

Durable Effects: Public Writing and the Children's Peace Statue Project



Risa Applegarth

Abstract: Drawing on new materialist and public writing scholarship, this essay advocates for public writing projects that foreground *distributed action* by pursuing *material ends*. Analyzing the rhetorical consequences and pedagogical potential of the Children's Peace Statue Project (1990-1995), a student-led activist project to fund, design, and dedicate in Los Alamos an international peace statue to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, I argue that such projects foreground *durability*: the slow grind of rhetorical action, its reliance on multiple texts composed and circulated over a span of years, across numerous sites, and encompassing multiple languages, registers, and media. Furthermore, through retrospective interviews with participants who contributed to this effort as children, I investigate the power of embodied learning to create durable literacy experiences—experiences that these participants reflect on vividly even twenty years after the statue was first assembled. Ultimately, understanding both *objects* and *public writing* as distributed networks foregrounds the attention to durability that I suggest needs to accompany our embrace of an ecological, distributed model of public writing.

"It's the power exerted through entities that don't sleep and associations that don't break down that allow power to last longer and expand further—and, to achieve such a feat, many more materials than social compacts have to be devised."

-- Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 70

The children who imagined, advocated for, and eventually helped to create the Children's Peace Statue between 1990 and 1995 almost certainly did not understand themselves as participating in a public writing project. In the years just before scholars of writing such as Susan Wells and Christian Weisser turned our field's attention to publicly-oriented writing in college classrooms, a group of elementary, middle, and high school students from New Mexico organized tens of thousands of supporters, through a grassroots letter-writing campaign in the pre-internet era, ultimately designing and building the statue in [Figure 1](#), which was dedicated in Albuquerque in August 1995 to commemorate the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki fifty years earlier. Although the participants primarily understood the project through the frameworks of advocacy and peace activism, nevertheless, I suggest that their collective work on behalf of this statue can be productively understood as public writing—and, furthermore, that the explicitly *material* orientation of the project, which aimed to create a statue to represent the desire for peace of children around the world, can offer a powerful model for public writing projects in our current classrooms and communities.

Certainly, the Children's Peace Statue project was *public*: Although it began in 1990 in an elementary school classroom in Albuquerque, where teachers Christine Luke and Caroline Gassner involved their 3rd- and 4th-graders in a Future Problem Solvers lesson aimed at addressing the problem of nuclear proliferation and the threat of nuclear war, it moved quickly beyond the classroom—to the cafeteria, where students held a popcorn sale to raise money for the statue; to a local bank, where students marched to deposit the first \$12 raised toward their project; and outward, to an expanding range of sites beyond the school, including local libraries, bookstores, and churches, a pizza place where monthly planning meetings were held, County Council meetings in Los Alamos, local press conferences, TV and radio interviews, classrooms around the country where children created designs for the proposed statue, and peace conferences in Salt Lake City, Seattle, and Hiroshima.

The project also involved significant and sustained writing, directed repeatedly toward audiences beyond the

students' immediate classroom. The students who organized in support of the Children's Peace Statue wrote letters to solicit and thank supporters in Russia, Japan, and other international communities of peace activists; drafted flyers and donation forms that they sent to schools, churches, and community groups throughout the US and beyond; composed and sent press releases to newspapers and magazines; prepared formal presentations that they delivered at local government meetings; composed, designed, printed, and distributed thousands of copies of their official newsletter, *The Crane*, which featured letters, narratives, fundraising and peace-building ideas, poetry, and artwork by children; and created an early computer database to record all donors who contributed to the project—a database of names, entered by hand, that numbered 50,000 by the time of the statue's dedication.



Figure 1. Children's Peace Statue in its current location at the Anderson-Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum; Photo courtesy of Richard Loyd

Certainly, on the model of public writing articulated by early scholars of the public turn, the project I investigate in this essay constitutes a sustained form of public writing, as it connects writers with a live audience for their work, invigorates writing by raising the stakes of students' literacy practices, and moves beyond the classroom to locate external stakeholders whose investments in particular projects or issues enliven classroom-based writing.

Yet, as I highlight the sustained, distributed activity of the students who worked for the Children's Peace Statue project, I am struck by the way in which this project most closely models the form of public writing advocated by Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber in their 2011 essay, "Ecological, Pedagogical, Public Rhetoric," in which they challenge the focus of many public writing projects on a single document or rhetorical act meant to intervene in and change social structures. As Rivers and Weber argue, public writing must be reconceptualized to involve the production of mundane as well as exciting or heroic texts. An ecological, distributed model of public writing aims to develop for students and teachers "an expanded scope that views rhetorical action as emergent and enacted through a complex ecology of texts, writers, readers, institutions, objects, and history" (188-189). Rivers and Weber aim to revise our field's prior visions of public writing as the creation of a single, heroically persuasive speech or essay and to promote instead projects and strategies that invest students' energy in more dispersed interventions that operate cumulatively—even bureaucratically—to shift institutions, attitudes, and networks toward change.

The peace statue project also anticipates the model of public writing Brian Gogan advocates in his recent essay in *College Composition and Communication*, which reframes the key elements of public writing—namely, its insistence on *publicity*, *authenticity*, and *efficacy*—to generate a more expanded and explicit framework for evaluating public writing projects and pedagogies. Gogan argues for a shift from understanding publicity as a condition of certain texts

to understanding publicity as an action undertaken by writers; from a concept of authenticity as inherent in a speaking location to a concept of authenticity as confirmed by rhetorical acts of legitimation; and from a view of efficacy as successful persuasion to a view of efficacy as sustained participation. Such conceptual shifts are meant to acknowledge the “momentum-building value of multiple rhetorical acts that extend across difference” (Gogan 540). Although Gogan employs this expanded framework to recuperate the “letter to the editor” as a productive public writing assignment, the shifts he details seem to me particularly crucial for assessing the power of distributed and sustained public writing projects on the model that Rivers and Weber advocate as well. More specifically, I understand Gogan and Rivers and Weber together as pressing public writing pedagogies to engage more fully with new materialism and the posthuman turn in rhetoric and writing studies, as these scholars re-align the goals of public writing pedagogy with contemporary theories of agency and action as distributed, partial, and shared among human and non-human actors.

