"Astral Forms: Halley's Comet and Sol Plaatje's Reading of the "Long White Tail" of Colonial History."

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Abstract:
This paper explores how Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1931) charts astral movements in the articulation of what I will argue is the novel's 'astrological form' through which it reimagines colonial history. The novel anchors its structure to the perennial return of Halley's Comet, which not only complicates the mode of historical epic with a parabolic form, but Plaatje also offers an eco-critical theory on the movement of colonial history. The diegetic time of the novel and the time of its writing by Plaatje, hinge on the cosmological significance of the Halley's Comet sighting in southern Africa, which I will argue links the historical moment of the *Mfecane* (the great nineteenth century scattering of peoples across southern Africa due to expansionist wars in the creation of the Zulu Empire) together with the early twentieth century consolidation of the four colonies of the Cape into the Union of South Africa in 1909-10. Plaatje returns to the 1835 sighting of the Comet in order to gesture towards the nation-making and dispersals and the violences witnessed at the start of the twentieth century, when the Comet next appeared in 1910, the year of Unification. This paper argues that Plaatje employs planetary, more-than-human markers, or 'astral forms', in order to offer a philosophy of history specific to the colonial condition in southern Africa. Locating historiography in astral forms, I will read Plaatje's writing as a kind of eco-philosophy on colonial history, by and for the colonized. Through its eco-cosmological marking of time, *Mhudi* provides a decolonial model of history outside of the nation-time of the South African state and the colonial politics of Unification. The paper will conclude by suggesting that within Plaatje's astrological form is also a future, a projection towards the Comet's next arrival. This positions Plaatje's writing and his cosmological reorientations to colonial historiography as part of a genealogy which grounds African speculative/science fictional reckonings of the future within a history of writing by African authors from the start of the twentieth century until the present.

Towards the end of *Mhudi* (1930), Sol Plaatje's tale of colonial incursion, wars of expansion, and the inter-personal and inter-group relations between "Barolong," "Boer," and "Matabele", the invading Matabele forces find themselves defeated by the personal army of Moshueshue the king of the Basuto and Mzilikazi orders the head "magician of the nation" to "throw the bones." The reading of the signs produced by this 'throwing' is the most detailed and prophetic description of the Halley's Comet which is repeatedly mentioned throughout the text:

> The bones being picked up and thrown down once more and praised again, the wizard chanted: 'A star…a big giant star…the biggest that ever appeared in the skies. Its tail will spread from the eastern to the western clouds, remaining visible for many a night. Cattle will die, cattle will be captured, chieftains will sicken and die, and so will their wives and daughters and sons. There will be wars in Zululand, fighting in Basutoland, a stream of blood across the world."[1]

Later in the series of battles, when Mzilikazi's commander, Gubuza, is on the run from a coalition made up of Barolong, Griqua, Afrikaner, the Matabele army is confronted by the arrival of Halley's Comet. Gubuza's "army marched all night. Towards dawn their attention was drawn to the eastern skies where they saw the tail of a comet transfixed above the horizon. The repeated prophecies of Matabele seers at once came back to mind and many of the soldiers began to murmur. They complained that they were driven to fight against the forces of aerial sorcery, which were far above the powers of their own witchcraft" (143). The Comet's appearance in the East is a symbolic arresting of their retreat away from the forces pursuing them from the West, manifesting a host of prophecies that have foretold its arrival. Within the arc of the novel's structure the Comet serves as something of denouement, marking the retreat of Mzilikazi's forces in a chapter titled "The Exodus", while also gesturing towards various geo-political futures, which Plaatje is chronicling in retrospect: the settling of the Ndebele in present-day Zimbabwe; the Basotho at Thaba Nchu; the Batswana across the Transvaal and north into present-day Botswana.

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[1] Sol Plaatje, *Mhudi,* Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2005; 136. While *Mhudi* was originally published by the Lovedale Mission Press in 1930 in was written closer to the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century. All further citations from the text are parenthetical.

