

THE THICKNESS OF STORYTELLING ...making sense of Capitalocene from the Global South

**A ESPESSURA DA NARRAÇÃO
...dando sentido ao Capitaloceno a partir do Sul Global**

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Abstract

This article proposes storytelling as a critical method for perceiving, communicating, and understanding the Capitalocene in urban territories of the Global South. Drawing from a workshop held in Berlin with researchers from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the work brings together situated stories and visual provocations, weaving a collective understanding of how capitalist urban experiences are lived and narrated across different contexts. More than representing experience, narrative and montage operate here as methodological, political, and epistemic devices—modes of inquiry that reveal how ways of dwelling, remembering, and resisting are shaped by capitalist logics in contemporary cities. In the face of fragmentation, exclusion, and socio-ecological crisis, the article affirms storytelling as a situated technology of knowledge—a collective, political, and counter-hegemonic gesture of world-building in the Global South.

Keywords: storytelling/narrative; montage; Global South cities; Anthropocene and Capitalocene.

Resumo

Este artigo propõe a narrativa como um método crítico para perceber, comunicar e compreender o Capitaloceno nos territórios urbanos do Sul Global. A partir de uma oficina realizada em Berlim com pesquisadores da América Latina, África e Ásia, o trabalho reúne histórias situadas e provocações visuais, tecendo uma compreensão coletiva sobre como as experiências urbanas capitalistas são vividas e narradas em diferentes contextos. Mais do que representar a experiência, a narrativa e a montagem operam aqui como dispositivos metodológicos, políticos e epistêmicos — modos de investigação que revelam como as formas de habitar, lembrar e resistir são moldadas pelas lógicas capitalistas nas cidades contemporâneas. Diante da fragmentação, exclusão e crise socioecológica, o artigo afirma a narração de histórias como uma tecnologia situada de conhecimento — um gesto coletivo, político e contra-hegemônico de construção de mundos no Sul Global.

Palavras-chave: narrativa; montagem; cidades do Sul Global; Antropoceno; Capitaloceno.

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Introduction

Africa and Asia, South America and North America—this work emerges from the encounter of eighteen researchers from diverse territories of the Global South (Figure 1). The process described in this article stems from the *In-Visible Walls* Workshop, held on June 25, 2025. Proposed, organized, and mediated by the authors, the workshop formed part of the Doctoral Training Program of the Global Center of Spatial Methods for Urban Sustainability (GCSMUS). Gathered in Berlin, participants engaged in a collective exercise of provocation, production, discussion, and the rendering-visible of narratives.

The procedure of this article is to narrate how these stories were provoked, produced, communicated, and subsequently assembled. How they were discussed and what symptoms emerged. It seeks to understand, from this process, how multiple fragments of experience can be brought together to problematize what it means to inhabit the Capitalocene from the frayed edges of the Global South. The juxtaposition of these localized narratives seeks to bring forth new meanings, or ones previously rendered invisible—operating not as totalizing syntheses, but as a series of radical alternatives: ethical, political, and sensorial frameworks through which we might cross-examine our compromised urban realities and imagine more democratic, inclusive experiences.

The workshop is thus understood as a narrative practice of montage—simultaneously an investigative posture and a device for generating knowledge through friction (Warburg, 2012; Jacques, 2015). What follows is not a passive archive or mere documentation of a past event, but an active proposition: that storytelling is a gesture of assembling differences, confronting institutionalized invisibilities, and constructing shared meaning amidst ongoing planetary crises.

Figure 1 - Diagram indicating the location of the storytellers. Source: the authors, 2025.

Let us assume narrative here, following the work of Walter Benjamin (1987; 2015) and Paul Ricoeur (1994; 2002), as the cultural transmission of lived, earthly experience—a practice that both expresses and produces the intricate entanglements between the human, the non-human, and the world itself through the discursive making of the world. In a non-representational manner, storytelling as the act of narration both makes sense of experience and (de)naturalizes modes of being in the world. Bringing in an understanding on the role of subjectivities and processes of subjectivation (Guattari; Rolnik, 2010) as techno-cultural products, we argue that storytelling in fact operates as a device for configuring meanings, opinions, images, and the cultural imaginary on a collective scale. Moreover, amidst hegemonic authorization regimes, in which the places of those who can and cannot participate are established by enunciations of power (Guattari; Rolnik, 2010), storytelling becomes a pivotal instrument for disputing dominant worldviews amidst massive processes of subjectivation, in which indifference to each other and to nature is systematically and hegemonically produced.

In this regard, Walter Benjamin's Berlin Chronicle (2015 [1932]) inspires this work both formally and conceptually. Composed by the assembly of multiple narrative fragments, it stands as an unfinished work in which a non-linear, incomplete, and heterogeneous text comes together as a means of making sense of the city and the world. Incompleteness as a narrative praxis denotes a radical openness: it yields a text that actively claims to be rearranged, reworked, and resignified by its interlocutors. The strength of Benjamin's chronicle lies in this incompleteness, offering an invitation to dig deeper into the urban soil rather than presenting tidy conclusions.

Our approach adapts this formal experiment to our globalized, interconnected era by ensuring there is not a single city, not a single author, and not a single chronicle under review. While Berlin functions here as our physical meeting point—one in which the role of the wall crosses over multiple semiotic layers—, this article navigates a multitude of cities, told by a multiplicity of voices. These narratives do not merge into a homogeneous, reassuring chorus; instead, they coexist, intersect, and occasionally collide. Each story remains fiercely situated, anchored in a specific territory, yet resonant far beyond its own borders. Together, they form a mobile archive, a shifting and remarkably incomplete constellation of terrestrial experience in the Global South. From this stubborn defense of multiplicity and difference emerges what is here understood as the *thickness of storytelling*: a layering of meanings whose careful excavation, we argue, may illuminate alternative ways of building and inhabiting a world deeply occupied with its own ruin.

