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# That Kind OF CHANGE

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*Tomorrow was too late to arm yourself.*  
—Nikki Giovanni

# INTRODUCTION

I admit that when I was asked to provide scholarly commentary on the newly-discovered poems by the near-mythical figure of John Sweeny and his contemporaries, I was intimidated. The texts that comprise this volume were discovered in a remarkably well-preserved foundation by Atlanta Autonomous University's Nathaniel Bateman's recent archaeological dig in the desert southwest. The site has been authenticated as being the original village of Chance, the first Autonomous Community of the Federation, and, as any student of our history knows, the last resting place of John Sweeny and home of many other prominent figures in the Change War. I am greatly indebted to Buffalo Autonomous University's Abdul Rahman for his tireless work collecting historical references and documents to corroborate my findings. His knowledge of antique data storage systems and dexterity in ferreting out the ephemeral news stories of the past has been immeasurably helpful. Further documentation of his research is available through the BAU archives. I have elected not to include his references in this text out of respect for space and aesthetics.

Poetically speaking, these texts are in the ironic, short-burst telegraphic style that was prevalent during and just after the Change War. Individuals would often record their impressions of events in poems addressed to friends, sometimes divided into multiple sections. These poems would then be collected into volumes some years later, when most of the correspondents had died. There are many examples of these collections extant, the most influential being A. Joron's "Enigmatic Glowing," which is the collected meditations of a small religious community in the Cascade Mountains, edited and annotated by that venerable poet of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The primary purpose of these collections was to provide the descendants of the writers with a clear and multidimensional view of the authors' lives.

It is assumed that the collector and editor of these poems was Ruma Velazquez, the daughter of Sweeny and his long-time partner, Nikki Velazquez.

In this edition, the presumed speaker in each poem will be placed at the head of the poem. Traditionally, the speakers' names are left off, in an attempt to express the lived totality of the co-authors' experience, rather than creating an indelible monument to one person's egoistic experience of events.

Out of great respect for the authors and the quality of their work, this edition will also be made available without my commentary.

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Buffalo Autonomous University,  
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## COMMENTARY ON “NIKKI, THE MOTHER”

This section briefly touches on the origins of Sweeny and Velazquez, and hints that they had personal contact before his return to the US from his exile in Mexico. Our third-hand knowledge of Sweeny and Velazquez indicate nothing about the nature of their relationship prior to the foundation of Chance, but these poems seem to indicate a personal, if not romantic, attachment. She mentions the Freedom Riders, which was a network of non-violent direct action groups active in the struggle against global capital. They were very active in that first, idealistic phase of the Change War, confronting what we now refer to as the corporate petrologarchy at their summits and meetings and disrupting the flow of industrial trade. They were largely Gandhian pacifists, seeking to bring the unacknowledged oppressions of capital to the forefront of the news media. It can be safely assumed that Velazquez was a member of this group.

The Los Angeles Uprising of 2014 is widely regarded as the first real battle of the Change War, even though it came nearly fifteen years before the first large-scale conflicts broke out. The uprising began as a nonviolent protest against the closing of several public schools in the city of Los Angeles and the surrounding communities, organized by teachers' unions and, as the news stories of the day claim, “co-opted by the radical element gaining power in the tent cities that surround the downtown area.” The report continues: “As mounted police contained the protestors on a freeway overpass, members of the fringe group Freedom Riders approached from the south, brandishing banners, signs, and musical instruments. Police responded by tightening their formation and attempting to move the main body of union protestors off of the overpass. Several union members plunged from the overpass into traffic on I-5 below.” It was at this point that Sweeny's small, heavily armed, unaffiliated group ambushed police from a side street, clearing the way for the protestors to fan out across downtown LA. For the remainder of the day, small bands of masked, armed individuals ambushed police in the streets and the city's population looted and burned many businesses and government offices. What had begun as a simple protest became a national incident requiring ten thousand soldiers and one week to “put down.”

