Inter Pares
WORKING FOR CHANGE...AMONG EQUALS
OEUVRER POUR LE CHANGEMENT...ENTRE ÉGAUX

Reclaiming the Romance

Keynote Address
by Molly Kane, Inter Pares Executive Director[i]
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For several months now I have been trying to imagine this moment – trying to place myself in this room with all of you to know what I would want to say after "Thank you and good evening". I realized that the imagination of the space was important as a starting point because of the ways in which certain spaces, created and sustained by people who aspire to bring about justice, have shaped what I understand about the world and what I feel compelled to share with you tonight.

I'd like to start with a brief story about one of those spaces. In January of 2002, I attended the first Africa Social Forum, which was held in Bamako, Mali. The Africa Social Forum was organized by activists from all regions of the continent and from many sectors, including farmers, trade unionists, students, academics, and journalists. I was one of a handful of non-Africans, committed to international solidarity with those movements, who were invited to attend as observers. The Forum lasted a week with workshops and plenary sessions on a wide range of issues including human rights, the WTO, debt cancellation, women's rights, peace-building, and democratization. There were heated debates and conversations that spilled over into meal times and long into the night.

In the course of that stimulating, somewhat chaotic week, I heard many stories and many points of view. Youth challenged the older generations to make way for new kinds of leadership and political action. Women asserted their determination to not be marginalized within movements. Farmers criticized NGOs and academics for appropriating their struggles and their voices. Intellectuals challenged government officials to justify the continued acceptance of policies of economic liberalization that are crippling the continent. A young man from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who had hitchhiked all the way to Bamako rose in the plenary, almost trembling, to ask why, even at the Africa Social Forum, there was no outrage, no response to stop the slaughter and pillage of war in his country.

There were tears and rage, and there were jokes and laughter. For someone visiting from Canada, and from the work-world of international NGOs, there was one element in this forum organized under the banner, "Another Africa is Possible", that was conspicuously absent: in the course of that week I never heard anyone say that Africa needs more aid. No one said that Africa does not require aid either. But, when the paths to other possible Africas were being discussed by the people for whom Africa is home, the subject did not come up.

The Africa Social Forum took place just months before Canada hosted the G8 leaders in Kananaskis; as you may remember "Africa" was a big issue on the G8 agenda. And many of us had been very busy meeting with government officials trying to influence Canada's action at the G8 summit. The lesson during the Social Forum in Bamako was not that foreign aid did not rank as a strategic priority for African activists. What I did think about at the time was how great a gap there was between what was said by

social justice activists engaged in real, local struggles, and what was being said on their behalf by the very organizations who seek to support their efforts. It did strike me that at a time of rising global campaigning around the future of Africa, the voices of the great majority of people living their lives and building their futures in African countries are rarely heard outside the continent – and that the messages broadcast by others in their name, and ostensibly in their service, had in fact reduced their lives from historical struggles for emancipation and de-colonization, from complex and diverse aspirations for survival and self-determination, to a "disaster" a "basket case"; a project to be managed, a problem to be solved with the knowledge, technology and power of others.

Why does this matter, to us, tonight?

It matters because we are living in times of localized and globalized oppression and repression. And we are also living in times of localized and globalized resistance and affirmation. It matters how we help each other to put the pieces together. Because how we put the pieces together will shape what we know and what we choose to do about it. How we build understanding of social reality and help each other interpret the events of our lives, will also reveal the politics of our future action.

The Indian author, Arundhati Roy has said, "At a time when opportunism is everything, when hope seems lost, when everything boils down to a cynical business deal, we must find the courage to dream. To reclaim romance. The romance of believing in justice, in freedom and in dignity. For everybody. We have to make common cause, and to do this we need to understand how this big old machine works – who it works for and who it works against. Who pays, who profits." [ii]

So what can we tell each other about how this big old machine works? I am sure I am not alone in feeling overwhelmed by the juggernaut of militarization and greed thundering across our planet. Even on a quiet evening in the west end of Montreal we know (as Amnesty International's current campaign against torture says so chillingly) "it may not be happening here, but it is happening now." Without any exaggeration we can say we live in times in which the brutality of power and the power of brutality are as menacing as they have ever been. We are living under a reign of bullies with the ruthless manipulation of democratic institutions and historical record, unprecedented militarization, violence, expropriation, pillage and impunity on a global scale.

We may often feel overwhelmed, but we are not Cassandras, cursed to go mad alone in seeing things that no one will believe. We gather together, whether in Bamako or Montreal, because we know, as Leonard Cohen says, that "there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." It is in the very nature of this edifice of power we confront that the cracks must also be there. They are there structurally, and they are there metaphysically.

