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Álvaro Menen Desleal's Speculative Planetary Imagination

La ciencia ficción tradicionalmente ha tenido una posición marginada dentro del canon latinoamericano. Esto se debe a varias suposiciones: su presunta baja calidad, contenido sensacionalista y desconexión con la realidad sociohistórica. En este artículo, abogo por la recuperación del escritor salvadoreño Álvaro Menen Desleal como autor fundacional de la ficción especulativa centroamericana. Examino por qué Menen Desleal recurre al género de la ciencia ficción – y abstrae sus mundos ficticios a futuros lejanos o galácticos – en un momento cuando la escritura de sus contemporáneos de la Generación Comprometida era intensamente politizada y realista. Propongo que la imaginación especulativa y planetaria de Menen Desleal alterna entre ampliar preocupaciones locales a escalas más grandes o evadir completamente lo nacional para retomar categorías y debates "universales". Al pensar las categorías de lo humano o lo planetario desde una posición ex-céntrica, Menen Desleal se apropia lúdicamente de las convenciones del género especulativo y las trastoca desde adentro.

Palabras clave: *cosmopolitismo planetario, El Salvador, ficción especulativa, guerra nuclear, Guerra Fría*

Science fiction has long held a marginalized status within the Latin American literary canon. This is due to myriad assumptions: its supposed inferior quality, sensationalist content, and disconnect from socio-historical reality. In this article, I argue for the recuperation of Salvadoran author Álvaro Menen Desleal as a foundational writer of Central American speculative fiction. I explore why Menen Desleal turns to sci-fi – abstracting his fictive worlds to far-off futures or other planets – at a moment when the writing of contemporaries of the Committed Generation was increasingly politicized and realist. I argue that Menen Desleal's speculative planetary imagination toggles between scaling up localized concerns and evading them altogether to play with "universal" categories. By thinking with the categories of the human or the planet from an ex-centric position, Menen Desleal playfully appropriates generic convention, only to disrupt it from within.

Keywords: *planetary cosmopolitanism, El Salvador, speculative fiction, nuclear war, Cold War*

Read side-by-side against his contemporaries, the Salvadoran writer Álvaro Menen Desleal (born Álvaro Menendez Leal) appears to be a striking anomaly. Unlike other members of El Salvador's *Generación Comprometida*, Menen Desleal wrote speculative and marvelous tales abstracted from immediate sociopolitical concerns. He refrained from thematizing indigeneity or rural life, and opposed literature's didactic function. His tales eschewed realism and local color in favor of universal non-places that seemingly transcended geopolitical space and linear historical time.

If at the turn of the twentieth century, *modernista* writers like Rubén Darío and Enrique Gómez Carrillo laid claim to Central America's ability to speak to the universal and establish global conversations, the majority of Isthmus authors who followed in their wake rejected this cosmopolitan approach and turned their attention back to the local, foregrounding literature's responsibility to shape and contest regional issues. Most Central American authors of the twentieth century dismissed cosmopolitanism as a misguided, Eurocentric posture that was disengaged with what really mattered: the quotidian reality of their readers' circumscribed space. Thus, the Isthmus's cultural particularity was not perceived as a sign of "backwardness" that distanced Central American literature from global conversations, but instead a proud marker of originality, a distinguishing feature that should be woven into cultural production in order to stand out.[1]

In parallel fashion, scholars of Central American literature have largely focused on regional specificity and cultural difference as justifications for the region's hemispheric relevance. Consequently, Central American literary studies has attended to what is widely considered exceptional about regional cultural production, such as subalternity, revolution, migration, and indigeneity. Critics have focused on works that illustrate the specificity of the contexts in which they were produced, or that actively shaped national political conversations.[2]

Within this context, Menen Desleal has slipped through the cracks, revealing the fissures that underscore current approaches to twentieth-century Central American cultural production. He has gone overlooked by critics precisely because he elides engagement with regional specificity and the imperatives of national literature. His work does not depict rural spaces or the Salvadoran peasantry. El Salvador is infrequently the setting of his fiction, which centers instead on protagonists from the United States, the Soviet Union, Asia, the distant historical past, or even outer space. Additionally, while his literature has a political bent, it is not political in the actively engaged sense of contemporaries like Roque Dalton or Manlio

Argueta (or, beyond the bounds of El Salvador, authors like Ernesto Cardenal and Sergio Ramírez). His posture is more cautious, cynical of ideology writ large. Further distancing him from his cohort, Menen Desleal avoids realist representational models. Instead he works within minor genres like sci-fi – which makes him a regional oddity – or within hemispheric genres like the fantastic – placing him more in dialogue with South American authors like Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar than with his compatriots.

This article takes seriously Menen Desleal's global literary engagement and accounts for what I term his speculative planetary imagination. This speculative planetary imagination deploys a scalar framework that zooms out both geographically and temporally. It expansively conceptualizes space and time by moving past the nation to think about the planet, past differences of race and class to think through the category of species, and past the historical moment and toward deep time. This scalar imagination is political, but not in the local revolutionary sense that depicts questions of national concern. Rather, it is politicized in its destabilizing of the anthropocentric credence that reason will ultimately make sense of what is, for Menen Desleal, a fundamentally chaotic universe. His fiction problematizes human ambition by calling into question a myriad of projects that supposedly demonstrate human exceptionalism, such as space exploration, nuclear power, authoritarianism, and even revolution itself.

In this article, I posit that Menen Desleal's speculative planetary imagination indexes a mode of response to authoritarianism and cultural marginalization that dramatically diverges from his contemporaries. I first outline Menen Desleal's disagreements with the Committed Generation, and his assertion that distance from the local context was essential to literary innovation. This celebration of migration, external perspectives, and autonomy is at the core of Menen Desleal's cosmopolitan thought. Second, I highlight the intersection between his cosmopolitanism and interest in speculative genres. Thinking from a planetary or even galactic perspective allowed Menen Desleal to accomplish several avenues of critique, including the critique of the neoimperial pursuit of mastery and belief in human exemplarity, as well as a critique of the belief that Salvadoran political concerns were unrelated to broader issues of the Cold War, such as the threat of total nuclear war. I argue that Menen Desleal's engagement with expansive categories like planet and species was not necessarily an escapist gesture, but laid claim to the Central American ability to narrate from the universal, and to the Isthmus' belonging within capacious ontological categories and global ethical debates. This zoomed-

out perspective held for Menen Desleal the allure of freedom from national borders and geopolitical and cultural marginalization, while also foregrounding the inherent fragility of our shared ecosystem, imperiled by nuclear war.