At this time news was broadcast from centralized, industry-funded networks of reporters, who were considered more trustworthy than first-hand accounts by most viewers. The Los Angeles Uprising stoked the fears of the country at the time, and there are reports from across the United States in the two years following of similar incidents. This news clip demonstrates the level of fear Sweeny's first strike caused, as well as the pro-authoritarian bias of institutional news reporting of that time:

Tullytown: The sleepy suburb of Tullytown woke to explosions last night, as several homemade incendiary devices detonated inside the headquarters of Corrections Solutions, Inc, a private

# Nikki, THE MOTHER

## 1.

*Where was the eye of the media? It scared me,  
But he needed more.  
He, like most, getting militant, used direct action tactics.*

*We went where we wanted,  
breaking windows and ideals—  
In the corrupt society, there was less warmth  
at what was (considered) violent.  
He broke a window, in the US, in Los Angeles.  
The Freedom Riders, turning their faces to this,  
gave themselves up,  
declared him off limits.*

*From that one executed executive  
sprouted the fists of our corrupt society.  
What it took to really change faces,  
break windows, or enrich his distance.  
Having a rough day, Ruima, cost us our practice.*

## 2.

*Then they sell their lives, these folks.  
We believed in the world, eternal rock.  
He determined to take what he needed,  
there was no ramp that month—no lines, or tree sits.  
Later, he reached out from his loosely affiliated crew,  
your father, commander of the six o'clock news.*

*And I saw a revolution.*

## 3.

*This time, innovative strategies  
become bumperstickers, buttons, patches.  
He imagined a society where “the left”  
gnawed stones and waited for the Second Coming.  
His belief was that most men  
were ideologically unsound and twisted.*

contractor that brokers prison labor contracts with American companies. Approximately \$100,000 damage was done to the building, in addition to as-yet uncounted damage in lost data. “This is yet another example of homegrown terrorism,” said Suffolk County Sherriff Jim Durmont. When asked whether he believed the organization that executed this attack has links to the national organization that fomented the Los Angeles Uprising, Sherriff Durmont said he couldn’t say for sure but that “it’s definitely possible.”

Some historical notes may aid in understanding some items in this sequence—before the Change War, sloganeering was an honored way of spreading ideology. People used stickers, cloth patches, and faux clothing buttons to adorn themselves and their possessions with slogans and symbols.

The “Wesson Blessing” is a slang term for the bar-coded tattoo on the left hand given to those deputized by the US government. Only individuals with this tattoo were allowed to bear firearms after the Security, Order, and Terror Act of 2025. It became a generalized term for the use of firearms sometime during the late Change War.

It can be inferred from these poems that Sweeny was a leader, or at least a participant, in the underground movement following the Uprising, and that he was reviled both in the press and in the circles of his political allies for his seemingly indiscriminate use of violence against property and individuals.

It is a foundational story of the Autonomous Congress that the un-damming of the Colorado River was what allowed the community of Chance to survive the Change War. After returning from Mexico, Sweeny found a home with Nikki Velazquez in the southwestern deserts. The only fresh water in the region was pumped from the Colorado, either to far-off Los Angeles, or even farther away, to the ethanol cornfields of the Central Valley of California. With the dissolution of the United States’ federal power, Sweeny and his militia group were able to free the waters, simultaneously depriving a nearby rival warlord (“Lord” Sepulveda of the Inland Empire, an unfortunately grandiose choice of name, given his eventual defeat) of irrigation, and gaining it for his community.

It is appropriate that the freeing a river from its bounds has become a symbol of the celebration of autonomy over authority—the community of Chance emerged from the war relatively unscathed. It is also ironic that the River Commission, the ultimate expression of petroligarchic authority during the war, provided Sweeny with the material and expertise needed to destroy those dams.

In surviving poetic memoirs by Ruima Velazquez, it is made clear that Nikki, in her old age, reserved her most bitter recriminations, not for the last of the power-grabbing petroligarchs, but for those on the “left” who abandoned Sweeny after he turned to violent methods.

*We anarchists were the militant echo chamber.  
Needs were taken care of with a Smith and Wesson.  
The bricks were thrown by protesters in the night.  
My existence bent in his direction,  
toward the biceps of his protest.  
Trying to gain use of the land,  
poor countries rose in revolution,  
soon the whole fairy tale  
was in our bones, in hunger, death,  
And he eyed Los Angeles with jealousy.*

4.