Building on the theoretical and pedagogical expansions of public writing articulated by Gogan and Rivers and Weber, this essay analyzes the Children’s Peace Statue project as a case study of public writing oriented toward an overtly, dramatically material goal: to build a statue, funded and designed by children, that would articulate the desire of children around the world for peace. A secondary goal of the project was also powerfully and provocatively material: to locate the statue in Los Alamos and to dedicate it on August 6, 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. As I recount more fully below, the children who undertook this project accomplished only the first of these goals. While the statue design was still being finalized, and before the statue itself was cast in bronze and assembled, the Los Alamos County Council voted twice to reject the statue, in late 1994 and again in early 1995, amidst enormous local uproar and national press.^[1] It was subsequently dedicated at the Albuquerque Museum in August 1995, and has since been relocated to several distinct sites throughout northern New Mexico—though never to Los Alamos, even as statue supporters continue to hope for its eventual relocation to the “birthplace of the bomb,” the site for which it was intended. Examining further the spatial and material resonances embedded in this short narrative of the statue’s creation and relocation, the remainder of this essay proceeds to explore the lessons this project might generate for a materialist orientation toward public writing pedagogy, along three lines.

First, I argue for public writing projects that foreground *distributed action* by pursuing *material ends*. That is, I suggest that because the project’s aim was a *statue*, the complexity of materializing this aim *necessitated* that the project be conceived for and conceivable only in relation to a distributed and shifting collective of actors or agents. The overtly material nature of the statue foregrounded for student writers—in a way difficult to accomplish in projects that span only a single semester or course—the slow grind of rhetorical action, its reliance on multiple texts composed and circulated over a span of years, across numerous distinct and varied sites, and encompassing multiple languages, registers, and media. Consequently I argue that public writing projects that emerge from our college classrooms could aim for similarly ambitious material ends and could benefit from the distributed model of action, engagement, and participation required by such ends.

Second, I argue that materially oriented public writing projects also shift our temporal frameworks productively. Drawing from posthumanist scholarship by Bruno Latour, Sarah Hallenbeck, and others, I explore the ways that taking up a new materialist orientation toward public writing can revise not only our notions of success and agency, but our temporal scope as well. In this way, I aim to contribute a concept of *durability* to Gogan’s key terms of *publicity*, *authenticity*, and *efficacy*. By *durability*, I point toward the thing-ness of the statue as well as to the networks of sustained effort among numerous dispersed participants required to make such a durable artifact. As Latour reflects in the epigraph above, *things* crystallize, extend, and solidify the power of social forces that are otherwise ephemeral; as “entities that don’t sleep and associations that don’t break down,” objects can be powerfully enduring, powerful in part *through* their durability, generating what Latour describes as the “steely” quality of particular social relations and associations. The material force of objects, like that exerted by all systems, requires maintenance, of course; it is this very quality that enables a materially oriented public writing project to make visible for students the difficult, crucial work of constituting and sustaining a public. Drawing upon Latour’s concept of durability, I conceptualize objects as distributed networks that maintain and materialize social force in differential ways. Understanding both *objects* and *public writing* as distributed networks, then, foregrounds the temporal dimension—the attention to durability—that I suggest needs to accompany our embrace of an ecological, distributed model of public writing.

And third, I investigate how the material orientation of the peace statue project also instituted what I call “durable effects” in the material practices of participants who contributed to this effort as children. Drawing from retrospective interviews conducted with three participants who were involved in the project over several years while they were in elementary, middle, and high school, I suggest that the benefits of materially oriented public writing projects also reflect the power of embodied learning to create durable literacy experiences—experiences that these participants reflect on vividly even twenty years after the statue was first assembled.

Material Projects, Distributed Agency

The overtly material goal of creating a *statue* focused student writers' efforts, from the very beginning of the project, on the kind of sustained, distributed, even bureaucratic writing that Rivers and Weber advocate—what they identify as “the mundane texts that shape institutions and therefore mold human behavior” (188). Over the five years from conceiving of the project to dedicating the statue, student supporters composed press releases, donation forms, personal letters, flyers, promotional posters, t-shirt designs, competition guidelines, evaluation forms, lists, spreadsheets, databases, phone trees, public presentations, origin narratives, meeting requests, thank you notes, informational brochures, editorials, and a host of ephemeral genres related to creating and sustaining a grassroots organization that ultimately included 50,000 supporters from more than 50 countries.

This writing was often, though not always, collaborative, and distributed among a shifting and largely unstructured collective. For instance, the Kids' Committee held monthly meetings at a pizza restaurant in Albuquerque; the meetings were advertised in the Albuquerque *Journal* and open to interested students from any school. As a consequence, even when significant decisions were being made (such as where to place the imagined statue or how to advertise their project more widely), the project's leadership shifted as students participated with greater and lesser degrees of frequency. It was at the first such meeting that the Kids' Committee formed and identified themselves, and those in attendance signed their names to a public letter that ultimately circulated quite broadly as a collective statement, although several of the students who signed (and presumably helped to compose) this initial statement did not sustain their involvement over the longer lifespan of the project, replaced by others who became active at subsequent points.

Participants' memories of such collaborative writing processes were largely hazy. Two of the participants I interviewed recalled working together with other students to plan how the group would speak to the Los Alamos County Council for what turned out to be the final time, and one of these participants noted that there was “some conflict over what to say,” but she did not recall how that conflict was resolved. Another interviewee suggested that the age of the participants provided a kind of leadership structure, noting that kids' participation varied with age, as younger students graduated from “setting goals, selling t-shirts, maybe talking to reporters” to “when you're older ... getting events going, teaching kids to fold cranes.”