DESLEAL TO THE COMMITTED GENERATION

Looking back at the revolutionary period from the standpoint of the present can feel disconcerting. Magdalena Perkowska has suggested that the drop-off in scholarly attention to Central American cultural production of the 1960s-80s can be attributed to the fact that the revolutions came and went without bringing radical change. Revolutionary parties have been institutionalized; as of 2019, both of the presidents of El Salvador and Nicaragua, Salvador Sánchez Cerén and Daniel Ortega, had served as guerrilla commanders during their respective wars. And yet governance by revolutionary parties has fallen short of their promises, performing instead like the parties that preceded them, marred by corruption and, in Ortega's case, violently suppressing opposition. To revisit the political optimism of the sixties in hindsight can thus feel not only disconcerting but grotesque. As Perkowska puts it, "Nada queda del horizonte utópico, del tono optimista y radicalmente cuestionador, de la literatura entendida como articulación simbólica del compromiso político, del discurso emancipador nacionalista" (16). Instead, the Isthmus's current literary production is pessimistic, defined by the "aesthetic of cynicism" aptly theorized by Beatriz Cortez.

Yet, in spite of this retrospective disappointment, the sixties and seventies were a period of remarkable literary innovation throughout the Isthmus. These were productive decades that generated what Arturo Arias has described as a "mini-boom" in formal experimentation, representational models, and ludic manipulation of meaning (54). Perkowska likewise agrees that the legacy of this period has yet to be fully apprehended. Álvaro Menen Desleal's experimentation with genre, perspective, and temporality is one such piece that merits revisiting. It illustrates the divergent ways in which writers of the sixties and seventies conceptualized the future and critiqued the far-reaching policies of the Cold War. For Menen Desleal, to write from El Salvador did not necessitate a restrictive focus on local change – as many of his generation believed – but was a position from which to engage global polemics like the nuclear arms race, and underscore their implications for the entire planet.

Menen Desleal formed part of El Salvador's *Generación Comprometida*, a robust group of budding intellectuals and writers who met throughout the 1950s in San Salvador, and included men who would later participate in

the revolution such as Roque Dalton, Manlio Argueta, Roberto Armijo, and José Roberto Cea. Menen Desleal's deviation from his generation's politicized realist ethos set him apart. In spite of his popularity with the reading public, his dissimilar aesthetic and philosophical approach led him to be largely ignored by scholars, particularly throughout the 80s and 90s, when critics were invested in literature that reimagined national politics. Nonetheless, the very qualities that made Menen Desleal incongruous when revolutionary optimism had yet to be exhausted index his relevance when reassessing the period today. His seemingly opaque political messaging, detachment from local realities, and abstraction into the distant horizon of planetary deep time, all confounded the modes of expression that characterized Central American literature of the era. While Cortez has identified Roque Dalton as the central precursor of the postwar disenchanted aesthetic (105), the same could be said of Menen Desleal, who was skeptical of radical political change: unconvinced that any ideology could fully account for the convolution of human nature and the inherent unknowability of the universe. The relevance of his literary project to current Salvadoran letters has been underscored by Horacio Castellanos Moya's assertion that Menen Desleal is one of only a few memorable Salvadoran writers of the twentieth century, alongside Dalton and Argueta (Lindo).

The Committed Generation shared the precept that in order to write literature that was both politically and culturally relevant, it was imperative to decisively break with Salvadoran literary tradition – namely *modernismo*, *vitalismo*, and *regionalismo* – which by the fifties felt outdated. These writers, most of who were born in the thirties, were instead inspired by hemispheric cultural trends like the avant-garde and existentialist movements, Mexican muralism, and Pablo Neruda's blending of verse with politics (Melgar Brizuela 88).

The group began as a literary circle, Cenáculo de Iniciación Literaria, which gathered in 1950. Its original congregants, including Menen Desleal, subsequently called themselves the Grupo Octubre, indicating their ideological affinity with Soviet and Guatemalan socialist revolutions, which both respectively unfolded during the month of October. In 1956, several members including Dalton, Argueta, and Armijo (but not Menen Desleal) broke off to found the Círculo Literario Universitario, based at the Universidad de El Salvador. Throughout these different groupings, members coalesced their energies around the Sunday literary pages of *La prensa gráfica* and *Diario Latino*, and later, the literary magazine *Hoja*.

Although the term "Committed Generation" is now used as a catchall to encompass these varying literary formations, the expansive nature of

these groupings meant that in spite of the name, its members never converged around a single goal or ideological point of view. The moniker "Committed Generation" was put forth in 1956 by Ítalo López Vallecillos, inspired by Jean Paul Sartre's vision of the socially engaged intellectual. Other writers did not share this vision and repudiated the name. Menen Desleal was one of the most vehement objectors. Unlike López Vallecillos and the members of the Círculo Literario Universitario, Menen Deseal fundamentally disagreed that literature had to serve a social or political purpose. He fashioned himself more in the mold of Jorge Luis Borges, a cosmopolitan writer who envisioned the literary vocation as an endeavor that stretched far beyond the immediate historical moment and spatial context. He preferred to call the group "Grupo Internacional" or "Grupo Espontáneo," which pointed to its global perspective or to the spontaneous manner in which it gathered (Melgar Brizuela 88).

A biographical blurb for Menen Desleal included in a 1962 issue of *Cultura*, a literary magazine directed by Claudia Lars, humorously noted Menen Desleal's brash repudiation of his supposed membership. It read, "Nos asegura que no pertenece a la llamada 'generación comprometida' – como nosotros habíamos afirmado – ni a ningún grupo que quiera apresarlo por medio de cualquier obligado compromiso … Según sus propias palabras: pertenece a la vida que evoluciona siempre, y que nunca guarda como nuevas, formas gastadas." As specified in his chosen pen name, which reworks his birth name from Menéndez Leal into Menen Desleal, the lack of allegiance to any one cause, group, country, or aesthetic form was central to Menen Desleal's philosophy. This disloyalty was often presented with performative hubris. He described the other members of the Committed Generation as "casi todos … con talento," but thought of himself as an autonomous entity (Alcides Orellana).[3] As he once put it with characteristic swagger, if necessary, he could stand in for his entire generation and act as "El 'hombre-generación', el 'hombre-orquesta', en cuyos hombros podría reposar la responsabilidad de la literatura nacional" (Alvarenga 13). Perhaps because of this ambition for exemplarity and posterity, Menen Desleal's fiction always reached past the confines of the local and toward more universal forms and themes.