*The Diggers and Wesson blessing:  
Liberty for all, where we work.  
His cement moment, two big undercovers  
trying to pull people on TV,  
he saw them waving that stupid, limp protester.  
That, to him, was the big war.*

*He went pariah,  
face down on the cement,  
raging at the civil rights,  
the anti-war that may have never come.*

*Simple: did breaking a window  
place him on the side of the dead?  
He'd been attacking cops.  
I was accepting;  
our folks got farms  
if we brought enough rags and fire.*

5.

*At protests I was told I was waving a lost, good thing.*

*Flat  
dry red  
earth.  
Who we are.*

*Wet, hearing myself and my illegal broadcasting, I feel relieved.  
I don't just want ash.  
I believe.*

## COMMENTARY ON “RUIMA, THE DAUGHTER”

Much more is known about Ruima Velazquez than is known about either of her parents. She, more than anyone, is responsible for defending John Sweeny’s story, and situating his struggle within the larger struggle for autonomy. Her insistence was always that Sweeny’s actions were guided by autonomous principles, even those that may have seemed arbitrary and counter-productive, like his massacre of the last units of government troops at the Battle of Georgetown, or his longstanding relationship with the Mormon patriarchs to the north of Chance.

Born into the turbulent times of the war, and coming of age during the complex emergence of the Council of Autonomous Communities, Ruima’s view of her father is colored by a sense of realpolitik that other biographers lack. As a child she watched the long meetings between the Diggers--Sweeny’s militia group--and representatives of Chance, bargaining for protection and territory. She witnessed, as a teen, the final summit of paramilitaries, where the mercenary groups paid by the River Commission decided that their employer was an enemy to liberty, and marched east to defeat them.

Sweeny is often criticized for being unconcerned with individual liberty and rights, for assuming for himself summary judgment and military power. And his methods were unsavory. Sweeny’s name was used as a bogey man for American children well into the 2040’s, when the autonomous model of Chance he defended and promoted had already spread far and wide. In her final days, Ruima Velazquez was asked what she hoped the world would remember about her father’s fight. Her now-famous reply was, “I hope people will remember that he was a man who cherished the autonomy and freedom of the future above his own moral purity.”

The environmental challenges faced by the early inhabitants of Chance were many. The constant desert heat, which grew more intolerable each year, meant farm work, and fighting, could be only done at night. With so many fewer demands on its flow, the Colorado River provided plentiful water for irrigation and drinking, and Chance thrived, despite the difficulties.

Every member of the community of Chance was required to pledge him or herself to the land where the community lived, and to his or her fellow community members.

## Ruima, THE DAUGHTER

### 1.

*You and your history—  
a fine distinction when you had members of Congress.  
Father was wounded by their faces.  
He was surrounded by the members of their extremism.  
He’d said, “We need the land, and how long a time do we have?”  
Better luck wasn’t what he listened to.*

*If our children look to history,  
they see the food just stopped—  
the stupid slogans rolled up  
against the buffoons’ consumption.*

*Over the next decade,  
the fairy tale we hungered for was crushed hard.  
As Father marched east,  
it seemed his eyes squinted into the distance.  
And that dust changed nothing.*

### 2.

*Mother, respect your traditions.  
Meetings, discussions, cantonments.  
Warmer places than the steam vents.*

*He despised “freedom,” despised America,  
and aimed at the head,  
and was not  
the real killer.*

*He saw it was too late to properly arm himself.  
Hospitals, churches, burned buildings—  
he begged for it all.*

*Let us find a man, give him simple corn and liberty.  
We’ve seen citizens can begin to rejoin the all.  
All we need is the force to protect each other.*

*In an instant, "could be" can begin.  
And the sky fell.*

**3.**

*We were the women in the night, with increased rage.  
Continue to develop, and you have your freedom.*

*Our message—to listen.*

*This site we will defend with spade and scythe.*

**4.**

*We make you a solemn pledge:  
to the red land of the desert,  
our bones in clothes,  
to defend our vital interests  
against that confronting hand.*

**5.**

*We've seen what was needed and now finger,  
idiotic, corroded fire on the wide sea.*

*Drawing breath.*

**6.**

*Our reconstruction,  
our soft technology,  
our steps.*

*Because stones think,  
the world believed we deserved famine.*

*Mother, let us come to finally take it away.  
we witnessed stirring moments wherever freedom  
advanced the jubilant Smith and Wesson dream of the children,  
urban barricades for some,  
to defend our land when the commander in chief of our poisons burst.*