As a consequence, identifying the specific contributions of individuals, or even the precise nature of the collaborative writing practices that the collective engaged in, is difficult to do with any precision roughly twenty years after the fact. Although ample archival materials remain, these nevertheless reveal little about the way in which the participants divided the project's labor or how students interacted with adults in their collaborative writing. Indeed, the archival documents themselves, such as the two versions of donation forms (among several employed over the course of the project) in Figures 2 and 3, underscore the diffuse nature of the distributed writing that characterized the project, as these documents largely lack clear authorship yet circulated broadly and contributed to the coalition-building and fund-raising efforts that statue supporters emphasized.

CHILDREN'S PEACE STATUE PROJECT

Please help us collect the signatures of children (and optional small donations) for the Children's Peace Statue. This project was started in 1991 by a group of children in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The names of all participating children will be read at the dedication of this statue August 1995.

"I want to see peace in the world, and I sign my name below to help the Children's Peace Statue project be a dream come true."

<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>City and State</u>
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____
6. _____	_____	_____
7. _____	_____	_____
8. _____	_____	_____
9. _____	_____	_____
10. _____	_____	_____
11. _____	_____	_____
12. _____	_____	_____
13. _____	_____	_____
14. _____	_____	_____
15. _____	_____	_____
16. _____	_____	_____
17. _____	_____	_____
18. _____	_____	_____
19. _____	_____	_____

<p>GOAL <i>The Participation of One Million American Children</i></p>	<p>Mail signature sheet to: CHILDREN'S PEACE STATUE P.O. BOX 12888 Albuquerque, New Mexico 87195 Tel: 505-255-1509 • Fax: 505-256-0071</p>
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Figure 2. Donation Form, 1994

FROM KIDS TO KIDS . . . FROM SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES . . . FROM WAR TO PEACE . . . FROM HIROSHIMA TO LOS ALAMOS . . . HAND IN HAND . . . HEART TO HEART . . .

Yes!

I want to be an original shareholder in the Children's Peace Statue. Read my name at the dedication of the statue and give me credit for helping bring peace to the world.

NAME _____ AGE _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

YES! I have given my dollar(s) to _____

FROM KIDS TO KIDS . . . FROM SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES . . . FROM WAR TO PEACE . . . FROM HIROSHIMA TO LOS ALAMOS . . . HAND IN HAND . . . HEART TO HEART . . .

Figure 3. Donation Card, 1995

The material nature of the statue necessitated a coalition of supporters, especially insofar as student supporters envisioned a statue that would speak for, and articulate the hopes of, children around the world. For instance, the Five-Year Plan students developed created a framework for their efforts both to generate a public invested in their project and to assemble the (financial, material, and symbolic) resources necessary to construct the statue (Figure 4). Although in retrospect the aim of promoting world peace may appear naïve or unrealistic, I want to emphasize the way the concrete and material aims in the Five Year Plan strongly oriented the variety of writing, speaking, and communicating they undertook and organized that activity specifically along a distributed model of public action. As the Five Year Plan demonstrates, even the most idealistic of 4th graders would not imagine that the handful of students currently gathered in the classroom would be sufficient to fund, design, build, and dedicate a statue; consequently the work of *creating* a public took precedence early on, and that work demanded both visible, “heroic” activity—such as staging a march to a bank to deposit the first funds raised for the statue—as well as more mundane and distributed writing.

FIVE YEAR GOALS

- 1990 Kids tell other kids in New Mexico**
- 1991 Tell kids in all 50 states - reach out to the world**
- 1992 Collect models and designs**
- 1993 Select site and model/design**
- 1994 Begin construction**
- 1995 Dedicate finished monument, August 6, 1995**

Figure 4. Five Year Plan, reprinted in *The Crane*, 1991

Considering the peace statue project in relation to the heroic narrative of social change that Rivers and Weber, Sarah Hallenbeck, and others have critiqued, we see a complex, partial embrace of that heroic model: in some ways, supporters' hopes for the statue imbue it with unrealistic, unified power. For instance, an early flyer announced, "By this action, we are saying NO to war. The Berlin Wall came down. Barriers between people must come down. We want to be friends with the children of our parents' enemies." Supporters hoped that the names and voices of "a million children for peace" would operate collectively to compose a single statement, in the form of the statue, that would, in the parlance of the times, "make a peaceful future for our world" (Flyer, 1990).

Yet the statue, imagined as a heroic text, was also a kind of statement that would be impossible for a single author to compose. Because they sought to create a durable, material utterance, students necessarily attended to questions related to distributed action: who would design the statue? By what process would the design competition be conducted, and who would determine the winning design? How could various perspectives be fairly represented in collectively composing the statue as a statement of peace? Who would fabricate the statue, and how could children contribute to the statue's fabrication, installation, and maintenance—especially over the many years it was expected to persist beyond the moment of the dedication? What institutions, organizations, or individuals did the students need to address to accomplish their plan to give the statue as a gift to the city of Los Alamos—who speaks for "Los Alamos," and how could they be best persuaded? The students' attentiveness to these concerns reflects not only the scope of their ambitions but also their embrace of process-based mechanisms for generating publicity, legitimation, and sustained participation that Gogan advocates.

