Applying Archival Methods and Methodologies to Public Open Records

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Abstract: This article examines the public comments citizens submit to local government agencies and explains how those texts can be incorporated into archival research practices. The central case study traces the processes a state-wide government agency—the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT)—undertook to solicit citizen feedback about a major public works project and the two thousand comments that GDOT received in response. Through a rhetorical analysis of these texts, the author argues that feminist scholars have a responsibility to encourage transparency in public engagement processes by accessing and analyzing open records, offering up competing narratives when possible.

Keywords: archives, open records, public engagement, transportation, public rhetoric, feminist methodologies

In October 2015, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) proposed reengineering two miles of Peachtree Road, a major north-south connector in Atlanta, to improve safety and traffic flow. According to GDOT's proposal, between 2009 and 2013, there were 801 crashes on this section of road—fifty-three with bicyclists and pedestrians. In addition, left lanes in both directions were rarely used except for turning. Following state policies for "Complete Streets"—which ensure road access and safety for pedestrians, cyclists, drivers, and transit users alike—GDOT redesigned the street to add bike lanes and a left turn lane. Based on the transportation engineers' models, the new design would improve traffic flow and make crashes less likely. The transportation engineers presented their model at a community open house and then opened up the project for public comment. Within the three-week comment period ending November 16, 2015, GDOT received a staggering 1,916 public comments. On December 11—less than a month later—GDOT withdrew the project, stating explicitly that they decided not to go forward with the street improvements because the public comments were overwhelmingly against it.

This decision may seem like a win for civic engagement and public participation. After all, if citizens speak out against a project, their voices should be

heard; government agencies should represent the desires of their constituents. However, when I heard news that the project had been scrapped, I was baffled. I wondered how public comments could lead transportation engineers to bypass written Complete Streets policies and knowingly forgo a street design that would improve public safety. As a driver and bicyclist in Atlanta, I had supported the road improvements and trusted the traffic models that GDOT provided, which showed that traffic would flow more smoothly for cars and bicycles alike. I found the citizens' pushback against GDOT's careful and inclusive street plan surprising, and I was curious to read these public comments to understand how and why they led to GDOT's reversal. In exercising my right to examine these public comments through open records laws, I found I was tapping into not only public opinion but also an archival research space largely untouched by historiographers in rhetoric and composition.

In an era of "alternative facts" and "fake news,"[1] 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 of our present democracy to be held accountable for their actions and decisions.[2] 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

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1   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.

2   The Society of American Archivists' Core Values Statement states, "By documenting institutional functions, activities, and decision-making, archivists provide an important means of ensuring accountability. In a republic such as accountability and transparency constitute an essential hallmark of democracy."

of critical imagination (Royster and Kirsch). These feminist archival research methods and methodologies have had success in creating archives that are more transparent and are more inclusive of historical and extant publics.

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 by soliciting citizens to submit comments about specific projects, they do so in order to make decisions, 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 of challenging 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 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.

In this article, I use the Peachtree Road case study to demonstrate how feminist historiographers and researchers can leverage open records laws to examine public comments submitted to government institutions. Through the act of analyzing these public narratives, I both challenge GDOT's clear-cut decision-making process and also untangle webs of discourse that demonstrate

competing narratives and metaphors regarding the role of the street and the community—metaphors that are steeped in Atlanta's complex and often racist historical policies. I argue that feminist archival researchers should lend our expertise to open records to assemble, publicize, and interpret the findings from public comments as a means of further democratizing archival research.

What Are Open Records?

"Open records" laws allow people to access most documents and other related media created by, about, or for the government, starting with the federal government's 1966 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Every state has passed similar laws that give citizens access to state records. The stated intention of open records is to provide a check on elected officials, underscoring the belief that democracy functions best when its citizens are informed, in a timely manner, about what their governments are doing.[3] Harvard's Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society notes that FOIA discourages the red tape that can come with government bureaucracy; without 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, specifically 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.

