

Empathy and the Teaching of Writing

*The 26th Annual Summer Conference of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning
of the National Council of Teachers of English*

YMCA of the Rockies, Estes Park, CO, June 15-18, 2023

“If we see each other in each other’s eyes...the walls of Jericho can come tumbling down!”

--Barack Obama

Remember 2008? When the walls of divisiveness seemed to be tumbling before our very eyes? Before the congealing of the now seemingly overwhelming movement to “Make America *Anti-Empathic* Again”? And the determined erection of so many new political and psychological walls between us?

AEPL’s first in-person gathering since 2019 seeks to bring together teachers of writing whose classroom experience has taught them to believe ineluctably that the cultivation of empathy in intimate spaces—in communicative classrooms, and in the contemplative writing process itself—can be saving and healing, both for individuals and, ultimately, for the larger world.

We will come together—both for encouragement and for comfort—in just such an intimate space: **as** a gathering of great-hearted teachers, leaping at the chance for both deep learning and deep succor, amidst the spectacular natural surroundings of the Colorado Rockies.

The conference will be keynoted by Lisa Blankenship and Eric Leake, who are compiling an edited collection *Empathy and the Other: Difference, Connection, and the Teaching of Writing*.

But perhaps more than in any prior AEPL conference, **YOU**, our participants, will have the starring roles. Sharing the practices of empathic connection that have been shaped in your own writing classroom that call out to be shared with other teachers and students. And that, if shared widely enough, may one day make empathic connection more the norm than the exception in our world: *one day* bringing the walls of Jericho *definitively* down!

Please join us! **Register at www.aepl.org!**



Lisa Blankenship is an Associate Professor of English at Baruch College, CUNY. Her book *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy* explores empathy as a rhetorical concept for connecting across difference, proposing ways of resisting the agonistic win-or-lose rhetoric that has so strongly influenced the central traditions of Western thinking. The book’s main premise, that we ourselves are changed (“changing the subject” or the self) when we try to understand, rather than simply to change, an Other, was informed by her experiences growing up in the conservative Bible belt in Texas and Oklahoma and moving to New York City for a faculty position in 2014. Her work on rhetorical empathy also was included in the edited collection *Feminist Connections: Rhetoric and Activism across Time, Space, and Place*. Besides co-editing, with Eric Leake, the collection on which this conference is based, she also serves as Co-Chair, with Eric, of the AEPL CCCCs Standing Group.



Eric Leake is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Master’s in Rhetoric and Composition at Texas State University. A 2010 AEPL graduate student fellow, he currently serves as Co-chair of our CCCCs Standing Group with Lisa Blankenship, with whom he is also co-editing the collection on which this conference is being based, while at the same time completing his own *Difficult Empathy and Rhetorical Encounters*. His work on empathy has been much influenced by the varied life he has led as a Peace Corps Volunteer and Fulbright scholar abroad, and as a journalist in the US: leading him to write also on the rhetorical uses of hospitality, citizen journalism, media literacies, and, recently, on civic literacy and media awareness in an age of disinformation.

Preconference workshop, Thursday, June 15 1-4:30: Writing workshop (with “what do I do in class Monday?” assignments) on Barry Kröll’s *The Open Hand: Arguing as an Art of Peace*. (\$40/\$25 for retired, adjuncts, students, K-12 teachers—refundable until April 14) **Register at aepl.org.**

Postconference workshops, Sunday, June 18, 9-noon (principles and exercises); 1:30-4:30 (personal writing workshop) Register at aepl.org

How Writing Can Heal Trauma, Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy



Trauma by its very nature is encoded in the brain in sensory fragments, inchoate images, impressions, even vibrations that are non-verbal. So the key stage in the writing process that enables the writer to move beyond the trauma is to create a narrative whole that can help put the trauma in the past through cognitive restructuring. This workshop focuses on the writing process that makes this artistic and psychological turn possible and on the safeguards that can be put into place to protect both teacher and writer. It offers a methodology for transforming frozen memories into moving prose, showing how the greatest gift of the writing classroom can be the creation of more integrated people, capable of converting their own losses and griefs into compassion for others.

Marian co-led the largest conference in AEPL history: 2002’s “Writing and Healing,” based on her co-edited NCTE book. She returns to us two decades later for these important workshops, based on her *The Mind’s Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma*..

(full description and bio at aepl.org)

Morning: \$75/\$50 for retired, adjuncts, students, K-12 teachers; Afternoon: \$50/\$35—refundable until April 14. In case of low registration in these iffy times for in-person conferences, we may have to make a decision to cancel after April 14th, in which case all registrations will be fully refunded. We are greatly hoping, though, that a good many of you will want to benefit from Marian’s deep teaching in the deeply traumatic times through which we are living.

To submit a proposal for a 75-minute concurrent session (preferred format) or for a 20-30 minute paper or short teaching demonstration, send an approximately 250-word abstract to aeplconf2023@gmail.com. (Be sure to include a description of participant writing and interactive activities that will directly involve empathic awareness and create the kind of intimate space AEPL is known for.) Early consideration (a month before earlybird prices expire): December 17th. Regular consideration: January 15th. Later proposals will also be considered.

Questions/topics you might entertain presenting on (though certainly do not limit yourself to these):
How to help students write to understand personal and cultural difference, including (but certainly not limited to) empathic anti-racist and anti-sexist pedagogies? How to help students see that writing itself is fundamentally an empathic activity: demanding empathic understanding of others, the world, and one’s own thought processes?
How to empathize with challenging students: either as writers (including those experiencing various kinds of writer’s block) or simply as people? How to empathize and work with those with an anti-empathic stance against the “touchy-feely” or “social-emotional learning”?
How to empathize with ourselves amidst the many struggles of teaching, especially in the deeply troubling times in which we are now living. How to use community writing to promote social empathy. What IS “empathy,” philosophically, scientifically, and spiritually considered?
What empathic ideas and practices originating in spiritual and religious traditions can be transferred inoffensively to the democratic writing classroom?

Register at www.aepl.org! \$195 until Jan 15, 2023; \$245 Jan 16-April 14th; \$295 after April 15th; \$50 discount for students, adjuncts, retirees, K-12 teachers, and for multiple attendees from the same organization. Registration is refundable, minus a \$50 processing fee, until April 14th. Current paid AEPL membership is required of all attendees upon registration. Register for rooms at the spectacular Y of the Rockies on aepl.org, or by calling 888-613-9622.

Direct all questions regarding any aspect of the conference (including room sharing to cut total costs for room and board to as low as \$200) to brucejnovak@gmail.com.