The process they ultimately developed aimed to compose the statue collaboratively, by distributing ownership and agency in myriad ways—among a variety of "texts, writers, readers, institutions, objects, and histor[ies]" (189), as Rivers and Weber outline. For instance, to solicit designs, they made use of the already-available infrastructure of a national organization, the American Institute of Architects, who helped the students reach potential student designers across the country by inviting state chapters of the AIA to solicit and select designs from schools within their state (Figure 5). From these designs, AIA chapters also helped sixteen student finalists create three-dimensional models, which featured each student's original drawing, the student's explanatory statement about the design, and a handmade maquette. These sixteen finalist designs were shipped to and exhibited in Los Alamos; after the winning design was selected, these maquettes constituted a traveling exhibit that circulated to libraries and public schools around the country for further fundraising. The selection process was designed both to generate an invested public and to legitimate the design as authentically speaking for a broad collective: the Kids' Committee assembled a jury of seven "youth judges" from different regions of the country and seven "adult judges" representing different stakeholder groups, including "an artist, a veteran, an educator, an architect, a peacemaker, and members of the Los Alamos community" (Letter, 12 Apr. 1994). Certainly adults were crucial elements in the network of public support the Kids' Committee sought to develop, not only insofar as adults were required to drive kids to meetings and events but also strategically, as powerful potential partners in the work of designing and fabricating a statue. Furthermore, the event of the judging, in May 1994, was staged for utmost publicity: the judges were flown to Albuquerque, hosted by the families of members of the Kids' Committee, and bussed to Los Alamos to tour eight potential statue sites, to meet with members of the Los Alamos County Council, to judge the finalist designs, and to participate in publicity events at the Bradbury Science museum, where Los Alamos' Art in Public Places Board hosted a reception and the Kids'

Committee organized a news conference to announce the winning design. Clearly, the students working to compose the peace statue were attentive to the necessity of legitimating their writing in relation to larger collectives and were willing to “risk complicity” (Rivers and Weber 191) by working alongside official institutions to increase the likelihood of their discourse achieving its desired effect.



- Contest open to all school-aged youth.
- Entries due between January 1 and February 1, 1993.
- Two final designs will be chosen from each state.
- Winning design will be constructed in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and dedicated August 6, 1995.

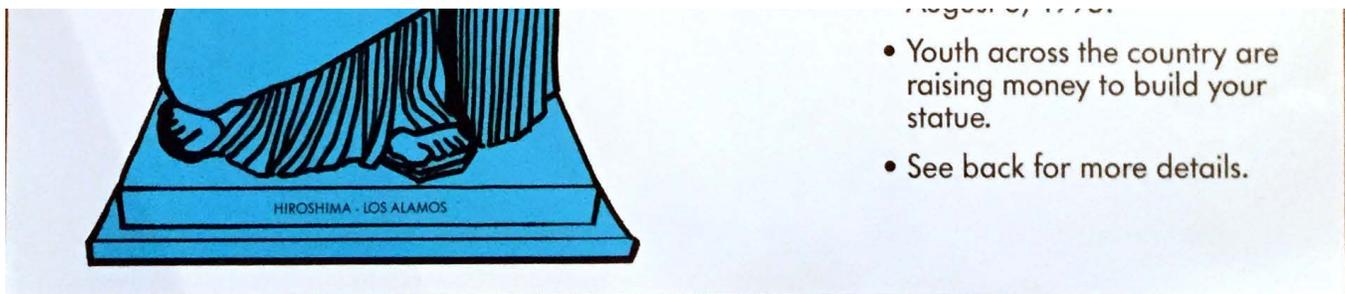


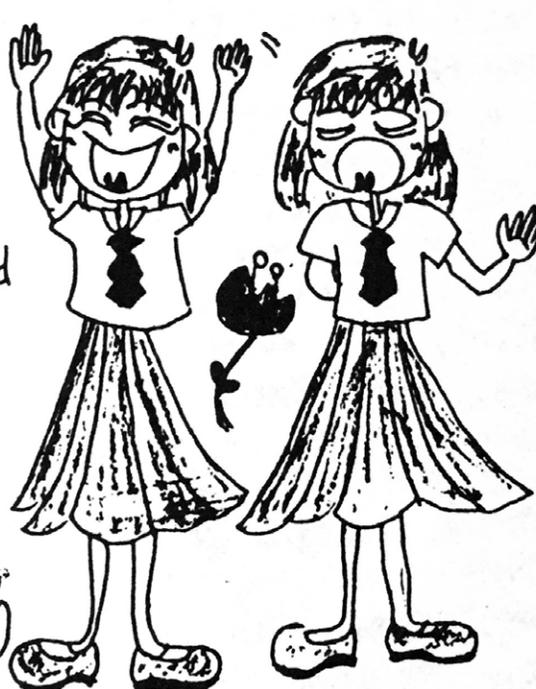
Figure 5. Flyer soliciting statue designs, 1992

Students may have been willing to “risk complicity” in part because their goal was not to place the statue as a protest but to *integrate* it materially and institutionally into the physical and symbolic space of Los Alamos; again, the material nature of the project moved students toward a distributed notion of public action as they attempted to fold specific local stakeholders in Los Alamos into their effort. This required reckoning with decidedly non-heroic, bureaucratic forms of writing, as they determined who—what institutions, composed of what individuals—had the authority to accept a statue envisioned as a gift to the city, and as they subsequently participated in Los Alamos County Council meetings by preparing presentations, reports, and impromptu public addresses in response to the Council’s deliberations and decisions. They also had to expand the network of meaningful participants in the project as they considered which specific adults in Los Alamos could become significant allies. They wrote, for instance, to invite Sig Hecker, a former director of Los Alamos National Labs, to serve as an Honorary Advisor to the project, and reprinted his letter accepting the role in *The Crane*, signaling their recognition that making an ally out of a possible antagonist could be a rhetorically effective strategy.