Historically, Halley's Comet appeared over southern Africa in 1835/1836 and again in 1910, correlating to two historical periods of national upheaval for the Black populations of southern Africa, the Mfecane and the Union of South Africa, respectively. The Comet is something of a coda around which the national and cultural configurations of southern Africa are given story in Plaatje's imagining of a long history of intra-African negotiations of political modernity. Ever the humourist, Plaatje's focus on the physical appearance of the Comet – its characteristic "long white tail" – is perhaps also his way of speculating on the futures of colonial rule in South Africa, these projections themselves becoming part of a 'long *tale'* of racialist control. Linking the temporality of the Comet's perineal return to the structure of the novel itself, I argue that Plaatje is articulating a certain reading of history, a kind of 'contingent reading' based both upon looking to the past, while also projecting towards the future. While much has been said about the historical project Plaatje is engaged in, reworking the hegemony of white, national(ist) narratives in the telling of the history of South Africa, less has been said about Plaatje's proleptical style, his futurism which links the historiographical with the cosmological and prophetic. This style, which I am thinking about as Plaatje's astrological form, is how I position Plaatje as part of a genealogy of African futurism.

Within *Mhudi,* the Comet works structurally, that is as intra-diegetic, symbolic portent and narrative coda, while also orienting the gravitational pull of the novel and its historiographical project outside the geographical and temporal bounds of the novel itself. I will treat this in some more detail below, but first I want to focus on how we might see the Comet as part of Plaatje's overall style or method, which thinks comparatively. Another way to put this would be to

suggest that Plaatje imagines southern Africa as an 'ecology of relations.'[2] That is, as expansive rather than delineated worlds in which sense is made through comparison or relation between things, peoples, narratives, etc. Sometimes these comparisons work by simple formulas of simile, e.g. this is like that – or at least relational intimacies where one thing might be placed next to another in his characteristically thick descriptions of life-worlds; at other moments they proceed by negative comparison. Perhaps the most interesting moments of Plaatje's comparative imaginary can be seen in his proximate, *almost* equivalences. Perhaps the most well-known and quoted example is the opening line of Plaatje's 1915 tome addressing the deleterious effects of the 1913 Land Act on Black life in South Africa, titled *Native Life in South Africa.* Plaatje writes that "Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, *not actually a slave*, but a pariah in the land of his birth."[3] Plaatje's structural comparison is important for how he positions slavery as a critical lens or metric through which to read the delineated landscape of segregationist policy. Plaatje's assessment also reveals how already, 35 years before it would be formally codified into national policy, the segregationist plan that would become apartheid was set to evolve along a rhetorical axis extolling 'separate development'. He writes that the "Bill was going to set up *a sort of* pale – there was going to be *a sort of kraal* in which all the Natives were to be driven, and they were to be left there to develop on their own lines."[4] In a clear reference to chattel slavery, Plaatje's comparison inverts southern African economies of wealth associated to cattle by showing how segregationist policy dehumanized the Black peoples of South Africa through commodification and racial enclaving. The "kraal," rather

[2] I thinking here with Glissant idea of an "ecological vision of relation"; see Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation,* 146.
[3] Sol. T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa, before & since the European War & the Boer Rebellion* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969; London: P.S. King & Son., 1969), p. 17; emphasis mine.
[4] Ibid., 34; emphasis mine.

than the central spatial configuration of economic and cultural wealth, is ominously rendered here as a prison for containment that Plaatje associates closely to slavery.

Not only is Plaatje's comparative method a way to think across contexts and racialist technologies, but it also asks the reader to think different life-worlds relationally, the US American South and South Africa for how these spaces might be mapped within a trans-colonial ecology of relations. Doing so has more than a few implications. Firstly, there is the historical case that Plaatje suggests, where the unfolding of histories of racial segregation, first under slavery and later through Jim Crow segregation, follow a trajectory across the Atlantic, informing the development of a segregationist imaginary in South Africa. I and others have written about this connection elsewhere, but it is worth noting here a comparative method of another and more sinister kind in traveler, quasi-sociologist, and vocal proponent of segregation in South Africa, Maurice Evans, whose *Black and White in the Southern States* is a massive exercise in detailing the racial landscapes of a post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow US South, as a way to construct both predictions and prescriptions for a recently unionized South Africa. After a lengthy survey of what he perceives as the social and economic ills afflicting the US, which are laid at the foot of what Evans diagnoses as the greatest sin of slavery, e.g. "racial miscegenation", he concludes with a chapter titled "For South Africa", a future-looking section in which Evans is unequivocal in his prescription for the new nation: that is more, and a more intense socio-political infrastructures of racial segregation.

