

Cuban Literature in the Twenty-First Century:
Jorge Cápiro and Adrián Pernas
Re-imagine *Cubanidad*

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The experience of exploring a new generation of Cuban writers, of reading and examining the creative spirit of newly published or still unpublished authors in Cuba, can be both fascinating and challenging: fascinating because the variety and richness of the literature defies any type of easy or straightforward categorization; challenging because Cuba's relative disconnect with the global market reduces the means by which one can access the writing. As any Cuban will tell you, in almost any given situation, *es complicado*. Nevertheless, the diversity of the works is a significant factor in this literature's appeal, and its availability can often be resolved to a certain extent by online cultural magazines and some limited publishing houses in other parts of the Spanish-speaking world. Two authors in particular, Jorge Cápiro and Adrián Pernas, are intriguing illustrations of this new literary diversity, and their range of interests and narrative versatility make for a worthwhile examination of contemporary Cuban fiction. Their works are bold given the variety of themes and styles they explore and their readiness to question previously established expectations placed on Cuban literature. They simultaneously interrogate present-day Cuban life and the experience of young people on the island while also integrating concepts and influences from across the cultural

spectrum. Their writing is suggestive, both literally and figuratively, of a literary journey. They include travels beyond the island's borders to real and mythical places at the same time that they embrace artistic inspiration from home and abroad. These two authors allude to a weariness with their experience of isolation but also stress their desire to find joy in writing.

Cápiro and Pernas, both born in Havana, in 1993 and 1999, respectively, represent a new generation of writers just beginning to explore their narrative voice in novels and short stories. Their works, which in some ways examine life in modern Cuba, also demonstrate original approaches to universal questions and, in this way, also reflect a continuation of the priorities and concerns of the previous cohort of Cuban authors, the self-named *Generación Año Cero*, or "Generation Year Zero." To consider Cápiro and Pernas in this literary context, they were born in the 1990s, just a few short years before authors such as Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, Raúl Flores, Osdany Morales and Jhortensia Espineta Osuna began their publishing careers in both print and digital formats. These writers, and others of the *Generación Año Cero* have been, in the words of Pardo Lazo, "willing to deconstruct all previous discourses of what 'cubanness' is supposed to be, whether erotic or political, ultimately betting it all on a kind of cubanless cubanness" (9). Representing innovative approaches to literature, the self-proclaimed members of *Generación Año Cero* are part of an "urban phenomenon, interested in prose much more than poetry, theater, or essay, . . . they seem to mutate easily from irreverence to indolence to incredulity to iconoclasm" (Pardo Lazo 9). As Rafael Rojas asserts in "Un 'ethos' de la lectura," their writing reveals "la certidumbre de una pertenencia a un nuevo siglo," reflecting more the temporality of belonging to the twenty-first century than the territoriality of living and producing literature in Cuba. Rojas maintains that the speed with which cultural change has come to Cuba in the twenty-first century, particularly through technology, social media and massive migration, has radically changed the way in which fiction is both read and produced on the island. Similarly, other scholars of Cuban literature¹ have observed that although the writers who claimed their place in *Generación Año Cero* do not necessarily form a unified group in terms of ideologies or literary vision, they share a common familiarity with the digital world and online literary

¹ A very good overview of the writers and ideas emerging in the early twenty-first century in Cuba is "Literatura cubana contemporánea: lecturas sobre la *Generación Cero*," by Monica Simal and Walfrido Dorta in *Revista lettral*, 2017.

magazines. Additionally, as they began publishing, they wished to separate themselves from others who, during the island's "Special Period" of the 1990s, were focused almost exclusively on the social and economic devastation of that decade. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the writers of *Generación Año Cero* did not feel the need to adapt to "las demandas del mercado editorial fuera de Cuba, el cual ha supuesto por décadas que la literatura cubana debe suministrar lo que el discurso oficial o la prensa no proveen" (Simal and Dorta 4). In a sense, the early twenty-first century saw a shift in Cuban literature, away from overtly political topics dealing exclusively with the island towards a more global point of view. As Simal and Dorta suggest, younger writers rejected the explicit or implicit mandate from outside the country that they offer special insight into the tensions and burdens of life in Cuba and instead preferred to explore their own ideas and interpretations of the world at large. There was a marked "descentramiento geográfico" (Granados 24), and although some critics have still signaled the sociopolitical context of a post-Castro Cuba² in the literature of *Generación Año Cero*, as a group the writers tend to encompass a more universal outlook. Their presence in online magazines, the incorporation of intertextual allusions as well as contemporary cultural media references, their experimentation with futuristic and dystopian texts, and, at times, the integration of bilingualism all combine to place this literary generation in a global setting.