We can teach each other about those cracks. Last year, I was fortunate to listen to a presentation in Kingston by a young man from the United States, Darrell Anderson. Darrell had come to Canada from Lexington, Kentucky in January 2005 to avoid being sent back to Iraq, where he had already served as a soldier for seven months and had been awarded a Purple Heart after being wounded by a roadside bomb. Darrell said that his experience in Iraq convinced him that the war was unjustified and that he could not live with the consequences of his own actions were he to continue. He said he had joined the army before the invasion like many young Americans who were promised an education and the respect of their

country. "But", he said, "My mama didn't raise me to hate people. And innocent civilians – people like my mother and my sisters, are being killed, and young soldiers are dying for an illegal war." Darrell had as much to say about the tormented dreams of a young man in America as he did about the war the rest of us see on television. And he implicated us in that story by urging Canadians to make it possible for more American soldiers to find refuge here, because, as he said, "I am now prepared to go to jail rather than return to Iraq. But that won't stop the war. It will take many more people refusing to fight. We have to help them. We have to stop this war."[iii]

It is easy to understand how a person can be paralyzed with fear with a fist in her face, or a gun at his back. But so much of the forces of death and destruction in the world today rely not on any obvious weapon, but on our consent, on our belief that we have no other options; that our hopes for one standard of dignity for all are not realistic. To subvert this logic, we need to recognize it for the construct that it is. We need to withdraw our credulity, and our consent.

We know from legends and history that there have always been cracks in the edifice of belief that "might is right", that "the poor are always with us", that "greed is human nature", that "everything has a price", that "God is on our side". These cracks of dissent and resistance are also our human heritage. They are expressed in art and dignity, courage, and generosity. They live in our memories and our imaginations, as a basic premise, as a legacy from our ancestors, angels, comrades and heroes. But to find the cracks we must look for them. We must believe they exist and believe they reveal what we absolutely must find if we are to live. We cannot afford to accept as permanent or natural what is so recent, limited, and dangerous to life on the planet.

It is surprising, and not a little troubling, how, in spite of what we know about ourselves and the world, we can adjust our judgment of what is tolerable or what is possible so quickly. It can be revealing to try to remember how we looked at the world in the not-so-distant past. What has happened that we did not even imagine, and that now shapes our perception of what we think has become normal and immutable, and therefore impossible to change? Think back 15 years ago. The summer of 1992. Where were you? What did you hope for? What were your fears? What woke you in the night? What inspired you to get up in the morning?

We were each in different places, different ages – some of us were toddlers, some teenagers, some grandparents. Some were looking for work, some were retiring. Some of you were attending the first Concordia Summer Institute. Some had never even been to Canada. For those who were living in Canada, you may want to jog your memory, as I did with a few of the headlines of that year. In 1992, twenty-six miners were killed in the Westray Mine disaster in Nova Scotia. A two-year shut-down of the cod fishery was announced. The new Ottawa Senators played their first game in the NHL. The Charlottetown Accord was rejected. A referendum endorsing the creation of Nunavut was successful in the Northwest Territories. The first members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment arrived in Somalia. The United Nations Earth Summit took place in Rio de Janeiro. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney signed NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. In 1992, The United States government was supporting the Mujahadin in Afghanistan, and the people of Iraq were not at war, but they were living under international economic sanctions responsible for the deaths of an estimated 500,000 children. In 1992 Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* won the Booker Prize, and Leonard Cohen released his album, *The Future*.

We organize the past to draw lessons. One of the lessons surely is that we can still be surprised. In 1992, Nelson Mandela had not yet been elected President of South Africa. The World Trade Organization did not exist. The secret OECD negotiations on the Multi-lateral Agreement on Investment had not begun. And, of course in 1992, September 11 had other anniversary meanings. Could we have anticipated how the promised "peace dividend" of the end of the Cold War became the madness of what is called the war on terror? As importantly, though, could we have imagined that on Feb 15, 2003, more than 10 million people would march against war on five continents? The list could go on. So, while we may have notions about how we got here, how are we to be prepared for what is yet to come?

How prepared were Maher Arar and Monia Mazigh for the consequences of Canada's participation in the so-called War on Terror?[iv] And how prepared were their fellow citizens? Maher and Monia's story of tremendous suffering is also, of course, a story of tremendous courage. And they have been the first to say that in their successful struggle for justice, they were not alone. Last February, I attended a dinner on Parliament Hill to honour Maher Arar and Monia Mazigh and to raise money for a scholarship in their names in human rights law at the University of Ottawa. It was an unforgettable evening in which Maher and Monia also honoured people who had stood by them from the beginning of their ordeal, at a time when many were too afraid to speak out. The dinner was a celebration of conviction and due process. Monia captured the essence of that conviction in an eloquent message to the assembled guests saying:

"Who would have believed that when I landed at Mirabel airport sixteen years ago arriving in a new country, that my life would become what it is today? I never would have believed it and yet, it is true. My dream at the time was limited to continuing my studies and having a fulfilling, motivating, intellectual and professional life. Even though I was able to realize this dream, I found myself in 2002 in a nightmare that seemed to be without end. Without work, without my husband, with two young children, and above all, having to convince the world that my husband was not a terrorist. Many people at the time looked at me with pity, as if to say: good luck, you can always hope. I did hope, and I continue to hope and that is how things can move."

