# The Confederate Flag: Materiality and Waste

## Introduction

According to the New York Times, by the summer of 2017 at least 25 confederate monuments had been removed in the United States, with another 21 proposed to be removed (Bidgood et al, 2017). This seems to be the modern trend across America, however, I wanted to discover if it effected the display of the confederate flag. I proposed the query; how does a flag's materiality contribute to its potential of becoming waste? My notion of waste in this sense is informed by the materialist perspective of Gay Hawkins (2013) who is not necessarily interested in the environmental impacts of waste, but its material mediations and affordances. For example, Hawkins traces the advent of food packaging as a technological triumph in the 1950's, to its modern label as problematic waste, producing both environmental agents and apparatuses (Hawkins, 2013: 81). In this sense, I am concerned with how a waste label could be attached to confederate flags, the actual process of discarding a flag, and the flag's agency in dictating its social life. This research materialized in the

exhibition *Residual Matters*, in which I put together an installation that explores how materials and technologies can potentially enact the social life of confederate flags. My idea was to spin a web of objects into things, or *Dings* as Latour calls them, in order to, "give way to their complicated entanglements and become matters of concern." (Latour, 2002: 31).

## Theoretical and Data-Driven Underpinnings

Theories of material culture initially informed my understanding of the confederate flag. Langdon Winner claims that objects can be made in such a way that renders them productive outside their expected use value (Winner, 1980: 125). He continues to explain that objects can be materially rigid or flexible. Rigid objects are almost always tied to and used by authority and powerful institutions due to their design and material properties, whereas materially flexible objects can be co-opted by different social actors (Winner, 1980: 134). This analogy isn't literal in that denser and harder materials make more rigid objects, but rather some objects offer less social resistance. In terms of confederate objects, monuments made of stone and steel seem to offer more flexibility. They were erected by an authoritative group, only to be removed through resistance and social progress. Flags meanwhile, which are mostly made of nylon or polyester, are more rigid in that, "There are no alternative physical designs or arrangements that would make a significant difference; there are, furthermore, no genuine possibilities for creative intervention by different social systems – capitalist or socialist – that could change the intractability of the entity or significantly alter the quality of its political effects." (Winner, 1980: 134). Simply put, destroy a confederate monument and reverse its political effects; destroy a confederate flag, and it can easily be replaced.

Upon reaching out to several confederate flag groups in the United States over social media, as well as individuals associated with the flag in popular culture, I ended up with two meaningful interviews. One was with an unnamed individual (participant 1) who flew and supported the confederate flag, and the other was with Belinda Kennedy. Belinda is the head of Alabama Flag & Banner, Inc., the last domestic flag manufacturing company in the United States; the last which produces confederate flags. Participant 1 was helpful in discovering who the subject of my flag research surrounded. This individual had an infinity with the flag, claiming he owned 15-20 of them,

and that he will never stop flying the flag. The catalyst for my exhibition output however, came from my conversations with Belinda, who through a discussion on manufacturing and politics, told me she holds retirement ceremonies once a year where she respectfully burns her customer's worn out flags. After this discovery I found many unofficial and official confederate 'guidebooks' that all shared the same mantra when it came the disposal of a worn-out flag.

> "When the flag is in such condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem for display, it should be destroyed in a dignified manner, preferably by burning." (Cook, 2014) (McGehee, 2008).

This was the 'waste' side of the research I was searching for. Interestingly, when I googled 'confederate flag retirement ceremonies', or 'confederate flag burning', it yielded many YouTube videos of individuals burning the flag as a sign of protest, most of which were in their own backyards. This means that the confederate flag was turned into waste the same way by both enthusiasts and protesters.