Nearly two decades into the twenty-first century, the youngest representatives of Cuban literature demonstrate they still have much in common with their *Generación Año Cero* predecessors. When the members of *Generación Año Cero* began publishing in 2000, the most recent names on the literary scene were at that time just beginning their education. Nevertheless, they continue to demonstrate, as Rafael Rojas established with *Generación Año Cero*, that their sense of residency is more closely aligned with "una cápsula temporal que un pedazo de tierra." Indeed, writers such as Cápiro and Pernas have created fictional worlds in which Cuba has a noticeable presence. However, the sociocultural influence of the contemporary international community, the inspiration of canonical texts and the enduring questions about our universal human experience often more clearly mark the overall narration. Their texts at

² See, for example, an interesting study by Omar Granados, "Ha surgido una literatura post-dictatorial en Cuba" in which the author argues for a reading of recent Cuban literature within the framework of trauma and memory studies.

times reflect current social and political concerns but with a carefully developed critical attitude that examines national issues while also inserting global themes. As Iván de la Nuez has noted in an essay on Cuba's economic and political transition of the past twenty years, "... we see a new generation that had its awakening in the twenty-first century, for whom the Revolution and the Berlin Wall are ancient history, a graduating class that grew up in the midst of the erosion of state monopoly over their lives, that has struggled from birth with a burgeoning economy as varied as their ideological references, topics and life stories" (43). While not speaking directly to the subject of contemporary literature in Cuba, these remarks convey the change in perspective and experience that informs today's young writers. Cuban national and international policy has been greatly altered since the turn of the century. From the expansion of the tourism industry, the growth of the *cuentapropista*³ program and the ever-developing private sector economy to the election of President of Miguel Díaz-Canel⁴ in April 2018 and the constitutional referendum in early 2019, Cuba's youth have lived through profound changes in the island nation. As Cuban politics and economic life become more open and internationally connected, it is logical that its literature is going to move in this direction as well. The up and coming writers Jorge Cápiro and Adrian Pernas have shown that their literary endeavors can reach beyond the long-established confines of what Cuban writing is expected to be.

At the heart of the novels of Jorge Cápiro, in particular *La piel bajo las uñas* (2017) and *El hombre universo* (2018), lies a probing of the human condition and an examination of what all lives have in common. In an interview in April of 2019,⁵ Cápiro explained that his desire as a writer

³ *Cuentapropismo*, or legal self-employment, was first authorized in 1993 in order to soften the economic repercussions felt in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union. The plan initially offered licenses for 117 specific occupations that could be filled by the private sector. In 2010 the number of licensed *cuentapropista* occupations rose to 178 and by 2017 more than 550,000 individuals had been issued licenses.

⁴ The selection of Miguel Díaz-Canel (1960) as the successor to Raúl Castro signals a significant generational shift in Cuba. He is the first non-member of the Castro family to serve as president since 1976 and is the first president to have been born after the 1959 Revolution.

⁵ I had the good fortune of meeting Jorge Cápiro during a sabbatical visit to Cuba. We met at the Hotel Habana Libre to discuss his ideas on literature in general, publishing in Cuba and the main ideas he wishes to explore through his own writing.

is not simply to examine the experiences that we share as human beings but, more specifically, to delve into the spaces we inhabit “entre la luz y la sombra,” in reference to those aspects of life and human interaction that often remain hidden and are most challenging to understand. This concern points to the need to explore the choices we make that impede our sense of happiness and fulfillment. He emphasized the fact that in any given situation or decision-making moment, there exists a myriad of options and variants that can alter our lives in unexpected ways. And the transformation wrought by our decisions in some cases can lead to our own self-destruction. His interest lies in exploring and attempting to comprehend the extremity of “las caídas” that can be the result of those decisions and alternatives. A realistic approach to narration is not quite as important to Cápiro as is the need to scrutinize our own propensity for self-sabotage and suffering, and to examine the circumstances that surround repulsive and damaging actions.