I want to argue that while Plaatje is also thinking in these kinds of global and comparative ways, placing South Africa at the center of a colonial world (at least an Atlantic one) where the futures

of racist systems of control would play out over the course of the twentieth century, his comparisons work towards very different ends. Plaatje's global framing is a way to map a common ground, a trans-colonial ecology of relations based upon shared structural and ideological systems of racialist control, but also of possible futures of resistance, relation, and social-political realities other to and outside of the increasingly recalcitrant infrastructures of segregation corralling Black life not just in South Africa, but also globally. I argue that this makes Plaatje's work speculative in nature, both for imagining other worlds and imagining them otherwise, but also for the ways in which the book's framing – often overlooked for its more spectacular and easily allegorized endings – is making a case for thinking about global Blackness at the start of the twentieth century. Plaatje has typically been read as articulating a national project; from his involvement in the formation of the SANC (later ANC), to his first work *Native Life in South Africa*, and even the historical fiction *Mhudi* is rightly read as a kind of origin story for South Africa, a budding national formation at the time of its writing. Michael Green correctly writes that,

> The significance of the history related in *Mhudi* lies in the corrective it presents to the Afrikaner Nationalist view, then in the process of construction but already pretty well entrenched, of the centrality of the Great Trek in South African history. In *Mhudi* the Voortrekkers enter a rich and complex history as relatively minor players, only able to survive at first with the assistance of people already settled in the region, and the story ends before their domination is achieved.[5]

[5] Michael Green, "Generic Instability and the Project: History, Nation, and Form in Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi*", *Research in African Literatures*, 37:4 (Winter 2006); 36.

Certainly, this is part of the interventional importance of *Mhudi*: the prescient complicating of a national(ist) origin story that was in the very moments of its formulation and consolidation. But we might also push this further to say that what Plaatje is doing is upending the very tenets of what we consider to be an origin story. Rather than looking to the cultural archives of southern Africa and excavating autochthonous stability or ethnographic stasis, Plaatje has premised his narrative of national becoming upon a moment of historical collusion and contact. The result is a story of relations between peoples, and not an entirely romanticized projection either. Instead *Mhudi* is left open for us to think about how the racial and social futures of South Africa might play out in cycles, and more on this below in the section on comets as historical models.

But first to focus on some of the complicating treatment of origins, especially for what it might tell us about relationships between form, genre and national imaginaries. Similarly to Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*, written roughly around the same time, Plaatje's novel is not interested in origins, but rather in constructing a story of contact. Put differently, Plaatje, as well as Mofolo, put forward narratives which ask us to consider the foundational tenants of origins stories, at least in the Western tradition. Both authors make an argument for moments of cultural contact, entanglement, and subsequent relation, as narratives upon which futures of national belonging might be based. Caribbean theorist Edouard Glissant writes that Mofolo's *Chaka* is "an epic that, while enacting the 'universal' themes of passion and man's destiny is not concerned with the origin of people or its early history. Such an epic is not a creation myth"[6] Glissant continues by saying that,

> The epic of these conquered heroes, which was also about that of their peoples or tribes, sometimes their beliefs, is not meant, when recounted, to reassure a community of its

[6] Edouard, Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia Press, 135

> legitimacy in the world. They are not creation epics, great "books" about genesis, like the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Old Testament, the sagas, and the *chansons de geste*. They are memories of cultural contact, which are put together collectively by a people before being dispersed by colonization. There is no evidence therefore of that "naïve consciousness" that Hegel defines as the popular phase of the epic, but a strangled awareness that will remain an underlying element in the life of African peoples during the entire period of colonization.