Materially, flags are recognizable objects. In his paper on flag power, Shanafelt claims, "… the display of a flag suggests social solidarity, it simultaneously demands political deference" (Shanafelt, 2009: 16). However, where flags differ from other objects which demand a political deference such as monuments, parliament buildings or memorial sites, is that they can be easily purchased. Most privately-owned objects do not stir up daily public debate, such as boots, cellphones and screwdrivers; some do however, such as flags, guns, and birth control. Habermas claims that the modern public sphere is no longer a space to reach consensus, rather it has become an arena for private interests and public prestige (Habermas, 1974: 55). My exhibition then, was about a piece of privately owned material, symbolically and politically loaded to the point where it produced its own waste ritual. Hawkins (2013) speaks on the ephemerality of poly fibres, and the enthusiast is burning the poly-fibred flag as a sign of respect, and to the hopeful ephemerality of a Confederate America. The protester burns the poly-fibre flag to destroy any hope for ephemerality. This private material is publicly polarizing, privately destroyed and publicly protested. The themes of materiality and a private/public dichotomy were the main themes I wanted to carry through my exhibition.

# Exhibition

Bringing my findings into an exhibition context was a complex and negotiated procedure. Through my research, I wanted my exhibition to reflect what Back (2012) refers to as the spontaneity of social life, precisely because the flow of my project was not dictated by myself, but by different findings and events throughout the research process. Originally, I was going to install just a backyard barbeque dawning a flag to substantiate a 'burning scene'. The materiality of this project would enact 'device that performs itself' and does not produce (Phillips, 2014: 104). Here, Phillips eludes to art (or an installation in my case) that functions more as mimicry than potential productive materials (Phillips, 2014: 104). My aim was not to mimic confederate flag burning, but to juxtapose two groups who both identify through this ceremony, as well as create a third group (the audience) as a critical spectator.

Image 1 shows the final installation with a description of all the elements that were put together. I will go further into my rationale for each element, but right away I can say I am happy with the placement of each object I used. One of the successes of my installation was the lack of hierarchy of 'things'. I wanted each element to both act independently and as a collective. Latour claims, that an exhibition should 'compose one body from a multitude of bodies' (Latour, 2002: 28). For me, this meant creating a cohesive piece of different, yet equally important items. Of the five elements I list with the image of my installation, not one particularly jumps out at you, rather each element deserves a deeper inspection.

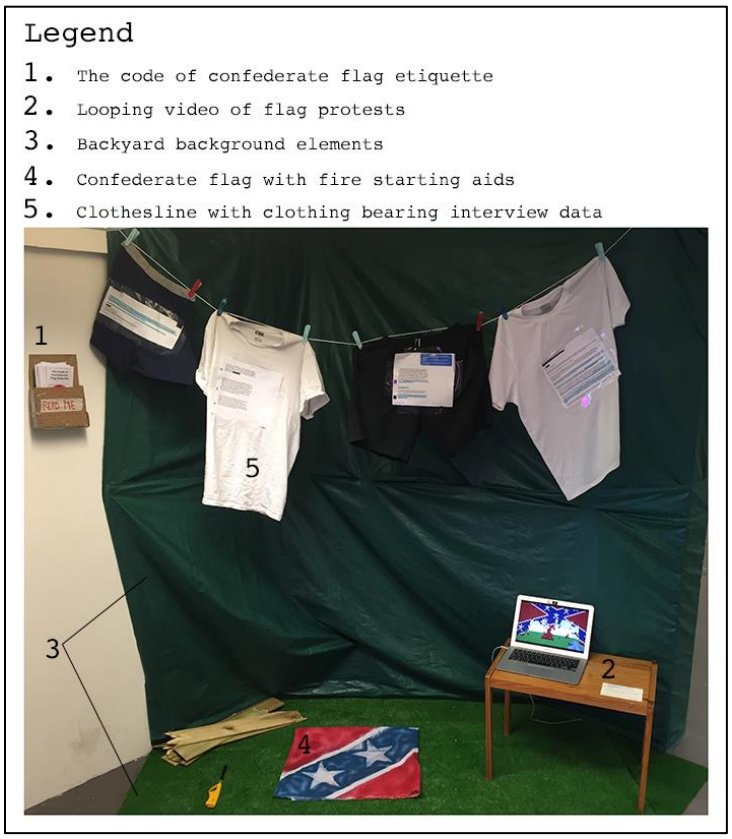



*Image 1. Installation Layout*

### 1. The code of confederate flag etiquette

In order to set the scene for my installation, I created a pamphlet called, "The code of confederate flag etiquette." I wanted the public to read the pamphlet in order to try and decipher the importance of the text and repetition.