The thickness of storytelling

To narrate is, as Paul Ricoeur (1994; 2002) suggests, to produce meaning from the dimension of worldly experience. This experience must be understood not in the manner of detached scientific experimentation, but as that which rawly and affectively happens to us in the world (Larrosa, 2017). Narrative, hence, acts as a vital mediator between life and knowledge, bridging human existence and the symbolic forms through which we signify and communicate. Crucially, once configured through storytelling, experience does not enclose meaning; it opens a threshold for the reading and understandings of others. The open dimension of storytelling, in which the reader can potentially take up an active role in the invention of meaning, derives from the openness of experience itself and the many modes in which the world can be experimented, perceived, signified and communicated.

Over the second half of the twentieth century, narrative extrapolated the field of Linguistics, expanding into the social sciences. From an object of study to a distinct perspective for investigating reality from the collective, dissensual, and therefore

political dimension of human existence (Arfuch, 2018), it has been gaining ground in the urban studies, where disputes for the meanings of landscape reveal multiplicities of versions of reality that materialize in contemporary settlements.

However, a crucial distinction must be made between narrative as a perspective, and storytelling as a live, embodied practice. While narrative offers the structural and epistemological framework for configuring and investigating reality, it is through the active, communal practice of storytelling—in the deeply relational, artisanal sense articulated by Benjamin (1987 [1936])—that these accounts find collective resonance. Storytelling is more than the passive transmission of information; it is an active composition of meaning and of modes of being together on Earth. Through technical devices of enunciation, these storytelling practices express the intricate entanglements between the human, the non-human, and nature.

If the act of telling stories participates in the production of collective subjectivities, it does so by shaping opinions, making images, and weaving imaginaries. By opening up alternative channels of expression, it actively challenges the systemic silencing of marginalized voices and offers a critical ground for disputing worldviews that treat the environment and vulnerable human lives with engineered detachment.

It is precisely within this landscape—where the possibilities of coexistence amid global crises emerge as our central theme—that storytelling emerges as a triadic tool:

- *Methodologically*, storytelling is not treated as a passive object or a mere practice under examination; rather, it is investigated through narrative—a perspective for accessing and assessing the raw multiplicity of lived experiences on Earth.
- *Politically*, storytelling invokes difference as a core political principle. It generates a space where diverse modes of life are juxtaposed, where they collide and actively dispute the meanings and power dynamics that produce urban landscape itself.
- *Epistemologically*, storytelling dismantles the myth of the detached observer. It opens up a mode of investigating the social world in which the researcher is never neutral, but rather deeply and affectively implicated in the very phenomena they are invested in.

Through this perspective, participants—both narrators and interlocutors, including the researcher—are invited to situate themselves, to remember, to understand, and ultimately, to form alliances amid the ecological and existential challenges of contemporaneity. In this regard, while concepts like the *Anthropocene* and the *Capitalocene* originated within the natural sciences, they have become vital coordinates for the Humanities because they illuminate ecological, social, and political crises that are deeply entangled. We mobilize the term 'Capitalocene' here following Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2014): not merely as a cold geological marker, but as a violent symptom of the capitalist, Western, and colonial predominance over both human and non-human modes of existence. This regime of authorization, in which some modes of being are naturalized to the detriment and erasure of others, does not simply exploit resources; it actively shapes practices of life, colonizes the imagination, and enforces a homogenization of possible futures. This perspective intensifies the disconnection between the Earth and its inhabitants, unraveling shared rhythms, ecosystems, and ancestral modes of dwelling.

In a Foucauldian sense, and drawing especially on the theory of subjectivation developed by Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik (2010 [1986]), the Capitalocene operates through the systemic capture of world-making—dictating our perceptions, affects, meanings, and the profoundly unequal forms of inhabiting a fractured planet. It yields a severe thinning of human experience and a ruthless capture of collective attention. For the Humanities, this crisis demands an active investigation into how these systemic ruptures are intimately lived, perceived, and resisted.

If the Capitalocene enforces an anesthetized indifference and hollows out our sensibility, then the active reclamation of storytelling becomes a counter-hegemonic gesture. Stories potentially reinscribe presence and attention back into world-making, acting as localized zones of resistance where body, memory, and territory co-constitute one another through relational entanglements.

To confront this captured reality without falling into the trap of producing a singular, authoritative counter-narrative, this work deploys montage as an aesthetic-political practice (Jacques, 2015) of work with narrative. In urban studies, a narrative perspective allows us to treat the city as a palimpsest—a multi-layered surface where hidden stories wait to be excavated, but where we also inevitably collide with dominant discursive regimes. Drawing on a historical constellation that spans from the interwar avant-gardes to contemporary counter-narratives (Benjamin, 1987; Warburg, 2000; Didi-Huberman, 2007), montage functions here as a tool to bring distinct narratives together, offering a complex, kaleidoscopic way of apprehending contemporary landscape production (Jacques, 2015).

Ultimately, montage serves as our core operational procedure for working with storytelling. By bringing fragmented, highly localized narratives into close proximity, we allow different points of view to confront one another. This composition does not seek a harmonious synthesis; rather, it forces the unfinished, the plural, and the contradictory to coexist within the same space, allowing their irreducible differences to remain visible. It is precisely in the intervals, fissures, and interstices of these combined stories that new meanings become possible, offering us a methodological tool to crack open consolidated urban hegemonies and unfasten the meanings of 21st-century terrestrial experience. It is this exact commitment to friction and the subversion of automatic perception that structured our empirical experiment: a collaborative narrative workshop carried out in Berlin.