Glissant's idea of African epic as "cultural contact" allows for a reading of both Mofolo and Plaatje as writers of stories about colonization. Stories which are both about the ways in which southern African peoples have been affected by and responded to local systems of colonization across the region, but also – and often by allegorical extension – both authors are invested in colonialism writ large across the African and diasporic worlds. Consider the prophetic final words spoken by Mofolo's Chaka as he condemns his fratricidal brothers: "You are killing me in the hope that you will be kings when I am dead, whereas you are wrong, that is not the way it will be because, *umlungu* the white man, is coming, and it is he who will rule you, and you will be his servants."[7] Chaka curses his brothers, as well as their dynastic legacy, which will come to crushing defeats less than a century later at the hands of the British Empire, but Chaka's prophecy also points to a colonial future, Empire's twentieth century high-water mark to which Mofolo was present and observant witness. Mofolo's return to a southern Africa of contact is certainly a way to critique the increasingly divisive colonial "space making"[8] being mapped onto

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[7] Mofolo, *Chaka*, Heinemann, 1981; 167.

[8] I am referencing Ato Quayson specifically here, who thinks about the logics of colonial space making as "Colonial space making is not merely the constitution of a geographically demarcated reality…Colonial space making is first and foremost the projection of a series of sociopolitical dimensions onto geographical space. These sociopolitical dimensions involve not just society and politics but also economy, culture, and a wide range of symbolic and discursive practices (Quayson, "Periods versus Concepts," 344).

the South African cultural and social landscapes in the early 20th century, if not also a meditation on some of the futures of Black life under various colonial and postcolonial formations that would be negotiated over the coming century.

If Plaatje sometimes works by approximation, as in the relationship of segregation's "not actually a slave" distance (or proximity as it were) to chattel slavery from *Native Life*, then at other moments in his work meaning is made within a relational frame. For instance, the opening lines of *Mhudi* work to draw a line around the cartography of the novel's life-world: "Two centuries ago the Bechuana tribes inhabited the extensive areas between Central Transvaal and the Kalahari Desert. Their entire world lay in the geography covered by the story in these pages" (1). The novel delineates the setting of the story itself, while also suggests a rather neat relationship between group (tribe, ethnicity, etc.) and land. Not only will the novel work for its remainder to offer a series of stories which undo the neatness and supposed stability of that relationship, but the scope, the comparative frame into which this diegetic life-world is placed, is immediately made more global. After several paragraphs of auto-ethnographic, thick description of the Barolong ways of life, from gendered economies of labor to the multispecies relationships making up the ecosystems of village life, Plaatje writes that "These peasants were content to live their monotonous lives, and thought not of their oversea kinsmen who were making history on the plantations and harbours of Virginia and Mississippi at that time; nor did they know or care about the relations of the Hottentots and the Boers at Cape Town nearer home" (2). Plaatje is brilliant in his subtle, negative suggestion that while the Barolong might not be thinking about the global Black Diaspora, he certainly is, and so too should the reader. The mention of the relations of the "Boers" to indigenous peoples of the Cape suggests further still that what Plaatje

is doing is framing his story, his tale of the *Mfecane,* within a larger and more global narrative of colonialism, gesturing towards the ways in which Black life across the colonial world and under various technologies of colonial encounter and subsequent racialist control have been violently hemmed in, in not exactly identical but often similar ways. Hidden in Plaatje's otherwise pastoralist renderings of pre-colonial life, where "simple folk were perfectly happy without money", instead "rais[ing] their native corn which satisfied their simple wants," is a more expansive, and even global purview, suggesting that while "To them [the Barolong] the limit of the world was Monomotapa (Portuguese East Africa)" that is not the only or the "entire world… covered by the story in these pages" (3). Instead, by focusing on the Barolong, indeed, by giving the story a centripetal orbit around an otherwise minor(itized) figure in the eponymous Mhudi, what Plaatje accomplishes is a story about how southern African colonialism was experienced, which in turn gestures towards writing an expansive experience of Black life under colonialism more globally.