For historiographers, open records are a unique type of archival research space, particularly in that there is no traditional archivist standing between the archive and the researcher; the government serves as the archivist. In addition, these open records are available to researchers almost immediately after they are created. While some researchers still find evidence of "red tape" or

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3   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."

burdensome bureaucratic processes,[4] particularly when accessing historical information, the real problem with open records is the slapdash manner in which they are often assembled. Many of the principles of archival research that Sammie Morris and Shirley K 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. Open records reflect larger publics and more recent histories, and the record-keepers who maintain them are often beholden to speed, not care, due to political pressure and public scrutiny. Combine the incalculable number of documents available for public scrutiny[5] and a legal deadline of three business days to process the request (or at least to provide a timeline of when the materials will be available),[6] and the challenges of utilizing open records as archives become quite obvious.

For example, in 2017, the City of Atlanta had to make almost a million and a half documents available to the public because of an open records request that was made in response to rumors of a bribery scandal. Then-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 million and a half documents were prepared for the journalists who requested them—printed and delivered in four hundred boxes. However, according to the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, this "document dump" did not make for a useful archive.

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4   Archival researchers Neal Lerner and Jennifer Clary-Lemon lamented difficulties they had in accessing FOIA-protected records; Lerner was directed to the University of Illinois President to gain permission to access historical documents about his research subject, while Clary-Lemon, seeking access to artifacts related to Margaret Thatcher from the 1970s, had significant problems accessing those records through FOIA, particularly because of "exemptions" and "closed files" on "politically sensitive" information (396).

5   According to Georgia's Open Records Act, 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."

6   According to the Georgia Secretary of State's website, "All open records requests will be processed within three business days of receipt of request. If the records exist, but are not immediately available, the Open Records Officer's response will include a description of the records and a timetable for their release."

Many of the documents were blank or illegible, printed on font too small to read; in addition, born-digital documents were printed when they would have been easier to access—and search through—if they had remained digital. *AJC* columnist Bill Torpy complained that the documents were released "in no particular order," and as "an act of political theater," particularly as then-Mayor Reed gave a press conference with the four hundred boxes stacked like a wall behind him. Clearly, this open records request led to the creation of a flawed archive, but the flaws do not make the documents within the archive less worthy of inspection—particularly as the allegations of the bribery scandal proved to be true. In fact, given the problems with open records documents (and public comment processes, which I will explore in more detail in the next section), I argue that historiographers and archival specialists have a special responsibility to engage with these documents, providing insight, alternate readings, and perhaps even guidance on how to use, store, and interpret them.

The fact is that open records, while (or perhaps *because*) they are messy, are also democratizing. In many cases, the researcher/citizen, simply by asking for the documents, becomes the creator of the archive. As with other archives, as Alexis E. Ramsey explains, inquiring into a collection can "cause the collection to get a level of preferential treatment and a timelier processing schedule"; however, oftentimes in more traditional archives, materials that end up being processed are the ones that people pay to have archived (Ramsey 80-83). In other words, a wealthy estate may be able to hire someone to archive and preserve records, but this is a luxury few can afford; this practical imbalance skews the archives that are available and housed in, say, Harvard's Houghton Library. However, open records laws have no such limitations; documents are required to be archived and accessible regardless of these financial limitations. This means that in the government's records, the wealthiest citizen's words are filed right alongside the poorest citizen's, making these archives more representative of the whole community—and thus, an important research space for feminist historiographers.

As I will demonstrate, feminist historiographers can leverage open records particularly as a means of examining citizens' public comments, which allow us a lens into the everyday thoughts and lives of those citizens. I define public comments as written and/or oral narratives or responses that citizens provide to a government agency when that government agency solicits feedback about an existing project, proposal, or idea. These public comments allow a glimpse into broader swaths of current public discourse, another unique aspect of these archives; feminist historiographers can use public comments to study what publics are responding to an isolated issue or exigency. As Michael Warner explains, such publics are "called into being by virtue of being addressed" (67). For example, by examining public comments submitted

about the redesign of Peachtree Road, we can get a glimpse into the publics Peachtree Road creates: a still life of the discourse of diverse citizens who feel called to respond to this exigency. These public comments are rich texts that allow us to view the current discourse of citizens writing about or toward government entities and officials. We can access these documents as a means of witnessing democracy in action: seeing how government officials receive and respond to citizens and what types of discourse engage these same citizens. In the following sections, I will apply these concepts to the Peachtree Road project, explaining briefly how GDOT organized and drew conclusions based the public comments and then detailing the alternative, feminist methods I used to read and analyze the same comments.

