

– *Written by Solidarity Gardeners*

“Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance?” – Saidiya Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America

On June 3rd, Jefferson Westside Neighbors, a city-funded neighborhood association, released a newsletter article accusing community members of stealing flowers from people’s front yards and selling them to passersby on the street. JWN provides no evidence for this claim but still implores people to not purchase the bouquets and to file police reports (despite admitting the petty nature of their concerns). Supposedly this “activity degrades the neighborhood livability for everyone.” Some neighbors are seemingly not included in “everyone.” If they were, the complaints raised by Jefferson Westside Neighbors about the crucial role the flowers play in neighborhood liveability would acknowledge that these flowers are more impactful for the people who may be forced to sell them on the streets to survive than they are for the people watching behind their Ring cameras.

The disconnection from and dehumanization of our neighbors who are pushed to the peripheries has a vicious hold on the hearts of the average NIMBY homeowner too. When whole segments of the city’s population, invariably marginalized ones, become objects to surveil rather than fellow human beings to witness, the crushing logic of the state finds fertile ground for its projects of exploitation, enforced precarity, and internalized colonialism.

There is a liberal myth that knowledge is a function of detachment. To be involved is to distort the purity of understanding. But the project of thinking and enacting human

relationships as a scientific endeavor has always been a reactionary project (eugenics, social Darwinism, race science; to name a few examples). What the NIMBY views as objective and neutral behavior is neither. The veneer of objectivity and neutrality is afforded to those who reproduce the logic and goals of dominance; be it by the state or a neighborhood association. You are not better informed because you spied on someone from your Ring camera rather than talk to them. You are not a neutral captive of the laws as written and society as it appears today. The criminal doesn't come into being when someone decides to break the law; criminality is an analytic and identity grafted onto those we choose to criminalize. Former police detectives will tell you one reason to never talk to cops is everyone breaks the law all the time. Putting out a newsletter with surveillance images of unhoused neighbors and asking people to file police reports is not respecting the law. It is using the existence of the law as a means of exerting power to discipline and punish people you don't think should exist. The largest share of theft in this country is consistently wage theft, which occurs when employers do not properly compensate employees. Wage theft is also disproportionately targeted at the marginalized and precarious. This is to say nothing of the fundamental exploitation at the heart of our labor system. Every Ring camera-bearing home in the city is on stolen land.

The expansiveness of surveillance, and the feedback loop created by the consumption and enactment of it, grows more deleterious by the day. LAPD has begun using footage taken from Waymo, a driverless taxi company, in investigations. Drones, driverless car cameras, homeowner cameras, phones; the gaps in surveillance which police departments can't fill for lack of labor are being filled by technology and volunteers. Everyone and everything, everywhere, a snitch. The suspicion and involvement of the surveillance state are reinforced by copaganda. Despite crime rates continuing to drop, politicians and media figures

continue to scaremonger, and people readily buy into the rhetoric. Police departments deliver ready-made releases to local news outlets who run the stories uncritically due to deep cuts in staffing and resources. We surveil, and in doing so we provide information to the state free of charge. The state acts on that information and reports back to us on the vital necessity of its violent action. Hearing these reports reinforces in us our need to surveil more. Snitching isn't just bad for the soul, it will break your brain.

"We can be redeemed only to the extent to which we see ourselves" – Martin Buber, Ten Rungs: Collected Hasidic Sayings

The alternative to playing volunteer cop and twisting ourselves into ever more horrid shapes at the behest of power is to bear witness to the world and each other. To surveil is to create distance. It is to be absent, unseen, untouched. The Ring camera doesn't just mediate vision at a physical distance; it imposes an existential distance between the surveyor and the subject (turned object). It creates a gulf across which understanding, relationship, and solidarity are impossible. The alienating technology of surveillance purports to protect the surveyor from the anxiety of the Other, but it is itself the creator of this anxiety and alienation. To witness is to approach, to be present with, to value truth. As The Verso Podcast host Eleanor Penny says, "Witness is the first gesture of change, the first gesture of solidarity." A better world is possible but getting there requires that we acknowledge and actively engage with the world as it is now. When we see pain, tragedy, and struggle we need to be drawn closer. Even if all you can do is to bear witness, it moves you toward the Other and toward yourself. Abjection and alienation are wounds which deepen and fester the longer we separate ourselves from each other. The wound is the cut between you and the Other, closing it means approaching. The state is invested in distance. It is a technology for creating

and maintaining ever-greater control across ever greater distances. Our solutions must be community-based, must be personal. We must bear witness and act so we can find each other and ourselves, save each other and ourselves.

“So what can we really do for each other except—just love each other and be each other’s witness? And haven’t we got the right to hope—for more? So that we can really stretch into whoever we really are?” – James Baldwin, *Another Country*

This piece emerged out of the disgust and anger of volunteers for the Solidarity Garden in response to JWN’s newsletter. The Solidarity Garden will be expanding its flower garden and invites all who feel called to come out and help. Flowers from the Solidarity Garden are available to all based only on want and need. Volunteer hours are Sundays 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. If you are growing some lovely flowers in your yard and you aren’t a volunteer cop, consider posting a sign letting people know the flowers are available.

We’re all we’ve got. We’re all we need.