A minute island, in a lake, where “fishes fly” and eagles eat serpents: “There we will rule... That [place] will become our endless city of Mexico-Tenochtitlán.” According to legend, these are the origins of Mexico-Tenochtitlán, the city upon the Texcoco Lake that the people of mythical Aztlán founded in the early fourteenth century, and where their city-state would prosper endlessly. And thrive Mexico-Tenochtitlán did, before and after the Spanish Conquest, and as the capital city of a nineteenth-century nation-state (Mexico). Hence Mexico City could be described by Eça de Queiros’s comments on Lisbon—“nem cria, nem inicia; vai”—that it neither raises, nor begins; it just goes. For the city has no real discernible beginning. It just vai. I speak of the City is formed by stories related, I confess, to my own experience of the vai of Mexico City, disguised as things that can actually secure a history: walks, urban voices, the experience of monuments, the nostalgia of past styles, and the estrangement of realities that once did not need to be named—they just were.

I focus on the years between circa 1880 and 1930 for these were the decisive decades in which Mexico City started upon the route toward what it is today, namely, a megalopolis, an ecological disaster, and the enchanting monstrous capital of a modern nation. In so being, Mexico City is not something peripheral and unintentional that should never have occurred. In fact, it has been the fulfillment of many modern promises—either rapid economic and demographic growth or cosmopolitanism. Far from being the exotic town described by foreign travelers or the mere involuntary consequence of cultural atavisms, Mexico City has been so much a part of the making of the modern that examining it is but another way to inhabit what is known as the modern world.

The book, however, is not a monograph, a chronological narrative of a chunk of the city’s time. Rather, it is formed by ways of essaying the history of the modern urban experience. Thus, these essays are ways of capturing different aspects of the modern urban experience: the city as a walking history textbook; the city as a global expression of the modern state; the city as an ephemeral modernist capital of the world’s utopias; the city as an orientalist object; the city as an orientalist subject fascinated with Japan and India; the city as a scientific laboratory; and, finally, the city as language. By essaying modern history through an assumed marginal mirror (Mexico City), I simply depart from the uncanny conviction that Mexico City has not been the mime,
Urban Experience

The urban experience is not a cinematic one, but rather a collection of overlapping vistas that can dilate the historian’s perception of the borders between past, present, and future. Entire libraries have been written on the notion of “experience” as a philosophical, historiographical, and even an urban-centered occurrence. The notion of urban experience that propels my essaying, however, appeals only marginally to the philosophical controversies about Erfahrung. Experience here is a concept closer to the simultaneous occurrence of vivencias (lived moments) and ensimismamientos (literally, one-in-one-self-ness: wondering about being conscious of consciousness). To be sure these terms do not entail a French-like conceptual repute, nor do they echo the acceptable tropical sonority of siesta or sombrero, to be incorporated easily into the English language. But for me they do the job marvelously. For vivencias and ensimismamientos are common occurrences for urban ramblers everywhere. Thus understood, experience becomes first, if not a fixed object of study for the historian, at least a well-demarcated set of historical evidences; and second, experience becomes thus the historian’s guiding hope—to try to render vivid images of past urban occurrence. Hence by history of urban experience I mean the attempt to grasp a past of simultaneous and chaotic mixtures of feelings, knowledges, and wonderings (in sum, ensimismamientos) produced by an urban walk, a building, a monument, a street, a scientific discovery, an urban poem, or a corner (that is, vivencias).

This is thus a kind of history of vivencias citadinas, of the very experiencing of cities whose separation between past and present, alas clearly distinguishable in terms of chronology, is less conspicuous. The urban experience of the past, without my present urban experience, becomes unintelligible. Past evidence ought to be dwelled in with the familiarity of that one who has walked and seen enough streets in the present. This might be because cities produce what Georg Simmel called in 1903 the “intensification of nervous stimulation,” which makes the “metropolitan man” “develop an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him... Intellectualism is thus seen to preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life.” Or perhaps cities unite vivencias and ensimismamientos because speaking of cities is to speak about, according to Octavio Paz, “that daily reality composed of two words: the others.”... “and in every one of them there is an I clipped from a we, an I adrift.”

Be that as it may, to write history of modern urban experiences calls for a blend of empirical research, imagination nurtured by urban life, and literary intuitions: it is, in a way, essaying the consciousness of urban vivencias that is also an essaying of the city-like shape of the modern consciousness.

