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Other Storytelling and the New Frontier

Introduction

Ashraf Zanati (see Figure 7.1), a former teacher and one of 52 men arrested in Cairo, Egypt, for ‘debauchery’ in 2001, in an incident which would stimulate worldwide attention concerning gay identity in the developing world, tells us (in the documentary Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World (John Scagliotti, 2001, US)):

I stayed in prison for 13 months. I tried to make myself quite useful, I adapted myself. I thought that I am there for a reason so I started to teach people in prison, English. I taught about 50 people in prison. . . . Now I am leaving [my home] behind. I am leaving everything behind me, even my memories. My mum is very attached to me, and when I told her that I am leaving, she couldn’t believe it, and she said to me ‘try again to be here’. But I couldn’t.

Zanati’s testament reveals the vulnerable nature of sexual nonconformity within the developing world.1 Not only was he arrested for simply attending a social event, and inordinately punished as part of a government campaign to limit gay visibility within Egypt, but also the context of imagined democracy within the Western (developed) world plays a significant role in his identity expectations. Unable to resolve the oppressive situation within his own country, in order to find a more fulfilled sense of self (as a gay man) he must leave for the West, eventually becoming a refugee in Canada. The affluent West plays a dynamic political role in the expression of sexual nonconformity within the developing world: although it offers a productive point of reference which stimulates possibility and agency, at the same time such expectations

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inevitably pose a challenge to local identity traditions which might not be accommodating.

This chapter consequently explores the representation and agency of gay and lesbian identities from the developing world, and the context of contemporary homosexual (Western) democratic ideals. However, whilst there may be a proliferation of homosexual behaviour within diverse communities around the world, it is important to note that my focus on identity is related to the contemporary concept of homosexuality and westernised social expectations of citizen equality. Furthermore, although Gilbert Herdt (1997) reveals that many non-Western societies occasionally are potentially ‘more tolerant of variations across the spectrum of sexual behaviours [compared to] western cultures, since the early modern period, [who have] been more disapproving and punishing of all variations and domains of sexuality and gender, especially homosexuality’ (p. 21), my investigation explores homosexual expectations of equality to heterosexual ideals. Consequently, although Herdt (1997) cites examples of liberated homosexual behaviour from the Sambia in New Guinea and the Zuni in pre-colonial North America, and we may also consider Lee Wallace’s (2003) findings on the ‘Fa’afafine’