GDOT's Approach to Archiving Public Comments

Less than a month after the public comment period ended, 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. Their press release, titled "Peachtree Road Project: Public's Voice Heard in Planning Process - No Bike Lanes" states:

> 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."

GDOT used the comments to determine to forgo the project, demonstrating the kind of swift decisiveness desirable in a government agency. However, as we might imagine, a transportation engineer's "intensive review" of citizens' narratives differs from the kind of "intensive review" a feminist historiographer might undertake. After reading this press release, I was curious to understand how GDOT "listen[ed] to the concerns and ideas of various audiences" and ensured that these audiences' "input and comments were properly reflected." Where and how were these comments "reflected" in the decision? How were "various" audiences identified and defined, and how were the comments organized based upon this information? None of these questions are answered in the press release. In fact, in the press release, GDOT tallies the public comments quantitatively. They note that seventy percent of people submitting public comments were against the project (specifically the bike lanes),

but GDOT does not explain how they surmised based on narratives (*not* votes) these citizens' perspectives.[7]

In order to understand GDOT's decision, I accessed the public comments to see both what the comments said and the methods by which they had been categorized. In a more traditional archival research process, my first step might have been to search a database like WorldCat, visit the archives, and/or contact a local archivist. However, with open records that are current and project-specific, like the Peachtree Road project, there is no such database, physical archive, or archivist in charge of this material. I had to leverage my local knowledge in order to know where to begin my research. First, I contacted an acquaintance who works at GDOT and asked her how to submit an open records request. She provided me with the name of a paralegal at GDOT whom I could contact and told me what information to include in my request—specifically, the number and name of the project.[8] I submitted an open records request via email on January 28, 2016, and I received a response on February 2, 2016. The paralegal for GDOT provided me with a link to a GDOT website where I could download requested records, which were in PDF files under her name with the title "Open Records Request" and a corresponding number, with the comments organized into sixteen folders. These sixteen folders were labeled based on how the comments were received (whether over email, through GDOT's website, via mail, or in person) and what the commenter's position on the project was (whether for, against, undecided, or in conditional support of the project).[9]

To illustrate: a comment that was emailed in and determined to be "against" the project was categorized in one of the sixteen folders; a comment

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7   On April 7, 2016, GDOT provided a more complete response letter to citizens who had submitted comments, breaking down specific concerns that were noted. However, this letter came four months after the decision to cancel the project was announced, suggesting that the decision was made before a more thorough analysis was undertaken.

8   I recognize that many researchers might not have a personal or professional connection to the organization from which they are seeking records. However, a Google search for "open records" and the name of the organization also led me to a document that explained the same information. Remember that a written request cannot legally be ignored; a citizen must receive a response within three business days.

9   I deduced these designations after spending time with the data; there was no legend or key explaining these codes.

that was sent in via postal mail and determined to be "undecided" about the project was placed in another folder. 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 (whether electronically or in physical copies). Comments submitted in person or via mail (39% of the comments) tended to be submitted on GDOT's prepared comment card, which had four boxes that citizens could check, indicating that they were in support, against, uncommitted, or in conditional support of the project. On the other hand, emailed or electronic comments (the remaining 61% of the total) tended to be much more free-form in their content because they were not tethered to a comment card or a checked box; they were typically composed of narratives or lines of text. However, regardless of the method of submission, nearly all the comments (91%) were categorized in folders "for" or "against" the project.

When I opened this archive of sixteen folders, I first looked at the comments to see what markings GDOT had made on them. From this reading, I deduced that National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysts[10] highlighted some language on each comment and, based on their highlighting, categorized the comment into one of four categories (support, opposition, conditional support, or undecided). Most of the language that the NEPA analysts highlighted indicated the commenter's stance on the project. For example, the most commonly highlighted word in the "against" category was "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). Isolating language that indicated a rigid and clear position on the project likely allowed the NEPA analysts (and by extension, GDOT) the ability to tally and quantify the public comments in order to elucidate a majority opinion in support or opposition to the project—a majority opinion they indicated in their press release just weeks after the submission period closed.

