

Toxic Masculinity and Homophobia in Contracorriente

**Emily Martínez
Whittier College
USA**

Contracorriente [Undertow] (Perú, 2009). Dir. Javier Fuentes-León. 1:50”

The Peruvian made film, *Contracorriente* (or *Undertow*), on the surface, is about the story of Miguel and Santiago. Their sexuality and acceptance of death and oneself is one of the main themes throughout the film. While the overarching theme of this film seems to be the love story between the two men, and their relationship even after Santiago's passing, the underlying issues are somewhat complicated. Not only do each of the main characters face challenges that play a role in the overall plot, but the side characters as well. The issues surrounding this small, Peruvian sea-side village is not explicitly stated, but undermine the basis of the problems in the film. A few of the main themes are homosexuality, acceptance of self, grief, and social constructions of masculinity within their community, and issues of homophobia in their community. These themes resonate and intersect throughout the film. Furthermore, the film has allegorical representations that have a deeper, more emotional meaning.

Some of the issues and challenges they face are also read as issues of Peruvian culture of smaller towns. This is because they are in a more traditional town that is presumably different than that of the "big city"- Lima, for example. The traditional views of the town and the people affect the way Miguel, Santiago, and Mariela interact with each other.

Homosexuality in Peru is not illegal, but a same-sex couple could have legal troubles that a heterosexual couple might not have, so there seems to be a stigma on them still. The stigma and mistreatment of same-sex partners are evident in the treatment of Miguel. After the town discovers that he and Santiago, who was already

deceased, were involved together romantically, he is shunned and ignored by his friends. The issue was not only he was involved with another man but just the pure fact that he was having an affair and did not approve of his infidelities, naturally.

Contracorriente takes place in a traditional seaside town in Peru called Cabo Blanco. According to the film's website: "Miguel (Cristian Mercado) is a handsome, young and beloved fisherman in Cabo Blanco, a small fishing village in the Northern coast of Peru, where the community has deep-rooted religious traditions. Miguel is married to the beautiful Mariela (Tatiana Astengo), who is seven months pregnant with their firstborn, but Miguel harbors a scandalous secret." (Wiegand). As the description states, Miguel's small community revolves around their daily life and their deep-rooted Catholic traditions. Although not explicitly addressed in the film, there lie homophobic tendencies within the community that derive from issues of toxic masculinity. There also seems to be internal homophobia that goes along with toxic masculinity within Miguel. One of the topics or themes in this film that can be addressed is homophobia and homosexuality between the two titular characters, Miguel and Santiago, and the role their sea-side town of Cabo Blanco played in the film. The relationship between them carries the weight of secrecy and infidelity because Miguel is cheating on his wife, Mariela, behind her back while she's pregnant with their child.

At the beginning of the film, Miguel carries the coffin of a relative who passed away, within this frame we get glimpses of Santiago-painter and photographer- taking pictures of the scenery. The director possibly chooses to share only some scenes of him, while displaying impressive and beautiful cinematography, to juxtapose the difference in how the character views this town, and the relationship he has to it. Santiago loves this location because it's quaint, away from his upper-class life, and brings him closer to Miguel even though they must be together in secret. Miguel, on the other hand, has his entire life set up here. His wife, job, friends, family, future child, are all there; so this town plays a significant role in the culture and interactions of everyone as well. Moving

