Ashley Thomas, 'What happened to the truth is not recorded': Anticipating the Shift from Postmodern Consumer Culture to Post-Truth in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*

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Introduction

We find ourselves in a cultural climate of global 'post-truth'. Post-truth has largely entered our societies through the political sphere, occurring in the American administration of Donald Trump, Britain's administration of Boris Johnson, Spain's *Partido Popular* (the People's Party),[1] and Brazil's administration of Jair Bolsonaro. Hardly isolated to the political realm, though, post-truth politics has changed how our societies value objective facts and the notion of truth—making entire nations consider whether truth or honesty matters at all in our new political and social condition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines post-truth as 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' ('post-truth n2'). However, we can expand our definition of post-truth beyond the *OED*'s formulation, and also view it as involving a democratic political institution putting forth numerous lies for a politician's personal gain, or for the purpose of obscuring the truth and complicating the public's access to factual information. For instance, one of the most remarkable moments that signaled our shift

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[1] For a full-length study of post-truth politics in Spain, see David Block's *Post-Truth and Political Discourse*

into a post-truth era occurred in 2017, when the newly elected Donald Trump claimed that he had one of the largest presidential inauguration crowds in history.[2] After the Trump administration received backlash for this claim, Trump's then-press secretary Sean Spicer doubled down on the president's statement, declaring that Trump had 'the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period' (Spicer, 2017). A few days later, counselor to the president, Kellyanne Conway, told NBC News that Spicer was merely giving the nation 'alternative facts' regarding the crowd size (2017). That the president and his administration told lies about the inaugural crowd size and justified such lies by calling them 'alternative facts' seemed to solidify a new era of post-truth where blatant lies were permissible, and political administrations actively worked to bolster a candidate's reputation and confuse the public's understanding of the truth. The effects of such post-truth politics have had a profound impact on our societies. Not only does the dissemination of falsehoods complicate the public's access to truth, but it has also worked to detach the value of truth from the public's political beliefs. Post-truth politics has weakened the value of truth itself. So, how did we get here?

A number of American journalists have attempted to explain our post-truth culture by analyzing the Trump administration in terms of postmodernism. To introduce the idea of postmodernism quite broadly, we can think of it as a cultural and artistic phenomenon that emerged during the 1960s and reached its zenith during the 1970s and 1980s. Generally speaking, the cultural and artistic forms of postmodernism are notable for their 'incredulity towards metanarratives'—meaning that they are skeptical of any overarching 'truths' regarding knowledge or human experience (Lyotard, 1984, xxiv). But if postmodern art and culture are concerned with rebelling against established metanarratives, how does postmodernism apply to our post-truth moment? Journalist Jeet Heer (2017) was the first to propose the connection between postmodernism and post-truth politics, publishing an article in *The New Republic* called 'America's first postmodern president'. Heer argues that Donald Trump embodies central tenets of postmodernism such as fragmented rhetoric, 'nostalgia', 'pastiche', and pop-culture (par. 5). For Heer, Trump's adoption of fragmented rhetorical styles and aspects of popular culture makes him a postmodern president because he is the 'culmination' of postmodern 'late capitalism', and has effectively dismantled an overarching narrative of what it means to be

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[2] In reality, Trump's inaugural audience was much smaller than that of previous inaugural audiences—coming in at about a third of President Obama's inaugural audience (Robertson).

presidential (par.11). Heer ultimately suggests that our post-truth moment stems from postmodern culture, and that the only way to remedy post-truth is to combat economic forces such as 'late capitalism'. Following Heer's article, media outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have published a flurry of responses[3] discussing Trump and postmodernism. *New York Times* writer Casey Williams (2017) and *Washington Post* writer Aaron Hanlon (2018), for instance, oppose Heer's view that we must combat postmodern forces, and instead argue that postmodernism is not at all responsible for our post-truth culture—that postmodernism's tendency to interrogate truth claims has, in fact, given us the tools to resist post-truth.

