Take It to the Streets: Archives, Open Records, and Public Rhetoric

Jessica A. Estep

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TAKE IT TO THE STREETS: ARCHIVES, OPEN RECORDS, AND PUBLIC RHETORIC

by

JESSICA ESTEP

Under the Direction of Ashley Holmes, PhD

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the public comments citizens submit to local government agencies and how those agencies, in turn, interpret these texts to make policy decisions. The central case study traces the processes a statewide government agency—the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT)—undertook to solicit citizen feedback about a major public works project and analyzes the thousands of comments that GDOT received in response. Based upon this case study, the author argues that rhetoric and composition scholars have a responsibility to encourage transparency in public engagement processes by working directly with government agencies.

INDEX WORDS: Public rhetoric, Archival research, Civic engagement, Community literacy
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by

JESSICA ESTEP

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Georgia State University

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TAKE IT TO THE STREETS: ARCHIVES, OPEN RECORDS, AND PUBLIC RHETORIC

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ......................................................................................................................... XII

1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 13

2 ESTABLISHING THE STREETS AS A MATERIAL, PUBLIC SPACE FOR RHETORICAL INQUIRY ................................................................................................................................. 16

   2.1 The importance of publics and going public ............................................................................. 20
   2.2 Spatial metaphors for publics: The streets .............................................................................. 24
   2.3 Publics are changing, permeating, and mobile ...................................................................... 26
   2.4 The “public turn” meets the “argumentative turn” ................................................................. 35
   2.5 Creating “Complete Streets” .................................................................................................... 37
   2.6 The case study ........................................................................................................................ 39

3 OPEN RECORDS AS AN ARCHIVAL RESEARCH SPACE ......................................................... 44

   3.1 Defining “open records” and “sunshine laws” ...................................................................... 47
   3.2 Challenging quantitative readings of public comments ......................................................... 50
   3.3 How I accessed open records .................................................................................................. 58
   3.4 Open records research: Digital and democratizing ............................................................... 61
   3.5 Open records as a complement to existing archives ............................................................. 66

4 HOW A PUBLIC AGENCY “READS” PUBLIC COMMENTS .................................................... 69

   4.1 GDOT’s frameworks for the public engagement process ....................................................... 71
   4.2 Reading public comments is reading customer comments .................................................. 78
4.3 The categorization of public comments .......................................................... 81
4.4 How GDOT tallies comments ........................................................................ 88
4.5 The lack of exigency for supporters ............................................................... 95
4.6 A deeper examination of how comments are counted as votes .................. 103
4.7 Public comments: Does location matter? ..................................................... 110
4.8 Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 113

5 UNPACKING PUBLICS AND NARRATIVES WITHIN PUBLIC COMMENTS

5.1 A note on my methodology ........................................................................... 117
5.2 Historical frameworks around Peachtree Road ........................................... 118
5.3 Invoking financial status as symbolic ........................................................... 130
5.4 You bike it, you buy it .................................................................................. 134
5.5 Streets: Part of the community or partitioning the community? .............. 141
5.6 Further divisions in the streets .................................................................... 152
5.7 The multiple definitions of “safety” ............................................................. 156
5.8 Conclusion ..................................................................................................... 163

6 ENGAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS THROUGH POLICY-FOCUSED INITIATIVES: PEDAGOGICAL AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS .......... 166

6.1 Partnering with local governments ............................................................... 169
6.2 Focus on public policy and interdisciplinarity ............................................ 172
6.3 Public pedagogy ................................................................. 175
6.4 Suggestions for pedagogical and scholarly application ............... 178
6.5 Implications for future research............................................ 184
6.6 Conclusion ........................................................................ 185

WORKS CITED.............................................................................. 188

APPENDICES............................................................................... 201

Appendix A: GDOT’s Categorization of Public Comments .................... 201
Appendix B: GDOT’s Comment Card.................................................. 203
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. An image of Peachtree Road as of December 2016, from Curbed Atlanta.................. 40

Figure 2. GDOT’s proposed redesign of that section of the road........................................... 41

Figure 3. Photo credit, Henry Taylor, AJC.com ................................................................. 64

Figure 4. “Buckhead Streets in 1949”: Atlanta Journal Constitution, via the Atlanta Journal Constitution Photographic Archive. Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Georgia. ....... 129
1 INTRODUCTION

What follows in this dissertation is an analysis of how community input through public comments leads to changes to a community’s public spaces, and particularly the streets. Specifically, I examine a case study in which bike lanes were proposed for a section of Peachtree Road in Atlanta and subsequently removed following an onslaught of public comments. My desire to study this particular case study is a direct result of my relationship to both bicycling and the city, and so in this preface, I want to explain both of those relationships so that readers can keep in mind my subjective perspective within this work as they read it.

First of all, my interest in writing about the rhetorical histories of transportation and civic engagement in Atlanta is not happenstance. I am an engaged citizen in Atlanta, active in local nonprofit work, neighborhood organizations, and political activism. In addition, I am an avid bicyclist, and I believe strongly that bicycling can contribute to cities and communities in myriad ways: by encouraging citizens to exercise, as a form of cheap and sustainable transportation, and for fun. When I heard that the Georgia Department of Transportation had planned and then abruptly removed a bike lane on Peachtree Road following the receipt of two thousand public comments, the bicyclist within me was angry—and the researcher within me was curious. Why did these public comments lead a government agency to completely shift course? What on earth did they say? So, to answer my curiosity, I accessed the public comments, and I began reading through them; my discoveries are laid out in the chapters that follow. My initial anger about the discarded project has largely subsided, and I am able to see why the decision was made to forgo the bike lanes, though I still do not fully agree with that decision. In this dissertation, I do not offer a particular solution to whether the bike lanes should or should not be there, and in fact, my interest in the bike lanes themselves has faded. Now, my interest is in the how of public
comments: not what do they say, but how are they interpreted? How can public rhetoric lead
government agencies to make decisions that shape public spaces? These are questions that I seek
to answer in the following chapters.

In addition to my love of bicycling, I have a love of Atlanta, and I sought to build a
framework through which to understand the current publics’ perspectives on transportation and
their city. I spent significant time reading through the archives at Georgia State University to
understand the kinds of transportation plans government officials have been making for the past
several decades—with public input and without—in order to frame the Peachtree Road public
comments within a historical context. As a sixth generation Georgian, understanding the
historical implications of transportation rhetorics in this city and state has allowed me a glimpse
of my own family history: to understand how government policies impacted how my
grandparents traversed the city back in the 1930s and 40s—and their parents before them, near
the turn of the century. The historical (and present) picture of the city that emerges from my
archival research is not a rosy one; the kinds of systematic racial discrimination and neoliberal
ideology implicit in the public policies and public discussions of transportation in Atlanta are,
frankly, appalling. However, reading through them allowed me not only to write this dissertation
but also to understand what rhetorics and policies existed when my grandparents fled the city for
the suburbs in the 1960s, with my father in tow.

I hope this introduction provides my readers with an understanding of the perspectives that I
bring to this dissertation. I set these biases before you so that you can understand my own
interestedness in the project and so that you can understand the lens through which I interpreted
this case study. As a researcher, I sought to provide an accurate, if partial, representation of
publics’ discourses, and I strived to be open-minded, systematic, and thorough throughout this dissertation.
2 ESTABLISHING THE STREETS AS A MATERIAL, PUBLIC SPACE FOR RHETORICAL INQUIRY

``We have the right to walk the highways - we have the right to walk to Montgomery if our feet will get us there.” –Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On July 11, 2016, following the police shooting deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, thousands of protestors marched through the streets of Atlanta and eventually made their way onto Interstate 85, a twelve-lane highway that cuts through downtown. Similar protests were occurring in cities across the country. In a long Facebook post that day, Atlanta’s Mayor Kasim Reed responded to the protests, specifically to condemn the act of the protestors walking onto the highway. While some people on social media drew a parallel between these protesters’ march and Dr. King’s 1965 march through Selma, Alabama, Mayor Reed vehemently disagreed with this comparison. He argued that unlike these “spontaneous” protests, King’s march was well-planned: “Dr. King would never take a freeway in the dangerous fashion that demonstrators in Atlanta this weekend tried to block our downtown interstates.” Mayor Reed also argued that, unlike the protestors, Dr. King would not have “walked onto an active highway and put innocent motorists’ lives at risk without warning.” Atlanta, Georgia in 2016 is a much more heavily trafficked city than Selma, Alabama was in 1965; perhaps Mayor Reed was right in his assessment of where Dr. King would or would not walk, given the traffic. However, you can see from the quote from Dr. King at the beginning of this chapter that he believed the highways should be accessible spaces that all citizens have a right to.

I draw on this narrative to highlight the power of streets as a physical—and supposedly public—space for discourse and protest, particularly in a racially and economically divided city such as Atlanta. People seeking political or social change—such as the protestors who marched
on I-85—often repeat the mantra *take it to the streets!*—or in this case, take it to the supersized streets (highways). Thousands of protests happen yearly in our streets. Most recently, on January 21, 2017, over sixty thousand people marched through downtown Atlanta as part of the March for Women and Social Justice, joining over six hundred sister marches worldwide. Georgia Representative John Lewis, a prominent Civil Rights leader, also led the march in Atlanta. A few streets over from the Women’s March, in the historically black Sweet Auburn neighborhood, the side of an entire multistory building bears Lewis’s face painted in profile with the words “Hero” etched above it. His image is accompanied by the following quote from his 1963 March on Washington: “I appeal to all of you to get into this great revolution that is sweeping this nation. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution of 1776 is complete.” In this statement and from his embodied actions, it is clear that Lewis believes that the only way for Civil Rights to move forward was for people to be mobile, filled with love, and to call attention to themselves in the most public of public spaces: the streets.

It is no surprise, given the prominent civic role that streets play in our lives, that in her book *Tactics of Hope*, Paula Mathieu led the re-adoption of “the streets” as a metaphor for democratic public space. “The streets” serves as a less squishy term than “community” or “local public,” and it is a term that allows rhetoric scholars to localize public discourse in a tangible space. John Ackerman and David Coogan in the introduction to their edited collection *The Public Work of Rhetoric* argue that “the street” is a term that gives public rhetors a concrete entry point into public discourses that lead to social change. John Ackerman and David Coogan assert that in public rhetoric “the street materializes as it represents the prospects of a radically inclusive democracy of human experience” (8). They see the streets as a located metaphor for
public discourse in a democracy—a concrete arena outside the university in the civic space of a city where we can envision citizens freely participating in the exchange of ideas.

The term “the streets” is useful in that it helps us locate discourses (particularly those outside the composition classroom) and situate them spatially so that we can enter into them. We can envision what it means to enter into or embody the *streets* to enact change; it is more challenging to envision what it means to enter into an intangible *community* for the same purpose, particularly because communities can be symbolic. However, symbolic acts cannot always replace embodied acts, even if those embodied acts are symbolic. Physical embodiment seemed to be rhetorically effective for the Atlanta protestors who streamed onto I-85; mainstream media sources including *CNN* and *The Washington Post* covered their protests—and, following the extensive press coverage, Mayor Reed met with protest’s leaders, despite his initial objections to their “dangerous” protest strategy. It seems that the idea of “taking to the streets” was successful in not only allowing protesters to have their voices heard to government officials and the media but also to democratizing a public space, as we have seen protestors do around the world—from the infamous Tiananmen Square protests in China in 1989 to migrant farm workers protesting inhumane conditions in Immokalee, Florida in 2014. Whether as spontaneous or planned protests, people seek the space of the streets to as an idealized space for democracy and public speech.

However, I argue that the streets, rather than nurturing democratic practices, are often constructed to be physical barriers to such practices. Like any public space, streets are rhetorically constructed. According to historian Richard A. Mohl, Atlanta highways were built with the intention of keeping black ghettos in tact and to “clear blacks out of the central city area to make way for business-related development.” The I-85 highway that the protestors marched
on—like many highways built in Atlanta—was originally built not only as a means of moving people through Atlanta but also as a means of walling black communities outside the center of the city. As historian Dr. N. B. D. Connolly argues, such streets and highways—and the policies that develop them—were and are intentionally built to be exclusionary and harmful, particularly for black bodies (8). Only by endangering their bodies (and others’ bodies) were these protestors’ voices heard; this highway, and others like it, were built not to foster civic engagement but to stifle it. Roads and highways are not material representations of idealized public space; they are often constructed to be barriers to public discourse. I-85 certainly was not built to help connect local communities or to foster local discussions; it was built to move goods and people more efficiently. The National Park Service, writing about the Sweet Auburn Historic District in Atlanta (where John Lewis’s mural is painted), decries the I-85 “highway construction that split it in two.”¹ Was such an act intentional? That specific question is beyond the scope of this project.² However, it is one of many questions we should be asking about the rhetorical construction of streets in our cities. Given that the streets are our material representation of public space, it is crucial that we as public rhetors examine not only the historical processes but also the discursive processes by which streets have been and continue to be constructed.

Increasingly, the streets in Atlanta and other cities are privatized spaces—streamlined for efficiency, not for human movement, much less embodied political movements. Such focus on efficiency is not surprising in Atlanta, a city that resembles in size and scope Houston, a city that has also adopted many neoliberal policies. Jennifer Wingard, in “Assembling Houston: Writing

¹ You can learn more about the historic Sweet Auburn neighborhood at the National Park Services website here: https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/atlanta/aub.htm
² I recommend Larry Keating’s 2001 book Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion for a more complete historical picture of how race, business interests, and urban development clashed in the twentieth century in Atlanta.
and Teaching the Neoliberal City,” published in JAC in 2013, makes a strong case for a connection between Houston’s no-zoning policy, car-dependency, and economic neoliberalism; she argues that Houston, in allowing private citizens and corporations to build structures without regulation, is creating a city hostile to democracy. Atlanta is similar to Houston in its responsiveness to privatization at the expense of public space (as well as its sprawl and lack of geographical barriers). However, it is not only the privately-owned buildings on the streets but the streets themselves that are vulnerable to neoliberal policies in this city and others.

In increasingly neoliberal cities that privilege private space over protest space, we need to pay attention to how the streets are designed and constructed, what discourse leads to that construction, and the democratic processes and private interests involved in designing a street that is supposed to be public—and open for protest. If we want the vision of the streets as totally democratizing spaces, then we as public rhetors need to enter into not just the streets themselves but also into the policy processes involved designing these streets. I argue that “the streets,” largely because of its aforementioned problems, is the best spatialized metaphor for publics, as it forces us to examine issues of change and mobility and to locate our discourse in tangible spaces. In addition, examining the physical space of the street will allow public rhetors to move from the field’s “public turn” to a more change-oriented “policy turn,” which John Ackerman has called for (80).

2.1 The importance of publics and going public

Complicating Jurgen Habermas’s homogeneous, singular public sphere has been the effort of public rhetoric scholars for the past few decades. Gerard Hauser, Nancy Fraser, and Michael Warner—among others—have taken issue with such an idealized and/or exclusionary view of public discourse and instead have insisted that public spheres are composed of infinite,
overlapping, mutable publics, whose distinct discourses bring about rhetorical meaning through conflict with other publics. As these scholars note, the existence of these competing publics is crucial for a healthy democracy, and according to Hauser, provides people with an access route to participate in political and civic life (21). Creating or responding to conflict in a public sphere allows ordinary people (students, teachers, and others alike) to join a public, thus entering into what Linda Flower, drawing from Michael Warner and Jeffrey T. Grabill, defines as “a symbolic space that comes into being when issues of mutual concern call people into existence as a public” (3-4). In publics, conflict brings about discourse, and discourse brings about conflict; consistent discourse and conflict result in healthy public spheres.

Participating in a public or public discourse, then, is the way for people to “go public,” or become actively engaged citizens in a democracy. Dewey explains that being able to be part of a public is the way by which people are able to have “any practical influence [or] control over the actions” of other people, which impact them, and that is why publics (and later, the state) emerged in the first place (35). People need to be able to participate and respond to discourse in order to be part of publics, which are necessary for human being to gather together in some way. Publics are the basis of our civilized society.

However, while it may be possible to define a public, it is not necessarily so easy to find one. Where are these publics located, exactly, or are they located at all? Where do they gather? One answer is, perhaps, nowhere. Dewey observes that some publics and states are delineated by shared histories or religions, and not necessarily by anything physical, such as their house or neighborhood (44). On the other hand, he also emphasizes that “we can hardly select a better trait to serve as the mark and sign of the nature of a state than a point just mentioned, temporal and geographical localization” (Dewey 39). So, if we look to Dewey, the answer is that some publics
are abstract and some are situated, and some are a mix of abstract and situated.

Flower emphasizes the importance of recognizing publics as abstract and so treating them as such. She claims that the communities she works with “are not physical but symbolic entities, constructed for a complex mix of reasons around affinities rather than physical borders… In fact, the most significant feature of a community is not what or where it is (with its shifting features and overlapping boundaries) but how it functions” (Flower 10). Focusing on where a public is in space might in fact detract from this larger question of operation. To understand that community, in Flower’s view, we should analyze how its members interact and respond to conflict—not where they are located.

However, other scholars, including myself, are dissatisfied with such a disconnection between the material world and theoretical publics. David Fleming explains that while publics are always at least in some ways symbolic, such concepts of free-floating publics do not address a simple fact of being human, which is that we live some place: “we are still, after all, situated beings; and we need, more than ever, publics that are…defined, at least in part, by simple copresence in space” (37). Fleming goes on to make the argument that ignoring physical place can have very real and detrimental consequences, as it “blinds” us to how our natural environment is impacted by human behavior (31).

In addition, as Nedra Reynolds explains, where we are or how we perceive of places also impacts how and what we write about. Reynolds argues that “places are hugely important to learning processes and to acts of writing because the kinds of spaces we occupy determine, to some extent, the kinds of work we can do” (157). We are physically constrained and supported by the objects and spaces around us. Reynolds insists that it is “embodiment” of a place that brings meaning to that place (43), and I agree with her. While it is important to recognize how
publics discourse with each other, it is also important to remember that we have human forms, and our human forms impact our discourse as well. Our discourse also impacts our built environment, in a perpetual loop—a point I will discuss further in another section.

If we want to analyze publics, we need to be able to see them, and we must also recognize that spatial and physical aspects of local communities and how those places impact discourse. Talk of “borderlands” in addition to “homeplaces” (hooks) and “commonplaces” (Fleming) makes it clear that where people are in space (“lands” and “places”) makes an impact both on how people perceive discourse and how they communicate across localities. We need to understand how people communicate across these spaces as part of the “public turn” in rhetoric and composition. Christian Weisser notes in *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, a text that is widely credited with solidifying the emergence of this “public turn,” that “If our conversations about public writing are to have any real value, we must work toward connections with other disciplines, discourse communities, and individuals inside and outside of academia” (xiv). To know where to go inside or outside, we need to know what spaces to occupy.

Identifying and isolating physical representations of publics is crucial for public rhetoric scholars if we want to move beyond the “public turn” (a turn that Frank Farmer reports in *After the Public Turn* has already passed) and move into what Ackerman calls a “policy turn,” in which we are able to make recommendations based on our understanding of public spheres and effect real, visible change in the world (80). Paula Mathieu makes a similar recommendation, arguing that “Long-term success for public-oriented composition works depends...on...devising timely and spatially appropriate relationships in the streets where we work” (20). Public rhetors need a physical representation for publics so that we can enter into those physical representations
and fight for real issues—such as climate change—that have real impact on the material world. After all, as Flower observes, “the most interesting thing about symbolic communities is what they do in the material world” (43).

2.2 Spatial metaphors for publics: The streets

To determine how to enter into theoretical publics, we need to invent metaphors to represent them. Luckily, there is no dearth of such metaphors. Elenore Long outlines proposed metaphors extensively in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*. In this book, Long tries to situate publics in space first by calling them “local publics”; she claims that the local is where “ordinary people most often go public” (5). Long defines local publics as “symbolic constructs enacted in time and space around shared exigencies” (15). In defining local publics, Long acknowledges there are real world barriers (“time and space,”), though these barriers are about as broad as they possibly could be. Long, having established that local publics exist “in space” then goes on to identify and explain several spatialized metaphors for them. Some of these metaphors include “an impromptu street theater” (Shirley Brice Heath); a “cultural womb and a garden,” (Deborah Brandt and Caroline Heller); or a “shadow system” (Ralph Cintron). I do not have time or space to analyze individual and specific value of each metaphor, as each metaphor provides a particular insight into publics that others cannot—such is the value of metaphors more generally.

However, one metaphor that Long does not directly address is Mathieu’s previously mentioned metaphor of “the streets,” which Mathieu calls the space “where we work.” “The streets” has emerged as a timely synecdoche for drawing us back to the material spaces of publics, since “the streets” allows us to speak in tangible terms about publics (Ackerman and Coogan; Farmer; Mathieu). Ackerman and Coogan, adopting the term, assert that “The street
materializes as it represents the prospects of a radically inclusive democracy of human experience” (8). Mathieu uses the term throughout her book Tactics of Hope, as a concrete “metonymic reference point” to differentiate academic and nonacademic spaces without having to turn toward less satisfying and more opaque terms “such as community, sites of service, contact zones, outreach site, etc.” (xii). Farmer, writing almost a decade later, criticizes Mathieu’s direct “conflation of ‘the public and the streets’” in her book Tactics of Hope (7), but goes on to argue that Mathieu’s use of “street functions here as a kind of synecdoche, a term that encompasses many of the ways that composition studies imagines its relationship to the larger public” (7). The metaphor “of the streets” is intended a representation of a physical space where public discourse occurs—a physical space we can imagine and point to. Just as all metaphors are flawed, this metaphor is flawed, and Mathieu and Farmer recognize that, as do I.

However, I believe this metaphor is useful because it allows us a concrete place to envision a public without sacrificing the concepts of mobility and change. Just as publics are constantly changing and moving and reshaping, so are our streets, both in how people embody them and how they are built as a response to people’s movement. Fleming observes that “if we define ‘the public’ as a ‘coming-together of equals,’ we now need to imagine ‘comings-together that are more transitory and unconventional, set in a world that is more fractured and more interconnected, than publics of the past” (30). Streets reflect these concepts of transitions, fractures, connections, and interconnections in a physical space. Let us now take a material turn toward “the streets” and examine more closely how the streets themselves embody, occupy, and create movement.
2.3 Publics are changing, permeating, and mobile

In his seminal 1984 text *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau thoroughly examines the idea of physical movement and its relationship to place. De Certeau notes that physical movement (specifically, walking) can often complicate borders that people attempt to create within places, particularly cities, which have drawn-up borders and proper names. In fact, de Certeau argues, “To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (103). De Certeau notes that walking is a kind of transgression, that it “affirms, suspects, tries out” different pathways (99). To walk through a city is to step through, around, and beyond classified areas. Such pedestrian movements, he explains, “are not localized” but instead “spatialized” (de Certeau 97). To him, walking or movement is “broken up into countless tiny deportations” (de Certeau 103) and that the “urban fabric” is not a single place but bodies’ movement and interactions and passing through; what we term a “City” is not a place but a ceaseless action, a movement (103). In other words, the place of the city is not a single, static geography as people might imagine; instead, much like theories of perpetual motion in physics, what we perceive as a place is our mind’s eye is but a screenshot of bodies that are constantly in motion. Even the buildings that we see in a city are simply the city’s response to movement: the residences and sidewalks and streets, which have emerged to accommodate that movement (103). Again, the streets are spaces of simultaneous stability/movement.

And streets, of course, make up places—particularly cities. Ackerman notes that what we consider the “civic” is synonymous with the city, and so civic engagement is when “citizens engage with each other through words and actions to rewrite the symbolic terms of public life, recorded in the material artifact of the city” (76). In other words, the physical structure of the city is both the imprint and vessel of public life, perpetually reflecting and generating the public’s
values and discourse, and perpetually moving through this loop. Again, the metaphor of the streets is valuable here, because it invokes cities, towns—spaces where people live and where they join in with other people to be civically engaged through participating in publics.

The streets, however, are not stable—and that is the beauty of them. They are a scaffolding of constant movement. But what kind of movement, and by what means? As I explained earlier, de Certeau examined over thirty years ago how people walk, specifically through New York City, and how such walking creates local spaces, carves out built environments, and impacts public discourse. However, consider the many ways in which you may have “moved” today, particularly when you were in the streets. If you are like most Americans, you were probably driving. Perhaps you were taking a bus, or you were bicycling—but let us focus for a moment on driving.

While he exhaustively explains “walking the city,” de Certeau does not give us a blueprint for how to interpret “driving the city,” to analyze how drivers, rather than pedestrians, are impacted by being inside a car that goes ever forward, rarely transgressing, rarely “affirming and suspecting and trying out” new pathways (99). Reynolds, too, researching from a pedestrian-friendly University of Leeds, and Mathieu, researching from the “walking city” of Boston, fail to examine in any substantial way what it means to be in the streets as most Americans are: in a car. We should explore, as Dewey noted in 1927, how the “consequences of conjoint behavior…[that] are immediately affected by inventions in means of transit, transportation, and intercommunication” (44). We must broaden the conception of “the streets” so that we can enter into the not just physical space of them but also into the transportation options that define them. Considered from behind the wheel of a car, “the streets” are not diminished as a metaphor; in fact, they become a much more complex and interesting spatial representation of public spheres,
one that urgently needs to be analyzed.

“The streets” as a physical representation of publics is endangered, given the way the streets are increasingly homogenized spaces (built for cars) formed to serve private interests (personal travel in a car). Rarely in America do we envision the street as a place that we can safely “venture into,” as though it were an open, public space, as Mathieu implies (xiv). If the streets were truly open and public, there would be access points everywhere for everyone—but there are not. Nancy Welch argues that privatization is problematic because it leaves people with “a dearth of space, opportunity and freedom” for open, public discussion (Welch 9). Private interests relish the streamlined, categorized, efficient spaces that come along with roads built for cars, interests that sometimes compete with public interests.

For instance, if most people use the public space of the streets in a privately owned vehicle for purposes of economic efficiency (i.e. getting to work on time), how does that change their—and society’s—conception of the streets as a public space? How might we augment the openness and accessibility of the streets? How does the built environment of the streets impact how we move through them? How does our movement impact our discourse? How does our discourse impact our built environment?

At this point you might argue that I have misunderstood the term “the streets,” that in rhetoric and composition it is obviously used as a metaphor for a broader public life—a synecdoche of sorts. In fact, Frank Farmer argues just that, critiquing Mathieu’s use of “the streets” as a “conflation” with the term “the public.” Farmer argues that “we could reasonably conclude that the street functions as a kind of synecdoche, a term that encompasses many of the ways that composition studies imagines its relationship to the larger public” (Farmer 7). With that clarification in mind, Farmer does argue that the metaphor is a fine one, and that in fact, that
by using the metaphor, Mathieu is “making a comment about what our public realm has become: an evacuated, abandoned space inhabited, for the most part, by those who ‘live the streets,’ who do not have the resources necessary to (comfortably) partition their daily lives” (Farmer 8). Only the poor or disenfranchised are left to the streets; any person with means has gotten into their car and driven to their homes or jobs, thus “partitioning” their lives away from the streets. The streets, in turn are left as discarded, undesirable places. If we consider the “streets” to be only useful to those who have nowhere else to turn, what does that say about our public spaces more generally?

This characterization of the streets as a largely lifeless spaces—or, even worse, as dangerous spaces—has not gone unnoticed by urban planners and policy makers. Recognizing the discord among street dwellers, public policy and urban planners have taken what might be considered their own “public turn” in their discipline, if we frame the turn as Farmer does as a “governing gaze” of a discipline or field (1)—a turn that, in composition, with its focus on “the streets,” has moved largely in the direction of increased community involvement and activism (Farmer 7). Urban planners and policy makers have also turned their attention toward the community and the neighborhood, responding to the supremacy of the automobile—beginning with Jane Jacobs fighting against Robert Moses’s highways in New York in The Death and Life of Great American Cities in 1961 and continuing with the next generation of planners, including Atlanta’s own Ryan Gravel, who writes in his 2016 book Where We Want to Live that “we need to stop building sprawl immediately” (53) and instead incorporate bicycle, pedestrian, and transit infrastructure into our current streets. This building out of multimodal improvements is the exact opposite of New York’s call to shrink sidewalks to make space for cars. Urban planners have sought to heal the wound of the auto-centric street. They have made their own turn to the
“streets” with the adoption of the Complete Streets policies, beginning nationwide in the early part of this century. I will return to this term later in this chapter.

Critical of car culture—as it is probably clear that I am—Zack Furness, throughout his book *One Less Car*, encourages people driving cars to stop thinking about themselves as single individuals trying to get from place to place (in a single occupancy vehicle) and instead as participants in a larger, interwoven community. In other words, have people move towards being more publicly and civically minded in order to create better streets. I agree with that concept, but I argue that we also need to look not just at the people (and publics) occupying the streets but at the physical space of the streets and how we might reshape them. Just as publics require conflict, the streets—as physical manifestations of publics—need to intentionally introduce conflict in order to be healthy public spaces.

Interestingly, as the term “the streets” has risen in popularity in rhetoric and composition as a concrete term through which to represent physical spaces of communities, the actual modern street remains a hotly contested public space, the focus of ongoing debates within public policy, urban design, and philosophy. It is worth taking a look at the history and the development of the “streets,” particularly in the modern city, before we continue. Peter Norton explains that in the nineteenth century, before cars were even invented, the streets were burdened by having to accommodate several forms of transportation and recreation; “private, horse-drawn vehicles and city services (such as streetcars, telephones, and water supply)” as well as “pedestrians, pushcart vendors, and children at play” fought for space on what were then dirt roads (Norton 332). Each of these users battled to establish their right to use the street, though of course each user has his/her own rationale for wanting to be in the street (Norton 332). The child could claim space within the street as well as the telephone company could. Adding to this “surface level street”
were two additional layers of the street, as Ryan Gravel notes: a “subterranean way” with “an evolving mess of utilities, pipes, and subways” and the “aerial way” that had “overhead wires, lights, traffic signals, signs, and tree canopy” (69). When cars were introduced to the already-hodgepodge streets in the early twentieth century, Norton explains, these embattled public spaces became even more complicated—and much more dangerous. He writes, “Of the many street rivalries, the feud between pedestrians and motorists was the most relentless—and the deadliest. Blood on the pavement often marked their clashing perspectives” (Norton 332). People driving cars regularly killed people walking. In the street, motorists could easily assert their dominance, or their right to the “public” space of the street, simply because of their power and speed:

Whatever the legitimacy of their claim to street space, the motoring minority had the power to drive pedestrians from the pavements. Fearful for their safety, nonmotorists learned to limit their own access to streets and to caution their children to look both ways before crossing (Norton 335).

With the introduction of the car, the street became not only a battleground, as Norton suggests, but one with a clear winner: the motorist. The street became a space that induced fear and silence in anyone who was not driving a car.

Apart from the overpowering strength that cars introduced to the streets, they also brought an increasing imbalance socioeconomically. At their inception, cars were only accessible to the wealthy. Consider Myrtle Wilson in The Great Gatsby, who is struck and killed by a car as she walks into the street in New York City. F. Scott Fitzgerald writes that after hitting Myrtle, “The ‘death car,’ as the newspapers called it, didn’t stop; it came out of the gathering darkness, wavered tragically for a moment, and then disappeared around the next bend” (Fitzgerald 137). Wealthy Tom, of course, is the one who kills his poor mistress Myrtle with his car; the police
officer is rightly shocked by the cruelty implicit in such a hit-and-run. Similarly, when cars first emerged, they were seen as pleasure vehicles for the elite, and the primary criticism of them was their inaccessibility (Schriller, Buun, and Kenworthy 32).

However, with the rise of the assembly line and Fordism, the vehicle became much more accessible to people who were not wealthy—and thus much more widespread on city streets. Particularly following the implementation of the interstate post-World War II, the flow of car traffic quickly became a top concern within urban design, and not only on highways but also in neighborhoods and tight city streets (Schriller, Buun, and Kenworthy 32). According to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), New York City even adopted policies in the early twentieth century that required sidewalks to be narrowed in order to make way for additional lanes of car traffic. Less room for the pedestrian Myrtles of the world, more room for the driving Toms—and much more danger for everyone.

If all this characterization of cars as killers in the streets seems somewhat melodramatic, consider how one might simply be desensitized to the physical—and social—power of the car. Adopting Lev Vygotsky’s theory of a “culturally determined” mind developed by our “day-to-day activities,” Michael Ferro argues that “Cars…are fundamental units of our mental life” and that “because we must drive, and we cannot easily think of how not to do so, we are also numb to the realities of cars as agents of death from crashes and other ‘accidents’” (34-35). The fact of the matter is, whether we are desensitized to their effect or not, cars have made the streets a dangerous place to be in. As of March 2016, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) includes a signature hashtag on every single email a GDOT employee sends out—#ArriveAliveGA—accompanied by this message: “In 2015, there were 1,427 fatalities on Georgia’s roads.” People who drive must be reminded to get to their destinations without dying.
According to Christopher Ingraham, who cites data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, as of 2015, automobiles kill people at the same rate as firearms kill people in the United States; however, there is no public outcry against them, and, following even the most gruesome ten-car pile up, there is certainly no sit-in in the floor of Congress\(^3\). In fact, we continue to build streets with the primary purpose that they be easy to drive on. As James Longhurst argues, “The modern U.S. city is clearly made for the automobile: it features lanes marked for the width of cars, signals and signage to manage their movement, vast parking areas for their storage…. All of these are supported by agencies, political constituencies, and funding streams dedicated to automotive needs” (5). The streets are not a simple piece of concrete laid in front of every dwelling in America, but instead a contested space with a carefully-crafted usability that may include or exclude people, depending on how they need or want to use a street.

