

UC Irvine

Teaching and Learning Anthropology

Title

Who is Juan?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/26n825nj>

Journal

Teaching and Learning Anthropology, 1(1)

Authors

Huffman, Arthur
Guaman, Juan

Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/T31141672

License

[CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

STUDENT SHOWCASE

Who is Juan?

Arthur Huffman and Juan Guaman
Minnesota Correctional Facility – Faribault

Keywords: student ethnography; prisons

I first saw Juan in 2014. I had arrived in St. Cloud as an inmate. St. Cloud is the reception and orientation prison for newly-received offenders in Minnesota. All new offenders are assigned to E-house, which is a narrow four-tiered cellblock of two-man cells. It is loud, smells terrible, and is tense because of the constant flow of new faces into an already unfamiliar environment. We never really spoke, but I immediately noticed that Juan seemed to be experiencing more than the normal, new prisoner culture shock, which can be seen on the faces of new arrivals. A good observer can tell who has been here before, who has likely been to prison somewhere else, and who is brand new to the experience of incarceration.

If I had to choose what I consider the worst aspect of prison life, it would not be the loss of liberty. The loss of freedom is not the worst part of prison life; the worst part is the company one is forced to keep. The experience of prison life is directly related to the people one must live around and their worldviews. Making a mistake, committing a crime out of perceived necessity related to addiction, or simply being one of the many poor or mentally impaired offenders trapped in the revolving door of the criminal justice system, are not the same kind of offender as those who are incarcerated as a direct result of malice and intentionality. The offenders who assume a character from a bad prison movie, and those who are just unfit for society, are the element that guarantees a level of suffering that incarceration alone could never achieve.

I would never equate the integrity of a soldier serving his or her country with that of an offender serving time, but the psychological damage done to both can be very similar. The main point of departure is that even if the offender was a good person who made a mistake, he or she will never have the honor associated with a veteran. In both cases, PTSD is generally observable. I am only a layman writing from a prison, but I have had occasion to observe veterans, offenders, and veterans who became offenders. I am certain there is a similarity in their behaviors.

A little more than two years later, I was transferred to Faribault, a medium security prison. I was offered a rare and unique opportunity to attend an Associate of Arts degree program. It requires genuine commitment to not allow the environment to act upon oneself as a poison. I was determined to not allow myself to become bitter

as a result of incarceration and upon some investigation and reflection, I asked to be considered for the college program being offered by the Minnesota Department of Corrections (MNDOC) in cooperation with Inver Hills Community College and Augsburg University.

On the first day of orientation for classes, I saw Juan again. He looked almost exactly the same with the exception of a haircut. He was very quiet, never spoke in class, and seemed only to associate with the Spanish speakers. After the first week, he approached me and asked for some help with an assignment. He then went on to explain that he had heard many people speak English, but he thought that I spoke very proper and correct English. I suspect he may have mistaken the remains of my Boston accent for the mark of an educated man.

It is a common misconception when hearing someone speaking in broken English to assume the speaker is uneducated. Most Americans will never learn to speak another language and will never consider the frustration of an individual attempting to learn English. The willingness to risk one's life to pursue a better way of life is what this country has always represented as its highest ideal. Any student witnessing the monumental task of a fellow student attempting to earn a degree in a new language should be honored to assist in any way possible.

For this reason, I was honored when Juan asked me to assist him in his studies. For the next several months, we went to school together and in the evenings we would work on his assignments. Every weekend, we would walk the frozen winter track and work on Juan's pronunciation of English. My own papers suffered greatly, but it was well worth it to see his joy upon receiving a good grade. There were several times when Juan was ready to quit school. I promised him I would help him as much as possible if he remained and I believe we were both being rewarded for our efforts. During our first semester, I gave him *Charlotte's Web* to read and after our homework he wanted to read out loud to me. He loved the book and we went on to read more.

