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(World) Literature as *Ars Vivendi* through Collaborative Authorship

The Case of Escape Goat

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Abstract

During the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, 46 Portuguese authors collaborated on a serialized hypertext novel: *Bode Inspiratório*, translated into English as *Escape Goat*. It draws attention to escapism in literature and calls to the mind a 21st-century retelling of the *Decameron*, which belongs to the rich sets of texts emanating from *The Thousand and One Nights* we define in literature as *ars moriendi*. By transferring the act of collective storytelling to a digital platform, *Escape Goat* transgresses the monologism of authorial isolation by bringing together the heteroglossic structure of the novel with the polyphony of collaborative authorship. This study holds up *Escape Goat* as a proto example of collaborative Covid-novels and aims to demonstrate how this "novel" form of collaborative authorship extends the boundaries of world literature through a transformation of the escapist, mortuary and agonistic aspect of literature as *ars moriendi*, into the collaborative, ludic and solidarist aspect of literature as *ars vivendi*.

Keywords

Escape Goat – collaborative authorship – literary ludics – solidarity – Covid-19 pandemic

So much writing across time and space is about the inevitability of death, negotiating with death and with the dead, or finding ways of defeating and escaping death. It is a reaction that flourishes within our fascination and fear of mortality. Oral storytelling repels death and thus achieves immortality by redeeming and sublimating the glorious deeds and early and beautiful death (*kalos*

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thanatos) of the epic hero, yet as the Latin saying goes, *verba volant, scripta manent*. The very nature of writing/script, inherent in its apparent permanence inverts the age-old concept of the acceptance of death and immortality by the epic hero extolled by the spoken/ephemeral word. By bridging the transition from orality to literacy with its embedded stories and unique role in textualizing the many elements of oral narrative, the eastern-invented frame tale provides a different strategy for staving off death. Scheherazade, the epitome of this latter kind of storyteller, "dramatizes an intriguing aspect of all literary discourse: its capacity to stimulate the postponement of human death through the prolongation of fictional life" (Faris 811). This impulse of narrating against death is what underlies the resurgent interest in Scheherazade's stories compiled in *The Thousand and One Nights* (hereafter cited as the *Nights*). The unabated presence of her persona and her tales in many literatures, transmitted like literary germ cells from one text to the next, records the common effort of raconteurs/narrators/authors to forestall and exclude death within the written narrative itself.

In this manner Scheherazade bestows on her literary progeny a fictional *ars moriendi* – the literary equivalent of the late Cinquecento genre on the art of dying. Emerging against the backdrop of the bubonic plague, famously known as the Black Death, the religious corpora of these texts became enormously popular. Like its theological counterpart, which acts as a how-to manual on preparing both the dying and their attendants for the rituals of dying well and which has certain salvific intentions, literature as *ars moriendi* acts as a form of mnemonic knowledge that equips narrators and readers with performative techniques such as inventing stories with an infinite number of beginnings and endings that grapple with the chaos of death and transform it into works of art.

Human beings have hardly ever felt the damp breath of death so close as in times of plague. René Girard in his seminal essay, "The Plague in Literature and Myth," shows that plague is one of the most common motifs in literature. By delving into the reciprocal affinity between the medical plague and social disorder, Girard develops a notion of "social plague," which plays out as a metaphorical configuration for the invocation of violence and terror (Girard 835–36). Upon scrutiny of the crisis of the social (King Shahriyar's femicides) and the political (his neglecting affairs of the kingdom) in the *Nights*, we may draw parallels with Girard's notion of "social plague" and what happens in the frame tale of the *Nights*. According to Girard, social plague foresees a resolution by death or cure by a sacrificial element through so-called scapegoat rituals (Girard 841). Though Scheherazade is mostly viewed as narrating solely against her own death, this situation of a social plague in the frame tale puts

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her in the position of a scapegoat who is compelled to save not only her own life but that of her sister Dunyazad and many more members of her own sex. Her self-sacrificial act, which she defines as her "means of deliverance" (Bettelheim 87), and the therapeutic and cathartic value of her tales, enable her to overcome her death and King Shahriyar's absolute power, which acts as a proxy for death.