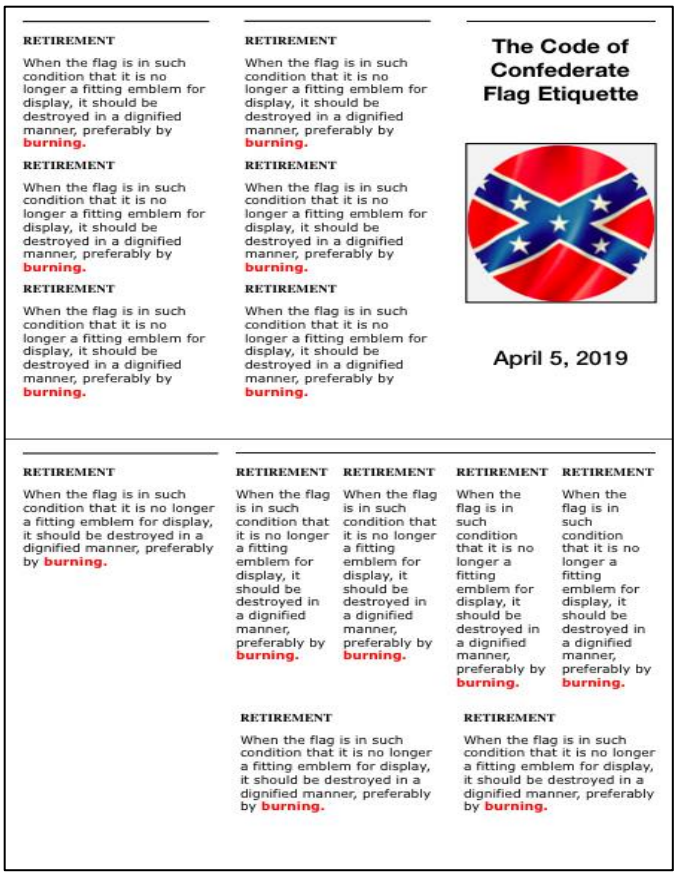



*Image 2. Pamphlet format used for physical*

The main characteristic that stands out in the pamphlet is the repetition of the retirement section, found in other confederate flag handbooks. Jefferies claims that patterns can become ways of investigating a particular social world (Jefferies, 2014: 125). Patterns, because of their continuous flow, disturb fixed meanings and encourage juxtaposition (Jeffries, 2014: 124-126). In this sense I thought the patterns would serve the purpose of creating a third public (the audience) and causing them to question what they were seeing. The statement was meant to become less fixed, the more they read it. It was an effort to re-appropriate the confederate flag enthusiast retirement mantra for the protester burning the flag.

I do think the pamphlets were able to invoke a critical gaze in the spectator through the repeated text, however materially I made an error. The guidebooks I found online were formatted as thicker, more official documents. They are meant to be read and put back where they belong. Materially, my pamphlets were floppy, light, and poorly folded. I printed twelve of them to make sure that no matter how many audience members, there were enough to go around. This backfired and

people ended up taking them, because they didn't look and feel like they were supposed to stay put. A laminated guidebook with the same content would have been more effective in what I wanted to convey.