A believer in the maxim that no publicity was bad publicity, he drew attention to his work through scandals, many of which he sparked himself. In 1963, shortly after winning second place in the Certamen Nacional de Cultura de El Salvador for his book of short stories *Cuentos breves y maravillosos*, Menen Desleal was accused of plagiarizing Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares' similarly titled collection, *Cuentos breves y extraordinarios*. The polemic unfolded in national newspapers with op-eds arguing both

sides of the case. As a result, a suit was levied against Menen Desleal, and he was found guilty. Yet, in spite of this, or rather because of this scandal, the book became a bestseller. It broke sales records, and was subsequently translated into English and Romanian – a rarity for Salvadoran writers of the era. In 1968, Sergio Ramírez revealed that Menen Desleal had himself unleashed the polemic by penning both the op-ed that accused himself of plagiarism and the subsequent one in his defense (Ramírez). The polemic caught on, and others dove into the fray, spreading the work's visibility. This game of mirrors was furthered by the collection's prologue, which was supposedly written by Borges in praise of the work. This too was apocryphal. Borges – who did not know Menen Desleal – later found out about the scandal and was bemused.[4]

The self-obloquy that shot Menen Desleal's first book to bestseller status exemplified his media-savvy grasp that public interest was best generated through ignominy and buzz marketing. He reveled in the spotlight, stirring the pot with games that blurred the line between plagiarism, appropriation, and dialogue. A firm believer that originality was a chimera, Menen Desleal insisted that good art was born out of imitation. This shrewd understanding of publicity derived from his extensive experience navigating a variety of media outlets, including a pioneering role in the nation's televised news. Throughout the fifties he worked at *El Diario de Hoy*, directing the Sunday literary supplement and writing the column "Paso Doble." In 1956 he launched *Teleperiódico*, the first Salvadoran publication to use rotogravure, or engraved printing (López Vallecillos 435). He went on to found El Salvador's first independent news programs: the radio program *Tele-reloj*, and the television show *Telediario* in 1956. In these organizations Menen Desleal had to constantly negotiate objective reporting while also evading censorship. In one case, he drummed up viewership by challenging president José María Lemus to a boxing match and declared himself the winner when Lemus unsurprisingly never showed. In another, when a censor appeared at the station to review the scripted news before it aired, Menen Desleal offered the official a blank page and then went on the air with black tape covering his mouth, gesticulating in silence for an entire minute. Citing these acts, Jorge Ávalos has argued that Menen Desleal was El Salvador's first performance artist: a person who imbued his actions with political and theatrical meaning (Ávalos).

This more flexible relationship with the existing authoritarian government led contemporaneous intellectuals to find Menen Deseal lacking, if not complicit, in his political stance. Unlike leftists who felt that the state needed to be overthrown, Menen Desleal's prominent role in the

media industry throughout the fifties and sixties necessitated a more measured stance. Later, during the most brutal years of the Civil War in the eighties, he worked for José Napoleón Duarte's nondemocratic administration as the Director de Cultura del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, participating in a world tour that was aimed at improving the regime's image abroad by spreading disinformation about the rebels.[5] Menen Desleal was an active participant in the authoritarian government during the worst years of the Civil War, and for this he was rightfully pilloried. Dalton poked fun at him in his posthumous work *Pobrecito poeta que era yo* (1976), and Cea accused him in his memoirs of being part of the "Generación Troncometida" that actively undermined the radical cause.[6] Cea wryly observed that this complicity "no le resta a su estética ningún valor, solamente a su 'moral y civíca' que creía y decía sostener" (124).

In the wake of Menen Desleal's passing in 2000, reassessments of his political waffling have eased, in large part due to the understanding that during the cultural Cold War in Latin America, "there were only troubling options" for intellectuals (Iber 17). Salvadoran writer and former guerrilla Miguel Huezo Mixco has noted that whereas some intellectuals of the era like Dalton approached politics as if it were a game of Russian roulette, Menen Desleal played it like it was poker (97). While his commitment to civic life in the sixties required dialogue with the authoritarian state, it did not mean an absence of risk. His news program *Teleperiódico* was shuttered in 1960 for accurately reporting on the military assault against the dean of the Universidad Nacional in the wake of student protests (Melgar Brizuela 92).

Menen Desleal thematizes the vexed practice of writing under censorship and the complicated question of state complicity in his short story "Una carta de familia," written in 1969. The story formally enacts a letter-in-progress from a woman named Carlota to her husband Víctor, whom we deduce is in exile for having denounced the government in the press. In the letter, Carlota assures him that he can now safely return; the strikes and guerrilla activity have ended, the government remains in power, but officials have been kind to her. The Colonel, she writes, has told her that he can come back without repercussions because "esas cosas no pasan en una democracia" (Menen Desleal, *Revolución* 58).

The short story is staged as if it were a play. Each content paragraph is separated by italicized stage directions that always remain the same, repeated word-for-word: "Esperó. Volvió a escribir" (57). This formal interruption indicates that we are watching the letter being written in real time, not coming upon it as an already finished document. The stage directions only change once, in the story's concluding line, after Carlota

exhorts that Víctor return home to his family. The final italicized directions read, "Le quitaron la hoja de papel," revealing that Carlota has been writing this letter under duress, with the state monitoring her every word (58). What at first had read as a reassuring note is retroactively imbued with dread. "Una carta de familia" signals the impossibility of discursive realism under the authoritarian state, a context in which every word must be read in two ways, not just at face value but also as a possible act of concealment. It also contextualizes why those who seem to be acting in concert with a regime might be doing so under duress.