The significance of these articles are twofold: they present postmodernism as a way to understand post-truth, and they also shows us that postmodernism is alive and well in our popular culture, in spite of the fact that theorists and literary critics have generally come to the consensus that postmodernism has ended.[4] The problem, however, is that they present significantly different definitions of postmodernism—or do not define the term clearly at all. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that Trump embodies postmodern 'pastiche' in his appropriation of certain rhetorical styles, does this mean that postmodernism has caused post-truth? Moreover, what aspects of postmodernism should we analyze when we compare it to post truth? Postmodern theory? Postmodern art? Late capitalism? What roles have the various features of postmodernism played in the creation of our post-truth society, and is postmodernism complicit in the formation of post-truth? In order to begin to answer these questions and gain a clear insight into the relationship between postmodernism and post-truth, I will now perform an analysis of a key literary narrative that critics and scholars have used to construct and define postmodernism.

Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) revolves around the character Geoffrey Braithwaite, a GP who aspires to be a respected literary biographer of Gustave Flaubert. The novel follows Braithwaite's attempt to write Flaubert's biography, and add something new to the biography by discovering the original stuffed parrot that Flaubert owned during his composition of *Un 13meri simple* (a problem that literary historians have been unable to solve). By the end of the novel, Braithwaite discovers

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[3] See 'Has Trump stolen philosophy's critical tools?', 'Is President Trump a stealth postmodernist or just a liar?', and 'Postmodernism didn't cause Trump. It explains him' (Williams; Edsall; Hanlon).
[4] See Linda Hutcheon's (2002, p. 166) famous claim that postmodernism is 'over', as well as *Supplanting the postmodern: An anthology of writings on the arts and culture of the early 21st century*, and *Post-postmodernism: or, the cultural logic of just-in-time capitalism*.

fifty stuffed parrots that claim to be the original as he realizes that it is futile to search for the 'true' parrot that Flaubert used. Barnes's novel can symbolically be read as the quest for historical truth; Braithwaite's failure to discover Flaubert's parrot can be seen as Barnes's attempt to ironize epistemological quests and the notion that we can arrive at truth in history. While *Flaubert's Parrot* epitomizes the way that postmodern art undermines the notion of truth, we may wonder why it is a good candidate for a comparison to post-truth when there is a plethora of other postmodern novels to choose from. Novels such as Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), Zulfikar Ghose's *Hulme's Investigation into the Bogart Script* (1981), E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), and Julian Barnes's later novel, *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) may present themselves as candidates for a case-study between postmodernism and post-truth, but these novels only embody a few stylistic features of postmodernism.[5] In my view, *Flaubert's Parrot*, amongst others, is able to provide an encyclopedic view of postmodernism's central tenets. The novel is divided into fifteen chapters, and each chapter displays a different kind of postmodern trope. For instance, a chapter entitled 'Chronology' parodies the way literary chronologies claim to provide an accurate history of an author's life, while a chapter entitled 'Emma Bovary's Eyes' ironizes how academics often focus on minute details in the hope that some kind of 'truth' will emerge from rigorous close-reading. The variety of postmodern tropes in Barnes's novel, then, gives us a broad range of ideas that we can compare to post-truth. Indeed, *Flaubert's Parrot* becomes most applicable to our post-truth moment in the way that its multifaceted chapters critique postmodern culture through their use of irony. By featuring chapters that ironize problematic elements of postmodern culture, *Flaubert's Parrot* is able to diagnose the problems of its culture and present a satirical portrait of postmodern culture that anticipates our post-truth moment.

Defining Postmodernism(s)

Before analyzing how *Flaubert's Parrot* ironizes its own postmodern culture and anticipates post-truth, we must first establish some definitions of postmodernism. Because of its manifestations in such sweeping areas as culture, literature, art, and

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[5] For example, Hulme's Investigation into the Bogart Script embodies postmodern pastiche in the way that it spoofs the genre of Westerns, and The Sense of an Ending embodies postmodernism's ontological depth and resistance to closure, but neither novel covers a large number of postmodernism's stylistic features.