However, public comments are more complicated and a richer data set than a survey or vote. As a result, the conclusions that are drawn from public comments can (and should) be more complicated than the commenters' "stance" on the project. In fact, many comments, particularly those submitted over email, where space is unlimited, were long narratives—not short emails

10   The analysts' names were stamped on several pages of the documents, so it is very likely that they did the highlighting, particularly since NEPA analysts are in charge of gathering public engagement data.

that indicated a quick nod of support or opposition to the Peachtree Road project. It is clear from reading these comments that citizens often think of the public comments as a place where they will be listened to—extensively. Many people submitted comments that were very personal, reflecting on their unique positionality as citizens in Atlanta, or offering up anecdotes about the project and its impact on their daily lives. For example, in her email, commenter 1584 goes into detail about her 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 the level of detail above demonstrates that her support of the project is related to a larger, much more personal, context as a citizen.

Of commenter 1584's 468-word comment, NEPA analysts highlighted the following words: "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 1584's comment was grouped in the file that indicated she submitted an email supporting the project, and perhaps this is a sufficient characterization of her comment for GDOT's purposes, since they were trying to make a concrete decision about whether to implement a bike lane. While there are some critiques in other disciplines about how

government agencies use public engagement processes to reach decisions,[11] this article is not intended to be a critique of GDOT's methods of reading public comments nor of their public engagement processes more broadly. Let us assume that government organizations have methods and goals that are simply different from ours—specifically, that they need to make design or policy decisions quickly, whereas we do not.

Feminist historiographers, as compared to policymakers and other government decision-makers, do not have the burden of coming to a fast "practical" or quantitative decision or outcome based on their readings of public comments. Archival methods and methodologies—or their combined and overlapping material "research processes," as Jennifer Clary-Lemon calls them—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 feminist 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." As a feminist historiographer, I can create space for examining anecdotes, metaphors, emotional language, and context, concepts that a government agency might overlook or simply not have time to consider.

In the case of commenter 1584, the rich text of the complete email allows us a glimpse into one person's life and connection to her community. She responds to the call for public comments about Peachtree Road not only

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11   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 (2130). Along these same lines, policy scientist Roger A. Pielke, Jr. notes that "the policy scientist who emphasizes context, unpredictability, uncertainty, trial-and-error, and normative commitments may easily appear to stand upon a 'lower plane'" (213), and as a result, he believes these methods are often overlooked in decision-making processes.

because she wants a bike lane on the road but also because, for her, bicy-cling is connected to her personal relationships (including the one with her husband) and the decisions she has made about where and how to live her life. Because feminist historiographers are not tasked with making a decision about how to pave a road, we have an opportunity to access these public comments in order to elucidate contexts and cultural narratives. While there is nothing wrong with an outcome-driven emphasis on quantitative methods—again, policy decisions often must be made expediently—such methods are insufficient for what I, as a feminist historiographer, consider an "intensive review" of public narratives, particularly when the goal is to understand competing public discourses. Thus, the task of analyzing public comments for con-text-driven, expressive, and rhetorical narratives should fall to rhetoric and composition scholars, particularly those feminist historiographers trained in archival research methods and methodologies. In the following section, I employ feminist archival research methods to read and analyze the public comments to both complement and complicate GDOT's initial reading.

Applying Feminist Methodologies to Public Comments

My analysis of these narratives, which follows, is intended to offer a partial and constructed history of the public comments—an alternative reading—not to argue for a different outcome of the transportation project. While I do not hope to change the outcome of the project, I do want to understand how people talk to and about their government and public space. I detail my research processes with open records in the hope that other historiographers can learn from them. Like Neal Lerner, I did not "imagine some pure narrative" (196) emerging within the archives—or, in this case, support for a particular deci-sion on the transportation project. Instead, I recognize that the narratives that I weave are one of many possible interpretations of the same data.