If we want, as Ackerman and Coogan want, a “return to the street as the location and figuration of public life, and an awareness of the conspiracies against democracy that coalesce there” (10), then we need to promote conflict and difficulty within those streets. Susan Wells observes that “Public spaces are difficult spaces, and they become more difficult as they become more inclusive” (336). The more challenging a space is to navigate—the more we must shout over each other to be heard—the more we know that heterogeneous voices are present within that space. As public rhetors, Wells calls us to “value what is difficult” (337) rather than trying to make discourse easier. We should value streets that make efficiency (a cornerstone of

\(^3\) In June 2016, following the murder of 49 people at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, John Lewis, Rep. of Georgia, led a sit-in on the House of Representatives floor to protest the lack of legislation against gun violence. He quoted to CNN as saying, “We've lost too many of our children, of our babies, too many of our mothers and fathers, our brothers and sisters. And we will continue to fight.”
neoliberalism) difficult; such streets—what urban planners are now calling “shared streets,” and “complete streets”—make communities more livable for human beings, as opposed to streets built for cars. It is, in fact, through the plurality of people and the disjointed movements of these different kinds of people that we can make the streets a viable public space that welcomes inclusion and discourse through difficulty. Including obstacles will encourage the “series of displacements and effects among the fragmented strata” that “are the very definition of a place” (de Certeau 108). David Fleming recognizes that we yearn for such spaces: “social spaces…that are open to hybridity, pluralism, and mobility…where we can encounter conflict and opposition but still feel that we belong and matter” (34). These places, which he calls commonplaces, I and other scholars call the streets.

M. Lane Bruner believes that the public work of rhetoric is to demonstrate how “discourses contribute to the human condition so we can responsibly reflect on them in order to construct the healthiest possible publics and the healthiest possible state” (62). To be healthy, publics and states need to be challenged, and so do our spaces. It is crucial that public rhetors look to the streets—a spatialized metaphor for publics—to examine how they are “constructed” and how we might change that construction to provide access to more people. We must also understand what competing “transportation publics” emerge in the streets—the publics that respond to and navigate the constructed streets with particular vehicles (from their own feet to their Ferrari 166 Inter) whether by choice or necessity. If public rhetors want to make real changes in the real world, we can start by examining how these transportation publics emerge and the impact these streets (and our transportation systems) have had and will continue to have on our public discourse—not to mention poverty, the environment, and our health, which are all important concepts for policy.
2.4 The “public turn” meets the “argumentative turn”

Christian Weisser crystallizes rhetoric and composition’s public turn in his 2002 book *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*. He defines composition studies’ public turn, which prepares students to be citizens engaged with public discourse, and he traces the lineage of it, from earlier progressivist and radical pedagogies. Going public is crucial because it focuses not only on the writing itself but the public impact of that writing: “When a students’ writing generates further discussion or leads to some societal change, he or she comes to see how discourse is deeply implicated in the structures of power in a society” (Weisser 92). In other words, writing itself can lead to broad policy or political changes, and rhetoric and composition scholars need to not only recognize those kinds of impacts but seek them out. Importantly, Weisser also argues that this public turn means that rhetoric and composition scholars should bring in theorists from other fields to supplement our understanding of the public and public writing within the field of composition. A field I believe that we should look to partner with is that of public policy, which seeks to not only theorize but also implement practical changes to policies in government and society.

In the 1990s, public policy scholars similarly began to highlight the importance not only of the policies they created but the language and communicative practices inherent in creating those policies. In 1993, Frank Fischer and John Forester, renowned public policy scholars, released an edited collection entitled *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* that spotlighted this “argumentative turn.” They write that as public policy scholars, “We need to understand just what policy analysts and planners do, how language and modes of representation both enable and constrain their work, how their practical rhetoric depicts and selects, describes and characterizes, includes and excludes, and more” (2). In other words, public policy scholars
need to reflect on the language and rhetorical appeals that impact policies. Fischer and Forester go on to say that their book “explores practically and politically a simple but profound insight: Policy and planning are practical processes of argumentation” (2). Rather than viewing public policies as created in, implemented in, and existing in a vacuum, they argue for seeing these policies as they exist in practice—recognizing the political and rhetorical battles that must be fought to implement policies, not only the analytical, systematic, data-driven process of creating good and fair policies. By implementing their argumentative lens, they seek more practical grounding of and analysis of their policies: “The argumentative view is a deeply practical one. We ask not only what an analysis claims but when it does, to whom, in what language and style, invoking what loyalties, and appealing to what threats and dangers” (Fischer and Forester 6).

Careful analysis of data alone is not sufficient to creating and implementing policies that fit into a rhetorically complicated society.

This “argumentative term” is alive and well in public policy scholarship today. In 2012, Herbert Gottweis and Frank Fischer released a new edited collection, *The Argumentative Turn Revisited: Public Policy as Communicative Practice*, to further explore the argumentative and rhetorical strategies that are crucial to creating and implementing public policies. In the introduction to the text, Gottweis and Fischer seek to find solutions to problems that are not based solely on “scientific frameworks” but instead “recognizing that the policy process is constituted by and mediated through communicative practices” (2), in turn “bringing back the critical role of discursive reflection and argumentation to both the practices of policy analysis and an understanding of the dynamics of policy making today” (6). As we can see, public policy scholars seek to move beyond data analysis to reclaim rhetorical frameworks and language as part of their discipline; rhetoric and composition scholars, on the other hand, seek to reclaim
writing as a public, significant act with consequences.

Both fields, I argue, are ultimately interested in the successful, practical application of their research; as such, rhetoric and composition scholars, well-versed in rhetorical and argumentative frameworks, should seek to support public policy scholars working to create and implement real policies in governments and society. The two fields are remarkably compatible in their aims. We should feel emboldened to delve into the rhetorical elements of public policy issues, to embrace a “policy turn” in our field. In the case study that I present, I try to do just that: offer rhetorical frameworks for what seems to be a decision based on policy and city planning—namely, how to redesign a street. Streets—easily identifiable, concrete, public spaces—provide rhetoric and composition scholars a readily available access point into public policy conversations. After all, everyone has had experience with navigating a street, just as everyone has had experience with navigating writing. I turn now toward a particular policy that has gained favor with urban planners and policy makers, that of “Complete Streets.”

2.5 Creating “Complete Streets”

“Complete Streets,” is a transportation design policy that attempts to redress the many problems of the streets as they stand today, particularly given their car-centric designs. In recent decades, the Federal Highway Association (FHWA)—and urban planners and policy makers across the nation—have begun to realize that car-centered street designs, particularly those that cut “through a city center, village main street, or even a residential neighborhood” are detrimental to the connectivity of those neighborhoods—not to mention the health, vibrancy, access, cost, and environmental concerns associated with car-centered streets (FHWA). Encouraging multiple uses of and access to a street “[ensures] that roads provide safe mobility for all travelers, not just motor vehicles” (FHWA).
National organizations, including the Interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities, composed by the United States Department of Transportation, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the United States Environmental Protection Agency, have adopted principles that are intended to “value communities by investing in healthy, safe, and walkable neighborhoods” and encourage transportation alternatives beyond the car (FHWA). “Complete Streets” policies have been implemented in states across the country, including Georgia in 2012, when the State Transportation Board adopted a Complete Streets policy “supporting the planning, design, and construction of streets and roadways in Georgia that integrate and balance accessibility for all modes of transportation…requiring that accommodations for pedestrian, bicycle, and transit modes of transportation be provided under specific compelling conditions along transportation projects with GDOT oversight (wherever it is practical to do so)” (GDOT). GDOT, as did many other cities, states, and national organizations (including the Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Department of Transportation), had mandated that public streets no longer be dominated by the strongest (and now the majority) public of drivers but instead that the streets be opened again to pedestrians, bicycles, mass transit, and other users, particularly those who have difficulty accessing streets.

In reality, as I will show, these policies are somewhat idealistic and difficult to implement. While James Longhurst finds hope in the “legal philosophy that considers the road as a public resource to be shared between diverse users,” he still believes that the “complicated urban landscape of our present-day cities” (21) makes it hard to apply those philosophies. The laws and the government agencies may promote streets for multiuse, but the current built environment of those streets (specifically for cars) makes it very difficult to support those ideals,
particularly because citizens are responding not to the abstract, governing ideals but instead to their physical environment of the streets within their discourse. In this case study of a road in Atlanta, I will explore how GDOT’s attempt to implement Complete Streets policy-driven changes to one major street was rebuffed, and I will seek to explain why.

2.6 The case study

I applied an archival research methodology to analyze a single street in Atlanta that was slated to be redesigned to improve safety, but following an onslaught of public comments, did not undergo the intended design. In 2015, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) needed to repave a two-mile portion of Peachtree Road, a major north-south connector in Atlanta. While many cities are centered around a grid-like structure, traditionally Atlanta’s major developments have followed along this single road, which is in many ways the backbone of Atlanta. In his famous novel about Atlanta, *A Man in Full*, Tom Wolfe writes, “…the towers of Midtown were streaming past on either side of Peachtree, which was the place to have a tower. In fact, if it wasn’t within a block or so of Peachtree, it wasn’t worth having” (195). Even two decades after the publication of Wolfe’s novel, many people would agree with this characterization of Peachtree as a core road in Atlanta. Therefore, when GDOT proposed repaving Peachtree Road and subsequently changing how it functioned, the proposal was a significant one for Atlanta.

As of 2015, Peachtree Road had three car travel lanes in either direction. The road was generally considered unsafe. According to GDOT’s proposal, between 2009 and 2013, there were 801 crashes on this section of road. Eleven of those crashes were with bicyclists, and 42 were with pedestrians. In addition to these safety issues, the road was not functioning to capacity; road users had difficulty making left turns along the area, and in fact, GDOT found that
the far left lane along either side of the road was only used about 15% of the time. Beyond these functionality issues, the road was simply due to be repaved and repainted.

GDOT decided to not only conduct this basic maintenance but also improve the functionality and safety of the road. So, in October 2015, GDOT released a proposal for the road that would implement Georgia’s Complete Streets policy and streamline the traffic flow. Rather than having three car travel lanes in either direction, GDOT proposed implementing two car travel lanes in either direction, a bicycle lane in either direction, and a single center two-way left turn lane. Figure 1, which follows, shows a Google image of Peachtree Road as of December 2016, with three car lanes in either direction:

![Figure 1. An image of Peachtree Road as of December 2016, from Curbed Atlanta.](image)
As you can see in Figure 2.2, the road as proposed would have been modified to include minimum-width (four-foot) bike lanes and a center turn lane. Because of the urban setting and cost, the road would not be widened to accommodate these additional lanes. Instead, the number of car lanes would be reduced from three to two on each side of the two-way left turn lane.

GDOT explained that these modifications would improve both the flow of traffic and safety for all users on the road. The addition of a two-way left turn lane was “proven to reduce fatalities, serious injury, and minor injury crashes up to 20%,” based on a Crash Modification Factors Clearinghouse’s study they cited. GDOT also wrote that addition of bicycle lanes would “provide a buffer between pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic” and “provide a dedicated space for bicyclists to travel in the roadway.” The redesign was intended to address the dual issues of safety and functionality for all users, not only car users, as Complete Streets policies require.

As GDOT’s roadway plan became public, some people began to critique the decision to add bicycle lanes to the road. A heated public argument began, particularly between those in favor of the bicycle lanes and those against them. In the first two weeks of November 2015, nearly two thousand people submitted formal public comments about the proposed changes,
whether through handwritten comments at a public meeting, emailed comments, or handwritten comments mailed into GDOT. GDOT subsequently canceled plans to redesign the street as proposed.

Immediately after announcing the cancelation, GDOT identified public comments opposing the bike lanes as the main reason they did not go forward with the project. GDOT explicitly stated that the comments they received about the bike lanes caused GDOT to forgo the planned bike lanes that were part of the Complete Streets design: “Due to the number of comments received at the PIOH opposing the conversion of a through lane to a north and southbound bicycle lane between Peachtree Battle Road and Deering Road, the bicycle lanes have been removed from the project.” This comment demonstrates that the public discourse around the street was able to directly shape the physical space of the street, in line with rhetoric scholars’ understanding of public space. Nedra Reynolds observes that “Places (or territories) are contested, with competing and shifting interpretations of their meanings, and these meanings are tied to signs and symbols that carry cultural weight” (59). In other words, we bring to a space our own interpretations and understanding of that space—and how it should be used, and those interpretations can have a ripple effect, changing not only our streets and our communities but, eventually, entire cultures. In this chapter, I have sought in this chapter to establish the streets as a material space for rhetoric and composition scholars to work, joining interdisciplinary studies such as public policy and urban planning to understand the discourses that create and sustain publics and public spaces.

In chapter two, I analyze public comments and open records as a space to be reclaimed and recognized by archival researchers. Government agencies, such as GDOT, receive public comments about projects, such as Peachtree Road, on a daily basis. These comments, which are
open records, can be accessed by rhetoric and composition scholars to provide a snapshot of current public discourse, much as historical archives can be used to provide snapshots and (competing) narratives of historical moments. I will explain how viewing open records as living archives focused on the present moment can complement the rich past of already existing archives. In chapter 3, I unravel the archival methods that GDOT used to read, categorize, and respond to the public comments, and I argue that GDOT problematically treated the public comments as votes for or against the project, as opposed to exploring the narratives and positionality of the commenters—the kind of responsible “discursive reflection” that policy makers should engage in. In chapter 4, I offer an alternative, archival reading of these comments, seeking to uncover the competing publics and competing narratives created by the discourse. In the conclusion, I encourage public rhetors to elucidate real time conversations occurring in public documents and offer suggestions for how to apply open records research pedagogically. Public rhetors can also help local publics shape their responses to government agencies in a way that will help local publics’ responses be heard and understood. I will argue that such work is a public rhetor’s responsibility.
3 OPEN RECORDS AS AN ARCHIVAL RESEARCH SPACE

On a recent visit to the Georgia State University Special Collections, I was talking to the archivist when a woman walked in carrying a pair of leggings patterned with President Donald Trump’s face, a hand-knitted pink hat with pointy cat ears, a t-shirt that said “RESIST,” and a handful of posters with feminist messages on them. The woman placed these objects on the archivist’s desk and left. At first, I thought the woman might be returning some belongings to the archivist, so I asked her about them. The archivist explained that protestors from the Women’s March on Washington—which had occurred eight days earlier—were donating their clothing and signs to be archived permanently as artifacts from the historical event. I was surprised, given how recent the march was; the RESIST t-shirt looked like it should be for sale in a store down the street, not locked away in an archive. However, to the archivist, these artifacts were already part of the historical record, and it was now her responsibility to collect and protect them. In addition, the archivist and her colleagues were well underway in curating a glass case display of the objects on campus so that students could see them.

Up to that point, I had (erroneously) thought of archives as a place where artifacts were held and protected for their own sake; talking to the archivist made me realize that these artifacts are held and protected for one purpose: to be accessed. In an era of “alternative facts” and “fake news,”

 archives are a bastion of information—and also of transparency. Rather than serving as gatekeepers, archivists serve as beacons, making visible historical records that force institutions

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\] In a January 22, 2017, interview with NBC host Chuck Todd on “Meet the Press,” Kellyanne Conway, Counselor to President Donald J. Trump defended Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s inflation of the crowd size at Donald Trump’s inauguration. Conway stated, “You're saying it's a falsehood. And they're giving—Sean Spicer, our press secretary—gave alternative facts.” In response, Todd said, "Alternative facts aren't facts; they are falsehoods." The phrase “alternative facts” as well as “fake news”—the unverified stories that tend to propagate through social media sites—have become popular terms since Trump’s election.
of our present democracy to be held accountable for their actions and decisions. Feminist
historiographers, meanwhile, have also sought to “democratize” archival research to include
women, minorities, and other marginalized voices through several avenues: by broadening the
definition of an archive to include less traditional sites (Glenn and Enoch); by seeking to increase
access to archival resources, particularly through digitization and meta-data (Graban; Gutenson
and Robinson); by encouraging previously marginalized groups to create their own
representative archives (Cushman); by rhetorically analyzing the silences within the archives to
augment the stature of those who have been silenced (Enoch; Gerald); and by encouraging the
use of critical imagination (Royster and Kirsch). These feminist archival research methods and
methodologies have had success in creating archives that are more inclusive and representative
of historical and extant publics—and more transparent.

Through national and state-level open records laws, our government allows its citizens
open access to public records for similar purposes. While GDOT and other government agencies
actively seek out public participation, particularly through public comments, they do so in order
to reach a decision, not to understand the subtle narratives within public discourse. However, by
applying feminist archival research processes to these public comments—by treating them as
artifacts—we can tease out multiple narratives as a means to challenge dominant institutional
narratives, particularly by focusing in on current public discourse. In “Finding the Grimkés in
Charleston: Using Feminist Historiographic and Archival Research Methods to Build Public
Memory,” (2016) Amy Gerald, drawing on Jessica Enoch’s work of examining the silences of

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5 The Society of American Archivists’ Core Values Statement states that “By documenting
institutional functions, activities, and decision-making, archivists provide an important means of
ensuring accountability. In a republic such accountability and transparency constitute an essential
hallmark of democracy.”
marginalized historical figures, argues that feminist historiographers have a responsibility to fill in the silences not only in the archives but also in public memory and current public discourse about these figures. Coming upon a limited historical record of her research subjects, Gerald recognized that her responsibility was not only to build up the historical record of the Grimke sisters but also to insert them into public discussion. Gerald set to “shifting my original goal of analyzing the sisters’ early rhetorical influences to actually doing the rhetorical work of creating public memory” (100). In other words, equally as important as digging into the past is staking ground in the present and making tangible change. Similarly, in “Looking Outward: Archival Research as Community Engagement,” (2017), Whitney Douglas argues that feminist historiographers should use archival research as “generative community literacy practice” that “integrates the knowledge and expertise of both contemporary and historical community members” (31). This “rhetorical work” of feminist historiographers can be augmented by open records research. Open records research allows feminist researchers to engage with current community members and interact with current public discourse in order to shape “public memory,” rather than relying on government officials to interpret it. As feminist researchers and historiographers, we should challenge institutionalized narratives that government officials build from public comments, particularly since we have free and open access to these public comments.

While feminist historiographers have made great strides toward inclusivity, I argue they should apply these same archival research processes to public comments like the ones in the Atlanta road improvement discussion. Doing so would further expand the limits of the archives and democratize archival research, with the additional benefit of exploring more recent histories and larger swaths of public discourse. More specifically, feminist historiographers and
researchers should leverage open records laws to examine public comments received by
government institutions in order to showcase competing narratives and complicate decisions that
policy makers create in the name of public comments. In the following pages, I demonstrate how
I used open records laws to access the Peachtree Road public comments, offering suggestions for
feminist archival research processes that will allow others to do the same. I argue that feminist
historiographers have a responsibility to lend their expertise in archival research processes to
assemble, publicize, and interpret the findings from public comments, creating competing
narratives that challenge dominant discourses.

3.1 Defining “open records” and “sunshine laws”

Like other archives, open records laws—sometimes called “sunshine” laws because they
require governments to conduct business publicly, or in broad daylight—can allow
historiographers to bear witness to recent histories and to examine large swaths of public
discourse. Following the 1966 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), every citizen has the right to
access nearly all federal agency records. Every state has also passed open records laws allowing
citizens to gain access to state records, with specific laws differing from state to state. The stated
intention of these laws is to provide a check on elected officials, underscoring the belief that
democracy functions best when its citizens are informed of what their governments are doing in
a timely manner. Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society champions FOIA,
noting that this law is in place to fight back against government bureaucracy or red tape; without

6 The Georgia Open Records Act states, “The General Assembly finds and declares that the
strong public policy of this state is in favor of open government; that open government is
essential to a free, open, and democratic society; and that public access to public records should
be encouraged to foster confidence in government and so that the public can evaluate the
expenditure of public funds and the efficient and proper functioning of its institutions. The
General Assembly further finds and declares that there is a strong presumption that public
records should be made available for public inspection without delay.”
it, they believe that “information-seeking citizens would be left to the whims of individual government agencies, which often do not give up their records easily.” We can imagine that without more traditional archives, like those housed in most universities, the situation would be the same—government agencies or people might be unwilling to provide information that the public has a right to access.

Archival researchers are already employing FOIA to gain access to historical research, a process that can be time-intensive and sometimes challenging. Neal Lerner and Jennifer Clary-Lemon both lamented difficulties that they had with accessing public records through FOIA. Lerner noted that he had to get FOIA approval from the University of Illinois’s President to read his historical research subject Robert Moore’s papers, for which Lerner had an incomplete record (197). Clary-Lemon, seeking access to artifacts related to Margaret Thatcher from the 1970s, had significant problems accessing those records through FOIA. Clary-Lemon writes:

...some of the more useful records I was hoping to uncover were marked “closed for 50 years”... The decisions made by archivists to leave the files on record but to close them publicly is due to exemptions from the 2000 Freedom of Information Act, suggesting that what those closed files contained might either endanger the physical or mental safety of a person, or directly contravene the UK Data Protection Act of 1998 (“FOI Exemptions”)... PRONI [Public Records Office of Northern Ireland] as a division of government makes decisions about what information is publicly available for historians to view... Thus, as an historical researcher with limited time available to devote to the archive but needing to recover material that is still politically sensitive…cannot escape the fact that the Culture Minister of PRONI is the “Keeper of the Records,” who makes current visible and political decisions about public access to the past” (396).
Clary-Lemon explains how her research methods were shaped by PRONI’s embargoes on “politically sensitive,” information, changing the documents she could access related to Margaret Thatcher. PRONI, in addition, as she notes, was not only a written policy but a physical archival site—and the institution’s leader, or the Culture Minister, had the ability to interpret the policy as he or she saw fit. PRONI as an institution had the power to decide what artifacts researchers could and could not access and what they deemed “politically sensitive” or not.

I concede that some documents under FOIA are difficult to access, but overwhelmingly, access is quite broad. While, as Clary-Lemon notes, “sensitive” information is hidden (and much may be considered “sensitive” in Northern Ireland, torn by political strife), the problem with FOIA is not the amount of documents redacted but rather the incalculable number of documents available for public scrutiny. For example, in the state of Georgia, citizens are allowed to view and copy any text that a state employee creates or receives, with few limitations. According to Georgia’s Open Records Act, “all public records shall be open for personal inspection and copying.” These public records refer to “all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, computer based or generated information, data, data fields, or similar material prepared and maintained or received by an agency or by a private person or entity in the performance of a service or function for or on behalf of an agency.”

Through open records laws, we can read our state legislators’ emails; we can check budgets; we can read through meeting minutes. The implications of this information to citizens, academics, activists, and journalists are tremendous. In the past two months, a lone Atlanta resident complicated a $400 million property sale that the City was planning by reading and publicizing the murky fine print of the deal; journalists for the Atlanta Journal Constitution uncovered a million-dollar bribery scheme at City Hall by combing through a database of city
payments. These pieces of information were available to citizens and journalists because of FOIA and Georgia’s Open Records Act. These recent histories available through open records have largely been overlooked by feminist historiographers up to now. While dissecting Excel spreadsheets to uncover evidence of bribery may be a job best left to journalists, rhetoricians seeking to understand current public discourses can look not only to documents that the government creates but also those that the government receives: public comments that constituents submit. While Lerner and Clary-Lemon invoked FOIA to access information about high-profile and/or historical individuals—a research process that can be politically fraught or sensitive—I argue that feminist historiographers should use open records laws to uncover current public discourses that involve regular citizens, particularly as a means of augmenting these citizens’ voices and narratives. Scholars can examine citizens’ recently submitted public comments, rather than historical documents connected to single persons, to understand what publics are speaking and why, what publics are silenced, and how citizens’ voices are or are not being heard by democratic institutions.

3.2 Challenging quantitative readings of public comments

Less than a month following the public comment period during which these comments were received, GDOT released a statement touting their successful citizen engagement process and announcing the decision they had reached to abandon the bike lane portion of the project: “Peachtree Road Project: Public’s Voice Heard in Planning Process - No Bike Lanes”:

Georgia DOT announced today that, after intensive review of public comments and public needs, the Peachtree Road project…will move forward…without the addition of bike lanes. “This is the public involvement process at work,” said GDOT Chief Engineer Meg Pirkle. “Throughout the planning and development of this project, we have consistently looked for meaningful ways to engage the public; to listen to the concerns and ideas of various audiences; and to make sure that their input and comments were properly reflected.”
However, while GDOT consulted the public and quickly reached a decision, the methods by which they analyzed the publics’ competing narratives in order to reach that decision are unclear. For instance, how did they “listen to the concerns and ideas of various audiences” and in what ways did GDOT ensure that these audiences’ “input and comments were properly reflected”? Where and how can we see these comments reflected? What methods of analysis were used to understand the “various audiences”? How were such audiences identified and defined? None of these questions are answered in the press release. In fact, in the press release, GDOT tallies the public comments quantitatively, as votes. They note that seventy percent of people submitting public comments were against the project (specifically the bike lanes), but they do not explain how they surmised that people were against the project. They do not explain what words were identified to indicate opposition and from what context such opposition emerged.

In other words, GDOT took the narratives within the public comments and used them to come up with a measurable dichotomy of those citizens for or against the project. While there is nothing wrong with an outcome-driven emphasis on quantitative, “rational” analysis methods—after all, policy decisions must be made expediently—such methods are insufficient when it comes to reading and understanding public narratives and discourses. No explanation was offered as to what methods GDOT used to decipher from citizens’ written comments whether they were “for” or “against” the bike lane project; it is unlikely that twelve hundred people stated explicitly that they were against the bike lanes, nor were citizens asked to offer their opinions on that specific topic. A public comment is an unstructured space for expressive communication; it is not a survey or vote, and so the conclusions that are drawn from public comments should be more complicated than those drawn from more defined methods. When creating new policy or
implementing institutional change, decision makers like GDOT seek out public participation for two reasons: 1. to demonstrate that they sought public input, and 2. to come to a decision. Less important appears to be the purpose of understanding the emerging narratives and contexts of publics who are participating. However, the answer is not to simply do away with public comments. GDOT may not have been carefully analyzed to uncover context-driven, expressive, and rhetorical narratives, but that does not mean that the opportunity has been lost. The task of analyzing public comments should fall to rhetoric and composition scholars, particularly those feminist historiographers trained in archival research methods and methodologies.

While policy makers used to privilege political expediency at all costs, they increasingly value public participation, particularly on a local level, as Greg Hampton notes (235). Public policy scholars increasingly champion narratives as a means of making decisions that incorporate and reflect citizens’ desires. Many public policy scholars champion “narrative policy analysis,” which encourages the juxtaposition of competing narratives, particularly between experts and publics, in order to lead to open discussion and debate (Hampton 235). These competing narratives are supposed to lead publics and experts to empathize with each other’s stories and develop a “meta-narrative,” a narrative that embraces different opinions and, importantly, results in consensus. Greg Hampton explains that narrative policy analysis promotes “reflective respect for public preferences… the potential for competitive telling of stories to lead to changes in perspectives and appreciation of others’ perspectives” (240). In the case study that Greg Hampton uses to showcase a successful implementation of narrative policy analysis, a water treatment plant was proposed. Those residents living near the proposed water treatment plant were against its construction; those residents with dirty water were in support of it. Once the two sides gathered together to hear each other’s opposing narratives, the constituents eventually
approved the plant, with the compromise that it would not be built in a residential area. However, while Hampton emphasizes that a decision was reached, it is unclear how the narratives led to that decision or by what methods those narratives were analyzed.

On their website, GDOT indicates that they solicit public comments because this public outreach process “enhances decision making; encourages ALL Georgians to share their views and concerns regarding transportation issues; leads to the development of better products and services that improve mobility, and brings GDOT closer to the public's vision of ideal transportation in our state.” In other words, GDOT wants to be sure that people have their voices heard and are able to ask questions about proposed projects; GDOT states that public feedback they receive allows them to tweak and change Georgia’s transportation systems to reflect the public’s desires. However, while GDOT solicits and receives narratives from constituents—while they have the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of publics’ specific and individual needs, ideas, histories, desires, questions, frustrations, biases, etc.—they do not have equally nuanced methods of analyzing the narratives they receive.

Geography professors Karen Bickerstaff and Gordon Walker argue that governments and researchers have put too much emphasis on encouraging public participation and not enough time into understanding how the participating publics’ discourse actually leads to changes in policies and institutions (2138). Bickerstaff and Walker believe there is little observable connection between public participation in creating policies and the policies that are ultimately adopted. In fact, they conclude that citizens are often unsure how their participation and narratives lead to actual policy change; citizens often believe that their participation is just a check in the box, a justification for a pre-determined decision. Bickerstaff and Walker explain that in workshops or other public discussions, “the search for consensus itself was seen as a
mechanism of silencing rather than of giving voice—where individuals held opinions that conflicted with the majority” (2130). When the decision is the most important part of a public engagement process, the actual engagement can seem pointless—a means to an end. However, this singular focus on decision making is important for government officials, who need to act quickly. The citizens in Hampton’s case study needed to decide whether or not to build a water treatment plant; each day the decision was delayed meant another day that some local residents would go without clean water. Similarly, GDOT needed to decide how to redesign a major road so that they could begin pouring concrete. It makes sense that policymakers and government officials are driven by outcomes.

Feminist historiographers can intervene in these instances, drawing out complex and competing histories: creating a map instead of providing an answer, being “aware of the many social forces that come to bear on…work in the archives—forces literally from the past, present, and future” and embracing “risk, uncertainty, and discomfort” (Lerner 204). These feminist archival research methods can complement the work of policy makers and transportation engineers at GDOT, who are tasked with making design decisions quickly and may overlook these methods. In some cases, policy makers may even intentionally ignore and look down on them. According to policy scientist Roger A. Pielke, Jr., "the policy scientist who emphasizes context, unpredictability, uncertainty, trial-and-error, and normative commitments may easily appear to stand upon a ‘lower plane’” (213). Qualitative researchers in rhetoric and composition, and feminist researchers in particular, embrace these “lower plane” concepts of interpretation, allowing space for “context” and “uncertainty.”

Feminist historiographers, as compared to policymakers and decision-makers, do not have the burden of coming to a “practical” decision or outcome based on their readings of public
comments, and they can create space for examining emotion and rhetoric and context, particularly if they treat public comments as artifacts. Archival methods and methodologies—or their combined and overlapping material “research processes,” as Jennifer Clary-Lemon argues—require on the one hand selection, access, examination (methods) and on the other hand, interpretation and positionality (methodologies), but these research processes do not require that researchers make concrete decisions. Clary-Lemon explains, "Archival research cannot in every case follow a particular predetermined series of steps that guarantee scientific 'results'” (382). If rhetoric and composition historiographers admit that rigorous archival research processes do not require us to reach a “decision” or a “consensus,” that admission frees up historiographers to step into the space of analyzing public comments in order to dissect the public narratives that lay between public participation and policy “outcomes.” For example, feminist historiographers would recognize that the public comments that GDOT received likely reflect the larger context of transportation in Atlanta, which has a complicated and very racialized history, and would certainly consider this context in any analysis of public comments. Certainly feminist historiographers would not read 1,916 narratives and at the end come up with a percentage; instead, we would consider the larger rhetorical situation and try to build a narrative or competing narratives that reflect publics’ discourse.

7 The racial tension stemming from transportation is an open secret in Atlanta, as it is in many cities. White flight to the suburbs was for decades enabled by building roads and highways that, according to historian Raymond A. Mohl, were also built with the intention of keeping black ghettos in tact and helping to “clear blacks out of the central city area to make way for business-related development” (36). As historian Dr. N. D. B. Connolly argues, such streets and highways—and the policies that develop them—were and are intentionally built to be exclusionary and harmful, particularly for black bodies. I recommend historian Kevin M. Kruse’s excellent 2005 book White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism for more information about the racialized history of Atlanta’s urban development and transportation system.
This practice is in contrast to Hampton’s argument that narratives should be analyzed in order to provide a practical conclusion. Hampton believes that there should be a “systematic approach to analyzing narrative” that “casts order on the process of analyzing narratives in practical decision making” and “provides a policy scientist with an orderly methodology with which to analyze the plethora of dialogue occurring in a controversy” (241). While there is some overlap between the two fields, policy makers are primarily focused on making policies; rhetoricians are focused on understanding rhetorical situations and discourses. Given that rhetoric and composition specialists need not focus on outcomes but the rhetoric itself, we can enter into and question, complicate, and critique the narratives of public comments for their own sake. Lynee Gaillet and Lisa Mastrangelo make a similar argument about analyzing historical documents for their own sake, to seek to understand “the important work that history can do on its own” rather than needing to connect such histories to present circumstances (23). We should seek to understand the important narratives that arise from the public comments for their own sake, even after decisions are made.