Essaying

The essay is the narrative genre intrinsically linked to accounts of the urban experience in the past and the present. Understood as a modern genre, it is characterized by persuasion and the necessary incompleteness derived from the many realms and broad topics that any essay explores; a stylistic union of form and content through the freedom to establish empirical and conceptual connections often with irony; an esteem of what the young Georg Lukács called the joy of conceptual logic; and, finally, the need to provoke further thinking. I do not claim, however, that the essays in the book are akin to classics of the genre. My essaying is much more modest because it is above all painstaking historical research; and yet, it is also part of the important—if devalued in the English language—expansion and transmission of historical knowledge through essays.

Often I have wondered why I wrote these essays in English. There are the demands of a U.S. academic life, but quite honestly, these imperatives played a minor role in my decision. For better or for worse, one day I started these essays in my alien English and continued over the years, aware of my limitations and of the difficulties I would face in trying to publish such bizarre products. I continued in English, even when anonymous reviewers of bits and pieces of the project—reviewers for a “Latin American Studies” journal at that—responded with: “the problem with Tenorio is that he thinks he writes English.” Sure, but for a nonnative, writing in English becomes a mandatory challenge and an inevitable hope. It is a challenge because it is one thing to write an academic report competently in academic English, and quite another to mess up with the difficult art of essaying. And it is a hope, perhaps self-defeating, that having been in dialogue with the experience of many past and present cities thanks to the intermediation of today’s lingua franca, one hopes to enter into broader dialogues through the same language. A hope also because while I talk about Mexico City, the topic is not solely, or mainly, Mexico City, and thus the optimism of reaching a wider readership gets inevitably activated.

These essays build on the insightful contributions of urban history, which have naturally nurtured the approach of an academic historian trained in the late 1980s. But I originally arrived at the subject of cities by a different route—that of my own urban experience filtered through essays about the city, its intellectual life, its experience. In the early 1980s, my ignorance of various languages hindered my realization that such nineteenth-century essayists as...
poets, novelists, cartoonists, political speechwriters, and all sorts of scientific literature that made of the city a body, with organs and a heart. In the sanitary crises of the nineteenth century, the city was depicted in political cartoons as a sick woman. In 1901, Mexico City’s most prominent illustrator, Julio Ruelas, depicted the city as a woman: a mixture of republican and modernist symbols of freedom and sovereignty. Likewise, revolutionary generals, including Álvaro Obregón, identified the city as a cowardly, antirevolutionary, and licentious woman. Popular ballads identified the city as a woman. This was a trend in popular lyrics that would continue into the 1970s, with the woman remaining the most prominent allegories in writing about the city: “My city . . . washes her brown skin in the afternoon rain and when she unbraids her hair, her sad eyes close,” says a tune that almost has reached the status of the city’s anthem.

Of course, these many characterizations could be seen as mere literary allegories, nothing more than the construction of a wooden doll manipulated in the hands of politicians, intellectuals, popular voices . . . and the historian. But whenever in Spanish I visualize the female—image of the city, its past and present becomes less a matter of fact and more a matter of ensimismamiento. This was the metaphor of the city as a subject, which was at the core of the major urban commentators of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from Dickens to Walter Benjamin, from Simmel to Salvador Novo, from Lewis Mumford to contemporary accounts such as that of Marshall Berman. Moreover, if we bear in mind while reading these essays the allure of economic, political, and cultural centrality inspired by this wooden doll, then the rigid figure acquires the agency of a historical subject that is difficult for the historian to miss. Then again, I can be accused of being simply another manipulator of the wooden doll. I hope not, but if so, please bear in mind Karl Kraus’s dictum: “When I can interpret a woman as I arbitrarily wish, it is the woman’s merit.”

On Echoes and Voices

Echoes are not voices. Yet in the midst of the noise and mess of modern urban history, what voice is not an echo and what echo is not a voice? These essays deal with a long-lasting global flow of concerns and ideas. In a way, in English my essays may sound like a de-Mexicanizing of Mexican history through Mexico City. Maybe, I, however, advance no alternative definition of Mexico or the city. I would want to return the idea of “Mexico” to the larger experimental impulses where it belongs. It is time for the word “Mexico” to mean what its people, ideas, and circumstances are: the flow. This simple proposal, I hope, would in the long run change the understanding of Mexico, and, more importantly, it would alter the global flow.
Therefore, these essays undertake various “odd” parallelisms, too many crossings of assumed barriers among civilizations—the same Mexico or the U.S. or France or Japan. In terms of these barriers, nonetheless, my aim is neither to deny nor to affirm the existence of so-called “civilizational” differences between Mexico and the U.S., for example. My goal is simply to show that, in the case of the region we now call Mexico City, cultural phenomena are not about the relationships of spiritual Ariels vs. materialist and powerful Calibans. I aim, rather, to show that these matters are about the Island and the chaotic interactions of all its modern castaways.