Finally, because of their determination to compose the statue as a *collective*, international statement, students involved in this project devoted the preponderance of their persuasive efforts toward the work of building a public that would share their desire to speak through the statue. This public-building work is evident in the flyers and donation forms that students circulated to promote the project, in which, for instance, students who contribute their name and a dollar toward the project are cast as “shareholders” in the statue (See [Figure 3](#)). It is also evident in issues of *The Crane*, which circulated broadly and featured the drawings, poetry, photographs, fundraising ideas, and narratives of students who had written to the Kids’ Committee in support of the project (See [Figures 6](#) and [7](#)). The Kids’ Committee itself constituted a shifting and dispersed form of ownership over the project, including children of wide-ranging ages who moved into and out of positions of leadership over time. Originally 36 kids who attended the first out-of-class meeting in late February 1990, where a flyer announcing the project was drafted and signed, the membership of this group remained unstable and shifting over the long-term life of the project; some original members moved away or changed schools, while others who were not part of the original Kids’ Committee became deeply involved in subsequent years. Although a few long-term student leaders and adult advisors provided a degree of stability, the distributed structure of the “committee,” as well as their ambitious conception of the public that the statue would speak for, required students involved in this project to confront one of the major challenges of grassroots organizing—that is, persuading a shifting collective to invest time and energy toward ends that might not be realized for some time.



I am a high school student.
私は高校生です
I'm looking forward to your letter.



Don't want war
戦争を止めたい
We must give up war.
私たちは戦争を放棄
しなくてはなりません
Japan has renounced
war forever.
日本は戦争を永久に
放棄した

NAME Mizuki Takeuchi



Figure 6. Reprinted letter and drawing, *The Crane*, 1991

guests who act as the hotel manager desires. Most powerfully, Latour argues, the hotel manager can create a technological object that will materialize the statement more strongly and thus increase adherence to his desire among the majority of hotel guests: he can attach a cumbersome, permanent, and weighty object to the key, such that disobeying the injunction to “leave your hotel key at the front desk when you leave” becomes more onerous than complying with it. Through such material means, the hotel manager has loaded the original statement with considerable force, creating a technological object—a bulky key fob—that operates with greater strength than the merely social force of “Please” (“Technology is Society Made Durable,” 104-110).

The power of material objects, institutions, spaces, and structures to materialize social relations and to *load* utterances in this way is one of the key insights that Latour’s work—and the work of theorists of posthumanism and new materialism more generally—has contributed to rhetoric and writing studies over the past decade. As Casey Boyle and Scot Barnett have argued, introducing their recent collection *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*, “things both occasion rhetorical action and act as suasive rhetorical forces” (2). Similarly, as Richard Marback argued in “Unclenching the Fist: Giving Objects Their Due,” “objects take up space and our bodies are our space. The space of our bodies moves around, away from, toward, sometime with, and even through objects in space. Certainly we realize our intentions toward objects only in these embodied encounters with them. At the same time objects in these encounters materialize an agency independent of our intentions toward them” (57). That is, not only can rhetors deliberately load statements with persuasive force through acts of materialization, as Latour outlines, but objects—and spaces, environments, the material world more broadly—retain a degree of recalcitrance in relation to human agency; in Marback’s terms, neither humans nor objects “get to relinquish their agency so easily” (57). It is this awareness of recalcitrance and durability that has made feminist investigations of material rhetoric so fruitful in recent years, as feminist scholars have investigated how gender, race, disability and other pervasive social systems are materialized through complex arrangements among objects, environments, institutions, bodies, and symbolic and discursive activity. As Jordynn Jack notes, “It is not only ideas or beliefs that must change, but also material arrangements of bodies, spaces, and times” (300). The deeply material way in which spatial arrangements, embodied practices, and technological (and other) objects operate to maintain systems of inequality contributes to the recalcitrance and durability of inequality.

In advocating for materially oriented public writing projects, I aim to address the longstanding concern of public writing scholars with notions of *efficacy* by taking up and extending Gogan’s insight that we should reconceive of *efficacy* as sustained participation. What might be further valuable about a turn toward materiality, and the commitment to distributed action that it necessitates, is that it helps scholars and teachers move away from an entrenched success/failure model of public action. That is, not only did the student writers working on behalf of the statue sustain participation as they worked across several years to create a statue, but the statue itself operates as an agent in this model, sustaining (other kinds of) participation, generating meanings (in excess of individuals’ intentions), and coalescing new publics in new ways across time. Granting agency to the statue as an object means acknowledging that it retains a capacity to make meaning and to generate effects that exceeds the desires or intentions of its original creators, however complex and contradictory those might have been.

Durability is key to the agential force the statue exerts—both within the moment of its creation and beyond. During the controversy, as Los Alamos residents and councilors argued against accepting the statue as originally planned, the material fact of the statue—its capacity to take up space in the city of Los Alamos, its very durability—seemed to threaten concerned residents of Los Alamos with a loss of control over longstanding narratives regarding the importance and benevolence of their community. For instance, Councilor Greenwood, who ultimately opposed the statue, worried at a public meeting in November 1994 that the statue could become a rallying point for anti-nuclear protests, marches, and demonstrations in the future, and asked the peace advocates in the room to promise not to use the statue for such demonstrations (LACC Minutes, 21 Nov. 1994, 9). A Los Alamos resident in the audience amplified this concern, reminding the audience that “there are no guarantees that people are going to use the site” in the peaceful ways the Kids’ Committee recommends (LACC Minutes, 21 Nov. 1994, 11). In another heated public meeting in February 1995, Greenwood emphasized the statue as a material “‘soap box’ for people to come to Los Alamos to speak general opposition to what the community has believed over the years” (LACC Minutes, 13 Feb. 1995, 12). Other Councilors sought to exercise control over any wording that might be part of the statue, and asked for reassurance that, as a “donation to the County of Los Alamos,” the statue “could be removed” in the future if the Council so desired (LACC Minutes, 21 Nov. 1994, 9). Two members of the Art in Public Places Board, which was meant to be working with the Kids’ Committee to locate a site for the statue, spoke at length to urge the Council “to secure [for Los Alamos] the sole and final jurisdiction over the wording on the commemorative plaque which will be placed on the sculpture,” as well as to retain control over the date of the statue’s dedication, to attempt to counteract associations with Hiroshima (LACC Minutes, 21 Nov. 1994, 12). The agency of the statue in these exchanges is quite striking, prompting significant anxiety even among residents who didn’t question the motives or intentions of the individual children supporters gathered in the room. The anxiety evident in these reactions reflects the stakes attached to Los Alamos’ cherished self-understanding as “having played a large part in ending a very tragic war”

(LACC Minutes, 16 Nov. 1992, 4), but also reflects specific fears tied to the power of objects to act as agents: the statue, if accepted, would occupy material space in the town and, through its durability, could generate unforeseen uses and meanings in the future.