Part 1: Refining the gaze

The workshop began with a direct provocation, inviting participants to reflect through image and word:

With Berlin as the meeting ground of multiple cultures—and with the Berlin Wall as a symbol of historical, political, and imaginative relevance—what walls, concrete or symbolic, do you cross in your cities and in your everyday lives? What separates you from others? Where are the fissures—and how might we break through these walls?

Each participant selected a single visual image, drawn from their own lived or observed experiences. While some chose to contribute personal photographs they had taken themselves, others sourced images from the internet that directly spoke to the questions posed by the invitation. Regardless of their origin, these visuals served as the anchor for a brief narrative responding to a shared matrix: *What is the context of this image? In what ways does it express the proposed theme? How does it relate to your community and your culture?*



What is the context? The image relates to public demonstrations against finance bill in 2024 by the youth. The demonstrations took place in the capital city which forced the Government to drop the bill all together. How does it express the proposed theme? The image expresses the invisible wall that the stakeholders within the urban space often ignore. The thin line between creating a socially and economically vibrant metropolis and social and economic equality and justice. This demonstration and any other demonstrations completely disrupted city life together with its social and economic enterprises. It seemed that the only way that the citizen could get attention to air their frustration against years of economic oppression. How does it relate to you, your community and/or your culture? It is up to the stakeholders to re-imagine the city and break the invisible wall, by not only creating a socially and economically vibrant metropolis but also ensuring equitable access to social and economic opportunities.

Robert Koech, Nairobi

The eighteen contributions, collected prior to the workshop, were edited by the facilitators onto individual A4 sheets, with the image on one side and the text on the other. The intent was to allow word and image to exert tension upon one another, producing layers of meaning and opening interpretive possibilities even before the collective montage exercise began.

This initial phase thus constitutes the inaugural gesture of narrative montage: refining the gaze so that difference—between images, voices, stories, and territories—can be perceived in its full density, even before being assembled.

To break perceptual habits and create space for estrangement, the workshop shifted toward a physical, collective methodology designed to challenge how we interpret images beyond the obvious. Following Didi-Huberman (2015), this approach treats the image not as a closed, passive reflection of reality, but as something that must be actively opened up—exposed to an analysis that uncovers its latent conflicts. Understood this way, the image operates as a vital device: it does not merely express pre-existing positions, but actively produces collective subjectivities and newly configured modes of perception. Seated in a circle, each participant held their sheet with the image facing outward, so that only the rest of the group could see it. The images then began to circulate through the room, passed from hand to hand to the rhythm of instrumental music. This silent movement was accompanied by a spoken sequence of rhetorical questions, designed not to clarify or decode, but to suspend habitual seeing and deliberately provoke doubt:

What does this image show?
Who appears in it?
Is it possible to tell where it was produced?
Is there a distinction between foreground and background?
Which colors dominate?
What do you imagine exists outside the frame?
Does something seem to be missing?
Would the image make sense upside down?
What changes when you bring your face close to the paper?
Does the image evoke any sound?
How do you feel when observing it?
And how would you feel if you were in this place—is it warm or cold? Welcoming or hostile?
What stands out?
What blends into the environment?
What could be there?
What would completely change the meaning of the image?

This moment of silent contemplation did not aim to fix meaning, but to open it. The methodological intention was clear: to install doubt, destabilize immediate readings,

Figure 2 - A narrative from Nairobi. Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/newsfeed/2024/6/25/protesters-storm-parliament-building-in-nairobi>, accessed 09.10.2025.



On the 25th of September 2021, feminist collectives in Mexico City, intervened Christopher Columbus monument and renamed its roundabout known as the “Anti-monument of the women who fight”. Today, a metal silhouette of a girl with her fist up is surrounded with an installation with protests and it is a landmark at Reforma Avenue, an emblematic place in Mexico City. Authorities have placed metal walls to protect the stone basement of the original sculpture designed and fabricated in France during the XX century. These metal barriers appear to be protecting heritage, but it could also be capturing two sides of a new order of urban decolonized heritage. How can ecological, indigenous and vulnerable feminist narratives can re-write notion of: What gets preserved in a city?

Joana Moreno Rivera, Mexico City

cultivate ambiguity, and allow uncertainty to take space. By shifting the gaze from automatic recognition to sensitive investigation, the exercise prepared the ground so that, when the narratives were later read and shared, they would be received not as explanations but as propositions—interpretive gestures, triggers for possible worlds.

Methodologically, these visual materials do not function as objective data or detached representations of territory. Sourced diversely—from personal photographs to journalism and social media—the internet and personal archives are treated here as a circulating repository of media fragments. Within the workshop, these images were deliberately removed from their original digital flows and isolated on physical sheets, transforming them into affective, unstable visual devices. Rather than serving as passive documents to be decoded or verified for historical accuracy, they were operationalized to trigger memory, spark collective friction, and generate new subjectivities through open-ended group interpretation.

This initial stage thus constitutes the inaugural gesture of narrative montage: refining the gaze so that difference—between images, voices, stories, and territories—can be perceived in its full density even before it is formally assembled.

Part 2: Narratives from the Global South

From this visual choreography, the stories emerged—each carrying the weight of lived experience while also offering an opening gesture toward the perspectives of others. Listening unfolded organically: there was no predetermined order. Speech arose through resonance with the previous narrative or by another participant’s invitation. Below, we present a few of the narratives produced and discussed. For each of them, we present the main arguments pointed out by each narrator, as well as some themes that emerged from the discussion.