Feminist historiographers do not research the archives to come to a decision; we construct one or more narratives, which we recognize is never the complete picture. While rhetoric and composition scholars can and do facilitate public participation and discourse as it is occurring, we can also access the archives of public participation through public comments, accessible through open records. We can then carefully analyze these public comments as recent histories, using the same research processes that we apply to more historical artifacts.

Just by the act of accessing and examining open records, we are challenging a government’s decision and demonstrating that public comments are open to multiple interpretations. Archival research not only serves to help us explore multiple histories but it also
allows us to bring to light a specific issue, simply by choosing to examine its paper trail (Glenn and Enoch 12). In addition, as Alexis E. Ramsey explains, inquiring into an archive can “cause the collection to get a level of preferential treatment and a timelier processing schedule” (83). Archivists at universities or other settings want to be sure that the material most desired is available to researchers. Similarly, if people are inquiring about particular public records or public projects, that interest will shed light on those records and they may be processed faster, particularly given the three-day window that the government has to comply with. By re-examining a history and writing a second (or third or fourth) narrative about that history, we are arguing as scholars that that topic is important enough to explore multiple times. By examining the public comments submitted to GDOT, I questioned the decision GDOT made as to how to construct Peachtree Road, recognizing that streets are constructed through an interpretation of public discourse. Considered from this lens, time spent researching open records is a tool not only of research but also of activism.

Since Robert J. Connors encouraged rhetoric and composition scholars to enter into traditional archives—those “specialized kinds of libraries that usually contain materials specific to one institution or activity” (53)—feminist scholars have questioned the need to enter into a specific institution to conduct archival research. Feminist scholar Cheryl Glenn has called us to “resist the Paternal Narrative of rhetorical history,” and to broaden the canon of rhetoric and composition research to include gender studies and female figures (66). By resisting the artificial and or patriarchal bounds of what constitutes an archive, archival research has expanded from the traditional Archive to what Cheryl Glenn and Jessica Enoch have called less traditional or “lower-case-a archives,” such as unpublished family documents (17). Moving from the sanctioned archive associated with a research university has expanded the histories that archivists
can enter into, and the narratives they can write about such histories. It has also allowed
historiographers “to challenge understandings of what our history is by drawing our attention to
people and places outside the traditional composition classroom” (Glenn and Enoch 12).

In other words, we should divert focus from universities to the people outside
universities, allowing us to spotlight issues of wider-reaching and more personal concern.
Through examining public comments, we can do just that: we can see what our neighbors have
to say about the construction of a new elementary school or what major issues residents have
with implementing a statewide lottery. These voices are those of the lower-case-a archives: the
individual and the personal; however, through the amalgamation of these comments, we get to
see not only individuals participating as citizens through public comments but also broad swaths
of publics emerging. Through their comments, we can witness discourse as it is occurring and as
it has just occurred. Unlike other lower-case-a archives, public comments submitted through
open records are always relevant to public concerns, both within and without the university.
Open records in particular allow us to view not only the inner-workings of our government
through emails between government officials, but they also allow us to view comments
submitted by regular citizens, a unique yoking of Archives, archives, and our present
democracy.

3.3 How I accessed open records

Before I delve further into defending open records as a democratizing space for archival
research, I am going to explain how I accessed them. When I first decided to invoke FOIA to
access the public comments submitted for the Peachtree Road project, I was nervous. I assumed
that there would be a long, arduous process, but the process was surprisingly simple. First, I
emailed a friend who works at GDOT and asked her how to put in an open records request. She
provided me with a link to GDOT’s website, where I clicked on “Resources” and found the link “Open Records Request,” from which I accessed the PDF Open Records Request form. She also gave me specific instructions that I might not have known without her help. For instance, every project GDOT tracks has an “PI” number that identifies it. She gave me the “PI” for Peachtree Road so I wouldn’t have to look for it myself. She also gave me specific instructions on what documents to ask for, explaining that I could ask for written comments as well as audio files recorded at the meetings.

The Open Records Request form is a one-page document that asks for the requestor’s name and contact information, the “Type of information/document/record requested,” and additional information as necessary, including the name of the project, the “PI” number, as explained above, the location, and the “date of accident/incident.” I filled out the Open Records Request and emailed it to a specific paralegal for GDOT. I would not have known to email this particular person if my friend had not told me to email her because there are no specific instructions on where the Open Records Request PDF form, once completed, should be sent. I imagine that without my friend’s help, it would have taken a few tries to be sure I correctly asked for and subsequently received all the documents I was seeking.

Georgia’s Open Records Act spells out in more detail how to effectively solicit these documents; overall, the burden of ensuring access is placed with the government, not the citizen. Even if I had not had this additional help from my friend to navigate the bureaucracy, GDOT legally would have had to honor my request within three business days, particularly since the request was made in writing. If they could not provide all the records I requested within that timeline, they would have had to provide partial records and/or a timeline for when they would be able to complete my request. When applicable, GDOT could charge some costs charged for
“search, retrieval, redaction, and production or copying costs for the production of records,”
though there are restrictions in place to keep costs low when possible. These costs cannot exceed
“the prorated hourly salary of the lowest paid full-time employee who...has the necessary skill
and training to perform the request.” For data that has already been aggregated, there is no
additional charge.

For the Peachtree Road project, I did not have to pay to access the public comments. I
submitted the Open Records request on January 28, and I received a response with all the records
on February 2. The paralegal for GDOT provided me with a link to a website where I could
download requested records, which were filed under her name with the title “Open Records
Request,” and a corresponding number. The records were PDF copies of all the public comments
about the project, both electronic and handwritten. The electronic comments were either
submitted through email or an online comment system, meaning they were born digital.
Handwritten comments—typically written during GDOT’s public meeting—were only
accessible to me in a digitized format, through PDF copies. I have never held the original,
handwritten public comments in my hand, and the state government is not required to give me
access to the physical copies, only the information, per the Open Records Act: “an agency may,
in its discretion, provide copies of a record in lieu of providing access to the record.” Alongside
my open records request were thirty-seven other open records requests, some of which I could
also access by clicking on them. Other people and organizations are clearly using open records to
inform themselves or their research as well. I will detail the Peachtree Road records I received
and how they were archived more specifically in the next chapter.
As I said earlier, reading the Open Records Act would have been useful before I made my request. In addition, the Georgia Attorney General provides a “Citizen’s Guide to Open Government” pamphlet, which can be accessed online. This pamphlet provides a sample open records request and explains how to access open records, with specific tips such as making the request in writing and a template of how that request might be written. The pamphlet also explains the types of information that can be accessed. I found this pamphlet after I made my own request, so it was not helpful for me, but it might be helpful for others.

3.4 Open records research: Digital and democratizing

As I have shown, open records tend to be digitized or born-digital, which makes them a welcome addition to the increasingly digital space of the archives. Using digital tools, feminist researchers and historiographers have sought to improve access to archives in two ways: 1. by making retrieval easier and less costly and 2. by giving marginalized people more rhetorical control to create archives that appropriately represent themselves (Enoch and Gold 74). Creating and examining digital or digitized open records will further democratize the archives, allowing more people to enter into them and to question and critique dominant public discourses. Because of their easy, legally-required, and often digital access, open records are an inclusive archival resource. In “Race, Women, Methods, and Access: a Journey through Cyber Space and Back,” (2016), Leah DiNatale Gutenson and Michelle Bachelor Robinson explain the need for rhetoric and composition scholars to expand access to digital archives: "Scholars and digital humanists need to continue their pursuit of the kind of access that transforms digital spaces. We need more women and people of color engaging in digital humanists projects utilizing methodologies that do not privilege some parts of materials over others and that digitally preserve all texts making them more widely available” (84).
If the two current goals of feminist archival research are accessibility—both in terms of what persons’ artifacts we can access and who can access them—then we should look to open records to allow us to achieve both aims. As feminist researchers, we should tap into open records to make transparent public discourse and expand access to the archives, thus augmenting marginalized voices, exploring the silences, and further democratizing archival research.

Open records are readily accessible resources because of their digitization (and because many of them are born digital), making them a cheap and easily accessible archive. That said, rhetoric and composition scholars have long discussed the problems with digitized archives. Because of the digitization of these open records, some archival researchers may argue that they are problematic as archives. Linda S. Bergmann argues for the personal feeling of the physical archive; digitized archives, she claims, cannot fully replicate the physical archive, particularly the pleasure of it (23). Elizabeth Yakel warns scholars that digital records can be incomplete, and that researchers who use digital collections, rather than physical collections, have a responsibility to state that fact in their methodology section (113). This is sound advice since digital archives are only as good as the person who digitized them.

However, many feminist historiographers have embraced digital archives. Ellen Cushman argues that “digital archives are beginning to define the disciplinary work we do” (116), and as such, feminist historiographers have a responsibility to set standards for how digital archives are examined and constructed, particularly for marginalized groups, such as the Cherokee Nation. Gutenson and Robinson take this argument a step further, arguing that “the existence of digital archives creates the possibility for a significant democratization of historical texts in the 21st century” (74); however, they recognize that such “democratization” depends on access and representation, particularly for women and people of color. I argue that open records as digital
archives provide scholars with two things that they do not yet have: 1. access to existing discourses, as opposed to “historical texts” and 2. a complete, democratized representation of discourse.

While open records may suffer from the “problem” of digitization, they do not suffer from other major problems of traditional archives—namely, that of being “specially selected,” “hidden,” or “removed from active circulation” in an archive (Ramsey 88) because they are required by law to be complete. That means that if a citizen requests the public comments on a particular project, all the comment will be delivered, with only very specific redactions. Not only can anyone access open records, but anyone’s comments can be accessed. Open records are a democratizing space in that no archive is considered more valuable or salvageable than any other. Ramsey explains that one barrier for traditional archives is that materials are not archived because there is no money to pay an archivist to do the work; as a result, the materials that end up being archived are those materials for which someone can afford to pay (80). In other words, a wealthy estate may be able to hire someone to archive and preserve their records, but this is a luxury few can afford; this practical imbalance skews the archives that are available. However, open records laws require that all documents be archived, transparent, and accessible, meaning that the wealthiest citizen’s words are filed right alongside the poorest citizen’s.

While the archive is legally required to be complete, it is doubtful that the public officials examining and archiving these comments specialize in archival research methods. As I noted earlier, the expectations for retrieving the information, organizing it, and presenting it to the requestor is stated to be the “lowest paid employee” that can do the work. In my case, I received the information from a paralegal (though it is not clear if she was the one who aggregated the records). That said, the government employees who are gathering this information likely do not
have specialized training in this field, as archivists do. It is doubtful that government employees
gathering records to respond to an open records request are aware of the need to preserve the
original order or the original rhetorical situation of the materials, as Sammie Morris and Shirley
Rose call archivists to do (56).

In the example of the million-dollar bribery scandal that recently plagued Atlanta’s City
Hall (which I referenced earlier), 1.476 million documents were made available to the public
because of an open records request. Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed scrambled to make the
documents public as soon as possible in order to avoid seeming shady or untrustworthy; within a
month, the documents were prepared for the journalists who requested them—(unorthodoxically)
printed and delivered in four hundred boxes. Pictured below is the Mayor standing with this wall
of documents at a press conference:

*Figure 3. Photo credit, Henry Taylor, AJC.com*
However, according to the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, this “document dump” did not make for a useful archive. Many of the documents were blank or illegible, printed on font too small to read. In an article, *AJC* columnist Bill Torpy complained that the documents were released “in no particular order,” and as “an act of political theater.” Many of the born-digital documents were printed, when they could have been easier to access—and search through—if they had remained digital. While the Mayor promised that people seeking help examining the documents would have help, Torpy wrote that no one seemed to understand what to do with the papers: “the few document concierges on hand, some who even had law degrees...were pleasant enough when shrugging in response to questions.”

Clearly, this open records request led to the creation of a flawed archive, but these flaws do not make it any less worthy of inspection; in fact, given the problems with open records documents and public comment processes more generally, historiographers and archival specialists have a special responsibility to engage with them, providing insight, alternate readings, and perhaps even guidance on how to use, store, and interpret them. That said, many of the principles of archival research that Morris and Rose explain—including questions of provenance, of a single creator, and of handling and preserved aged documents (55-58)—do not (always) apply to open records. These records reflect larger publics and more recent histories—and are beholden to speedy timelines due to political pressure and public scrutiny. In addition, to access solicited public comments sent via email in the “original order” in which they were sent or received would mean to access multiple email servers; the creators are multiple, and one could argue, the creator may be the project or, in the case of Peachtree Road, the street itself, which draws public comments toward it.
In an ideal world, quick access to comprehensive archives of recent histories would allow feminist historiographers and researchers to consistently make transparent extant and institutionalized corruption and prejudice, particularly against minorities, women, and other marginalized groups. However, such quick access to timely issues—particularly those implicating governments or politics—is rare since it takes time and care to build an archive. To overcome this delay and expeditiously access ongoing public discourses, researchers can leverage open records laws to examine nearly all texts created or received by government institutions.

3.5 Open records as a complement to existing archives

Open records are a democratizing site of research because they are inherently social, rather than isolating; when we engage with open records, we are trying, perhaps idealistically, to get a snapshot of our extant democracy, as opposed to an understanding of a single individual or a particular group of people. Rejecting the image of the lonesome researcher, Neal Lerner reframes archival research as a social experience, reminding us that archives are not the artifacts themselves but instead the relationships connected to those artifacts (196). Much as a rose preserved in a Bible has little meaning in itself, we must recognize artifacts are physical evidence of a social webbing: of the gardener who grew the rose, the woman who offered it, the child who received it.

In “The Personal as Method and Place as Archives: A Synthesis,” Liz Rohan argues that this social web extends beyond the historical social webbing to our own personal connections to our research, the “imagined communion” between the researched and the researcher—a communion available through the physical world that connects them across time (244). It occurs to Rohan that the texts of archival research are not only in the “library an hour away,” but also in
the actual streets that she is driving on: “These texts were outside my car window” (italics hers, 244). The present moment, and the present design of the streets, are crucial to Rohan’s archival research—and not only for nostalgia’s sake. Rohan believes that examining the streets that her research subject Janette walked on is as important as visiting the physical archives because the extant streets allow the living person to enter into an “imagined communion” with Janette. Not only should archival research recognize the social circle of the artifacts but it should engage the living researcher as well. What is missing from this social representation of archival research is the hodgepodge of the streets: diverse individuals drawn to a specific place, writing and arguing in real time—multiple citizens responding to public discourse, crashing into each other. A space where this kind of messy, ordinary, democratic present does exist is in public comments. Through open records, we can build sweeping narratives from amalgamations of individual, public discourses, and we can locate the sites of discourse that bring citizens together. Considering archival research from this angle of socialization, we can explore limitlessly the paths, overlaps, and meeting places between people and their ideas across space—and across time.

Our interest in present circumstances can also lead us to inquire into history. For example, my interest in Peachtree Road’s current design led me to explore its earlier designs. As I read through public comments submitted only months before, I began to ask myself: “What past influences may have led to these current narratives?” As a result, I wanted to examine historical institutional documents—urban planning manuals, photographs of Peachtree Road—as a means of bolstering my research into recent histories, and I found myself at the Georgia State Special Collections archives seeking these artifacts so that I could better understand the present through comparison to the past.
We are, after all, always drawn back to the present moment, and just as we should acknowledge there is nothing wrong with wanting to study history for its own sake, we should recognize that there is nothing wrong with wanting to research recent histories with the explicit intention of connecting those histories with the current moment, particularly for researchers (like me) who acknowledge the activism in their own work and who want to have an impact on public discourse occurring now. Taking an archival lens to open records can allow us to challenge how public discourse is conducted and how policies result from those public discourses, with the idea of creating change. Open records research can be a complement to existing archival research, particularly because studying open records can help us better frame archival research as not only as a social act but as an act that impacts current publics and democracy.
4 HOW A PUBLIC AGENCY “READS” PUBLIC COMMENTS

Whether it takes the form of voting, protesting, attending public meetings, or running for office, civic engagement is a cornerstone of a functioning democracy. John Ackerman notes that civic engagement practices have permeated every sphere of our lives from the missions of universities to global economic policies (79). Governments have kept pace with the citizens’ desires for engagement by encouraging this practice through public engagement and public involvement processes that allow citizens to voice feedback. Public engagement seeks to ensure that publics are informed by and inform decision makers and governments; in turn, decision makers and governments will implement policies that reflect publics’ discourse and debate. However, while public engagement processes are lauded as a key piece of civic engagement (and thus our democracy), there is little information on how these processes actually work in practice. When a government calls for a “public engagement” process before making a decision, the “process” part is largely left unexplained. How civic engagement and public engagement work in practice—how the texts or discourse citizens produce are implemented by governments—is often unclear, though both practices are championed.

Ackerman has questioned the inherent good of civic engagement, revealing the capitalistic undertones of the concept, and he calls rhetoricians to explore how civic engagement functions in practice. He writes that “There is a uniquely powerful position for rhetorical agency as it sorts through the economic myth and reality of civic engagement in the polis” (83). In order to examine the capitalistic frameworks through which civic engagement functions as both a “myth” and a “reality,” we need to understand how civic engagement processes work; it is easy to champion civic engagement without examining how that engagement is interpreted by public officials.
As I will show in this chapter, GDOT reads public comments and holds public engagement periods through the lens of neoliberal and capitalist frameworks that seek efficiency and treat citizens as customers. In addition, the methods they employ for “reading” public comments are unclear and haphazard; their goal is to distill these narratives into “votes” for or against the project. While this process may not seem problematic at first glance—as voting is a form of civic engagement—this conflicting understanding of the genre of public comments leads to confusion and opaque processes. Constituents often employ the genre of public comments in order to express longer narratives about their ideas, experiences, and feelings about public spaces and their city; public officials look to them in order to make a quick decision about whether or not to go forward with a project.

In this chapter, I will begin by briefly explaining the environmental regulations and processes that are the impetus for public comment periods and then detailing the published guidelines that GDOT provides for the public engagement process, demonstrating the dearth of methods provided for actually reading and implementing public input. After problematizing GDOT’s framework of referring to and discussing constituents as “customers” and “stakeholders” rather than “citizens,” I will turn to the public comments for the bulk of this chapter. I will break down how GDOT categorized the public comments for Peachtree Road before issuing their decision to forgo the project, demonstrating that GDOT’s “methods” consisted of distilling comments into votes, primarily for or against the project. I argue that because supporters of the project had little exigency for submitting public comments—which are often used to ask questions or make critiques—using the public comment process as a referendum led to a skewed result, as did the tallying process, in which many people’s comments were counted multiple times. At the end of this chapter, I will problematize the ways that GDOT
chose to tally these public comments, particularly through their framework of treating public comments as votes. In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate how government officials view and use methods for “public engagement” in a single case study. By understanding the processes—both good and bad—that these officials use to engage with citizens, rhetoric and composition scholars can better approach collaboration with government agencies on public projects more broadly.

4.1 GDOT’s frameworks for the public engagement process

Before examining public engagement in practice, we must define it and understand the frameworks through which it is deployed. GDOT states in their Public Involvement Plan that the public engagement process is a means of hearing and responding to concerns of residents in order to make decisions that are multilateral. “Listening and responding to customer concerns is the foundation of every successful public agency’s mission and is necessary for competing interests to reach consensus on how to address multiple social needs” (4). GDOT’s engagement with the public—through public hearings, open houses, and public comment periods, among other methods—stems from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) rules. The federal government enacted NEPA 1970 as the “basic national charter for protection of the environment. It establishes policy, sets goals…and provides means…for carrying out the policy.” GDOT, like other state agencies, is required to abide by NEPA, and their reporting processes have to reflect adherence to this policy. While there are some limitations on which projects are required to abide by NEPA policies (for example, projects under $100 million are under less scrutiny), the impetus for public engagement stems from these environmental policies. NEPA requires that agencies such as GDOT “make a diligent effort to involve the public in preparing and implementing their NEPA procedures during the environmental phase of project delivery.” As such, public
engagement is under the jurisdiction of the Office of Environmental Services (OES), and environmental transportation planners at GDOT are in charge of the processes. I am not going to offer an examination of NEPA or its implementation here. However, it is important to note that the public engagement process exists in order to comply with NEPA, and that environmental scientists and transportation planners in OES are the people in charge of public engagement—including soliciting, reading, understanding, summarizing, synthesizing, responding to, implementing, and archiving public comments—all skills which might not be their specialty.

In order to help OES employees understand how to engage the public, GDOT published a seventy-page guide titled “Public Involvement Plan for NEPA Projects 2016.” This guide, which applies to the Peachtree Road project, explains in detail how to encourage public engagement for projects, particularly by advertising and executing open houses and soliciting public comments. The instructions for how to conduct an open house are very detailed, stating when the public meetings should be held (“after typical work hours, during typical lunch hours”), where they should be held (“Locations near transit are preferred, and the facility should be able to easily accommodate 100-125 people”), and what the citizens should receive at the meeting (“at a minimum a welcome letter, comment card and project description”). There are templates for advertisements for the open houses, explaining the exact size they should be, and where they should be posted. The open houses—like the one GDOT held for Peachtree Road in October 2015—are expected to last two to three hours, without any formal presentations, and specifically as a means of collecting public comments (24). In fact, in reading through the guide, it is clear

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8 For more information about NEPA’s processes, I recommend The NEPA Book: A Step-by-step Guide on How to Comply with the National Environmental Policy Act, though there is also very limited information on methods for implementing public comments in this text.
that the end goal of “public engagement” is the texts that it produces—the public comments. Getting people to attend meetings, understand the information provided there, and feel engaged in the process is intended to get them to create texts (public comments). However, while there are pages and pages of explanation on how to hold an open house in order to encourage and collect public comment, the guide provides almost no explanation of what to do with the texts once they are created. As shown in the detailed instructions on open houses, GDOT employs concrete instructions where the outcome is measurable. Reading and rhetorically analyzing thousands of words of public comments—perhaps through a lens of demographic and historical information about a community—requires methods as well, but these methods may not be easily explained in a single guide. However, it is likely because reading and analyzing public comments is less concrete that it receives very little emphasis in this Plan.

Regardless of the reason, instructions on how to examine public comments are sparse and vague. The OES is tasked with ensuring that “the public involvement record is properly documented” (12) and “preparing the initial synopsis for each open house, preparing the Summary of Comments…of all comments for the official transcript of the open house and coordinating responses from appropriate offices that address public comments and questions” (23). OES is asked to be sure that the record is complete and to regularly summarize groups of public comments, afterwards identifying the right person to respond to these comments. How is a synopsis written? What is included in the summary, and what is left out? The guide demonstrates no awareness of the need for further instructions. Of the seventy-page guide, only one page in the Appendix of the Plan is devoted to methods for reading, summarizing, and synthesizing the

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9 It might take getting a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition to really get a hang of such methods.
comments, which are the focus of so much effort to gather. The Appendix includes a template response letter with the instructions for a “Disposition of Comments”:

Suggested strategy: 1. Sort your comments alphabetically by the commenter’s last name. Give each commenter a number. Be aware that some commenters provide their comments in multiple ways (i.e. providing a comment form and a court reporter interview). Should this occur, the commenter should still only have one comment number and these different sources for comments should be grouped together. 2. If the commenter touches on multiple subjects, split the commenter’s remarks into multiple parts designated with letters and combined with the number (e.g. 1a, 1b, 1c…). 3. Summarize these comments in the Nature of the Comment Column [above]. List in the Comment # Column all comments (from multiple commenters) that fit the Nature of the Comment description.

From these instructions, the comments are supposed to be summarized and synthesized according to the “nature of the comment,” with instructions that if “the commenter touches on multiple subjects,” that comment should be split up accordingly. However, again, no explanations are offered as to what subjects should be highlighted and why or how to identify the “nature” of the comment. Also, there are no templates or examples, either of public comments or summarized public comments. The only other instruction for summarizing is ambiguous: “use completes sentences with enough context and information.” Again, these instructions are on one page in an appendix of a seventy-page guide to public engagement; almost no focus is given on meaningfully interpreting these texts.

Essentially, the guide moves from explaining how to solicit public comments to how to respond to public comments—specifically how to demonstrate in a response that/if public feedback was incorporated into design. GDOT notes that if the engineers adopt citizens’ suggestions in their plans, “the Department must ALWAYS find ways to inform the public of the impact of their input. These could include: verbiage in project fact sheet/information letter on decision” or a flyer or “visual/graphic/display board notifying public of decision on their behalf”
Although GDOT warns that the public can oftentimes be misinformed and may make suggestions that are unsafe, the gold star for a public engagement process appears to be making changes to a project based on citizens’ desires. And the more publicly GDOT can demonstrate these changes, the better. In their December press release, GDOT titled their press release to indicate the impact of public input: “Peachtree Road Project: Public’s Voice Heard in Planning Process - No Bike Lanes.” The head engineer on the project, Meg Pirkle, then goes on to praise GDOT’s process of public engagement as a shining example: “Throughout the planning and development of this project, we have consistently looked for meaningful ways to engage the public; to listen to the concerns and ideas of various audiences; and to make sure that their input and comments were properly reflected.” Again, this seems like a win for public engagement: when a government agency listens to the public and incorporates their suggestions into public spaces. However, as I will show, there is little methodological indication that GDOT spent much time “listening” or “engaging” with the publics’ diverse feedback. Instead, GDOT’s desire and pressure to appear to take public feedback into consideration adds to the unmethodical process for examining public feedback; it also may have led to the rushed response to those public comments.

According to the schedule below, the timing of the December 11 press release also means that less than a month passed between GDOT receiving all the public comments and their final decision to forgo the bike lanes from the project:

**October 25, 2015:** Open house

**November 16, 2015:** Public comment deadline

**December 11, 2015:** GDOT’s press release
February 2, 2016: I accessed the public comments through an open records request

May 29, 2016: GDOT mailed a letter to everyone who publicly commented on the project, summarizing the “major concerns” and responding to those concerns

This turnaround means that the process of reading, digesting, summarizing, synthesizing, and seeking out responses did not occur before the decision was made. That process only occurred four months following the public comment deadline. By the time GDOT responded to the publics’ specific concerns, their decision had been made for over three months. This timeline means that GDOT made a decision without fully considering the narratives contained in the public comments. As a result, engagement or involvement of the public—and the creation of public texts—is a means of checking a box by appearing to be very responsive to public engagement. Of course, a more generous explanation for these processes is that GDOT is a government agency tasked with making and implementing transportation decisions quickly, particularly to uphold NEPA deadlines. Therefore, if it seems blatantly obvious from a quick read-through of the public comments that most citizens were against the project, then the project should be scrapped, right? The problem with that line of thinking is that GDOT does not solicit comments in order to understand the majority position on a project but instead to involve constituents in the process of implementing projects and to listen to their ideas and concerns.

It is essential that rhetoricians understand how these public comments are understood as a genre both to public officials (who are calling for and reading the texts) and to the publics who produce the texts. We should focus on the uptake of public comments, as their discourse often

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10 I am not going to examine that letter in this chapter because, while it addresses several concerns constituents had, it only addresses them once the decision had been made.
leads to major public decisions. Dylan Dryer defines *uptake* in genres as “readers' and writers' enactment of acquired dispositions toward recurrent textual forms” (503). Rhetoric and composition scholars need to understand both publics’ uptake of their public comments and government officials’ uptake of public comments. In particular, we should be concerned about how institutionalized genres (such as public comments) perpetuate capitalist frameworks, particularly in those who read and write within them. Dryer writes that “Genres do not negate human agency, of course, but it would be unwise to underestimate the degree to which institutionally entrenched genres reproduce themselves by reshaping the readers and writers who are required to take them up” (512). In other words, genre can transform people just as people can transform genres. In the case of public comments for Peachtree Road, genre can transform not only citizens and government officials but also the city streets in question.

Exploring the similar genre of public petitions, Mary Jo Reiff argues that rhetoric and composition scholars must examine material conditions of how public discourse is produced. She writes, “Locating discourse in its material conditions and recognizing the material resources that influence the production, circulation, and reception of discourse in the public sphere magnify our critical lens for studying public discourse” (Reiff 100). Scrutinizing how public comments are produced and how they are read and used as a tool will allow us insight into not only this genre but also public engagement processes more broadly. Little research has been done in the field of rhetoric and composition to interrogate what capitalistic frameworks might be influencing public officials’ uptake of these texts and what methods are applied when using these public texts as a catalyst for their decisions. Understanding these material conditions is important because these texts lead public officials to make decisions about our public spaces.
4.2 Reading public comments is reading customer comments

GDOT’s efficient processes likely stem from their explicit desire to cater to their “customer” base, delivering products (projects) quickly to ensure customer satisfaction. It is customers, not citizens, whom GDOT is thinking of when they are making decisions about public spaces and/or the public good, as seen in the chart below, printed in the Public Involvement guide. GDOT’s four goals as an agency are: having a good workplace, improving safety, maintenance, and constructing new projects—and “customers” are at the center of everything they do.

Figure 4: An image from GDOT’s Public Involvement Guide.
Throughout the public involvement guide, GDOT uses the terms “customers,” “stakeholders,” “citizens,” “communities,” and “public” almost interchangeably. GDOT tells its employees to think of themselves as “public servants” whose work is ensuring the satisfaction and positive perception not of publics but of customers: “We, as an agency are public servants and stewards of the public trust. Our customers and stakeholders must be at the center of all we do; how we communicate with them on a daily basis and over time will determine the public’s perception of us.” The guide also states that GDOT is beholden to these “customers” when trying to build or fix transportation: “As Georgia DOT works to plan, design, construct and maintain a high-quality transportation infrastructure, it is important to remember that the public is our primary customer” (4). However, public servants cannot serve customers; they can only serve publics.

When the public is viewed as a customer, GDOT’s positionality and view of itself changes, encouraging public servants to think of themselves as service providers or businesses. A more efficient delivery of the product desired by most customers leads to those customers being happy (just as if I were to think of my students as “customers,” doling out A’s might be the best thing to do to ensure their satisfaction—and it would leave everyone with a lot less work to do.) I argue that the desire to please customers instead of listening to and engaging citizens allows GDOT to leave out the hard labor of a nuanced process. If the citizens are customers, then the streets are transformed into products rather than public spaces. This framework for public engagement is problematic, particularly as it can trickle down to the perceptions citizens have of themselves.

In terms of how to respond to public discourse, the guide encourages project team members to view themselves as beacons of expertise while simultaneously listening to public
concerns. These team members are expected “to be experts on the proposed concept and design while being open and available to hearing the concerns of the public” (41). The emphasis on relying on expertise is developed further, with GDOT explaining that employees should see themselves as professionals and citizens as less informed. The GDOT Project Team members are aware of safety considerations that many citizens are not, because transportation is their field of expertise:

As transportation professionals, Project Team members are aware of the industry and safety standards and practices that guide our decisions on project concepts and designs. Most citizens are not aware of these standards and practices when they make suggestions on changes to proposed project plans. In cases where addressing public concerns would conflict with safety, standards, policies or cost-efficiencies, the public would still benefit from knowing that we heard their comments and concerns; were willing to discuss and evaluate them; and that as a steward of taxpayer dollars, we have federal, state and industry parameters to guide our decisions.

This recognition that citizens do not understand transportation best practices is a useful one, as I do not understand many of these best practices myself. The document does not state outright that if citizens’ ideas are too expensive, too dangerous, etc., that the ideas cannot be implemented, but this document does suggest that that is the case. Again, this policy is reasonable; the major issue is that GDOT thinks of its agency as a “steward of taxpayer dollars,” a problematic conception when juxtaposing the highest taxpayers’ desires against the safest projects that demonstrate proper policy implementation. As we will see in the next chapter, this perception of GDOT as in charge of the money that constituents pay leads constituents to think of themselves as power players, particularly if they pay a lot of money in taxes. Similarly, if both GDOT and taxpayers think of GDOT as a “steward of taxpayer dollars,” the control of the situation does not lie with citizens but instead with the highest-paying customers or most frequent shoppers: the wealthy and the rowdy constituents.
It should now be clear that while GDOT encourages public engagement, particularly through public comment, they have no transparent or explicit methods for analyzing the texts such engagement creates. Instead, their focus is efficiency, in which they appear to listen to their “customers” and to appear to be responsive to these “customers,” at the expense of understanding publics and public concerns. When creating new policy or implementing institutional change, decision makers like GDOT seek out public participation for two reasons: 1. to demonstrate that they sought public input, and 2. to come to a decision. While real constraints of time, budget, competing projects, and the need to take action certainly impact GDOT’s public engagement process, it is important to examine what that process looks like to inform rhetoric and composition’s scholars approaches to these processes in the future. I will now turn to the public comments and retrace the means by which GDOT archived, reviewed, and categorized the comments, problematizing these haphazard processes done in the name of efficiency.