On Limits

More than well-articulated theories, personal preoccupations, as it were, drive my essaying. On one hand, I am concerned with history and freedom; on the other, with words. History, thought Benedetto Croce, would liberate individuals and societies from all sorts of atavism. In its Enlightenment origins, history was, as historian Constantin Fasolt maintains, a powerful and dangerous form of knowledge. It therefore has been, some believe, the acid that dissolves all absolutes, even history itself. Whether seen as a historicist acid, or as the path of power or/and freedom—as Richard McKeon submitted—history, I believe, still ought to assist collective reinventions.12 In my own career as a historian I have seen many academic fashions come and go, and I have benefited from a growing historiography on all sorts of aspects of Mexico and France and the U.S. and India. And yet, despite so much historicizing, the category “Mexico” seems to me caged in a set of inevitable and robust cultural assumptions. These essays are my attempt to analytically capture and question these assumptions.

On the other hand, words and language have concerned me in more than just a utilitarian manner. Every word to me brings stories alive, and thus due to an inexcusable fixation for the early twentieth-century urban language of Mexico, I have learned old and cursi (gaudy) utterances of composers, scientists, artists, writers, and urban dwellers in general. I have command of this dead language, and thus I have been fascinated by the pervasiveness of some rather dense words. But it seems that Mexico has been a global idea to be spoken of in a language of simple, if well-established, terms: from siesta to guerrilla, from pistola to tequila, from machismo to mestizaje, from sombrero to ojones (the last a recent Spanish addition to the English language). It is as if the complex, immense, and dynamic universe of words produced or consumed in Mexico City was not a part of the city’s meaning. As it will be clear throughout the book, I treasure words and the human realms they encompass.

Finally, my approach is also driven by the simple fact that I do have interest-

Communicating Vessels

As whimsical as I Speak of the City could seem as a mere compilation of essays, the book as a whole has three basic concerns that make the various parts essential counterparts of each other. First, there is the need to comprehend the universal through the particular and vice versa; that is, the inevitable strategy of reading Mexico City as an essentially local and yet inevitably global historical phenomenon. Second, there is language. These essays are simply the effort to understand past circumstances through the reality of past words and styles, analyzed as objectively as possible. Finally, there is the craving to experiment with different essay-like forms of storytelling.

As a result, the book is made up of six parts that blend these basic concerns through different recipes that often return to the same dates, events, streets, buildings, actors, and objects. Part I deals with 1910 as a year of weighty historical connotations that reached well beyond Mexico. Thus, the essay on 1910 begins with a momentary exercise in historical amnesia, useful for rethinking our selective equilibrium of memory and oblivion: taking 1910 as one of the last years of the nineteenth century, a year in an era of profound and accelerated transformations, in which the self-consciousness of achieved progress interacted with the insecurity of the world’s political, social, and economic circumstances. That is, I see 1910 in Mexico City less as the year of the Revolution and more as the year of the Centenario—the centennial celebration of the beginning of Mexico’s independence, which had an extraordinary impact on the city’s shape. The city can be read as the central allegory of a nation and a memory, but this was nothing particularly Mexican. Thus, a second essay in part I launches the oddest possible contrast of cities in 1910: Mexico City and Washington, D.C. By contrasting these two cities around 1910, the essay seeks to demarcate the true parameters, and the common grounds, of two historical exceptionalisms—that of Mexico and that of the U.S. Finally, whereas the essay on the Centenario is by and large based on the city’s public exteriors, a third essay in part I inhabits the interiors of the city around 1910. By look-
ing at bourgeois and popular interiors, I seek to essay the forms of intimacy that emerged at the moment of the launching of the city on its path toward megalopolis.

In turn, various vistas of Mexico City in and around 1919 make up part II, which attempts to imagine the life of the city as the capital of twenty years of the world's radical hopes: revolution, avant-garde art, exoticism, love, and betrayal. Around 1919 Mexico City became for many foreigners a summer resort of the sort sought by such modernist poets as Wallace Stevens, who spoke of an essence of summer needed to rejuvenate and recapture peace, permanence, and intellectual conformity; a summer to "fill the foliage with arrested peace, / joy of such permanence, right ignorance/ Of change still possible. Exile desire/ For what is not. This is the barrenness/ Of the fertile thing that can attain no more." Mexico City was this modernist summer: a shared epic for a generation of world intellectuals, activists, and artists. The city housed the hopes of many of the world's radicals, and part II, through sequential stories, tries to capture the simultaneity of the city as a moment of the world's radical hopes. Rather than trying to test a hypothesis, this series of stories aims to make the reader experience this world capital in all its contradictions and creativity. The stories focus on specific groups, events, and individuals, all of them as supporting characters in a plot in which the main role is played, if quietly, by the city itself.