*The history of liberty.  
We've seen arresting officer's negotiations,  
the protests, read the novels.  
We have reviewed our strategy,  
and People of the Chance will choose a future,  
and come clean.*

*Or else, sickness,  
the River wants all of it—  
and is training militia groups.  
And our children look to short lives  
and do nothing, nothing.*

COMMENTARY ON “SWEENEY A HISTORY OF THE CHANGE WAR”

John Sweeney’s involvement in the Change War is complex and difficult to parse, but this poem provides some insight. The broad outlines are well-known—he was heavily involved with the widespread resistance to federal authority in the years between the Los Angeles Uprising and the Philadelphia Uprising, fled to Mexico for some years, returning to the States after the failure of the Carta Colloquy and the foundation of the River Commission. Having maintained his underground contacts during his exile, he was able to assemble the paramilitary force that became known as the Diggers and hire on with the Commission to provide security for the Executive Branch of the government. In the course of his duties as a private contractor, he reunited with his longtime companion, Nikki Velazquez, presumably in the community of Chance, which Velazquez founded after leaving overt political activism. At that time Chance was a large affinity group of farming squatters and artisans, occupying an out-of-the-way corner of Arizona.

As the federal government became less and less viable, Sweeney convened a meeting of paramilitary and resistance groups, someplace in the desert near the settlement of Chance. At this meeting it was decided that these groups would coordinate an attack on Washington and maintain peace among their communities while rebuilding. With environmental challenges, fuel crises, widespread disease, and several foreign wars (or “interventions,” as the federal government called them at the time) to contend with, the US government was weak enough to be toppled by this force.

While it is generally believed that Sweeney had little in the way of political consciousness, it is evident in these poems that he had many anti-authoritarian, and even anti-capitalist, leanings. The repeated references to the “owners” and the obvious disdain he feels for the Commission indicates the loss of faith in authority. Considering that the stated mission of the River Commission was to “restore order and democracy to the United States” and that their first action was to dissolve the House of Representatives and impose martial law, it is not surprising the Sweeney’s (and many others’) ideological backlash was harsh. The death of the president was said to be a breaking point for many, especially when the press amplified the conspiracy theory that his helicopter, provided by the Commission, was intentionally sabotaged.

Sweeney also had a keen sense of identification and detachment, which he repeatedly described as the “fuck it” point. Theorists since the Change War have further articulated this idea—that there is a point at which each individual will cease to identify with the system she is being exploited by. Until one realizes that there

# Sweeney: A HISTORY OF THE CHANGE WAR

1.

*The man with three kids (Me) reached the hunger years,  
the terror of rutting mouths; the living small, then the fall.*

*And that old earnest hippy claptrap seemed foolish as our poisons burst—  
with these simple and quick deaths, luck was what said “fuck it.”*

*The Diggers, we felled the megaphones, blood bags, backboards and tasers.  
We loved something, and nothing happened.*

*Finally, our fracture—bone survivalist militia minions,  
without land rights—carefully planned, honed and timed—*

*We raged so carefully,*

*Revolution was our dinner table.*

2.

*River Commission wanted us, it drove us forward—People, guttered or  
buried.*

*Stages, open and twisted metal and killed for.*

*I was given to touch someone.*

*We were levelers, diggers, exploders with oiled rags and fire.  
we were muzzled, cramped, chafed, in the irrigated desert, California and  
Texas.*

*In Philly, the homeless had built something of the rust-through on the  
steam vents, underground—their rage, the blood bags burst, the ghosts  
marched.*

*After they were hauled off, we burned the building.  
Those clowns were traditional about being tolerant—we fools killed.*

*When their dreams were really dead—our mobility became that distance—  
our detachment.*

is more to be gained by destruction of a system than there is by participation in it, any resistance to the system is bound to be reformist. After she passes this point, an individual's options for action become wider, and include violent resistance. This is not a new idea, and there are many possible places Sweeny could have encountered it. My feeling is that it is something he learned in Mexico, because it is after his return that his actions and writings become more proactive and systematic.

