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*Assembling Openly
from ABC to the COVE Collective
For Dr. Ana-Karina Schneider*

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In April of 2002, I arrived in Sibiu and first met the inspiring faculty and students of Lucian Blaga University. The occasion was an exchange organized by the British Council between Sibiu and my postgraduate institution, the University of Wales, Aberystwyth (now, having devolved from the University of Wales system, operating as Aberystwyth University). I was entranced by the experimental theatre scene in Sibiu, the symphony's performance at the Cercul Militar, and, of course, the distinctive, expressive "eyes" of many of Sibiu's oldest houses. More interesting than all that was the American Library. In 2002, it was not easy for professors at Sibiu to obtain library resources for their students – something I understand more clearly now that I am a professor at an institution that often struggles with obstacles to resource access. Still, the Library enabled Sibiu's faculty and students to read global Anglophone literature and cultural theory. More importantly for us all, that library as well as the Academic Anglophone Society of Romania projects allowed Sibiu's scholars to challenge and invigorate the global Anglophone literature community with a unique and urgent perspective on Anglophone literature: one that privileged a European (as opposed to archipelagic British or neo-colonial American) perspective and not only resists the Orientalism that still plagued (and does plague) the field and, to quote Sibiu scholar Cristina Șandru, "to translate the specificity of (post-) Communist life experiences into the theoretical and critical languages with most currency" (113) for literary scholars today.

My two-week education at Lucian Blaga University is a gift that I draw on every day in my career as a Professor of English in America. I learned about the music of The Doors as liberatory literature; Shelley's "trumpets" of the "unacknowledged legislature"; about reading Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" with awareness of the meaning of Byzantium within the Orthodox Christian world and post-Communism, and about the powerful poetry of LBUS scholar and Rector, the late Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop – a former political prisoner who had proven the power of literature by breaking down the emotional barricades put up by his rather intimating cellmate by sharing with him remembered fragments of Oscar Wilde's ultimate ethical and spiritual statement, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." I also learned how to teach students whose enthusiasm and potential outmatches their resources and who dreamed of using their literary skills to affect change, rebuilding their society. I hope that I can inspire my students to read and write with their courage and vision.

How can we do that? I think by building trans-cultural libraries like the one that I saw in that well-lit room in Sibiu, the American Library. In 2002, the World Wide Web had been in the public domain for little over a decade. Its potential for "humanities computing" (what is now known as the digital humanities) was largely unexplored. (Maybe it still is now, of course.) However, we can model digital spaces on the physical spaces that have worked magic for it. One way in which I have engaged in this kind of skeumorphic thinking is by contributing to the work of the COVE Collective, guided by the COVE's foundational ethos: what COVE founder Dino Franco Felluga has recently termed "open assembly."

To explain this, I would like to introduce the COVE project, its two digital environments (COVE Studio and COVE Editions), and the concept of "open assembly."

What Is the COVE and Open Assembly?

A decade ago, Felluga (Purdue University) determined that scholars need a robust platform for open-access research, especially critical editions, that would not be dependent upon any one institution and would liberate us from the current neoliberal model of academic publishing. Originally

designed to expand scholarship on the Victorian era beyond the constraints of that model, the project was titled the Central Online Victorian Educator (COVE). Since then, its scope has expanded to encompass other periods and topics within literary and cultural history.

COVE stands for the **Collaborative Organization for Virtual Education**, a scholar-driven open-access platform that publishes both peer-reviewed material and "flipped classroom" student projects built with our online tools. It is maintained by a number of field groups and independent institutions. Although all peer-reviewed material is open access, we charge a modest amount for use of our tools. It is also a kind of "cove": a space from which the transnational currents of literature, history, and culture can be accessed by anyone with the inclination. Like international waters, it affords publishers and users freedom from the predatory practices of the neoliberal capitalist academic publishing industry of the late twentieth century.

COVE maintains two interoperable environments. **COVE Studio** is our makerspace. In it, scholars (individually or in groups, including, especially, course groups) can create projects (including courses) consisting of anthologies of texts, images, and image-text assemblages and critically annotate them, including with audio, video, images, and hypertext. The anthologies easily replace the expensive, static, hegemonic anthologies produced by academic and commercial presses and foster social annotation – in an environment that has proven remarkably resistant to infiltration by Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI).

COVE Editions offers a searchable archive of published scholarly editions, enhanced by technology made possible in an online environment. Each critical edition is based on the highest scholarly standards and is peer-reviewed. In COVE Editions, you can build a digital edition, gallery, map, timeline, or a resource that combines two or more of these genres. To build a critical edition, create and annotate text and image as Projects in COVE Studio for porting into COVE Editions. You can begin with any of our thousands of vetted primary sources, all encoded in XML in compliance with the TEI guidelines, or easily add new ones. You can build all these projects with students, sharing them only with the student group, or for a wider audience. If you choose to publish your work – and we hope

that you will – you will find that our peer review process is rigorous, conscientious, and efficient.

Originally founded as a Victorian studies resource, COVE has expanded to sustain the teaching of literature and other humanities texts from across time and around the world, much as ABC does.

Open Assembly

Both COVE Editions and COVE Studio support a new ethos that Felluga has termed “open assembly.” As he explains in a recent article, open access and open-source methods are insufficient to counter the destructive influences of academic publishing neoliberal capitalism. Open Assembly, or the free, transformative remixing of texts, items, and archives, can achieve this end. “Both open source and open access face a similar problem, as it happens: neglect and obsolescence, as well as the most pernicious Achilles’ heel of the vast majority of digital humanities initiatives: long-term sustainability,” Felluga proposes. “COVE offers an alternative to both long-term sustainability and the collective sharing of content” (Felluga 198).

In 2018, I was drawn to this project because of this ethos, though Felluga had not yet formulated the term “open assembly.” I think this is, to a great extent, because of my exposure to ABC and the international scholarly community that sustains it. I had travelled to Sibiu for the first time because the fledgling journal’s then-home department believed that transcultural communication and collaboration is good for scholars and their graduate and undergraduate students. My colleagues at Sibiu stressed that there is no universal reading of any text or discourse, and that culture, language, nation, and region all shape reading experiences. That ethos also informs the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, which brings together theatre audiences from across Romania, Europe, and the world every summer in Sibiu. Attending this festival, and discussing some of the performances with Ana-Karina Schneider and her colleagues, was a form of open assembly. We openly assembled to watch theatre, and, in reacting to it, we remixed both the performances and our own cultural experiences. I remember, in particular, an avant-garde treatment of

Othello that incisively confronted the original script's Orientalism, for instance, bringing to life the anthropophagi, strategically costumed in high-necked turtlenecks that obscured the actors' real faces – in just the way that Orientalism historically does. I remember Karina and I discussing the interpretation during the intermission: the way it brought theory to life. Our shared reading has remained with me since.

I look forward to the next twenty-five years of ABC. I know it will provide a global audience with opportunities to practice open assembly sustained by technological possibilities that in 2002 were unimaginable. I only wish that Ana-Karina could also have seen this next phase of ABC's existence, and for that reason I dedicate this reflection to her.

Works Cited

- Felluga, Dino Franco. "Going a Step Further than Open Access and Open Source: COVE and the Promise of Open Assembly." *Victorians Institute Journal*, vol. 49, 2022, pp. 198-209, <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/victorians-institute/issue/volume/49>.
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