“This is not me,” I thought as I saw my reflection on the mirror. “Why do I feel so disconnected from my identity?” I questioned as I struggled to recognize the image of the man in front of me. I have worn tuxedos in many occasions before, but this time it felt bizarre, off-putting, and even extraneous. While I am fully aware that etiquette demands me to wear a tuxedo to attend a black-tie event, I could not but feel a sense of uneasiness in having to express my formality through standards that had no natural connection with my identity. As I stood in the dressing room confronted with this foreign image of myself I wondered, “why do I have to express formality norms that do not represent me?”

I grew up in Ecuador, learning the Western guides and standards for the modern gentlemen’s etiquette. I was taught how a gentleman eats, how he gets dressed, how he behaves in public and expresses himself through his manners and personality, and what kind of values and principles are well regarded in the social life of the elite. These standards represented the way things were supposed to be and the dandy that I was meant to become. Yet these social standards were not only the inflicted affirmation of Western social values, but were also meant as a clear rejection of the social conventions associated with the rather autochthonous behaviour of the lower classes and its connection with our pre-colonial folklore.

It was not until recent years, as I have continuously tried to re-discover myself through fashion that most of these norms began to feel artificial and imposed. Through this process, I came to realize that traditional etiquette could not showcase the full complexity of my identity, as my inspiration processes took me more and more closer to the one thing that felt unique and natural about myself, my cultural association with what I have come to understand as Latin-American folklore.

As such, this graduation project endeavours to create a new class of menswear that fully embodies the cultural identity of a Latin-American dandy. In order to do so, it is important to grasp the everyday understandings of Latin-Americans, which, as noted by the Argentinean philosopher and writer Enrique Dussel (1974, p.22): “includes our Indo-American pre-colonial history, early history of colonial Christianity, the divided and non-integrated nations, the Western influences, the ever-changing present and the future to come”. Accordingly, this study’s focus on pre-Hispanic civilizations will serve as cultural background as a means to understand today’s Latin-American zeitgeist: the need for change.
and to find a true identity that could encompass every citizen, reflected in the current political discontent of the majority with a structure that did not seem fit for all social classes. In contrast, the British Edwardian era will be studied as the embodiment of the influence of Western standards throughout recent history. Finally, an analysis of the youth-subculture known as the “Teddy boys” will serve as a case-study to attempt to illustrate a methodology to achieve change and move towards a new Latin-American class.

**Cultural Roots: Pre-colonial Latin-American civilizations**

Long before Europeans conquered America, the continent was populated by various aboriginal civilizations. Early nations like the Aztects, Incas and Mayas had a wide and rich cultural life that defined their living. Professor Abner Cohen defined in 1969 these societies as incorporative states had not yet been shaped into defined socio-political units but where their inhabitants had the same level of cultural development and lived very close to each other. In contrast, this study proposes that these civilisations had their own defined social structures derived from an ingrained believe visible in every aspect of their lives and specially reflected in their dress.

The Aztec society was heavily stratified. According to David V. Kurtz (1978) the nobility, priests, military leaders and traders were part of the higher ranked categories while the peasants, serfs and slaves occupied the lowest rungs of social hierarchy. Social class, gender, role in society, age and religion were uniquely expressed through clothing. Colourful garments and expressive masks articulated their place within the clan and enhanced their personal identity (See Fig. 1). Special details like ornaments, lavish materials and exclusive designs made apparent where they came from, what they represented and the big accomplishments of their life. The accessories used by the Aztects were also representations of social strata through the portrayal of deities. As such, the symbols of the jaguar and the eagle, both important in Aztec culture, were heavily represented by the privileged warriors during battles. Other details like flower petals, feathers or bows were used as high distinctions for members of the nobility or high ranks of the militia and had very little connotations of femininity or weakness.
Once the two worlds met with the arrival of the Spaniards in 1942, life in America changed forever. “The one, modern, composed of free subjects in a commonly decided accord; the other, the greatest empire of the new world, completely limited by its traditions, divinatory laws, rites, ceremonies, and its gods” (Dussel 1995, p. 41). Despite the cultural richness of the native civilizations, once they were conquered it did not take very long for them to fade away.