4.3 The categorization of public comments

As I noted above, I accessed two thousand public comments about the Peachtree Road project through an open records request on February 2, 2016. The records were provided to me as PDF documents on a website hosted by GDOT, on which the comments were organized into sixteen files. I am going to explain how they were categorized before I explore why they were categorized that way. Each file was labeled with two identifiers that showed just those things. The first identifier was how the comments were submitted, whether “mailed,” “emailed,” “online,” or “meeting,” and the second identifier was the stance on the project, whether “A” (against), “S” (support) “U” (uncommitted), or “C” “conditional.”11 It is important to examine

11 I deduced these designations after spending time with the data; there was no legend or key explaining these codes.
how these files were organized, as the organization reflects GDOT’s emphasis. From this original order, we see that GDOT chose to highlight a commenter’s perceived stance on the project (whether for, against, or other) and the material means by which the comments were submitted. For easy visualization, I have provided a breakdown of the organization of the comments in Appendix A, in the same order that GDOT provided the information to me:

As seen in the chart above, comments that were mailed in or submitted during the meeting were written on prepared comment cards, just like the one in Figure 2 shown below. However, comments emailed in or submitted through GDOT’s online comment system were not composed on these comment cards. Instead, they were written into the blank freeform spaces of a textbox on an online comment system or the textbox of an email. For distinction, I will refer to these comments submitted via mail or in person at the meeting on prepared comment cards as *paper comments*. I will refer to comments submitted via email or through the online portal as *electronic comments*. Before going further, it is important to examine the comment card that paper comments were submitted on, as this comment card shows what information GDOT sought to collect. The comment card is listed in Appendix B.

On the comment card in Appendix B, over half the space is dedicated to feedback on the open house itself—whether it was convenient or accessible—and about a quarter of the space asks for the commenter’s name and address. The remaining space is related to the project. There are four boxes for commenters to check when submitting public comments about a project: for, against, uncommitted, and conditional. The labels on these four checkboxes led to the labels given to all the files: S (support/for), A, U, C. These four checkboxes mean that there are four

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12 Or, in rare cases, on handwritten letters.
13 Except in a few cases in which comment cards were attached as scanned PDFs.
options, indicating that GDOT was not looking for a black and white yes/no vote, which would not be suitable for a public engagement period. However, two of the four checkboxes (for, against) provide for a concrete yes/no response, with a third option (conditional) offering support contingent on changes, and the final checkbox (uncommitted) allowing a respondent to indicate uncertainty. Approximately 91% of all comments were categorized in the for/against categories, while only 9% of comments were considered uncommitted or conditional. In addition, though only 39% of commenters submitted paper comments with boxes checked, 100% of comments were organized as if they had a box checked.

In contrast to these paper comments, electronic comments submitted through email (58% of the total comments) or the online portal (3% of the total comments) had no set parameters or checkboxes. GDOT does even not require emailed comments to provide a name or address (and many do not). While the project itself is the impetus for comment, what the commenter chooses to write about and how long she chooses to write is entirely up to her. Commenters also had the option to submit electronic comments through GDOT’s online comment system, which asks for each commenter’s name, email, address, city, the “category” for the comment (typically “Planning” or “Design,”) and then the comment itself, which can be input into a textbox. Unlike on the comment card, there is no box on the online comment system to check whether the commenter is “for,” “against,” “uncommitted,” or “conditional support” for the project because the online comment system is not specific to a single project. In addition, there are no questions about the meeting or what the commenter has learned from GDOT about the project. The responses to this online comment box vary widely in theme, but most comments are about the same length: a short paragraph, likely because the box itself is only about a tenth of the size of
the screen. However, while there were no boxes to check for electronic comments, GDOT organized these comments as if boxes had been checked, putting each electronic comment into one of the four categories they had prepared on the comment card. The method by which they accomplished this categorization was by highlighting a few words in each electronic comment; in my reading of these highlighted “codes,” it is clear that GDOT surmised what box they believe the commenter would have checked, had she been given the option, and they labeled and categorized the comment accordingly. I argue this method for reading public comments led to a hasty distillation of pages’ worth of narratives into a vote in a category, as I will demonstrate in the next section. Through this “method” of reading, GDOT does not listen to the ideas and concerns of constituents, as GDOT indicated the public involvement period was supposed to do, nor is the agency able to understand emerging narratives and contexts of publics who are participating.

While we cannot know for sure, my sense is that paper comments were likely not read because they are not highlighted at all. GDOT categorized the paper comments based solely on what box was checked. However, as I will show in the next section, a person who indicates she is “against” a project might have very different reasons for being against it from another person who says he is “against” it. I may be “against” drinking a can of soda because I am not thirsty, while my neighbor might be “against” it because she has Type I diabetes. When forced to check a box, the nuance of argument or narrative is not captured. Being presented with the checkboxes first, before general comments are provided, encourages both citizens and GDOT to focus in on the “vote” rather than reading the nuanced narratives provided in the “General comments”

14 I have submitted comments through GDOT’s online system, and I felt compelled to keep my comments short since the box is so small.
section below. We might think of the checkboxes as the grade for the project and the “General comments” section as feedback on the project; upon seeing their grade, it seems GDOT felt no incentive to read further to understand why that grade was given, though many commenters wrote well outside the bounds of these X lines, continuing comments on the back or sides of the comment cards. Examining the results of the checkbox or forcing an electronic comment into a checkbox was the way that GDOT “listened” to these commenters before making a decision: a problematic conception.

By this point in my argument, it may seem that I am against concrete measurements of all kinds--instructions, deadlines, and the kind of quantitative data that emerges from votes or surveys. I want to make it clear that I am not against these methods at all. What is problematic in GDOT’s approach to public engagement is their distillation of narratives into quantitative data and their use of a public engagement process as a referendum vote. The checkboxes and the grouping together of all the comments into the categories created by these checkboxes are problematic because they corral citizens’ general ideas into categories that commenters did not even know existed; thus, the public comment process is essentially asking people to vote when they don’t even know they are voting.

In fact, citizens often think of the public comments as a place where they will be listened to—extensively. Particularly in electronic comments, where space is unlimited, people submit comments that are very personal, reflecting on their unique positionality as citizens in Atlanta. It is clear that many constituents expect, perhaps based on GDOT’s promise that they will “listen,” that GDOT is interested in hearing whatever constituents would like to say about the project, or how it will affect them. Commenter 1584 writes a long email, in which she goes into detail about her very personal relationship to bicycling, to Atlanta and its suburbs, to her friendships and her
marriage, etc. I am only showing a snippet of this email, but it is 468 words—a short essay. She writes:

My name is [redacted], and I have lived in the Atlanta area for most of my life. I grew up in [a suburb], about 45 minutes south of the City, attended Georgia Tech… During my time in Atlanta proper over these past five years, I've seen the city, and my interaction with it, transform. Living in the suburbs, it never occurred to me that I could use a bicycle as transportation… however, [I] quickly saw that not only was it possible to use a bicycle for transportation, it was affordable, healthy, and fun. My social network grew around bicycling - I even met my husband on a bicycle ride, and we now live in [an Atlanta neighborhood]. I worked at a job in [an Atlanta suburb] for years and eventually decided to make a change in part due to my inability to reach it safely or quickly by alternative means of transportation. I know that I'm not alone in this.

Commenter 1584 goes on to explain why she supports the implementation of a bike lane, but this level of detail above demonstrates that she does not view her public comment as a quick vote to be tallied. She expects that GDOT will “listen” to what she has to say and understand her specific experience. It is certainly possible that GDOT read and understood her nuanced appreciation for bicycling, but the only pieces they highlighted of her comment are “greatly support the center turn lane, 4 travel lane, and 2 bike lane option for the corridor and will be happy to see it in any form. I strongly,” suggesting with their highlighter that those pieces of information were the most important to record.

Commenter 1586’s email is twice as long as commenter 1584. In the selection below, he seeks to synthesize arguments made by different interest groups in Atlanta in order to demonstrate the overlap those groups have in their ideas:

Two anecdotes illustrate the need for a new configuration on Peachtree Road, like GDOT's proposal: first, a community member at the recent meeting reported witnessing a hit and run crash due to a left turn on their way to the meeting. Second, David Pendered, Managing Editor of the Saporta Report, was nearly struck by a distracted driver as he walked across Peachtree Road after the meeting-in a marked crosswalk, on a green light. Addressing the broad spectrum of people who use Peachtree Road, Nina Schwartz, as quoted in NeighborhoodNewspapers.com, made an excellent point: "Any time you mess
with a road, you have to look at all the stakeholders. I don't think anyone stakeholder should be so arrogant to think it's okay to ... damage the health of neighborhoods, solely for a singular purpose.” I agree with her. Currently neither the victim of the hit-and-run which the meeting attendee saw, nor Mr. Pendered, nor the cyclist who has to take the lane, nor the driver stuck in a traffic jam behind that cyclist are adequately served by the lane configuration. It is imperative, as Ms. Schwartz said, to account for the needs of all users in redesigning this or any road.

While this analysis would earn him an A in my composition classroom, his anecdotes and analysis of newspaper articles about the project—and his desire to point out the mutual points of interest for several different citizens—were likely left unread, as none of this anecdote was highlighted by GDOT. The comment was filed in “support,” with only a few words highlighted.

In contrast to the commenters above, Commenter 793 clearly believes that the public comment genre is a place to hash out major complaints about Atlanta generally, and to express his frustration at governance more broadly; the bike lane discussion is a gateway to his larger complaints. He writes:

HAVING BIKE LANES ON PEACHTREE ROAD IS RIDICULOUS. THERE IS SO MUCH TRAFFIC THAT CAN BARELY GET AROUND LET ALONG [sic] HAVING TO WORRY ABOUT SOME IDIOT RIDING A BIKE IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL THAT TRAFFIC! THESE ARE STREETS FOR AUTOMOBILES NOT BIKE/WALKING PATHS OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF PARADISE. ALSO, FIX LENOX ROAD FROM PEACHTREE ROAD TO PIEDMONT - IT LOOKS LIKE A THIRD WORLD ROAD- THERE ARE SO MANY CHUNCKS [sic] OF ROAD MISSING, IT IS HAZARDOUS TO DRIVE. PATHETIC ATLANTA DID NOT KEEP UP THEIR INFRASTRUCTURE AND ROADS WHEN THEY WERE FAT WITH ALL THOSE TAXES COMING IN FROM THE REAL ESTATE BOOM IN THE PAST 20 OR SO YEARS!! TOO MANY CROOKS IN THE KITCHEN GOING OUT THE BACKDOOR WITH ALL THAT MONEY!!! THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE VOTE IDIOTS INTO OFFICE ...........

We see that commenter 793 used his comment to complain about the lack of adequate infrastructure and governance in Atlanta more generally, while commenter 1584 saw the public comment period as a means of expressing her loving relationship with Atlanta (and to her
bicycle); commenter 1586 saw his comment as a space where he could draw out for GDOT the overlap among many different arguments about the project. While these commenters speak to the project specifically, they also provide GDOT with narratives specific to their own positionality and context for their reasoning; the lengthy and often emotional renderings of their relationship to Peachtree Road or transportation suggest that these commenters believe their comments will be read—and taken to heart.\textsuperscript{15} They are produced with passion and thoughtfulness. Those citizens who view a public comment period as time to type out nuanced feelings or ideas about their communities’ public spaces are essentially wasting their energy, as the details in these narratives are not considered in a public engagement process. As a result of this confusion, citizens may become apathetic or cynical about their involvement in public engagement; therefore, it is our job to make transparent these processes so that they might be changed, or so that if they are not, citizens can at least understand the genres that they are participating in. In the next section, I will explore what information GDOT highlights and takes into consideration in electronic comments like these, which allow for an open-ended response.

\textbf{4.4 How GDOT tallies comments}

As I stated above, GDOT relied on highlighting and checkboxes in order to tally comments within four categories. Paper comments were not highlighted, and therefore possibly not read at all; they were simply categorized according to the box checked. Rather than read the electronic comments in their original format—on a screen—GDOT printed them in order to read them, which is clear because the online comments are hand-numbered in the corner and

\textsuperscript{15} In the next chapter, I will offer an alternate, feminist reading of these same comments, with a methodological basis for my analysis. However, in this chapter, I simply want to point out that GDOT ignored the personal stories or emotions that constituents expressed, disregarding these elements as they sought to extract a quantitative vote from the comments.
highlighted by hand, with uneven marker strokes, and then they were uploaded as PDF files. This movement of electronic comments to paper likely allowed GDOT to make swifter decisions (a quick highlight) and stack the comments in the “right” piles. Using the highlighter, a GDOT employee seems to have tried to identify whether the commenter is in favor of or against the project as a whole. In order to do this, GDOT was searching for specific words that match with their language from their comment card, words like “support” or “oppose.” The most commonly highlighted word in the “against” category was, in fact, “oppose,” which was highlighted 201 times, followed by the similar “opposition,” which was highlighted 32 times. The word “against” appeared 22 times on scanned comment cards, which had the “against” box checked, or “against” was highlighted as part of a sentence 38 times. Other common words that were highlighted were “concern” (28 times) and “object to” (10 times). Any personally identifying information, including personal experiences, reasoning behind positions, income level, transportation type, community affiliations, place of residence, length of type of commute, or other personal or identifying information was almost never highlighted.\(^\text{16}\)

Let us turn to a few examples of comments filed against the project to demonstrate what GDOT chose to highlight. Commenter 1269 wrote the following in her email:

I am an Atlanta resident living in Buckhead and have been here for 42 years. I was the former Vice-President and General Manager of [a store] at [a popular Buckhead location] for 28 years and certainly am familiar with the area and all of its inherent traffic and road issues.

I am vehemently opposed to "road diet" to accommodate bike lanes. Given the seriousness of the traffic issues already existing and the continuing growth occurring not only on the Peachtree Corridor but many of the side streets as well will naturally exacerbate the traffic problems we already have and clearly adding those bike lanes by eliminating a lane of travel will create an even more serious situation. In addition, it will

\(^\text{16}\) GDOT did not redact any such information in the public comments, either; I have made the redactions in the previous comments. Whether open records should make available to the public such personal information is an ethical question for another time.
also create even more of a problem in surrounding neighborhoods that will be seriously impacted by this proposal. As it is, Peachtree Road traffic congestion is already driving thru traffic in those neighborhoods to escape the continuing traffic jams on Peachtree Road.

I am totally against this proposal to accommodate bike lanes. Please do not allow it…

The portion of her email that GDOT highlighted is replicated above. While commenter 1269 explains her relationship to the Buckhead area (as a resident and an employee) and her concerns about too many cars driving through neighborhoods around Peachtree Road, GDOT only highlights the portion of the text wherein she indicates her opposition to bike lanes and the proposal, which she states outright.

That GDOT chooses to ignore identifying information (such as where commenter 1269 works) demonstrates a commitment to generating a sample untainted by personal affiliations, which, it could be argued, is a good thing. GDOT does not highlight any personal information about the subjects: where they live, how long they have lived there, what their businesses are, what their commute times are, whether or not they have children, their disabilities, their age, etc. Even CEOs and other prominent businesspeople who self-identify are not noted for their jobs or stated business connections, as one respondent boasts that he is a “close friend and colleague of Jeb Bush” (comment 1232). No such information is highlighted in electronic comments, ensuring that identifying information that might encourage wealthier or influential people’s voices to be heard more clearly than others. However, it also leaves out important pieces of context about the commenters. For example, were GDOT to come to the realization that many local neighborhoods opposed the project specifically because they were misinformed about traffic patterns and rightfully concerned about heavy influx of traffic on quiet neighborhood streets, GDOT could address these issues and inform residents about them.
Comment 1267 is filed right before Comment 1279 in the “against” category, despite its very different message. Comment 1267 suggests that people bicycling should be on a dedicated pathway (like the “Beltway”), and that if lanes for cars are reduced, access to public transportation should be increased:

If more people biked to work, this plan could be considered. They don't and they won't. So the plan is not feasible. If you take a lane away, put in street car/public transport to go up and down Peachtree. Don't let bikers bully! This is a road in a major metropolitan center--w cars, trucks, buses, pedestrians. Expand beltway for bikers who want to bike to midtown and downtown. Beltway is already so cool--that would make it and Atlanta even more internationally renown!

While commenter 1269 opposed the project out of concern for increased traffic in her specific neighborhood, commenter 1267 writes that he opposes the bike lanes because he would prefer to see the road modified for increased public transportation and for improvements to be made to the Beltway to accommodate bicyclists (by which he means the “BeltLine,” a nearby dedicated multiuse path that has, in fact, brought Atlanta international renown). However, the only line highlighted of his message is “the plan is not feasible,” after which it is put into the “against” category.

Comment 1904, too, is categorized in the “against” category. He writes:

I attended the last community presentation at Shepard. Also I've been following this proposal since my wife and I live [at an address near the project]. Almost every day we take a walk either north toward Pharr Rd. or south at least to Collier Rd. I can count the number of bicyclist using Peachtree on one hand. Of those five, 3 are on the sidewalk and the other two are riding downhill at ridiculous speed without helmets.

My question and comments are: why is so much planning effort, and eventual expense, being spent on changing the marking pattern south from Peachtree Battle for bike lanes and 3 down/2 up for car lanes north to Pharr Road. Accidents are inevitable just from confusion.

What I see more of are walkers. For recreation, to shop, from bus stops, people walk. And in many places along Peachtree, particularly around St. Phillip, the sidewalk narrows to the point of being scary. No buffer.
My idea: make it simple. From Deering to Pharr, using the existing 60 foot total width, create five 11 foot car lanes. Two lanes north, two lanes south, one dedicated center turn lane. Take the remaining 5 feet and add 2.5 feet each side for sidewalk width increases or at least buffers.

Done. There may be frustrated bike people, but many more less frustrated drivers and a lot of happy walkers.

This comment does not state outright opposition to the project, yet it is filed under “against.” The commenter makes suggestions that are not standard to transportation (11 foot car lanes are not standard; 10 and 12 foot car lanes are), and this information is what GDOT chooses to highlight and then, based off this information, slot this comment into the “against” category. The commenter has an idea that demonstrates he would like to see improvements to sidewalks and areas where people can walk. He is very critical of people who ride bicycles (unconcerned with “frustrated bike people” and criticizing bicyclists who “[ride] downhill at ridiculous speeds without helmets.”) However, while his suggestion for how to engineer the road is a modification of the current project, he is not explicitly against the project, though he is against the bike lanes. Interestingly, while commenter 1267 and commenter 1904 both make alternate suggestions (both of which would likely be too expensive and/or outside planning boundaries), only commenter 1904’s idea is highlighted. There is little consistency in how these comments are highlighted.

For example, on comments 1796, only one word is highlighted “disapproval”—and then that comment is filed under “Against.” However, 1796 goes on to say that, “A left center lane is not a bad idea” and in the subject line deems the project a “road decrease on Peachtree.” Similarly, in comment 1794, the only words highlighted are “objection to,” despite two paragraphs of text. In many cases, the subject line is the only thing highlighted. In the case of comment 1362, there is no actual message, only a subject: “No bike lanes please! I’m happy to ‘share the road.’” For comment 1595, a two-page letter is attached along with a comment card in
which the box is checked “against.” Nothing is highlighted on the letter or on the comment card, perhaps since the person’s “vote” is clear.

Another problem with organizing comments into those four categories is that some people do not state outright whether they oppose or support the proposal or parts of it. Commenter 777 writes a paragraph in which she restates some facts about bicycling that GDOT offered. The only portion of her comment that is highlighted reads “Why in the world would you want to increase the number of bikes on a busy commuting road.” Other comments are somewhat more straightforward, stating: “I am vehemently opposed to the proposed project along the Peachtree Rd corridor” (787), with the words “vehemently opposed to” highlighted, and no other highlights made since there is no reason offered. One also has to assume that she is opposed to the whole project, since she does not state that she is opposed to only parts of the project. It is also not clear whether she is opposed to any changes to the road at all or if she is opposed to the bike lanes. Again, these are examples of electronic comments, where no box is available to be checked— but all were categorized as “against.”

By counting comments as votes, GDOT problematically privileges those comments that have a decided-upon and decisive message, as opposed to those commenters who are unsure, willing to learn more, and perhaps, as a result, more open to hearing and understanding more information. Of course, we must recognize the fact that those people who are motivated to write in a comment are likely passionate about the topic— either they adamantly want bike lanes or they adamantly oppose the two-way left turn lanes (TWLTL) or they are strongly concerned about their home values and the impact a changing road might have on that. We can see from the chart of tallied comments that it is more likely that commenters felt passionately in favor of or against the project and that is why they sent comments in in the first place. This polarization is
easy to tally and organize. What is less difficult to organize, highlight, and tally are these comments that ask questions or admit to uncertainties.

For example, Commenter 928 is filed under “Conditional” because he checked the box to state that his support was conditional. However, his narrative is much more ambiguous, and he ends the message by saying, “I am not sure how the utilization data for Peachtree was configured; I can attest that adding bike lanes and left turn lanes may help in some isolated situations, but again, please rethink the proposal so that bikers, walkers, and drivers have safe passage through our streets” (928). This commenter clearly wants to understand the project better and is seeking out the best thing for all users—a “best thing” that he has not yet determined and is entrusting to GDOT. None of this text is highlighted or documented. In the “Conditional” category of electronic comments (which has no box to check), commenters 1777 and 1807 likewise have nothing highlighted—because despite pages of text, there is no single sentence when these commenters “take a stand” and support a specific proposal that GDOT submitted. In the case of commenter 1807, he writes a page and a half with some suggestions that do not support any of the plans that GDOT suggested. His comment meanders. Similarly comment 1777 is hard to pin down as for or against the bike lanes specifically. She writes, “I support bicycling as an alternative, but as an occasional biker, I still think it would be insane to ride a bike on Peachtree, even with a bike lane.” This commenter does not state outright whether she wants the bike lane to exist. Therefore, nothing on the comment is highlighted, and the comment is labeled “conditional” and filed that way. Citizens indicating ambivalence about the project—who, like this citizen, can see both the need for bicycle accommodation while simultaneously questioning the value of this particular bicycle accommodation—seek to understand or learn more about the project, and yet their comments essentially go unread. They are tallied alongside “conditional”
comments that adamantly speak out or for the bike lanes. However, these comments with inconclusive messages are rare, likely because an exploration of the project is not encouraged; a firm stance—a vote—is what GDOT would like to see, as indicated both by checkboxes and by their own rhetoric around the “public engagement” period.

Though they do not state their methods (publicly or perhaps otherwise), we can see that GDOT follows clear methods for analyzing and filing public comments in order to make a decision about whether to implement a project. First, they try to determine if a public comment is for, against, uncommitted, or offering conditional support for the project. For paper comments, they look to the box that is checked; for electronic comments, they search for statements that indicate support or opposition, highlight those words, and then file the text accordingly. For comments that are more ambiguous—or offer “conditional” support or are “uncommitted” without a checkbox marked—GDOT files them in one of these two files. GDOT seemingly does not read the narratives or reasons carefully, seeking an efficient “yes/no” response to the project.

4.5 The lack of exigency for supporters

GDOT’s primary goal in soliciting public comment is to determine whether the public votes for or against the project—a problematic dichotomy for people who support the project, as they have little to no exigency to send in a comment to GDOT. With a typical vote, there is a choice posed and/or a question posed; in this case, there is a project posed, with no question attached. Citizens in favor of the project are less likely to submit a comment indicating full support for the project because to do so means to essentially write in to praise the project, and in many cases, to restate GDOT’s original reasoning for proposing the project, which drew upon their best practices and transportation engineering models. In order to ensure that GDOT received a fair sample of citizens’ thoughts, GDOT should have explained their methods for
reading these public comments, providing clear parameters to citizens on how their comments would be received, categorized, and considered.

Just as publics are called into being through rhetorical discourse, rhetorical discourse is called into being through exigence, or the feeling that something important is at risk. Lloyd Bitzer states that in the rhetorical situation, “exigence…can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence.” In other words, people are called to participate in discourse when there is a crisis that needs fixing or modifying—this need gives them exigence for speech. In the case of the Peachtree Road project, no crisis was presented to the supporters of the project; there was no indication that the project as proposed was at risk. Instead, in soliciting “comments,” GDOT was soliciting thoughts or ideas that the public had. If, perhaps, there were several options for how to redesign Peachtree Road, and if there was an explicit call for a vote, then supporters excited about a particular design would have exigence to weigh in on that design. However, when time is set aside for citizens to comment on a design that traffic engineers consider the safest and best plan—as the design of Peachtree Road was—people who support the project have little exigency to provide critiques, praise, or additional information, because nothing seems to be at risk.

In fact, many public comments submitted “in favor” of the project directly restate GDOT’s evidence and indicate GDOT’s own evidence as the reason they support the project. Commenter 1289 writes,

The proposed cross section of a center turn lane, two travel lanes in each direction, and bike lanes benefits all street users. GDOT models and analysis of the corridor show the cross section can handle vehicle capacity while making it safer for everyone. It has an added benefit of providing dedicated space for people biking and additional space between vehicles and pedestrians, making it more comfortable to walk and bike along the street.
GDOT’s evidence and models demonstrated that reducing lanes and lane size would make the street safer for all users and also not impact the flow of car traffic. Thus, supporters were tasked with restating this evidence to GDOT in order to improve the numbers of people in the “support” category. For example, Commenter 1636 writes in to encourage GDOT to make a decision based on their own evidence, which demonstrates that the changes will improve both safety and traffic flow: “Please make the decision on the Peachtree Road project based on evidence, not uninformed hysteria. The evidence shows the ‘road diet’ planned for Peachtree Road will improve traffic flow and safety, not reduce it.” Commenter 822 includes several elected officials and GDOT employees on his email, writing that “I am confident all of you know and understand that GDOT's research and analysis demonstrate that its proposal will increase safety and efficiency for all road users [italics hers]. That a vocal minority in the neighborhood opposes the project - for reasons that fly in the face of GDOT's evidence - should not prevent such an obviously good project from being built.” Commenter 822 is restating to GDOT that the evidence they provided for the project is good evidence. Commenter 1587 also writes a comment explaining that the data that GDOT gathered should be used:

Despite emotional opposition, best practices in traffic engineering and modeling continue to prove that motorized vehicle throughput can be maintained or improved even when lanes are reduced, through the addition of turn lanes, more consistent speeds, intersection improvements, and modal alternatives like bike lanes.

Here, too, the references to “best practices in traffic engineering” simply reflect GDOT’s statements about the project; however, restating information to GDOT that originated from GDOT is not the reason that this commenter writes in. Instead, commenter 1587 writes a public comment not to make suggestions/changes to the project but to respond to the “emotional opposition” of people against the project. In other words, people writing in to support the
comment were often actually writing to opponents of the project. Otherwise, they had little exigency to submit public comments. GDOT should expect that most of the comments they receive will be “conditional” or “against”—with suggestions or opposition to the project—because those people are the ones who have the exigency to speak up. Therefore, when these public comments are tallied, the “vote” calls forward publics who wish to make changes to the project.

Of course, some people were excited about the prospect of bike lanes on Peachtree Road and wanted to write in with praise. Commenter 1403 writes, “I am in strong support of the complete street project along the entire route of Peachtree. I am particularly excited about the addition of bike lanes which will open the area to me and allow me to patronize all the awesome local businesses on the street.” This comment indicates enthusiasm. Commenter 1403 writes that he is “excited” and with the bike lanes in place he will bicycle to the “awesome local businesses.” However, comments written only to express praise are rare. Since GDOT proposed the project as the best possible option and submitted it to public comment, it seems like the proposal is concrete and simply open to discussion and modification; this problem stems from the publics’ lack of understanding of what the public comment genre entails.

While the addition of bike lanes was generally welcomed by people who ride bicycles (myself included), there was also widespread recognition that the bike lanes were of a mediocre design; in fact, they met bare minimum requirements for what constitutes a “bike lane.”¹⁷ They

¹⁷ National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) guidelines encourage bike lanes to be 6 feet wide: “The desirable bike lane width adjacent to a curbface is 6 feet. The desirable ridable surface adjacent to a street edge or longitudinal joint is 4 feet, with a minimum width of 3 feet. In cities where illegal parking in bike lanes is an concern, 5 foot wide bike lanes may be preferred.”
were very narrow, and they extended for 1.2 miles without any connection point to other bike facilities. As a result, some people wrote in to note that the bike lanes were too narrow or that they did not extend far enough, and in doing so, were often not categorized as in “support” of the bike lanes. Their comments were alternately categorized as “in support” or with “conditional support,” with no real distinctions made between the two. In 15 of 85 (18%) of the emails filed under conditional support, I identified comments that were either explicitly in favor of the entire plan (and simply miscategorized) or supported the project with the critique that the bike lanes did not extend far enough. For example, commenter 833 is filed as “supporting” the plan and writes, “We completely support your plan to bring bike lanes to Peachtree street and that solution has been long overdue. The significant defect in the State's plan, however, is that the bike lanes do not extend all the way to Pharr Road [italics his].” Though GDOT does not label the comment as conditional, this comment actually demonstrates conditional support for the plan, in that the commenter would like to see the bike lanes extended. A similar comment that is labeled “conditional support” states, “I would like to see bike lanes on the whole length of Peachtree Rd. Please add me to the bike lanes all the way list. It is time for Atlanta to move away from its car centric origins.” (1559). This commenter does not state that she is explicitly for or against adding bike lanes on the portion proposed (though presumably if she wants them on the entire length of Peachtree Road, she wants them on the section in question), and so commenter 1559’s support is categorized as “conditional.” Commenter 1559’s statement also reflects an unawareness that her comment will be slotted into one of four categories; she specifically requests that her comment is placed in the more nuanced category of “bike lanes all the way.” However, she does not know

18 This is likely because the only sentence highlighted in the full-page single-spaced email is “completely support your plan to bring bike lanes to Peachtree.”
such a category does not exist. In fact, her comment is filed alongside commenters who are against the bike lanes altogether, which was probably not her intention. If GDOT provided transparent methods for their “reading” of public comments, perhaps she would know better what to write.

What drew in most public comments from “supporters” was not the desire to praise or critique GDOT’s plan. Instead, people who wrote in to support the Peachtree Road improvements were responding to the uproar from opposition, perpetuated in local media. On October 28, 2015, local newspaper *Creative Loafing* published an article titled “We Don’t Need No Stinkin’ Bike Lanes,” where a caption read, “OUTTA MY WAY: The congested chaos on Peachtree Road between Buckhead and Midtown leaves little space for bicyclists.” On November 14, 2015, the *Reporter Newspapers* (a local newspaper covering Buckhead) published an article titled “Commentary: Elected Officials Sound Off on Peachtree Bike Lanes,” in which three elected officials were interviewed, and all three indicated they did not support the bike lanes. The *Atlanta Journal Constitution* published an op-ed November 23, 2015, titled “Keep Bike Lanes Off Peachtree,” in which the president of a local civic association wrote, “Why is the Georgia Department of Transportation so intent on putting unwanted bicycle lanes in Buckhead?” Three days later, the *AJC* published another article titled, “Buckhead Coalition opposes Peachtree Road Bike Lanes,” citing the decision of a coalition of 100 wealthy CEOs in the Buckhead area. Articles were also published in neighborhood newspapers opposing the project, and there were also televised news segments that discussed the opposition. Peachtree Road began getting significant press, particularly toward the end of the public comment period.
As a result, it is clear that many commenters who write in support of this project were not talking to GDOT but instead responding to this uproar. Commenter 913 writes in that she was “dismayed to read that ‘Controversy has erupted over the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) project that would add two-way left turn lanes, medians, wider sidewalks, and bike lanes to Peachtree Road, north of Midtown to Buckhead’” and asks GDOT to “please stand firm in Atlanta’s commitment to diversifying the available transportation options,” the latter sentence of which is highlighted by GDOT. Commenter 1581 writes in as a means of responding to the opposition:

The opposition to the original plan to make Peachtree Road more accessible to bikers (also thereby excluding many city residents who cannot afford to drive) is voiced by a loud minority. GDOT’s traffic experts are well equipped to determine the best course of action for Peachtree Road - their expertise should be valued. It should be valued over the assertions of residents who could be resistant to the change for the sake of it being a change (which is understandable for folks with vested interests in their neighborhoods).

As we see in the comment above, commenter 1581 encouraged GDOT to listen to themselves rather than the “loud minority” who was “resistant” to the project. Commenter 1173 also writes in that people who are opposing GDOT’s plan do so because they do not believe GDOT; his argument appears not to even address GDOT but instead other people in the community. He is writing to GDOT but states “either we believe GDOTs [sic] engineers or we don’t”:

I am dismayed at the irrational, emotional, non-fact-based opposition to the Peachtree Redesign. It's not bikes vs. cars. It's about improving all modes. Either we believe GDOT's engineers or we don't. All of the arguments I've heard against this design are either frivolous, or rooted in the idea that this redesign would negatively impact car throughput, which my understanding is it will not.

Again commenter 1173 restates GDOT’s evidence that the design with bike lanes will not hurt car traffic. This commenter’s exigency for supporting the project stems from a desire to address other members of the public, not GDOT. As we can see, the exigency for voicing their support
came from desiring to respond to the opposition to the project, which became a loud voice, particularly in local media. Thus, supporters of the project sought to speak not to the project itself but instead to the opposition developing in the negative press. Under these circumstances, tallying public comments as for/against votes is not methodologically sound, particularly as the publics envision public comments as a place to offer critiques and suggestion. There is a mismatch of purposes and publics here; people are talking past one another, or even in different spheres. Some people submit four-word “comments” in order to cast a vote against the project; some people write in with suggestions about curb cuts; other commenters seek to explain how Peachtree Road brings them a feeling of connectivity to their neighborhood.

