

1. Introduction

On June 26th, 2025, the *Invisible Walls Workshop* was organized as part of the GCSMUS PhD Training Program Reflexive Week. This account reconstructs the event and reflects on the narratives produced by eighteen participants from nine countries, brought together to **share and confront lived experiences of inequality, division, and resilience in the Global South**.

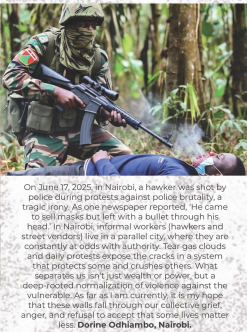
The workshop explored the method of **narrative montage**, understood not simply as a technique for collecting testimonies but as a way of weaving fragments into a field of meaning that is collective, open-ended, and political. Through montage, individual stories resonate with one another, creating juxtapositions that surface tensions and solidarities otherwise obscured. The workshop was structured in three interconnected moments: (1) provoking participants to produce narratives on what it means to inhabit the Global South; (2) enabling the sharing and discussion of these situated perspectives in a collective setting; and (3) exposing the resulting assemblage to a wider public.

2. Method

Narrative was employed as a methodological perspective attentive to lived experience (Arfuch, 2018). Placed in montage (Benjamin, 1999), stories gain significance by resonating with one another, highlighting both commonalities and contradictions. This approach aims to situate knowledge in places of speech (Ribeiro, 2019), foregrounding how transformations are not only structural but embodied and contested in everyday life.

The process unfolded in three steps:

- 1.Provocation:** participants composed narratives in text and image, reflecting on the walls—material or symbolic—shaping their lives;
- 2.Sharing:** at TU Berlin's Architecture Institute, participants presented and discussed their stories, tracing thematic intersections;
- 3.Exposition:** the narratives, accompanied by an explanatory poster and the flags of the represented countries, were exhibited publicly for one week;



On June 17, 2025, in Nairobi, a hawk was shot by police during protests against police brutality, a tragic irony. As one newspaper reported, "He came to sell insects 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. Thin 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 concerned, I only hope that these walls fall through our collective grief, anger, and refusal to accept that some lives matter less. **Dorine Odhiambo, Nairobi.**



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 other residences in Birati are modest one or two-story houses with small yards built over the years by entering refugees from nearby 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 neighbors 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.**



The Chirungu Road is a path I knew well. A path I walked as a student and now travel daily to work. It leads to the University of Malawi, where a group of students stand at the entrance. Full of dreams. It symbolizes possibility for those with big dreams and mark the start of a journey that could transform their futures. Yet Chirungu Road is more than just a gateway. It's an invisible boundary between two realities. On one side, opportunity and ambition. On the other, a community weighed down by poverty, where survival overshadows dreams. Residents watch from across the road, imagining the lives of the students beyond their reach. As night falls, the divide softens. Students cross over, seeking food and shelter in the very community they seem separated from. We walked this road countless times, yet its quiet questions remain: Is the grass really greener on the other side? **Zola Manyungwa, Zomba, Malawi.**



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, emblematic place in Mexico City. Activists have placed metal walls to protect the stone basement of the original sculpture designed and fabricated in France during the 19th century. These metal barriers appear to be protecting heritage, but it could also be capturing two sides of a new order of urban decommissioned heritage. How can ecological, indigenous, and vulnerable feminist narratives can rewrite notion of what gets preserved in a city? **Joana Rivera, Mexico City.**



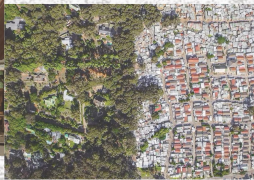
Porto Alegre, 1981, a deluge submerged the city, not only drowning its streets and buildings, but also, unsettling the collective imagination in response to the waters' unrelenting force, the Maua Wall was then devised and built — alongside dikes and pumps — as a concrete promise of protection. By the 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 Guibaia Lakes gained traction. Experts agreed: The market applauded. The wall, they said, stood in the way of progress. Then came the rain 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 630 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. Decades of acts of solidarity mobilization and aid (local government response was absent). No meaningful measures were taken to mitigate the disaster, not to prepare for those yet to come in this new era of climate emergency. A year later, the waters are calm again as these words are being written. **Gianluca Perseu, Porto Alegre/Brasil.**



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 altogether. 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 Kooch, Nairobi.**