architecture, the term 'postmodernism' has long been plagued by a multitude of definitions, and it is thus impossible to produce a definition that can sufficiently inhabit all aspects of postmodernism. Additionally, we must remember that 'postmodernism' is a term retrospectively applied by historians and theorists to a period of time ranging from about 1960-1990, meaning that there was no consensus about what actually constituted postmodernism during the postmodern period itself. While we therefore must be careful about creating a rigid definition of postmodernism, we can still identify the kinds of *tendencies* that the postmodern period displays. For the purposes of this discussion, it will be important to separate two key aspects of postmodernism: postmodern art and postmodern culture. We can think of postmodern art as having a tendency to challenge the larger institutions that 'make' truth, and consequently postmodern art strives to include the voices of minority groups who are often barred from participation in genres like historiography and canonical literature. We will often find that postmodern art (in literature, painting, sculpture, music, film, etc.) seeks to transgress the formal features of its discipline in order to break down classist, racist, sexist, and elitist barriers of what 'counts' as art, and whose voices get to be included in the production of art. In addition to these stylistic features, we must also note that postmodern art is especially skeptical of the notion of 'truth', since the institutions that produce truth largely operate from privileged positions.[6] Taking all of these features into consideration, we can define postmodern art as a discipline that seeks to flout formal features of elite art and ultimately include a globally diverse set of artists in order to challenge pre-established 'metanarratives' of truth (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv).

Postmodern culture, on the other hand, can be thought of as a social experience that is informed by global 'consumer culture', or, 'late capitalism.' Jameson defines 'consumer culture' and 'late capitalism' as a social transformation of the 1960s that is marked by 'transnational business', 'international division of labor', 'international banking and stock exchanges', 'computers and automation', and 'gentrification on a now-global scale'—putting particular emphasis on the way new technologies have expanded the possibilities for international travel and business endeavours (Jameson, 1991: xix). What we may notice in this description of postmodern culture is that it

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[6] For instance, see Hayden White's claim that the historical record is imbued with 'a specifically Western prejudice' used to 'substantiate' the 'presumed superiority of modern industrial society' (1973, p.2).

seems to share the 'global' aim of postmodern art. But even though postmodern art and postmodern culture appear to desire a more globally diverse society, postmodern culture's emphasis is on global *marketability* rather than the expansion of society to include diverse voices who are so often excluded from cultural participation. An example of this postmodern 'consumer culture' can be seen in Disney's *Epcot* theme park. While the park claims to offer visitors the opportunity to visit eleven different 'countries'[7] and experience their cultures (via architecture, shopping, and cuisine), what visitors really experience are American-made caricatures of France, Mexico, Germany, China, etc., and not genuine cultural enrichment. What is advertised as a 'global experience' is really a marketing technique used to enhance Disney's revenues. In fact, this example of Disney tourists exploring American-made versions of France and Mexico within a single Florida theme-park can be taken as an instance of *pastiche*, a hallmark feature of postmodern culture that can be defined as being 'like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style,' but without a sense of irony.[8] In the case of Disney's *Epcot*, the park imitates certain elements of the countries it tries to replicate, but does so in earnest, refusing to acknowledge that its versions of China or Morocco are wholly inauthentic constructions used for marketing purposes. Though pastiche does not always have an economic inflection, pastiche in the realm of postmodern culture often occurs when an individual or institution claims to have 'globally inclusive' affinities, but only does so for the purpose of sheer marketability instead of genuine global participation. This particular manifestation of pastiche (where 'global' voices are imitated in order to promote marketability), I will term 'cultural pastiche' for the rest of my analysis.

Although pastiche is a feature largely unique to postmodern culture, we can see pastiche occurring in our current cultural moment. To provide a contemporary correlative to the *Epcot* scenario, we see an example of cultural pastiche in Starbucks's 'Been There' series of coffee mugs. The 'Been There' mugs feature the names of various locations, along with illustrations of the location's most famous features. These mugs have become popular collectibles among tourists and are often used to tout the various

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[7] These countries include: the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, Norway, China, Japan, Morocco, the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

[8] To provide a more comprehensive definition, Jameson (1998, p.5) defines pastiche as being 'like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style…but…a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive…without laugher…pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour'.