**2. Looping video of flag protests**

The videos I used for the looping film were of individuals and news stories, proudly burning and desecrating a confederate flag in an act of protest. Latour claims that the agency of a non-human actant is dependent on the strength of its program, or its socio-technical context. (Latour, 1990: 105). To simplify this notion, the video on its own did not connote an anti-flag message because it had a weak program. I made the decision not to include sound in the video, because I felt it may have been too overpowering in terms of the overall installation. I Considered the sound of the video as noise, and, "To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill" (Nardone, 2016: 94). This decision may have been a mistake. While I did not interrupt the transmission of the rest of the installation, I interrupted the transmission of the video. The materially confusing and fascinating discovery that two opposing groups discard a confederate flag in the same way, was confused because the video was not strongly 'anti-flag' enough. A bystander who watches the full five-minute video could probably tell through visual cues that the video featured flag protesters, however a normal pedestrian who spends a minute or two looking at the entire installation wouldn't be able to tell a protester from an enthusiast in the video. In essence, there was no clear binary between the two publics.

**3. Backyard background elements**

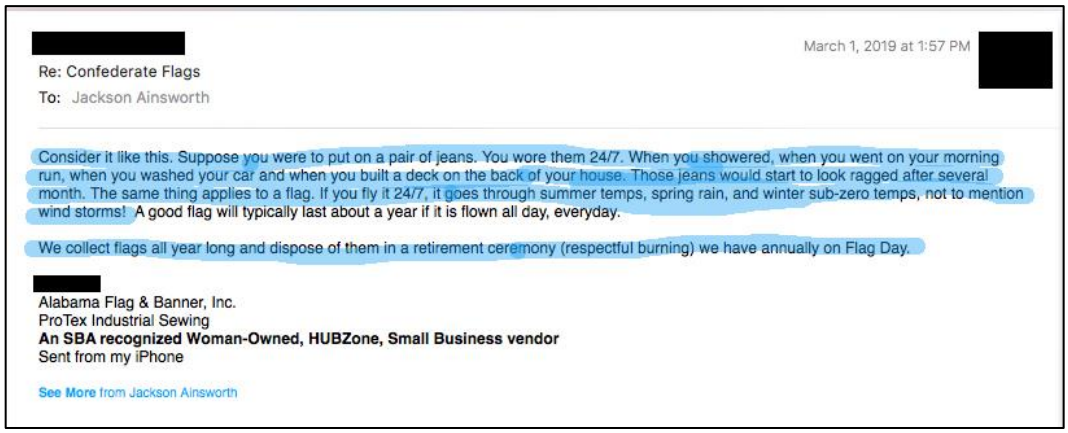
Creating a backyard scene for the installation was important because it was the setting for most of the burning rituals; pro and con confederate flag. The backyard element helped bring to light my private/public research negotiations. I used AstroTurf to emulate grass, and initially didn't have the green cloth. Only upon installing the rest of the elements, the realization set in that the setting of the exhibition played a major role. Barker claims that exhibition sites are assumed to be neutral, however, they possess ideological identities (Barker, 1999: 14). She continues to claim that artists can both adopt or refute these identities depending on how they display their work (Barker, 1999: 30). Behind my green cloth was a church column, and instead of acknowledging or using it, I covered it. I regret not adding more elements to the background to make it look like a backyard. The turf, cloth and

clothesline were a good start, but a few plants or a section of a fence could have created a more complete picture.

### 4. Confederate flag with fire-starting aids

I think this element of my installation was successful as a representative device, however, exhibiting a confederate flag in London did not draw the same response it would if it was in North America. Deliss claims that there is a dilemma in exhibiting work when the political and historical dimensions of a piece clash with the geo-aesthetic field of a place (Deliss, 2011: 90). While painting the flag that was eventually displayed (In the ceremonial 'folded' manner), I was worried it may be too blunt or offensive. I decided it would be important and along with the 'burning elements', I wanted to invoke the potential for destruction. In this sense I wanted to enact the social. One way to do this is to situate the properties of the objects in a way that act as a 'social probe' (Lury & Wakeford, 2014: 18). Unfortunately, these objects were situated in a place (UK) that was not faced with the polarity of the confederate flag on a daily basis, therefore didn't enact the social world I wanted it to.