Although Menen Desleal never took up arms against the state, his work was not apolitical. Several of his short stories poke subtle fun at characters who are military men, like "El suicida" (1961), which narrates a man's futile attempts to effectively commit suicide, mentioning in passing that he is a member of the military and underscoring the impotence of supposedly strong masculine figures. Other short stories like "Intoxicación" (1970) thematize the omnipresence of state violence by recounting the tale of a woman who is worried about her husband's pill addiction, a problem that is overshadowed by the quick mention that their building has been blown up, presumably by the government (*Revolución* 59). The long speculative collage "El día en que quebró el café" (1961) imagines how the successful creation of synthetic coffee would send El Salvador into a tailspin, with regimes recurring to foreign intervention.

Unlike other members of the Committed Generation, Menen Desleal didn't restrict his critiques to one ideology, but instead found all political ideologies wanting. "Revolución en el país que edificó un castillo de hadas" (1970) critiques how revolutionary projects often end up consolidating power in a few hands, and are driven by ideological fanaticism: a veiled dig at the Cuban Revolution. *Luz negra*, his most successful play (which had a record-breaking 66 show run in El Salvador in 1966), chastises the death penalty, human hypocrisy, the *pueblo*'s complicity with State violence, religion, and morality (Náter 187). It also decries societies that criminalize freedom of thought and devalue love. This critique was not just formulated in response to the authoritarian regime, but also to leftist revolutionary ideologies.

While the stories mentioned above speak to El Salvador's sociopolitical situation, they do so without explicitly referencing it. As such, these fictions are universalizable; they can be extrapolated to any nation in Central America, or to any authoritarian or developing country in the world. The absence of cultural particularity or markers of national difference (with the exception of atypical stories like "El día en que quebró el café") reflect Menen Desleal's forceful rejection of the contemporaneous

mandate that Salvadoran writers principally dramatize the domestic in order to diversify character types or move political conversations in new directions. While he wrestled with local politics on a daily basis through his news programs, he viewed literature as an autonomous sphere, a space that could disconnect from these quotidian battles and operate on a larger scale by engaging with universal themes, attracting transnational readers, and reworking cosmopolitan paradigms. This approach exemplifies what Ignacio Sánchez Prado has described as the "time-honored tradition of … Latin American cultural thinkers devoted to challenging the notion that universalism is solely the province of European and U.S. culture, or that the region can only be a permanent source of foreignness and otherness" (9).

Since most Salvadoran writers of the early-to-mid-twentieth century were preoccupied with regionalism and costumbrismo, Menen Desleal viewed his literary project as one of rupture. Unlike the more tempered approach of colleagues like Dalton who advocated a critical reappraisal of the national canon that kept the good while discarding the bad, Menen Desleal dismissed antecedents like Salarrué and Alberto Masferrer entirely. With characteristic provocation, he titled a poem "Viejuemierda" debunking Masferrer's heroic status, and penned a series of articles in 1953 deriding his philosophy as mediocre. He elaborated that this mediocrity was unsurprising, given the stagnant parochialism of regional intellectual life, writing, "Su mediocridad – seamos sinceros, aunque duela a muchos – no es sino producto de nuestra propia mediocridad … hoy, como ayer, no somos sino una prolongación de las corrientes en boga en Europa" (qtd. in Alvarenga 8).

For Menen Desleal, this national mediocrity was not just confined to the past, but also permeated the present. Like Castellanos Moya's protagonist Edgardo Vega in *El asco*, Menen Desleal was not just ambivalent about El Salvador's emblematic characteristics, but openly mocked them as irredeemably retrograde.[7] As his friend Renán Alcides Orellana noted, "Así era Álvaro… convencido de que aquí no podrá existir jamás el espacio azul que necesitan el arte y la cultura." Consequently, Menen Desleal felt that leaving El Salvador was imperative to intellectual growth, the only way to escape its insular literary scene and suffocating political conditions. In an interview published in *Revista Caracol* in 1974, he described emigration as driving his generation's creativity:

> Voluntaria o involuntariamente, nos vamos de El Salvador, por el exilio o porque de alguna forma nos sentimos presos en nuestro país, de tal forma que debemos irnos, a los quince años, a los dieciséis. Eso contribuye a la salvación de la generación aparecida en 1950, gracias a la vinculación que tiene con el movimiento del exterior,

su interés por la temática y por la técnica cultivada en el exterior. Por eso trato de llamarle generación internacional … Nos vamos a México, trabajamos allá. Vemos una serie de cosas que es imposible ver en un medio como el salvadoreño. (Qtd in Alcides Orellana)

While migration is typically discussed in tandem with the civil war or postwar eras, Menen Desleal's voluntary and involuntary migratory patterns index the longer histories of Salvadoran translocality. He lived in Mexico in the fifties, and served as the Salvadoran consul in Western Germany in the late sixties and in Algeria in the seventies. He perceived emigration as a way to access cultural universality, but also to reignite the creativity tamped down by authoritarian rule. Cecilia Rivas points out in *Salvadoran Imaginaries* that "the tendency to view emigration as a solution to El Salvador's social ills and personal issues alike" is "a 'very Salvadoran' trait" (79). Menen Desleal believed that distance from the nation nurtured a certain expansiveness of thought, which, in turn, brought with it literary inventiveness.

He consequently conceived of his personal literary canon as a cosmopolitan constellation of authors whose narrative techniques departed from nationalism and realism. None of his formative influences were Salvadoran, with the exception of Francisco Gavidia, whose play *Ursino* (1887) Menen Desleal later reworked into *El cielo no es para el reverendo* (1968). He was primarily indebted to authors throughout the Americas and Europe. Borges and Juan José Arreola influenced his early fantastical work, as did sci-fi writers like HG Wells, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury. He was inspired by existentialists like Franz Kafka and Albert Camus, repeatedly thematizing the latter's proposition that suicide is the fundamental philosophical question. In addition to existentialism, Menen Desleal was intrigued by absurdism: his acclaimed play *Luz negra* echoes Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and dialogues with José Revueltas's *Ensayo sobre un proletariado sin cabeza* (1962) (Camacho Navarro 207). His short stories circle around the fundamental nonsensicality of the universe, which is framed as a query that transcends geopolitics.