In this way a material orientation in public writing pedagogy, by grappling with the agency of objects to generate effects in excess of individual intentions, can also help to upend a too-common focus on success and failure. Specifically, the objects created through materially oriented public writing projects might productively unsettle the narratives of success or failure that too easily shape our retrospective accounts of prior rhetorical activity, as Sarah Hallenbeck has argued. Although Hallenbeck focuses on sanctioned narratives of prior women rhetors as either heroic agents of change or failed and tragic figures of social constraint, her insight regarding the power of distributed, posthuman models of agency holds value for our thinking about public writing projects as well, which in our classrooms, if not in the pages of our journals, are subject to perpetual scrutiny regarding whether or not the change they aim for has “succeeded.” Like feminist rhetorical history, public writing projects can be more usefully evaluated along alternative lines.

In a success/failure model, the statue was built—a success—but rejected from its intended location in Los Alamos—a failure. Yet by considering the statue’s *durability* and employing Gogan’s framework to see efficacy as *sustained participation*, we can productively shift temporal frames, thus revealing the ways in which the material orientation of the project and the materiality of the statue itself both help to sustain participation, extend the scope of action for distributed participants, and register the more complex ways in which the statue, now itself an agent in the regional symbolic ecology of northern New Mexico, has continued to make meaning in relation to Los Alamos. Following the Los Alamos County Council’s final rejection of the statue early in 1995, the Albuquerque Museum offered to provide a location for the dedication, even as many supporters of the project persisted in hoping that the statue could be located in Los Alamos eventually, either on private land or through a renewed effort to petition the County Council. The statue was eventually installed at Plaza Resolana, a conference center in Santa Fe, where it remained for many years and served as the primary site for annual Peace Day demonstrations in Santa Fe that drew large, international crowds. Promotional materials and news coverage of Peace Day demonstrations routinely referred to the Children’s Peace Statue as “intended for Los Alamos”—an indication that the County Council’s decision to reject the statue did not in fact forestall the statue’s ability to generate meanings in relation to their community. Likewise, an exhibit about the Children’s Peace Statue at the Anderson-Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum in 2011 featured the maquettes of the sixteen finalist designs and recounted the Kids’ Committee’s efforts to place the statue in Los Alamos, concluding with a reiteration of supporters’ hope that the statue will eventually be located in Los Alamos. This framing was repeated when the statue was rededicated at the Balloon Museum in Albuquerque in 2015, as promotional material surrounding the dedication and material signage at the rededication site reiterated an open temporal framework, in which the statue could eventually arrive at its intended destination. Not only does the statue, through its nomadic movement across the region, come to materialize Los Alamos’ antagonism to the project; but viewed through a posthuman framework, each of these ongoing events (of demonstration, rededication, reference) extends the duration of the project and generates the unanticipated meanings and uses that Los Alamos opponents feared. New materialist approaches, especially the distributed form of agency they advocate, can provide a productive focus for our public writing projects: namely, the creation and circulation of materials that share agency with humans, institutions, and publics.

Embodied Experiences, Durable Effects

In addition to tracing how the peace statue itself has operated as an ongoing agent in the creation of meanings throughout the region, I have also sought in this analysis to understand how the material orientation of the peace statue project might have reverberated in the lives of the specific students who helped to bring the statue into being in the early 1990s. Consequently, I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews (over video call and in person) with three of the original student members of the Kids’ Committee for Peace.^{2} In these retrospective interviews, I sought to learn what role this early experience may have played in the participants’ later writing and literacy experiences.^{3}

The responses of these participants reinforce my claims, above, concerning reverberating effects related to the distributed and material orientation of the project. All three respondents reflected on what they understood as the ambitious temporal and spatial scale of the project—the number of people involved, the range of ages among the supporters, and the challenge of planning over a five-year period. For instance, Nathan Miller, discussing the Five Year Plan as the organizing framework for the Kids’ Committee’s activities, emphasized the way in which the meaning of such a span of time was heightened by the ages of the children involved. He was struck, he recalled, by the impossibility of anticipating, as a ten-year-old, “who I would even *be*” five years later. Breanna Young, likewise, recalled how striking the differences in students’ ages appeared to the students themselves; as one of the youngest

participants—only twelve when the statue was dedicated in 1995, some five or six years younger than other leaders in the project—Young noted the awe she felt for the high school leaders, and how privileged she felt to have opportunities to represent the project on public occasions.

All three respondents also commented on the expansive spatial scope of the project, as it not only drew together supporters from sixty countries but also forged significant and sustained connections to far-flung locales. Such spatial connections were formed in myriad material ways: through exchanges of letters and donations with supporters around the globe, of course, but perhaps most significantly through the practice of groups of supporters who assembled and mailed chains of one thousand folded paper cranes, which arrived at the project from groups of supporters worldwide, and which figured prominently in public events the Kids' Committee held to promote the project. The weight and size of such strands of cranes should not be discounted. Each individual crane would take only a few minutes to fold, but it took sustained effort on the part of many individuals to assemble a strand of one thousand cranes, and each strand took up considerable space—roughly a 3' x 3' box would be required to ship each strand of one thousand cranes to the Kids' Committee mailbox in Albuquerque. At the time of the dedication in 1995, although the Kids' Committee had not received the million names they originally sought to collect, they *had* received more than a million folded paper cranes from supporters worldwide.^[4] Such links formed material as well as symbolic connections between project leaders in Albuquerque and Los Alamos and the supporters they sought to engage with worldwide. Additional spatial connections occurred through the media coverage of the project; Young and Elizabeth Lawson both recalled their experiences speaking on the phone and in person with journalists reporting on the project or on the controversy it spurred in Los Alamos, and Miller recalled that the Kids' Committee was shadowed for several weeks by a documentary film crew from Japan, who profiled the project and sent him a VHS recording of the final news feature that aired in Japan.