The first account (Figure 2) erupted as a shock, bringing forth the social and political climate of Nairobi, Kenya.

In the image, the rigid geometry of concrete pavement dominates the foreground, while in the background, a dense mass of bodies dissolves into tear gas, waving flags, and collective motion. Mundane urban order—materialized by standard traffic signs—clashes with the raw, disruptive force of the mobilizing crowd.

This narrative documents the 2024 protests against the Finance Bill, led primarily by youth in the Kenyan capital. Their mobilization ultimately forced the government to withdraw the proposal. The narrator framed this scene as the materialization of a structural wall routinely ignored by planners: the violent boundary separating aggressive metropolitan development from fundamental social and economic survival. The group’s debate emphasized how protests interrupt daily urban life and, although



On the right-hand side of the image is Imizamo Yethu informal settlement, meaning “our efforts”. A name that carries both pride and struggle. On the other side of the forested divide lies Hout Bay’s (Cape Town) suburbia suggesting: abundance, vitality and security. The dense tapestry of informal homes tells a different story—one of survival and the daily labour of the excluded. The forest acts as both barrier and metaphor: not quite a wall, but a space that absorbs and obscures the tensions between two unequal worlds. Inequality builds walls without bricks: in access, opportunity, and dignity. The small trickles of greenery in Imizamo Yethu signifies the abstract efforts pushing against boundaries—there is hope! This is not just a map of division, but of determination. It necessitates seeing hope where there seems to be none and consciously seeking to dismantle not only the physical separations but the mental and systemic ones that sustain them.

Thuli Ndlovu, Johannesburg, South Africa

they may create discomfort, are vital in expressing frustrations built up after years of systemic oppression. The narrator argued that urban managers must reimagine the city, dismantling this invisible wall by promoting not only economic vitality but also equitable access to opportunity. Participants added that populations also exercise inventive forms of agency, even at the scale of everyday practice.

This gesture of public claim-making opened up a conversation about what it means to demand visibility and justice in spaces where policy often constructs walls against the very people it seeks to govern. The symbolism of the green branches—signs of peaceful resistance—echoed across the group. From this resonance, the next account emerged from Mexico City (Figure 3).

On 25 September 2021, feminist collectives intervened in the monument to Christopher Columbus, renaming its roundabout the ‘Anti-Monument of Women Who Fight’. A silhouette of a young girl with a raised fist—surrounded by protest installations—now stands as a landmark along *Avenida Reforma*, one of the most emblematic axes of Mexico City.

Authorities have placed metal walls to supposedly protect the sculpture’s base—designed and fabricated in France during the twentieth century—from being vandalized. However, the collective subverted these barriers, turning them into a raw canvas for political graffiti. The narrator analyzed how ecofeminist and Indigenous narratives have the potential to break through official heritage constraints, transforming the preservation site into a decolonial urban shout. During the workshop, this prompted an intense critique of the politics of memory: how institutions selectively freeze certain colonial legacies while actively suppressing living struggles. The group focused on how grass-roots communities formalize counter-narratives within contested urban spaces, highlighting the permanent state of irresolution that defines the contemporary public sphere.

The discussion then pivoted from the symbolic reclamation of monuments to the structural imposition of macro-scale segregation, turning to the aerial analysis of Cape Town (Figure 4).

The theme of difference and urban autonomy also appears in this narrative, in which an image widely circulated online as a symbol of spatial inequality is interrogated. To the right, the narrator explains, lies Imizamo Yethu, an informal settlement whose name means ‘our efforts’. An ambiguity between pride and struggle seems to coexist. To the left, enveloped by greenery and low-density luxury housing, are the suburban neighborhoods of Hout Bay, commonly associated with abundance and security by its inhabitants.



My home city, Semarang, is a coastal city facing continuous challenges of tidal flood. The picture (credit: Kota Kita Foundation) shows remnants of sinking and destroyed houses because of tidal flooding over years. As much as water is important part in people's life, it could become a barrier that slowly but surely uproot people from their possession, livelihood, community, and significant part of their identity. This kind of barrier, sometimes that comes from the very elements that are supposed to be supporting us, also present in my journey in academia. Government, instead of ensuring knowledge and science thrive, moves towards commercialization of higher education. It is manifested in age limit for prospective lecturers/researchers, non-merit based qualifications, and inclination of anti-science approach in policy decision.

Tia Insani, Semarang, Indonesia

The narrator warns that the forest acts as both barrier and metaphor—not quite a wall, but a filter that absorbs and obscures tensions between unequal worlds. Inequality erects walls without bricks—in access, opportunity, or dignity. Yet the small patches of green within Imizamo Yethu evoke persistence. Hope remains, participants suggested. This is not solely an image of division, but of determination: it demands that one perceive hope even where everything appears engulfed, and calls for the deliberate dismantling of physical, mental, and systemic barriers that sustain inequality. The contrast between one side and the other expresses spatially how social regimes are configured and maintained.

The narrative in Figure 5 emerged in a discussion on the material dimension of inequality. The coastal city of Semarang has long faced rising tides and recurrent flooding. The image shows remnants of a home submerged and destroyed by the slow, relentless advance of the water.

Participants discussed how water shapes people's lives, yet can also become a barrier that displaces, impoverishes, and de-identifies entire communities. In the narrator's account, this environmental process echoes her own academic journey: rather than fostering knowledge, the government has increasingly commodified higher education—imposing age limits, dubious criteria, and anti-scientific policy decisions. Barriers, then, appear not only in territorial form but as expressions of power over the social locations of individuals and groups.