Similarly, a plague, this time the physical manifestation of *yersinia pestis*, serves as the background of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which is considered one of the best-known imitators of the Scheherazadean *ars moriendi*. Its narrators were popularly referred to as *brigata* and defied the Black Death by retreating to the pastoral and into the realm of storytelling. As scientific, religious, and philosophical discourses of the era failed to capture the devastating effects of the epidemic, it fell once more to literature and particularly Boccaccio, to whom "we owe the greatest homage, for his descriptions of the plague is masterful" (Keys 41), to lay out the blueprint for combatting future pandemics. Having said that, the *Decameron*, with its rich diet of jovial and tragic tales, not only aptly portrays the vast array of the pre-plague social texture of Quattrocento Italian life, but also sets the standard for subsequent plague texts by Daniel Defoe, Albert Camus, Thomas Mann and most recently Orhan Pamuk, to name but a few.

The Covid-19 pandemic has left its mark on our living history, both by its swift pace and global reach, and through the ensuing social, economic, and political crises. It was precisely when our pandemic reached its climax, in its second year, that many turned to literature once again in search for possible answers. Portugal, a country located on the relative periphery of the global economy and the world republic of letters, was the subject of a surprising, seemingly off-topic news article taking up a small space amongst the growing death toll and case numbers (Flood). Adding a new challenge to the "challenge craze" on virtual platforms, Ana Margarida de Carvalho invited her fellow writers to take part in a literary *cadavre exquis* or exquisite corpse, a salon game which was explored for its creative potential by the Dadaists/Surrealists. Forty-six authors accepted this challenge, and the serialized hypertext Covid-novel known as *Bode Inspiratório* – a witty reversal of Portuguese word for a scapegoat[1] – appeared on the Facebook platform on March 21, 2020 (*Bode Inspirató-*

1 'Bode expiatório,' which is Portuguese for 'scapegoat,' was inventively transformed into 'bode inspiratório,' echoing inspiration as a fortitious enterprise of literary creativity. This amusing and creative word play both in Portuguese and English, clearly evokes the scapegoat rituals which were at the core of our plague experiences as pointed out by René Girard, which we discuss in the text.

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rio). The novel was rapidly translated into several European languages, including Spanish, French and Italian, and beginning on April 13, 2020, the English translation was made available in daily instalments on the *Escape Goat* webpage.

The English title, *Escape Goat*, draws attention to escapism in literature. It is this escapist and death-defying strain inherent in *ars moriendi* literature that links *Escape Goat* dialogically with the *Decameron*, and (indirectly) with another canonical text of world literature, the *Nights*.[2] This example allows us to notice the potential existence of *ars moriendi* in a literary web that encircles world literature both spatially and temporally. We thus need to consider this web of literary materials to help us to situate *Escape Goat* and contextualize its significance. So far, we have tried to demonstrate the thematic roots which *Escape Goat* shares with the major texts of what is called *ars moriendi* literature. In what follows, we will first be tracing the generic, narrative, and associative foundations upon which *Escape Goat* was built intertextually in dialogue with canonical works of world literature.[3] We will then continue to illustrate how it establishes an exemplary and prototypical literary phenomenon, transgressing those very substrata with its unique set of features: namely *collaborative authorship*, which we will be discussing against the backdrop of Romantic notions of authorship and Harold Bloom's agonistic theory of literary production; *literary ludics*, which we borrow from Warren Motte (4); and Dean Spade's conceptualization of building *solidarity* in times of crises.