In the mid-16th century the Spanish had successfully established themselves and the empire had expanded throughout the land. Anything connected to the pre-Hispanic civilizations was deemed barbaric and uncivilized. In 1995, Enrique Dussel (p.42) commented how “the European ego experienced a quasi-divine superiority over the primitive, rustic, inferior Other”. With the help of the Catholic Church, Western values were rapidly implemented, notes Dussel (1995, p.45), who continues to describe how “the conqueror domesticated, structurized, and colonized the manner in which those conquered lived and reproduced their lives”. The Spanish social structure travelled directly from the Crown, which settled on top, and pushed the locals to the bottom of the society. As such, the
aborigines had to adopt Western behaviour norms and believes, in order to be taken seriously, otherwise they were marginalized to the lower classes without a proper role in their new communities.

The Edwardian influence

On the turn of the twentieth century Latin-America continued to be heavily influenced by Europe. Although it had been almost a century since the independence, people in the former colonies continued to look and behave in a European fashion. At the time, the British nobility known as “The Edwardians” epitomized the ideal of modernity, education and Western civility; they represented good manners and well behaviour for civilized people and in such capacity they became the model to follow in European societies as well as within the upper classes in Latin-American countries.

In order to be perceived as a civilized person, individuals behaved as “Edwardian as possible,” especially those who were from a non-European country and as such has “more to prove.” A person’s conduct was very important during this period; for that reason “the Edwardians” followed a strict set of rules. Men and women were told how to interact, especially with each other; what was expected from them; and above all how to behave like a civilized person in order to fit in. Author and curator of the blog “Edwardian Promenade” Evangeline Holland (2012) explains how conversation in particular was an art that embodied politeness and could quickly demonstrate a person’s social status. From the tone of voice to the words used while chatting, Edwardians utilized conversation to identify one another and recognize their social background. Educated Latin-Americans followed the same rules while rejecting any connection with their cultural heritage; the key to their personal success was to blend in with the advanced societies.

Common life was strict for the Edwardians with little room for individuality. This way of thinking was reflected in their dress; everybody was expected to look in a certain manner if they wanted to be accepted. Men especially had limited options when it came down to their attire. In 1897, Mrs. C. E, Humphry (p. 153) wrote, “If a man does not dress well in society he cannot be a success”, Notably, John Bridges and Bryan Curtis (1950, p. ix) state that being a gentleman, a man “does not want to stand out in the crowd (...) the gentleman desires simply to dress appropriately for the occasion (...).” In this context, to dress well
meant to understand the subtle details like the shine of the fabric or the wrong length of a jacket. Humphry (1897) describes how every occasion had to follow a proper dress in a specific colour, length and material; and goes as far as to describe the proper dress for a morning walk in the park during summer. Although the guides were created to help citizens avoid embarrassments, these directives were extremely restrictive and at times difficult to obey. People were not allowed to be different and as such, uniformity was a core value which directly impacted menswear.

Latin-Americans followed the Edwardians very closely. In spite of the differences in geography and cultural heritage, upper-class Latin-Americans tried to emulate British nobility. Men wore the same coats, overcoats and trousers with top hats and waistcoats that were in fashion among the nobles in Great Britain (See Fig. 2).

![Fig. 2: Unknown, 1920, Riobamba, Ecuador.](http://www.multiandinocasa.com)

Despite the hot weather, men followed the rules of Edwardian attire to be regarded as educated gentlemen. However, the influence of the British in the American elites created a big gap between the wealthy and the low rung citizens. While the rich tried to look and behaved like Edwardians, the poor were made fun of for maintaining the few cultural traces they had left from their ancestors.
The Edwardian lifestyle suffered a big blow with the abdication of King Edward VIII. Under a lot of pressure from the British government and with the disapproval of his family, The Duke of Windsor stepped down to marry Wallis Simpson, an American divorcé. Against every rule and principle his family, religion and crown represented he decided to follow his feelings and trust his heart above all. Outside the United Kingdom, the couple became a symbol of elite and individuality. David turned into a legendary socialite well known for his extravagant parties and fashion risks. His look became relaxed and playful but always maintained an air of class and formality. His silhouettes became bolder with a touch of masculine heaviness. He was not afraid of mixing intense colours especially when in combination with graphic patterns. Tartan checks, argyle diamonds and bold graphics created an amalgam of tradition, nostalgia and modernity that represented the understanding of history with the need for change in the modern world (See Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Menkes, S., 1987, The Windsor Style

