on the circumstances that led to this moment and what would have been different.

[illegible]



Research, Authorship, and Imagination

Though written as a memoir in the first person point of view, this book was conducted as a form of social science research. Building from traditional research methods and tools of imagination and speculation, this book centers advocacy for supporting change and collective hope for all readers. Alix writes:

“My biggest hope for this book is that it will open people’s minds to the fact that, in a matter of seconds or with the smallest of mistakes, your life can change forever. That’s what happened to me. Never in a million years did I think I would lose it all and be forced to be undocumented. But I promise you: my life won’t be in vain. Our unity, love, and care for each other will get us through hardships. Fight for your neighbor, share the few or many things you’ve got. All of us were put on this earth with a purpose. The world needs what only you can offer. Our stories, especially now, are so necessary.”

Alix’s text is a reminder that personal stories can serve as both evidence and inspiration, bridging the distance between research and lived experience. Her call for unity challenges readers not just to empathize, but to act in ways that directly support undocumented communities.

Questions for discussion and reflection around research:

- In a note at the beginning of the book, the authors explain that their Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol was rejected. What does this mean in terms of research and the choices the authors made?
- What are the aspects of Alix’s story that are wholly unique? What aspects are quite generalizable?
- In Chapter 1, Alix shares her “why am I here” story. If you had to share a similar narrative of how you ended up where you are today, what are the main points you would share?

What questions or thoughts do you have related to research after reading this book?

Writing Invitation

In the book's final pages, Alix offers a bill based on the various costs named throughout the narrative. She notes, "I'm putting a number on my life because too many of us are forced to bear these costs in order to make the United States operate affordably for everyone else." Look back on the various experiences in your own life. Create an invoice for the invisible costs that allowed you to be reading this text today. At the end of the invoice, tally up all financial and non-financial costs and consider writing a short explanatory note justifying the costs you named.

[illegible]

Additional Reading Suggestions

Immigration Narratives

- *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* - Jose Antonio Vargas
- *Solito: A Memoir* - Javier Zamora
- *You Sound Like a White Girl: The Case for Rejecting Assimilation* - Julissa Arce
- *Beautiful Country: A Memoir of an Undocumented Childhood* - Quiann Julie Wang
- *Americanized: Rebel without a Green Card* - Sara Saedi

Books about Immigration and U.S. Society

- *For Brown Girls with Sharp Edges and Tender Hearts: A Love Letter to Women of Color* - Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez
- *Not “A Nation of Immigrants”: Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion* - Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz
- *Humanizing Immigration: How to Transform Our Racist and Unjust System* - Bill Ong Hing
- *Unbuild Walls: Why Immigrant Justice Needs Abolition* - Silky Shah

Books on Voice and Identity

- *Here to Stay: Poetry and Prose from the Undocumented Diaspora* - Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, Janine Joseph, and Esther Lin (Editors)
- *Hear My Voice/Escucha mi voz: The Testimonies of Children Detained at the Southern Border of the United States* - Warren Binford (Editor)
- *Knowing Silence: How Children Talk about Immigration Status in School* - Ariana Mangual Figueroa



Resources and Places You Can Help

- La Cuenta - LaCuenta.substack.com
- National Immigrant Justice Center - immigrantjustice.org
- The Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights - theyoungcenter.org
- United We Dream - unitedwedream.org
- Define American - defineamerican.com
- National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights - nnirr.org
- Suicide Prevention - 988lifeline.org
- National Domestic Abuse Hotline - thehotline.org





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