Plaatje's narrative, for all of its regionalist scope, and despite the subsequent critical reception of his work in the service of re-thinking the historical foundation of South Africa's *national* origin stories, keeps gesturing towards a world certainly bigger than the pastoralist scenes of a pre-colonial idyll, and perhaps even more expansive than the regional geo-political shifts of the *Mfecane*, Unionization, etc. Indeed, Plaatje frames this story as not only a historical moment of southern African political and cultural modernity being negotiated, but that this drama unfolds as part of more global story of empire, resistance, and relations within and across colonial lines. But if Plaatje's comparativist framing is geographical in nature, then it is also cosmological in scope, making his tale of a Barolong community living two centuries ago and caught up in the

regional geo-political tectonics of both colonial expansion and regional power consolidation, a narrative that is planetarily inflected.

The clearest and most consistent example of Plaatje's planetary scope is the ways in which *Mhudi*'s narrative structure as well as the expansiveness of its imaginative landscape is linked to the perineal return of Halley's Comet. The prominence of the Comet within the novel works to impart various temporalities, including Plaatje's literary excavation of a southern African archive of dispersal and relation (the *Mfecane*) in the 1820-1830's, a present in which Plaatje writes at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, as well as gesturing towards a future, plotting the coordinates of the Comet's inevitable return as a way to project the political and social futures of the country in another 75 years. Taken together these might be said to articulate a vision of a kind of philosophy of history, which Plaatje's writes under the signs of the perineal and the prophetic. Historically, we know that the Comet appeared in the southern African skies in 1835/1836 and again in 1910, which creates a historical arc roughly corresponding to the diegetic action of *Mhudi* and Plaatje's early conception and writing of the novel, while also directly marking the historical dates of the *Mfecane* and the Unionization of the four colonies of the Cape into the Union of South Africa. Plaatje is clearly trying to suggest a relation between the two moments by linking the structure of the novel to this astrological phenomenon, giving the narrative what I want to call its 'astral form', a way of writing/imagining that pulls together both a sense of indigenous astronomy – *bolepa*[9] *dinaledi* – as well as kind of historiographical project which in Plaatje's case is working to recuperate a narrative of modernity based in and on Black life and experience in southern Africa.

[9] "Holepa" meaning to foretell, observe, take notice of, watch carefully, to tie in an intricate and difficult knot. It is the goal of the forthcoming chapter to think more about the implications for *holepa* as Plaatje's meditation on kinds of reading practices which allow for critical formations and textualities which gesture towards possible outsides to the western epistemes.

But why Halley's Comet, we might ask. Plaatje himself had an abiding fascination with the Comet, even naming his third child Halley. And from the literature on the subject, making meaning from the stars specifically and the cosmos more generally is a common understanding of the relationship between southern African communities and their celestial environments. In a comprehensive look at indigenous astrology and cosmological understandings within various Batswana communities, MT Koitsiwe writes that historically "Batswana were not just meagre or ordinary stargazers, they had a particular worldview, philosophy, *relational ontology* with the cosmos and the stars played a significant role in their daily livelihood."[10] Koitsiwe's emphasis on the "relational" suggests a reading of the celestial and terrestrial as one ecosystem, one ecology of relationships in which life is experienced and re-presented. Part of what I would like to suggest here is that Plaatje is trying to make sense of, and even critique, the colonialist moment of national formation witnessed in the politics surrounding the Union, especially the racialist enclaving resultant from the subsequent 1913 Native's Land Act, by thinking this particular moment up and against the longer cycles of Halley's Comet. The first and most obvious connection this historical infrastructure suggests is to relate the moment of the *Mfecane* with that of the Unification in a kind of allegorical way (again, keeping in mind the appearances of the Comet happening in 1835/36 and again in 1910). Part of the implication here would be to think various historical nation formations (colonial and Zulu expansionism) comparatively with Plaatje's own contemporary nationalist moment. I want to caution here that I am not suggesting that Plaatje saw the *Mfecane* as equivalent or even commensurate with the violence that ensued from Unionization politics. Rather, thinking the two together is a way to comment upon and even

[10] MT Koitsiwe, "African Indigenous Astronomy of Batswana in Botswana and South Africa", Doctoral Thesis, North-West University (2020); 75; emphasis mine.

critique national moments of origin – as mentioned above. Moreover, linking the two via the Comet is a way to locate origin narratives within more expansive, and in this case even cosmological, frameworks; again, imparting what I am thinking about as the novel's astralogical form.