The workshop conversations stressed how many of the barriers shaping our experiences arise precisely from elements that should sustain and connect us. Participants highlighted that this uneven topology of power produces continuous tension between proximity and distance. To give form to this ambiguity—between structuring inequality and narratives of resilience that attempt to emerge through it—participants turned to the figures of paths and borders, such as coastal geographies, institutions, and literal pathways and walls, expressing both limits and possibilities present in the stories. The production of images as a weaving of space, time, and subjectivity was understood by the group as a device for perceiving over-arching themes and delineating broader urban phenomena.

Continuing an inward exploration of the wall, the narrative in figure 6 depicts the bedroom of two siblings who, with their mother, have lived since birth in a 24 m² space. Because the property belongs to the Crown Property Bureau, any structural or permanent modification to the architecture is strictly prohibited, forcing the inhabitants to negotiate their lives within fixed spatial constraints.

The narrator detailed the rigorous, non-verbal micro-negotiations required for the two inhabitants to perform daily chores and maintain privacy without encroaching on one another. "Everyone has their invisible walls. We do not invade each other's space", the account by one of them informs. This delicate, everyday negotiation inspired reflections



This photo captures a scene from my thesis informant's room. Here, two study desks define the shared space of a brother and sister who, along with their mother, have occupied this 24 sq. meters room since birth. As the shophouse is owned by the Royal Family, interior modifications are impossible; residents must arrange their lives within these limitations. I often wondered how they navigated daily routines—sleeping, studying, resting, or making calls—without disturbance. One sibling shared, "Everybody has their own invisible walls. We don't invade others' space" For me, this was difficult to imagine how someone could manage such a situation. This case inspires my thinking on the affective relation of space and the sensitivity of home dwellers, also highlighting how the concept of public housing requires further research concerning state-owned property.

Piyathap Tanmahasmut, Bangkok, Thailand

on spatial sensitivity, affective relations in cohabitation, and the intersection among hyper-density, dignified shelter, and private property. A similar erosion of domestic autonomy under the pressure of real estate capital emerged in the account of Kolkata (Figure 7).

The photograph, taken by the narrator herself, captures two similar cats lying across from one another directly atop a wall separating two properties. Locked in a state of near-perfect mirroring, their bodies draw attention to the boundary line itself. Through this symmetry, the house in the background ceases to be a simple backdrop; it emerges as a structural double of the home next to which the photographer stands. This visual echo immediately destabilizes the wall, turning a mundane partition into a critical question about the unseen spaces behind it: do these domestic environments mirror each other in size, color, and geometry? Do they reproduce the exact same conditions of occupancy, privacy, and socio-spatial containment? What are such walls separating?

In 2021, under pandemic restrictions, Birati—a rapidly expanding district north of Kolkata—was caught between past and future. Built by refugees from former East Pakistan, its single- and two-story homes with small courtyards once formed a permeable community fabric.

But real-estate pressure intensified: many of these homes were sold to developers and replaced with three- or four-story buildings. The "walls" that emerged were not only concrete ones but shifts in habits: where neighbors once circulated freely, privacy now dominates. Only stray cats, the narrator notes, continue their routes unchanged.

Participants reflected on walls as metaphors for territorial dynamics and temporal transformation—becoming thicker as communal ways of living recede under the pressure of urban capital. This opened space to address another historical layer: colonial segregation.

Figure 8, taken by the narrator from the internet, frames the monumental entrance gate to Semarang's Chinatown (Pecinan Semarang), an architectural threshold hanging over a busy street. A string of red lanterns and traditional Chinese roof contours are imposed onto an everyday urban scene filled with motorbikes, commercial signs, and overhead wires. By capturing this historic monument amidst modern traffic, the image brings forward a deep temporal friction: the gate ceases to be a mere decorative or tourist landmark and reveals itself as a historical boundary device. This visual layering invites an interrogation into the invisible divisions hardcoded into the city's fabric. It forces us to look past the vibrant street life to see how an architectural artifact, originally built to contain and separate a population group, continues to dictate the threshold between different urban worlds.



In 2021, COVID-19 restrictions were still in place but the lockdown restrictions were eased a bit in West Bengal. Birati is a fast-growing locality that falls in the North 24 Parganas but is part of greater Kolkata, more so now due to its proximity to the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport and the upcoming East-West Metro. Most of the older residences in Birati are modest one or two-storey houses with small yards built over the years by enterprising refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The walls around these houses are symbolic, growing more formidable as the pressures of modern life endanger the old community way of life. A lot of these houses are being sold off to real estate “promoters” to make way for more profitable three-four storey flats. Earlier neighbours could freely move in and out of houses but families live more privately now. Only the way of the ubiquitous stray cats remains fairly unchanged...

Pratyasha Nath, Kolkata, India

Semarang’s Chinatown has existed since the colonial period and remains a symbol of the ethnic segregation that shaped the city. Dutch administrators divided the territory by population groups such as Europeans, Chinese, Arabs, and pribumi (Indigenous people), imposing gates and walls that structured physical and social boundaries. Today’s landscape still bears these traces, reminding us how racial classifications and spatial devices once structured (and still reverberate through) modes of life, trajectories, and senses of belonging.

From this narrative, discussions turned to the persistence of such boundaries in contemporary cities: how material and symbolic walls continue to produce inequality, how historic hierarchies reappear in new forms of segregation, and how each participant recognizes, in their own context, the barriers shaping their everyday lives and the strategies—individual or collective—for resisting and transforming them.