As I mentioned, my first step in understanding the public's discourses was to read the 1,916 narratives submitted to GDOT. I did so not to categorize citizens as "for" or "against" the project; instead, I read the comments as an archive outside these dichotomous bounds in which they had been placed, considering the larger rhetorical situation and attempting to draw out competing narratives that reflect publics' discourse about their community space. In reading the public comments, I noted three things: 1. the language that the NEPA analysts for GDOT had highlighted (as I explored earlier), 2. commenters' personal anecdotes, and 3. any other descriptive, emotional, and/or metaphorical language about the street or the community. The latter two elements had been mostly excluded from GDOT's analysis, as I showed with

the example of commenter 1584. It is this less objective and more abstract or intimate language that I sought out as a feminist historiographer, particularly as a means of understanding citizens' reflections on their personal connection to the street and to their neighborhoods. From my analysis, I gleaned that citizens have multiple definitions of what a street and a community actually are, and these competing definitions lead them to expect very different things from both. While some people view Peachtree Road as a connection point well integrated into the community, others see it as a barrier wall protecting the "real" community inside. I found that these competing perceptions of the street's purpose lead to competing ideas about how their street—and, by extension, their neighborhood and their city—should function around them.

Nearly all commenters agree that Peachtree Road is integral to the community—not surprising, given their decision to submit public comments about the street. However, while citizens agree on Peachtree Road's importance, their views diverge about what it means for a road to be "important." For example, some commenters see Peachtree Road as the "heart" of the city, as a place they are drawn to gather, while other commenters see Peachtree Road as an "artery," intended for pushing people out and away as efficiently as possible. 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, as its central location makes it necessary to ensure that all types of commuters are able to use it. However, for some, Peachtree's central location also makes it a place to get through quickly; it is not a desirable destination. Commenter 393 believes that it would be crazy to redesign this "artery" for a handful of people on bicycles, who would harm the overall efficiency of the road. He writes, "THIS IS ABSURD!! Who wants them [the bike lanes] is the question—could be more than 10 people who would use [sic] 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 should serve the majority of users, who drive cars. His 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 or linger. It is interesting that the commenters choose two words for heart, one a synecdoche for the heart, and the other the entire heart itself. This word choice reflects the idea that some people see the street as a tool of the city and other people see the street as the city itself.

As the "heart" of the city, there is a clear consensus Peachtree Road is a "major" street; the road is at turns referred to by three commenters as "our marquee street" (commenter 1301), "a major thoroughfare" (commenter 845), or as the "most important north-south motorway in our city" (commenter 396). However, as shown just from these three commenters, few people agree

on what "major" means: whether as a destination itself, as an area to speed through efficiently, or as an easily accessible space. Metaphors abound within the public comments, as people try to explain what the street means to them. The two most common metaphors invoked were a river and a wall, with the former metaphor suggesting a mutable, shifting expanse, and the latter summoning a solid, material obstruction. This disagreement on how to both categorize and describe the street leads to crucial questions about the streets' purpose and function. In addition, the mutable concept of the "streets" cannot remain undecided forever. The concrete must be poured.

Let us turn to the metaphor of the "river." Many commenters view Peachtree Road as fluid part of the neighborhood, necessitating ease of access and openness in order to be integrated into the community. Commenter 1738 argues that improving access to the road augments 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. Commenter 1625 writes 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!

Commenter 1625 believes that opening the road up to more users will improve the flow and integration of the road into the neighborhood. Allowing additional types of traffic will push the street to expand, as opposed to clogging it up. Other commenters 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 [a bicycle] 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. Likewise, Commenter 1825 wants to see changes that will allow Peachtree 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 text, commenter 1825 reveals that she believes that increasing the accessibility of the street to multiple users will open the street up to allow for improved community and neighbor relationships, which she finds valuable. Her perspective demonstrates that she sees what she calls an "important" street not as a space to be avoided but as a public space that should be better integrated into the community, as it is a fluid space. Imagined as a river, the street improves as its function as a public space when more people are allowed to enter it. Closing it off to different types of commuters means cutting off the flow of water (or blood) to this part of the city.

