Foreword

AMAL HASSAN FADLALLA'S *BRANDING HUMANITY* is a compelling ethnographic and longitudinal examination of the ways in which different histories of violence, efforts at reconciliation, and postcolonial reckoning in the Sudan became interwoven with transnational currents of human rights activism and humanitarianism, feminist mobilization, and the emergence of new configurations of flexible citizenship against the backdrop of neoliberal globalization. At the same time, however, Fadlalla's study is also a profoundly nuanced exercise in critical reflexivity, in which her own subject position as a diasporic Sudanese scholar deepens and thickens her interpretations on every page, through every ethnographic interview, and at the end of every consideration of the dilemmas that arise with the kind of participatory action research that she was often called upon to undertake. And as in her own poem, with which she begins the book, there is also a pervasive sense of longing in Fadlalla's study: a longing for a conceptual path along which the competing narratives that form the basis of her work can be rearticulated; a longing for the excruciatingly difficult kind of synthesis that embraces both national unity and the messiness of actually existing pluralism; and finally, a longing for the emergence of new forms of political and social alliance that can resist the dangerous dichotomy that she reveals with such analytical and empirical precision, that which sees the cultural or the cosmopolitan as the only possible categories for collective belonging.

In tracing the contours of conflict in and about the Sudan, Fadlalla deploys a diverse methodological repertoire that includes both traditional strategies of engagement and highly innovative moves that result in what she calls "multifaceted" research. With a complicated and self-aware insider/outsider perspective, she casts a wide empirical net as a way to encompass novel spaces of encounter

and reflection even as she herself is an ever-present actor in the history that her research problematizes and reinterprets. As she shows us, the struggles in the Sudan both before and after secession were—beyond their quotidian tragedies—constructed and reconstructed in terms of competing ideologies of suffering, cultural authenticity, and moral righteousness. Her ethnographic parsing of these domains of ideological contestation does not lead easily to the kinds of normative judgments that have so often been attached to, and mobilized by, the various sides within the succession of interlinked ethnic, religious, and political conflicts in the Sudan.

Beyond the fact that its historical scope and ethnographic richness make *Branding Humanity* an unparalleled resource for understanding the course of contemporary Sudan, it also holds a range of key implications for human rights studies more generally. There are two that seem to me to be of greatest importance, and their consequences for the field are significant indeed.

First, this study suggests that what might be thought of as the “transnational fix” is like a mirage that keeps moving farther away the closer one approaches. In this sense, Fadlalla’s research does for human rights studies what Tania Li’s work did for our understanding of the politics of cultural identity. If it is true, as Li argued, that there is, in the end, no “communal fix” to the problems of indigenous marginalization and disempowerment, then *Branding Humanity* stands for something like the opposite proposition: there is no transnational fix for national histories of violence and division, no final “humanitarian public” whose beneficent engagement will ultimately lead to what the Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung described as “positive peace.”

And second, Fadlalla’s study serves as a powerful argument for how the politics of recognition, which became so hegemonic throughout the first decades of the post–Cold War period, can accelerate a politics of difference into spiraling practices of embodied category of violence—ethnic, gendered, religious, class, political. Indeed, on the basis of Fadlalla’s intervention, one can read the fracture of separation that gave rise to South Sudan—including the attendant conflicts within the new nation-state—as a consequence of the transnational politics of identity taken to its logical and tragic conclusion. In this way, *Branding Humanity* gives new meaning and theoretical impetus to what David Kennedy described as the “dark sides of virtue.”

Finally, by rejecting the siren song of what she describes as “transnational sovereignty,” Fadlalla leaves us with a much more measured, open, and contingent approach to understanding conflict and structures of violence—whether in the

Sudan or within the ideologies and practices that “perform humanity” for an international market. It is an approach oriented toward much smaller gestures and less-reified moments of interconnection, an approach that is sensitive to the possibilities of what she calls “historically grounded solidarities.”

Mark Goodale

Series Editor

Stanford Studies in Human Rights

This page intentionally left blank