While the Comet is repeatedly mentioned throughout *Mhudi*, it is a chapter titled "Halley's Comet, its Influence on the Native Mind" in which the plotting of this astral form makes clear how the text imagines historical movement as perineal and prophetic. Following a defeat by the personal army of Moshueshue, in which the Basuto king displays what comes to be known as a legendary act of political magnanimity, the beaten Matabele king, Mzilikazi, "called his magicians together and asked the principal national wizard to throw bones and communicate any omens he could divine" (135). After the first prophesy read from the bones assuring Mzilikazi that "Umnandi, the favourite wife of the king…was alive and well among strange people to the east", the seer throws and re-throws the bones several more times, "repeating the operation a few more times, he critically examined the lay of every piece" and offers this reading:

> 'Away in the distance I see a mighty star in the skies, with a long white tail stretching almost across the heavens. Wise men have always said that such a star is a harbinger of diseases of men and beasts, wars and the overthrow of governments, as well as the death of princes. Within the rays of the tail of this star, I can clearly see streams of tears and rivers of blood…I can see the mighty throne of Mzilikazi floating across the crimson stream, reaching a safe landing on the opposite bank. I also perceive clear indications of death and destruction among rulers and commoners, but no death seems marked out for Mzilikazi, ruler of the ground and the clouds' (Ibid.).

The prophecy continues, fervently advising Mzilikazi to promptly move his kingdom north "On the other side of this river of blood" (136). The seer is clear about what he reads from the bones: only on the other side of this stream of death will the Matabele once again find prosperity. He relates to the king that "The bones tell me that there will be much of death and tribulation before the new haven is reached. Instant emigration, therefore, and arrival at the new place *before the appearance of the star with the long tail* is the only sure way of escaping these troubles" (Ibid.; emphasis mine). The prophecy in this way is actually a rehearsal of the historical migration north and the settling in Zimbabwe of the Ndebele and other groups. Writing in the midst of the unfolding and racialist politics of the Union, Plaatje asks us to think about the two historical moments, (the Mfecane and the Union) within a comparative frame of the Comet cycle. Rather than the increasingly symbolic significance of the Great Trek in the national(ist) discourse of South Africa, what this astral structuring of the story gestures to is another migration as integral to the narratives making up the modern South African nation. Recalling Glissant's reading of Mofolo, Plaatje has in similar ways, written a story which is less about essential origins and their supposedly timeless connection to geography and more about an ecology of relations, traversed with movement, migration, and "cultural contact".

I am interested in the kinds of textualities, as well as reading practices, Plaatje is constructing here through this cosmological prophecy. In other words, both the Comet, its trajectory, its particular astral features ("the long white tail") are a form of cosmological text to be read and deciphered. But the divination itself is of course also being foregrounded as a reading practice. In a recent doctoral dissertation, Nduduzu Makhathini makes clear this connection of divination and language, writing that "divination in (*ubu)ngoma* – the throwing of bones is a form of

improvisation, a performed language overlapping between time and space"[11] The throwing of bones in Makhathini's formulation is language, both as a system of signs or a semiotic field, as well as an analytical practice or discourse in the ability to read these signs. In the context of *Mhudi*, the Comet's divination (reading) is Plaatje way of giving story to southern African pasts, to re-signify the importance of reading multiplicity in historical narratives. Think here too of the above definition of indigenous astronomy as *bolepa dinaledi* – and that etymologically foretelling and reading are part of a related analytical practice, one which also gestures towards the tethered nature of the cosmos with the terrestrial in a shared, relational field of meaning. Of course, given the phenomenon of Halley's Comet itself, Plaatje is also suggesting a proleptic reading; a future in which signs will again require interpretation. In storying the past in this parabolic way, linked to the perineal return of the Comet, Plaatje is actually asking his reader to think about both the present (in which he writes) as well the future. Southern African history is global history in Plaatje formulation. Likewise he imagines the unfolding of this history as part a planetary future.