forward in the film, we intercut from Miguel sharing a couple of beers and a meal with his inner circle- a somewhat stereotypical masculine pastime-to the camera leading us through an abandoned complex that's hidden away from the main town. In it, Santiago is waiting for Miguel in the corner. This hint of secret buildings that look seemingly haunted hints that there could be "magical" or "spiritual" themes to be explored. However, while it can be said that there are magical love story qualities to the narrative, the film is more than that. It explores the self-acceptance of Miguel and his journey to be happy with himself, as well as acceptance of his sexuality. As the film progresses, the viewer may think "will Miguel ever bury Santiago? He remains a wandering ghost." Throughout the film, there is a key scene that sticks out the most is the one in which Miguel and Santiago (who is deceased, but a ghost), are walking down the street together, holding hands. The director uses tracking shot while filming this scene. A tracking shot is "any shot where the camera moves alongside the object it is recording. The camera is mounted onto a camera dolly that is then placed on a track to move around." (Hayward 478). Santiago and Miguel walking together in public is an important scene, as they are able to be free in public. However, from the perspective of the people on the street, Miguel is walking alone. Santiago remains invisible and unnoticed, like how he was in Miguel's life while he was alive. This can be an allegory for the ignoring and rejection of LGBTQ people in Peru recently. Although there are attempts to make them more visible and have more rights, they remain invisible or rejected by their government/public. As aforementioned, Miguel is isolated and treated as "other" for his homosexuality after the town finds out. Conversely, when Santiago was alive, is also treated as "other" because of his non-masculine job of being an artist, his class, and his light-skinned, European features. The treatment of "otherness" is applied to homosexuality in Peru as well, which could have been the director's intent.

According to Emilio Bossio, "The Homosexual is always considered "the other" Not only do these men deny their sexuality, but their families deny that there might be a

gay man among them. Peru is a macho country that applauds the strong man.” (Bossio, et al. 504). A critical scene that comes into mind when reading this quote is the argument between Santiago and Miguel on the beach regarding his worth as a macho man and his family. While Santiago has accepted himself as a gay man, Miguel has an inner conflict of his own identity as a man, husband, and lover. The issue isn't that he's less of a man because of his relationship with Santiago, it's that he is untruthful to his family, and more importantly to himself. His inability to admit to himself, as well as his family and community, reinforces the theme of machismo and deep-rooted Catholic beliefs that shape him as a person. Furthermore, this idea of toxic masculinity runs so deep in himself and community, that Miguel's circle of friends ignore him when there's a rumor of his nude paintings; he was also confronted by his friend that said that is he was gay, his son will be born gay. There is a clear systemic problem of toxic masculinity in their tightknit community.

A critical cinematographic element that is most prominent in *Contracorriente* is cross-cutting used to depict Miguel interacting with the ghost of Santiago, then showing the reality that Miguel is walking by himself. This element of fantasy can also be related to Hollywood cinema that commonly makes these types of films. Although *Contacorriente* is not necessarily a fantasy film, it could be read by some as that genre, since it contains a lingering ghost.

The portrayal of youth in this film can be seen in the final scene between Miguel and the community coming to help him bury Santiago. This is representative of not only his self- acceptance but the semi-acceptance of some of the town. Despite their religiosity and judgment, they put their differences aside to give Santiago a proper burial to honor him. To quote the director, Javier Fuentes- León, he wishes to portray the future of youth and their acceptance of others. In an interview with Michael Guillen from ScreenAnarchy.com, Fuentes-Leon states:

Not all the village honors the ritual and those that follow Miguel are the young, which was my way of saying that it is the youth of Latin America that will bring about change. They are bringing it...Enough to provide a sense of hope that the youth will bring about change. (Fuentes-León)

Concerning reviews for *Contracorriente*, there were mostly positive and praised the portrayal of the love between the two main characters. It was more than just a "ghost love story," it was a story of acceptance, the importance of community, and being true to yourself. As David Wiegand from "SFGate", a film reviewer states: "The film works because it is much more than either a ghost story or the tale of a man afraid to come to terms with his sexuality. While those elements are key to the film's overall structure, what pulls us in and makes the story compellingly universal is, first, the careful characterizations of the secondary figures in the small Peruvian fishing village where the story takes place." (Wiegand). The high praises for *Contracorriente* are an indication that despite this being a small film, it made a strong impact.

Furthermore, the director of the film emphasizes the fact that it is much more than an average ghost story about two separated lovers. It tells the story of a man who, despite the death of his lover, must continue to go on as normal in his life but also come to terms with his identity:

Undertow is disguised as a ghost story and if people want to stay there, that's fine; but, I really wanted it to be about Miguel's conscience and his struggle. The ghost of Santiago is the representation of that struggle and—as I mentioned earlier—Miguel's mentor. Once Miguel gains his integrity, he has to externalize it. He can't keep it inside himself.

Bibliography

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