As we can see, many commenters in support of the project write in simply to encourage GDOT to carry out their plans, which were based on best practices and current policies in transportation. The reason that these commenters sent in public comments was not to talk to GDOT but to respond to the flurry of opposition emails, as a means of confirming for GDOT that the plan that GDOT had chosen was, in fact, based on evidence, and would, in fact, improve safety, as their traffic models showed. These comments demonstrate a strange take on the public comment, as it essentially means that the publics who might have otherwise silently supported the project based on GDOT’s evidence were called into action not by GDOT’s call for public comments but instead by the opposition’s response. A very public debate raged on silently in the public comments, where no one could actually communicate their ideas to each other or reach any kind of consensus or mutual understanding; however, public comments were the only sure place where the public could feel their narratives “counted.” Perhaps unwittingly, GDOT became a moderator of that silent debate that emerged on paper—a debate that was suppressed even further because GDOT did not read the comments in order to understand the nuanced
arguments; instead, GDOT made a decision about the project by about taking head count of how many people were sitting on each side of the auditorium. As David Coogan notes, “To conceive of publics…as deliberating bodies or parliamentary debaters who have the power to alter reality, is to limit the style and substance of publics and in some ways miss counter publics all together” (162). GDOT considered the public commenters as “deliberating bodies,” not as people who might simply be expressing a thought about their community—a thought that might not neatly fit into the prescribed sides of the debate.

4.6 A deeper examination of how comments are counted as votes

In the beginning of this article, I recalled Dryer’s argument that institutionalized genres can shape people; it is not only readers and writers who shape genre. GDOT’s uptake of public comments casts public comments as votes, and we can see this emphasis on votes shaping supporters’ comments as well. Some supporters became aware that GDOT was using the reading genre of public comments as a vote, and they changed their comments accordingly. Commenter 1640 criticizes this method: “I appreciate the extension the committee has provided to further collect feedback from the community. But the feedback shouldn't be a referendum vote.” While he notes that is essential for GDOT to understand the communities needs, these comments should not be tallied as a vote. Let us examine further how the genre influenced the public comments that were submitted, first by people who supported the project and then by those who opposed it.

Following the uproar of opposition to the Peachtree bike lanes, the Atlanta Bicycle Coalition (ABC), a bicycle advocacy organization in Atlanta, sent an email to its members. The email was sent on November 16, 2015, the last day of the extended public comment period, and it made explicit how GDOT was going to “read” the public comments submitted about the
project. This email from ABC was attached to comment 1757, and given that ABC has thousands of people on its email list, it is likely that other ABC members read the email and were encouraged to write in support of the bike lanes. The email encouraged constituents to “have their voice heard” but explained the particular format in which public comments must be submitted in order to be “counted”\textsuperscript{19}:

\textit{After months of negative media attention on the GDOT Peachtree Road project, now is the time to have your voice heard on what you think of the proposed changes… The Peachtree Road project is about safety and connectivity, not just bikes… TODAY [November 16] is the last day to share your comments about this project… When emailing GDOT and are supportive of the project, please make sure your comments are explicitly "in support" of the bike lane projects. If you put conditions in your e-mail (i.e., "I'm in favor of the project AS LONG AS other conditions are met"), your support is counted in a different category called "conditional support." This category is weighted differently than those "in support" or "against". Of course, feel free to share your suggestions or comments on the various proposals, just make sure you're not giving a "conditional support" vote towards the project.}

This email makes explicit that the public comment period had devolved into a “vote” for or against the project and encourages supporters to follow the expectations of this genre when submitting their public comments. However, this clearly stated explanation of GDOT’s uptake of public comments was only provided to supporters on the very last day of the comment period. Sixty-seven emails were sent in support of the project on this day, and most of them are one- to three-sentence emails stating unambiguous support for the project. In other words, the contents of these emails are not like the contents of the emails that write lengthy, personal narratives of support—such as the ones I explored earlier. Here are some examples of subject lines of emails sent on November 16 and categorized in “support” of the project:

\textsuperscript{19} As I noted in the preface, I am an avid bicyclist. I am also a member, supporter, and volunteer for ABC. Their mission is “to transform Atlanta into a more livable, accessible city by making biking equitable, safe, and appealing.”
#1335: “In support of Peachtree Road Project”

#1337: “in Support of the Peachtree bike lane projects”

#1338: “In support of the Peachtree bike lane”

#1339: “In support of the Peachtree Road bike lane project”

#1342: “Keep the bike lanes please!”

Each of these subject lines is highlighted by GDOT, and little to none of the actual email (if one exists) is highlighted. As supporters of the project realized what mattered in submitting the comment was the quantity of comments—not content of the message—they had an exigency for responding and sent in these bare bones comments. However, these comments are hardly sterling examples of civic engagement and public discourse, and they do not require GDOT to “listen” to the concerns of constituents. They are commenters who finally understood the uptake of the genre of public comments—albeit at the last minute—and wrote in accordingly.

I would argue that opponents of the public comment considered this a vote early on. As a result, these citizens recognized how to navigate the public comment period. For example, twenty-seven of the emailed comments refer to a vote, either their own or GDOT’s; only two emailed comments in support of the project mention the idea of a “vote.” This difference in a desire for a vote could be chalked up to the fact there are few people who ride bicycles, and that non-bicyclists would win out in a vote. This may very well be true. However, I am not going to explore what would happen if a vote had been held; what is interesting is that many people—particularly opponents of the project—already viewed the comment period as a vote. In particular, I would like to explore why many people who explicitly opposed the project saw their comments as votes, not spaces for narrative.
Some opponents explicitly desired that a vote would be held. Commenter (1659) stated, “The GDOT is not [sic] allow for a vote at the meeting held at Shepard [sic] Spinal Center the other night which was very suspicious.” However, most commenters did not want to hold a vote but instead saw their comment as a vote. Commenter 1114/1272 stated, “this is a vote against the plan.” Commenter 1045 wrote, “This is a vote against the plan.” Commenter 985 wrote, “I vote no to this proposal!” Commenter 1653 wrote a two-sentence email, one of which stated, “My vote is no.” Note that in all of these cases, the words that I have quoted were also the words that GDOT highlighted; GDOT sought out the language of voting in order to categorize comments into a particular category. Other people used their comment to encourage GDOT to vote a particular way, as if they were writing to a senator or other representative. Commenter 1635, “Vote no to this if you care about preserving the beauty and integrity of our wonderful city.” Commenter 1593 wrote, “As a property owner in Buckhead, I’m opposed to the proposed ‘improvements’ to the Peachtree Road corridor. Please take my comments into consideration when placing your vote.” However, GDOT officials, like all bureaucrats, are not elected by citizens to vote or speak on behalf of those citizens. These commenters presume that either they have a vote or that GDOT will cast a vote on their behalf.

This language may come from the fact that opponents of the bike lanes tended to be older and more established citizens who were practiced in “civic engagement” and were well-versed in the dynamics of working with an organization such as GDOT. Former Atlanta Mayor and Buckhead Coalition President Sam Massell, himself age eighty-four at the time, polled the members of the Buckhead Coalition, an invitation-only organization made up of wealthy CEOs
in the Buckhead area\textsuperscript{20}. Massell wrote, “From our members and from the general public, it appears that the argument we face concerning adding bike lanes now to part of Peachtree separates at about age 30 for those in favor against those opposed. On a popular vote, we believe that would calculate to as many as 63 percent being in opposition.” Massell here highlights his awareness of an age split and uses the language of a vote, though it is clear that he has not done any demographic analysis to calculate an actual age split, and he has not taken an actual vote. He “believes” that 63 percent would oppose the project. However, this letter from Sam Massell demonstrates that older, politically empowered, wealthy people in Buckhead (like the members of the Buckhead Coalition) saw the comment period as a time to take a vote as a democratic means of making a decision. While I do not know if the age split was as young as 30—-and a complete demographic analysis is outside the scope of this project—there does appear to be a clear age split. Many commenters opposing the project specifically cite their age or the number of years they have lived in the Atlanta area\textsuperscript{21}.

Politically and civically empowered citizens who have participated in public decision-making for decades believe that their voices matter and that they will be heard. They likely have relationships with their councilperson or state representatives—or they recognize that such

\textsuperscript{20}The Buckhead Coalition is made up of “100 chief executive officers of major area firms,” and members pay $9,000 a year in dues.

\textsuperscript{21}For example, commenter 1692 states, “For 37 years I’ve lived on [a Buckhead] Road and run businesses on both sides of Buckhead.” Commenter 1704 writes, “I’ve been driving in the city of Atlanta for 51 years and whoever had the idea of putting bike lanes on Peachtree had to be drinking.” Commenter 1647/1637 writes, “I’ve lived in NW Atlanta for 47 years…” and “I’m the father of a 46 year old avid biker.” Some people in support of the project state their age as well. Commenter 1279 writes, “I am 33 my wife is 32. We have two kinds on the way. We will live here for the next 30 + years.” That said, some elderly people also indicate support of the project; commenter 1822 writes, “I am nearing 70 and still bike in Atlanta with the traffic. It has become increasingly unsafe.”
people are willing to hear their concerns. They may know officials at GDOT, or at least they may
know their names and email addresses. These politically and civically empowered people were
able to have their voices “heard” more than most people because they did one or both of the
following: 1. Emailed multiple public officials, and/or 2. Emailed multiple times. In many cases,
either act, or a mix of both acts, led to multiple comments being tallied from the same person,
which I am calling multiples. Multiples led to that person’s support or opposition to the plan
being tallied two, three, four, five, or even six times. Multiples emerged more often in opposition
comments than in supporting comments, primarily because comments opposed to the project
tended to include more elected officials and GDOT officials on their emails. One hundred and
fifty-five (155) out of 581, or 26.7%, of tallied emailed comments against the project were
multiples, while only 46 out of 367, or 12.5%, of tallied emailed comments supporting the were
multiples.22

While 201 multiples may not make a difference to the overall tally, it does indicate that
politically savvy people who reach out to multiple government officials can have their comments
counted the most. Commenter 1932, whom I will call Susan, writes that she has “been a resident
in one of the neighborhoods off of Peachtree Road for 20 years” and that she opposes the project:
“this should NOT be done on one of the busiest streets in Atlanta…PLEASE do not take away
lanes on Peachtree.” She provides some personal anecdotes about her children and her
neighborhood, none of which are highlighted by GDOT. Susan’s comment—written in the exact
same language from the exact same email address, with the exact same signature—is counted six
total times: again as 1048, 1053, 1054, 899, and 1686. Susan emailed a city councilperson and a

22 Some people wrote in paper comments and electronic comments as well, but I am focusing for
a moment on emailed comments specifically.
state representative, the email address created specifically for Peachtree Road comments, and an official at GDOT. Both public officials forwarded her comment on to GDOT. GDOT also forwarded the comment on four layers internally, as can be seen on a paper trail. Susan knew to complain broadly—to a city councilperson and a state representative, as well as to GDOT directly—and as a result of this political savvy, Susan’s “vote” was counted six times. Similarly, the commenter who submitted two hastily written one-sentence emails within five minutes of each other (both in all capital letters with exclamation points) had his entire one-sentence message highlighted (“PLEASE DO NOT IMPLEMENT!” and “PLEASE USE YOUR INFLUENCE TO PREVENT IMPLEMENTATION [sic] OF THIS FAULTY IDEA!”) and counted as two separate comments, or two separate “votes.” Imagine if such miscounting happened in an actual vote. Our democracy would crumble.

I will not speculate as to whether Susan or the other commenter knew their comments would be counted multiple times. However, clearly these commenters feel comfortable with and entitled to having their comments read and received several times. Their comments also demonstrate that GDOT’s system for counting public comments as votes is not methodologically sound. In fact, in many cases it is sloppy. Consider the case of comments 1723, 1724, and 1727, which follow each other very closely numerically, and all had the same pieces of text highlighted with the same pink marker: “We have serious reservations about the wisdom of reducing Peachtree Rd from 3 traffic lanes to 2 traffic lanes in each direction to accommodate a bike lane in each direction.” It is surprising that someone highlighting and “counting” these comments would not make note that they were sent at the same time, by the same person, with the same text. And yet all three comments were given different numbers, and tallied separately. When I was reading the comments in order, I was aware that they were exactly the same.
4.7 Public comments: Does location matter?

In addition to ignoring multiples, GDOT also did not consider the geographic origination of the comments, as is generally considered in any vote; a person votes in her town, district, state, or nation. However, Atlanta is a sprawling metropolitan area, with non-residents regularly commuting in and out of Peachtree Road. While the city limits only occupy portions of two counties, twenty-nine counties are considered part of the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), according to the Metro Atlanta Chamber. These counties extend to the Alabama border, over sixty miles away. Anecdotally, the metro Atlanta area is known to extend much further—well into Alabama. One commenter who lives about sixty miles from Peachtree Road, at the edges of this MSA, submitted a comment indicating that she was in opposition to the bike lanes: “Having a white painted line to keep bikes safe from a moving vehicle/bus/truck is not safe—to reduce lane width for a car—which pays taxes to drive on the paved road—bikers do not is not [sic] safe for the drivers of vehicles” (1280). Commenter 1280 indicates that she works near the Peachtree Road project, and it is understandable that she would not want to ride her bicycle sixty miles two and from work. However, should her comment be considered as readily as someone who lives on the road?

Commenter 1193, who is counted again as commenter 1257, states from the first line of her email that she does not live in Atlanta and signs her email with her address—in North Carolina. In the second line of her email she indicates that she was “visiting friends who live just off Peachtree Road in Atlanta” and “as a guest, shared my own opinions.” Her “vote” was counted twice. Similarly, Commenter 498 writes a two-page letter criticizing the project; he notes that he is a native of Atlanta who now lives in Arizona. He writes in to express his views about this “glorious boulevard” of Peachtree Road, despite the fact that he lives on the other side
of the country, and his “vote” is counted as a resident of Atlanta’s would be. His love of and connection to Atlanta are certainly valuable, and his desire to preserve this “glorious boulevard” led him to write a comment from thousands of miles away. However, a vote cast for an Atlanta mayor from a nostalgic Arizona resident would likely not be accepted.

I am not the only one who questioned how these comments are/should be weighed based on geographical location. Commenter 1606/1714 submitted a comment that was filed in the support of the project; he cc’d several GDOT employees and public officials on his comment. When a GDOT employee responded with a form email thanking him for his public comment, Beth Beskin, a state house representative publicly opposed the project (and who was cc’d on the response), wrote to GDOT to point out that commenter 1606/1714 lives eight miles from the Peachtree Road project. Rep. Beskin asked whether “the amount of time one spends on the Peachtree Road corridor should be at least one factor considered in weighing public input.” This question was never answered, and this comment was filed under “uncommitted,” with GDOT highlighting nothing. GDOT does not have any mechanism for “weighing” public comments according to proximity to the street, and because of the fluid space of the street, determining what parameters to consider when making a decision about a street is indeed very challenging.

Beth Beskin herself submitted a public comment against the project and emailed her constituents encouraging them to oppose the project. In the email, which is attached to several people’s public comments, there is a picture of Rep. Beskin riding her bicycle on what appears to be a bike path, as there are trees and another person is walking along the paved portion she is standing on. She is wearing sneakers. Below the photograph, she writes, “I love bikes. And I love my husband; yesterday was our 32nd anniversary. To celebrate, we are going on a bike trip this weekend. And I can assure you we won’t be biking on Peachtree Road.” Later in the email, she included a link to the “GDOT Comment Card” and encouraged people to “drop it in the bag located on the outside of the mailbox at 3489 Dumbarton Road.” She said she would collect and deliver these comment cards in the afternoon. Should a representative encourage her constituents to oppose a project, or should it be the other way around? That is a question for another dissertation.
What gives a person the “right” to streets? Should everyone, regardless of where they live, be able to submit their ideas for the configuration of a street—particularly when those “comments” are actually counted as “votes”? Should driving the road five times per week on a daily two-hour commute give someone the power to help decide how the street is designed? Should someone who lives on the road be given more power? What if she works from home and rarely travels on the road? What if he is elderly or disabled, or has restricted mobility? These are questions I will turn to in the next chapter, when I examine how this public comment process—particularly with its emphasis on efficiency and consistency—has impacted not only the shape of people’s discourse but the shape of our public spaces.

As we can see from the problems in the tallying process, GDOT’s methods were haphazard, but they were successful in providing an efficient response. On December 3, 2014—eight days before the decision to forgo the bike lanes from the project was released to the public—Sam Massell of the Buckhead Coalition stated to the Atlanta Journal Constitution that “It’s my understanding that the bike lanes are not going to be done,” in an article that stated as much. In other words, it is likely that GDOT came to their decision in just seventeen days following the end of the public comment period, and they related this information to a politically powerful Buckhead group before relating it to the public or organizations in support of the project. (I was volunteering in the Atlanta Bicycle Coalition’s office on December 11 when GDOT called to inform them that the project would not go forward.) It would seem impossible to read and “listen to” two thousand public comments in seventeen days. This rushed “tallying” process and a desire to please the most politically savvy and civically loud constituents—in other words, their best customers—led GDOT to make a decision without adequately examining the public comments, and maybe without even reading them. Given our access to open records,
rhetoric and composition scholars, as well as regular citizens, should question, problematize, and demand transparency in these processes. If public comments are going to be distilled into votes, and voting processes are going to mimic those of American Idol in which anyone can vote as many times as they want, then GDOT should publicly acknowledge that these are their methods. Otherwise, maybe GDOT and similar government agencies should take a closer look at how, or whether, they are reading public comments, and why they are using this civic engagement method in the first place.

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that a government agency seeking “public engagement” had problematic methods for calculating and incorporating that engagement. In light of this knowledge, rhetoric and composition scholars should not be bystanders: we should intervene in and complicate civic engagement processes in order to preserve the remaining spaces that remain devoted to open public discourse, particularly when those spaces are vulnerable to the influences of neoliberal practices. Nancy Welch recognizes that spaces for open, public discourse are dwindling and precious resources: “Within the urgency and constraints created by neoliberal policy, we face the fundamental tension: an abundant need for people, particularly those lacking official credentials, to engage in public argument; and a dearth of space, opportunity and freedom for most people to do so” (9). The reality is that public comment periods are one of the few remaining spaces where citizens can enter into public argument, and rhetoric and composition scholars, attuned to the needs of publics and civic engagement processes, need to ensure that such spaces remain transparent, rigorous, and trustworthy. The first step, as I have done here, is making visible the analysis of such public comments in order to understand where we can insert ourselves into the process.
However, perhaps given the long, bureaucratic, and complicated processes involved in government public engagement processes, few scholars in our field have chosen to involve themselves in this arena. Instead, scholars seeking to engage publics tend to partner with organizations that are unaffiliated with the government—such as nonprofits, community organizations, or at-risk populations like prisoners or homeless people, where their work may have great personal impact on individuals but likely will not lead to changes in public policy. Government agencies, on the other hand, may seem vast and opaque, with no clear place for scholars to insert themselves. How does one become civically engaged and influence public policy, the way that John Ackerman has called scholars to do? We must involve ourselves with these government agencies, first by lifting the curtain on their understudied-and-problematic methods (as I have done in this chapter) and then by involving ourselves in the inner-workings of the government, whether by questioning and critiquing their methods or by offering alternative, competing readings of the same data. At the very least, we should read and interpret the public texts that these citizens have created in attempt to participate in public discourse, particularly given the dearth of spaces where we find whole texts submitted in order to participate in public discourse.

Essentially, if open, public discourse is going the way of the glaciers—as Nancy Welch believes it is—then that discourse, like the glaciers that remain, deserve our devoted study, analysis, and protection. In the next chapter, I provide a detailed analysis of the public comments, providing an alternative reading in the historical context of transportation in Atlanta. I provide this analysis in order to demonstrate the capacity that rhetoric and composition scholars have to provide alternative and competing perspectives on the rich texts of actually existing public discourse—texts that a government agency may merely scan through.
5 UNPACKING PUBLICS AND NARRATIVES WITHIN PUBLIC COMMENTS

In the previous chapter, I critiqued GDOT’s methods of reading and categorizing public comments to decide on a major public works project, and I argued that rhetoric and composition scholars should involve themselves in the public engagement processes of government agencies in order to highlight problems with these methods and influence public policies. The major problem that I pointed out in the last chapter was that the comments were, in a sense, a stifled conversation that occurred on paper, and not among these multiple publics.

In this chapter, I am going to turn away from examining GDOT’s methods—or lack thereof—in order to analyze the comments from the Peachtree Road project themselves and to isolate two major things: 1. How neoliberal influences impact what is supposed to be democratic discourse, and 2. Where counterpublic voices emerged within these public comments. Because GDOT largely ignored the narrative elements of these public comments before making their decision—perhaps because, as Nancy Welch argues, policymakers tend to devalue the participation of mass publics in policy decisions (138)—rhetoricians have a responsibility to examine those narratives to excavate the discourses that were ignored and put them into conversation with each other.

In choosing to avoid public conversations and distilling complex narratives into a few words, GDOT sought organized, sophisticated voters. However, such a perspective on public discourse may disempower those publics who do not fit into a specific mold or have a solidified message—particularly counterpublics. David Coogan writes, “To conceive of publics this way, as deliberating bodies or parliamentary debaters who have the power to alter reality, is to limit the style and substance of publics and in some ways miss counter publics all together” (162). GDOT engineers, in treating multifarious publics as if they are two opposing sides conforming to
particular “rules” of organized discourse do not have to contend with the complexity of publics, or the narratives that emerge in public comments.

However, this desire to whitewash counterpublics is not surprising, given how neoliberal policies have infiltrated government agencies like GDOT and have trickled down to the general public. Tony Scott and Nancy Welch explain that neoliberal ideals are now entrenched in our public policies, “packaged and applauded as common-sense populism,” and rarely called out or reflected upon (4). Rather than taking neoliberal concepts like efficiency, privatization, and concentrated wealth at face value, I use this chapter to point out where these biases and influences emerge in the public discourse. I hypothesize that such problems stem from historical racism in government planning agencies in Atlanta, which is perpetuated in current neoliberal perspectives among citizens and government agencies like GDOT, and thus reflected in the public engagement processes.

In the first section of this chapter, I frame the discussion about Atlanta’s streets historically and socially, drawing upon archival records in the Planning Atlanta archive at Georgia State University to showcase Buckhead’s fraught history with urban planning, particularly in terms racial segregation. From there, I analyze the comments to draw out neoliberal language in the them, which privileges efficiency, privatization, and the customer/consumer model of the streets (and by extension, citizenship). I argue that GDOT’s decision to forgo the redesign of the street privileges this perspective, leading to a homogenized view of both citizenship and the streets, an unsurprising outcome given Peachtree Road’s history as a wealthy, exclusionary space. Throughout this analysis, I also point to vulnerable, indeterminate, and marginalized voices—which I explain we can identify as counterpublics—in
order to give voice to the perspectives that were left out of GDOT’s streamlined “reading” of the comments.

5.1 A note on my methodology

My methodological approach to analyzing these documents reflects my desire to uncover competing and/or silenced narratives in order to challenge dominant narratives. As a feminist historiographer, I seek to honor the voices of the citizens who speak and who do not speak in the unfolding narratives in the history of the streets in Atlanta and to uncover partial and situated knowledges. Like Neal Lerner, I do not “imagine some pure narrative” (196) emerging within the archives—both in the Atlanta Planning archive and in the public comment archive. Instead, I recognize that the narratives that I draw out are one of many interpretations of the same data, as archival inquiry “is an intervention into a world that has been lived and narrated by the person who has experienced it and then is once again recorded, interpreted, and circulated by the researcher” (Glenn and Enoch 194). In this chapter, I offer a partial and constructed history both of Atlanta and of the public comments submitted to GDOT, just as Donna Harraway calls feminist researchers to do in order to provide entry into a new conversation: “Feminist embodiment, feminist hopes for partiality, objectivity, and situated knowledges, turn on conversations” (596).

My analysis of these narratives is intended to offer an alternative reading of the public comments. Rather than accepting the overriding narrative that GDOT decided upon, I have accessed the public comments and historical documents as a way to “make the government accountable to its people,” as Sammie L. Morris and Shirley K Rose believe archivists and scholars are called to do (70). Rather than viewing GDOT’s decision as the end of the discussion on this topic, I seek to challenge their dominant narrative by drawing out alternative, competing
narratives in the public comments. Note that I do not seek to advocate for a particular “side” in this debate\textsuperscript{24}. As Linda Flower explains, rhetors have the responsibility not to join with a particular public or advocate on the side of a particular issue; instead, rhetors should seek to understand the many facets of every particular debate (Flower 6).

Thus, in my analysis, I avoid categorizing the comments “for/against” the project because I am focusing on uncovering the publics that participated, and I do not want to focus on a false dichotomy of publics who are either “pro-bike lanes” or “anti-bike lanes”; instead, I want to understand the multiple publics that emerge with different visions of how to build street, a community, and a city and to see how neoliberal discourses—like the ones I demonstrated GDOT has adopted—are impacting these publics’ discourses, and as such, the policies that govern our public spaces.

5.2 Historical frameworks around Peachtree Road

While GDOT recognizes the need to understand demographics specific to a community when working on a project in that community,\textsuperscript{25} they offer no clear explanation of how to

\textsuperscript{24} As I explained in the Preface, and as I am explaining now as a researcher exposing my own interestedness in this project, I was initially in favor of the project, but my own opinion evolved as I learned more about it.

\textsuperscript{25} From GDOT’s Public Involvement Plan for NEPA Projects: “Each of Georgia DOT’s transportation projects will certainly have its own set of unique stakeholders (area residents, businesses, commuters, emergency response agencies, etc.) that will need unique strategies and tactics for effective public involvement. However, a general understanding of Georgia’s diverse citizens, customers and communities, may be helpful as background context…Some other general background factors that may inform your public engagement considerations and tactics include your community/stakeholder average age; educational attainment; income; and home and/or business ownership. The U.S. Census Bureau can also be of assistance to obtain some of this information by searching by county or city” (5).
integrate that information in the reading or analysis of public comments. I seek to accomplish that task in this chapter, by providing a historical context for Peachtree Road within a broader framework of the history of Atlanta in the twentieth century, particularly the region of Buckhead, where Peachtree Road runs through. Buckhead is a particularly good place to examine neoliberalism’s impact on public discourse since it has always been a wealthy community with public amenities, political power, and a high quality of life, a history that many residents are proud of. Buckhead’s residents are civically active, as is clear from the hundreds of residents who submitted comments on this project, and they must genuinely care about their city. However, like many wealthy neighborhoods across the United States, Buckhead’s centralized power and wealth is not accidental and in fact has resulted from decades of explicit policies—particularly transportation policies—within the city government.

To understand Buckhead’s history with transportation, I accessed transportation planning documents in Georgia State University’s Planning Atlanta archive, which contains historical maps, detailed city plans, newspaper articles, and transportation planning guides dating to the 1930s. I also accessed the “security maps” and neighborhood descriptions from 1935 to 1940 through the Mapping Inequality project. From these documents and secondary sources, I pieced together a picture of Buckhead as a wealthy, white, and isolated, bolstered by government policies and transportation plans that intended to keep African-American citizens out, particularly in the name of property tax values and efficient business practices. This historical framework, which I explore in detail in this section, helps us understand how—as Welch and Scott noted—policies about road construction that seem like “commonsense” in Atlanta today actually stem from systematic inequalities. In addition, as Candace Epps-Robertson argues, “constructions of citizenship in America are tied to racial hierarchies…” (109), and we must
acknowledge the impact of these hierarchies on policies, both educational (as she argues), and in transportation.

As a wealthy fortress in Atlanta during much of the twentieth-century—when the rest of the city was deteriorating—Buckhead’s history is one of barriers and restrictions. During the New Deal era, the federal government supported the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC), which was tasked with mapping and describing neighborhoods across the country, creating “maps that color-coded credit worthiness and risk on neighborhood and metropolitan levels.” Home loans were then given, or not, based on the neighborhood’s score. 26 In 1937, several neighborhoods in the then-suburb of Buckhead were included on this map. One such neighborhood in Buckhead, Tuxedo Park, is described as an “A” neighborhood, the best possible score, and the neighborhood is broken down into “favorable influences” and “detrimental influences.” Of the former, HOLC writes, “Majority of area highly restricted. Recently zoned for one-family residences. Reasonably accessible to schools, churches, community business centers. Low effective tax rate.” From its inception, Buckhead has benefited from the rare juxtaposition of two elements: being a “highly restricted” area that is also “accessible” to the center of the city and its amenities. Of the “detrimental influences,” HOLC writes, “Street car service only along Peachtree Road to Buckhead presents difficulty of transporting negro servants.” A former street car line on Peachtree Road was the means by which “negro servants” were transported in and out of the neighborhood—a neighborhood which was otherwise lauded as being “highly restricted.”

26 The implications of this federal program are enormous in urban areas across the United States, particularly for African Americans whose “blighted” neighborhoods were essentially cut off from home loans. The Mapping Inequality project states, “Federal housing policy simply blocked African Americans from accessing real estate capital, leading to the creation of segregated mass suburbia and, neighborhood by neighborhood, opened residents to opportunity and wealth accumulation or closed citizens off from the American dream.”
How to provide transportation (or not) along Peachtree Road has always been a major question in Buckhead neighborhoods like Tuxedo Park, and it started as a question steeped in segregation.

In 1949, three years before it was incorporated into the city of Atlanta, Buckhead was described in the AJC in an article titled “Wealthy Buckhead Atlanta Showplace,” in which the writer stated, “Buckhead, with its concentration of wealth, is Atlanta’s most amazing suburb.” The article goes on to describe how people seek to protect “Atlanta’s residential showplaces, some of them fabulous estates built with fortunes made in booming Atlanta,” and to do that, they continued the practice of segregation. In 1952, an Atlanta city planning document is explicit about the desire to keep the northern areas of Atlanta white, calling for a “Negro Removal” program. The premise for this program was the lack of “colored” schools in the northside of Atlanta during segregation:

Also shown on the opposite map is a section of Northside Atlanta in which there are now several scattered colored settlements. This general section differs from the other two areas shown in that it does not include a large, single nucleus on which a new community might easily be built. The scattered colored settlements are surrounded by fast-growing white suburbs and there is evidence that they themselves are not expanding. They pose an immediate problem of how to provide better school facilities… If the normal long-run trend is toward gradual disappearance of these Northside colored settlements, a new colored school would probably not have to be built in the area… Community and local government cooperation should be able to solve the problem (90).

Here, the Atlanta planning manual explicitly calls for African Americans to be removed from the northside of Atlanta, north of Peachtree Road. The manual focuses on the lack of density in the African American population, a “problem” since African American children had to be grouped together to attend a “colored” school together. The solution to this “problem” was to force African American families out of the north part of Atlanta. Obviously, the problem was not ensuring sufficient “colored schools” exist but instead segregation itself as a practice. The planners were confident that “Community and local government cooperation should be able to
solve the problem,” though there are no stated methods by which such “cooperation” would occur, leaving the process murky, much as it is today.

In the same document, the City of Atlanta seeks to eradicate “the serious concentration of Negroes in unhealthy and inadequate downtown neighborhoods” just south of Buckhead, for which “the pressure to expand has pushed this group into white neighborhoods and tensions have resulted” (39). In other words, in neighborhoods where African American communities burgeoned, the City saw problems, and in neighborhoods where African Americans were scarce, it was the same. In their planning document, the City blamed African Americans’ expansion into white neighborhoods on their inability to purchase both a car and a house, the primarily expected purchases for middle class life in 1952—and, I would argue, now.

In 1954, with the Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, segregation became illegal in the United States, and official planning documents no longer included explicit plans for moving and reorganizing African Americans. Instead, Atlanta embraced “urban renewal” and “relocation” programs. According to a 1967 “Relocation Study Supplement” published by the City of Atlanta for the Atlanta Community Improvement Program, 67,000 people were “displaced” from Atlanta by the government between 1956 and 1966, a project that helped Atlanta “[make] progress in eliminating its worst slums… The vast majority of people displaced were the poor and disadvantaged with special needs and special problems. Most were Negroes with poverty level or sub-average family incomes…” (i). The idea was reorganizing the downtown area in order to improve that area, moving low-income African-American residents to public housing. However, as David Fleming notes, “‘Public’ housing in this country, after all, was never about building a genuinely public sphere, one open and accessible to all; it was about protecting the private interests of a few and cosigning the most desperate to a ghetto” (151). In this systematic “urban
renewal” program, we can see neoliberal policies at work: moving the poor out of sight while damaging what might have been a public sphere composed of multiple, spontaneous publics.

