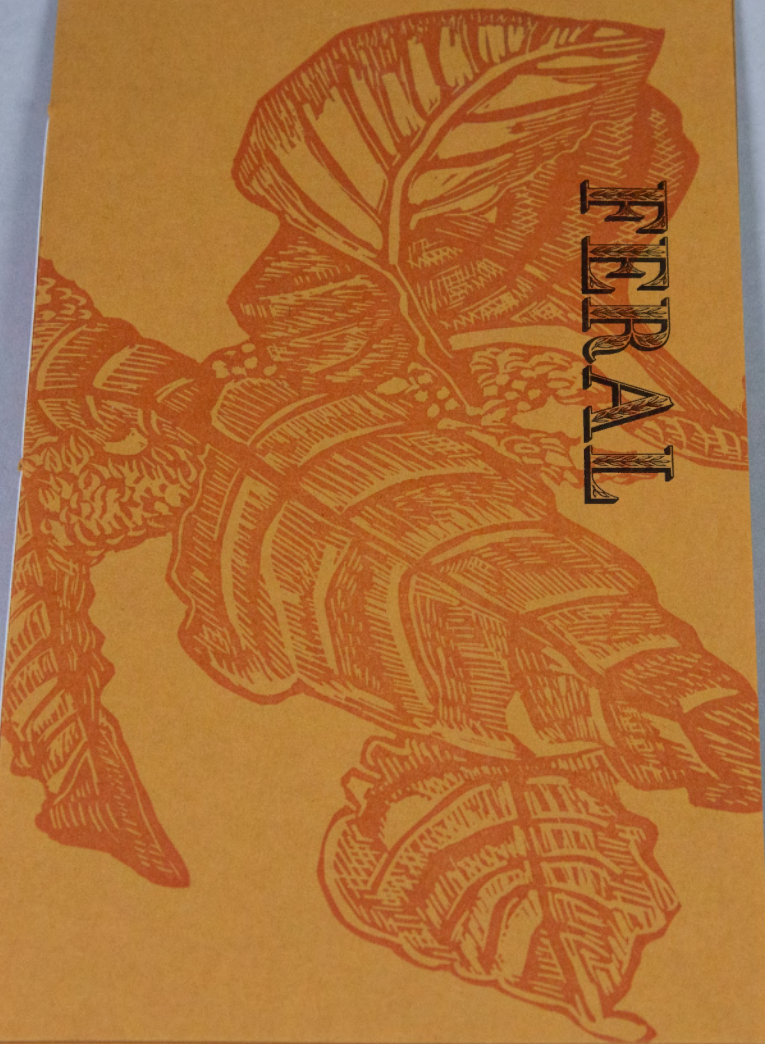


FERRAT





BRAIN WASHING from PHONE TOWERS
Informational Pamphlets

Sarah Nicholls, *pamphleteer*
www.brainwashingfromphonetowers.com
sarah@sarahnicholls.com

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It's May 1st. It has rained all weekend long, flooding streets across NYC and soaking through my inadequate raincoat. On my way to the train I think about walking through the park north of my apartment, but abandon this plan due to mud. I wonder when I will have time this week to go out to harvest some garlic mustard, which arrived a few weeks ago, at exactly the point where things tipped from *almost spring* to *full on spring*. That point feels early this year, and I remember wearing my winter coat in mid April in years past. Mid April felt more like summer than winter this year.

Garlic mustard is classified as an invasive plant, and if you google it the first link that comes up calls it *highly destructive*. I've been told that new growth of garlic mustard in the spring will make a soft green paper and I want to try to make some. It is a plant native to Europe and Asia, brought over in the mid-nineteenth century as herbal medicine. Crushing the leaves releases a garlic scent which gives the plant its name. Young plants are edible, and many people gather it as food.

Gathering plants for use as food or material is a basic activity that humans have practiced for millennia. A word often used to describe the land where this is practiced is *the commons*, referring to land that is accessible to all members of a community. The resources of this land are understood to be managed for individual and collective benefit, even if the land is privately owned. *Common rights* refers to the right of members of the community to access and use land to gather wood, to hunt or fish, to pasture animals, and to forage.

Native peoples across the Americas do not view land as something to be owned but as something to be communally stewarded. Common rights are not an exception to private property rights, they are a basic principle underlining their communities. Even after the arrival of European colonists, common rights were practiced by NYC residents in a variety of ways. Colonial farmers would pasture their animals on common land. Working class people would gather oysters and fish in the Hudson, or gather plants for food, or herbs for medicine in areas not yet deforested and turned into



that could take place there. Nature was pristine and separate from human activity. People entering parks would only be able to interact with the land in certain kinds of ways, and traditional common rights like foraging would be restricted and labeled as vandalism. Native people, African American communities, and working class immigrants, groups who did not own their land, and had limited amounts of money to purchase food, became used to supplementing their diet and maintaining their cultural traditions through gathering forage on public land. They all found themselves policed by the parks department. But these practices never completely disappeared; even today you can find people foraging for mushrooms, ginkgo berries, or mugwort. You can also go on a foraging tour of Central Park with someone who calls himself Wildman Steve Brill, who is mostly tolerated by the Parks Department even as he leads tour groups through the park, sampling sumac and mulberries. He was arrested back in '86 for foraging but since then has led his tours, promoting a participatory, non-destructive relationship to nature, especially the forms of nature that are close to hand.





There are good reasons to be cautious around foraging in New York City Parks. Here are some questions that should run through your mind: Are you certain that plant is edible? How certain? What about the soil the plant is growing in, is it toxic? How can you tell? How much of the plant is here, and how much can you justify taking? Do you need it more than the birds and animals that live here? Is this plant home for another species? Truthfully, if everyone began indiscriminately harvesting plants in the park, we would all have much less plant diversity to enjoy. But this assumes that foraging is similar to other kinds of extractive relationships to nature, and also that the majority of New Yorkers would rather gather their food in the park than the grocery store. Neither of these seem to me to be true.

Responsible foragers gather a small amount of each plant at a time. Don't take more than the remaining plants can easily replace. Harvest in a way that causes the least damage to the plant. Selectively harvesting many plants can actually stimulate growth and help them flourish. Foraging can also be an act of stewardship, a way to actively engage with a landscape. Or it can be a way of controlling the spread of an invasive species.



by Ted
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activity, by fencing them off, protecting their
borders, and controlling the kinds of things