cultures its consumers have experienced. The very idea of flaunting one's worldliness through these coffee mugs embodies pastiche, because the 'Been There' line has little to do with genuine cultural participation. A tourist in Spain, for instance, might purchase a Sevilla mug, but instead of supporting authentic Spanish culture, the tourist has bought an American-brand mug that has likely been produced in Thailand or China. Starbucks's line of coffee mugs, then, unironically imitates other cultures and claims to offer consumers a 'global' product when the mugs are really used to increase the international market for Starbucks products. To extend this contemporary example of pastiche to the post-truth political sphere, we see a figure like Donald Trump employing cultural pastiche in his 2016 tweet where he posts a picture of himself eating a taco salad with the statement: 'Happy #CincoDeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!' (Trump). While the purpose of Trump's tweet is to dispel claims that he is racist against Mexicans, the tweet epitomizes cultural pastiche by showing the president eat a wholly inauthentic 'Mexican' dish. Taco salads were created in Texas, not Mexico, and the president is eating one that was made in his own (American) hotel, all while pretending that he has genuinely taken part in Hispanic culture. While the president's tweet may not have fooled his opponents, his use of cultural pastiche shows how an aspect of postmodern 'consumer culture' has made its way into our post-truth society.

If our current cultural condition can be seen as a kind of evolution of postmodern culture, then what role has postmodern art played in critiquing its own culture, or possibly predicting a post-truth culture where pastiche has been taken to the extreme? Though Jameson (1998: 20), questions whether postmodern art 'replicates or reproduces…the logic of consumer capitalism', we see that postmodern art—especially literature—has been able to diagnose and critique the problems of its consumer society, and even anticipate our post-truth cultural moment. Indeed, this is where a novel like Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* comes into play.

Cultural Critique in *Flaubert's Parrot*

While I take *Flaubert's Parrot* to critique postmodern culture and anticipate post-truth, it may be valuable to contextualize this interpretation with the ways that *Flaubert's Parrot* has typically been read. A standard reading may see the novel as operating solely within the realm of postmodern art, since it displays a disdain for epistemology that is so typical of postmodern novels. Braithwaite's failure to locate

Flaubert's original parrot may prompt us to think that the novel's central meaning is to undermine the notion of truth, but the novel does more than ironize epistemological quests. *Flaubert's Parrot* is also concerned with ironizing postmodern culture, and Barnes achieves this cultural critique through Braithwaite's biography of Flaubert. While each chapter of the novel can be read as fragmented narrative that ironizes truth, each chapter also represents a piece of Braithwaite's biography (for instance, the 'Chronology' chapter ironizes historical chronologies, but also shows that Braithwaite has written chronologies for his biography). What we find in the chapters is that Braithwaite employs problematic techniques in order to become a marketable biographer. In the name of including 'diverse' voices in Flaubert's biography (such as that of Louise Colet, Flaubert's lover) Braithwaite ventriloquizes female voices, and consequently erases the voices he claims to include. Indeed, Braithwaite's biography devolves into cultural pastiche. Braithwaite is a twentieth-century English GP taking on the voices of nineteenth-century women—silencing these women's authentic voices—and ventriloquizing them only for the purpose of being a marketable biographer. By looking at the novel in this light, we see that Braithwaite's biography begins to look like the *Epcot* example in my definition of cultural pastiche. Braithwaite purports to give readers a diverse set of voices to enjoy in his biography, but he fails to provide readers with these authentic voices, and instead provides textual caricatures of figures like Louise Colet. The playful and ironic tone of the novel makes it clear that Barnes is critiquing the cultural pastiche of Braithwaite—and that of the larger postmodern culture. However, the novel's ironic portrayal of Braithwaite not only critiques its own cultural moment, but also anticipates a post-truth culture where pastiche is employed without irony.

Ventriloquism and Cultural Pastiche

Braithwaite employs cultural pastiche in order to profit from including traditionally marginalized female voices into his biography. One of the most glaring instances of cultural pastiche occurs in the chapter 'Finders Keepers', where Braithwaite meets Ed Winterton, a professor who claims to possess previously undiscovered correspondence between Flaubert and Juliet Herbert, an English governess to Flaubert's niece, and possible mistress to Flaubert (Barnes, 1990: 40). Winterton explains that he has acquired seventy-five letters between Flaubert and Juliet which heavily imply that she

was Flaubert's fiancée. The only trouble, Winterton confesses, is that he has burnt the letters. After Braithwaite's initial shock at this, he decides that the destruction of the letters will not prevent him from publicizing their existence, telling the reader, 'perhaps [Flaubert] didn't want us to know that his famous devotion to solitude and art had nearly been overthrown [via a marriage to Juliet]. But the world would know. I would tell it, one way or another' (1990: 47). While Braithwaite's intent to tell the world about the letters initially seems to be inclusive towards Juliet, we see that Braithwaite's actual reason for publicizing the letters is self-motivated. As Winterton describes the letters, Braithwaite imagines himself being thrown into the spotlight for publishing them, stating,

