

# Anthro NOW pology



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## Solidarity and Resistance on the Island of Llingua

*Anton Daughters*

Irene Mansilla is 52 years old. Her face is ruddy, freckled and youthful in appearance, but her leathery hands betray the decades she has spent gripping plows and hoes. She and her husband, Hugo, live on Llingua, one of several dozen islands that make up southern Chile's Archipelago of Chiloé. They farm, fish, gather shellfish and harvest seaweed on their six-hectare seaside farm. They depend on their neighbors for the grueling work of harvesting crops, and they return that labor in kind. Their life is hard, they tell me, but it is still preferable to a job at one of the many salmon farms or fish-processing plants in the area. "Work for someone else?" Irene scoffs, as if the very idea is offensive. "Not me." Like most of the 400 or so residents of Llingua, Irene and Hugo have steadfastly refused to abandon their rural livelihoods.

Over the past 40 years, much of rural southern Chile has been undergoing a slow transition to industrialism. As new lumber, fishing and aquaculture companies have moved into the region, people have been drawn from their small family farms to wage-paying jobs in urban centers. This trend has been especially dramatic on Chiloé, a historically rural part of Chile that according to the country's most recent national census

is more than 60 percent urban today. With the rise of the aquaculture industry in the 1990s—and Chile's ascension to second-leading exporter of salmon in the world—low-paying jobs at salmon farms and fish-processing plants have become common on the archipelago.

The island of Llingua has proven an exception to this trend. Residents there consistently turn down jobs in the aquaculture industry in favor of their rural subsistence livelihoods. Remarkably, even when they stand to make more money at a salmon farm, many islanders opt for fishing and farming. In 1988, when the Norwegian-owned multinational Marine Harvest—the largest salmon-producing company in the world—built a farm just off the southeastern end of the island, the company was unable to fill eight of the 12 full-time positions it offered. A second farm was built on Llingua's southwestern shore 13 years later. The water temperatures and coastal geography of the area were ideal for salmon aquaculture. The disposition of Llinguanos, however, was not, and most of the positions were filled by residents of other islands. To this day, a majority of workers on Llingua's two farms are brought in by motorboat from neighboring islands.

There are many reasons Llinguanos turn down these jobs, and to begin to understand them, one must look at the economics of the island. Most households on Llingua have established good food security by diversifying their sources of subsistence and cash. Families grow potatoes, carrots, squash and other crops on small horticultural plots; they harvest mussels in the shallow waters in front of their properties; and they dig up shellfish on



*Fisherman Juvenal Guenchur steers a motor boat on a crossing from Llingua, one of the smaller islands in southern Chile's Archipelago of Chiloé, to Achao.*

the shore at low tide. They consume much of what they harvest. The remaining food is shared with neighbors or sold at the weekly market in Achao, a town of 4,000 and a hub of local commerce on the neighboring island of Quinchao.

Fishing, moreover, has become an especially reliable source of both food and cash for Llinguanos. Government grants helped establish a fishing cooperative on the island in the 1960s. The modest profits generated from the co-op led to the purchase of motorboats and nets. The organization was disbanded during General Augusto Pinochet's

17-year dictatorship from 1973 to 1990, but much of the infrastructure remained. Islanders built on that advantage, and today, nearly half of the households on Llingua include a small motorboat. Catches of hake and sea bass are sold to middlemen, generating anywhere from \$200 to \$500 USD a month on average. Those who don't own a motorboat offer their labor to someone who does. Nearly everyone on Llingua benefits monetarily from fishing in some small way.

I spent 2006 documenting these facts of economic life for Llinguanos. I have returned four times since then, most recently

in 2014. Yet the more I speak with islanders, the more I realize that their resistance to jobs at salmon farms runs deeper than simple household economics. Many of them make very little cash from month to month, and full-time work in aquaculture, despite its low wages, presents a slightly higher-paying alternative that they nevertheless reject. Others fail to even consider the possibility. Contrary to my initial assumptions, I have come to believe that the livelihood choices made by many Llinguanos have as much to do with a way of life they prize as with a desire to maximize their income. In other words, their *identity* as rural farmers and fisher people looms as a significant factor in their all-important decisions about how to subsist.

### Factory Hand to Fisherman

Pablito Mansani, a fisherman in his late 20s, is short and stout, with heavily calloused hands that seem at odds with his soft voice and shy demeanor. Born on Llingua, he is the oldest of three siblings. His father, a lifelong fisherman, owns two motorboats, the second acquired after years of painstakingly saving every scrap of surplus he made from his sales of sea bass and hake.