Figure 9 became well known online, being chosen by this story’s narrator for establishing a lethal juxtaposition between a soldier in full camouflage kneeling with a rifle, and a young man lying defenseless on his back with a face mask pulled down around his chin. By framing this heavily armed institutional force directly over an exposed body, the image forces a raw confrontation with state violence.

On 17 June 2025, during protests against police brutality, a street vendor was killed by a bullet fired by the police—a tragic irony: he left home to sell face masks and returned as a statistic, shot in the head. The scene laid bare a parallel city in which informal workers survive in constant tension with authorities. Amid tear gas and daily demonstrations, the fissures of a system that protects some while crushing others become visible.

What separates these lives is not only income or power, but the normalization of violence against the most vulnerable. Yet the narrative ends where denunciation meets hope: the desire for these walls to fall—not through abstract reforms, but through mourning, indignation, and the collective refusal to accept that some lives remain treated as expendable.

This political demand to dismantle the structures that crush vulnerable populations brought the workshop’s focus to a story from Porto Alegre (Figure 10), where a very different kind of wall exposed the fatal frailty of trying to segregate a city from its territory.

The frame splits into clear layers: a dry avenue at the bottom is separated by a thin barrier from historic port warehouses trapped in brown floodwater. By showing this tense coexistence of routine infrastructure and severe flooding, the photograph exposes a profound metabolic fracture, turning a physical barrier into a symptom of an urban landscape built on the vulnerable illusion of walling out nature.

The author’s narrative reconstructs the trajectory of Porto Alegre’s Mauá Wall, from its origins after the 1941 flood to its collapse during the storms and flood of 2024.



The Chinatown area of Semarang has existed since the colonial era and stands as a symbol of ethnic segregation in Semarang. During that time, the Dutch segregated residential areas based on ethnic groups, with each area separated by walls or gates. The population was demographically divided into three classes: Europeans (first class), Chinese and Arab communities (second class), and the indigenous population (third class). The presence of gates reinforced both residential and cultural segregation. It clearly shows that how physical barriers—like gates—and social classifications were used to divide people based on ethnicity and perceived privilege. The gates, however, reflect how Semarang’s urban landscape was shaped by colonial planning and cultural boundaries.

Jurike Winarendri, Semarang, Indonesia

Navigating between memory and forgetting, the account shows how a structure conceived to protect the city became a symbol of vulnerability, revealing the effects of political negligence, the erosion of technical expertise, and urbanistic illusions that sought to replace infrastructure with aesthetics.

Among participants, the narrative opened fertile ground for reflecting on how disasters are socially produced. Parallels emerged with other cities where critical infrastructures have been abandoned, where institutional memory deteriorates, and where the most vulnerable bear the cost of accumulated omissions. The discussion also addressed the ambivalent role of walls and urban barriers—sometimes protective, sometimes exclusionary—and how these structures shape relations of power, belonging, and security. Rather than closing a story, the narrative reopened questions about collective responsibility, care for territory, and the need to re-encounter water as a constitutive element of urban life, not an enemy to be forgotten.

Part 3: Leaving Traces of Existence

Once the narrative circle came to an end, the work of storytelling did not conclude, it merely changed form. What had been spoken in shared presence became an exhibition: a material constellation of memories, images, and ideas installed in the Faculty of Architecture at the Technische Universität Berlin. In an open and accessible circulation space, each contribution was printed and displayed alongside a presentation poster and the flag of each participant’s country of origin—signaling the plurality of worlds gathered there in a cartography of experiences that was at once shared and divergent.

The narratives, now visible to the broader academic community, remained as traces of something simultaneously intimate and profoundly political. They offered no conclusions but rather clues—fragments of lives shaped by contested landscapes, pieces of earthly existence made communicable through the encounter between image and word.

By occupying a public space within the university, the exhibition brought the Global South into the everyday rhythms of a Northern institution. It interrupted the abstraction of urban theory with the intimacy of lived experience. It invited passersby to pause, read, feel, and perhaps remember. It expanded the workshop’s circle to include others—not as mere spectators but as potential interlocutors in an ongoing conversation about inequality, belonging, resistance, and hope.

Its very format—the visual and the narrative in dialogue, side by side—echoed the structure of the workshop. Just as the circle had set images in motion and opened questions, the exhibition resisted linearities and hierarchies. There was no starting point or destination. Viewers could approach from any angle, remain as long as they wished, and carry with them whatever stayed. In this openness resided the strength of the assembly: an invitation to relationship, to response, to continuity.



On June 17, 2025, in Nairobi, a hawker was shot by police during protests against police brutality, a tragic irony. As one newspaper reported, 'He came to sell masks but left with a bullet through his head.' In Nairobi, informal workers (hawkers and street vendors) live in a parallel city, where they are constantly at odds with authority. Tear gas clouds and daily protests expose the cracks in a system that protects some and crushes others. What separates us isn't just wealth or power, but a deep-rooted normalization of violence against the vulnerable. As far as I am currently, it is my hope that these walls fall through our collective grief, anger, and refusal to accept that some lives matter less.

Dorine Odhiambo, Nairobi, Kenya

Clues, by nature, do not solve a mystery—they deepen it. They call us to follow, interpret, speculate. By leaving these traces of existence, participants affirmed that their stories are not sealed artifacts but active forces. Each narrative remained incomplete, open to new readings, to other stories, to different montages. In this sense, the exhibition was not a final act of communication but a practice of hospitality—welcoming difference, creating space, offering testimony as a form of presence. These were not universal stories but situated ones; they did not generalize—they particularized. And it is precisely through this specificity that they resonated far beyond themselves.