Other members of the Committed Generation scoffed at Menen Desleal's interest in vanguardist techniques and dabblings in absurdism, existentialism, and speculative fiction. For writers like Argueta, Armijo, and Cea, aesthetic play distanced literary creation from the urgent realities of national life (Alvarenga 21). To their minds, in order to truly transform the status quo, realism was the most effective literary form. The peasantry and the proletariat's vernacular, daily routines, and exploitation needed to

be accurately captured in order to awaken the reading public's consciousness. But Menen Desleal found this approach militant and narrow-minded. He was one of only a few writers of his generation – alongside Dalton and Waldo Chávez Velasco – who utilized avant-garde techniques.[8] Likewise, he made no effort to depict rural life or to recreate the countryside vernacular (Martínez Gómez 208), grounding his fiction instead in a mestizo, urban, middle-class point of view (although he himself grew up quite poor).

Menen Desleal's open aspiration for cosmopolitan universalism was derided by his peers as escapist. In his memoirs, Cea dismissively described him as having "aires provincianos de Universalismo" (129). Dalton mocked his worldly ambitions in *Pobrecito poeta que era yo*. A chapter centered around a character conspicuously named "Álvaro" parodies Menen Desleal's bourgeois attitude, obsessive desire to kill Salarrué (Dalton 61), and mercenary ambition to transcend his impoverished past by turning it into a bestselling book. Dalton, who worked for Menen Desleal at *Teleperiódico*, presents his fellow writer's drive to be "cada día menos salvadoreño, cada día más bienaventuradamente cosmopolita" (81) as an opportunistic scheme, and not an aesthetic choice. The character Álvaro baldly articulates the self-serving ambition to leave his country behind: "Después uno triunfa escribiendo cuentos cosmopolitas, se va a Londres o a una Universidad norteamericana y se jode para siempre jamás" (40-41). For Dalton and others of the Committed Generation, intellectual detachment from the national project (be it literary or political) was indefensible, and Menen Desleal, a chief reprobate.

Menen Desleal's repudiation of the local and embrace of international characters and milieus indeed reflected his cosmopolitan approach to literature. Mariano Siskind has defined cosmopolitanism as a "desire for the world" and a means of escaping "nationalistic cultural formations" (3). In contrast to the delimited conceit of the nation, the concept of the "world" operates as a discursive "symbolic horizon for the realization of the translocal aesthetic potential of literature and cosmopolitan forms of subjectivation" (Siskind 3). Cosmopolitanism imagines the literary product and its author to participate in horizontal, non-hierarchical dialogue with other works of world literature on an abstract plane that disregards spatial and temporal modes of production. For Menen Desleal, cosmopolitanism went hand-in-hand with the refusal to be marginalized from certain themes and forms, such as artificial intelligence and nuclear war, or science fiction, simply because of his country of enunciation. Even if these were conversations or conventions established in the Global North, they

nonetheless affected Central America. As an ex-centric writer, Menen Desleal asserted his ability to speak to the universal, to imagine and contest planetary questions of concern. From the Isthmus, he addresses the problematic ethics of the nuclear age, and does so through Global North genres like sci-fi, in ways that empty contemporaneous neo-imperial projects like space exploration of their heroic content.

SPECULATING THE PLANET FROM THE ISTHMUS

For the remainder of this article, I will focus on a salient aspect of Menen Desleal's cosmopolitanism: his speculative planetary imagination. This narrative technique zooms out temporally and spatially, projecting into unknown futures, or distant galactic spaces and alien perspectives. This expansion outward shifts the conversation away from the here and the now, and disrupts normative ways of thinking about space and time. Menen Desleal's planetary speculation enacts what Wai Chee Dimock has theorized as deep time, which regards time as "a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways" (3). This temporal broadening decenters the nation-state by "loosening up [its] chronology and geography," while simultaneously creating planetary temporal coalescence by "binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, [into] a densely interactive fabric" (4). Such a loosening allows Menen Desleal to approach the intersection of ethics and futurity from a capacious spatiotemporal point of view.[9]

I argue that Menen Desleal's disinterest in the nation and disavowal of the responsibility to envision Salvadoran political futurity leads him not to an impasse in which the literary exercise is deemed futile or frivolous, but to an affirmation of Salvadoran participation in questions of planetary concern: namely, survival in the nuclear age. Rather than appraise his belonging to a peripheral nation as delegitimizing his narrative claim to projects that originate elsewhere, like space exploration or artificial intelligence, Menen Desleal inscribes planetary interconnectivity in order to communicate these projects' scalar consequences for humans as a species. This act of speculating from a planetary perspective encourages holistic thinking, while simultaneously questioning the very nature of this totalizing enterprise by subverting human exemplarity and universal knowledge.

The conceptual shift from the nation to the planetary was particularly resonant within the context of the Cold War. The Cold War has often been framed as a bipolar struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. This antagonism, however, was not confined to these two nations, but extended globally. Nations were divvied up by allegiance to these

competing centers into a taut network of relational power. For many Latin American countries, the Cold War was a period of political polarity in which the ideological dispute between the US and the USSR saturated domestic battles. Such was the case for El Salvador, in which the military-oligarchic state was challenged by revolutionary forces pushing for democratization (Chávez 9).

Menen Desleal's fiction was uninterested in how these conflicts played out in the domestic sphere. He narrates through characters native to the centers of power: the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as China, Spain, and Germany. His depiction of protagonists from the US or the USSR does not flesh out the particularities of their opposing ideologies, but instead represents their disquieting similarities, like the shared ambition for global domination and unwavering belief in human prepotency. Menen Desleal focuses on manifestations of human hubris that are premised on mastery, such as the nuclear arms race, space exploration, and artificial intelligence, positing these anthropocentric projects portend the species' demise.

A primary preoccupation of Menen Desleal's fiction is the nuclear arms race. In spite of international condemnation of the devastating 1945 US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear power remained a coveted defense tool in the escalating Cold War. Throughout the fifties and sixties, the United States and the Soviet Union grew their nuclear stockpiles exponentially (Holloway 387). In the fifties, both countries developed thermonuclear weapons known as superbombs. While nuclear war was widely seen as unacceptable by citizens and policymakers alike, these stockpiles were not just a latent threat; in 1953, Eisenhower suggested they might be used to end the Korean War. The US housed missiles in Turkey and Guam, and the USSR planned to do so in Cuba, sparking the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Put simply, these weapons had global reach. Any misstep or miscalculation between the principal antagonists could therefore quickly spiral into catastrophe on a planetary scale, and would likely be played out first in peripheral regions.