The novel *La piel bajo las uñas* reflects this literary curiosity as it narrates the story of a love affair gone horribly wrong. The reader is given warning in the opening preface that there is a monster lurking in the following pages and that perhaps not all are prepared to face it:

Esta novela es el reflejo de las cuatro estaciones de una relación entre espíritu y cuerpo. A partir de este momento, les aconsejo pensarlo dos veces antes de leerla próxima línea, pues cada letra se encaja aún más profundo en la piel cálida de la bestialidad humana. Esta es una historia que no todos entenderán ni aceptarán sin antes borrar los límites impuestos por el respeto y la cordura de nuestra razón. (12)

As the first-person narrative continues through the four stages—amor, sexo, depresión y muerte—of a love destined to be extinguished, the hypersexualized characters and their encounters become increasingly more disturbing and more difficult to bear. The narrator, a young man from an unnamed tropical island, and his partner, Yulia Vatutina, a native of Moscow,⁶ where the story takes place, quickly move from an idyllic romantic relationship and a placid married life to an anguishing and, at times, violent and misogynistic display of despair and dangerous sexual

⁶ Although Moscow also remains explicitly unnamed in the text, Cápiro confirmed in our interview that the setting of the story is indeed a stylized version of the Russian capital city.

experimentation. When the narrator discovers that he will not be able to give Yulia the child they both had hoped for, his own guilt and sense of failure lead him to extreme behaviors that he could not have previously imagined. The disintegration of their relationship accelerates as they are unprepared and unable to talk about their disappointments and their lives further separate. The sexual exploits of the narrator run the gamut of erotic fantasies from voyeurism and exhibitionism to orgies and sadomasochism, and are all narrated in an over-the-top, excessive manner that can leave the reader feeling very unsettled. The descent of the narrator into an existence governed by, as he describes it, his own “demonios,” hints, admittedly in a very exaggerated fashion, at the depths to which one can sink when faced with pressures, disillusionment and an inability to communicate. In addition to wrestling with and trying to control his “demonios,” the narrator becomes progressively more untethered and alone. The struggles he faces within his relationship and with respect to understanding himself reflect an existential effort to come to terms with those monsters alluded to in the book’s preface.

It would not be contradictory to signal here also that the universal themes of the novel can still be understood within the context of twenty-first century Cuba. In spite of the way in which the story delves into the dark and dangerous psychological torment that can impact all human experience, the narrator’s loneliness and aimlessness is also suggestive of the observations of Omar Granados with respect to certain authors of Generación Año Cero. That is, that contemporary Cuban literature has at times addressed on an individual level the feelings of frustration and isolation that also embody a larger national sentiment. In spite of the recent political changes on the island, the official inability or unwillingness to openly discuss past trauma and systematic abuses has, in Granados’ reading, caused a damaging silence in the country that has led to feelings of seclusion and hopelessness and the need to resolve those feelings through the literary text. In *La piel bajo las uñas*, the impotence and resentment experienced by the narrator certainly grows out of the failure of dialogue and communication that Granados signals (26-27). There is an aversion to approaching the most delicate topics. Furthermore, in addition to this silencing of trauma, the narrator’s experience can also be understood as a bitterness experienced by many young Cubans in this era of political, social and economic apertures. An energized cohort of young people on the island seek new opportunities that are still out of reach and unavailable to a good portion of the population. In other words, just as the

narrator sees his chance at a happy, stable life grow more impossible, so too do many of Cuba's younger generation as the country undergoes significant reform that is not necessarily benefitting all in the same way.⁷ The future for these young people, just as for the narrator, in literal and figurative (the child that will not be born) terms, is uncertain or perhaps completely stunted.