From my first impression of Juan, he clearly stood out as the "Other" and I have identified as the "Other" all my life. I can never remember a time when I felt comfortable in any setting. Only when I arrived in new places did I feel a sense of comfort. As soon as the newness began to fade, I would again feel out of place. This began when I was a child and has only become more significant as I have become older.

During our second semester, we took a cultural anthropology class with Dr. Katie Nelson. I immediately became interested in the subject and her style of instruction. When she went over the syllabus and explained that we would have to complete an ethnographic interview paper, I immediately thought of Juan. After reviewing many different anthropological techniques, I realized I had been studying Juan from such a perspective without being aware of it. In fact, I had spent much of my life studying others as an untrained field scientist. After passing decades among people who were

made uncomfortable by my level of curiosity, I am discovering there are innumerable opportunities for people of my mindset. The study of anthropology may prove to be especially useful to me precisely because I may have found my niche. Even though I have a lengthy sentence remaining, the time is proving to be a positive growth experience.

Many times, I have tried to interpret or polish Juan's writing; however, I believe for the purpose of introducing him here I will allow his words to remain as close to how he gives them to me as I possibly can.

My Family

My family is very important for me, as it is to anyone, although, we are not living together now. I am Juan Guaman. I am 27 years old and I am from South America, Ecuador. I live here in Faribault, Minnesota. Unfortunately, I am incarcerated here in the Department of Corrections (DOC) in Minnesota. Here I am to tell the stories that I have lived and introduce my humble family.

I have my parents and thanks to God they are still alive. They are Manuel and Maria. They live in Chanchan-Triunfo, Ecuador. They are indigenous, as am I. I have three sisters: Adela, Mauela, and Juana. Adela and Mauela are my older sisters. They both are married and have their own families. They have been in United States for more than fourteen years. They currently live in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Juana is my younger sister who lives with our parents in Ecuador.

I also have three brothers: Manuel, Clever, and Sergio. Manuel has my father's name because in our culture they give the father's name to the first-born of a family. He also has been in the United States for a long time like my older sisters. He lives in Bronx, New York. He is very different compared to my older sisters. He does not really like to talk to us, not even with our parents. I sometimes call him on the telephone, but he never answers my calls. I don't know exactly what his thoughts are. Clever and Sergio were my younger brothers whom I loved with all my heart as I love my sisters and my parents. Unfortunately, they both are passed away.

We all together were nine people in the family, but now we are only seven. We were born in an indigenous community called Sisid-Chico, Cañar, Ecuador. Once upon the time, we lived together in the same house, but now we live in different parts of the world. When I was a kid, I thought we were never going to separate, but I was wrong. These were my thoughts as a child. Now the time has passed fast and we have grown and have taken our own paths to live in this world by ourselves. Therefore, we live separated and very far away from our parents and country. I never thought I would be alone, living behind bars.

I miss my brothers and sisters, but I miss my parents more. I can only see them in some of my dreams. I know they are waiting for me. I know this incarceration is not for eternity, but this is just a part of my life that I am experiencing and learning. One day I will get out and I will go back to my country to see my parents. I will take care of

them as they cared for me when I was a child. I will never lose my hope to see all of my family together again.

Early Memories

My earliest memories are from the country of my birth, a small village called Sisid-Chico, a village of indigenous people. None of the people have any Spanish blood. People with Spanish ancestors lived in cities and big towns. Cañar is the closest city to my village and it is at least two hours on a bus from Sisid to Cañar. Sisid has no more than 600 people. All of the roads in my village are dirt. All of the homes are made of adobe brick. Adobe brick is made from mud and straw. It is not easy to make adobe bricks. They require much work. A lot of people get together to help new families build a home. Lots of dirt and straw are mixed with water and then horses and people walk through it to mix it all together. After it is mixed together, they form it into blocks. After the blocks dry, they use them to build the house. The women mix the blocks and the men make the blocks. After the bricks are made, the men build the house and the women help them. The women mix mud mortar and bring it to the men. In my village everyone comes together when it is time to help a new family.