Here is where I want to suggest that not only is Plaatje part of an African futurism genealogy, but that in this articulation he is actually preemptively complicating some of the prominent formulation of both science fiction and Afro-futurism. While Samuel Delaney writes that science fiction is a "significant distortion of the present", William Gibson suggests that "science fiction is a means through which to reprogram the present."[12] Without placing Plaatje squarely within the genre of science fiction, I do mean to think about how a text like *Mhudi*, especially its astrological form, is a kind of speculative fiction; a future-writing inflected by African

[11] Nduduzo Makhathini, "Breaking into South: Dis/Locating Ntu Cosmology and Improvisation in South African Jazz," Doctoral Dissertation, Stellenbosch University, 2023; 11.
[12] Quoted in Kodwo Eshun, 290.

epistemologies and reading practices. This as well as the complex temporality of Plaatje's astrological structure is where I locate *Mhudi* as a kind of African futurism. Thinking about the temporality of proleptic intervention, Kodwo Eshun writes that, "Afrofuturism…is concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional"[13] Plaatje's Comet as historical scaffolding for *Mhudi* must be read as bringing into focus both the present of the first decades of the twentieth century, while also asking us as readers to follow the "long white tail" of the Comet another 75 years into the future, to divine how the future of this space might look upon the return of this astral form. The long white tail is also Plaatje's tale of how South Africa's history might be figured differently. But it also a speculative tale about what the futures of the country – and again Black life more globally – might look like given the increasing recalcitrance of racist control in his moment of trying to reprogram the present. The astral form of the Comet, the parabolic shape it lends to the structure of Plaatje novel as well as his philosophy of history requires a kind of contingent reading practice; much like the throwing/reading of the bones, the reading of the present is a practiced and improvisational language requiring both a historical analysis and a futurist projection.

What scenes like Koapodilalelo (the Venus Star), as well as the overwhelming importance of the Halley's Comet in structuring not only the book's arc, but alos much of its cosmological imaginary, suggest to us, is that Plaatje is interested in an outside to the Western epistemological corralling of Black imaginaries in southern African (and elsewhere). These interaction with astral forms offers us pre-Christian[14] negotiations of a few key and consistent tenets of Plaatje's

[13] Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism", *The New Centennial Review*, 3:2 (Summer 2003); 293.

[14] We know from Andrew Clegg, P.G. Alcock and others that Modimo – as prime creator-figure – was consolidated within the Tswana religious imaginary only towards the end of the nineteenth century and as a result of missionary

project: a modernity that is the domain of intra-African relations and histories, as well as a mapping in the southern African imaginary of where this place sits within the broader global and even cosmic orbits of life on the planet. It is important to say here that Plaatje doesn't figure either of these articulations – either the negotiation of what a modernity (a sense of time/space and relation to it) as well as a mapping of global geographical relations) as simple importations from European/Western ideas or even predicated upon an encounter with the colonial epistemological enterprise. It is precisely his point to suggest an ontology in which meaning making, form-giving are the products of indigenous knowledge, local, ecological experience and relationships, etc. I don't think it is too much to say that Plaatje's regional/national landscape is one he imagines as caught up in the momentous currents of a twentieth century world historical-moment unfolding into the future.

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emphasis on the Modimo figure as a ready-made scaffolding for the important of a Judeo-Christian, monotheistic cosmology. Not only was Plaatje certainly aware of this, given his life-long and intimate relationship with missionary culture, but given his devout Christianity I would go so far as to say that he *mostly* believed the 'Modimo as Judeo-Christian God' correlation.