Angels in South Africa?

*Queer Urbanity in K. Sello Duiker’s The Quiet Violence of Dreams and Tony Kushner’s Angels in America*

**Verena Jain-Warden**

Sel**lo Duiker’s novel** *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* can be called a queer text in various respects: it explores different concepts of queerness, which are often inspired by the West, as well as the limits of these concepts in a South African context. In many ways, the novel’s discussion of queer city life is reminiscent of Tony Kushner’s play in two parts *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes.*¹ The play has been praised not only for its queer depiction of the era of Reagan and HIV/AIDS but also for its vision of a world in which everyone, independent of their religion and sexuality, can be a citizen. *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* shares the fantastic features of *Angels in America* as well as many of its influences from Walter Benjamin’s philosophy: the employment of flânerie, the criticism of consumerism, and the darkly visionary view of history. It is set in Cape Town, the city that has been called the capital of gay culture in Africa,² and draws on post-apartheid developments that allow for “new spaces of ‘queer’ visibility, identity politics, and literary/cultural practice.”³ The novel does not directly refer to the discrepancy between the legal situation, with its “constitutional protection of same-

---

sex intimate relationships," and the reality of everyday homophobia and homophobic violence. Nevertheless, Cape Town's position as a tolerant and open space in which homosexuality is wholeheartedly accepted is complicated at several points.

In fact, the contradictions and tensions of postcolonial Cape Town, particularly of its queer subcultures, finally make the novel's protagonist Tshepo turn away from US-inspired ideas of queerness as they are advocated, for instance, in Angels in America. Instead, he looks for new, different ways of queerness in South Africa. His engagement with various concepts of queerness can be traced in his numerous walks through the city, his prophetic visions of an apocalyptic future, as well as his changing attitude towards consumerism and ethnicity.

‘Queer’ has become one of those terms that can be used in many different ways, giving it a plethora of meanings. An important aspect of queerness that has been stressed by researchers such as Judith Halberstam is its focus on non-normativity. Halberstam writes: “‘Queer’ refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.” Significantly, queerness is linked with, but not limited to, sexuality in this definition; the term ‘queer’ encompasses ways of being and living that oppose “institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction,” but the “willfully eccentric modes of being” that Halberstam deems queer also serve to counter notions of productivity, sustainability, and longevity. Such an inclusive view of queerness, which goes beyond sexuality, does justice to texts such as The Quiet Violence of Dreams, which takes up many more facets of queer life than just sexual ones. Above all, the characters’ queerness manifests itself in their attitudes towards the space they live in. Queer space refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics.

---

7 Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 1.
8 In a Queer Time and Place, 1.
9 See In a Queer Time and Place, 1, 6.
10 In a Queer Time and Place, 6.