As a beginning, we will demonstrate how the innovative origins of *Escape Goat*, which introduced a hypertext Covid-novel as a product of collaborative authorship into the novel genre, are again based on classics of the 'genre' – formally and textually remarkable and innovative frame tale narratives of world literature, namely the *Nights* and *Decameron*. Indeed, the frame tale draws upon a variety of rhetorical styles and sources from both oral and literate traditions, and adapts to various linguistic and cultural contexts. This inher-

2 Curiously enough, *Escape Goat* establishes a link with a near-contemporary project of collective storytelling named *Scheherazade 2001 Foundation* initiated by a group of theater workers who commissioned different writers to write stories to be read aloud in different European cities following the bombardments of Sarajevo in 1994 (Dragas 250). The project, which was initiated as a creative resistance to the Serbian occupation during the Bosnian War, bears the thematic link with the first Italian frame narrative, Bosone da Gubbio's *Avventuroso Siciliano*, written during the French siege of Sicily (Malette 190) and once again invokes elements of literature as *ars moriendi*, since war and occupation act as morbid and destructive features of social plague.

3 Moreover, *Escape Goat* also moves beyond text using hypertext "no longer as a text, but a new "medium"" (Cicconi 3) in its circulation as a work of world literature.

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ent flexibility brings it close to a Bakhtinian definition of a novel, which he calls "the only developing genre" and to the "phenomenon of novelization," which he characterizes with a sense of "indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, and living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality" (Bakhtin 7). This generic affinity testifies to the significant role the *Nights* and *Decameron* have played in the establishment of the modern novel. It is important to mention that the *Nights* establishes what van Leeuwen calls a "transitional zone" (3) between the Arabic and European literary fields by linking the Arabic prose genre the *maqāma*, which inspired the picaresque novel,[4] with the birth and expansion of the modern European novel. In a similar manner, with the *Decameron* Boccaccio "raised storytelling to the dignity of literary genre and defined the scope of the novella" (Stewart 84), making it one of the building blocks of the European novel.

Frame tales or framing devices can be considered as one of the primordial specimens of *novelized* forms which were present in the European literary traditions. One could think of Homer's *Odyssey*, Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, and even Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as frame tales enclosing "complex narratives that would retain much of their significance without the inclusion of their interpolated tales" (B. Irwin 29). In Aesop's *Fables*, embedded stories have more or less didactic purposes which clearly resonate with a large corpus of frame tale narratives such as *Sukasaptati, Panchatantra* and *Kalila wa Dimna*. However, the frame tale structure of the *Nights* does more than simply combine tales for didactic or entertainment purposes. What the frame tale in the *Nights* does is subvert the moral function prevailing in conventional frame tale narratives and serves "to seek refuge from danger; a backdrop of psychological or civil malaise, which may be symbolically healed through narrative therapy" (Malette 189). Therefore, it is the contribution of the frame tale structure of the *Nights*, which is bound together by the prevalent theme of telling a story to escape death, that creates a novel kind of narrative contingency which was later followed by premodern Italian writers such as Boccaccio[5] and by the collaborative authors in the contemporary era of *Escape Goat*.

4 Emerging in the backdrop of polictical upheavals of tenth and eleventh centuries, the *maqāma* derived its influence from a wide spectrum of literary materials, "from the high literature of the Badouins, to that of the urban intellectuals, and even the popular street tales of *'Alf Layla wa Layla* (A Thousand and One Nights), for its homiletic purposes" (Bocher 9). For extensive discussions on the relationship between *maqāma* and Spanish picaresque novel see Abu-Haidar.

5 Although the date of the *Nights* initiation into European literary space is commonly believed to be the eighteenth century with the translations of Antoine Galland, Robert Irwin (92) asserts that there is ample evidence that medieval Europeans were familiar with the *Nights*.