### 5. Clothesline with clothing bearing interview data


[redacted]

March 1, 2019 at 1:57 PM [redacted]

Re: Confederate Flags

To: Jackson Ainsworth

Consider it like this. Suppose you were to put on a pair of jeans. You wore them 24/7. When you showered, when you went on your morning run, when you washed your car and when you built a deck on the back of your house. Those jeans would start to look ragged after several month. The same thing applies to a flag. If you fly it 24/7, it goes through summer temps, spring rain, and winter sub-zero temps, not to mention wind storms! A good flag will typically last about a year if it is flown all day, everyday.

We collect flags all year long and dispose of them in a retirement ceremony (respectful burning) we have annually on Flag Day.

[redacted]

Alabama Flag & Banner, Inc.
ProTex Industrial Sewing
**An SBA recognized Woman-Owned, HUBZone, Small Business vendor**
Sent from my iPhone

**See More** from Jackson Ainsworth

*Image 3.* A screenshot of an email between myself and Belinda, displayed on boxers, with important text highlighted. I kept her anonymous for the public.

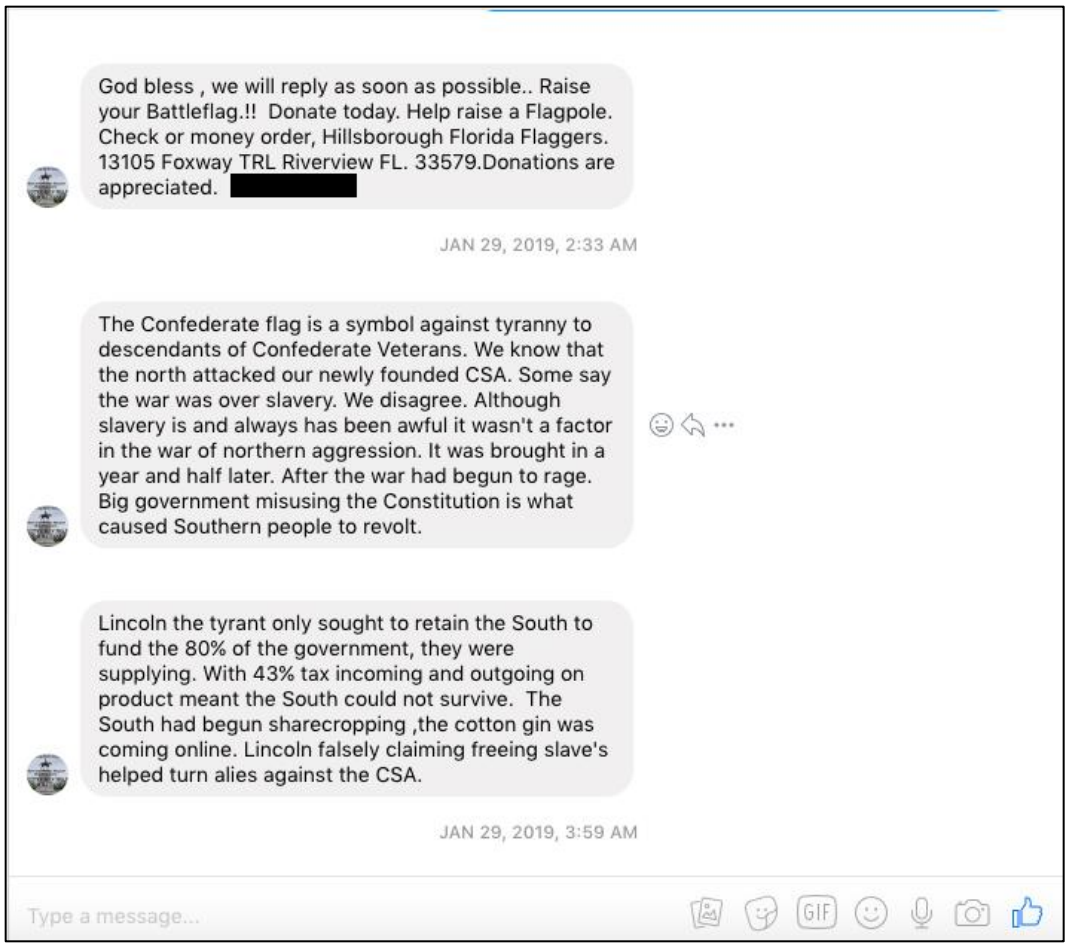



*Image 4.* Facebook response I received from the Hillsborough Florida Flaggers Facebook group, displayed on a t-shirt.