Menen Desleal's short stories that thematize nuclear war concur that its inevitable outcome is ruination: the end of the world, if not the planet. These are apocalyptic narratives of human extinction. In "Hacer el amor en el refugio atómico" (1968), a German couple survives nuclear war by hiding out in a bunker. In stark contrast to the title, the protagonists decide that without breathable air they have no option but to end their own lives. The sci-fi story "Los vicios de papá" (1972) recounts, from the perspective of future artificial intelligence, how nuclear war wiped out the human race. The narrator's mother is a supercomputer that helped the United States

"win" the war; a triumph defined by their possession of the lone human survivor, who died soon thereafter. Her account of this victory is uttered in a patriotic tone that the narrator flatly observes "no fue escuchada más que por el viento" (Menen Desleal, *La ilustre familia androide* 28). These stories problematize the notion that there is a way to "win" world war, since the most likely outcome – the end of the species – obviates nations themselves.[10]

In one of Menen Desleal's best known tales of science fiction, "Una cuerda de nylon y oro" (1965), nuclear war is combined with another venture driven by the belief in human exemplarity: the exploration of outer space. Written in the wake of China's second nuclear test in 1965, the story reflects Menen Desleal's concern with the emergence of the fifth nuclear power and the reliance on nukes to assert international strength. It is also a meditation on the fragility of the planet, and the terrifying interrelatedness of the shared commons. The story is narrated by Henry, a North American astronaut who decides to commit suicide during his twenty-sixth orbit because his wife has been unfaithful. He severs the titular cord that connects him to the shuttle, and floats off into space, where he believes he will perish after depleting his 110 remaining minutes of oxygen. However, like many of Menen Desleal's stories about men who plan to take their own lives ("El suicida," "El malthusiano," "Tribulaciones de un americano que estudió demografía"), things go awry. Mysteriously, even after Henry's oxygen is gone, he does not die. Suspended in a liminal state between life and death, he orbits the Earth for eternity.

At first, Henry rejoices in his newfound freedom unimpeded by "un planeta que ya me hartaba" (Menen Desleal, *La ilustre familia androide* 74). He enjoys the spectacle of the planet's "mapamundi borroso" obtained from this omnipotent perspective (76). He revels in the ability to totally see the planet yet not know anything about it. This seems to actualize the promise of space exploration: transcendence of the human's terrestrial origin through technological innovation. Henry is a man no longer subject to the Earth's rhythms and logic, able to gaze down upon it as if it were a small object compared to his human form: "a veces la tengo a mis pies, a veces arriba, a veces a los flancos" (75). This is the ecstatic pleasure of "seeing the whole," described by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a distant view from above that "allows one to read [the world], to be a solar eye, looking down like a God" (92).

Yet, the pleasure of detached observation sours when something happens that colors the Earth's sky "rojo sangre … verde … violeta" (Menen Desleal, *La ilustre familia androide* 78). In his eternal circumvention, Henry is forced to witness the planet's nuclear annihilation, without knowing

what triggered it. His totalizing vantage is not a triumph but a sadness; a realization of planetary interconnectedness that comes too late. He sees a series of flashes, first in Vietnam, then China, "San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, Nueva York, Washington … Y otros cien al sur, sobre México y Panamá y Río y Buenos Aires; y otros al norte, sobre Montreal y Ottawa" (78). The list goes on, piling up cities East and West. From Henry's satellite perspective, the mushroom clouds look serene, a proliferation of blooms that appear to join hands "en macabra ronda infantil" (78). The dark side of the earth turns even darker, "oscuro con una fosforescencia de ultratumba," and the green woods on its light side fade to grey (78). For Henry, the nuclear disaster is a spectacle: a calamity full of dynamic coloration and transformation, devoid of graphic carnage. Thus Henry embodies the aerial view of the bombs themselves – the drone view – that surveys the expanse below as an abstracted cartography. The spectacular aerial view of total planetary destruction encapsulates in one image the macabre conclusion of human scientific achievement. However, this aerial view is also opaque and limited. It offers the viewer no way to understand the causes behind the event, or the human bodies beneath the smoke – the information that exists beyond the limits of visibility.

Although Henry is a spectator of this disaster and not a participant, he is not altogether detached from its ethical consequences. He is embroiled in what Gennifer Weisenfeld terms the "participatory encounter" of spectatorship, in which the spectator is morally implicated in the observed event (83). This participatory observation is evidenced by a list that Henry repeats to himself, an inventory of events that unfolded on the day that he cut the cord. The events range from the political, to the cultural, to the personal: "Había un presidente llamado Johnson, de Gaulle amenazaba con un ataque a la OTAN … Von Braun seguía haciendo ciencia ficción. Río de Janeiro recién había cumplido cuatrocientos años de fundada. San Salvador acababa de ser semidestruida por un terremoto … Ciento ochenta mineros japoneses morían dentro de su mina derrumbada ... Mi hijito John tenía rota la nariz" (Menen Desleal, *La ilustre familia androide* 75). This montage of spatially disconnected yet temporally concurrent events acts as an archive of the moment and provides a kaleidoscopic view of planetary time. The recurrent list counteracts the potential homogenization of the planet as a uniform space that the abstracted satellite view suggests. The narrative reveals what exists underneath the totalizing image, the inherently mutable terrestrial matters. The story thus scales both up (to a planetary view) and down (to quotidian dramas), layering visual information with the language of memory, to grasp the concept of planetarity: the planet as a "world commons" grounded in ethical relation

(Elias and Moraru xviii). Yet, of course this relationship between human and nonhuman, memory and planet is inherently unequal. The end of this world, the world as Henry remembers it, is not the end of the planet. Though greyed, the planet persists, continuing to rotate, with Henry captured in its orbit.

Henry was likely modeled after the astronaut Edward White, the first North American to successfully walk in space. While accomplishing this feat during the 1965 Gemini 4 voyage, White famously joked to his mission partner that he did not want to reenter the spacecraft, calling it "the saddest moment of [his] life" ("The Glorious Walk" 39). *Life Magazine* celebrated the achievement with a huge color spread that featured the astronauts' onboard dialogue and pictures of White floating in front of the curve of our blue planet. The spread declared the mission a "triumph" of human engineering (26). White died two years later during a preflight test of Apollo 1. Fatal spaceflight-related accidents were common for astronauts of the era. Those that joined the profession were seen as heroes or as men harboring a death wish – or both, martyrs in pursuit of the "final frontier."