**Political and identity dilemmas**

Ever since it was invaded, Latin-America has tried to free itself. Until the late 18th century their biggest pursue was to cut ties with the Spanish crown and allow the locals to be sovereign of their lives. However, the transition after the independence made very little
difference as the Criollos -the Spaniards born in America- took over from the empire and maintained the same system but placing themselves on top of the existing social strata.

In the beginning of the 2000’s there was a big shift to the left in Latin-America’s politics. After suffering several economic crises created by corrupt governments and unstable international markets, the citizens voted for left-winged parties that promised a better repartition of goods and support for a national identity. Political commentator James Petras (2009) explains that throughout the past decade the people of many South American countries have expressed their disappointment with neo-liberal socio-economic doctrines developed by the upper classes. Cries for change and a revolution of the citizens have resulted in abrupt changes of leadership in Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia among others. These new regimes promoted a more or less radical detachment from the previous systems where governments were heavily influenced by the international super powers. Independence was offered one more time but in this case it was about liberating countries from a modern colonialism of ideas and values.

As explained by Enrique Dussel (2012, p. 18), the tendency to disparage Latin cultures has allowed them to survive in silence disdained by their own modernized and westernized elites. The idea of this negated exterior indicates the existence of an unsuspected cultural richness, which is slowly revived from hundreds of years of colonialism. The political agendas of the new rulers offered a social transformation in favour of the abused and marginalised with a clear rejection of Western control. The repressed cultures were revalidated and there has been a clear pursuit of national identity by promoting traditional folklore with pride. Of course these governments have had a lot of problems. The process of rebirth is searching for new paths for future and inevitably at times is taking the wrong path (Dussel 2012, p. 18). In many of the changing countries, what was promised as the key to successful independence and self-determination turned into disguised dictatorships.

In midst of this situation it is easy to be aware of the clash of influences that embodies the Latin-American identity. The Latin-American culture has to respond from the perspective of their own cultural experiences, which are distinct from those of Europeans and North American, and therefore have the capacity to respond with solutions that would be impossible for an exclusively western culture. (Dussel 2012) But because it has been
influenced by Europe for centuries, it is also interesting to search for European examples of change and subversion of modern values.

**The Teddy Boys’ methodology**

At the beginning of 1950’s, Great Britain was coming out of a dark period and stepping into an era of abundance. The social divisions of the past were dissolving as citizens had access to a wealthier life. As explained by Dick Hebdige (1974), a superficially less class-driven system was replacing the traditional patterns of life in Britain with the exposure to higher wages. Out of this social climate, “The Teddy boys” appeared as one of the first youth subcultures demanding attention with their self-determined attitude. Their speech and manners were aggressive and so was the way they presented themselves.

These young men came from working-class environments but had more access to money than their parents did at their age. The Teddy boys broke new ground with the introduction of a fashion that was totally working-class and the establishment of a teenage market. Far from being a casual response to “easy money” the extravagant sartorial display of the Teddys required careful financial planning and was remarkably self-conscious (Hebdige 1988). Their attitude towards clothing made it acceptable for males to dress purely for show, although it was also seen as a distasteful slap in the face to the past generations that have had a shortage of supplies.

