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



A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Philosophy**

in

**Visual and Material Culture**

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## Abstract

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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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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.

# Contents

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<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Contents</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Illustrations</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Italian settlement of Island Bay.....	5
Italian food.....	6
The garden and food.....	7
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Material culture and gardens.....	12
Material culture and generational change.....	14
Multi-disciplinary literature on the garden.....	15
Representation and media stories of the Italian community in New Zealand.....	18
Garden history scholarship.....	20
Conclusion.....	21
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Location.....	23
Country of birth.....	24
Occupations.....	24
Garden knowledge.....	24
Timeframe.....	25
Multi-method data collection.....	25
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....	<b>28</b>
The materiality of culture: the object in garden structures, the garden, cultivation and environment.....	28
Garden structures and the materiality of culture.....	34
Recycling.....	41
The glasshouse.....	44
The ‘copper’.....	48
The tomato-sauce making process with the copper.....	51
The object in cultivation.....	52
Food, necessity and luxury.....	58
Seeds.....	63
Conclusion.....	72
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....	<b>76</b>
The Garden as Identity.....	76
The garden as identity.....	79
Tradition.....	84
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> .....	<b>98</b>
Faith and Knowledge.....	98
Faith.....	98
The blessing of the boats ceremony.....	101
Experiences, knowledge and continuity.....	103

Matthew – A third generation Italian .....	104
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>119</b>
Garden map.....	119
Table of participants .....	120
Interview questions .....	121
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>122</b>



## List of Illustrations

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Figure 1. Map of Italy showing region of origin of Italian migrants (Google Maps 2013). .....	1
Figure 3. Location of Island Bay, Wellington. (Google Maps 2013).....	5
Figure 4. A print of the fishing village of Massa Lubrense on the living-room wall belonging to a first generation participant. ....	6
Figure 5. The side and back garden of a first generation participant. ....	8
Figure 6. Location of Italian participants in Island Bay, Wellington (Google Maps 2013).....	23
Figure 7. An example of an Italian garden map (Google Maps 2011) (for original see Appendix, Figure 29).....	26
Figure 8. A back wall courtyard of a first generation participant.....	30
Figure 9. A mix of recycled materials as weather shelter. ....	36
Figure 10. The conservatory used as a glasshouse and pizza oven cooking. ....	38
Figure 11. Recycled boat materials sheltering a garden. ....	41
Figure 12. Fishing nets used as support for plants.....	42
Figure 13. A glasshouse built from recycled materials, with tomato plants and grapes.....	46
Figure 14. The 'copper' bowl, now decorated and used as a plant pot or container. ....	49
Figure 15. Beer bottles stored in the garden shed, waiting to be used for another tomato puree making session. ....	52
Figure 16. The mimosa tree in Flora's front yard. ....	64
Figure 17. Tomato seeds drying out on the windowsill. ....	66
Figure 18. Flora's broccoli plant.....	67
Figure 19. Heirloom tomato seedlings in the shed ready for transplanting in the garden - first and second generation garden.....	70
Figure 20. Heirloom tomato seedlings almost ready for transplanting - first generation participant. ....	71
Figure 21. An old grape vine being supported by a shed wall and recycled material. ....	81
Figure 22. Tomato plants and other vegetables in the garden of a first and second generation participant with fishing nets as protection. ....	85
Figure 23. Heirloom tomato seedlings placed in the recycled buckets once used on fishing boats, placed in the garden for the cooler spring months. ....	86
Figure 24. Artichokes being grown in Ada's son's adjacent front yard.....	87
Figure 25. A section of Matthew's grandparent's garden. ....	92
Figure 26. The blessing of the boats ceremony in Island Bay.....	101
Figure 27. Matthew's garden with olive tree and tomato plants (under the black cover).....	106
Figure 28. An outdoor pizza oven in Ada and Peter's garden. ....	110
Figure 29. Map drawn by participants and researcher (Map: Google Maps 2010) .....	119