How do we, like Monia Mazigh, continue to hope, so that things can move?

That most difficult of questions: "where does hope come from?" has for me an answer that doesn't exactly wrap things up neatly. The struggle for justice, for humane and sane life on earth for all, is an ancient story – and there is plenty of evidence that it is likely to remain unfinished. Nothing is guaranteed. Nothing is promised. And, still, as June Callwood said shortly before she died from cancer this spring, "what you get is a life". What we get is a life.

Martin Luther King said, "We lose a part of our lives when we are silent about things that matter." Monia Mazigh reminded us last February that it is also true that when we name the things that matter we know the fullness of our lives.

What things matter to us today? What must we name so as not to lose a part of our lives?

Whether in Bamako in 2002 or five years later in Montréal, what can we say and do together? Tonight, as we begin a people's forum of a kind, we assemble with our own questions, our hopes, our fears, our

memories, our disappointments and our pride. We are called to create a space where stories can be told and where surprising as well as familiar truths can be heard. This is not only because it is our desire to be warm and welcoming. It is because it is absolutely necessary to understand the world in which we live and to imagine and create the futures that will sustain us.

Perhaps we need to assert not so much that another world is possible, but that other worlds have always existed, and still do. By other worlds I mean the diversity of places and ways of being human society, of birthing and growing and working and dying. A couple of years ago I had a very brief encounter with a woman my age in Sudan. She had left her village in the Red Sea Hills for the first time to travel to Khartoum for a conference organized by Sudanese NGOs and women's organizations to give a testimony of her activism at home for women's emancipation. Our journeys to and from that conference were, as we often say, "worlds apart". But it is also true that this brave, determined woman shares this planet, this human story with you and me. She is an artist of survival and social transformation. Her world is no more, or less, becoming or 'developing' than ours. We are all manifestations of what human life is on this planet, right now.

Justice is the politics of right relations; it is the politics of hope and of gratitude for the inescapable miracle that we do indeed get a life. We all know people whose words and actions remind us of that miracle, and the joys of struggling together, in solidarity, in common cause, to make our dreams real. I would like to conclude tonight with the words of a beautiful Montrealer, Lea Roback, whom I first met in 1982. At that time Lea was already 80 years old herself. She was a force of fighting spirit and love who inspired so many, including I am sure many people in this room. During the Depression, Lea joined the struggle against poverty and injustice and for women's right to vote, the right to an education and the right to have a job. She was a trade union organizer and activist in the peace movement and the women's movement. Lea died seven years ago. She left a legacy for those who had the good fortune to know her and for others who can still hear her words today.

Lea said, "You have to tell yourself: 'I'm acting out of my deepest conviction. Come what may I am going ahead; if it succeeds, so much the better; if not, I'll find another way or just move on.' There is nothing sadder than people with no enthusiasm." I think Lea would have loved the spirit in this room tonight. We are bringing to the coming week of the Summer Program our deepest convictions and our enthusiasm, and we will surely be blessed to know the fullness of our lives.

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[i] Inter Pares works with social change organizations around the world who share our analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by structural inequalities within and between nations, and who are working to promote social and economic justice in their communities. Visit: www.interpares.ca.

[ii] Arundhati Roy, An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire, South End Press, Cambridge, Mass., p. 116.

[iii] See www.resisters.ca.

[iv] Maher Arar is a 34-year-old wireless technology consultant. He was born in Syria and came to Canada with his family at the age of 17. He became a Canadian citizen in 1991. On Sept. 26, 2002, while in transit in New York's JFK airport when returning home from a vacation, Arar was detained by US officials and interrogated about alleged links to al-Qaeda. Twelve days later, he was chained, shackled and flown to Syria, where he was held in a tiny "grave-like" cell for ten months and ten days before he was moved to a better cell in a different prison. In Syria, he was beaten, tortured and forced to make a false confession. During his imprisonment, Arar's wife, Monia Mazigh, campaigned relentlessly on his behalf until he was returned to Canada in October 2003. On Jan. 28, 2004, under pressure from Canadian human rights organizations and a growing number of citizens, the Government of Canada announced a Commission of Inquiry into the Actions of Canadian Officials in Relation

to Maher Arar. On September 18, 2006, the Commissioner of the Inquiry, Justice Dennis O'Connor, cleared Arar of all terrorism allegations, stating he was "able to say categorically that there is no evidence to indicate that Mr. Arar has committed any offence or that his activities constitute a threat to the security of Canada." See: www.maherarar.ca.