The Neo-Edwardians’ look was very characteristic. Meticulously explained in the blog The Edwardian Teddy Boy, the jacket was elongated and draped down to the knee with a seamless back and no vents. The construction created a very recognizable boxy squared silhouette. A crisp white shirt and tight trousers rounded up the look, which in many occasions was paired with a waistcoat. The preferred shoes were oxfords and later on the “Brothel Creeper” mostly worn in black. The first “Taddy’s” used sombre colours, reminiscent of the Edwardian Era (See Fig. 4). As the years passed and more dyes appeared in the market, bright shades like purple, red or light blue made their way into their attire in a visually arresting colour block.
The Teds have been seen by many as an attempt to mediate between the familiar and the novel. Cultural writer Phil Cohen has described the Teddy Boys as a compromise solution that incorporates the need to express autonomy with something new, like a new sense of dressing, and the need to maintain parental identifications like the use of traditional references with their Edwardian attires. But what was fundamentally radical is that the ways in which social class was lived changed dramatically. The conjunction of the neo-Edwardian’s economic and social influence at the time have lead authors like Hebdige (1979) to study the Teds and their youthful revolution as a completely new social class with their own economic market.

**The collection**

The collection emerges from the complexity of Latin-America’s clash of classes, one reminiscent of its ancestry and another looking up to foreign values. After centuries of influence, the Western way of living is engrained in the region’s history. Clothing, manners and behaviours are so deeply enrooted that is nearly impossible to dissect them from Latin-America’s current cultural identity. Sadly, this upbringing also represents the repression of the seemingly more truthful cultural background of past autochthonous cultures. These ancient cultures do not seem to have a lot of room in modern Latin-American society. That is why taking notes from the Teddy Boys, “Folkloric sins of a modern dandy” is a collection
that aims to comment on the cultural clashes that represent Latin-America in the hopes of coming up with a new language that showcases a more natural and familiar identity.

The collection blends the formalality and playfulness of the Duke of Windsor with the outspoken visuals of the pre-colonial civilizations combined with the rebellious air of the Teddy Boys. Formal garments reminiscent of the Edwardian era are exaggerated and blown out of proportion when mixed with design elements of the Aztecs and Incas. Classic garments like shirts are oversized to create loose dresses like the Inca’s loathes. Formal jackets are combined with shield-like shapes to produce a new kind of formal warrior that is both ready for an evening gala and for war. Contemporary accessories like hats and backpacks are reinterpreted through the eyes of the Aztecs to create oversized helmets and larger than life armours. Other delicate details and accessories are applied to enhance the connection of the wearer with the garment.

The graphic traditions of both cultures play a big role in the collection. Oversized tartans and herringbones are combined with graphic symbols from the Aztecs to emphasize the illustrative heritage of the area. This lively combination of patterns attempts to create an image full of history, sentiment and even nostalgia but within a modern setting. On the other hand, a play on visual movement and optical illusions enhance the reality of the cultural tensions lying behind Latin-America’s identity.

The colours of the collection are inspired in the traditional sombre appearance of Edwardian men with black, white, grey and brown but with high contrasting tones like vivid red, pale blue and a toasted yellow. The palette hopes to generate an assaulting visual of strong colours to seek attention and create an impactful image.

The potential costumer is a young man very connected to his heritage. He does not need to be Latin-American or European as the collection tries to reflect on the contemporary clash of ideologies by utilizing these subject matters as inspiration.

In sum, a modern Latin-American dandy might be difficult to pinpoint, but he can definitely be found. He lies behind the influences he has had, the cultural background so engrained to his roots but most importantly he is defined by the need to amend and take control of his identity.
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Imagery:

Fig. 1: Mcbride, A., 2011 Aztec Armies. From: https://thelosttreasurechest.wordpress.com/2011/05/15/historical-warrior-illustration-series-part-xl/ [Retrieved 22 February 2015].

Fig. 2: Unknown. 1920. Riobamba, Ecuador. From: http://www.multiandinocasa.com/%21Fotos-Antiguas-de-Ecuador-que-no-hab%C3%ADas-visto/clxo/7D7DAF9D-197C-4780-9BA7-0743B8A3A1A2 [Retrieved 10 March 2015]

Fig. 3: Menkes, S., 1987. The Windsor Style. Grafton, London, p.130

Fig. 4: Unknown. The Teddy Boys From: http://thetasteofashion.blogspot.nl/2014/09/street-fashion-inspired-style-teddy-boys.html [Retrieved 22 February 2015].