

Foreword

By Tessa Karsten and Sasha Staggs

‘Tis strange—but true; for Truth is always strange, / Stranger than Fiction
—Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

Determining who is pulling the narrative strings has become essential in an era plagued by scepticism and contested truths. In 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary chose ‘post-truth’ as their Word of the Year (BBC), defining the adjective as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Post-truth”). Indeed, we are in the midst of a post-truth era where there is a growing and pressing necessity to determine the authenticity of narratives by assessing potential partisanship and verifying the accuracy of these accounts (McIntyre). This has resulted in infectious doubt, in which feeling unable to rely on the media for accurate information—distrusting news sources due to conflicting narratives being presented as unbiased truths—and relying on social media instead have become the norm. Evidently, the fundamental question at the core of this issue is: who controls the narrative? Who produces and legitimises it? Whose voices are amplified, and whose are marginalised or erased?

The Byronic adage of truth being stranger than fiction has been ringing particularly true in recent years. Reality at times can feel

more bizarre, odd, and uncanny than a work of fiction; potentially because you can put down a novel and remove yourself from its fictional world, but you cannot truly escape from the real world, from the truth. At times, reality teeters on the thin line between truth and fiction. Imagined dystopian regimes have echoed reality since their inception, inspired by the faults and failures of our governments and societies in order to shed a critical light on these unequal systems and express dissent. Typically, these fictional realms either mirror existing political structures—historical or contemporary—or magnify modern technological advancements to explore them at their most extreme form. Nevertheless, with growing political polarization and the rise of far-right extremist movements globally, the boundary between truth and fiction seems to be eroding at an increasingly rapid rate as fictional dystopian worlds eerily mirror our present socio-political climate. In response to this ideology spreading, and various forms of restrictive governmental policies, we have witnessed international record-breaking public protests. Many protesters carry signs with slogans referring to dystopian novels—further evidence that the line between truth and fiction feels thin—such as ‘Welcome to *1984*,’ ‘Make Orwell Fiction Again,’ and ‘*The Handmaid’s Tale* is not an instruction manual,’ as well as renowned maxims from authors like Toni Morrison’s “The function of freedom is to free someone else.” By the same token, in September 2025, the first Readers’ March (*Lezersmars*) made its way through the streets of Utrecht. Organized by the International Literature Festival Utrecht (ILFU), participants marched through the city holding up a book; one that characterized hope, freedom—novels that everyone should read as the answer to indifference and oppression. A stream of books flowed down the cobblestone roads; a stream that symbolized polyphony, democracy, and the freedom of thought and the written word. On the central Domplein, people simultaneously read aloud from the books they had brought along. The revelry of voices and stories symbolized the powerful voice of literature. In literally giving a voice to these narratives, this event was a powerful reminder of the narratives often controlled and not given a chance to be heard.

Literature is manifestly evocative and influential, and as Aldous Huxley writes in *Brave New World* (1932): “Words can be like X-rays if you use them properly—they’ll go through anything. You read and you’re pierced” (70). By comparing words to X-rays, Huxley brings forth the sharply compelling nature of reading. An X-ray is an imaging technique that goes deep, uncovering what is unseen to the naked eye; it reveals what might be broken, torn, or metastasizing, divulging any foreign objects causing damage. Extending X-rays to words and reading metaphorically, literature ‘pierces’ us at our core, causing us to be inspired, moved emotionally, inducing our rational and critical capabilities. On the other hand, the enlightening potential of books means that literature is often placed under pressure by repressive governments and authoritarian regimes. The influential quality of words is a double-edged sword and oppressive systems also use words to their advantage—dominating the narrative from above by indoctrinating through propaganda, and from below by concealing counter-narratives through censorship. Some of the first forms of censorship we reflected upon during the conception of this issue’s theme were book bannings and burnings, the most literal examples of literature’s power to challenge totalitarianism and a physical representation of authoritarian control attempting to subjugate the narrative. Owning, controlling, and distributing a narrative can therefore be both a tool of domination or resistance. Literature can be used as an act of protest, it can serve as a tool to reclaim the narrative, creating counter-narratives that go against hegemonic accounts and combat oppressive agendas; giving a voice to the unheard and the silenced, those who lack the voice to speak out against injustices or to push back the boundaries of repressive regimes and systems. Storytelling and literature have the power to help us understand the world around us, and come to terms with it or strive to change it, interrogating norms and normativity, imagining alternative ways of organizing society, creating solidarity and understanding on a human level—making room for polyphonic perspectives.