The first line of the first poem in this sequence is troubling, because as far as we know today, Sweeny's only child was Ruima Velazquez. I am again indebted to Abdul Rahman's research, as he was able to pinpoint some evidence of Sweeny's early life. Records from that era are very difficult to access, but there is a financial record of a John Sweeny in a Los Angeles suburb called Thousand Oaks; it is a notice of foreclosure. Foreclosure is an alien concept to us today, but at that time people who wished to own a home had to ask a centralized, privately-owned banking company to purchase it for them and then accept an inflated debt to be paid back in increments. If at any time the "homeowner" was unable to make the required payment, he was removed by officers of the law from the house, and was no longer considered the owner of the house. It is possible the John Sweeny in these records is the John Sweeny of whom we now speak.

Further evidence for this possibility is a small news article from a year later which quotes a "John Sweeny" at length. There had been an attack on a tent city outside of downtown Los Angeles. The tent city was mostly inhabited by families who had lost their homes to the banks, and the attack was devastating; many were killed:

John Sweeny was one of the survivors and reporter Gayle Chin had a chance to talk to him today. "I have lost everything," he said, tightly controlling his tears. "My wife, my kids, are dead. They just swept through the camp, shooting everyone and burning everything." Mr. Sweeny, a former teacher whose home was foreclosed nearly a year ago, is one among many who lost everything in the attack. Several times during the interview, his emotions got the better of him; his anger and sorrow were palpable. When asked where he would go next, he replied, "I don't know. I have nothing. But I do know one thing. I am going to do something. I don't know what, but something has got to be done."

### 3.

*What we needed was radical—a fairy tale that would be each person's alone.*

*To use the land.*

*As the owner reached into his pocket, with a smug smirk,  
we triggered something.*

*Up the exit ramp this month—the ethanol corn, if some would just listen,  
was the gravest of errors.*

*Nothing we built survived.*

### 4.

*This happened as people begged—the act was like revolution—  
But mine was serious business, revenge—not a prophet,*

*at root I was a "terrorist"—so count the human cost:  
murder and slaughter ruled—years, and years, some with courage—  
and so many of the owners died at my hand.*

*And the world, in an ideology shared, saw square-on the stolen land.*

### 5.

*all our eyes saw shreds of sense, and we felt the need was radical—  
to root out discourse and words, the fascists and Franco and Ford,  
and each other.*

*And my Smith and Wesson blessing was the given sign.*

### 6.

*Bombs were blown, not even a hair of fear when they came to take it—  
at thirty dollars per gallon—the whole town's got a filthy right to eat.*

*And the whole town said "go," chucked the truth of change—flat pariahs,  
not prophets, but loaded, fully noncompliant.*

*With the stronger hand, we survived intact.*

### 7.

*We will still need some songs, speeches, interpretive dances;  
we enslaved, our clean rebellious bones, will rise.*

Though the attack was initially blamed on local street gangs, it later came out that it was an undercover group of off-duty local and federal officers who carried out the massacre in collusion with local authorities who were concerned about the growing number of tent cities in Los Angeles County. The news broadcasters ultimately explained it away as a “drug enforcement raid” gone sour. Given the pervasive racism of the time, and the fact that most of the tent city residents were of African-American or Latino-American descent (Including Sweeny himself, who was black), the blasé response on the part of the public was to be expected. It was three months after this raid that the Los Angeles Uprising took place.

There is an oblique reference to the Philadelphia Uprising of 2017, similar in tactics to that of 2014 in Los Angeles, a non-violent protest (the “clowns”) turning into a widespread riot. It was shortly after this uprising that Sweeny was identified by federal agencies as a leader of a widespread and organized resistance and listed as a wanted man. It is also shortly after this that Sweeny fled to Mexico.

There is much in this series of poems that reveals the nature of the later Change War—the widespread food shortages caused by conversion of food farms into farms producing biomass for the manufacture of ethanol vehicle fuel and the constantly shifting propaganda broadcast by the River Commission, for example. Another thing that emerges is the political need for a landbase. Once Sweeny’s Diggers had pledged to protect the community of Chance, and settled among them, the tenor of the war changed. Many groups found that this was the element that had been missing for nearly two decades. The Mormons to the north of Chance also grasped this early, and drew out and closed their borders. After the battle of Georgetown, both the militia the non-militia citizens realized that the combination of local governance and food security was the key to autonomy.