Car and home ownership also became markers of neoliberal interests in Atlanta starting in the 1960s. As Doug Monroe wrote for Atlanta Magazine in 2012, white flight between 1960 and 1980 took half of the white population from the city to the suburbs. Along with this exodus, white people across the South began embracing the suburbs (and so, car-dependency) as an expression of personal freedom and individualism, as Kevin M. Kruse argues in his book White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism. Kevin M. Kruse believes that Atlanta, which Mayor William Hartsfield famously called “The City Too Busy to Hate” (1), is better referred to as “The City Too Busy Moving to Hate.” Kruse argues that white flight was not simply the movement of white people into the suburbs but instead was the complete restructuring of the politics of Atlanta, and in many ways, the South: “White flight, in the end, was more than a physical relocation. It was a political revolution” (6). White people who chose to move couched their movement in the rhetoric of individualism and freedom; the “rise of white suburbia” in Atlanta is central to “the debates over the public realm and the private” (15), with the “familiar language of homeowners’ rights and community protection” (12) at the core of their argument. These are arguments that emerged in the public comments for the proposed Peachtree Road project as well, as I will demonstrate in the following sections.27

27 As white Atlanta residents themselves in the 1960s, my grandparents took part in that white exodus. With their move from Atlanta to suburban Stone Mountain, Georgia, some twenty miles away, came a long car commute back to the city for work. Their children, my father and my aunt, who used to walk alone to the movie theater as children, could no longer reach any destination beyond the cul-de-sac in their neighborhood in Stone Mountain without a car. My grandfather, who had lived downtown and ridden the streetcar as a young man, began driving what would now be twenty-nine miles one way via car to get to his job.
Amidst all this chaos and relocation within the city limits and the metro area, Buckhead remained an anomaly during this period: a wealthy, white stronghold in a city that was increasingly African-American. When the city annexed Buckhead in 1952, it was a burgeoning commercial center, according to a 1970 “Planning Atlanta” guide released by the City: “At that time, small local specialty shops were concentrated primarily in a cluster around the intersection of Roswell Road and Peachtree Road, and often referred to as the ‘heart of Buckhead.’” In this 1970 guide, which breaks down the demographics and problems in each neighborhood—of which there were many—Buckhead is presented as the crown jewel in a City that was fighting to keep (white) people living in it. During the 1960s, according to this Planning Atlanta document, 35,000 white people moved out of the area while “50,000 non-white” moved in. Buckhead, on the other hand, saw an increase in white people moving in, with the “non-white population” shrinking from an already-small 698 to 494 people. The Mayor of Atlanta in 1970, whose name was on at the top of this transportation plan that outlined the 1960s “urban renewal” efforts, was Sam Massell—the same man, who, as President of the Buckhead Coalition in 2015 and 2016 (and still today), led the wealthy business people’s opposition to the Peachtree Road changes. While we would like to assume that segregationist practices—whether overt or occluded—are long dead and that each individual public project is considered based on its own merits, the truth is that each project is connected to others that have come before it. Epps-Robertson explains, “If we are to challenge racist ideologies, we can remain vigilant only when we recognizing the connections between past and contemporary expressions” (118).
While the inner city crumbled in poverty and “blighted” areas with primarily African American residents,\(^{28}\) a few miles north, Buckhead was noted for its location in one of the most “prosperous areas...where median household incomes range from two to four times the city-wide average.” The narrative description of Buckhead in this 1970 city planning document reads almost like a travel brochure\(^{29}\) for the neighborhood, enticing people to live in this desirable area, with its private schools, private clubs, and exceptional public amenities:

The North Buckhead Area contains several large private social and educational institutions including three country clubs and several private preparatory schools. Several city-owned parks are scattered throughout the area. The largest, Chastain Memorial Park...contains an 18 hole golf course, amphitheater, large picnic areas and tennis courts. The City Parks Department operates a number of outstanding recreational programs in this area...

At the center of Buckhead’s prosperity was Peachtree Road and all the shops that were emerging along it. The document recognizes that high-density buildings were expected to emerge along Peachtree Road, and it recognizes that traffic congestion would increase on Peachtree and neighborhood streets; however, the major concern related to this traffic appears to be scaring away people who live in the “high-quality” single-family homes to the west of the Peachtree.\(^{30}\)

\(^{28}\) The 1970 Planning Atlanta document states, “Income patterns vary within the city from area to area, but one definite trend is apparent. Lower income families tend to concentrate in areas around the Central Business District where health and welfare services and facilities are centralized. The moderate and affluent areas lie farther out. The most prosperous areas are located in the northern portions where median household incomes range from two to four times the city-wide average.”

\(^{29}\) This sentiment is not surprising, given Massell’s affinity for the area. In a 1994 AJC article, Sam Massell states, “Buckhead is a wonderful place to work, play, visit and live. If there was a cemetery here, I’d be here forever.”

\(^{30}\) “West of Peachtree Road and Roswell Road, the large single-family residential area is retained as the high-quality residential area it currently is. The major threats to this area, however, are several: increased traffic on local neighborhood streets, the possibility of reduced maintenance, and flooding problems. The addition of three neighborhood parks, a new high school, an elementary school and a primary school should meet existing deficiencies and complement existing community facilities in North Buckhead.”
From 1952 until the present, the City has recognized that car traffic is incompatible with growth in Atlanta. In 1952, transportation planners wrote, “The outward push of population and industry is taking place on streets and roads designed for yesterday, not today or tomorrow. The streets are narrow, crooked and radial... Even with the best traffic control system—and Atlanta’s is excellent—there is no hope for efficiency in such a maze” (28). However, the City continued to prioritize automobile traffic, despite the congestion and the known harms to the environment and communities. The 1989 City of Atlanta Development Plan states as much:

Atlanta, like all modern, affluent cities, is heavily oriented toward private automobile travel for both people and freight. While this orientation may have negative aspects such as air and noise pollution, congestion and neighborhood intrusion, its flexibility and low cost are essential in providing for the level of economic development which Atlanta has achieved. Transit services are provided, publicly for the most part, to achieve the twin goals of mobility for low income people and congestion reduction (89).

As we can see here, the narrative of cars being unhealthy (both in terms of pollution and community growth) did not stop cars from being the primary means of transportation, because they were viewed as “essential” to economic growth—another indicator that profit and efficiency were at the heart of Atlanta’s policymaking process. Public transportation was recognized as a means for low-income people to travel. In essence, wealthy white people could afford to travel in cars—and so they did—while low-income people were provided for by the Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) public transportation built in the 1970s. MARTA replaced the street car as a means of allowing low-income people to enter and exit Buckhead on an as-needed basis.

However, the (white) suburban counties refused to support a transit system—no coincidence, but as a result of systemic racism, couched in American individualism. Monroe writes:

The 1965 and 1971 votes against MARTA by residents of Cobb, Clayton, and Gwinnett [three suburban counties] weren’t votes about transportation. They were referendums on race. Specifically, they were believed to be about keeping the races apart. Consider the
suburbanites voting back then. The formerly rural, outlying counties had exploded with an astonishing exodus of white people fleeing the city as the black population swelled during the civil rights era.

This problem of racial strife and disconnection did not end after the Civil Rights Movement but was instead further ingrained by the disconnection that the racialized suburbs brought. In 2002, when bus service finally began in the suburban counties around Atlanta, the New York Times noted that “Suburban politicians would often say that their constituents just liked to drive, but occasionally one would blurt out the racial fears that kept Atlanta's system from growing into white areas,” recalling 1993, when then-Gwinnett County Commissioner W. J. Dodd openly admitted that for his constituents, “One of the worst fears is bringing people out of Atlanta, the minorities.” In other words, he worried that minorities would get “out of Atlanta” and come into the suburbs, particularly if they were given access to public transportation.

MARTA, however, exists in Buckhead, and white people there regularly use it; in fact, the Buckhead neighborhood station is the wealthiest stop along the whole system, with incomes decreasing the closer one gets to south Atlanta.31 In 2017, Emmett Melton, a white MARTA rider, shared his perspective on feeling like an outsider while riding the MARTA train. His description of his trip demonstrates the clear racial divide (and racism) that still exists between Buckhead and downtown areas of Atlanta:

As my fellow white passengers and I pull out of North Springs station, we add more white passengers at the next few stations as we pull toward Buckhead. As we enter the heart of the city, African-Americans begin entering the train, and at Five Points, the racial makeup of the train has flipped to predominantly African-American. I watch as the African-American passengers entering the train look for seats next to other African-Americans, and I watch white passengers seek out other white seat mates. I see the

31 The MIT Media Lab broke down average income by metro stops on MARTA here: http://youarehere.cc/j/subway/atlanta.html#
uncomfortable looks of white people who think the black kid dressed like a gang member is going to sit next them, and then the sigh of relief as he passes by…. (Bennett).

Bennett’s article in the AJC, which was widely criticized for its racist undertones, demonstrates the extant stigma and “fear” of minorities, a fear has remained tied to public transportation in Atlanta to this day. The city and metro area suffer from “the never-ending ramifications of a race-based transportation infrastructure” (Monroe). It is important to keep in mind that race and transportation method in Atlanta are essentially intertwined. Buckhead is unique in that its white population did not flee the city as part of “white flight,” but remained insulated in a wealthy enclave in the northern part of the city, benefiting from the public amenities (such as public transportation) that only a city can offer, while encouraging policies that allowed them to be cut off from the low-income, African American population that made up most of the rest of the city.

In 1994, Atlanta Planning Commissioner Leon Eplan called Peachtree Street “a disgrace”: “Lenox [Mall], Phipps [Plaza], Peachtree Street, most of Buckhead is a disgrace. It is absolutely ugly…it is almost a disgrace.” According to the article, “Eplan said the high-rise buildings have ‘turned their back on the city,’ because they are designed for motorists rather than pedestrians. The same with shopping centers…and streets lined with billboards and utility poles.” At the time, Eplan was leading a failed plan to make Buckhead more pedestrian friendly; Sam Massell, who headed the Buckhead Coalition at the time, led the backlash against the project. A subtitle in the article details the history of Buckhead and states “150 years later, area still place of wealthy.”

While the rest of Atlanta was in turmoil—while whites were fleeing the city and blacks were trapped in poor inner-city ghettos just a few miles down the road and the Civil Rights
movement burgeoned—Buckhead insulated itself. It is one of the few neighborhoods in Atlanta that has not undergone a large racial or socioeconomic transformation of any kind. Peachtree Road, and Buckhead, has remained unchanged: a wealthy, white enclave in the city, amid turmoil that plagued the rest of the city and the suburbs. In fact, here is a photo of Peachtree Road in 1949, reprinted in 1994 with a caption that read, “Even in 1949, Buckhead was a booming thoroughfare that suffered from modern-day problems such as traffic congestion and a glut of commercialism.” The street looks largely the same as it does today: multiple lanes for car traffic with ample parking near businesses with large billboards, serviced by a large gas station.

Figure 5. “Buckhead Streets in 1949”: Atlanta Journal Constitution, via the Atlanta Journal Constitution Photographic Archive. Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Georgia.
Much of Buckhead’s insulation comes from the fact that Peachtree Road, the major north-south connector, is so difficult to traverse and has remained essentially untouched for decades. It is important to recognize this briefly stated but complicated history of Atlanta, and particularly of Buckhead, before delving into the public comments about the proposed Peachtree Road project from 2015. While scholars are generally aware of these racist histories, such histories must continually be brought to the forefront, particularly in order to understand how and why our current cities have been built in response to—or under the direction of—those injustices. Buckhead’s racist policies and emphasis on business and privatization—as well as cars for transportation—have helped it remain an island inaccessible for most Atlantans.

5.3 Invoking financial status as symbolic

While it is important to understand this history of Buckhead, it is also important to recognize that citizens in the twenty-first century rarely call for explicit “Negro removal” or segregationist policies that were common in the 1950s. In addition, citizens would almost never say in a public sphere (or in a documented public comment) that their desire to avoid public transportation or the like is a result of their own racism. Not a single public comment submitted for this project referenced racial segregation or integration as a reason not to go forward with the Peachtree Road reconfiguration. However, I argue that a century of isolation of wealth and privilege in Buckhead—largely a result of intentional planning practices—has morphed the publics’ discourse from that of race to that of wealth. Hundreds of commenters refer to their own personal wealth or private property in their arguments about this project, which is supposed to be a project for the public and public good. In the following section, I turn to the public comments to draw out the argument of citizenship from and of a citizen’s wealth, and I argue that the
historical situation of Buckhead has impacted the neoliberal, isolationist discourse that some publics engage in.

In “Power, Publics, and the Rhetorical Uses of Democracy,” Candice Rai argues that many citizens believe that they should receive government benefits and programs in accordance to what they pay in taxes—a concept that she calls the “consumer ideal of citizenship.” In this neoliberal model of citizenship, a citizen who pays more in taxes also has more right to interject into public life and request changes that benefit her; she also believes she has the power to direct where her money goes. Rai writes, “The consumer ideal of citizenship is defined through a conflation of individual preference with the right to demand of the social contract exactly what one wants” (50). Given the neoliberal entanglement of money with citizens’ understanding of “fairness” and their own citizenship, I examined the public comments to draw out the unnoticed conversations occurring around financial power.

Commenters often referred to themselves as “taxpayers” and questioned how their tax money was being spent. In addition, commenters touted their consumption power—particularly in terms of where they shop and live. Of great concern in the comments were home values and property taxes, with commenters occasionally threatening to move in or out of the Buckhead neighborhood based on this transportation project. Some commenters referenced their contributions to political campaigns as an attempt to sway GDOT or politicians they had cc’d on their emails. I noted that GDOT did not highlight any of this language in the comments before making their decision about the project, so it is unlikely that GDOT’s decision was swayed by this language. However, it is worth examining how people invoke money in their comments, particularly since, as J. Eric Oliver notes, the reason that they may submit comments at all is because of their affluence: “Educated and affluent citizens are far more likely to participate [in
Because they are typically more informed about public affairs, have more experience in organizations and democratic governance, and experience fewer costs of performing activities like registering to vote or contacting officials” (73). Many (presumably affluent) people wrote in public comments about their large tax burden or their valuable property; I argue that such discourse reflects a neoliberal ideal of the street, in which the street is not a public space but an anchor for private property.

Likely influenced by GDOT’s treatment of them as “customers,” many commenters invoke their status as not only citizens but “taxpayers.” Commenter 1722 asks that “I am writing to request that this proposal be voted down.” She signs the email “Concerned, taxpaying citizen.” She is not just a “citizen” but a “taxpaying citizen”—a person who lives in the community and contributes financially to the community. Commenter 1657 writes that GDOT’s purpose is to improve the return on investment that taxpayers and homeowners have put in, by using “their” money to improve property values and bringing in revenue through businesses. He writes: “As taxpayers and voters, we assume that our elected officials will be working hard to ensure our safety, encourage business growth, increase property values, and maintain an environment that allows us to meet our own basic needs. Taking away two driving lanes of Peachtree would be counter productive to each of these” (1657). It goes without saying that people who live in Atlanta pay taxes, but many people felt the need to reiterate to GDOT that they are the ones who provide the money to the government in order to emphasize their desire for a return on that “investment.”

There is significant concern about not only taxpayer return on investment but also parity. Many commenters argued that Buckhead residents pay their fair share of taxes and government projects should be implemented according to this payment, or they were against the plan because
they saw it as a waste of their money. Commenter 918 writes, “Someone will be accidentally injured or even worse - because of the intense traffic in that area. This is without a doubt a waste of taxpayers money & your time. Surely, there are better projects for the city to plan. If not, then whoever had this hairbrained idea needs to find another job.” The anger from this commenter appears to stem from the fact that she does not feel her money is being used wisely by GDOT.

Commenter 888 believes that Buckhead residents face a high tax rate, for which they do not receive adequate compensation through public works. Commenter 888 writes, “…The traffic into the hospital is terrible as it is, why would you knowingly make it worse? Seems like the more taxes Buckhead residents pay, the fewer accommodations they receive.” There is a clear indication of the consumer model of citizenship, in which taxpayers view GDOT as stewards of their tax dollars and expect to receive what they pay for. Commenter 1679 echoes this sentiment, taking the argument a step further to say that it is unfair that Buckhead residents pay the most in taxes and get what he believes is inadequate recompense for their funding. “How much of our taxpayer dollars were spent on just this study alone? I am so incensed and certainly hope that someone in city government speaks up about what is right for the people who pay THE MOST IN EVERY CITY SERVICE AND GET THE LEAST OF THOSE VERY SERVICES” (1679).

In this comment, we again see that this citizen views paying taxes not as a civic duty or a contribution to the overall health of the nation-state but instead as an investment that should pay off individually, according to this person’s preference.

Of additional concern beyond how taxpayer dollars were used was personal property values. People wrote in against the bike lanes because they were concerned that bike lanes would increase car traffic in streets around Peachtree, thus decreasing their property values. This emphasis on personal property/businesses demonstrates a neoliberal viewpoint that Kruse
emerged in the 1960s, when individual rights and protection of personal property became the rallying cry of whites seeking to isolate themselves from the complex publics inherent in city life. Commenter 1613 wrote, “Is there a verifiable study pr [sic] data that justify causing economic damage to homeowners and businesses in order to accommodate a very small number of cyclists?” (1613). Commenter 1175/1230 writes, “If this proposal does go through and our quality of life is further diminished, I expect to see a massive property tax reduction bringing once-great Buckhead into line with other failing Atlanta neighborhoods.” This commenter does not recognize the underlying racist and neoliberal policies that buoyed Buckhead into being a “great” neighborhood, and he believes that the other neighborhoods in Atlanta are failing because their residents cannot afford or choose not to afford to make them great. Each neighborhood becomes the responsibility of its residents, not of the city as a whole. This perspective is problematic for a city, which is “commonly theorized as a model of the democratic public sphere—a catalyst and depository for our collective and contradictory democratic hopes” (Rai 51). The neoliberal interests that emerge in this discourse indicate that many citizens do not believe that citizenship in a city comes with any responsibilities toward promoting diversity or democratic ideals—toward civic engagement—but instead their own economic interests.

5.4 You bike it, you buy it

This concept of taxpayer parity was extended not only to changes to the street but also to usage of the street. Many commenters were against bicycles being on the road because of their perception that bicyclists do not pay to use the road—that they are not taxpayers the way that drivers are. Communications professor Zack Furness writes that “Bicyclists, if we believe the corporate press, are the welfare queens of the road, bent on taking advantage of an honest
system” (135). This system, of course, is one of “commonsense” neoliberalism: a person should only be able to use a public amenity if he/she has paid for it directly. Several commenters indicate that they disapprove of bicyclists using Peachtree Road because they do not pay sufficient fees. Commenter 1678 writes, “It confounds me how willingly the city is to inconvenience tens of thousands of drivers for a handful of cyclists. The majority of Atlanta taxpayers are in CARS, not on bicycles.” In other words, commenter 1678 believes that “the majority” should be accommodated on the road, particularly because they pay for that access through taxes. Commenter 1786 echoes this question, writing, “It is a travesty the way you tax us and take traffic lanes away on crowded streets. Why don’t you tax the bikers? …Fulton County continues to keep my car in the shop because of potholes and metal plates across our roads. I am going to move out of Fulton County as quickly as I can sell our over taxed Buckhead home….” Implied in these comments is the belief that people riding bicycles do not pay taxes the way people driving cars do because they are too poor, an assumption reflected in their mode of transportation; after all, anyone who can afford to drive a car, does. In addition, commenter 1786 believes that the government is responsible for the maintenance of her private property, specifically that they are the ones who “keep [her] car in the shop” because of their decision not to repair the pavement. With her emphasis on fairness, it is understandable that she believes people who ride bikes, who she believes do not pay taxes, should not be afforded access to the road. Or, another way of reading this would be: if people are too poor to afford to use the road as it is currently designed (for cars), then they should not use it.

There are major concerns from commenters that people who ride bicycles do not pay to use the road the way that cars do, and as a result, they should not be allowed to use the road. Commenter 1787 asks, “And by the way, do bikers pay any user fees, as do cars?” Commenter
1742 writes that the gas tax is responsible for the creation of the streets, and since people who ride bicycles do not pay for gas, they should not be given access to those streets. He states explicitly that to give those people access is “unfair” because of “scarce resources,” in which only some people can be accommodated: “Bikes simply do not belong in the middle of heavy traffic. It also is annoying that your proposal provides a benefit to users who do not pay into the transportation fund via gas taxes, while penalizing those who do. This is unfair, particularly in a time of scarce resources” (1742). Commenter 891, too, believes that because people who ride bicycles are not required to have a license and registration for their bicycles, they should not be allowed on the roads, because they are not paying for that access. He writes, “The Bike people [sic] for some time now have fought the idea of having to register or have license plates for their bikes since they do not want to be identified when they break traffic laws… if they push for part of the roads to be designated for them alone my suggestion is that they must be licensed & show proof of insurance to access these bike lanes and therefore ‘pay’ for part of the road” (891). Commenter 856 echoes this concern, stating that, “The bikers do not pay to register their bikes each year, nor do they pay ad valorem taxes, nor do they pay tax for gasoline as all the car owners do. Once they starting paying taxes for using the road as we do, I will agree to bike lanes but NEVER on Peachtree Road.” In other words, in order to use the streets, a person must pay the same taxes regardless of mode of transportation; since bicycles do not pay the same taxes and fees as drivers do (gas, registration, insurance, and ad valorem taxes), they should not be able to use the streets as a person who drives a car can.

From these comments, it is clear that some citizens do not view the streets as a public space but instead as a private space that must be paid to access. Because people riding bicycles do not pay to access the streets (whether because they are too poor or because the government is
giving them a “free pass” from paying registration or gas taxes), to allow them space on that street would be unfair. This certainly is true in a privatized model of public space, where supply and demand govern whether or not a person has access to the streets. No one is guaranteed access, and certainly not if they do not have money to pay for that access. This model insures that people who can afford to stay in do so, and those people who cannot afford to, remain out. Such a sentiment is common in the media as well. Furness writes that “The habitual reproduction of this non-driving ‘other’ necessarily pits the interests of bicyclists—not to mention pedestrians and environmentalists—against those of the driver/consumer… bicyclists are turned into unwanted invaders of our space, self-righteous complainers telling us what to do with our money…” (136). Because drivers perceive themselves as spending more money to use the road, they consider themselves the consumers who have the most right to the “product” of the street. These citizens’ perception of the street reflects the historical configuration and isolation of Buckhead as a whole.

Commenters also self-identify not as consumers of the road but as consumers more generally, promising to spend money or avoid spending money at businesses along the street, depending on how the road is configured. People seem to believe that invoking the money they spend in stores will lead to a change in the configuration of the road, a reasonable conjecture in a part of town that is heavily business-focused, and when writing to GDOT, a government entity that promises “customers” are at the core of all they do. Commenter 1624 writes that since people driving cars spend money at these businesses, they should have a larger share of the road. She states, “What about all the stores the people in cars are spending money in? The bikers are self centered and egotistical. They add nothing to society but they demand to have the right of way… Wait until we go to the poles… we outnumber them” (1624). This person, who as we see
brings up the concept of voting, believes that the people who spend money at stores along the road (whom she presumes are drivers) deserve to have a larger portion of that road; another seemingly commonsense, populist idea that excludes large swaths of people from the conversation.

People who identify as riding bicycles also invoke this shopping power, or write in that the current configuration of the road is a block to allow them to shop more. Commenter 1341 writes that he is “just an occasional cyclist” but that when he does ride bike, he cannot go to Bell Street Burritos on Peachtree Road because “that section of road is so unfriendly it is as if I were separated from my favorite burrito by the Grand Canyon. Bell Street Burritos might as well be on the moon.” Commenter 1842 states that when she did not own a car and had a bicycle “as my primary means of transportation,” she was unable to visit her dentist in Buckhead and as a result changed dentists: “My dentist was located in Buckhead, and the trips I took there on my bike were memorable--not in a good way. It was challenging to find a safe route… Traveling on Peachtree Road was harrowing. Ultimately, I changed my dentist to one who was easier to reach by bike, taking my business to another, more bike-accessible area of the city. I avoided doing other business in Buckhead, too” (1842). Because she felt blocked from accessing the road, she chose to give up spending money along the Peachtree Road corridor. Many of the commenters who express similar sentiments about feeling “blocked” from spending money on Peachtree Road do not live in Buckhead, including commenter 1744, who writes, “I don't live in Buckhead, yet as a citizen of Atlanta, I ride my bike -- my primary mode of transport; I am car-free -- on Peachtree: it is a horrorshow… Were I more easily able to bike to and in Buckhead, and to do so with increased safety, I would do so more often; I would patronize the businesses and merchants located there, and explore its shops,” and he believes that other people would follow suit.
Commenter 1497 writes that she is a “cyclist” and a “motorist” and that she lives south of Buckhead. She writes that, “Peachtree Road from Deering to Peachtree battle...is one of the scariest experiences in the city by bike… the congestion makes me think twice about going to buckhead [sic] to eat or shop—it’s just not worth the frustration and delays.” She chooses not to frequent businesses along Peachtree Road because she cannot ride her bicycles. Commenter 1314 indicates that “bicycling is my primary means of transportation” and that bike lanes “would allow me to access that area of the city more easily. I could get there safely to support business there” (1314). People view Buckhead as a business center where money is to be spent, and according to their means, they choose to or are forced to avoid shopping there because the street configuration keeps them out. They likely emphasize their spending power as a means of convincing business-minded Buckhead for the need to reconfigure the road. Most commenters indicate that they can choose to spend money elsewhere (commenter 1341 can buy a burrito in another place), particularly if they live outside Buckhead. Commenter 868 writes that the city must improve bicycle facilities in order to attract businesses and workers more generally: “After spending a few days traveling around Colorado I am now a big fan of bike lanes… I hope Atlanta adopts such a policy as it seemed to promote less traffic, more businesses (as the younger people were demanding it, and businesses wanted those workers)....”

As I explained in an earlier section, Buckhead represents itself as a central business district since its annexation in 1952. These commenters attempt to appeal to the idea that they are cut off from participating in commerce; they cannot ride their bicycles, so they cannot spend money. Increasing the right of way would increase their ability to spend money. They argue that they deserve access to the street because they will be customers of businesses along the street. They, too, believe that access to the street is something that must be purchased; they view the
street as a mechanism for encouraging business. Interestingly, though they completely disagree with the commenters who invoke taxes about whether the project should go forward, they do believe that the city should provide space to them so that they can spend money. It is not clear whether they actually believe this or whether they are trying to appeal to GDOT on a “reasonable” or “rational” level or in ways that would be most persuasive to increasingly neoliberal forms of government decision-making. However, when these commenters saw that they could not access businesses, they simply chose to spend their money elsewhere.

It is not surprising that people lean heavily on their property, taxes, wealth, or spending power in writing to GDOT to convince them to go forward with or discontinue the project. In the mailed public comments, people write their businesses alongside their names or write only their businesses, without any names at all. Commenter 234 identifies as “Smith Ace Hardware Store,” commenter 254 identifies as “1224 Maternity Store,” commenter 257 identifies as “Mint Julep (a store),” and Commenter 260 identifies as “White House Restaurant.” These commenters likely recognize the effectiveness of stating their business affiliation in lieu of stating their names as citizens. Though none of these commenters offer their names, GDOT counts these businesses as they would citizens’ comments, indicating a lack of distinction between “stakeholders” and “citizens.” In addition, in the mailed comments against the project, several business names are highlighted, though it is not clear whether GDOT did the highlighting or someone else did. Regardless, it is clear that citizens view their relationship to businesses and money as the rhetorical strategy that will convince GDOT whether or not to continue a transportation project.

While I am not relying on language “for” or “against” the project, it is probably clear from the comments above that those people who did not want the road to be altered in any way were the most likely to emphasize their property values or their status as taxpayers, while those
who were more open to change indicated their ability to make choices in where they shopped or lived. Likely, those who are entrenched in the road and their relationship to it want the status quo to continue, while those who see themselves as more mobile (in where they live, shop, work, etc.) wanted to see the road changed. This, of course, is partially due to age and an extended period of home ownership in the area; a person who has lived in a home along a street for forty years may have seen failed projects in the past and may want the road to stay as it is, as commenter 389 notes: “Those of us who live in Buckhead are worn out by years of construction on Peachtree….” In my historical analysis of Peachtree Road, the street has always been under contention, as the central corridor in this portion of the city. Residents’ desire for tranquility and stability is completely understandable; however, in a robust, ever-changing city with publics competing for voice, such a demand may not be realistic. An urban space is unstable, both as concept and as reality. De Certeau explains the “progressive symbiosis” of urban areas, in which “to plan a city is both to think the very plurality of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural effective” (94). Anyone planning a city must turn a concept into a space while also embracing the change and multitudes inherent in it. However, planning practices up to this point have left Buckhead homogeneous in several respects, as I have shown.

5.5 Streets: Part of the community or partitioning the community?

Regardless of their views of the tax or property value implications of the proposed project, nearly everyone agrees that Peachtree Road is crucial to Atlanta. Commenters repeatedly refer to Peachtree Road as an integral piece of the community, though views diverge on what it means for a road to be “important”: does that mean it is a highway, with the purpose of moving cars as efficiently as possible? Is it a “signature street” because it somehow reflects Atlanta’s values? Is it a central shopping and tourist corridor, the way Las Ramblas in Barcelona is? Is it a
public space to live along, amble along, or move through as quickly as possible? Is it a mixture of all three? There is no consensus about what a “major” street should be. While most people seem to agree that it is a crucial connection point, they disagree about what the street is supposed to connect people to—or if it is meant to serve as a barrier, discouraging connections. Should the street connect people to their jobs? Local businesses? Each other? Citizens responded to this comment period in droves because the street is a defining space for Atlantans. However, some people see it as a private space that they need to use efficiently, while others see it as a public or community space that they may want to linger on.

Commenter 1748 states that Peachtree Road is a “route that cuts through the heart of Atlanta” and as a result, should have bike lanes on it. Commenter 1301 writes that “Peachtree Road is our marquee street” and she argues that it “should be a destination, not just a thoroughfare.” Commenter 1937 writes, “I do not think bikers should mess with our signature street in Atlanta,” as she believes that “a bike lane will increase traffic and cars will be diverted through my neighborhood.” Commenter 845 writes, “Bikers are at HUGE risk on a major thoroughfare” and believes that people riding bicycles should be “[routed] through quiet less congested neighborhoods.” Commenter 445 writes, “This is a major thoroughfare, removing a lane of traffic makes no sense” and encourages GDOT to focus on “beautiful alternative routes” in other neighborhoods. Commenter 429 explains, “Peachtree Road is one of Atlanta’s premier streets,” and she encourages GDOT to “repair curbs and sidewalks,” leaving traffic lanes as-is but allowing for better connectivity for handicapped people and pedestrians. Commenter 396

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32 The 1994 AJC article asked these same questions of Buckhead as a whole: “Is Buckhead a graceful residential neighborhood? The Southeast’s largest premier shopping destination? Home of strip shopping centers and aliens new to the country? A tree-lined office park? An entertainment district?”
believes that the proposed improvements would “destroy” Peachtree Road, which he refers to not as a street but as “the most important north south motorway in our city.” Commenter 346 believes that Peachtree Road is a major road but “will not become a DESTINATION until it is comfortable ON FOOT.” Most people agree that Peachtree Road is a “major” street, but few people agree about what “major” means, or how the road should be accessed and used.

The idea of the “majority” belonging on this “major” road is a popular one; just as some commenters argue that people who pay for the road should be the ones to use it, other commenters believe that frequent users of the road—drivers—should be the ones accommodated. Their vision is intended to increase efficiency on the road, as human-powered modes of transportation will be excluded and keep from clogging up car traffic traffic. Commenter 896 recognizes the importance of Peachtree Road as a “main thoroughfare” and says, “Most citizens travel this area in cars, buses and trucks, not bikes. It is a main thoroughfare and should serve the majority of those who use it” (896). In other words, he believes that since people who currently use the road tend to be in motorized vehicles, the road should be designed to accommodate motorized vehicles. Commenter 393 believes that it would be crazy to redesign the road for a handful of people on bicycles, who would harm the overall efficiency of the road. He writes, “THIS IS ABSURD!! Who wants them is the question—could be more than 10 people who would use and half of them are Jimmy Johns delivery guys—who are fine—but we can’t change the traffic patterns on Atlanta’s most famous artery for the Jimmy John’s guys.” Commenter 393 recognizes that Peachtree Road is a key street in Atlanta, and to alter it for sandwich delivery people does not seem to make sense. However, we can see from his comment that he sees the street not as a destination but as a space for moving through quickly. His use (and many other commenters’ use) of the term “artery” invokes a body part that is essential for pumping blood
and keeping systems moving—not a space where one should be delayed, linger, or seek become one of de Certeau’s *flaneurs* Commenter 393 views the street as transient, non-space in the city with a singular job to do: to move car traffic as quickly as possible.

Many comments view Atlanta’s major street as being “major” because of the number of cars it accommodates and moves quickly, just as we might consider a university “major” based on the vast number of students it graduates every year. Commenter 1369 believes that the main purpose of a road like Peachtree is efficiency in moving cars through. Commenter 1369 writes,

**THERE IS SIMPLY TOO MUCH VEHICULAR TRAFFIC ON PEACHTREE TO EVEN CONSIDER BIKE LANES ON PEACHTREE. THE FIRST PRIORITY IS MOVING TRAFFIC EFFICIENTLY THROUGH THE CITY… I FEEL FOR THE BIKERS IN ATLANTA, BUT THERE ARE JUST SOME ROADS THAT THEY HAVE NO BUSINESS BEING ON AND PEACHTREE IS ONE OF THEM. THERE ARE PLENTY OF NEIGHBORHOOD STREETS AROUND PEACHTREE THAT BIKERS CAN UTILIZE FOR EXERCISE.**

Commenter 1369 views the street as a space for efficiently moving cars; as bicycles are a tool for exercise, they do not belong on the road. (I will return to that point later.) She does believe that Peachtree is unique because of its status as a highly-visible and highly-traveled road and that “neighborhood streets” need not be designed this way. Note that she believes that Peachtree is separate from “neighborhood streets” and does not believe that Peachtree is integrated into neighborhoods but instead outside these neighborhoods.