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At this point, it becomes important to clarify how we conceptualize the connection between the frame tale structure and *Escape Goat*. Certainly, *Escape Goat* as a novel does not deploy the formal characteristics of the frame tale in its composition. The advantage we gain from considering *Escape Goat* not only as a literary product but also as a *project of collective resistance* against social isolation, as declared on its "manifesto-like" homepage, is to permit us to consider the tropical nature of the connection between the frame tale and *Escape Goat*:

> For us, simply making trenches of our sofas was not enough. More than 40 writers and visual artists have come together to present to you, each day, a chapter of what will become *a great document of these times of social isolation*. We are 46 writers and 46 visual artists (and now 46 translators!) who have decided to unite in a *common cultural resistance project*: a collective serial novel, with a strange name, resulting from numerous heads, more hands, and even more fingers ….
>
> *Escape Goat*; emphasis mine

Indeed, we can say that the very "manifesto" of the project functions as the framing device, defining the limits of the work's contents and setting its rules "every day, one chapter by a different writer, punctually at 12 p.m." (*Escape Goat*). A similar structure can be observed in the frame tales of the *Nights* and especially in the *Decameron*, where "each character/narrator is responsible for a day, setting ground rules for the activities and choosing a theme for the day's stories" (B. Irwin 41). This form of narrative interplay also modulates into the idea of writing as a game, even if a morbid one, which "invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits" (Foucault 206). Whereas the *Nights* and the *Decameron* engage in the narrative game by means of multiplying their stories, *Escape Goat* transgresses the limit by proliferating the number of authors and initiating a literary ritual of "exquisite corpse," which serves as an attempt to exhaust the act of narration ad infinitum. In the course of our essay, we will once again come back to the ludic and communal aspects of the *exquisite corpse* as a literary device employed both by Surrealists and *Escape Goat* alike.

Escape Goat also follows the time-frame characteristics that are inherent elements in the frame tales, as Bonnie Irwin mentions, "by creating a frame, a composer could maintain a contextual continuity, linking a series of stories from day to day" (36). *Escape Goat* spans forty-six days between April 13 and May 28, 2020, which is inscribed under each chapter on the screen, imitating the thousand and one nights of Scheherazade and ten days of the *Decameron*

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from which its title – Italianized version of Greek words *deka* (ten) – *hemeron* (day) – is derived. Apart from introducing the element of contingency to the narrative and creating a sense of reality by linking the fictional world to the real world, this temporal arrangement manipulates our sense of endings and beginnings and thus achieves deferred gratification by creating a version of Shklovsky's retardation effect (65) as one of the essential techniques intrinsic to the storytelling/narration. With the rise of literacy and advancements in the publishing industry, this temporal manipulation belonging to the oral traditions found its way into literate cultures in the Victorian Era in the form of serialized fictions published in periodicals. The growing popularity of these serialized fictions can be traced back to the novels of Charles Dickens, and in a different register ultimately influences our present-day comics and graphic novels and television series. With the advent and advances of the internet, a vast array of serialized digital or hypertext novels have proliferated using various online self-publishing platforms, of which *Escape Goat* can be regarded as an example.

Just as a work of fiction enters the 'real world' and tries to capture its own unique reality, the real world enters the work of fiction and its world "both as part of its creation and its subsequent life" (Bakhtin 254). This disorienting and transgressive ontological relationship between 'real life' and 'fictional world' was first and foremost explored in the frame tale narrative compositions, as the framing device establishes a connection between reality and the fictional worlds of the embedded stories:

> The inserted stories contain an allegorical representation of the world, which acquires its meanings by associating it with a realistic 'metanarrative'. It is acknowledged that the stories are not identical with reality and that they have a meaning which transcends real, incidental events. They contain a general lesson, not meant for just one situation, but for a category of situations. These categories are defined by the framing story, which anchors the metaphorical representations in 'real life'. Here, the technique of interruption is used to fulfil one of the main functions of literature: the linking of fictional worlds to a realistic world, of representation to reality, of allegory to the experience of life.
>
> VAN LEEUWEN *The Thousand* 7