I grew up speaking Kichwa. It is the language of my people, the Cañari, the language of our ancestors. Cañari are a tribe of the Inca. When the Spanish conquistadors invaded my land about 500 years ago, they began to kill the native people. They killed because they wanted the land and the resources and the wealth. Many of the native people ran away to live in the mountains. Over the next few hundred years, the Spanish people took all control of Ecuador. The political system of government, religion, and education was controlled by Spanish speaking people. The power and wealth of Ecuador is controlled today by the ancestors of the Spanish people.

As I only spoke the Kichua language, my parents had decided to put me in Spanish school. They knew that life was so hard for them and for all indigenous communities. The majority of the native people did not speak Spanish. Many of them were stolen from in the weekend markets by Spanish people, known as gente blanco (white people).

Indigenous people would go to the markets to sell some animals or agricultural products to support their families, or to buy things they needed. That was a big opportunity for white people to take advantage of indigenous people. They did not pay the fair price for native products; they used to pay whatever they wanted to. Not knowing how to speak Spanish and count the money, indigenous people just accepted whatever they were given.

I remember my first day of school at Santiago Vasquez. Everyone was in class from 7:30 until 12:30. My mother, brother, and sister and myself had walked 2 kilometers to school on a dirt road through farmland. I had never heard a bell before; no one had a bell in my village. The bell rang at 10:30 in the morning to signal for recess, but I did not know what it was for. I thought the bell was telling

me when it was time to go home. I missed my mom so much having to be away from her at the school that when I heard the bell I ran out of the school and continued running for the 2 kilometers until I reached my house.

I returned on the same dirt road. When I got home, my mom asked "Juandy (Juan), what are you doing here? Why did you come home early from school?" I explained to her everything that had occurred, weeping. My mom asked "Why are you crying?" I told her, "Because I missed you a lot and now I don't want to go to school anymore." Mom asked "Why?" and I said "Because I have missed you too much. I couldn't understand anything they were saying today in the class. Nobody spoke Kichwa. How am I going to communicate with them?" My mom, crying, hugged me and kissed on my chin. She told me "You are going to be okay and very soon you are going to understand the Spanish language."

Poverty

I think some people don't even know what poverty means. They might know the definition, but they do not know what it feels like to be poor. I define poverty in a different way. For me it means that you cannot have what you want, or what you want for your family. Because of poverty, people don't have a good education, a good profession, or enough food to support their families. We can have thousands of ideas or dreams, but without money we cannot do anything.

I know how hard it is to be poor because I lived through it when I was a child. I didn't know what poverty was back then, but I knew hunger. Some days we would eat once or twice a day and some days we ate nothing. My parents did not make enough money to support our big family. My father worked in agriculture and then left that job for the coast. My mother was a farmer. She would exchange agriculture products for food. She left that to be a shopkeeper. She sold all kinds of vegetables she bought in a small town and then she traveled to a bigger town to sell them. One of my older sisters used to accompany her. They stayed until they sold everything. Sometimes they were gone for days. They couldn't afford a hotel, so they would sleep beside their goods outside.

She worked all weekend for a long time. One day, she saw a little boy shining shoes for money and decided to copy that idea for her first-born son. When my father returned from the coast, he made a shoe-shining box for my brother Manuel. My mother bought him all the necessary supplies. That's how we lived: my mother and sister selling vegetables, brother shining shoes, and the rest of us taking care of the animals and little kids.

After many months, they noticed their businesses were running well. My older brother took me to show me how to shine shoes. He wanted me to be his partner. I was eight at the time. He took me to his usual clients, some taxi drivers. He started polishing their shoes and explained what to do. When it was my turn to shine some shoes, I was so nervous that I was shaking and I got some dye on the taxi driver's

sock. I thought he didn't notice but he did and got very angry with me. The next time we went, they wouldn't let me shine their shoes because they knew I was a beginner. My brother was not a beginner though. He was an expert shoe-shiner and fast too. One day he told me the secret to shining shoes. He said, "You must spit a little on the front of the shoe and get a dry rag and scrub it." That was good advice that worked on dry shoes but not the wet ones.