In "Una cuerda de nylon y oro," White's assertion that he wasn't "coming in" from his spacewalk is reimagined as a literal refusal to return to life on Earth. Henry chooses to die at the pinnacle of his success, in the ecstatic moment of planetary escape and observation. Yet this ambition – the ambition of human triumph, of dictating death, and of scientific mastery – is subverted. Technological innovation is not a sign of future possibility and mastery, but of mass extinction. The astronaut does not represent the start of a new era of human achievement, but its end. Henry is rendered an impotent observer, a passive object caught forever in Earth's orbit. The totalizing cosmic view reveals Earth to be dangerously interconnected, a fragile ecosystem.

Menen Desleal's narration from the vantage point of protagonists who are supposedly heroic in the Western tradition – like the astronaut – in order to undermine them, enacts what we might describe as a decolonial gesture. It complicates and fractures the human project of mastery: mastery over Earth, which can be viewed from the outside as a discrete object, an external view that solidifies the role of the human as subject, and the Earth as object. This enterprise is subverted as Henry is caught in the deadened Earth's eternal orbit, which reinstantiates his status as an object caught in the dynamics established by his home planet. He has no control over the planet, his species, his wife, or even over his own life: shattering the illusion of human agency. The story thus empties the narrative of mastery that saturated Cold War discourse and disputes.[11] The invention of

powerful superbombs is not decisive proof of human power, but an invention that becomes more agential than its creator, culminating in the end of the human species. The competition for mastery that unfolded during the Cold War as a project of dominion, subordination, and control folds back upon itself, and is revealed to be both absurd and self-exhausting.

Menen Desleal notably elaborates this critique of the neocolonial ambition for mastery through the Global North genre of science fiction. Although sci-fi circulated regularly in the United States (albeit as a less-prestigious genre) and to a lesser extent in neighboring Mexico, its use was totally anomalous in the Isthmus.[12] Menen Desleal was an outlier, as well as El Salvador's pioneering science fiction writer (Bell 126). His appropriation of the genre manifests what Sánchez Prado calls "strategic Occidentalism," the purposeful divergence from national norms and use of Western forms in order to perform them "back at Western culture as a form of intellectual decolonization" (19). This gesture of appropriation lays claim to the Central American ability to narrate questions of ethical and political concern through other aesthetic modes that deviated from the realism of the Committed Generation. It also thematizes the impossibility of thinking about the future – specifically, the political future of the nation – without also engaging the global context in which those futures unfold.

Menen Desleal's entire *oeuvre* can be effectively situated within the super-category of speculative fiction due to its consistent engagement with a variety of non-mimetic narrative strategies: sci-fi, magical realism, absurdism, and the fantastic. The term "speculative fiction" has risen to prominence as a more expansive alternative to these subgenera, in reference to any non-realist mode of imagination. While speculative fiction is often oriented toward the future, futurity is not a requisite component. Regardless of its temporal or ideological orientation, speculative cultural production is any form of artistic expression that does away with the rules of reality. The departure from consensus reality allows authors to interrogate existing norms and socio-historical conditions, and rewrite the possible. Speculative recastings encourage readers to imagine how things could change for the better, or to confront the eventualities of current trajectories. Non-realist speculation provides distance from what is, so that the status quo might be questioned.

It is not the case, according to Menen Desleal, that speculating from a cosmopolitan or planetary perspective is a facile way to overcome the myopathy of local or national epistemologies. By abstracting out to galactic settings or foregrounding alien narrators, Menen Desleal concludes that there is no perspective from which accurate universal knowledge can be

created. This is because knowledge is always indelibly linked to the body that articulates it, and cannot be delocalized. The presumption that one's perspective is universal leads to epistemological blind spots; it cannot anticipate its own failings. Just as Henry's totalizing view of the Earth occludes more than it reveals, several other short stories also dramatize the fallacy of perception. These are tales that operate at the level of species and are narrated from the perspective of alien life forms that encounter Earth. These accounts of humanity from the perspective of a nonhuman species stage the impossibility of cosmic knowledge or of transcending ontology. In "El animal más raro de la Tierra" (1961), a Martian scholar concludes that the rodent is the most notable species on Earth – erroneously attributing to the rat actions that have been dictated by humans, such as the use of mouse traps. Likewise, in "Primer encuentro" (1966), an alien runs away in disgust after first glimpsing the barbaric form of the human body. Both tales ask readers to see the world askew, to denaturalize what we take for granted.

A similar message is at the heart of the short story, "Memorandum sobre el tercer planeta" (1964). As in "El animal más raro de la Tierra," this piece also adopts the format of an official state document written by an alien bureaucrat, the Acting Commissioner of the Milky Way, and addressed to the "Tercer Intuidor Emérito de Venus" (Menen Desleal, *Una cuerda* 83). In this document, the Acting Commissioner summarizes the findings of a longer report analyzing the possibilities of life on the Third Planet of the Solar System, or as we call it, Earth. The Commissioner writes that the team has concluded that life is impossible on this third planet, given its large bodies of water, "elemento impropio para el desarrollo de la vida," and its "atmósfera letal" (83). However, he notes, the planet's molten core offers amenable conditions for the development of life, "gracias a su densidad y temperatura cálida" (83). The author furthers that such a possibility is remote, given that the planet appears to be rapidly cooling. This refers to nuclear winter, the climactic result of nuclear war, which goes unmentioned in the text.

Through narrative inversion, Menen Desleal underscores that ontology drives epistemology. As humans, we consider the geosphere – the solid parts of the Earth – to equal the absence of life. We consider the biosphere, the parts of the planet above the earth's surface, as containing the conditions that allow our ecosystem to flourish. By inverting the narrative point of view, this supposition is turned on its head: it is in the Earth's core that the aliens find the promise of life. Here Menen Desleal pokes fun at contemporaneous ambitions to find life in outer space, pointing out that the search is based upon the premise that all life looks the

same and relies on the same conditions. The target of this mordant humor is bureaucracy, which reappears throughout Menen Desleal's prose as an object of mockery. The second message of the story is more melancholic, buried beneath the story's humorous play with point of view. The fact that the atmosphere is rapidly cooling indexes that all life on Earth has recently been extinguished by nuclear war. The momentous arrival of alien life to Earth occurs right after humans have brought their species to extinction.