> I imagined myself presenting it in one of the more important literary journals; perhaps I might let the *TLS* have it. 'Juliet Herbert: A Mystery Solved, by Geoffrey Braithwaite,' illustrated with one of those photographs in which you can't quite read the handwriting...*Flaubert's English fiancée*, I was thinking to myself. By Geoffrey Braithwaite. (Barnes, 1990: 41, 45)

That Braithwaite plans his literary success down to the illustration on his book-cover shows that his primary motivation for publicizing the letters is to appear 'in one of the more important literary journals' and have his name featured on the cover of a best-selling biography, and not to include Juliet's actual voice in the biography. Indeed, that Braithwaite wants to publicize the letters in spite of the fact that they were burned (or perhaps did not exist in the first place) shows that he is more than happy to ventriloquize the voice of Juliet in order to gain literary notoriety. Consequently, Braithwaite performs cultural pastiche by planning to appropriate the voice of a nineteenth-century English governess for the sake of being a profitable biographer. Given how obviously ridiculous it is for Braithwaite to publish the existence of nonexistent letters, we see that Barnes is ironizing Braithwaite's intention to publish the letters; and that Barnes's representation of a man who is determined to profit off Juliet's nonexistent letters implicitly critiques the way that postmodern consumer culture condones the appropriation of marginalized voices for the sake of marketability. More than this, though, in showing the way that Braithwaite shamelessly appropriates female voices for the marketability of his biography, Barnes

anticipates our post-truth moment, where political candidates employ cultural pastiche for the purpose of becoming more likeable and marketable.

We see Donald Trump employ cultural pastiche during his campaign for president in 2016. When holding a campaign rally, Trump pointed out an African American man (Gregory Cheadle) in the crowd, stating 'look at my African American over here. Look at him. Are you the greatest?' (Trump). Trump continues his speech by touting the presence of African Americans at his rallies, claiming 'we have tremendous African American support'. In this moment, Trump uses pastiche as a campaign tactic. Trump is a white man (known for his racist comments) who uses the presence of an African American supporter to make his campaign more marketable to black voters. Notably, Trump's use of the possessive phrase 'my African American' shows that Trump appropriates Cheadle's identity in order to suggest that Cheadle supports his campaign. Of course, Trump has avoided the opportunity of letting Cheadle speak for himself and has merely used him to bolster his own campaign. We receive virtual confirmation that Trump has used cultural pastiche as a campaign tactic, when nearly three years later, Cheadle commented that Trump had used him as a 'political pawn' (PBS NewsHour, 2019). When asked what he thought about Cheadle's comment, Trump told the reporter, 'I don't know who you're talking about...we have tremendous African American support, I would say I'm at my all-time high' (Trump, 2019). That Trump has forgotten the supporter he made such a spectacle of during the 2016 rally shows that Trump cared very little about including the voices of African Americans and only acknowledged Cheadle so he could appear more likeable to voters. This example of cultural pastiche in post-truth politics not only shows that our post-truth society has grown out of a postmodern consumer culture, but also shows that a novel like *Flaubert's Parrot* has anticipated our current situation. Barnes's ironic presentation of a man who appropriates and erases marginalized voices for his own commercial gain has come to fruition in our current society, but without any of Barnes's irony or self-awareness. While *Flaubert's Parrot* has critiqued postmodern culture and predicted how cultural pastiche can be used to problematic ends, the novel anticipates more than post-truth's tendency to exploit minority voices for marketability. The novel also anticipates how the multiplicity of rhetorical discourses in postmodern culture can lead to the post-truth tactic of denying truth altogether.