Memory of a Sunday Drive

Accidents can alter a person's life in an instant. Sometimes lives are changed without any warning at all. Other times people receive warnings, but do not recognize them. Sometimes tragic or serious accidents are foretold in our dreams before they happen in real life. Everyone dreams, but what a dreamer does with the information received in the dream may have a positive or negative impact in a dreamer's life.

On a Saturday evening in 2004, we were eating dinner my mom had cooked. She had prepared a delicious meal. My younger brother Sergio and I were watching a Chuck Norris movie when our mom called us to eat dinner. When we got to the kitchen, my mom and my sister were sitting at the wooden table. Sergio and I were eating fast because we wanted to finish watching the movie. As we were standing up to leave, my mom said, "Tomorrow is Sunday and it is shopping day. Who wants to come with me?" My little brother jumped up and raised his hand, saying "I want to go mom."

After she told us her plans, she and my sister went to bed. My little brother was playing with his Spider-Man and Superman toys as I washed the dishes. He fell asleep and I carried my brother to bed.

I dreamed we were involved in a car accident. In my dream, I saw my little brother crawling in the back of a truck, stretching out his right hand and asking for help. I saw my mom crying a lot, but I did not dream about my sister and me. The next day, I woke my brother up and we got dressed. After eating breakfast, we washed the dishes quickly.

We lived five yards away from the main road where the cars and busses passed. The three of us were waiting for a car on the way to Cañar so we could ask for a ride into town. After a while, I saw a car coming and I raised my hand making signs to stop it, but it did not stop. I told my mother that I tried to stop the car, but it just went by. My mother said, "Keep waiting for another one." My little brother was playing with his toys, while my sister was watching him play. I saw a small white truck coming from a distance of about 300 meters away. When the truck got closer to us, I raised my hand again to try to stop it. This time the small white truck with a small wood truck bed stopped.

"Mom, the car stopped," I screamed. My mom locked the main door of the house and she came running with a large basket in her left hand. She opened the truck bed

door and helped us climb into it. She closed the door and she went and rode in the cab of the truck.

As the truck was coming around a curve, I felt something odd as the truck started to go too fast on the steep road we were travelling on. I heard the truck's tires squealing. That was when we got too close to the curve and crashed into a blue bus, which was coming from the opposite direction. I remember my stomach hit against an old truck tire and I was rolling from side to side in the truck bed. I got up and I could not breathe. The pain was terrible. I got down from the truck and I went to see my mom. My mom was crying a lot and asking loudly for help while saying, "My kids, my kids!" She was trying to open the door of the truck, but the door was jammed. I saw blood running down my mother's nose, and when she saw the blood she said, "Son, open the door." I tried it, but I couldn't open it.

Afterward she said, "Where are your brother and sister?" I returned to the truck bed and I found my little brother crawling and stretching out his right hand and he said "Help me brother." I grasped his hand and got him down from the truck. He was bleeding from his mouth because he had lost a tooth, but I did not find my sister in the truck bed. She was sitting on the road and some passengers from the bus were helping her. I do not know how she came down and how she got on the road because the truck bed door was closed, but someone told me that she had flown out when we crashed. Somehow, my mom had gotten out from the truck cab; her nose was bleeding a lot. Fortunately, my uncle Caetano had been on the bus we had crashed into. I could not speak. I just made signs and he could understand that we needed medical attention.

My uncle asked for a ride from somebody to get us to the hospital. That is how we got to Cañar hospital, where the doctors and nurses couldn't help us. Quickly, my uncle Caetano took us to a private Albeniz Clinic, where the doctors attended us rapidly; they gave each of us an injection in our arms to calm down the pain. My sister and mom were on the bed as the doctor was cleaning my mom's nose and asking which part of her body was hurting. The doctor told me my mother's nose was broken and my sister's wrist was fractured. They both needed surgery, but there were no surgeons in that hospital.