That which emerges

Reading these narratives not as isolated testimonies but as fragments of a shared montage calls for another mode of interpretation—one that does not seek a unifying thread but is instead guided by the resonances, dissonances, and recurrences that surface when stories encounter one another. Through the gesture of montage, something distinct is produced: a mobile constellation of critical coordinates that reveals how the Capitalocene, rather than an abstract global epoch, operates through highly localized, violent spatial design. The juxtaposition of these narratives cracks open the consolidated urban hegemonies of the Global South, revealing that the micro-territories of everyday life are active battlegrounds of memory, containment, and structural resistance.

A transversal thread produced by this montage is the operational continuity between historical and contemporary mechanisms of socio-spatial containment. When the colonial gates of Semarang are placed in direct friction with the modern, real estate-driven privatization of Kolkata's Birati district, the wall reveals itself not as a static architectural artifact, but as an evolving technology of social ordering. The explicit ethnic segregation engineered by Dutch colonial administrators in Indonesia does not disappear in the 21st century; instead, it is re-coded through the aggressive financialization of housing in India. In both cases, the materialization of the wall—whether a monumental stone archway or a private concrete element—regulates the visibility and circulation of those who may or may not enter a space. The wall is therefore an expression of regimes of authorization. By reading such images together, it ceases to be a neutral urban partition and emerges as a symptom of unequal control logics that dictates who belongs and who is cast out.

This systemic capture of world-making operates simultaneously across the macro-scale of environmental segregation and the micro-scale of domestic subjectivity. The stark, aerial metabolic fracture of Cape Town (Figure 4)—where a lush forest filter actively obscures the violent proximity between low-density luxury and the packed tin roofs of Imizamo Yethu—finds a profound, interior echo in the 24-square-meter shophouse room in Bangkok (Figure 6). In both contexts, the inhabitants are forced to negotiate their existence against rigid, pre-constructed boundaries designed by sovereign or



Porto Alegre, 1941: a deluge submerged the city, not only drowning its streets and buildings, but also unsettling the collective imagination. In response to the waters' unrelenting force, the Mauá Wall was then devised and built – alongside dikes and pumps – as a concrete promise of protection. By the turn of the 21st century, calls to bring down the wall began to resurface. Visions of a reconnected waterfront, of a city once again touching the Guaíba Lake, gained traction. Experts agreed. The market applauded. The wall, they said, stood in the way of progress. Then came the rains of April, May and June of 2024 – rains that did not stop. Floodwaters surged once more across the whole state. Porto Alegre, along with over 430 other cities, was overtaken. More than half a million people were forced from their homes. Decades of disinvestment had eroded the public infrastructure and the memory needed to operate the city's floodgates. Despite countless acts of solidarity, mobilization and aid, local government response was absent. No meaningful measures were taken to mitigate the disaster, nor to prepare for those yet to come in this new era of climate emergency. A year later, the waters are rising again as these words are being written.

Gianluca Perseu, Porto Alegre, Brazil

corporate power—be it the wealthy suburban landscape or the prohibitive regulations of the Crown Property Bureau. Yet, by forcing these scales into a single interpretive frame, we perceive the micropolitical resistance that survives within subaltern spaces. The small patches of green defiantly sprouting inside Imizamo Yethu and the non-verbal, intimate micro-negotiations of daily routines between the siblings in Bangkok are not merely survival strategies; they are localized acts of world-building. They represent a stubborn refusal to allow human and non-human entanglements to be entirely hollowed out by the predatory logics of urban capital.