However, many commenters view Peachtree Road as part of the neighborhood, not a space outside the community built for efficiency. As a result, their definition of what it means to be a “major” street differs. Rather than viewing a “major” university as the one that graduates the most students, for instance, they would likely view a “major” university as one with top qualities: low student/faculty ratio, distinguished alumni, and active student organizations. Many commenters believe that Peachtree Road is a very busy street because it reflects a vibrant
community. They want to see more modes of transportation integrated into the road to improve community relations; the wider the reach of the public space, the more vibrant it will be.

Commenter 1625 echoes this sentiment, writing that she would like to see Peachtree Road become a “community” street, one worthy of a neighborhood. She writes, “If you want to discourage commuters from using Peachtree as an alternate route, stop allowing Peachtree to be a 6-lane superhighway where drivers rule and everyone else is put at risk. Make it into a road that is safer for pedestrians, cyclists and drivers—a road that is friendlier to our community... Do the right thing and return Peachtree to the neighborhood road it used to be!” (1625). Commenter 1625, rather than seeing the street as one outside the neighborhood, believes it should be integrated into the neighborhood.

Commenter 1825 calls Peachtree Road “an important corridor” and wants to see changes that will allow it to be better integrated into the community. She writes:

The proposed Peachtree Road lanes would fill a dramatic need, making an important corridor navigable by bike...Building good cycling infrastructure will make our community healthier and happier. And people on bike or on foot are also much more likely to talk to their neighbors or people they meet, which increases social solidarity and cohesion. I find I now have much closer relationships with my neighbors than when I was driving. Bike lanes are good for individuals and good for our communities. I hope the plans will be implemented!

In this comment, commenter 1825 reveals that she believes that adding bike lanes to this “important corridor” will improve the community and neighbor relationships. This perspective demonstrates that she sees the major street not as a space to move through but as a public space. In this comment, it is clear that she thinks of the road as integrated into the community, not a moat around the community. Commenter 1738 argues that allowing everyone to access the road is essential to the diversity of Atlanta. He writes, “We live in a diverse city with many different types of users including drivers, bike riders, and transit riders. All major public thoroughfares,
except limited access highways, should be open to all of these citizens.” Commenter 1738 believes that openness of the city and openness of the street are intertwined concepts. Rather than existing as a non-space, these commenters view the street as a connective, community space.

Some commenters view the street as a public space that is or should be integrated into the fabric of the community, while other commenters consider it a barrier that, at turns, should serve to shield, protect, barricade, isolate, or cut off the community, depending on their view of it. The first viewpoint recognizes the fluid nature of the streets, while the second suggests that the streets are stable spaces. It is, of course, difficult to create a street that is a fluid wall, and so designing a street that integrates both ideals is nearly impossible; however, the discourse around what it means to be a street allows us to view citizens’ varied concepts of the nature of a street and its purpose.

Several commenters view Peachtree Road not as space built for efficiency, but instead as a barrier, expressing their fear that any additional traffic congestion on Peachtree Road will cause destruction of their neighborhoods; if Peachtree Road can no longer contain the traffic, then like a broken dam, it will allow a flood to pour into their homes and their neighbor’s homes. Commenter 363 writes in with concerns about Peachtree Road explains, “As a resident of [a Buckhead neighborhood], I am outraged at the thought of bike lanes. The congestion would choke Peachtree… The thought of the NIGHTMARE of traffic that would spill over to residential streets is overwhelming…. ” (363). He views Peachtree Road as a barrier protecting his neighborhood from cars. Commenter 443 writes, “The traffic on Peachtree is already congested. [Adding the bike lanes] would aggravate the problem. This would also cause impatient drivers to feed into our neighborhoods.” Commenter 280 writes, “This proposal will gridlock Peachtree, forcing traffic into our neighborhoods and devaluing our property values.”
The concern of the “spillage” from Peachtree Road is both property values, as commenter 280 writes, and the children who want to play in the neighborhood streets. Commenter 1148 writes:

This plan will increase congestion and the commuters will move to our neighborhood streets for relief from a more congested Peachtree. My street and many others have no sidewalks, but we have over 40 kids on our street. My kids can't ride their bikes during the evening commute because of cut through commuters trying to get on 75. Your plan will only increase the volume of cars. Let the bikes use our neighborhood streets and keep the cars on Peachtree. Bikes don't pay tax but cars do - the plan seems very ill thought out. What about the walkability of my own neighborhood and my kids?!! I am doing my best to prevent obesity in my own kids and your plan hurts all parents in Buckhead who are trying to let their kids play outside. I am an active citizen and won't give up on this issue.

From this comment, it is clear that commenter 1148 views Peachtree Road as a protective barrier for her neighborhood, where her children play. Like the other commenters above, she is nervous about the idea of people spilling over into “her” streets in her neighborhood. She sees her neighborhood as a place where her children can ride bicycles; she views Peachtree Road as a barrier wall, where one should not ride bicycles. She invokes the argument we explored above—that “bikes don’t pay tax but cars do”—and seems concerned primarily with her private neighborhood and her and her neighbors’ children, with little perspective on the community as a whole. This emphasis on protecting neighborhood children from the violent wave of cars hemmed in on Peachtree arises again and again. Commenter 1917 writes, “Added congestion on Peachtree Road will exacerbate the problem we have with cut through traffic in our neighborhood that endangers the safety of our streets for our children.” Commenter 1919 writes, “Imagine the increase of cut through traffic on neighborhood streets where our children play. This will be dangerous to our families, possibly increase crime and decrease property values.” These commenters believe that cars need to be kept on Peachtree Road, out of local neighborhoods, where the cars will hurt property values and the community.
Commenters write in with fears not only of traffic flooding their neighborhoods but also of being trapped inside their own neighborhoods if this barrier “wall” is upset. Comment 1016 writes, “Our neighbors are already facing cut through traffic... I can't imagine trying to get out of my neighborhood if this proposal is approved. Please help us preserve our neighborhoods and keep driving safe and less congested on Peachtree.” Commenter 1016 fears being trapped inside her neighborhood by the wall that is Peachtree Road, while at the same time, she wants to “preserve” her own neighborhood. She clearly drives a car and wants car traffic to flow on Peachtree Road but does not want car traffic to come into her neighborhood. She believes that her neighborhood should be “preserved” and unharmed by the flow of car traffic on the streets. Commenter 1153 states that he feels “landlocked” in her Peachtree Road townhome because of current traffic patterns: “For the last two years I have lived in a townhouse community…[with] no light at the point of our ingress and egress to Peachtree Rd…. I believe my community in particular would be rendered landlocked much of the day, should this project be completed.” He indicates that he is “an avid biker” and goes on to propose that GDOT “route bikers to Midtown with an elevated bridge” over a nearby road. However, he views Peachtree Road as an impermeable barrier composed of cars and sees that his “community” is outside this barrier of the road; the two are not integrated.

Other commenters view Peachtree Road as part of the community: as the river itself, not the dam keeping the river contained. They see Peachtree Road’s integration of multiple modes of transportation as crucial to connecting and improving community relationships, particularly as the city becomes denser in the future. Commenter 1809 writes, “…I have been riding in Atlanta for 30 years and believe having a connection in Buckhead is a necessity. The city is planning a network of bike lanes and some already exist north of this area, which I have ridden. This stretch
would help...by adding pieces of bike lanes through the city until one day they connect all areas.”

He sees Peachtree Road not as a crowded street that is beyond its capacity but as a connection point with other areas of the city. Commenter 1811 writes that “…the connection between these two parts of town [Buckhead and Midtown] is missing. Currently, Atlanta is effectively split into two segregated areas with no way to get from one to the other by bicycle.” She also sees Peachtree Road as a connection point, a bridge from which she would be able to connect to the “segregated” area of Midtown, a not-inappropriate term, given Buckhead’s history with segregation. However, she is referring not to racial segregation but to the lack of transportation connectivity between the two areas.

Commenter 1827 writes about the increasing traffic and development and worries that she will no longer be able to travel in her van on Peachtree Road; however, she believes that the solution to the problem is to open up Peachtree to additional transportation modes. She writes,

“The traffic is so fast, curvy and hilly [on Peachtree Road], I am afraid to ride my bike without a lane, and It [sic] drives me crazy that I have to drive my van. I keep waiting for a lane, so I can get the 2 miles down Peachtree to my yoga class safely. I look at all the condos being built around me and am very concerned about just how much worse the in-town traffic will be. Bike lanes that connect us to shops safely are wonderful” (1827).

Though more people are driving on and living along the streets, she embraces this growth because she sees the streets as a means of connecting to places. Several other commenters recognize this future of growth and, as a result, see the proposed changes as providing additional connectivity: Commenter 1513 writes, “…this project...promotes incorporation of a complete streets policy and this is the way to a more safer [sic] and vibrant future for Atlanta.” Commenter 910 writes that the project will improve the city by improving connectivity: “This is a good push for Atlanta's future as a connected city.” Commenter 1832 praises Buckhead’s density as a positive, stating that he believes that adding bicycle lanes will provide more connectivity: “One
of the beauties of Buckhead is that so many things are in close proximity - cycling proximity. With the planned residential growth, the congestion will only get worse... have yet to see where a well planned bike lane in city does not payoff in community satisfaction in the long term…” These commenters view the street as a space for connectivity as part of the community, not a walled-off space for moving cars efficiently outside of the community. As a result, their language speaks more to the community and Atlanta as a whole, not to their specific neighborhoods. They view the bike lanes as providing additional connectivity for the future of Atlanta, not threatening the existence of the current neighborhoods. However, the impetus to preserve Peachtree Road as a wall won out since planned changes to the street were rejected. This win, of course, could be seen as a reflection of local citizens having their voices heard about local issues. However, the planned changes were part of a larger urban plan for Atlanta to make the streets more accessible and connected, and their loss is significant. That this plan was not approved means that a crucial connection point for people of all modes of transportation is absent.

The public comments indicate that far from the streets “emerging as a radically inclusive democracy of human experience” as John Ackerman believes they should be, the streets, even in an urban metropolis like Atlanta are often created, used, and perceived as spaces for privatized acts—particularly moving from one’s home to one’s job as efficiently as possible. To attempt to

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33 I am referring to the Connect Atlanta Phase I plan and the Complete Streets policy, both adopted by the city. In the March 29, 2016 letter that GDOT released, they wrote: “The primary purpose of this proposed project is to improve safety along the project corridor by adding a two way continuous left turn lane. This will assist ease of left turn movements and reduce the incidence of crashes associated with left turns. The bicycle lanes were included in the proposed design as a secondary benefit, consistent with GDOT’s Complete Streets policy and the City of Atlanta’s Connect Atlanta Bike Plan.” This was written after they decided to forgo the bike lanes.
locate publics in this space—or in any public space—is increasingly difficult as public spaces like “the streets” are viewed not as community spaces but as private spaces, intended to accommodate those people who pay for them. Some people view the streets as non-places or walls, intended to hem in communities and keep out people who are not part of the community. GDOT, too, adopts this mindset, assuring citizens that traffic—presumably, car traffic—should remain on Peachtree Road, away from the neighborhoods; they also view Peachtree Road as a “buffer” for the community, a space where cars should move efficiently. As streets are increasingly considered private spaces (either a space for traveling to work, or a space for building a private residence on), they are less connected as a network, and the people who embody them are less connected as well.

As I explored in the first chapter of this dissertation, “the streets” as a metaphor for public space has allowed scholars to envision a concrete place without sacrificing this concept of ceaseless mobility, which is inherent to the streets. Mathieu explains that, “Moving from the university to the streets means that the rules that prevail in the classroom or the dean’s office no longer apply” (xi). It is this movement and mobility that “the streets” as a metaphor capture, and that rhetoric and composition scholars have begun to examine closely. The Thomas R. Watson Conference 2016 theme was “Mobility Work in Composition,” which sought to unpack the concept of mobility, asking participants: “In what ways might mobility get taken up in practices and rhetorics of activism in engagements across divides of institution, discipline, program, location, and language?” As community literacy adopts mobility as an undergirding force in “located” places, pinpointing that mobility gives rise to the “streets” as a located, moving.

34 In their March 2016 letter, GDOT wrote: “Diverting traffic to other roads near Peachtree Road would not be in the best interest of GDOT or the community… [With the turn lanes] vehicles are less likely to use neighborhood streets to bypass Peachtree Road.”
divisive, connective tissue that bridges and divides communities and institutions.

5.6  Further divisions in the streets

Rhetoric and composition scholars have long recognized the spatial and physical aspects of communities and how those places impact discourse. Talk of “borderlands” (Anzaldua) in addition to “homeplaces” (hooks) and “commonplaces” (Fleming) makes it clear that where people are makes an impact both on how people perceive discourse and how they communicate across localities. Where we are or how we perceive of places also impacts how and what we write about (Reynolds 157). As I established in the last section, people living in a four-bedroom home along a quiet, tree-lined neighborhood street in Buckhead perceive Peachtree Road as a borderland, which should not be crossed; other people view it as a commonplace that should be accessible and public. Additional “perceived” barriers emerge within the public comments: 1. the streets as spaces for transportation only (not to be mixed with recreation) and 2. the streets as spaces that are inherently dangerous, for vulnerable users to avoid. In this section and the next one, I will explore these perspectives on the street.

Many commenters perceive the streets as spaces for transportation. Commenter 12 identifies herself as a person who rides a bicycle. She writes that “We often bike as a family and have NO INTEREST in doing so on Peachtree.” She writes that she “[loves] New Orleans and St. Charles Avenue but Atlanta’s Buckhead development does not lend itself.” Here Commenter 12 is explaining that while she enjoys riding bikes with her family—and in areas built for bicycling, such as those in New Orleans—she does not want to ride her bicycle in Buckhead because she believes the area is not built for bicycling: it is not a space for fun with her family, as St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans is. Commenter 777 states that Peachtree Road is “not a scenic drive for bikes,” and 1683 believes that bicycling cannot be used for shopping or
going out to dinner, two things people might want to do on Peachtree Road: “How does one shop or go to a restaurant on a bike? Biking is mostly for exercise in Atlanta.”

Commenter 1244 argues that GDOT’s job is not to provide exercise to people riding bicycles but instead to deal with more serious types of transportation. “Linking bikers up to the Beltline for recreational activity is not an appropriate goal for the DOT. Keeping cars and trucks on a commercial Peachtree Road...is” (1244). Commenter 84 writes that “Peachtree is not the road for bikes. Too congested. Too dangerous. Many other options available to bikes!! Let them bike elsewhere” (84). Commenter 1858 believes that people riding bicycles should be excluded from Peachtree Road because they have sufficient facilities elsewhere for their exercise: “Bike riders have the Beltline. Don’t give them Peachtree Road” (1858). Commenter 1624 writes that people riding bikes are not doing so for utilitarian purposes, so they should not be allowed on the road: “Most are not using bikes to get to and from work...they are exercising. Practicing for the Peachtree Road Race” (1624). Peachtree Road, as a major street, is seen as a space for serious transportation acts, not for recreation, which is what people on bicycles seek.

As we can see from the previous comments, many people feel that bicycles do not belong on the road because they are for recreation, which is outside the bounds of what a street should provide. A bicyclist’s use of a street is frivolous, an activity that gets in the way of adults attempting to complete serious business. Because they are not carrying out a meaningful act (transporting a spouse to the hospital, attempting to arrive at work in a timely manner, taking children to preschool, etc.), bicycles do not belong on the road. This perspective of bicyclists is common: As commenter 366 writes, there are “…few-very few-people who are not in a hurry who can afford to spend precious time on a bike (when it is not raining, and the weather is nice) and who can afford the time at the expense of the time of others to make a political point. This is
elitism at its worst…” (366). Those people who choose to ride a bicycle for their own pleasure are clogging up the streets for other people who are carrying out real business. After all, Peachtree Road is a “major street,” and for bicyclists to decide to ride on this street when they could ride in other, much more desirable green spaces is absurd. From the comments above, it is clear that these commenters view bicycling as a form of recreation: a choice. People who choose to bike on Peachtree Road for fun have little argument for accommodation if the space is one for utilitarian activity.

However, Buckhead’s history as an isolated enclave of prosperity has largely contributed to this perception of bicycling as a “choice” activity. People who see bike lanes for leisure, as I demonstrated many commenters do, are likely used to talking to or seeing people using bikes this way in their neighborhoods, and they are likely wealthy. In fact, in a recent study of 2,004 bicyclists in Montreal, only 17% of people reported riding bicycles primarily for leisure. The remaining 83% of people rode bicycles primarily for some form of transportation, whether as “dedicated cyclists” (24%), “fairweather utilitarians” (23%) or “path-using cyclists,” (36%). Leisure cyclists “never” (15%) “rarely” (35%) or “sometimes” (30%) ride their bikes for “utilitarian purposes”—because leisure riders view bicycles as others might view a jet-ski: not as a tool for transportation but for recreation. The study shows that riding a bike as transportation “corresponding inversely and unsurprisingly to the groups’ household incomes,” (17), with leisure cyclists more likely to be wealthy than other groups.

This correlation between income and reason for riding a bicycle makes sense, given that nearly half of people who bike to work (the ultimate utilitarian riding), are low-income. Andrew Keatts, writing for Governing, explains: “Nationally and in cities across Sun Belt, the bulk of those who bike to work – based on our best available data – are low-income people. Nationwide,
49 percent of people in the cycling category earn less than $25,000 per year.” Half of the people who are riding their bicycles to work are likely doing so because they have no other choice. However, the discourse around bicycling that we read above does not address bicycling as an economic need at all. In the bicycle advocacy world, Keatts notes, these bicyclists have their own name: the invisible cyclists.35

The fact that this group of cyclists is “invisible” in the wealthy Buckhead neighborhood is not surprising, given Buckhead’s history and its current status as a wealthy neighborhood,36 which I explored in detail above. It is very likely that because they were wealthy, the leisure cyclists I cited above understood cycling to be an activity of the wealthy—a means of fun. Not surprising given the “peculiarly American association of internal-combustion automobiles with adulthood, and of bicycles with childhood,” that has been ongoing since the 1950s, as James Longhurst argues (185). If bikes are fun, leisure activities, and the road is a space to conduct utilitarian movement in the most “commonsense” and efficient way possible (in a car), then it is really not surprising that these Buckhead residents were against accommodating multiple modes of transportation on Peachtree Road. No one wants to see people in silly costumes blocking “real” traffic when they could be exercising anywhere else in the city.

However, the discourse characterizing of bicyclists as frivolous public means that this public of bicyclists is “called into being,” as Michael Warner argues, “by virtue of being addressed” (67). In other words, those people who respond to and join into the discourse create

35 Some people in the bicycling community reject this term, as they believe it is insulting to these low-income bicyclists. I am going to use the term here for ease and clarity.
36 Buckhead is still very wealthy. In its 2011 article “Where the 1 Percent Lives,” Bloomberg ranked Buckhead as the No. 20 richest zip code in the country, with an average household income of $280,631, and an average household net worth of $1,353,189, significantly more than the average Atlanta resident’s income.
the public; since recreational riders are arguing against recreational riders, then recreational riders are the public of bicyclists that is invoked. What is interesting, though, is that Michael Warner does not address the paradox of the fact that those doing the “addressing” and those responding to the addressing have to exist at the same time, which is impossible: a kind of chicken-and-egg problem of “circularity,” as Farmer notes (59), with the public and the people addressing the public coming at the same time. As Frank Farmer explains, “Public discourse, then, is its very saying, proclaims not merely, ‘Let a public exist,’ but [also] ‘let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.’ It then goes in confirmation that such a public exists” (Farmer 59). Many commenters view the bicycling public as recreational, and so they likely go to the streets expecting to see recreational bicyclists. When they imagine a street with bike lanes on it, the bike lanes are filled with recreational bicyclists. And it is true—some people (maybe even 17% of the people, or higher, given Buckhead’s wealth) would have ridden in this bike lane specifically for leisure. That GDOT responded to this discourse by getting rid of the bike lanes legitimizes the “public” of bicyclists as recreational riders, while simultaneously delegitimizing counterpublics of bicyclists who ride primarily for transportation. As neoliberalism privatizes the social and economic spaces that used to be within the realm of the public sphere (Chomsky; Reynolds; Welch), the sustainability of counterpublics and subpublics is threatened. The street becomes not an inclusive public space but a dangerous, hostile space for these publics.

5.7 The multiple definitions of “safety”

Counterpublics of marginalized people, including minorities, children, and low-income residents, etc., need the most protection in order to thrive. Linda Flower notes that “Counterpublics act first as safe houses for withdrawal and regrouping where new
representations can be crafted and where identities are formed and transformed” (39). In addition, while counterpublic discourse can be a “safe house” for crafting new identities, counterpublics themselves remain vulnerable to dominant publics: “A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” (Warner 119). “Subordinate status” often leaves publics in harm’s way, particularly when we think materially about the public space of the street. Similarly, in rhetoric and composition scholarship, “the street” has primarily been used as a space to identify the most vulnerable groups: prisoners (Coogan), sex workers (McCracken), and homeless populations (Mathieu and Ryder). Frank Farmer argues that the term “the streets” is a socially commentary “about what our public realm has become: an evacuated, abandoned space inhabited, for the most part, by those who ‘live the streets,’ who do not have the resources necessary to (comfortably) partition their daily lives” (Farmer 8). Only the poor or disenfranchised are left to the streets; any person with means has gotten into their car and driven to their homes or jobs, thus “partitioning” their lives away from the streets.

Thus, we can identify counterpublics by identifying those who indicate 1. that they use the streets, and 2. that they feel vulnerable when they do so. Several commenters indicate they are concerned about the safety of the road as currently designed. Commenter 1814 writes that he does not own a car and travels everywhere on bicycle with his thirteen-year-old son: “Although we are healthier from bicycling… like pedestrians, we are additionally vulnerable commuters and [Peachtree Road] is currently designed to put us in increased harms [sic] way.” Commenter 1625 writes of her own fear and her fear for her children when they are on Peachtree Road:

As a family, we often walk from our house to restaurants and stores on Peachtree… However, crossing the 6 lanes of Peachtree is almost as scary as running across [Interstate]-85. Cars have little respect for pedestrians and 6 lanes is a really long way—you only get a few seconds. Our children like to ride their bikes by themselves to the Peachtree Battle Shopping Center to go to Richards or out to lunch. But I hold my breath until they return, knowing they have to cross the 6 very dangerous lanes of Peachtree.
Peachtree Road is seen as a dangerous space, particularly given how many lanes it has and how fast the cars drive. Much as commenters viewed Peachtree Road as a wall or dam or as integrated into the neighborhood, this commenter views it as a gulf, challenging and “very dangerous” to pass through. Commenter 1395 writes that she, too, views the current design of the road as a dangerous section to get through and laments that she has “no other choice” but to use the road in its current state:

I live directly on Peachtree Road...and I have no other choice but to ride [a bicycle] on the road when I go to town. And this is what I do. It is a misnomer that adding a bike lane would bring bikes to Peachtree Road. Peachtree Road already has bicyclists and I am one of them. It would be much safer for me if I had a designated bike lane.

Commenter 1395 feels that the current design of the road is dangerous, particularly as she is forced to ride her bicycle on a space that does not have accommodations for her.

It is not only bicyclists who view the current state of the road as dangerous. Commenter 1496 writes of his experience being in a car crash on Peachtree Road: “As a driver, I will appreciate some sanity being introduced into a stressful, dangerous section of our city streets. In my fifteen years of living in Atlanta, the only car crash I have been involved in was during an attempt to turn left off of Peachtree in the proposed change route.” Commenter 1496 states that he also rides a bicycle and sees Peachtree Road as “a less friendly and accessible part of the city.” He views the current state of the street as dangerous and unwelcoming. Commenter 34, who identifies himself as a driver, bicyclist, and pedestrian, writes that the street is not currently safe for any mode of transportation:

I drive this segment of Peachtree very often. It is among the least safe roads I have driven anywhere in the U.S. I cannot avoid it given where my home is. I like to walk—there is no buffer between the sidewalk and frequently speeding cars. I like to ride my bike rather than drive. It is too dangerous to ride a bike on Peachtree as is. If I could ride my bike, it would take a car, my car, off of Peachtree (frequently).... Plus, [the Complete Streets improvements] would be safer for cars, pedestrians, and bicyclists. I do not see why this project is even up for public input.
He sees the street as currently dangerous, making him fearful of using it through any mode of transportation. Commenter 58 explains, “This project is about safety and improving equity in our transportation system…. I am glad to see GDOT proposing a different use of our public right-of-way that considers those who cannot, or choose not to, travel by car. Please…improve safety and accessibility for people on foot and bike.” Commenter 58 notes the choice in traveling by car, and that some people “cannot” do so, and so must use other forms of transportation, including walking and biking. These commenters indicate that they fear for their lives when using Peachtree Road, or that they feel they have no choice but to protect themselves in a car in this “dangerous” space.

We can see the neoliberal “consumer model” of citizenship playing out, in that other comments indicate that if some citizens fear for their life, then those citizens should stay off the road altogether. Commenters write that because this major street is dangerous for bicycling, the solution is to keep bicyclists off this street. Commenter 1002 explains, “…Although my husband, son and I have road bikes and enjoy biking, we recognize that bikers cannot reasonably expect to be safe on Peachtree given the volume of traffic, the traffic signals and turning movements into businesses and residential areas, pedestrians, etc. along the street. I do not believe it is responsible to encourage biking on Peachtree…” The commenter is concerned about the safety of the street in its current form; because it is not safe for bicyclists, bicyclists should be kept off the street. Commenter 1913 writes, “I enjoy riding my bike, but I have no interest in doing so in the midst of the dangerous Peachtree Road traffic. I shudder to think of the injuries that such a set up would produce.” Commenter 1071 writes, “I was previously a biker and both of my children live in apartments on this strip, while they own bikes, they go elsewhere to ride. This is just too
dangerous.” Commenter 413 writes that only people who can conform to the current flow of traffic should be allowed on Peachtree:

This is a disastrous idea… I'm not anti-bike but I go to work at 7:15am and see 1-2 bikes max a week! This town and Ptree Rd is hilly and it's 95 degrees in summer—nobody is going to ride a bike to work—more than already do—so to take out a whole lane is just crazy. Plus, bikes don't ever follow road signs or traffic laws/ bikes recreational [sic] shouldn't be on Ptree at rush hour unless they want to be part of traffic. Because the street is not designed to accommodate bicycles, they do not belong on the street, especially since they do not conform to the demands of the street. To introduce them would be too dangerous.

What is missing in these public comments is the ability of the dominant public people to see the counterpublic perspective—those subordinate, vulnerable users. Here, we see the individual perspectives being stamped onto paper as votes for or against the project, with no possibility of open, public discourse. As I explained in chapter 2, Greg Hampton notes that such narratives are supposed to help policy makers make decisions when controversy arises. Exchanging narratives of dominant and counter publics allows a meta-narrative to form, to allow policy makers to better understand the complexity of the problem (240). He argues that such policy promotes “reflective respect for public preferences… the potential for competitive telling of stories to lead to changes in perspectives and appreciation of others’ perspectives” (240). However, in these public comments, we can see that there is no option for swapping stories and therefore developing empathy for another’s perspective. Instead, every story is archived as a singular experience and tallied as a singular vote.

As a result, for the dominant public of people who drive cars, “safety” remains defined as safety for them, within the current car-centric model of the street; they believe that changes will threaten their own safety by introducing difference. Comment 802 writes, “Bicycle travel on this
major artery will certainly slow down traffics [sic] considerably, causing traffic backup and is absolutely not safe for cyclists and poses danger to drivers trying to avoid cyclists. PLEASE reconsider the current plan being presented to the public.” Commenter 817 explains that she believes “bike lanes will provide a false sense of safety for the bikers. Cars drive too fast on Peachtree and are constantly ‘jockeying’ in and out of lanes. This cannot be a safe environment for Bicyclist [sic].” Commenter 995 explains that the addition of bike lanes will make it harder for people driving cars on the street: “…we believe the bike lanes would actually create a more dangerous driving environment on Peachtree... adding bike traffic will add another ‘moving part’ that motorists will have to navigate. I fear those driving in the right lanes will not be able to make safe right turns with cyclists traveling in the bike lanes even when car traffic is stopped.” Commenter 428 explains that, “Both my wife and I work in Buckhead...and travel both directions at a minimum of twice daily. I have had at least two close calls with bicycle riders on Peachtree Road. I believe there is too much traffic and some of it traveling much too fast to safely accommodate bicycles. The objective of any DOT plan should be to accommodate the most citizen needs, not those of a few.” Commenter 961 explains that adding bike lanes is too dangerous because it would require drivers to pay close attention to the road, avoid texting or talking on cell phones, and paying close attention when they make right turns:

…there are instantaneous changes in the driving condition that take place throughout the corridor requiring a high degree of concentration. And this does not even take into account the distracted drivers talking on cell phones and texting as they drive this section of Peachtree, making an already taxing situation dangerous. The addition of bike lanes would require drivers in the right lanes to be aware of bikers approaching from behind the line of vehicular traffic which would be difficult during the highest capacity times. For these commenters, the danger that emerges in the street is to drivers, who already enjoy a (comparatively) safe experience on the road; changes to the street, they believe, will require drivers to be more cautious. This perspective likely emerges from their view of the street
as a space to accommodate cars: an efficient space intended to take people to and from work from their neighborhoods, which are outside this space of the street. Perhaps their definition of safety would have evolved if they had been exposed to counter narratives (and perhaps not).

Safety, was, as I noted, the major concern with the project—and the major discourse opposing the project. What did GDOT have to say about safety in response to the commenter’s concerns? They summarized the following “major concerns” about the bike lanes and safety that they highlighted throughout all the comments, citing “Peachtree Road is too dangerous for bikes,” “Bike lanes will conflict with drivers making right turns…” and “Bike lanes are too short to be effective” as some of the major safety concerns, with most people opposed to the bike lanes as a safety hazard. In response to these tallied concerns, GDOT wrote that safety was their primary concern for this project, particularly by adding the two-way turn lane: “the primary purpose of this proposed project is to improve safety along the corridor by adding a two-way continuous left turn lane” and that “the bicycle lanes were included in the proposed design as a secondary benefit, consistent with GDOT’s Complete Streets policy.”

However, despite indicating that the bike lanes would not impair safety (and would in fact improve it), GDOT goes on to respond to the comments they summarized by saying that the point is essentially moot, as the bike lanes have been removed from the overall project. There is no open dialogue about how to define safety or should be included in that definition. GDOT writes that although the bicycle lanes have been removed, “The removal of the bicycle lanes does not impair the ability of the proposed design to facilitate safer left turn movements and improve safety, which is the primary goal of the proposed project.” Safety will still be improved, they note—but what is left out is for whom safety will be improved. In this case, safety will be improved for people who are driving cars, while conditions will remain nearly the same for
people on foot or bike. In the original proposal, GDOT noted that the addition of bicycle lanes for Complete Streets purposes would “provide a buffer between pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic” and “provide a dedicated space for bicyclists to travel in the roadway.” In the March 2016 letter, GDOT does not mention the fact that these pedestrians and bicyclists will remain vulnerable, as they are and were originally. Safety applies only to the dominant public—the majority on this major road; bicyclists and pedestrians remain a counterpublic, left with little access to Atlanta’s grand boulevard. Essentially, counterpublics—those people who are not already accommodated by the street—are left out of the catch-all “safe” space of the street and forced to avoid or precariously navigate spaces that were not built to accommodate them.

5.8 Conclusion

The ideal of liberalism is multiple individuals choosing to cast off difference in order to join together to form publics and fight for the common good (Fleming 25-27). It would seem that public comments—and public engagement processes more generally—could be intersections for citizens’ narratives, allowing disparate groups to shape public policy. However, in GDOT’s analysis, there is no clear overlap in the publics’ discourse because there is little recognition that multiple publics exist, and there is little space provided for open discussion. What I have done differently from GDOT in tracing these narratives is to understand the neoliberal viewpoints impacting publics discourse and also unearthing the vulnerable populations—counterpublics—that may have been silenced or overlooked in GDOT’s tallying process. Rather than seeing whether a comment was “for” or “against” the project, I have sought to put the comments in conversation with each other, to extricate the discourse that exists or might have existed had open, public debate been encouraged in the commenting process.
That said, there were many overlaps in the public comments; commenters overwhelmingly viewed Peachtree Road as a crucial thoroughfare and were concerned with safety. In terms of the former, such a major street was seen as a barrier or a community gathering space, depending on the perspective. In comparison, rhetoric and composition scholars view the street as an open, democratic space. In addition to how they view the street, how a person uses a street can lead them to decide what they find acceptably safe or not. We can identify the counterpublic voices by isolating those who feel the most vulnerable in the streets, allowing us to elevate and highlight those voices, just as I did in this chapter. However, we must recognize that policies promoting segregation (both by race and income) and neoliberal influences (in which concern about one’s own property and tax payments) have shaped how citizens view access to such public spaces. For many, the street is an arena that can and should be accessed according to how much a person pays for that right; this problematic perspective has been accepted in many publics as a commonsense, if exclusionary, practice.

