Cultivating Continuity and Change:  
The Domestic Garden Tradition of the  
Italian Community in Island Bay, Wellington, New Zealand  

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In Island Bay, Wellington, there is a small community of New Zealanders of Italian descent who appear to maintain traditions of Italian life within a contemporary suburban landscape. This cultural distinction is manifest from a century of chain migration from Italy to New Zealand. Some individuals in the community identify themselves as Italian and others describe themselves as Italian albeit being born and raised in New Zealand.

Being ‘Italian’, is an expression of their identity as individuals and affiliation to a group. This concept warrants further inquiry as to how participants see themselves as being ‘Italian’ and how this is constructed. From casual observation, the material culture of contemporary suburban garden space captures concepts of cultural identity. This thesis examines what it means to be Italian for the older and younger generations of this community and the distinctions between these generations, through an ethnographic analysis of their gardens and gardening practice. For the purpose of this thesis, the term ‘Italians’ will describe the participants in this research.

The practice of gardening and the ‘stuff’ it contains, whether conceptual, physical or emotional, will provide a better understanding of the ‘cultural sense’ of being a first, second and third-generation Italian living in New Zealand. It is clear the Italians bridge two cultures in everyday life. The everyday for this community is tinged with familiar landscapes and memory from another country. However, this familiarity is real to some as opposed to imagined by others.

Cultural memory through gardening practice is the mechanism in which Italian gardeners embrace their customs and traditions. The processes engaged by Italians to help maintain garden traditions assert their cultural identity and display aspects of continuity and adaptive changes. Christopher Tilley’s volume of anthropological work on understanding the materiality of the garden and its connection to people is drawn on to help make sense of identity constructions. Daniel Miller’s anthropological concepts identifies that through things we are capable of developing relationships, which nurtures the care of the self. Sociologist, Phillip
Vannini’s work is also drawn on to make succinct sense of ethnographic work within an everyday environment, which is significant to the people that live within them. Multidisciplinary in its character, this thesis is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu’s philosophical theoretical work on distinction and the concept of *habitus*. Italian identity places difference from the other and the learning of certain dispositions which constitutes being Italian. Bourdieu’s *habitus* thus provides a theoretical framework on which to critically analyse social practices around the materiality of gardens. The thesis will, in particular, examine the critical social role of the contemporary suburban garden within this community. The study of the material culture of the Italian garden space in a contemporary New Zealand suburb provides a lens into the experience and nature of a small, close-knit community who see themselves as being ‘Italian’.
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Dedicated to all those who have made New Zealand ‘home’. 
Approval for the research has been obtained from the appropriate University ethics committee for the research outlined in the thesis.

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Cover Image. The blessing of the boats, Island Bay, Wellington.
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