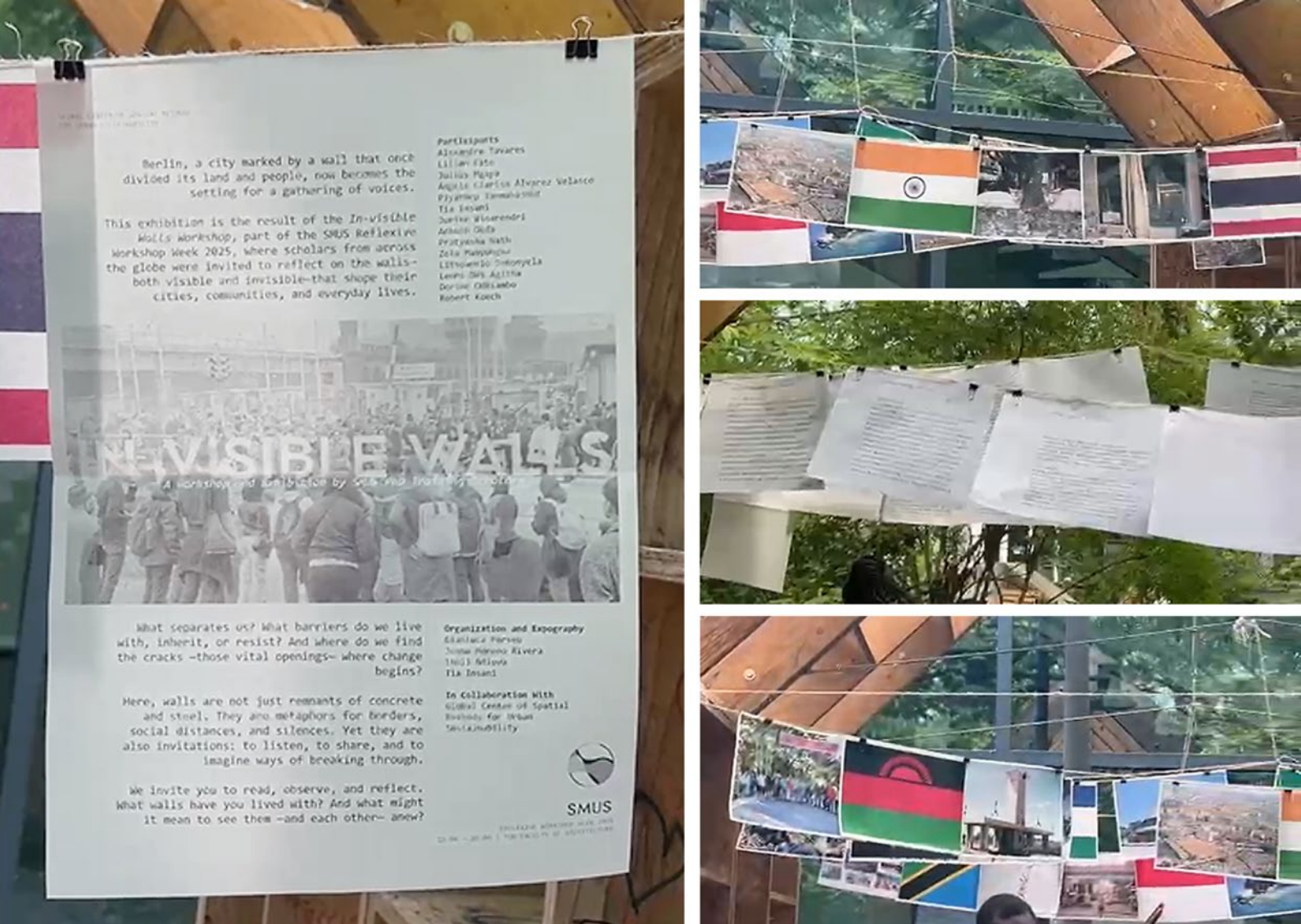
Ultimately, this montage reveals that the contemporary city of the Global South is a deeply unstable palimpsest, perpetually caught between institutionalized omission and embodied refusal. When we juxtapose the state-sanctioned violence on the streets of Nairobi (Figure 2, Figure 9) and the ecofeminist subversion of colonial monuments in Mexico City (Figure 3) with the catastrophic collapse of infrastructure along Porto Alegre's Mauá Wall (Figure 10), the illusion of the modern, controlled city completely unravels. The street vendor shot for selling face masks and the historic port warehouses marooned in brown floodwater are twin expressions of the same structural trauma: a system that treats both marginalized lives and natural ecosystems as disposable resources. Porto Alegre's failed wall, built on the urbanistic illusion of completely severing the city from its river, directly mirrors the militarized barriers designed to insulate power from public indignation.

The cross-reading of these fragments demonstrates that disasters—whether ecological, economic, or militarized—are socially and politically produced. Rather than offering a reassuring counter-narrative, this visual assembly forces the incomplete, the plural, and the deeply contradictory to breathe side by side, providing a relational method to navigate our compromised planetary reality without yearning for administrative closure.

Some considerations

This collective experiment in narrative montage was not designed to produce answers, solutions, operational solutions, or definitive spatial models. Its purpose was to operationalize another way of knowing—one that emerges from localized encounters, conceptual resonance, and the slow, relational labor of sharing and listening. At a time when knowledge production is increasingly subordinated to metrics, acceleration, and instrumentalization, this work reaffirms storytelling as a slow, situated, and relational practice capable of restoring critical attention and sensitive inquiry to an age of engineered indifference.

As an epistemological gesture, narrative montage challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries and the hierarchies that sustain them. It calls forth the co-presence of affect and analysis, personal memory and political critique, situated perspective



and collective inquiry. It does not aim to resolve contradictions, but to inhabit them. It does not universalize, but insists on the singular and the partial as conditions for producing knowledge. In this sense, it resonates with critiques of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, which highlight the limits of totalizing visions and call for multiple perspectives, both human and nonhuman, through which the world may be apprehended.

Methodologically, this approach positions storytelling, not as mere data, but as the perspective through which we work with data. The situated stories assembled here are constitutive of territory; they carry memory, trauma, and spatial possibility. They map what metrics and abstract masterplans systematically obscure: the uneven textures of everyday life, localized structures of feeling, slow infrastructural violence, and the micro-politics tactics spatial resistance. Working with this sensitive material requires care. It demands a non-extractive, dialogical, interpretive practice that treats knowledge as an unstable property co-produced in relation, rather than an objective commodity to be harvested from afar.

Politically, this collaborative assembly demonstrates that alternative modes of dwelling are already being lived, narrated, and constructed at the margins of formal governance, entirely outside dominant regimes of authorization. The stories gathered here render visible not only the material walls that divide but also the micropolitical gestures—crossing, naming, and reclaiming—that fracture institutional authority. Rather than romanticizing urban precarity or marginalization, the project maps the complexity of survival and creativity in contexts of historical abandonment, state repression, and historical neglect. It shifts the focus of urban studies from detached abstraction to an intense proximity with specific people, places, gestures, and relations, marking the exact threshold where politics meets radical intimacy, and where knowledge emerges from proximity, not distance.

Epistemologically, storytelling forces a critical reconsideration of authorship, voice, and representation. It destabilizes the figure of the detached urban expert and clears space for a polyphonic, collective production of meaning. This text, like the workshop from which it emerged, is structurally open-ended, comprising fragments, clues, and traces meant to invite further rearrangements, interventions, and political alignments. In a landscape defined by socio-ecological exhaustion and violent division, the act of assembling fragmented stories ceases to be a mere academic exercise and reveals itself as an urgent ethical and political commitment to inhabiting a compromised world together.

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