Pablito has straddled the two worlds of Chiloé—that of wage-labor processing plants and factories, as well as that of small-scale fishing, farming and rural livelihoods. Raised in an A-frame wooden home perched on one of Llingua's steep southern flanks, he attended the island's single-room schoolhouse up to the sixth grade. He moved to

Castro for high school, living in a boarding school in the middle of Chiloé's capital city of 40,000. He stayed in Castro for two more years following graduation, renting an apartment with two friends and studying mechanical engineering at a trade school.

During his second year at the trade school Pablito was hired at a local factory that produced salmon food. The job, he recalled, was decent but uninteresting. He found the work rote and repetitive—grinding dried fishmeal and pouring it into bags for shipment. The position offered few possibilities for advancement and little in the way of long-term job security or benefits. And Pablito spent nearly all of his wages on basic necessities. "I was working to live and nothing more ... to pay rent and buy food."

When he was 20, Pablito moved back to Llingua, where he could live with his family and work with his father as a fisherman. His situation, he told me, improved considerably. "Here I can live at home ... we have food, I'm with my friends and family." Not only that, he added, "but you keep almost all of what you make. In Castro, on the other hand, everything depends on money."

Today, the modest cash he makes every month from sales of hake to vendors in Achao is money that he can mostly save or spend. But the work is tough, he conceded. Much tougher than his job at the factory. "You go through real hardship. Sometimes, when the weather is bad [and] you're out there for many days, you really suffer." He cited the exposure to the wind, the rain, the sun and the dangers of getting caught in a storm. He described how he is always moving—dropping lines, pulling up nets, un-



*Llingua fishermen (from left to right) José Ainol, Juvenal Guenchur, Pablito Mansani and Juan Carlos Díaz pause from gutting fish to hold up their catch.*

hooking fish, gutting fish, slicing and hooking bait, catching bait. “Once you are out at sea, the work never stops. ... Sometimes you eat only once a day, or you eat something at eight in the morning and then nothing else until ten at night. It’s hard. It’s risky.”

Nevertheless, the option of working at one of Llingua’s salmon farms—where he would be manning platforms and feeding caged fish—has never been a serious consideration for Pablito. He highlighted basic differences in the lifestyle. “I don’t like to have someone ordering me around. I don’t like to be stuck somewhere all 30 days of the month, seeing faces I may not find pleasant to look at.” He

laughed, saying that fishing, though challenging, represents a way of life that is far more rewarding. There are aspects to fishing that one gets nowhere else, he insisted. He described the settings—the open water, the spaces, the proximity to the ocean. “It can be beautiful,” he said quietly, as if revealing privileged information. There’s also the camaraderie with other fishermen. “In the evenings, when you finish working, you bring your *lanchas* (motorboats) together, one next to the other, and you join your *compañeros*. You throw out jokes, you play cards, you drink some beers.” He told me that little moments like these make it worthwhile.

## Stars and Aquatic Fireflies

I got a sense of what Pablito was referring to one winter night in 2006. It had been a long day at sea, and we floated a hundred feet or so offshore from Llingua in the Mansani family motorboat—named *Cristal*—waiting for a drop-off of hake from two other fishermen who were due to show up at any minute. Pablito was accompanied by Juvenal Guenchur—a 27-year-old Llinguano who regularly assisted the Mansanis on their fishing forays. Juve paced the wooden deck, rubbing his hands together to stay warm.

The boat we had been waiting for appeared suddenly, emerging from the shadows like a phantom and gliding up to the edge of *Cristal*. Pablito picked up a rope to fasten the two vessels together. He turned to me and said, “Let’s see if tonight we can stop in Mar y Velas<sup>1</sup> and drink some *schopitas*” (draft beer).

The two men on the other boat were in the usual fisherman’s garb—rubber boots, orange waders and wool hats. Bending over in unison they lifted the 100 lb. crates of hake and conger eel and heaved them onto our deck. Juve pointed to the rows of silver fish. “That’s it,” he said. “That’s what we all chase after so much.”

“Let’s hurry this up,” urged one of the other fishermen. “I want to get to Achao for a beer.”

With swift and deliberate motions, Pablito and Juve went about gutting the fish. They hooked their bare fingers into the gills and dangled the rubbery bodies over the side of the boat. With their other hand they sliced the bellies, then reached in and yanked out the guts. Then they tossed the fish into a

separate crate. Their hands and wrists were shiny from the entrails, scales and blood that covered them.