It is also necessary to point out that even before learning the news that he will not be able to father a child, the frustration on the part of the narrator has been building due to his ever-increasing dependence on Yulia. As an insecure foreigner, a "miserable y común masajista de 26 años de edad" (15), the narrator is easily seduced by the attractive, outgoing and financially secure young woman. He moves into her chic, modern apartment, drives her expensive car and, eventually, allows his career to rely on her assistance. As their relationship falters, he feels increasingly dislocated from his current and past life; he has been emasculated by his reliance on Yulia. This sense of emasculation remains unnamed but is strongly suggested and leads to what Michael Moon terms "sexual disorientation" as the narrator begins to explore the transgressive, darker side of sexual expression and attempts to regain some amount of control over his situation. In addition to questioning the motives of sexual transgression, Moon further argues that the incorporation of what he terms "minority" or "marginal" sex acts in literature and film is a means to produce a sense of unease in the audience, to both titillate and repel, to stir interest and revulsion. This concept is relevant to the study of Cápiro's work as the reader can simultaneously empathize with the depressive state of the narrator and at the same time reject the hyperbolic recounting of his many transgressions and, eventually, explicit crimes. Many of the scenes are imbued with more fantasy than realism but the reader may well still feel a strong abhorrence for the narrator and his decisions. The point, as Cápiro has indicated, is to begin a dialogue, a questioning of the "whys" of our decadence and corruption rather than to judge the actions.

⁷ For compelling reads on the inequality of social and economic change in Cuba, consult Roberto Zurbano's article, "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun" and Randal C. Archibold's "As Cuba Opens Door to Private Enterprise, Inequality Rushes in." An additional source is Emma Phillips' piece "Maybe Tomorrow I'll Turn Capitalist: *Cuentapropismo* in a Workers' State" or her ethnographic essay on the early stages of the *cuentapropista* program, "Transforming Identities."

This isolation and dissolution that can provoke conflicting reactions in the audience is also an important aspect of Cápiro's most recent novel, *El hombre universo*. In this work, José Jacinto, a 45-year-old albino garbage collector living in an abandoned building in Havana, very intentionally carves out a marginal existence for himself. He rebuffs the attempts at friendship offered by his co-workers, spends most of his free time reading in the solitude of his dingy one-room living space and eventually becomes involved in the black-market sale of stray dogs. José Jacinto is not an easily relatable character; however, his place on the periphery of Havana's social and economic transformations does present the reader with another version of contemporary Cuban disillusion while at the same time communicating a more expansive perspective on human suffering. The capital city represents a space in which foreign investment, re-emerging classism, and racism cast a shadow over the promises of more political and financial opportunities. And in spite of the new opportunities, other trends such as the rise in international tourism, have also brought the complications of rising crime rates, unfinished projects and a local culture more interested in catering to visitors' illusions of the past than the needs of residents in the present. The sentiments attendant with the capital city are reminiscent of those explored by Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo in his short story collection, *Boring Home* (2013). In both cases, Havana is a place that fosters low expectations and high rates of apathy. It is a city of contrasts and challenges in which garbage collectors vie for territory in order to lay claim to the discarded treasures of the wealthy, and expats simultaneously feel nostalgia for the past and gratitude for having left it all behind. Havana does not present hope or even the excitement often associated with a large metropolis; rather, it is an asphyxiating urban landscape. As Elena Valdez notes in her essay on the representation of the cityscape in Caribbean literature, in the 1990s and 2000s, Havana is often "depicted as an obscure place of isolation and ostracism . . . dominated by a sense of emptiness and deception after the failure of the revolutionary promises" (341). This is certainly an appropriately bleak description of José Jacinto's Havana as he scavenges for cigarette butts to smoke and does his best to avoid most human contact. Nevertheless, the decadence of the city our protagonist inhabits is to a large extent a reflection of his own personal despair. Havana is an uninviting place as José Jacinto experiences an existential crisis; he is spiritually lost and his city projects his angst. Although it is impossible to overlook the critical examination of contemporary Cuba, sociopolitical commentary is not necessarily the central narrative focus.

The novel takes a dizzyingly creative turn in the second part when José Jacinto must leave Havana and undertake a journey by sea, ostensibly to Haiti. The narrator opens José Jacinto's adventure tale with the words "El primer movimiento de las fichas se originaría en la propia embarcación que había abordado" (162), and in this way suggests not only that from the very first decision the protagonist has set his own story in motion, but also that any other decision would have put him on a completely different course. Therefore, as José Jacinto begins an adventure that will result in discoveries of his own family history as well as an exploration of fantastic and mythological spaces, the narrative emphasis is on the power of self-realization. The surprises of this travel chronical remind the reader of the many influences, experiences and beliefs that affect us and shape our lives. José Jacinto's adventures also suggest the surreal nature of imagining the paths not taken while at the same time, as one exploit flows into the next and one "plaga" is escaped only to lead to another, we are confronted with the idea that there always exist other options and opportunities; our own desire to discover more can lead us to other versions of our own reality.