Lastly and most importantly, we argue that *Escape Goat*, with its collaborative authorship of forty-six authors who germinate, sprout and grow from the seed of Scheherazade and Boccaccio's literary marriage, invert the above-mentioned equation by linking the real world to the fictional world in terms of the trope

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of narrative metalepsis, which "first identified by Genette, is a paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told" (Pier 190). Genette built his conception on Jorge Luis Borges, who explored the labyrinthine and mise en abyme aspects of narration both in his literary works and in his creative non-fiction. By citing several texts in his essay "Partial Magic in the Quixote," including the *Nights*, where the link between fictional characters and real life is blurred, Borges contends "that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious" (196).

By the same token, we can regard the authors of *Escape Goat* as fictitious or Genettian metaleptic narrators. By the act of writing a text, they themselves simultaneously become written by the power of language, much as Roland Barthes declared: "it is a language which speaks, not the author" (126). By taking part in the narrative game of continuing the collective story (telling), the authors of *Escape Goat* become simultaneously both subjects and objects of the literary game of *exquisite corpse* and provide plural perspectives or *voices* to the singular story. This polyphonic and heteroglossic move can also be regarded as a real-life imitation of some of the best-known fictional heteroglossic narratives, for instance Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* or William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, where instead of a single narrator, readers are presented with parallel voices which offer alternative versions of the same incidents. We therefore argue that it is the transgressive potential of collaboration that enables *Escape Goat* to transcend the escapist strain of the literature of *ars moriendi* with the prophylactic, collective and solidarist features inherent in collaborative authorship.

In order to consider the implications of collaborative authorship on the understanding of *Escape Goat* and its position as an exemplary literary phenomenon of world literature, we contrast the *solidarist* image of collaborative authorship with the image of the author as *solitary and isolated genius*. Notwithstanding the common notion that working against the idea of authorship is a relatively contemporary stance, it is curious to see how the literary predecessors of *Escape Goat* undermine and challenge the notion of authorialism in their own rights. While the *Nights*, typically known as "The Book without Authors" (R. Irwin 42), challenges the notion of authorship with its anonymous and complex textual history, Boccaccio chooses to hide behind his narrators by "labeling himself not as the *auctor* or inventor of original work, but as a *scriptor* or scribal transmitter of existing stories" (Daniels 39).[6] By resorting

6 Boccaccio's account clearly coincides with the Medieval notions of authorship set by St

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to the "democratizing" and egalitarian possibilities of digital platforms and the communal nature of collaborative storytelling/authorship, *Escape Goat* analogically challenges our present model of authorship, which finally maturated in the Romantic period with the consecration of the image of an author as a solitary and isolated genius.

Leaving aside the qualities of originality, autonomy, and self-expression commonly ascribed to the Romantic (and by extension) the modern author, it is precisely this quality of relative isolatedness of the authorship we want to compare with the inherently dialogic and communal feature of collaborative authorship. It would not be wrong to say that the Romantic author indulged in solitude as a refuge for aesthetic expression, which found its eloquent metaphorical reverberations in the Byronic hero, the Shelleyan lyrical solitude and the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime. Nonetheless, this persistent myth of the Romantic author can be regarded as "a fiction of subsequent critical reception, a fantasy, a back-formation or 'retrojection' produced through a partial reading of Romantic poets" (Bennett 71), and it was challenged by literary critics as they revealed the existence of a large portion of writers "working within various poetical fraternities, political alliances, sects, and leagues like the 'Lakers' and the 'Cockney School'" (Stone and Thompson 16). Thus, considered as an outcome of socially constructed discursive practices shaping the author and her/his writing, or intricate social and economic environments of the publication process, collaboration has been "one of the routine ways of producing literature all along" (Stillinger 201). Yet because of its disruptive and subversive qualities, collaboration poses a potential threat to the hegemonic ideology of authority and was therefore repeatedly marginalized within literary theory as "something like literature's shameful family secret, a shared vice of writing" (Bennet 95).