Therefore, in this issue of *FRAME* we aim to investigate this blurring boundary between truth and fiction, and the role literary works take on in exploring this fine line. We examine who owns a narrative

and how this ownership determines the effects a work of literature has; interrogating how creative works contribute to struggles against oppressive structures. Contributions in this issue contemplate how different critical frameworks critique and/or read authority, questioning, for instance, who bears the interpretational responsibility of written works. Additionally, we explore the effects that censorship and limited narrative freedoms may have on texts, not only for authors and readers, but also for scholars. The articles gathered here interrogate who is permitted to speak, how stories circulate, and what forms resistance may take when dominant frameworks of intelligibility falter. Across these contributions, narrative emerges not merely as representation, but as a site of contestation: a space in which silenced voices are reclaimed, marginalised subjectivities rearticulated, and new modes of solidarity imagined.

Several contributions engage with the question of whose voice can be heard. In Kári Driscoll's article "'Let's howl, said the dog': Dissent, Potentiality, and the Politics of Voice in José Saramago's *Seeing*," the seemingly marginal howl of the dog becomes a crucial point of theoretical intervention, unsettling anthropocentric assumptions about political speech and intelligibility. By placing Rancière's *distribution of the sensible* in dialogue with Agamben's account of biopolitical power, Driscoll shows how *Seeing* (2004) not only stages dissensus but also exposes the anthropocentric assumptions that shape what counts as political speech, protest, and meaning. It thereby posits the question of who is recognised as a speaking subject.

This concern with the erasure and recuperation of voice resonates with Jennifer Cavanaugh's analysis of Sharon Pollock's *Saucy Jack* (1994). In "Reclaiming Narrative Authority: Gendered Violence and Feminist Reauthorship in Sharon Pollock's *Saucy Jack*," Cavanaugh confronts the enduring silencing of Jack the Ripper's victims. Through the figure of Kate, a music hall actress tasked with reenacting the murders, Cavanaugh demonstrates the ethical significance of feminist reauthorship, exposing the biases and patriarchal discourses underpinning the Ripper narrative. In doing so, Cavanaugh argues that Pollock restores narrative agency to those historically reduced to anonymity.

Extending this interrogation of voice into contemporary political struggle, Cassandra Scherr turns to the speculative fiction of Akwaeke Emezi in “Tracing Akwaeke Emezi’s Maps to Black Resistance.” Scherr demonstrates how Black counternarratives function as a necessary response to the rise of far-right white supremacist ideology in the United States.¹ Through an analysis of *Pet* (2019) and *Bitter* (2022), Scherr argues that storytelling operates as a form of resistance, offering readers narrative strategies such as collective imagination, space for connection and pleasure, intentional language use, and ethical commitment that serve as actionable frameworks for real-world change.

If these contributions foreground the politics of voice, they also gesture toward a broader concern with subversion and the reclamation of narrative authority. Cavanaugh’s feminist rewriting of a canonical crime narrative finds an echo in Scherr’s emphasis on storytelling as a form of resistance, where narrative production becomes an explicitly political act. This question of who controls the narrative—and to what ends—is taken up from a pedagogical perspective in Abaigeal Uphoff’s “*The Pillowman* and the Creative Writing Classroom: Who Controls the Narrative?” Through an engagement with Martin McDonagh’s play *The Pillowman* (2003), Uphoff examines the tension between viewing stories as autonomous texts and reading them through an author-centred lens that enables control and interpretation. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s concept of *Jetztzeit*, the article proposes the creative writing classroom as a ‘suspended’ mediating space where power structures are examined and challenged.

These concerns with subversion and resistance are further developed in Francesca Girardi’s “Travesti Narratives: Transformed Bodies, Transformative Texts,” which explores the textual politics of travesti subjectivity. Through readings of *Ciencia Ficción Travesti* (2023) and *Las Malas* (2019), Girardi highlights how these texts depict both everyday scenes of travesti solidarity and the ‘enmonsterization’ of travesti bodies, challenging normative frameworks. By drawing on concepts such as Marquis Bey’s *fugitivity* and José Esteban Muñoz’s *brown commons*, Girardi argues that travesti writing is inherently collective, polyphonic,

1 *FRAME* capitalizes the words “Black” and “white” according to the author’s discretion.

and anti-assimilationist, reclaiming the right to exist outside normative constraints.