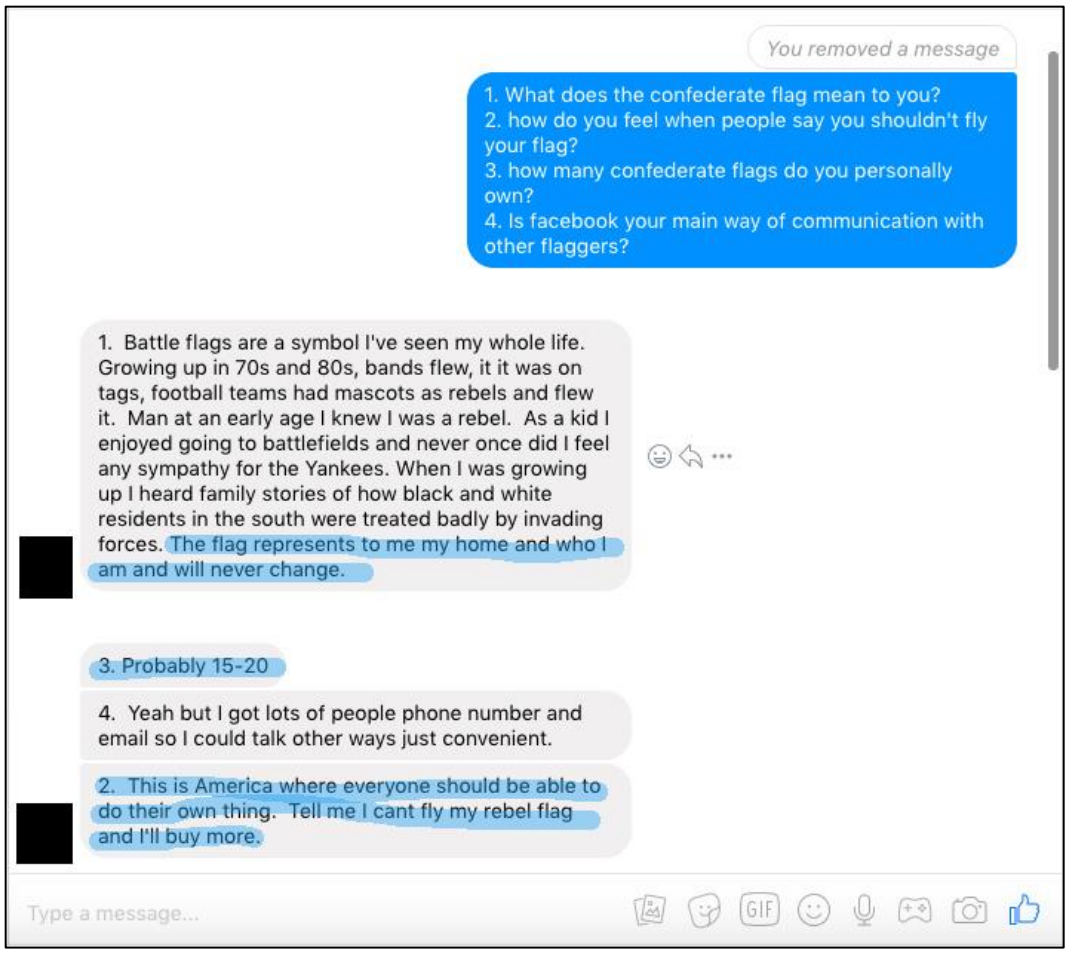