However, this concept of fluidity as the benchmark of a good public space is not established across the board. Several commenters view Peachtree Road not as a river but instead as a barrier protecting other public and private spaces, expressing their fear that increasing access to this space or otherwise changing it will cause destruction of their neighborhoods. Imagined this way, if Peachtree Road can no longer contain car traffic, then, like a broken dam, it will allow a flood to pour into their homes and their neighbors' homes. Commenter 363 notes his concerns along these lines: "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 space to be avoided—a border and barrier protecting his neighborhood from cars. Similarly, 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." Citizens are concerned about "spillage" from Peachtree Road both because of property values, as commenter 280 writes, and because they worry about the safety of their children who want to play in their 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 sort of blockade to protect her neighborhood. Like the other commenters above, she is nervous about the idea of vehicle traffic spilling over into her neighborhood. She sees her neighborhood as a place where her children can ride bicycles; she views Peachtree Road as a dangerous space where one should not ride bicycles. She is concerned about the safety of her children were this blockade to be removed. Her and the other commenters' view of the street as a wall suggests that they may feel insecure about public spaces and more comfortable with private spaces that they can control directly. A street imagined as a wall is a solid barrier against the untamable, unknowable publics outside one's private property.

Along those same lines, commenters seek to keep domestic spaces safe from the public streets. Commenters who seem to have female-identifying names in particular invoke children as needing special protection from the violent wave of cars hemmed in on Peachtree. 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, so that their children can be kept enclosed and safe. Children are intended to remain inside established, knowable spaces, not to enter into the city itself, which de Certeau calls "a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places" (103). These commenters want the streets to remain unchanged in order to preserve and protect their private and domestic spaces.

Commenters write in with fears not only of car traffic flooding their neighborhoods or endangering their children but also of being trapped inside their own neighborhoods if the Peachtree Road barrier is changed. Commenter 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 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. Along those same lines, Commenter 1153 states that he feels "landlocked" in his 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.

As we see, commenters use different language and metaphors when they speak about Peachtree Road. Some commenters view the street as a flowing, connective tissue within the community, while other commenters consider the street a barrier that, at turns, shields, protects, barricades, isolates, or cuts off the community. The first perspective 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 simultaneously an accessible barrier, and so designing a street that integrates both ideals is nearly impossible; however, in the push and pull between the street as a fluid, open space or as a border protecting private neighborhoods, it seems that the latter metaphor was the most pervasive or most heard, particularly since GDOT decided against implementing the proposed changes to the street. However, while it is unlikely that GDOT perceived the idea that they were accepting or rejecting a particular metaphor or narrative of public space, we can see that the commenters' different perceptions of what a street or community actually is led to the commenters' conclusions about how these spaces should function. These perceptions, of course, are not accidental, but have a historical basis and context, as I will briefly discuss.

Reaching into the Archives

When I began this project, I intended to analyze these public comments as an isolated data set—a contemporary archive that would allow me to seek out the voices of regular citizens in current discourse. Unsurprisingly, however, my findings from the public comments also led me to ask what historical influences may have led to present-day conversations about Peachtree Road. As I analyzed present conversations about Peachtree Road, I felt a natural curiosity

to uncover past conversations about the development of the road. Returning to Gerald's idea of "creating public memory," we should seek not only to insert forgotten historical figures into their deserving historical places but also to connect current discourse to forgotten (or ignored, or neglected) histories. Thus, my research into these public comments led me to seek out a university-sponsored archive housed at Georgia State University called "Planning Atlanta," a relatively new collection devoted to preserving city planning and urban design documents for the city.

In examining twentieth century planning documents from this digitized archive, particularly two lengthy plans from 1952 and 1970, I quickly realized that discussions of Peachtree Road's metaphorical purpose had been ongoing since the road was annexed to Atlanta in 1952 as part of the neighborhood of Buckhead. Even then, the road was regarded as central—a "heart" of the city. According to a 1970 Planning Atlanta document, "At that time [1952], 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'" (italics mine). Historically, I learned that 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," a prosperity that is still very much alive in Buckhead today. However, in the 1950s and beyond, city leaders' concerns about sustaining and supporting this prosperous heart were intertwined with explicit and implicit policies that kept what they considered to be undesirable populations out of the area—specifically, African American residents.

The narrative description of Buckhead in a 1970 Planning Atlanta document, put out by the city of Atlanta, reads almost like a travel brochure for the neighborhood, enticing people to live in this desirable area, with its private schools, private clubs, and exceptional public amenities.[12] While the 1970 planning guide recognizes that high-density buildings were expected to emerge along Peachtree Road and that traffic congestion would increase on Peachtree and neighborhood streets, the major concern related to this increase in car traffic appears to be scaring away people who live in the "high-quality" single-family homes to the west of the Peachtree:

12   The 1970 Planning Atlanta document states, "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..."

> 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.

