

# Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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captured in an absorbing 2010 documentary (foreignpartsfilm.com) co-directed by anthropologists Véréna Paravel and J.P. Sniadecki, both fellows of the Harvard Film Study Center. It will play in art-house theaters this fall.

Willets Point pulses with grassroots entrepreneurship, driven by the repair of automobiles, which often involves

**Puddles of water, a leitmotif in *Foreign Parts*, fill the rutted streets of Willets Point in Queens, a mecca for auto repair and parts.**

tearing down other cars. City motorists flock to the rutted, puddled streets to find bargains

in windshields, sideview mirrors, tires—all manner of parts salvaged from dead cars. Images of dismemberment stud the 80-minute film, as viewers witness cars and vans chopped to pieces in the automotive equivalent of organ donation. Watching a worker saw off a steering column and carry it away, severed wires dangling, feels like seeing a butcher carrying entrails down a boulevard. Since cars hold such a formative place in American culture, *Foreign Parts*' intimate look at the backstage work of a junkyard doubles as an explora-

## An Elegy Set in Queens

*Filming a vital, vanishing junkyard neighborhood of New York City*

by CRAIG LAMBERT

**I**N THE NONFICTION FILM *Foreign Parts*, a tall, scrappy, solitary man named Joe strides majestically through the junkyard neighborhood of Willets Point, a 75-acre section of Queens that lies beside the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, site of the U.S. Open tennis tournament, and in the shadow of Citi Field, new home of the New York Mets. Joe, now 79, is the last legal resident among the 2,000-odd transients and working stiffs of Willets Point, and he rages like a deposed king

while loping through his homeland, now threatened by the city's juggernaut of eminent domain. In both accent and attitude, Joe is pure "New Yawk"—quintessentially, lovably, New York—and the fact that Willets Point is doomed, destined to be destroyed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg's \$3-billion plan to help developers build stores and offices there, feels like a death sentence for a dogged part of the soul of the great city. Luckily, the neighborhood's fascinating, gritty life-world has been



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## MONTAGE



**Joe, a quintessential New Yorker and central figure in *Foreign Parts*, takes a walking tour of a warehouse stocked with automobile parts.**

tion of the society itself, in both its vitality and its cruelties. When Paravel first stumbled on Willets Point while shooting her first film, *7 Queens*, “I had the feeling,” she says, “that I was walking into a cemetery, a cathedral, a museum, a feudal village, a third-world country, a postindustrial microcosm, all at once.”

The community does indeed feel like a world apart, a foreign bazaar for auto parts that somehow remains intensely American: in a way, the film shows capitalism in its rawest form, and in particular those who have been shunted aside by its unsentimental calculus. One man seems to do little but direct incoming motorists to the right shop for their needs, oiling the wheels of commerce on a pro bono basis. The people of Willets Point face the same fate as the cars that fuel their livelihood. “We wanted to make visible a community that is trying to survive,” Paravel says.

In two years of shooting, the directors made monthly trips to New York and spent a full month in the junkyard during the summer of 2009. In the process, they built relationships with the individuals who reappear in the movie, which unfolds like a vivid ethnography. A fond but down-and-out young couple, Luis and Sara, live in a van; Sara shows the filmmakers the tire iron and knife she sleeps with while Luis is in jail. A free-spirited African-American woman, Julia, appears as the lov-

able town drunk—the friendly, incoherent transient, neglected by the machinery of society, who carries on thanks to the protection of a community that can't quite imagine doing without her. Affectionate abuse stitches the neighborhood together: when Julia hits up a working acquaintance for yet another loan, the latter ripostes, “What am I—an ATM?”

Paravel, born in Switzerland to French parents, lived in Algeria, Togo, Portugal, France, Russia, and the Ivory Coast as the child of a petroleum engineer. She earned her doctorate in anthropology and soci-

ology at the University of Toulouse II in 2003, and is currently a lecturer on anthropology at Harvard, as well as a faculty associate of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, a collaboration between the departments of anthropology and of visual and environmental studies. In 2002 she settled in New York City with her husband, Vincent Lépinay, a fellow social scientist; the family moved to Boston when he joined the MIT faculty in 2006.