'Discursive Heterogeneity' and the Denial of Truth

Before I explain how *Flaubert's Parrot* ironizes the way that rhetorical discourses can be used for problematic aims, it will first be important to contextualize the way that multiple discourses have manifested themselves in postmodern culture. As we discussed earlier, 'late capitalism' has expanded society's access to international travel and global business pursuits. For Jameson, the vast technological and global advances of late capitalism have allowed for 'a linguistic fragmentation of social life…to the point where the norm itself is eclipsed…the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm' (1991: 17). In other words, the plurality of experiences that late capitalism offers have undermined the idea of a singular 'norm' or 'truth' regarding human experience. In turn, this has resulted in various groups in society adopting such idiosyncratic ideologies and rhetorical modes that there is no longer a single 'norm' for rhetorical expression and systems of belief—something that can have negative effects in postmodern culture. Jameson mentions that 'the stupendous proliferation of social codes' can lead to people using their modes of belief as 'badges of affirmation of ethnic, gender, race, religious, and class-factional adhesion' (1991: 17). This idea that people may take advantage of the 'proliferation of social codes' and turn their beliefs into 'badges of affirmation' suggests that the absence of a singular 'norm' or 'truth' can cause people to adhere to a set of beliefs that makes *them* feel validated and may not regard truth itself. For instance, one may subscribe to a certain belief system, and if questioned about these beliefs, one can refer to the plurality of discourses available and justify themselves by stating 'this is *my* truth'. This idea that there is no linguistic 'norm' to compare one's beliefs to can lead to the elision of truth, or the denial of truth altogether. This phenomenon of exploiting heterogenous discursive modes to deny truth is something that Barnes anticipates when he ironizes the proliferation of discourses in a chapter called 'The Flaubert Bestiary'. In this chapter, Braithwaite sets out to discover Flaubert's 'spirit animal'. Using evidence from Flaubert's letters, novels—and even office decorations—Braithwaite constructs six different essays, each arguing that Flaubert identifies with a particular set of animals. Braithwaite writes,

> [Flaubert] is clusters of beasts: hungry to see Ernest Chevalier, he is 'a lion, a tiger—a tiger from India, a boa constrictor' (1841); feeling a rare plentitude of strength, he is 'an ox, sphinx, bittern, elephant, whale' (1841)…He is an oyster

in its shell (1845); a snail in its shell (1851); a hedgehog rolling up to protect itself (1853, 1857). (Barnes, 1990: 50)

Here, Braithwaite cites credible instances[9] where Flaubert claims to be 'a lion', 'a tiger', a 'boa constrictor', etc., but what is troubling about this passage is that it refuses to make meaning. By saying that Flaubert is *all* of these animals, Braithwaite also suggests that Flaubert is *none* of these animals—Flaubert cannot be everything at once. Describing Flaubert as a multitude of animals seems to qualify as exactly the kind of 'stylistic and discursive heterogeneity' that Jameson describes. This passage resists a linguistic 'norm' where Flaubert would bear likeness to a single animal, and instead undergoes 'linguistic fragmentation' where Flaubert's identity is split among a number of animals. Indeed, Braithwaite makes explicit his defiance of linguistic norms when he states '[w]hat happened to the truth is not recorded' at the end of this chapter (Barnes, 1990: 65). Braithwaite, then, chooses to disregard the format of a 'normal' biography (where the 'truth' about an author's life is discussed), and instead adopts a rhetorical style which denies that we can learn *any* truth about Flaubert. While the denial of an overarching truth can often be used for productive aims, such as questioning large institutions who 'make' truth, Braithwaite's bestiary merely distracts from the larger biography. In this particular instance, it seems that Braithwaite's rhetoric is more a 'badge of affirmation' (for his cleverness in connecting the animals to Flaubert) than it is a productive discourse. Indeed, the way that Braithwaite compulsively lists Flaubert's spirit animals seems to be an implicit point of irony for Barnes. Seeing Braithwaite accomplish nothing in the sixteen-page span of the 'Flaubert Bestiary' (for the sake of something as minute as a spirit animal) causes readers to note just how ridiculous Braithwaite's project is. By showing how Braithwaite tries to flout linguistic norms but only creates unnecessary confusion, Barnes ironizes 'discursive heterogeneity' when it is put to useless aims. While Braithwaite's project to discover Flaubert's spirit animal is fairly low stakes—and Barnes's depiction of Braithwaite is quite playful—we see that post-truth politicians have taken advantage of the rhetorical plurality that Barnes ironizes.