Menen Desleal utilizes galactic settings and nonhuman narrators to decenter the human from the epicenter of narrative and planetary history. The story of the earth, Menen Desleal cautions, is longer and more expansive than that of humans. The Earth is inherently out of human grasp: defined by the irrational and the absurd. Menen Desleal echoes Albert Camus' belief that any attempt to understand the world is doomed, because the universe has no discernible meaning or rational logic. Consequently, the pursuit of knowledge is futile. This is not only a human problem, but a problem for any life force that attempts to understand the world. As Camus puts it in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "those categories that explain everything are enough to make a decent man laugh" (21). For Menen Desleal, this disorderly universe will go on long after we are gone – a demise he speculates that we will bring about ourselves, driven by the injudicious quest for mastery.

The resolute pessimism and planetary cosmopolitanism that defined Menen Desleal's aesthetics was out of place amid the Committed Generation's utopian search for better politics and more expansive representations of El Salvador. Yet its sardonic disenchantment with literature's didactic responsibility anticipated trends in contemporary literature from the Isthmus, which has grown weary of literature's nation-building charge. An ex-centric writer with complicated politics and a grating personality, Menen Desleal has been overlooked by scholarship. But his engagement with the geopolitical and ecological effects of nuclear war was far from apolitical. Menen Desleal's speculative fictions questioned the endgame of nuclear war, and the obsession with human exceptionalism. The scale of this crisis was not beyond the scope of Salvadoran letters. The global magnitude of settler technological hubris had implications for every continent on the planet.

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NOTES

1 Nobel-winning author Miguel Ángel Asturias exemplified this local grounding in his reweaving of complex themes rooted in the Maya cultural tradition into Western literary modes. Asturias's reception was inconsistent. His work was derided by hemispheric Latin American thinkers like Angel Rama as mere mimicry, yet celebrated by international audiences for its innovative foregrounding of Indigenous themes.

2 We might propose that this privileging of local cultural distinctiveness is why Central Americanist scholars have spent more time discussing Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano* than his novels set in Africa and Asia (like *La orilla africana* and *El tren a Travancore*), or Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* than *Baile con serpientes*. Looking further back, authors like Carlos Martínez Rivas, a contemporary of writers of the Sandinista Revolution, but who did not participate in revolution, has also gone overlooked. In this manner, scholarship has tended to echo the dominant posture of the time that the only literature that mattered was that which actively engaged in national politics. Such an approach perpetuates a narrow view of the political and of literary production, and reinforces the centrality of the nation, a view that writers like Menen Desleal actively subvert.

3 Menen Desleal opined in an interview in 1974 that only a third of the so-called Generación Comprometida had any talent. Or perhaps even less: "Más estrictamente, quizá sólo yo y Dalton tengamos valor. Ya lo veremos" (Alcides Orellana).

4 In a letter unearthed by Miguel Huezo Mixco, Borges brushed aside concerns that Menen Desleal had gone too far with the apocryphal letter, noting: "Ya que el volumen consta de una serie de juegos sobre la vigilia y los sueños, queda la posibilidad de que mi carta sea uno de tales juegos y travesuras" (Huezo Mixco 103). Huezo Mixco concludes that Borges understood Menen Desleal's game: the creation of a work that was not only his, nor that of any other writer.

5 As a young man, Menen Desleal used to attend the group's literary sessions in his officer's uniform, which irked other members until they realized that he only owned a few items of clothing because of his family's precarious economic situation. He was kicked out of the Escuela Militar in 1952 for publishing a poem that the authorities deemed "subversive" (Huezo Mixco 97).

6 Cea accused Menén Desleal of writing an apocryphal letter in Cea's name that sarcastically expressed admiration of the director of *El Diario de Hoy* after his death. Cea did not write the letter, and Menén Desleal later admitted that he had written it as a mean joke (Cea 130).

7 Horacio Castellanos Moya's *El asco* (1997) takes place in the postwar era, and is narrated by a man who has reluctantly returned from abroad to a nation that

he openly despises. The views of the narrator, Edgardo Vega, echo Menen Desleal's derisive approach to the motherland. In a breathless monologue about everything that disgusts him about his home country, Vega posits it is impossible to write literature there: "Nadie a quien le interese la literatura puede optar por un país tan degenerado como éste, un país donde nadie lee literatura, un país donde los pocos que pueden leer jamás leerían un libro de literatura … A nadie le interesa ni la literatura, ni la historia, ni nada que tenga que ver con el pensamiento … Y todavía hay despistados que llaman 'nación' a este sitio, un sinsentido, una estupidez que daría risa si no fuera por lo grotesco" (Castellanos Moya 29-30).

8 This paucity of experimentation led Luis Alvarenga to conclude that the Committed Generation can be described paradoxically as a "vanguardia estética tradicional" (21).

9 David Wise posits Menen Desleal utilizes temporal distance in order to "suavizar lo horrible y lo pesimista de sus relatos" (41). However, I argue that it is not so much a strategic "softening" but rather a way of making the reader think in different temporal terms, through expansive timescales that articulate the longevity of these ethical questions.

10 Another story that thematizes nuclear war is "Problema #639" (1969), which takes the form of a mathematical logic problem. It compares the relative cost of exterminating Madrid's three million rats individually with rodenticide, or instantaneously via a single atomic bomb. The format of the logic puzzle suggests that nuclear war has been grotesquely conceptualized as a calculation that values efficiency over life. The transposition of its target to the rodent focalizes nuclear war's absurd dehumanization – in which humans become comparable to pests – and disregard of collateral.

11 Another story that runs parallel to "Una cuerda de nylon y oro" and that analogously bursts the bubble of space exploration as proving human exceptionalism is "Venera 2, Venera 3" (1969). Referring to the Soviet spacecrafts launched in 1965 to explore Venus, Menen Desleal posits an explanation for why they failed to gather data. In the story, Venusians alter planetary conditions to appear uninhabitable by human life.

12 In Mexico, sci-fi began to emerge as an identifiable genre in the sixties and seventies, with the publication of journals like *Cromonauta* and works by writers like Carlos Olvera, René Rebetez, and René Avilés Fávila (López-Lozano 26).

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