Once Paravel discovered the magic of Willets Point, she realized that she would need a male collaborator to



Visit [harvardmagazine.com/extras](http://harvardmagazine.com/extras) to see a clip from *Foreign Parts* and a gallery of stills from the film.



Véréna Paravel



J.P. Sniadecki

COURTESY OF J.P. SNIADICKI AND VÉRENA PARAVEL



shoot throughout the rough neighborhood, and joined forces with Sniadecki. A graduate student in anthropology at Harvard, he had directed a 2008 documentary she admired, *Demolition*, about workers at a demolition site in China. (He is currently pursuing research in China.) “Aesthetically, we were speaking the same language,” she says; in the junkyard, they “would be swapping the camera back and forth—it was so organic.”

*Foreign Parts* reflects both their aesthetic and their philosophy, which rejects many traditions of documentary film: narrative structure, voiceover narration, identifying titles, and musical soundtracks, for example. “Documentaries tend to be too timo-

rous, and too beholden to the conventions of broadcast journalism,” Paravel explains. “I’m allergic to the strictures of a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach, in which the filmmaker tries to be completely invisible and inaudible, as if they’re some kind of all-seeing God who has no real relationship with the subjects in front of the camera. For me, films should enact and embody an encounter, rather than just report on one after the fact. The notion of a unidirectional gaze is an illusion—a camera’s vision is always returned and contested by those in front of it.”

The result is a film that draws the viewer into an unfamiliar but very real place. (“Sure, it’s an ethnographic film,” Paravel jokes, “—like any other fictional film.”)

Whatever its genre, *Foreign Parts* seems to resonate strongly with audiences: it won the Best First Feature prize at the prestigious Locarno Film Festival, best-film prizes at three other European festivals, and was an official selection for the New York Film Festival.

“I try to offer something for viewers to see, experience, and make sense of on their own terms, rather than imposing my own interpretation through a voiceover,” Paravel explains. “I try not to finger-point. This is more empowering for the subjects, and also for the viewers. Film at its best aspires to be a medium of commensality rather than mere communication, a way of sharing and reliving the world with one’s subjects.” ▢

## Salads with Panache

*Gardening, mixing, and tossing in Santa Fe*

THE HIGH DESERT and gourmet salads; experience as both a *fashionista* and a farmer. Unlikely pairings apparently come naturally to Erin Wade ’03, farmer, chef, and owner of Vinaigrette, a salad bistro in Santa Fe. The menu at her 68-seat establishment (100 seats in the summer, when the patio is open) offers about 20 varieties of salad daily—and her creations have a way of hitting the palate with aplomb. Consider the robust Apple-Cheddar Chop (\$15.95)—grilled pork tenderloin over peppery baby arugula, julienned green apples, pickled fennel, and sharp cheddar, chopped and tossed in a ruby port vinaigrette, or the relatively light Eat Your Peas (\$9.95)—fresh baby lettuce and sweet green peas with crunchy bacon shards, savory white mushroom sauté, and Asiago cheese with a tart vinaigrette. Should you

come during the growing season (roughly late May to late September), there’s a good chance that Wade will have picked your greens herself that very morning.

She began to think seriously about food after college, while studying to become a fashion designer in Milan. “The Italian attitude toward pleasure and food, it’s infectious,” she says. “It’s this sense of entitlement—that everyone deserves good food.” A Milanese pizzeria that featured more than 100 different pizzas, ranging from kiwi and *talleggio* to Gorgonzola and hazelnut, inspired her; all were “simple, fresh, and healthy.”

“As a woman coming out of college, I was looking for a way of eating, a philosophy of eating, that wasn’t deprivational,” she recalls. “I wanted to eat in a way that was loving and nurturing.”

Wade tends her three-acre garden, with a 1,200-square-foot greenhouse, in Nambé, a hamlet 20 miles north of Santa Fe, with help from one other gardener. Her family bought the 10-acre parcel of land, including the



**Salad creator Erin Wade on her New Mexico farm. (At left) Wade's Cherry Tart salad at Vinaigrette in Santa Fe**

300-year-old adobe fixer-upper where she now lives, in 2003 as a family redoubt, but Wade moved in after returning from Milan unclear about her career plans.

In 2004, she began planting cover crops like alfalfa and legumes to replenish the soil's nitrogen, and began trying to irrigate, a task far more complicated than she'd first expected, given the area's written and un-