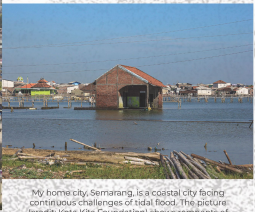
The Chinatown area of Semarang has existed since the colonial era and stands as a symbol of ethnic segregation in Semarang. During that time, the Dutch segregated residential areas based on ethnic groups, with each area separated by walls or gates. The population was demographically divided into three 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. **Jurke Winarandri, Semarang.**



On the right-hand side of the image is Irizabato, a rich 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, signifying 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 obscures and obscures the tension between two unequal worlds. Inequality builds walls without bricks: in access, opportunity, and dignity. The small trickles of greenery in Irizabato, yet 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.**



In Mexico City, there are many divisions that demonstrate social inequality, but none as evident in my opinion, as the one in Santa Fe, where the poor neighborhood is separated from the rich neighborhood by a bridge and a highway that form a wall that makes the free flow of bodies inaccessible. **Angela Clarisa Alvarez Velasco, Ciudad de México.**



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 cracked roads 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. The 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 inconclusive policy-making approach in policy decision. **Tia Insani, Semarang, Indonesia.**

3. Results

The workshop generated a corpus of narratives that mapped how walls—material, symbolic, and ecological—organize urban life in the Global South. When read together, they produced a relational cartography of division, vulnerability, and persistence.

Infrastructures such as bridges, highways, and colonial gates emerged as **markers of exclusion**, encoding policies and histories that segregate populations and sustain unequal access.

Forests, rivers, and seas were depicted as ambivalent divides, both sustaining and displacing communities. Water in particular surfaced as a recurring motif of life and loss, underscoring climate vulnerability and governance failure.

Constrained living arrangements illustrated how **invisible walls organize privacy and resilience in everyday life**, shaping opportunity and coexistence.

Protests, monuments, and episodes of repression revealed **urban space as a field of struggle**, where storytelling became mourning, refusal, and a means of reclaiming voice.

Roads and crossings appeared as spaces of paradox: separating deprivation and aspiration, yet also enabling exchange and solidarity.

Together, the narratives pluralize urban knowledge and re-signify **"walls" not only as barriers but also as sites of resistance, imagination, and hope**.

4. Discussion

The *Invisible Walls Workshop* sought to demonstrate how narrative montage can register and reframe the complexity of urban problems in the Global South. Rather than reducing experience to a single storyline, montage creates a field where multiplicity is preserved and brought into dialogue. This approach amplifies marginalized perspectives from the Global South, highlighting their analytical and political value.

The workshop also underscored the **pedagogical and public potential** of narrative practices. By displaying the narratives within a university space, lived accounts of inequality and resistance disrupted the dominance of abstraction and technical discourse, repositioning the Global South as a site of knowledge production. The exhibition transformed private testimony into shared reflection, inviting interlocution from a wider audience.

Future editions could extend this potential by experimenting with multilingual formats, sound, and performance, and by sustaining networks of exchange across geographies. Such developments would strengthen the workshop's capacity to foster solidarities and to challenge hegemonic discourses of urbanism.

Narrative montage thus consolidates itself not only as a method but also as an ethic. It cultivates **practices of attention, hospitality, and imagination** that are attuned to complexity, respectful of difference, and open to ongoing reinterpretation.

5. Conclusion

The workshop advances narrative montage as both inquiry and pedagogy: a practice that assembles fragments of memory, image, and testimony without forcing closure. It demonstrates how stories, once exposed to public space, become material clues that interrupt abstraction and reinsert Global South perspectives into contexts that often marginalize them.

Recurring motifs of walls, streets, domestic spaces, and ecological thresholds revealed how inequality takes spatial form, but also how cities are continuously remade through presence, resistance, and care. The refusal to synthesize these stories into a singular narrative is itself significant: **montage resists closure, cultivating an ethic of listening and openness**.

In this sense, the *Invisible Walls Workshop* is less a finished product than a starting point. It is a call to read stories collectively, to learn from their tensions and resonances, and to imagine more just, habitable, and ecologically attuned urban futures.

References

- Arfuch, L. (2018). *La vida narrada: Memoria, subjetividad y política*. Buenos Aires: Poliedros – Zona de Crítica.
- Benjamin, W. (1999). *The arcades project* (H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ribeiro, D. (2019). *Lugar de fala*. São Paulo: Pólen.