The city of Havana is often the explicit setting for the short stories of Adrián Pernas as well, and here too, it can be a difficult place to navigate. In the story "¿En qué momento se había jodido . . .?" from Pernas' unpublished collection *La prisión de Carlos*,⁸ Santiago, a university student, awakens to a city marked by scarcity. Although, as the narrator notes, "Santiago estaba acostumbrado a que en su casa no hubiese nada, ni siquiera más sombras que las suyas propias" (12), the day is especially frustrated by the fact that he does not even have the means to prepare himself a coffee or light a cigarette, and, hoping to smooth over these deficiencies, he looks to take a swig of rum only to find his bottle of *Mulata* empty. He is forced to walk to campus under a blistering sun because the few buses that pass are completely full, and when he arrives, he discovers the professor has not shown up and class is canceled. Finally, sitting in a local bar that has also run out of alcohol, Santiago contemplates his situation and compares it to another literary Santiago—Santiago Zavala, or Zavalita, protagonist of the semi-autobiographical novel by Mario Vargas Llosa, *Conversación en la catedral*.

⁸ Pernas has submitted this short story collection for publication consideration to a national competition in Cuba. At the time of writing, the entire collection had not been selected; however, some of the individual stories were under review.

Entonces Santiago sintió que su homónimo peruano, Zavalita, no era ya un personaje sacado de la ficción, sino una analogía profética de su propia realidad.

Desde la entrada de la Casa Balear, Santiago mira la Avenida de los Presidentes, sin amor: guaguas abarrotadas e indiferentes a las repletas paradas, edificios desiguales y derruidos por la brisa marina, el mediodía gris.

Y Santiago, en cuanto vio que no había ni ron, ni cigarros, ni café, supo exactamente *en qué momento se había jodido La Habana*. (13)

The story ends with these words, affirming that Santiago has reached a conclusion but leaving the ultimate answer open to each reader's interpretation. The precise answer to the query is not as important as the fact that the legendary question of Zavalita, taken up here by Pernas' protagonist, reflects a personal and unsettling pessimism in the face of stagnant social ills, similar to those feelings felt in the Vargas Llosa novel. The logical outcome of this disillusion is a rejection of established socio-political norms, much akin to the refutation on the part of Zavalita of mid-twentieth century Peruvian society. Additionally, this day in the life of Santiago in Havana, analogous to the hours-long conversation of Zavalita, shines a light on the current social, political and economic realities of a country through the experience of the individual. That focus on the experience of a particular person allows for the narrative situation to become more realistic, more palpable and unambiguous at the same time that the positioning of Santiago in Havana, surrounded by his fellow city-dwellers, clearly creates a link between the individual and his community. As Pernas himself observed in our interview,⁹ “. . . a mí me interesa el individuo . . . me centro en el individuo, de cualquier modo, [porque] en cada uno de ellos se verá reflejada la sociedad, pues no se puede separar objetivamente el uno de la otra.” The sense of lack and deficiency felt by the protagonist as he wanders the streets of Havana and finally ends up in the bar Casa Balear cannot be divorced from the larger social context of a country that is chronically struggling.

The intertextual reference to the Vargas Llosa novel is also an interesting literary choice if we recall Pardo Lazo's affirmation that contemporary Cuban writing conveys to the reader a sense of “cubanless

⁹ I conducted an online interview/conversation with Adrián Pernas in May of 2019, as we were unable to meet when I visited Havana in April of that year.

cubanness.” As the island’s emerging, post-Castro writers embrace the idea of Cuban literature as much more than a Cuban experience, the interrelationship among texts from all parts of the Spanish-speaking world and beyond becomes more evident and, perhaps, more significant, in their work. By incorporating this literary device into their narrations, Cuban authors are, in effect, breaking out of the isolation that is often portrayed in their texts. In this way, their written words derive a deeper meaning; their writing must be read and understood within a greater context. The texts take on an additional relevance in relation to their literary references. Moreover, as they establish interconnections with other works, they place Cuban literature within the framework of world literature, to be considered as part of a larger literary history, signaling the need to continue questioning the expectations placed on Cuban literature.