Bonaventure who lists *auctor* or author as one of the four categories of authorship that he calls the "fourfold way [*modus*] of making a book" (Kraebel 98). It should be remembered that this definition does not give privilege to the author in favor of originality and inventiveness, since "within the Medieval view, the human author of Scripture has no power to originate, and his text derives from the creativity and authority (*auctoritas*) of God" (Burke xvii). Another noteworthy aspect of authorship in the Middle Ages is that far more emphasis was placed on group identity and collaboration since copying and dissemination of manuscripts were executed collectively and regarded as an anonymous practice in effect. However, by the end of the Late Middle Ages there occurs a significant shift in this theological conception of authorship, as the medieval notion of author begins to transpose from "divine *auctor* to human *auctor*" (Minnis 5) characterized by the growing sense of individuality. One must note the influence of emerging vernacular literature in the West, particularly the *Decameron* on this growing sentiment as it strongly advocates the importance of the individual agency.

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We can regard the self-imposed and voluntary form of Romantic authorial isolatedness in stark contrast to the enforced isolatedness of the Covid-19 pandemic, which gave rise to the collaborative authorship of *Escape Goat*. By naming it as a resistance project against social isolation, the authors of *Escape Goat* expose the revolutionary aspect of their collaboration. This is reminiscent of the Girardian social plague discussed earlier, and is analogous with the political upheaval when "the revolutionary refiguring of the patriarchal familial paradigm as a fraternity threatens the singular nature of political authority, so refiguring authorial paternity as fraternity jeopardizes the singular nature of writerly authority" (Hickey 306).

The accelerated expansion of internet-based platforms and social media have made them into empowering conduits that bring together people who would otherwise have remained powerless in their isolation. This condition also explains the underlying reason for the preference of *Escape Goat* for digital rather than analog publishing, which we see as a way of militating against the established means-ends institutions of world literature that drive literature toward homogeneity, standardization, and commodification.[7] In the wake of the rapid proliferation of electronic hypertexts and multiple selves online, which is well beyond the conception of isolated and autonomous authorship, the original Portuguese version *Bode Inspiratório* started as a typical Facebook page, and stands out as a successful example of the complete democratization of Web 2.0 platforms, which is to say, it is only "in offering anyone and everyone the ability to express oneself in public that the digital element can be most truly called revolutionary" (van der Weel 219).

Another subversive quality of collaborative authorship comes with the destabilization of the godlike author figure through the constant negotiation of power that acknowledges differing subjectivities and reverses the hierarchy of authority reputedly thought to exist between collaborating parties. If we closely examine the authors taking part in the composition of *Escape Goat*, we come across much acclaimed writers such as Gabriela Ruivo Trindade, Afonso Reis Cabral, and Nara Vidal, who share and negotiate the (hyper)textual authorial space with relatively unknown neophytes. This collaborative dissolution of the traditional and dominant authorial position results in the intertwining and blending of multiple authorial consciousnesses and the emergence of a hybrid form of authorship, which equally endorses and privileges the aberrant sta-

7 It is true that in July 2020, a bilingual, Portuguese-English edition of *Escape Goat* was published in a book format. However, we consider this not as something for consumption by a wide readership, but as a souvenir which has a symbolic value for bibliophiles, considering the etymology of the word symbol – *symbolon* (token) from Greek.

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tus of multiple authorship and translation.[8] Traditionally defined as subsidiary and deemed invisible to hegemonic authorship, the hybrid and elusive authorial position of collaborative authorship not only rejects the paramount role ascribed to the author by tradition, but also challenges the constant rivalry and agonism towering above authorship which culminates in the Bloomian "anxiety of influence," a symbolic way of expressing poetic discontent felt for the significant Other(s). While Bloom's theory may appear to affirm the hegemony of the authorial figure, in fact it demotes the author to the mere aggregate of poetic influences, which authors try to disavow altogether or use to achieve immortality by struggling against their (dead) literary precursors. According to Bloom, the anxiety of influence operates with this covert premise, which riddles the author with the "fear that no proper work remains for him to perform" (148).