The next day my mother and I traveled to Azogues, a large city two hours away from our home, where there were surgeons to operate on my mother's nose. My uncle's wife knew of a woman who could heal broken bones. The same day my mom had her surgery, my aunt took my sister to the home of the healer. The healer used medicinal herbs to help my sister with the pain and wrapped her wrist with a bandage. My sister had to visit the healing woman three times a month before she was healed. My sister's wrist took six months to heal, and my mother's nose took one year. The first week, my mother and sister were weakened with pain and had to remain in bed. My brother's face was swollen from losing his tooth in the accident, but he and I were not injured so badly. We took care of my mother and sister until they felt well enough to take care of themselves.

I never knew a dream could come true before that day. I will never forget that Sunday drive when we got into the accident. It still remains in my mind as if it happened yesterday. Now I know it is good to pay attention to some dreams.

Comments On: A Memory of a Sunday Drive

Juan had originally been describing how his little brother died on the road where his mom would have him wave down passing cars for their rides into town. The two memories are almost synonymous in that his little brother was playing with a Spider-Man toy in both, and Juan's account of putting his brother to bed the night before. Somewhere in the telling of it, Juan became very visibly upset and he asked that I omit that portion of our interviews.

Juan's decision to come to the United States was set into motion by another tragedy. He and his parents had harvested the entire cacao crop on their little farm, and they borrowed a truck to take it into town and sell it to the "Spanish people." After being paid \$1,500, they were driving back to their farm when they were run off the road by a car that had overtaken them. They were held at gunpoint and searched. Juan's mom had a check for \$1,000, and Juan had \$500 concealed on him. Juan was the only one who spoke any Spanish so he had to translate while the men held a pistol to his mother's head and demanded their money. The men knew exactly how much money they had because after Juan's mother gave them the check and what cash she and her husband had, they asked for the rest of it.

Juan had tears in his eyes as he tried to explain to me why he did not try to overtake the men to save the family money, which was to last them for months and enable them to plant more crops. It is obvious his pride has been deeply wounded by this event. Juan gave the bandits the money he had concealed in a place sewn into his pants, and the men flattened all the tires of the borrowed truck and left them stranded on the road.

Soon after this event, Juan decided to leave home to work in America in order to help his family financially. He did exactly what he had promised his family until he was arrested and sent to prison. He is deeply ashamed of what he views as his failure in his duty to his family and did not want his actual words recorded.

Getting into the U.S.A.

Before I immigrated, I went to the American embassy to apply for a visa to try to enter the U.S. legally. After a few months, they refused my application and denied the visa. I asked them "Why don't you want to give me a visa?" They told me I could not qualify for a visa because I did not have a profession, a steady job, or even money in the bank. So, I couldn't do anything. Then I had no other option than to prepare my luggage and to start to immigrate illegally. I crossed different frontiers of countries in planes, cars, buses, sometimes walking thirsty, starving, and afraid, but the most difficult was to cross the Mexico-U.S. border. I had to walk with some illegal people through a desert, which I don't want to remember because I suffered so badly. The harder part was to see a kid passed out along the way and to find human

bones in the desert. Finally, I arrived in America after 45 days from my country to the U.S. That was an unpleasant experience that I lived through. I think the America Dream is not for all dreamers; only a few fulfill their dreams.

Going to Jail

I had never been in a prison or jail before. I didn't have trouble with the police or the laws in my country. But someone used to tell me, "There is always the first time to face new issues." When the Minnesota police caught me and put me in jail, I felt like the world was falling upon me. I felt without strength and weak. When they got me to the courtroom to see the judge, I felt like a useless person. It has happened every time I go to see the judge. They hurt me psychologically. They wanted to give me more than 10 years in prison. When I heard that, I was traumatized. The first days were eternity. The clock looked like it was stopped. It was so ugly that I could never forget it.