At the same time as the neighborhoods along Peachtree Road were prospering, other parts of the city were crumbling in poverty. In particular, the downtown area, just a few miles south, was described as a crumbling, "blighted" area with primarily African American residents.[13] In a 1952 regional land-use planning document, the Atlanta Regional Commission specified that it sought 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). Atlanta planners blamed African Americans' expansion into white neighborhoods on the problems and (often the crime) cropping up in the community; this 1952 land use planning document outlined explicit "negro expansion" plans to push these citizens out of the north Atlanta/Buckhead area under the pretense of not having enough segregated schools to serve them (88-90).

By the 1960s, following *Brown v. Board of Education*, such explicit segregationist policies could not be written into government texts, but the sentiment was still apparent, and the effects of the policies up to the 1950s were still felt across the city. The 1970 Planning Atlanta report notes that during the previous decade, 35,000 white people moved out of Atlanta and 50,000 "non-white" people moved in—a common migratory pattern during this era of "white flight."[14] However, during this same time period, the report notes that Buckhead saw an increase in its white population and a decrease in the "non-white" population, which dwindled from 698 to a mere 494 people. In other words, intentional policy implementation that discouraged access to the

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13   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."

14   I recommend Kevin Michael Kruse's book *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* for a more thorough, Atlanta-based study of this phenomenon.

areas just to the west or north of Peachtree Road led to the "preservation" of Buckhead as an isolated, wealthy, and white space—and ensured continued prosperity along this route that endures today. Surely, this briefly stated history of planning and land use informs the current language that citizens use when discussing Peachtree Road at turns as a barrier or an access point: a river to be crossed or a flood to be dammed in.

I momentarily call attention to the historical practices that informed the development of the community along Peachtree Road because government agencies likely have neither the time or space to thread such narratives within the context of current planning discussions. In addition, citizens submitting public comments might not realize the connectivity between current public discourse and past planning decisions. While one might argue that such explicit, government-sponsored language from the 1950s about "negro expansion" plans and coded language from the 1960s and 1970s about "urban renewal" programs are long gone, we can connect current public comments to trace how these policies have echoed within our communities, particularly through the metaphors that are adopted. 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. As Candace 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). Just as Peachtree Road remains the "heart" of Buckhead, concerns remain about how streets are accessed and by whom; maybe the language has morphed while these concerns have remained the same. If we as feminist researchers use open records as a means of accessing current public discourse, we can more easily draw out these connections between present and past government policies and decisions. Again, I have only briefly drawn such a connection here, but the potential for additional scholarship in this realm is limitless.

Concluding Thoughts

In an ideal world, quick access to comprehensive, carefully-constructed 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. In the absence of these archives, researchers can leverage open records laws to access public comments as texts that offer us a snapshot of our present-day democracy—and allow us to better enter into current discussions about it. As I have shown in the case study of Peachtree Road, accessing public comments through open records gives us a glimpse into citizens' cultural

discourses, and we can use these archival research tools to map out broader narratives that shape our culture.

While government agencies may seek out public comments as a means of making quick, finite decisions about projects or policies, feminist historiographers can consider the narratives contained within these public comments subjectively and/or holistically, putting them in a larger context within time and space. Now more than ever, feminist historiographers must turn their lenses to current public discourses and the functioning of our government. As we move deeper into what Jennifer Wingard calls in the Fall/Winter 2017 issue of *Peitho* "one of the most divisive presidential administrations we have ever witnessed as a country, one that is demonstrably changing how political rhetoric and even policy-making are performed and circulated," and as calls for a "wall" on the Mexican-United States border infiltrate our everyday discourse following the longest partial government shutdown in history, feminist historiographers can look to public comments as a means of interrogating present-day government policies and offering up narratives that question or contradict them—narratives that augment the voices of regular citizens, particularly those who risk marginalization or silence. Considered from this lens, open records are a tool not only for research but also for activism.

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