The same fear which is acted out as the fear of death – or more precisely the fear of posthumous oblivion – becomes crucial to Bloom's conception of authorship, as it clearly gains nourishment from the obsession of the modern author with making durable works for posterity. It follows that for Bloom poetic creativity, which he formulates as "poetic divination," "intends literal immortality, and any poem may be defined as a side-stepping of a possible death" (102). Subsequently this fear of death is what acts as an impetus for Bloom's conception of poetic agonism, and he endorses it with escapist tendencies, which clearly coincides with our contextualization of literature as *ars moriendi*. Moreover, Bloom's notion of agonism in its fixation upon death and the single-minded determination to achieve immortality oversees the communal, ludic, and solidarist capacity of literature, which we can name antithetically as *ars vivendi*.

We argue that Bloomian agonism is one-sided and thus pernicious as it disdains and excludes any attempts of collaborative authorship. More precisely, Bloom formulates collaboration in terms of weakness and asserts that "where generosity is involved, the poets influenced are minor or weaker; the more generosity, and the more *mutual* it is, the poorer the poets involved" (30; emphasis mine). The question that arises here is: how then could we turn the vice of Bloomian agonism into a virtue of collaboration? With this in mind, we resort to Janet Lungstrum and Elizabeth Sauer as they challenge and invert the Bloo-

8 Translation, which helps writers learn their craft from each other without falling prey to the "pernicious anxiety of influence" (Grossmann 22), is an integral part of the creation and circulation of *Escape Goat*, as it belongs to the generation of "born translated" novels (Walkowitz). Since the focus of our present essay is on the collaborative authorship, we decided to explore the role of translation in *Escape Goat* in future studies.

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mian agonism with their new paradigm of *creative agonistics*: "It is in the nature of the agon neither to render its participants mute nor to attain the conquering finality of *telos*. The agonistic paradigm allows texts, authors, historical events, and cultural voices to engage in a creative and regenerative contest" (25). In this manner, by applying the regenerative aspect of creative agonistics, *Escape Goat* transforms the contestatory dimensions of poetic struggle into something more meaningful than desire for immortality: a celebration of life. *Escape Goat* emerges as a preliminary example of Covid-novels,[9] embodying the dialogic and dynamic vibrancy needed to keep world literature from succumbing to stagnation or becoming conservative.

In addition to collaboration, *Escape Goat* confronts Bloomian agonism by ignoring the "dark and daemonic" anxiety of influence and relegating it to the ludic aspect of agon (Huizinga 30–31) as exhibited in its concept of play, which brings it close to the Dadaists and Surrealists. As precursors of *Escape Goat*, those avant-garde movements emerged against the backdrop of traumatic events of another social plague, i.e., the post-WWI era. They celebrated the ephemeral qualities of life by appealing to the creative, healing potency in games, especially "exquisite corpse," which worked "towards effacement of individual will in favor of collective authorship" (McShane 88). This collective authorship created a "consistent capacity of 'renewal' " (Laxton 138), as seen in the initial example of the game which provided its unusual name: "le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau" ("the exquisite corpse will drink the new wine"), which, viewed in a liturgical sense, "reenacts the drama of Christ's resurrection" and "predicts the eventual triumph of life over death" (Bohn 151–152). By resorting to the realm of play, *Escape Goat* trades the escapism of *ars moriendi* for a ludic *ars vivendi*, since these games call for new beginnings, new realities, and new lifeworlds.