In interviews, participants marveled at the opportunities for travel their engagement in the project afforded them. Lawson traveled to a peace conference in Seattle on behalf of the group when she was fourteen, with an adult advisor and several other Kids' Committee members, and she and Nathan Miller traveled to Hiroshima on behalf of the project to speak to audiences numbering tens of thousands at a peace conference on the 50th anniversary of the bombing. Such experiences were, as might be expected, deeply memorable, and Lawson and Miller both spoke at length about the embodied experience of speaking before such enormous crowds—“a *stadium* full of people” (Lawson)—as well as speaking through translators for the first time and participating in highly formal meetings with, for instance, the Mayor of Hiroshima and with other international peace activists in attendance. Even the distance between Los Alamos and Albuquerque—roughly 2 hours by car—was memorable to participants, who recalled long drives to Los Alamos and late nights returning from the evening meetings of the County Council.

As the above instances illustrate, respondents' memories of their work with the project center on material objects, spatial locations, and embodied experiences. Participants recalled, for instance, the embodied experiences of marching to a bank, holding peace signs, to deposit the first funds raised for the project and collecting donations in the nose cone of a missile. The Los Alamos County Council meetings, which were highly-charged occasions, the room packed with vocal opponents, served as a dramatic backdrop for Lawson, who, as a fourteen-year-old, was heckled and shouted down during the contentious 1995 meeting. Recounting the meeting, Lawson reflected that it was her “first time speaking in any sort of political context, and it was an intense one. It wasn't some cutesy kid project, they were pissed.” As adults in the audience yelled to prevent her from speaking, Lawson recalls, “I remember just not knowing what to do. I didn't finish, I just sort of [stuttered] and sat down.”

The statue itself was, of course, a key and memorable object, but in the years during which it was being imagined, designed, debated, and finally assembled, other objects also figured as centrally important. Numerous t-shirts, for instance, were designed, printed, and sold for fundraising over the years, and supporters wore these to public events to amplify the visibility of their project. As objects, the t-shirts also manifested the distributed network of participants; for instance Young, recalling the pride she felt at being involved in the project, notes “we had all of these t-shirts that had a paper crane image on them. I would see people wearing them, ... fellow students wearing them, that had bought them at a school fundraiser, and I felt like ... *That's my project*, that's a thing that I do and you're here and you're wearing my t-shirt ... so [there was] a real ownership around that.” We see in this recollection how the t-shirts materialized the way in which the project extended beyond the individuals most directly involved, as the project was taken up by a distributed network and appeared in visible form on others' bodies.

Among the embodied experiences and materials objects recalled by my three respondents, the perpetual activity of folding paper cranes resonated strongly across their memories. Many of the public events staged by the Kids' Committee included teaching others how to fold paper cranes, a Japanese symbol of peace. (See [Figure 8](#).) All three respondents mentioned, unprompted, that they still teach others to fold cranes and find this activity provides ongoing occasions for talking to others about their earlier involvement with the Children's Peace Statue. As Young explained, “I also remember folding paper cranes, like, all the time. I kind of feel like actually everything ... I have this memory of

everything that happens, happens in conjunction with folding paper cranes. There was never a time you weren't folding paper cranes." Lawson, too, recounted how this embodied practice, which had been so central to her engagement with the project, had persisted over time: "we have a little boy down the block who's really into origami and I was like, *Oh, let me show you what I can do*. I made him some cranes and my son was like 'Why do you know how to do that?' and so it went into a whole discussion of this thing I had done in elementary school, how I wasn't much older than him and we had this idea [for the peace statue]." As these recollections emphasize, the repeated, embodied activity of folding cranes, which formed a kind of node of activity and exchange across the duration of the project, persists far beyond even that original five-year scope; in the present, this embodied activity continues to provide the occasion for Lawson to reenact the teaching she participated in as a high-school student and to re-narrate her involvement in the project to her own children.



Figure 8. Kids' Committee member demonstrating how to fold a paper crane

Conclusion: Material Orientations for Public Writing Pedagogy

An ecological, material perspective on public writing asks: What objects will be created? What kinds of participation will they sustain? Where will they live? How will they operate alongside and beyond the intentions of human actors? How will they extend the reach of the collective who have labored to materialize the object, construct its setting, or constrain its meaning? In this essay, I have sought to investigate the generative potential of new materialist and posthumanist concepts as a frame for public writing projects, spurred by the artifacts and remembered literacy experiences generated by the Children's Peace Statue project in the early 1990s and onward. A materialist orientation toward public writing pedagogy reminds us to shift our temporal scale toward long-term networks, assessments, and efforts to sustain participation, even when such a shift challenges the semester-long or year-long duration that often defines our scope in the classroom.