My analysis of these comments is intended to raise questions for researchers about how qualitative data is being read, recorded, and understood by experts, particularly when such a reading impacts public policy and the material reality of public spaces. GDOT’s analysis of Peachtree Road is not an isolated incident; since the decision was made to scrap the project, two other “major” streets in Atlanta have undergone public comment periods for proposed changes. In addition, such public comment periods are going on constantly all across the country at both the state and federal level; as I write, the Department of the Interior is accepting public comment on whether to keep twenty-seven national monuments, including one (Bear’s Ear) that covers 1.35 million wild acres in Utah. However, no explanation is offered for how these public comments are read or interpreted by these agencies. Rhetoric and composition scholars should
question the methods by which these public comments are being read, recorded, and understood, and we should seek to make transparent and involve ourselves in such processes. What is at stake is not only the integrity of public discourse but also the spaces where we live. In the next chapter, I offer up practical suggestions for how we can integrate our scholarship and pedagogy with government agencies and public comment processes.
In this dissertation, I have shown that open records are an overlooked, rich primary data source for rhetoric and composition scholars, and the public comments contained within them pave a path through which scholars can enter into actually existing public discourse. In the last chapter, I provided an alternative reading of the public comments submitted to GDOT and argued that multiple narratives emerged from them—narratives that were completely overlooked or ignored by GDOT. These alternative narratives, steeped in the racialized history of transportation in Atlanta, provide an additional framework from which to consider an otherwise cut-and-dry project: how to pave a street. This analysis answered a call I made in chapter 2, in which I argued that rhetoric and composition scholars have a responsibility to use open records to uncover competing narratives that may challenge the “official” narrative created and adopted by local government. However, as I will discuss in this chapter, we must not stop at making alternative interpretations. I see John Ackerman’s call for a “policy turn” in rhetoric and composition scholars as a mandate to enter into local government decision making. In this chapter, I argue that rhetoric and composition scholars should not only question the decisions that local governments make but should involve themselves as public intellectuals in the decision-making processes for three reasons: to enhance their own research, to improve their pedagogy, and to be responsible citizens.

Rhetoric and composition, and the humanities more broadly, are known as thinking, theorizing, and artistic spaces; rarely are we called to make decisions that impact the public
realm. However, Candice Rai argues that we cannot stagnate in what she calls “agnostic pluralism,” simply recognizing the value of each person’s narrative and idea, or we risk being left behind or ignored in a world where decisions must be made. As she notes, “…eventually, public policy must act” (Rai 41). As I explained in chapter 2, archival researchers too, have shifted their focus to “actually doing the rhetorical work of creating public memory” (Gerard 100). In other words, we can help reconstruct the present by critiquing past interpretations, but we must do something else: “work.” We must act, encourage action, and foster action, specifically by inserting ourselves into real-time projects that impact our current society. This “rhetorical work” can sometimes go against the grain of our discipline, as Linda Flower notes: “[academic journals] tend to value abstract and symbolic representations. We delight in rising to talk of principles, generalizations, and theory” (179). Rather than “act” or “work,” scholars, particularly in the humanities, too often focus on providing hypotheses about how that work might be done.

It may seem from my last chapter that I, too, am doing futile work in analyzing GDOT’s public comments after they have already made a decision. It is unlikely that GDOT will alter their final design of Peachtree Road based on this dissertation, and I have not explicitly made a case that they should. I do plan to “go public” with my findings by sharing my dissertation chapters with GDOT and publishing about my findings in a grassroots urbanism publication like Thread ATL or a more established newspaper like the Atlanta Journal Constitution. That said, analyzing public comments through open records is uncommon in rhetoric and composition, and I understood that I was pioneering a new area of research. Rather than conducting this research

37 When I use the term “public realm” in this chapter, I am referring to any domain outside the scope of the university in which people debate, examine, or seek solutions to problems that impact community life.
to alter the design of one project, I hoped to forge a path that would allow scholars to partner, or intervene, in future community engagement projects conducted by local governments. To do that, we first needed to examine and understand the methods government officials use in such projects. As I have demonstrated through my case study of Peachtree Road, methods for community outreach can be opaque, haphazard, or unstated. This finding both helps scholars understand the process that a government agency like GDOT is working with and also demonstrates that rhetoric and composition scholars have a responsibility to seek out partnerships with such organizations, as we are trained in (and embrace) community engagement methods and tactics. Rhetoric and composition scholars should intervene in such real-time instances of public discourse; specifically, we must involve ourselves in public policy decisions, and, by extension, the local governments that make them.

However, before we are able to partner with policymakers and government organizations, we must do two things: 1. make a commitment to expanding our purview of “community engagement” and “public pedagogy” to include not only composition-focused initiatives but also policy-focused initiatives, and 2. embrace the identity of public intellectual. These two things will allow us to partner locally with scholars and actors in public policy, particularly in the concrete areas of urban planning and government regulation and decision-making. In addition, rhetoric and composition scholars will benefit from these partnerships by grounding their own work in visible, pragmatic areas that make writing programs visible, as Jeffrey Grabill calls us to do. In this chapter, I offer ways that rhetoric and composition scholars can simultaneously embrace public intellectualism and partner with government organizations and policymakers as a means of effecting change and expanding our discipline through new approaches to
interdisciplinarity and pedagogy. I will explore ways that such partnerships can develop and explain the success I have had in my own initiatives that implement these principles.

6.1 Partnering with local governments

In our field, it has become increasingly common for scholars to partner with established organizations like nonprofits, local public schools, prisons, local newspapers, or community activists in order to advocate, organize, or effect change through writing and activism. However, rarely does anyone suggest harnessing public engagement practices and pedagogies to partner directly with local governments for the same purposes, or to intervene in the policies that are at the base of our democracy—the written and unwritten laws and practices that develop in response to citizens’ needs and problems.

The public turn in composition combined with increased focused on community literacy practices has meant that our field largely defines “public engagement” as assisting in what I will call composition-focused initiatives. Most of the scholarship about “public engagement” and its corresponding pedagogies and initiatives stems from students and faculty assisting with literacy or teaching in the community through service-learning, community-based writing, or public pedagogies focused on composition. The goals of such public engagement tend to be one of the following: exposing students to locations and ideas outside the realm of the university (as Ashley Holmes seeks to do by partnering undergraduates with struggling middle school students), ensuring that underrepresented people have their voices heard (as Paula Mathieu does by publishing a street newspaper with homeless people), simply reiterating the idea that marginalized voices matter (as David Coogan does with encouraging prisoners to write poetry), helping marginalized or youthful voices publish their written works outside traditional publishing venues (as Linda Flower does with local teenagers at the Community Writing Center),
or partnering with community organizers and advocates to create much-needed change on a local level (as David Fleming does with longtime residents of public housing in Chicago). Other scholars, such as Phyllis Ryder, reach out to established organizations or nonprofits, seeking to have their students write with or for them. These are all admirable initiatives that deserve a permanent place in the field of rhetoric and composition—and, as David Coogan notes, we should continue trying “to enable student-citizens to write for social change” through “public advocacy, community organizing, or collaborative writing with nonprofit groups” (667-668). However, we should not stop there; we should also seek to partner with local governments.

Part of what is stopping us is the lack of emphasis on rhetoric in these community engagement and public pedagogy programs; the focus, particularly institutionally, is on rhetoric’s counterpart composition. Donald Lazere states that the “hegemony of disciplines and departments oriented toward specialized faculty research” (among other issues) has “caused the study of political rhetoric to fall between the cracks of most current curricula, almost to the disappearing point” (289). Allowing “political rhetoric to fall between the cracks” also means allowing our understanding of the polis to fall between the cracks. If we consider rhetoric and speech at the base of civilization, community life, and governance, in the tradition of Greek rhetoricians such as Isocrates then we should recognize that “public engagement” practices should also seek to transform the policies and policymakers that shape our polis—not only the literacy practices of those who live within it. Rhetoric and composition scholars should seek to engage with political rhetoric (at its essence public) just as they seek to engage with

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38 Isocrates states that “...we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. For this it is which has laid down laws concerning things just and unjust, and things honorable and base; and if it were not for these ordinances we should not be able to life with one another” (Antidosis 254-55)
composition-focused initiatives. This emphasis on public engagement through the lens of rhetoric—and particularly political rhetoric, which rhetoric and composition scholars often steer away from—will allow us an entryway into policy and local government, an entryway that might not be as clear taken from the lens of composition, which encourages scholars to focus on writing, literacy, and community voices.

However, rhetoric and composition scholars are once again taking up the banner of political rhetoric, particularly as it pertains to the structure of our democracy. As I explored in the first chapter, John Ackerman has led the way in taking what he calls a “policy turn” within rhetoric and composition studies. He argues that our field needs to involve ourselves in policy and the governments that create it, as a means of direct access to ensure that citizens’ voices will be heard:

...though policy spheres are overtly political and hierarchical in nature—power continues to travel up to those who decide—these spheres tolerate and sometimes openly court local, civic activism. Those citizens who are able to participate in a policy sphere may on balance achieve a higher degree of political influence when compared with participation in other areas of public life because policy debates tend to be less encumbered by public participation in the form of noisy protests or the quieter forms of representative government, such as voting… (Ackerman 80-81).

While direct community action or work with nonprofits is crucial, and while augmenting and intervening in the discourses and literacies of communities is and should be standard practice in our field, rhetoric and composition scholars can also seek to intervene more directly into our governments and policies by working with governments directly. Later in this chapter, I will provide examples of ways that we can seek out such partnerships.
6.2 Focus on public policy and interdisciplinarity

If rhetoric is at the base of community life and the *polis*, then rhetoric and composition scholars can broaden our scholarship and pedagogy to seek out interdisciplinary work that focuses on these two things, even if that work falls outside the scope of composition studies. Of course, the arguments about the merits and drawbacks of interdisciplinarity are as old as the discipline itself. Some people view our field as inherently interdisciplinary: “Rhet/comp has always been an interdisciplinary endeavor, borrowing from areas as diverse as literacy studies, computer technology, sociolinguistics, communication, and cultural studies to supplement the core discipline” (Hucken, Adrus, Clary-Lemon 110). But not everyone agrees with the need for, or the good, of such interdisciplinarity, as they believe it weakens the field’s already-precarious status. Louis Phelps and John Ackerman argue that rhetoric, in order to be given proper recognition as a field on its own—to “carry any weight or gain purchase in the [academic] domain”—should avoid being seen as a “service or supplement to other fields” (Phelps and Ackerman 162).

While Phelps and Ackerman do not argue against rhetoric’s partnership with other disciplines, they believe that the field must be seen as one on its own if it is to be taken seriously within the academy, and that recognition requires the field to stand apart and to stand alone. Mike Rose acknowledges the value of such disciplinarity, but he notes that “with disciplinarity also comes a turn inward, on the mechanics of the profession, on internal debates and a specific kind of career building” (291). He argues that the purpose of our discipline is to be involved with other disciplines—to be interdisciplinary. I agree with Rose that the “turn inward” encourages rhetoric and composition scholars to turn away from the work of the field to effect real change in the public realm. Rather than attaching ourselves to other fields as an afterthought, we should be
the ones seeking out and leading interdisciplinary work, becoming not just inward-facing scholars or “servants” to other fields, as Phelps and Ackerman worry we will be, but public intellectuals. We can become interdisciplinary, public intellectuals by turning our focus toward public policy and partnering with local governments.

The argument over interdisciplinarity stems from the reality that people outside our field tend to minimize the field of English studies, pigeonholing it into pedagogy and/or reading and writing about published texts. These are essential components of our field; however, they are not the limits of it. For example, I recently wrote a grant proposal for an interdisciplinary project in which I proposed soliciting community feedback on a local street redesign project (a proposal which was approved and successfully completed, and which I will discuss in detail later in this chapter). A reviewer wrote that she was surprised that I proposed and was leading the project, given how “far” outside English studies it was. If rhetoricians desiring to be involved in understanding and shaping local decision-making comes as a surprise to scholars in other fields, maybe we should rethink how we are presenting ourselves in the academy and beyond. Seeking out more partnerships across disciplines will help us demonstrate the breadth of our field and correct these misperceptions. While analyzing texts and teaching are essential elements of our discipline, we should also choose to engage with living policies and discourses. We can lead the charge on these projects, changing our field from one in “service” to other disciplines to a field that is a connective tissue for other disciplines, and so truly interdisciplinary.

Public policy can be a juncture for rhetorical scholars to enter into interdisciplinary work, particularly because there is already considerable overlap in this field and our own field—and because, as I explained in chapter 1, public policy has taken its own “argumentative turn,” focusing on rhetoric’s impact on policies. Rhetoric and composition has already taken interest in
topics that are traditionally within the realm of public policy, particularly the diversity of publics and the recognition that these publics are at the base of all discourse that we study. As John Dewey explains, “Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences” (126). Much like philosophy, public policy scholarship stems from the same core texts as rhetoric, including John Dewey, as well as Aristotle and Plato—just to name a few.

Rose, arguably our field’s best known public intellectual, writes that rhetoric and composition scholars should explore this overlap, and that graduate students should be taught “analysis of public policy and media to heighten sophistication about how they work and how one might find or create an entry point. And such training could also include rhetorical theory and history that enhances the understanding of such public intellectual work” (292). In other words, the best way to become public intellectuals is to recognize the overlap between our already-existing curriculum in rhetoric and then use that knowledge to insert ourselves into arenas that are very public. Policy studies is a public field where rhetoricians can begin. Rebecca Dingo is one of the few rhetoric and composition scholars who has braved into public policy, exploring transnational implications stemming from public policies: “Rhetoricians must consider how the rise of neoliberal economics, neocolonial power relationships, and the permeability of nation-state borders creates transnational rhetorical links in public policy” (493). These considerations are essential ones, and Dingo demonstrates how rhetoricians can examine these links on a global scale.

That said, rhetoric and composition scholars should also examine the rhetorical implications of public policy on local economies, power relationships, and borders, as these examinations of concrete, localized areas can help us draw conclusions about larger problems.
Rather than think only in terms of national, international, or transnational public policy, we can examine how public policies impact local spaces and the rhetoric about those spaces. That way, we can become public intellectuals engaging in community outreach in spaces beyond composition studies. Of particular interest to me within the broad realm of public policy are transportation policies and urban design, which are always necessarily grounded and local. As rhetoric and composition scholars such as Nedra Reynolds and David Coogan call us to ground scholarship in material, even map-able spaces, we should focus on the physical spaces of our streets, partnering with public policy and urban planning scholars—or simply using these tangible spaces as a concrete entry point to ground our work and demonstrate its usefulness. This way, we can connect to real communities. Integrating rhetorical studies with public policy studies—or at least embracing and highlighting the overlap between the two—will allow us to become even more public-focused, giving us face time with community partners. Entering into public interdisciplinary projects will have the twofold effect of strengthening our discipline’s reputation as a discipline on its own and strengthening the discipline from within, all in the name of seeking social change.

6.3 Public pedagogy

As traditions are passed down in the academy, public intellectualism through policy-focused initiatives and work with local governments should start pedagogically, in the training rhetoric and composition scholars receive as graduate students as well as in undergraduate composition classes. Rose states that rhetoric and composition graduate programs should be teaching graduate students “to speak to wider audiences, to insert our various bodies of

39 I recognize that not everyone has the same interest that I do; others may be interested in sustainability, food sourcing, affordable housing, immigration, etc. These issues can be material and local, and the approaches I model in this chapter can be applied to them.
knowledge and perspective into the public record” (291). We must encourage public intellectualism through interdisciplinary work with public partners, including local governments. However, providing students clear methods and instruction for how to write for public audiences or involve themselves with public agencies can be difficult. Henningsen et al. argue that public pedagogies and projects must be mixed with social learning theory; students cannot be taught how to write for public audiences but instead must learn “through social engagement and of course, through doing” (90). Graduate students can combine “social engagement” and “doing” with work they do for and with local governments; in the next section, I will provide examples of projects that graduate students could undertake.

Students in lower-division composition courses can also benefit from incorporating open records as a type of public, primary research, which will encourage public writing and civic engagement from the first semester on. By accessing and analyzing these records, students will feel empowered as citizens, able to demand and review information about their local government, and writing about public works will make their writing public and meaningful. According to Christian Weisser, composition as a subject is unique in that it can access the “real world” of public concerns and need not button itself off in the academy (43). Given composition’s unique place in academia, Weisser argues that it is the responsibility of composition teachers to “create” public spaces that students can enter into. Weisser states that given the dearth of public audiences in the university campus, “Compositionists, then, must work to create spaces where audiences do exist and where student writing has importance and potential consequences” (Weisser 47). Having such a public audience is the only thing that will imbue discourse with meaning and allow students to feel the impact of their writing on other people and other spaces (Weisser 91). Open records are spaces where students can enter into public
discourse in a meaningful way.

But in order to teach students to write to public audiences or to become public intellectuals, faculty must themselves be able to connect with public audiences. Encouraging teachers to partner with outside organizations encourages teachers to become civically engaged themselves. Henningsen et al. discuss how “hybrid” partnerships, in which organizations outside the academy take on half the leadership or projects, are good for teachers because they force teachers outside their traditional roles. "As classroom teachers re-imagine their students’ academic work as forwarding the civic missions of our partner organizations, they begin to re-imagine themselves as teachers who are also civic actors” (Henningsen, et al 85). If we want teachers to be successful leaders and public intellectuals, they have to be civically engaged themselves. Jonikka Charlton and Colin Charlton write that teachers and students both must think of how and why they want to be public intellectuals in order for things like service learning to work. They write that we need to consider “what we want out of our influence and what our students want in terms of their lives as ‘public’ intellectuals” (Charlton and Charlton 81). It is not important only to think about pedagogical applications of public writing or community-engaged writing fosters for students; we must also consider how faculty feel connected to this rhetorical work. Faculty members must first consider themselves public intellectuals before they can model public intellectualism for their students.

Of course, practically speaking, there is little incentive in the academy to stray from the academic journal; academics, particularly untenured academics (such as myself) do not get “credit” at their day jobs by publishing in local newspapers or blogs, presenting at a PechaKucha night held at a local coffee shop, being interviewed about a community project by the local news, or consulting on a project with a local public agency. However, it is essentially impossible for
faculty to teach students to become public intellectuals if they have no experience articulating their own expertise to the public realm. Grabill notes that some colleges, such as Michigan State University, are amenable to expanding the traditional categories in tenure and promotion (service, scholarship, and teaching) to include things like “outreach,” and we can hope that other colleges will follow suit. The reality is that this step may only be possible for tenured faculty who can use their laurels, relationships, and connections as a springboard out of the ivory tower. More faculty should use their hard-earned methodological skills to shape the function of local governments and the policies that emerge from it—and encourage students to do the same. Public pedagogy should engage the instructor as much as the students, as it stems from the instructor’s interests and relationships.

6.4 Suggestions for pedagogical and scholarly application

As with most research in our field (pedagogical or otherwise), we must attach ourselves to the work of local governments and policymakers first as scholars ourselves and second as teachers, laying the groundwork and building the relationships that allow our students to enter. However, working with governments to influence policy decisions is possible, particularly if we enter into this work on a local level. In this section, I will provide some examples of work that rhetoric and composition scholars can do both as teachers and as scholars themselves to partner with local governments and effect change in policy.

The first example of a pedagogical project that graduate students could undertake is the GDOT project I have written about in this dissertation. While it was an interesting project for me, a graduate student, it also could have easily been a project for a methods and methodologies class to explore. I came up with the germ of this project in my own methods and methodologies class, for which writing a research proposal was the final assignment. The instructor told me my
proposal was “timely, local, public…fascinating, with an audience already built in.” However, coming up with an original research project for this methods and methodologies class was the hardest single thing I have ever done academically (even harder than writing this dissertation!), because I was essentially told to invent something out of nothing. Coming from a creative writing M.F.A. program, I had never designed or participated in a research project before, and I had only the barest understandings of methods and methodologies from the readings we had done in class. I would have benefited greatly from participating in a small-scale research project before having to design one on my own, and a project like this one would have been perfect in allowing me to test and apply the methods I was learning, particularly in a group setting where the stakes would be lower.

This research project about GDOT provided data in the form of written comments, which needed to be analyzed so a public agency could make a decision about a project that would impact the shape of the local community; such decisions have to be made frequently at GDOT and other government offices. If a faculty member had a relationship with a government agency (such as GDOT), she could regularly get these public, local, timely data about major projects, particularly when such data is subject to open records laws. Ideally, of course, the government agency would know about her involvement and welcome it. Armed with this government agency’s data, the faculty member could allow her students in a research methods course to examine and evaluate these public comments, putting their newly-acquired methods skills to use on a meaningful public project. While it is doubtful that these students would have enough time to tackle additional archival research to historically situate public comments, a multitude of other methodological approaches could be used, including rhetorical analysis, thick description, mapping, and discourse analysis. In addition, students could take a quantitative approach to the
data, reporting age or location ranges, which would be valuable data for GDOT. GDOT would then receive a report of analyses that they themselves could not produce, given the limitations of both their resources and their methodological approaches.

At the same time, graduate students would be forced to try out different methods and write their results with a real, public audience in mind (GDOT and citizens of Atlanta more broadly), encouraging them to think as experts in an important civic project: training them to be public intellectuals. The project could be fodder for class discussions about methods. It is likely that the students’ report would impact GDOT’s reading of its citizens’ needs or problems, and the report could also lead GDOT to question or change the decisions they make about the design project. As a result, the students would be working with a government agency to impact public policy. This is an example of a policy-focused initiative, outside the realm of composition-focused initiatives, within public pedagogy—though of course the texts of public comments would be at the heart of the research. Essential to this pedagogical experiment would be two things: 1. an instructor’s relationship with GDOT, and 2. GDOT’s trust in rhetoric and composition students as burgeoning experts applying their methods to a project of public concern: or, burgeoning public intellectuals who are also civically engaged and practiced at research methods.

In addition to partnering with local governments as their data trickles in, rhetoric and composition scholars can create and lead their own projects, which can gain credibility within the public realm if local government officials are involved. Last year, I leveraged my own interests in connecting my rhetorical knowledge and research methods with a public project that will likely lead to lasting change in the shape of my college’s community. When I found out the town was planning to build a new road to better connect its commercial square to the college, I
proposed an interdisciplinary project to solicit college, community, and local business input on the new design. Considering Ellen Cushman’s advice that we should be “participating in our communities despite (to spite) the sociological distance we must cross” (Cushman 248), I thought of the street public and material space that would provide a reason for me (a representative of the university) to connect with local government, students, and other disciplines. The most important aspect of this project, however, was the Mayor’s involvement; I asked her to be a community advisor, and she agreed. This local government involvement lent my project credibility not only with the academic committee that approved my request for a grant but also with the local community, the college administration, and even the students I asked to participate. They recognized the value of building a relationship with the Mayor’s office, if only for their future job prospects.

After receiving the grant for my project proposal, I built a team of interdisciplinary students and a faculty member from the School of Science and Technology, the former of whom received course credit for the year-long project. This course allowed students to learn methods on the go—through “doing”—and to apply them to a policy-focused initiative: understanding the needs of community members, including other students, faculty, local government, and businesses, in order to make suggestions about how best to connect the campus to the downtown area. The students met with the Mayor and spoke to her regularly, and they presented their findings twice: once at a City Council meeting and once at a college-sponsored presentation, where a city councilperson, the Mayor, and the college president were in attendance. These students were empowered by the project and the knowledge they gained; the project itself gave voice to people who might not have had an input on the project; real audiences and stakes were
at play; the discussion was timely, and the City Council to publicly state that they would make changes to the new road based on the students’
research.

Importantly for our discipline, all of these community partners were aware that I, an assistant professor of English, was a Principal Investigator on the project, and that my scholarly interests in community engagement and public pedagogy had been the driving force behind the project. Rather than being “merely a service or supplement to other fields” (162) as Phelps and Ackerman worry our field will be, I demonstrated that our field could be the leader on an interdisciplinary project, and this information became clear not only to other disciplines in the academy but to the decision-makers in local government. We must demonstrate our value to the public realm as well as to the academy, and we can do that by expanding our partnerships with local governments.

Lower-division or first-year composition students, who may not be prepared for advanced research processes, can also benefit from involving themselves in local government, particularly by accessing open records during a traditional, semester-long course. Students and faculty can access these primary resources in a timely way that fits neatly into a semester, as requests for open records must receive a response in three business days. Such action will encourage students to view local governments as transparent rather than opaque, and it will encourage them to ask questions about local projects. For example, a student in my first-year composition classroom conducted a research project about a roundabout that was being built on her street (in her view, unnecessarily). She attended public meetings and talked to local officials about the project. Having access to public comments received about the project—or the local officials’

40 This is the response time required in the state of Georgia. Please look into your state’s own open records response timelines.
own discussions of the project—would have bolstered her research. In addition, she could have used these documents as primary sources in place of interviews, particularly if local officials were unwilling or unable to talk about the project on a semester-long timeline.

Of course, there is danger in students, particularly first-year students, misusing the Open Records Act—for example, by requesting information about their own instructor (such as her email records, income, etc.) as a means of making her uncomfortable, by making public people’s contact information or public comments—whether accidentally or intentionally, or by burdening a local government by requesting an onerous amount of information. However, these ethical and work-related questions can serve as discussion points for the class, to encourage students to reflect on their ethos and to see themselves as citizens acting with integrity. Through introducing these public documents, we can teach students how to analyze primary sources, and we can also empower them to understand what public audiences are there and what current concerns exist. This kind of research may also encourage students to engage civically in the future, by recognizing the value that their own engagement—through public comments, voting, etc.—can have in their local government.

Analyzing open records will also prepare students for navigating the onslaught of primary sources that are now available to the average citizen. In an age in which Hillary Clinton’s emails are leaked via Wikileaks, President Donald Trump regularly posts rants on Twitter, and Fernando Castillo’s police shooting death was broadcast live on Facebook, students need to know how to navigate primary sources in real time. We need to teach students how to analyze, draw conclusions (or avoid drawing conclusions), and build multiple narratives from the primary sources that constantly bombard them. Donald Lazere, in *Political Literacy in Rhetoric and Composition*, encourages rhetoric and composition scholars to encourage political literacy
through a top-down approach of teaching basic news-reading methods. However, political literacy is growing increasingly personal, with multifarious news sources—a news source for every political ideal. Rather than teaching students the basics of Marxism or leftism (as he suggests), I argue that we should teach students political literacy by taking them directly to primary sources, particularly open records sources. And rather than tackling national questions that may be polarizing (“What do you think of Donald Trump’s latest tweet?”), focusing on open records about a local street or a local project will allow the research to remain intimate and immediate, grounded in students’ own neighborhoods. Encouraging both undergraduate and graduate students to utilize open records as a means of primary research—and modeling that kind of research as scholars—will allow our field to open up to current political questions while honing our analytical skills. By leading research in these areas, rhetoric and composition scholars (and budding scholars) can demonstrate that they are indispensable to local governments and decision making.

6.5 Implications for future research

As I explained in chapter 5, a research project about a single public engagement project from a single government agency is limited, and the results that stem from it are limited as well. However, public engagement processes are happening around us all the time, determining everything from where stop signs should be placed to where a new middle school should be constructed to whether millions of acres of land should be reserved. Given government agencies’ focus on public engagement processes (particularly forced engagement stemming from NEPA regulations that I explored in chapters 3 and 4), rhetoric and composition scholars can and should be using open records as an entryway into primary research more regularly, just as they have focused on other, more traditional types of archival research. Exploring open records and public
engagement processes from local to federal agencies across the nation will force these government agencies to make transparent their methods and methodologies, and it will give us a way to enter into these public conversations. Future research must be done to determine what methods of public engagement are best suited to these kinds of projects, particularly when written public comments are solicited. What does “public engagement” mean, and when is a “public engagement” process satisfactorily achieving its goals? Should written public comments continue to be solicited at all? If they are, how should they be read, both in order to allow voice to multiple publics and to allow decisions to be made in a timely manner? How can rhetoric and composition scholars best integrate themselves into public agencies? What are best practices for working with these agencies, and what are the best practices for public pedagogies that seek integration with local governments? These are just a few of the methodological questions that need additional consideration.

6.6 Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that the streets are ubiquitous public spaces and that we, as rhetoric and composition scholars, should question how and why they are constructed in response to public discourse. In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate that we can also go beyond questioning such decisions about our constructed spaces and work alongside government officials to help make those decisions. I am hopeful that our discipline can enter into local governments as a means of “going public,” much as we have made space for other forms of public work, such as advocacy, activism, nonprofit work, and community organizing efforts. In many cases, we can build relationships and partner with local governments in order to effect change and influence policy decisions directly. We can teach our students to join with the government in bureaucratic efforts like reading and analyzing public comments, even when it
might seem more glamorous or remarkable to teach our students how to protest the many injustices of our government, as scholars such as Nancy Welch do. Civic engagement, and working within the system, can frankly be frustrating and boring. (I have been to my fair share of public meetings, and I always take my knitting.) The government is not amenable to all kinds of feedback or action, and elected officials do not always act responsibly or fairly. I demonstrated in the last chapter that Atlanta implemented transportation policies that intentionally segregated the city. As such, outside groups need to put pressure on the government. But despite these barriers and limitations, we need to teach students how to be civically engaged, and we need to demonstrate that existing within the government—participating with, advising, serving in, talking to, or partnering with elected officials and other bureaucrats—is an essential means of civic engagement.

Too often, Americans view their governments as outside themselves, or they consider sharing a YouTube video of Bernie Sanders on their Facebook as participatory politics. While an assistant professor of political science at Yale University (he is now an associate professor at Tufts University), Eitan D. Hersh self-published a scholarly article on his website decrying political participation in the past decades, which he argues has turned into nothing more than a “hobby”: “For many Americans, political participation is not appropriately described as motivated by duty, but is more akin to a hobby,” (2) one that “motivates donating and protesting, but also media consumption and peer-to-peer production” (2) but does not elicit feelings of responsibility or civic duty. Essentially, Hersh argues, for many Americans, politics is no different from football, and a person might cheer on his candidate or political party the same way he cheers on the Atlanta Falcons—from the sidelines, for fun, and out of a competitive spirit. Such “participation” in democracy only serves to cheapen the privilege that democratic citizens
have been given to help shape their society.

If rhetoric and composition scholars do not become public intellectuals, willing to cross imagined interdisciplinary lines in order to involve ourselves in policy and decision making, we risk exiling ourselves from government processes that structure public engagement. As Eitan Hersh—the public intellectual—wrote on his Twitter account recently, “individuals need to want to do more than be hobbyists. many of us who stay above the fray need to get into it.” Scholars must look past the risk of “sullying” ourselves by working with imperfect governments, particularly if we do not always agree with their ideologies and policies. It is my hope that scholars can seek out additional avenues for partnering with governments to examine how our local communities are structured and how publics engage and participate in discourse that changes the shape of our public spaces. We still have work to do and policies to change. Congressman and Civil Rights leader John Lewis promised that he would to stay in the most public of public spaces—our streets—until the ideals that our democracy was built upon were finally realized; as of 2017, you can still find him marching there.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: GDOT’s Categorization of Public Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Categorization</th>
<th>Vehicle for Comment</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mailed S</td>
<td>Mailed, in support of the project</td>
<td>Comment cards</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailed U</td>
<td>Mailed, uncommitted to the project</td>
<td>Comment cards</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting U</td>
<td>Received at meeting, uncommitted</td>
<td>Comment cards</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting A</td>
<td>Received at meeting, against the project</td>
<td>Comment cards</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting C</td>
<td>Received at meeting, conditional support for the project</td>
<td>Comment cards</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting S</td>
<td>Received at meeting, in support</td>
<td>Comment cards</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online A</td>
<td>Received online, against</td>
<td>Online comment system on GDOT's website</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online C</td>
<td>Received online, conditional support</td>
<td>Online comment system on GDOT's website</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online S</td>
<td>Received online, in support</td>
<td>Online comment system on GDOT's website</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online U</td>
<td>Received online, uncommitted</td>
<td>Online comment system on GDOT's website</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email A</td>
<td>Emailed, against</td>
<td>Emailed</td>
<td>581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email C</td>
<td>Emailed, conditional support</td>
<td>Emailed</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email S</td>
<td>Emailed, in support</td>
<td>Emailed</td>
<td>362</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email U</td>
<td>Emailed, uncommitted</td>
<td>Emailed</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Mailed, against</td>
<td>Comment cards</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailed C</td>
<td>Mailed, conditional support</td>
<td>Comment cards</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: GDOT’s Comment Card

Comment Card

Please print responses.

Name

Address

Do you support the project? Choose an item. (check your response)

☐ For       ☐ Against       ☐ Conditional       ☐ Uncommitted

General Comments

How did you hear about this Open House? (check)

☐ Radio       ☐ Newspaper       ☐ Signs       ☐ Word of Mouth       ☐ Other

Was the location of the Open House convenient for you to attend?       ☐ Yes       ☐ No

If no, please suggest a general location that is more convenient to your community.

Was the time of the meeting convenient for you to attend?       ☐ Yes       ☐ No

If no, please suggest a time frame that is more convenient for you.
Were your questions answered by GDOT personnel?  □ Yes  □ No

Do you understand the project after attending this meeting? □ Yes  □ No

Please share your suggestions on improving the ways GDOT conducts Open Houses:

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

Mail to:
Ms. Hiral Patel, P.E., State Environmental Administrator
Georgia Department of Transportation
600 West Peachtree Street, NW – 16th Floor
Atlanta, Georgia 30308