Everything we have covered so far has led us to the solidarity inherent in the participation and creation of *Escape Goat*, which we consider the pivotal feature of literature as *ars vivendi* in demonstrating that literature may take an active part in social movements in times of acute crises like the Covid-19

9 While this essay was in progress, we came across another interesting example of literary influence which proves our argument of collaborative authorship as a salient trait which may change the course of world literature in the aftermath of Covid-19. According to *The Guardian*, a collaborative Covid-novel titled *Fourteen Days: An Unauthorized Gathering*, scheduled to be published in September 2022 under the editorship of Margaret Atwood, will bring together famous novelists such as John Grisham, Diana Gabbaldon, Dave Eggers and many others. At the same time, the novel project will also employ literary ludics in which "the writers remain anonymous until the end of the book, when it is revealed who has written which story" (Flood, *Margaret Atwood*).

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pandemic. We can dichotomize our configuration as solidarity versus charity, following Dean Spade's recent theorization of mutual aid and solidarity as an empowering aspect of social activism. Boccaccio emphasizes the role of charity at the outset of the *Decameron*. In opening the Prologue with an evocative phrase, "It is a matter of humanity to show *compassion* for those who suffer" (3; emphasis mine), and in presenting Neifile as an allegorical symbol of the theological virtue of charity (Kirkham 14), Boccaccio pointed to the importance of sharing and caring for others and of moving on collectively through a crisis. Interestingly, the plague which Girard mentions as a "process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities" (833) eventuated in the heightened notion of the individualism of the post-Decameronian world, and brought us to where we are now in "the most atomized society" (Spade 8) living under a new wave of the pandemic. Naturally, charity with its moralistic, discriminatory, and stigmatizing stance (Spade 21–23), which is rooted again in modern individualism, colonialism, and capitalism by disrupting the historically potent apparatus of sharing and caring, falls short of providing an answer to a crisis of such scale. Spade posits the unbroken tradition of solidarity among Indigenous people[10] (11) as a powerful way of survival and resistance to enforced social isolation and forced dependency on hostile government systems during times of crises. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, hostile systems bolstered with the support of the medicinal and scientific authority are prone to overlook the consequences of social isolation, which carries dangers of creating real-life scenarios with growing acquiescence, cynicism, and ensuing authoritarianism, and these in turn cultivate despair and in many ways resemble the direst examples of dystopian fiction. In a countermove, *Escape Goat* converges on solidarity as a communal action, and turns dystopian overtones of social isolation into the affective vision of utopian thinking by rejecting isolation and despair in favor of consolation and hope.

To conclude, we consider *Escape Goat* more of a literary *oject de virtu* than a compelling read, a decision that highlights the process of creation rather than its product as a literary *objet d'art*. Indeed, *Escape Goat* challenges and changes the art of literary criticism and invites a kind of metatextual criticism, since approaching a collaborative text with existing paradigms employed for a single-authored text would be limited and problematic. Yet the storyline of *Escape Goat*, which projects an alternate future where the Covid-19 vaccine was found much earlier than its real-life equivalent, enables a sense of hope and calls forth

10 One possible reason for inherent solidarity of Indigenous cultures may be found in their literary tradition, which puts a strong reliance on collaborative authorship, for example the Mayan epic *The Popol Vuh*.

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the ability of literature as *ars vivendi* to serve a consolatory function in the context of a still menacing global pandemic. With this prophetic maneuver, the literature of *ars vivendi* epitomized by *Escape Goat* animates real life once more and combats the morbidity of the pandemic by drawing us into a fictive community of consolation reminiscent of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. In our enforced social isolation we resemble the imprisoned Boethius on the brink of his rendezvous with death. Just as philosophy comes to his rescue, *Escape Goat* assumes this role and consoles us by dwelling in hope, not in some future, ideal or transcendental sense of the word, but in a present, communal, ludic and solidary act of hope of the resurrection of mundane life. This kind of hope supplants our melancholy sentiments of growing isolation with a rhetoric of consolation, transforming us into a Spinozaean free man who "thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation, not on death, but on life" (Spinoza qtd in Nadler 234).

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