Part III is the necessary complement to the vistas of the cosmopolitan Mexico City of 1919. The city was the center of the intellectual radical milieu, thus becoming the odd center of what I call the search for "a Brown Atlantis": Mexico as the world's imaginary space made of modernist dreams of racial, cultural, and social authenticity and disenchantment. The city thus became a seemingly passive site of fakeness where foreign and local literati merely happened to be located in order to envisage the "real" Mexico of Indigenous people faithful to their racial purity and untouched by four centuries of massive demographic, cultural, and political transformations. Whereas the goal in writing part II is to zoom in for narrative close-ups of the lives of different kinds of cosmopolitans in the city, part III zooms out for a wide view of the disdain of the city—often enforced by the same cosmopolitans. And it does so by examining the variegated clichés in foreign and local views—and nonviews—of the city, which were indispensable in conceiving Mexico as a mythical place, a Brown Atlantis that was everything Mexico City was not. By doing this I seek to display the contours of the Brown Atlantis and how such confines have led to a relatively fixed and lasting idea of "Mexico" in the world: fiesta, siesta, sombrero, pistola, and Frida Kahlo.

In a way, part III is an analysis of Mexico as the object of the world's exoticist needs—as well as of Mexico's self-exoticism. Part IV therefore completes this exploration by examining an uncanny exoticism, one that was part and parcel of that which maintained the search of a Brown Atlantis but was of a different polarity. That is, an excursion into Mexico City as the center of what I call Mexican odalisque-mania: a momentary but deep urban fascination with Japan and India. Many echoes clashed and blended in this bizarre andyruent Mexican orientalism: those of the 1910 capital of a local expression of republican nationalism and memory, those of revolutionary global hopes, and those of the Brown Atlantis excitedly sought by the world's luminaries. All these echoes acquired different connotations when the city's intelligentsia eagerly sought oriental ecstasies in Japan and India—through great experiments in language and the arts—at the same time that it nourished local and global similes of what Mexico meant for the world. At the risk of its own invisibility, modernist Mexico City tried out and produced the ingredients necessary to maintain the global search for a Brown Atlantis. But such a trial could not stop in the many efforts at self-exoticism; it simultaneously involved the imaging of Mexico City's own private Oriental Atlantis through, say, Japanese haikus, Hindu thought, or Rabindranath Tagore's poetry. As a fake local West, as a second-class East, the city participated in the global circulation of various Easts and Wests for, after all, Mexico City was a world capital of this obsession with defining the East and the West.

Part V deals with these local and global connections but uses science as the lens, a realm that remains seemingly unsuitable to observe anything Mexican. That is why, I think, it is so revealing. The essays on science and the city thus tramp the Mexico City of the decades from 1890 to 1930—the period in which the city was finally and definitively "scientized"—to tell the joint story of local and global knowledge, experience, and city life, and not the conventional account of the city's progressive modernization, which at times historians have absurdly called Westernization. By using variegated foci of analysis—from the import of history in the science of the city to rats, lice, and typhus—part V aims to provide views on how an old city urbanized modern science, on how modern science scrutinized the city, and on how this scientism and urbanism were part of a larger modernist matrix including literature, journalism, and the arts.

To conclude, part VI stops to examine in detail the language of the city, which is at the core of all of this book's essays. Language is the most fleeting but most present realm; all of the book's essays in one way or another attempt to hear languages of the past, but it is impossible to listen to or comprehend all, in the same way that it would be hard to decipher all the words one hears in a single day in a city. Language in the past, as fashionable as it is to study it, is an undecipherable riddle that we can only partially, and only after a long im-
mersion into past languages, discern. Part VI examines the city's words, inviting the reader to sharpen her ear for sounds that are colors and styles. Though Mexico City was not a Buenos Aires or a New York of the turn of the century, in those decades it was a major linguistic laboratory that produced the unique chilango (belonging to Mexico City) tongue. More than examining this tongue, part VI dialogues with it in order to enact in the present the vividness of past urban experiences. But the sounds I examine have so many subtleties and differences across social, temporal, and spatial contexts that one ought not to maintain any great interpretative pretensions. One is better served by doubting like Antonio Machado, who en las bóvedas del alma (in the soul's vaults) never knew whether the whispers were voices or echoes of his own voice.

In sum, these essays are about Mexico City from the 1880s to the 1930s. That is why I Speak of the City is useless in speaking merely of Mexico City, incapable of talking only about those decades. It is as if in essaying, the evocation of the city's name would free an uncontrollable naming of other eras, of other places.