Transcending boundaries can also obfuscate geopolitical and cultural confines, as illustrated by Anonymous' article "Writing Across Borders: Wu Qin's 'A Letter from a Tehran Prison' as a *Hidden Trans-national-crypt* in Global Resistance." Anon. foregrounds the text's transnational circulation and its engagement with global resistance. Through a comparison between Iranian protests and Chinese media censorship, the article examines how the letter operates as a *hidden transcript*, negotiating tensions between anonymity, translation, and readerly interpretation. By situating the text within broader discussions of transnational memory, Anon. argues that its cross-border movement enables forms of transcultural solidarity and amplifies its potential for resistance.

Border crossing finds a material counterpart in Ksenia Kwiecińska's "Safe for birds, but not for people': Centering the Landscape in Urszula Glensk's *Pin. Stories from the Polish-Belarusian Border*." In her analysis of the polyphonic work of experimental reportage that documents the experiences of those attempting to cross the Polish-Belarusian border, Kwiecińska draws on necropolitics, border studies, and posthuman theory. Kwiecińska examines how the environs of the border, most notably the Białowieża Forest, participate in systems of violence and expulsion as an active subject, and how it also simultaneously serves as a site of solidarity and resistance.

We continue to examine the role of the natural world as both witness to and participant in systems of violence and resistance in Ollie Köhn-Haskins's "Drowning Out and Breathing In: Water as a Vessel for Palestinian Memory and Resistance in Hala Alyan's 'Hamra' (2016) and Suheir Hammad's 'a prayer band' (2005)." In tracing the image of a sea swallowing houses on the occupied Palestinian coast (in "Hamra") and the connection of flooding in Palestine to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (in "a prayer band"), Köhn-Haskins argues for the remedial potential of water. Water emerges as a carrier of violence and displacement, but also as a means of communicating repressed histories of genocide and exile, enabling reflection on the impact of discriminatory systems and fostering transnational solidarity.

Taken together, the articles in this issue demonstrate how narrative operates as a crucial site for negotiating voice, power, and resistance. Whether through reclaiming silenced histories, challenging dominant frameworks of intelligibility, or imagining new forms of collective belonging, these contributions highlight the transformative potential of storytelling in confronting and reconfiguring the structures that shape our world. Literary studies—and the humanities more broadly—can serve as a tool to navigate the crisis of contested truths rife within this post-truth age. It is also important to acknowledge that the verified information gathered throughout scholarship of various fields of study is not always readily accessible to the public and there exists a gatekeeping of knowledge which subsequently heightens this crisis of truth.

That *Controlling the Narrative* should be *FRAME*'s first open access issue is, our Editorial Board feels, especially fitting. This shift marks a new chapter in the long history of the journal. In October of 2025 *FRAME* received an NWO Diamond Open Access Grant to flip the journal, allowing us to make literary research more accessible. This transition has granted us the possibility to open our archive and expand our digital reach, making our authors' research available to a wider, unrestricted audience; taking steps towards freeing the narrative. While *FRAME* still values the traditional format of print, and will continue to publish our issues on paper, moving to an open access model marks a step towards a more open and accessible future for the journal, its contributors, and readers.

This blurring of the boundary between truth and fiction, and the role literary works assume in probing this fine line, underpin the broader conversation to which this issue seeks to contribute. Through the articles collected in this issue, we hope to further the discussion of narrative as both a potential tool of domination and a means of resistance: as a way for literature to respond to master narratives that seek to solidify unequal structures, and as a site of reclamation for those unheard or whose voices are being actively silenced. With this issue, we offer a small but deliberate contribution to the conversation about fiction in our current time, assembling a corpus that demonstrates how literary works can contest, reframe, and reclaim control over the narrative.

Works Cited

- BBC.** “‘Post-Truth’ Declared Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries.” *BBC News*, 16 Nov. 2016, www.bbc.com/news/uk-37995600. Accessed 9 Apr. 2026.
- Byron, George Gordon.** *Don Juan. Cantos XII, XIII, and XIV*. John Hunt, 1823, p. 165.
- Huxley, Aldous.** *Brave New World*. 1932. Turtleback Books, 2012, p. 70.
- McIntyre, Lee.** *Post-Truth*. MIT Press, 2018.
- “Post-Truth, Adj.”** *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, July 2023, doi.org/10.1093/oed/3755961867.