Once the crates had been filled with the gutted fish, they were weighed on a hand-held rusty scale, then stacked astern. The two fishermen climbed back into their wooden motorboat and glided away from us. Meanwhile, Pablito and Juve rinsed their hands in a bucket of salt water, dried them on their coveralls and stepped into the boat’s small cabin. The engine rumbled and gurgled as we pulled away from Llingua toward Achao. The ocean was calm, the night air sharp and cold. Standing in the dark cabin we gazed at the orange streetlights of Achao in the distance. They reflected off the waters of the bay like trembling electric spires.

Within minutes we pulled up to the cement dock of Achao. Pablito and Juve unloaded the crates into an idling pick-up truck belonging to a local distributor. The transaction was quick and perfunctory—a few bursts of words along with exchanges of cash and paperwork. Minutes later we were sitting at the local eatery Mar y Velas. We shared beer and a *pichanga* (a platter of french fries, pickles, sliced hotdogs, eggs and cubes of beef). We talked about fishing, soccer and politics. We drank a second round.

It was after 11 by the time we left Mar y Velas. We walked down the empty cement dock and clambered aboard *Cristal*. As we chugged back to Llingua we gazed out the cabin window in silence. The calm waters were black beneath a starlit sky. Llingua was somewhere ahead, invisible to us now that the island’s generator and electric lights had been shut off for the night. I could see the

Magellanic Clouds just above the horizon and the thick arm of the Milky Way arching above.

As we approached Llingua, Pablito flipped on the boat's spotlight. It sliced through the darkness, illuminating a stretch of water before us. Juve dropped anchor about 40 feet from shore. Tiny waves lapped the stony beach.

Pablito clicked off the spotlight and darkness rushed back in. We fumbled along the edge of the deck, climbed overboard, and lowered ourselves into a wobbly rowboat that seemed far too small for three people. "Do you know how to swim?" Pablito asked, laughing. He locked the stubby oars in place and began rowing. We were surrounded by black water and a brilliant canopy of stars. The only sound was the gentle splashing of the oars and the soft, rhythmic backdrop of the waves. Moments later the rowboat scraped bottom. As I stepped onto the beach I noticed that the water was speckled with tiny phosphorescent lights. I pointed to them and said something aloud. "Ah, yes," Juve explained, "*cauquiles* (aquatic fireflies)." We stood there for several minutes admiring the astonishing view. It was as though we were hovering in a black void, blue-green embers swirling below, the white, wispy Milky Way stretched above.

The cold forced us to move on, and we gingerly stepped through the darkness toward Pablito's house.

### *Mingas and Reciprocity*

"Why would anyone want to work at a salmon farm?" Hugo Mansilla asked rhetori-

cally, flipping his hand outward in a dismissive gesture. We were sitting around the cast iron stove of the kitchen—the epicenter of social life in most houses in Chiloé—drinking *chicha* (hard cider) with Irene. It was late, eleven or so, and the local generator shared by a dozen houses on the southwest side of the island had been shut off for the remainder of the night. Two candles cast an orange glow across the wooden walls.

Irene and Hugo recounted the history of the Marine Harvest salmon farm—the reluctance of any islanders to work there in the late 1980s and the continued resistance today to wage-labor jobs. "If you work there," Irene said, "you're breaking with what people here have always done. You're taking on a different life. We weren't interested [then], we aren't interested now."

They told me about the farming they do every year, their reliance on neighbors and the way labor is shared reciprocally among households. The *minga*—a tradition in which families receive help for farming and other tasks from members of the community, then reciprocate that help—looms large in the ethos of islanders. It is a source of pride for many of them, a centerpiece of their identity as Llinguanos. "That is where we get our solidarity," declared Irene. "And we have always depended on that solidarity."

Four days after our conversation in the kitchen, I accompanied Hugo and Irene on a *minga*. Six people showed up at the couple's two-hectare field to help them plant potatoes for the season. These neighbors had been beckoned weeks earlier by way of a *súplica*—an informal solicitation for help generally made during a social visit for *once* (tea) at the person's home. Aristide—Irene's





*Irene Mansilla plants potatoes on her property on the island of Llingua.*

burly and jovial brother—was there, along with her sister and four other neighbors.

The spring day was mild and cool, a blue ocean stretching out before us. The stillness of the morning was punctuated by the snorting of oxen, the sharp commands from the workers and the occasional cackle of a rooster in the distance. Mickey, the couple's stubby-legged dog, scampered excitedly around the unplowed side of the field. The rest of us lumbered slowly across the black, overturned earth, backs arched, arms in motion.