College

College is so important for me right now. I know it is little bit hard for me because of the language, but every day I'm struggling to keep going forward. I'm learning many new things about American education. Now I feel good and I'm proud about myself because I see that I'm progressing with the English language. I hope to finish all my college classes and get my A.A. degree. I don't really have a specific plan, but when I get out I would like to keep studying music. I also want to be an English teacher. In general, I want to live decently and stay away from trouble and I would like to travel to other countries to know and learn more about this wonderful world.

In Conclusion

Helping Juan and interviewing him has been challenging and rewarding on many levels. One of the best rewards has been quite simply my ability to think of myself as a good person again. By assisting Juan in his studies and in his understanding of both American culture and prison as a subculture, I have redeveloped a sense of self as a worthwhile and productive human with a legitimate contributive effect remaining within me.

Juan frequently expresses gratitude. Amazingly, as I write this, exactly at the moment I was writing "gratitude," Juan knocked on my door to share some Rolo candies he had just purchased from the vending machine. Every time he thanks me, I try to explain to him that I am receiving more than I am giving. He truly thinks I am simply a benevolent soul and never accepts my explanation of myself as ultimately selfish. I am reinventing and renewing myself every time I help Juan complete a college assignment or figure out a new concept.

I long ago failed at being a father to my daughter as I was incarcerated as a young man for armed robberies and conspiracy to traffic narcotics. I thought I would be a better father to her brother, who is 15 years younger, but I failed again. Then I thought I had a chance to be a good grandfather and here I am writing this paper from another prison. The only reason any of this is relevant is so the reader may follow my reasoning when I explain why I believe I am receiving more by helping Juan than ever the time and effort could cost me. I suppose there has been a mental adoption of sorts and that also makes my life more bearable.

Juan speaks, reads, and writes in three languages. It is four languages if you count music as a language, as I do. Granted, I have only been able to give him the basics of music, but that is only because that is the extent of my own fluency. I suspect if Juan's I.Q. were to be taken, he would score in the high above average range at the very minimum. My ultimate goal in this experience is to convince Juan that he has the ability to achieve anything he can imagine for himself.

Update

Eight days before this paper was due, Juan was taken to segregation for using a razor blade removed from the razor to sharpen his pencil to work on a poster board presentation for cultural anthropology class. It is likely that Juan will lose the opportunity to finish the Associate's degree program. Some irony exists in all of this as I also went to segregation when we were in St. Cloud for an exposed razor blade I had been using to cut my cellmate's hair. It is also ironic that Juan was sharpening the pencil to write more on this paper. A few days before he was taken, I advised him against using the blade as a pencil sharpener, and he made fun of me for being an "old person who worries too much."

A Letter from Juan

Thank you, my friend, for your positive words. It means a lot for me. Thanks for supporting me. I appreciate you. You are the person who understands my difficulties. I have been locked down more than three years and I never met a person like you in prison, not even outside. If I had a person who supported me, maybe I wouldn't be here. It is okay. I understand it is my fault for everything that I have done. As I did bad things, I have to face the consequences.

I have read Proverbs in the Bible and it says young people should listen to older people because the older people know life better than young people. Also, my parents used to say that. I thought they were wrong. Being in prison, I have reflected on life and I have found that the proverb is true. My parents told me "Don't go to the U.S. We're going to be okay." Also, they told me "Study, son, because life is hard." How stupid I was. I didn't pay attention to their advice. But I know older people are right. They know what they are saying and why they are saying it. Maybe because

they suffered like us or more. You are my inspiration to keep studying and learning new things in life. I'm so sorry if I'm not the person who you want me to be. Thousands of apologies if I have written this letter with misspelling. Please, if you find any wrong or misspelled words, would you correct them for me please?

Your sincere friend, Juan