

## From Turning Wheel – Fall/Winter 2009

### Overcoming Speechlessness: A Poet Encounters “the horror” in Rwanda, Eastern Congo and Palestine/Israel

by Alice Walker

*Three things cannot be hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.*

Buddha

#### Three years ago

Three years ago I visited Rwanda and Eastern Congo. In Kigali I paid my respects to the hundreds of thousands of infants, toddlers, teen-agers, adolescents, young engaged couples, married people, women and men, grandmothers and grandfathers, brothers and sisters of every facial shape and body size, who had been hacked into sometimes quite small pieces by armed strangers, or by neighbors, or by acquaintances and “friends” they knew. These bodies and pieces of bodies are now neatly and respectfully buried in mass graves. Fifteen years ago, these graves were encircled by cuttings of plants that are now sturdy blossoming vines that cover their iron trellises with flowers. Inside the adjacent museum there are photographs of the murdered: their open smiles or wise and consoling eyes will remain with me always. There is also, in the museum, a brief history of Rwanda. It tells of the long centuries Tutsi and Hutu lived together, intermarrying and raising their children, until the coming of the Belgians in the 1800s. The Belgian settlers determined, because they measured Hutu and Tutsi skulls, that the Tutsi were more intelligent than the Hutu, more like Europeans, and therefore placed the Tutsi above the Hutu. (Before the Belgians, the territory had been colonized by the Germans). When the Belgian colonists left for Europe, over a hundred years later, and after many changes to each of these groups, they left the Hutu in charge. The hatred this diabolical decision caused between these formerly co-existing peoples festered over generations; coming to a lethal boil in the tragedy of genocide.

Though I had done research while in college and written a thesis of sorts on the “Belgian” Congo, where King Leopold of Belgium introduced the policy of cutting off the hands of enslaved Africans who didn’t of couldn’t fulfill their rubber quota: collecting the latex for the rubber that made tires for the new cars everyone was beginning to want, in America and Europe, I had not known these same activities spread into the Kingdom of Rwanda. But apparently, to the Belgians, and to the German colonialists before them, it was all one vast “empty” territory, to be exploited without any consideration for the people living there. Indigenous Africans didn’t seem to exist, except as slaves. While visiting the set for the film *The Color Purple*, many decades after college, a sad older man from Africa, who had been a doctor in the Congo, and was now hired as an extra for our film, lamented the loss of his country, his people and his land, telling me that the Firestone Corporation had taken millions of acres of land, “leasing” it for pennies an acre, in perpetuity. The people who’d lived there since the beginning of humanity, had been forced to tend the trees planted there on Firestone’s vast rubber tree plantation. Needless to say I immediately thought of every car I’d owned and all the tires that ran under them.