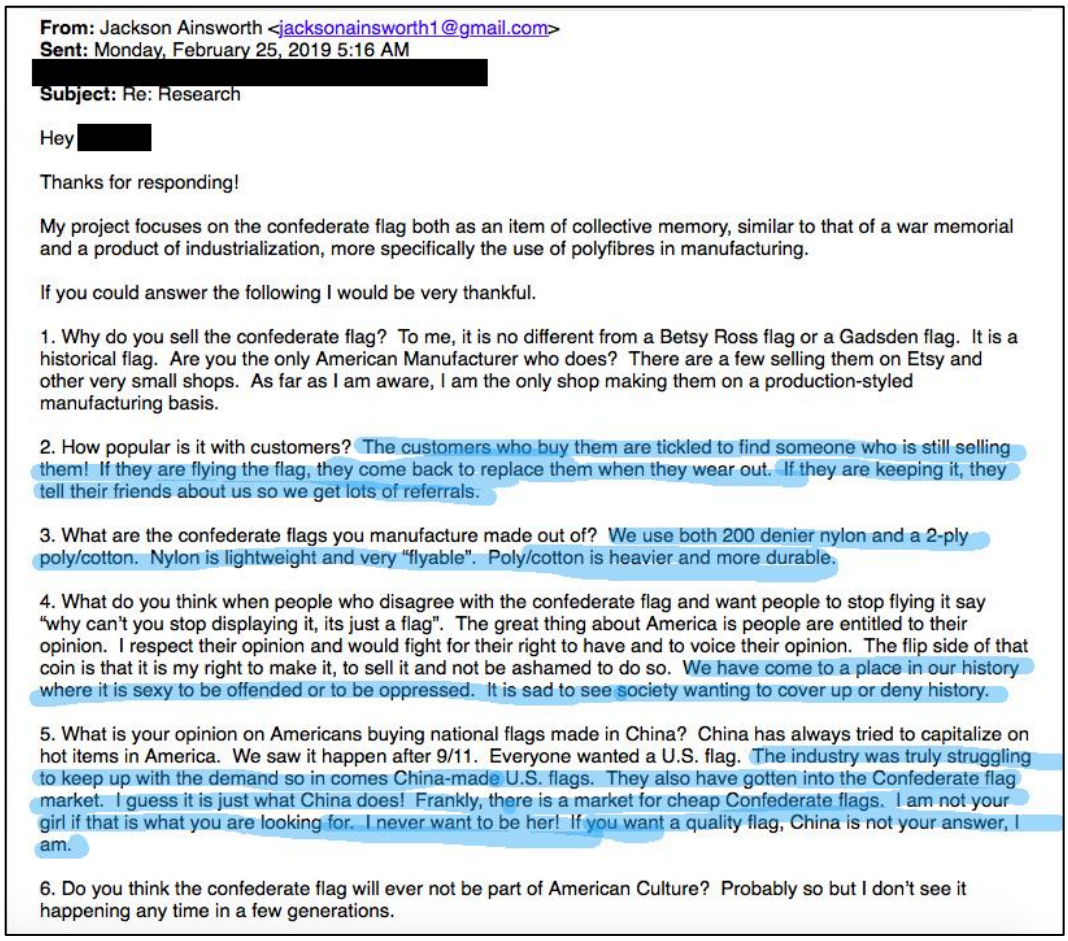