No one directed the work as each person knew what to do. Aristide guided a plow pulled by two oxen, his arms shaking with the effort of holding the apparatus upright. Irene and her neighbor Leticia placed the potatoes behind him, bobbing up and down rhythmically. Gastón, a stocky fisherman from the opposite side of the island, guided

the oxen, coaxing the beasts with a mix of soothing clicks and harsh commands that rolled off his tongue in well-rehearsed cadences. Hugo followed the two women, sprinkling fertilizer out of a metal bucket. I lingered behind all of them, swinging a hoe to scoop chunks of sod onto the seed potatoes.

It was a concerted effort, and the work was carried out mostly without conversation except for the occasional joke. Every hour or so we stopped for a break and drank chicha out of a red plastic cup that was filled repeatedly and passed around. The buzz from the fermented cider eased the aches we felt in our limbs. As the morning progressed and the chicha settled into our empty bellies, the jokes flew out with increasing ease—a gentle teasing meant to cut everyone down to size. “Your rows are more crooked than *El Pinocho*,” Irene quipped to her brother. “You





*Neighbors and relatives of Irene and Hugo Mansilla help the family plant potatoes, part of the reciprocal-labor tradition of the minga in Chiloé.*

need to grab the plow with strength!" she said, knowing full well that he was the strongest person there. I laughed along, though moments later the ribbing was directed at me for wearing jeans that seemed far too clean for a minga.

Just before noon, Irene stole off to her house to make final preparations for lunch. We soon shuffled into the Mansilla kitchen, crowded around the small wooden table and partook of a delicious chicken stew that had been simmering since early morning. Irene placed a single rag on the table as a napkin, and we each wiped our hands and mouths with it as we slurped up the soup. An hour later we were back at work.

Although verbal exchanges were kept to a minimum that day, much was at play. In providing a solid meal, Irene and Hugo were following through with their basic obligation

as hosts of the minga. The meal, however, was not a form of payment for the help they received; rather, the couple was expected to return the labor in kind at a later date. Work associations between neighbors on Llingua, in this respect, tend to be ongoing. Labor debts are never entirely extinguished. They are simply passed back and forth between households, establishing an ongoing sense of mutual obligation.

Irene explained that full-time work at a salmon farm meant a rupture from that cycle of mutual assistance. "If you're at the salmonera six days a week, you have no time for mingas, no time for your neighbors." Moreover, it meant abandoning multiple sources of subsistence—fishing, farming, shellfish gathering, harvesting mussels—in favor of a single source of income. It is a risky decision, she said, even if the pay is better. "Why

would we throw away something that we know, something that we identify with, for something that is foreign?"

## Identity and Self-Interest

Full-time wage labor with the salmon industry may bring some Llinguanos a little more cash from month to month, but it also carries risks. Multiple means of acquiring food and cash—fishing, farming, shellfish gathering and animal husbandry—have to be abandoned in place of a single source of income. Moreover, reciprocal obligations to neighbors go unfulfilled, reducing the help islanders can get in return from other members of the community. Families over time become increasingly reliant on cash to meet their most basic needs and to get assistance for household tasks. In the end, they risk isolating themselves economically and socially.

Beyond these practical concerns, Llinguanos clearly place a premium on their collective heritage. They identify strongly with the rural livelihoods they have grown up practicing. They confer a high degree of prestige on fishing, farming and mingas. Wage labor represents a shift away from these things, an abandonment of traditions they hold dear.

The assumption on the part of many economists today is that people act primarily out of a desire to advance their material self-interest. Indeed, the phrase "self-interest utility maximizers" is often used to describe the most basic of human motivations. But many months of participant-observation fieldwork have convinced me that this is only true to a limited extent on Llingua. Is-

landers there established long ago a modicum of economic stability by engaging in a variety of subsistence livelihoods and by promoting practices such as the minga that strengthen relationships among neighbors. They have made these livelihoods and traditions a source of pride and a cornerstone of their identity. Economic stability is no doubt important for these islanders, but once it is achieved, their impulse for further material gain is largely outweighed by the value they place on their rural life, their autonomy and their sense of solidarity.

## Notes

Photos by Anton Daughters

1. Mar y Velas is a popular restaurant in Achao.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

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**Anton Daughters** is assistant professor of anthropology at Truman State University, Kirksville, Missouri. He received his doctorate from the University of Arizona, Tucson, in 2010 and spent two years as a Mellon Fellow at Cornell College, Mount Vernon, Iowa. Daughters has carried out field research on the archipelago of Chiloé since 2002. He is co-editor of *Moquis and Kastiilam: Hopis, Spaniards, and the Trauma of History*, a forthcoming documentary history of the Hopi (University of Arizona Press). His research articles have appeared in *Journal of the Southwest* and *Kiva*.