Even within the shorter temporal scope of the college writing classroom, teachers can attend, I believe, to the lessons this study offers regarding the durable effects of public writing projects. These effects might be most vividly

evident in the reflections of my interview participants regarding the embodied practices that made certain literacy experiences indelible even twenty years later. The statue they created remained memorable, of course, but so did the habitual practices of folding cranes, selling t-shirts, and opening letters from supporters, and the more heightened experiences of attending charged public meetings, traveling to other cities, speaking to reporters, and organizing large public events to celebrate the conclusion of their collective, long-term work. Embodied experiences linger. Writing teachers might pause to consider: what embodied experiences will students associate with writing in our classrooms? What routine embodied behaviors will connect students to their writing over the long term, and what more dramatic or intense writing events will persist for them? It seems possible to me that a writing classroom that primarily focuses on *genres* or *documents* – even when these are publicly oriented—misses an opportunity to provide students with powerful, embodied associations with writing as a collective, public endeavor. For instance, can the daily or weekly writing practices we engage students in mimic the repetitive, shared behavior of folding paper cranes—an act of concentration, manual dexterity, and shared learning, operating almost as a ritual to ground engagement and learning in repeated bodily practice? Likewise, what scenes of encounter are available to students in our courses—or what opportunities could we help them construct—for engaging intensely with audiences or for moving into unfamiliar situations of exchange, even as we hope such scenes unfold more civilly than the emotionally charged County Council meetings that my interview participants recalled?

I invite writing teachers to consider these questions in part because I was myself struck by the extent to which my interviewees could scarcely recall whether or what they had written for the project. For instance, when asked about what writing he had done for the project, Nathan Miller equivocated: “There’s a good chance I have some writing in *The Crane*. ... I don’t have memories of *composing an essay for The Crane*.” Breanna Young likewise strongly remembered talking with journalists, talking with fabricators, and participating in the design charette, but could recall no specific piece of writing she contributed to, even as she believed she had probably written letters or other documents during the project. This was the case even as other dimensions of their involvement with the Peace Statue project remained vivid—even central to their intellectual identities—two decades later. Consequently, even as I recognize that the temporal limits of college classrooms may seem like a barrier to enacting the long-term model of sustained public writing I offer here, I invite writing teachers to consider whether we might revise any of our more mundane classroom practices to create more sustained opportunities for either ritualized, repetitive acts of writing or for dramatic and memorable scenes for writing to create these kinds of durable effects.

The Children’s Peace Statue offered a durable site of literacy formation, I have argued, in part because of the complex effects activated through its materiality and the way consideration of that materiality prompted the distributed, long-term, sustained writing practices of the middle- and high-school students who brought the statue into existence. Those effects continue. Even in 2017, the statue occupies space, requires a location, acts through its enduring material presence in both expected and unexpected ways. Breanna Young’s reflections on the statue brought this ongoing, unfinished quality home to me, as she recalled the deep feeling of disillusionment and defeat that she and other participants experienced when the statue was rejected by the Los Alamos County Council for the final time:

I remember there being a really strong attachment to Los Alamos, as the place that the statue belonged, and that the feeling that Los Alamos didn’t want it felt like they rejected our message, you know, our message of peace across continents, and so I think that when the Albuquerque Museum decided that they wanted it, I think it was bittersweet. It was positive that we got a home for it, [but] I also remember it always being accepted as temporary... [That] someday we’ll get it to Los Alamos. And well I just think, now, I don’t know that the location matters as much. That it’s more the spirit of it, and that New Mexico carries with it a whole history of military testing outside of just Los Alamos and so I think that it resonates probably around the state in a different way.

The contrast Young draws here, between participants’ felt sense of failure in 1995 and her more recent understanding of the capacity of the Children’s Peace Statue to make new meanings as it “resonates ... around the state” in relation to a wider, regional history of nuclear testing, reflects the potential I see in materially oriented public writing pedagogies: to generate rippling, unforeseeable, and nevertheless durable effects in the lives, spaces, and literacies of the students who engage them.

Appendix: Video Call and Face-to-Face Interview Questionnaire

Section 1: Memories of involvement with the Children’s Peace Statue Project

What are your strongest **memories** associated with the Children’s Peace Statue Project?

When did you first learn about the project? When did you become involved? Do you recall how the project began?

What was your role in the project? What do you recall doing?

Do you recall working closely with any other particular students or adults? Whom?

What kinds of **writing** did you contribute to the project? Did you write for *The Crane* newsletter? Did you contribute to any press releases, flyers, or other kinds of writing?

Did you **speak publicly** about the project at any press conferences, churches, schools, libraries, or other venues? What do you recall about these occasions?

What were your feelings about the project leading up to the dedication of the statue? After the dedication?

What seemed most important to you about your involvement with the project?

Section 2: Later Writing Experiences

Did your involvement with the project influence any of your later academic work, such as your decision about where to go to college or what to study in college?

Did your involvement with the project create any strong associations for you, either positive or negative, related to writing or public speaking? Related to activism or public advocacy?

Do you recall speaking with others about the project in the years after your involvement ended? When, and in what contexts, did you tell others about the project?

Do you see your involvement in the Children's Peace Statue Project playing any role in your schooling, work, hobbies, or other kinds of community involvement?

Do you see yourself now as an activist? As a writer? Did this experience play any role in these developing identities for you?

Notes

1. See Applegarth, "Children Speaking," for further discussion of the local and national press coverage devoted to Los Alamos' decision not to accept the peace statue as a gift from children around the world. ([Return to text.](#))
2. After receiving IRB approval for this study, I contacted a total of six individuals who had participated in the project as children; four responded, and three agreed to be interviewed. Interviews lasted between forty and fifty minutes, and were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Although the identities of the Kids' Committee members and project supporters are in many cases a matter of public record, available in published news stories and records of the Los Alamos County Council meetings, I use pseudonyms below to protect the confidentiality of the individuals who spoke with me. ([Return to text.](#))
3. IRB approval from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, received 30 November 2016; see Interview Questionnaire in [Appendix](#). ([Return to text.](#))
4. They received 1,015,000 cranes by August 1995, in strands of 1000, many of which festooned the statue during the month-long dedication. ([Return to text.](#))

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Return to [Composition Forum 36 table of contents](#).