Pernas creates other playful intertextual links in many of his stories. “Enloqueciendo al loquero” borrows its references from Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and in this retelling the tortured protagonist, Gregorio Samsa, believes himself to be an enormous flea and, at the urging of his worried family, visits the psychiatrist Sigmund *Fraude* in order to work through his apparent delusion. Gregorio is able to convince the psychiatrist that, not only is he not insane, but indeed that all human beings are, in reality, giant insects sucking the life out of all that surrounds them. Kafka himself makes an appearance in a story within the story and Pernas deftly calls attention to both the environmental and spiritual costs of a parasitic existence. In the end Sigmund Fraude declares that Gregorio Samsa has not succumbed to insanity, but rather, that he truly is a flea and has achieved a level of clarity that allows him to understand the corruption and destruction that comes from the selfish pursuit of rewards and advantage. As the narrative focus moves away from Gregorio and his doctor, a larger picture comes into view and the reader discovers a scene in which all the inhabitants are literally blood-sucking organisms in a world that can no longer host them.

. . . la perra, Vida, mataba en cada una de sus rascadas cuanto bicho encontraban sus patas. Y las pulgas que no morían por la fuerza de las garras lo hacían, irónicamente, ahogadas en la sangre que tanto chupaban. Sólo los que escucharon a Gregorio Samsa y comprendieron qué eran, lograron sobrevivir. (42)

“La perra, Vida”—which, of course, in a humorous twist, can also be understood on a purely auditory level as *la perra vida*—can no longer endure the depredations of the multitude.

It is through this brief yet highly creative re-imagining of the experience of Kafka’s famous central character that Pernas is able to explore such existential questions as an individual’s desire for well-being and personal fulfillment in contrast to a society’s values that highlight avarice and unsustainable expansion. The themes of self-perception and awareness, communal welfare and security are topics that place this narration in dialogue with other writings outside of the Cuban context.

Similarly, one final story of note by Adrián Pernas is “La prisión de Carlos,” a tale that also posits the importance of cultural influences that span ages and geographies. The labyrinthine experience of the title character closes the collection and presents a series of interrelated scenes that render homage to many of the figures Pernas notes as his own literary and philosophical influences. Representatives of cultural transformation, such as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, the Dalai Lama and Nietzsche, among others, make appearances in the tale. As the protagonist Carlos composes a story in which his own fictional creation dreams he is able to travel through time to meet his intellectual heroes, Carlos as writer becomes keenly and uncomfortably aware of the limitations of his own imagination. He feels trapped within the story he is writing, trapped within himself and his own creation. As he finishes his typing, he comes to the conclusion that “le era imposible escapar de aquel círculo vicioso que se le volvía lo mismo sueño que pesadilla” (46). The oneiric references in the story as well as the literary device of the embedded story and the skillful ending in which Carlos realizes that he “quedaría para siempre atrapado en este cuento” (47) is reminiscent of the way in which Borges often explored the realm of dreams as he contemplated the links between writers and their texts. In crafting his art with this intertextual approach, Pernas shows his texts to be dynamic sites of interaction with his literary forerunners.

As one begins to scratch the surface of the next generation of Cuban authors, it becomes clear that the local and global forces that influenced their immediate predecessors of Generación Año Cero are having an impact on their writing as well. Through their innovation of topics and style, this is a generation that is undertaking a revamping of Cuban literature. The shifts and transformations affecting Cuban political, economic and social realities are evident in their work; they cannot avoid

the complexities of contemporary Cuban life as the island embarks upon historic change. However, there are other larger questions that they wish to explore. Questions that reflect our common experiences and our interconnectedness are the basis of much of their fiction. Their *cubanidad* is not absent nor hidden but they reject the implicit pressures that wish to insinuate that being a Cuban writer solely means being political. This is the site of their “descentramiento geográfico.” They are not writing to satisfy any publishing norms or expectations about literature produced in Cuba but rather wish to explore humanity in all its beauty, ugliness, joy and suffering. There is potential and promise in their concept of modern Cuban literature as they begin to write as part of a universal tradition.

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