*Image 5.* A Facebook exchange between myself and a flagger with important text highlighted. Displayed on a pair of shorts.



**From:** Jackson Ainsworth <jacksonainsworth1@gmail.com>
**Sent:** Monday, February 25, 2019 5:16 AM
[redacted]
**Subject:** Re: Research

Hey [redacted]

Thanks for responding!

My project focuses on the confederate flag both as an item of collective memory, similar to that of a war memorial and a product of industrialization, more specifically the use of polyfibres in manufacturing.

If you could answer the following I would be very thankful.

1. Why do you sell the confederate flag? To me, it is no different from a Betsy Ross flag or a Gadsden flag. It is a historical flag. Are you the only American Manufacturer who does? There are a few selling them on Etsy and other very small shops. As far as I am aware, I am the only shop making them on a production-styled manufacturing basis.

2. How popular is it with customers? The customers who buy them are tickled to find someone who is still selling them! If they are flying the flag, they come back to replace them when they wear out. If they are keeping it, they tell their friends about us so we get lots of referrals.

3. What are the confederate flags you manufacture made out of? We use both 200 denier nylon and a 2-ply poly/cotton. Nylon is lightweight and very "flyable". Poly/cotton is heavier and more durable.

4. What do you think when people who disagree with the confederate flag and want people to stop flying it say "why can't you stop displaying it, its just a flag". The great thing about America is people are entitled to their opinion. I respect their opinion and would fight for their right to have and to voice their opinion. The flip side of that coin is that it is my right to make it, to sell it and not be ashamed to do so. We have come to a place in our history where it is sexy to be offended or to be oppressed. It is sad to see society wanting to cover up or deny history.

5. What is your opinion on Americans buying national flags made in China? China has always tried to capitalize on hot items in America. We saw it happen after 9/11. Everyone wanted a U.S. flag. The industry was truly struggling to keep up with the demand so in comes China-made U.S. flags. They also have gotten into the Confederate flag market. I guess it is just what China does! Frankly, there is a market for cheap Confederate flags. I am not your girl if that is what you are looking for. I never want to be her! If you want a quality flag, China is not your answer, I am.

6. Do you think the confederate flag will ever not be part of American Culture? Probably so but I don't see it happening any time in a few generations.

*Image 6.* A screenshot of an email between myself and Belinda, displayed on a t shirt, with important text highlighted. I kept her anonymous for the public.

The clothesline, although not always recognized as such, was an important piece for injecting relevant interview data into the installation. It served two purposes: one was to help set the backyard scene, and the second was to add my research context to the installation. Latour claims that the assembly of objects for public viewing should not be driven by political means, rather be an assembly of things that make up the architecture and technology of a subject; a realist attempt to make public an otherwise non-public set of interactions, technologies, institutions and bodies. (Latour, 2002: 24-28). My interactions and the opinions of relatively unknown groups and individuals, while not central in the political arena of confederate iconography, made up the bulk of the publics in my research. For this reason, it was an important element, and also personalized the research.

# Conclusion

My installation did get away from my initial planning slightly. My idea to exhibit a neutral setting, showing two opposing publics linked on a similar act was only fully understood by a few people. It may seem surprising based on the subject matter, but the installation was not meant to be strongly political. Latour claims, "objects – taken as so many issues – bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of 'the political'" (Latour, 2002: 5). In other words, my exhibition was not meant to map out a damning narrative of Southern Americans who support the confederacy, or fly a confederate flag, but rather map out an intertwining of publics connected through the act of burning a confederate flag. Dant claims "There is an idiomatic relationship between series of objects and bodily practices…" (Dant, 2005: 137); The salience of my research was that two outright polar groups shared this same idiomatic relationship with 'retiring'/ 'destroying' the confederate flag, and I am not certain that was clear enough through the exhibition. In other terms, I wanted to "… (re)enact the political in a thoroughly more-than-human… world." (Avila & Ernstson, 2016: 2).

Retrospectively, there were a few different directions I could have gone. My research was heavily involved in the paradoxical rigidity of polyfibres as a catalyst for the confederate flags popularity. I could have made a confederate flag out of stone or steel to display two opposing materials and their subversive potential. Overall, the lack of audience engagement with my topic became my undoing so to speak. Not enough people were familiar with the confederate flag or its politics, and I didn't exhibit material in a way that would help this particular audience. I was too partial to my research and not the public. Gronemeyer claims that audience interpretation is the 'driving force for the exhibition and its material' (Gronemeyer, 2015: 51). In the future I hope to develop more ideas on how materials drive their social life, and how to effectively display these ideas in a specific setting.

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