An example of a post-truth politician exploiting rhetorical plurality can be seen in Boris Johnson's 2019 interview with BBC correspondent Andrew Neil. Johnson,

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[9] See Geoffrey Wall's 'Gustave Flaubert: Eleven Letters'.

much like Trump, has been associated with a post-truth, postmodernist politics in which the truth is rarely discernible. The interview concerned Johnson's view on trading with the EU in the event of a no-deal Brexit, and specifically focused on Johnson's interpretation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Article XXIV, paragraph 5(b). Johnson believes that paragraph 5(b) will allow the UK to continue to trade with the EU in the event of a no-deal Brexit, telling Neil that it will allow the UK and EU to continue 'their existing zero-tariff, zero-quota arrangements until such time as we do a free-trade deal' (Johnson, 2019). While Johnson is correct that paragraph 5(b) will allow for 'an interim agreement leading to the formation of a free-trade area', Johnson seems to be disregarding paragraph 5(c), which essentially voids Johnson's claim that the UK can automatically continue its existing trade-deal with the EU, since it explicitly states that both parties must work together to form 'a plan and schedule for the formation of an interim agreement' (Jozepa 2019). Neil attempts to confront Johnson on this issue, but viewers quickly notice that Neil and Johnson are not on the same rhetorical playing field. Neil attempts to acknowledge the truth that Johnson has misinterpreted Article XXIV, while Johnson uses a discourse consumed with minutiae and emotional appeal in order to invalidate Neil's claims. Firstly, when Neil attempts to ask Johnson about his interpretation of paragraph 5(b), he makes a small error, calling it 'article 5(b)' instead (Johnson, 2019). Johnson immediately pounces on this error, emphatically telling Neil, 'paragraph 5(b), article twenty-four. Get the detail right. Get the detail right, Andrew. Article twenty-four, paragraph 5(b)'. In this moment, Johnson seems to capitalize on a postmodern plurality of rhetorical discourses. Instead of abiding by a rhetorical 'norm' and acknowledging Neil's claim that he has misinterpreted Article XXIV, Johnson instead adopts a rhetorical style that privileges minute details (Neil accidentally calling paragraph 5(b) an 'article') over the truth. Later in the interview, when Neil is explaining why paragraph 5(b) cannot work as an intermediary trade agreement, Johnson says, 'why this defeatism? Why this negativity? Why can't we rely on the common-sense and the goodwill of those parties to get this done?' (Johnson 2019). Here, Johnson yet again adopts a rhetorical style that refuses to acknowledge truth, instead privileging positivity over negativity, 'goodwill' over facts. While a comparison between 'The Flaubert Bestiary' and Johnson's interview may seem incongruous— since one is about the biography of a nineteenth-century French writer and the other is about the current political climate in Britain—we still see that Barnes has ironized

the discursive heterogeneity that Johnson exploits, and that *Flaubert's Parrot* inadvertently anticipates how the plurality of rhetorical modes can be, and has been, taken advantage of for the denial of truth.

Conclusion

Our post-truth moment has grown out of a postmodern consumer culture: phenomena such as cultural pastiche and 'discursive heterogeneity' have become the tactics that post-truth politicians employ for the purposes of marketability and the denial of truth. While many have wondered how post-truth made its way into our societies, taking a closer look at postmodern culture may be valuable in diagnosing the problems of our current culture and in finding solutions to mitigate the proliferation of post-truth. One way of doing so is a literary analysis such as this one, which looks at *Flaubert's Parrot* as a piece that had the foresight to critique its postmodern culture and ultimately anticipate a society where tactics like cultural pastiche are employed without any sense of irony or self-awareness. While some American and British media outlets have noted a relationship between postmodernism and post-truth, their definitions of postmodernism and its effects on our societies remains inconsistent. Performing literary analyses of postmodernism and post-truth will not only help us define the relationship between the two but will also clarify that we are not giving current politicians a positive platform to stand on. While American political figures like Kellyanne Conway and Rudy Giuliani have attempted to frame Trump's politics as being on-par with postmodern thinkers via phrases such as 'alternative facts' and 'truth isn't truth' (phrases which may initially seem to echo postmodern theorists), we must make clear that politicians like Trump are nothing more than a product of a postmodern consumer society (Conway 2017; Giuliani 2018). If we are able to clarify the distinction between postmodern consumer culture and postmodern theorists and artists like Barnes who were critical of their cultural moment, we may be able to identify the cultural problems that led to our post-truth era, and learn how to resist them so we can effect progressive social change.

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