*A dirty technology using little burr hook stickers  
to hitch a ride on the collapse—*

*Luck, the mother of chances lost,  
the posies, the ashes, ashes.*

**8.**

*Hidden under a tarp with the minority leader of the Senate:  
I saw a rust-through of my delusions, and their professional qualifications.*

*The Commission elected, and retreated,  
blessing the invisible fist as it appeared.*

*I was a machine for killing. The biceps of good hard fighting  
called the shots.*

**9.**

*First the Capitol Mall, then the fall.*

*The world, the eternal rock of the Senate; and Federal Agencies-  
the River wanted, needed, levelers, diggers, exploders,  
a Chair and a Vice for this kind of hungry scrape.*

*And I was identified by the Chairman  
of the ranking minority for rapid social change.*

*Appointed by the individual members, my homegrown terrorism (and 10  
others’)  
were appointed for the revolution.*

*Every technologic destiny of the children died.*

*It died.  
That kind of change.*

**10.**

*It was the evil kind of hungry made the River necessary.  
The balance point took its time—*

*our last want, though, was to advance political Representatives.*

*The muscle of what sets you seething—you distrust.*

*You’re pariah, when it comes to that,*

*not a man who is given the hand  
he reaches out for.*

**11.**

*I conducted the commander in chief to the machine,  
and we remember he was destined to be an axis of glory and terrorism.*

*Anyone can out his stupid slogans—And the fat stomachs of those who owned,  
and the sweat, and the regulations, and the Executive Orders that radicalized  
the unaffiliated “terrorists.”*

*So, not limited to behavioral science this time—  
a revolution.*

**12.**

*So we fought him.*

*His executive orders governed the belief system.*

*I stopped waving that stupid flag,  
a simpler hunger was crushed into terrorism.*

*We wore down those “betters” whose arrogance, born, raised,  
and commissioned, considered important every broadcast saying “mine.”*

*I stopped waving and plugged those Chairmen of the Committee,  
those “betters,” those who had made me.*

**13.**

*We felt the right people were finally hungry in the United States.  
For we felt a need for homegrown terrorism in our funny likes and dislikes.*

*The liberals marching signs were impossible.  
The River Commission was the sole basis of our metal.  
They had the dirt and the base violence.*

*In the irrigated desert,  
we “homegrown terrorists,”  
ideologically debased,  
fight for these others,  
these locals,  
in the end,  
for a tribal homeland.*

*Tomorrow was too late.*

**14.**

*Certain governments, including the stones,  
thought the United States should not stay united.*

*In liberty and belief, they voted and pocketed the wrong terrorism.*

## COMMENTARY ON “NIKKI, DURING THE WAR”

These poems trace the experience of Nikki during the Change War. While news records of that period turn up little about the founding of the community of Chance prior to Sweeny’s paramilitary march on Washington, DC, oral histories written down in the first generation, including the memoirs of Ruima Velazquez, abound. Generally speaking, Chance was the result of a group of former Freedom Riders and other activists deciding to “drop out” of activism and pursue a different course of life. Squatting in the desert along the rarely-flowing Colorado River, the community worked out its culture and norms against the backdrop of the Mid-Change War chaos. The elder Velazquez was instrumental in maintaining the community as a line of escape from the collapse of the petroligarchy, an opaque zone for anyone who was willing to work and respect her fellow community members.

The precarious nature of squatting led to the necessity for defense, which was largely seen to by members of the community at first, then by a detachment of Sweeny’s Diggers when they came north from Mexico. Many such small autonomous communities were founded throughout the country as groups of people ceased to see the federal state as a reliable provider of food and protection, and with many larger issues on its plate, the government largely let them alone.

It was Velazquez who introduced the idea of a landbase as an anchoring force to Sweeny and many of the other paramilitary bands who joined him. At the final meeting of resisters, before the march on Washington, Velazquez challenged each of the men and women present to choose a place to defend, and to settle in, after the war was over. She was able to clearly and simply explain to them how they had been used by the River Commission, or by whatever political faction for whom they were fighting (there were many) to restore, not order, but elite control of the landbase. She challenged them to root their fight in a particular place. This speech, available to us via oral histories of the era, is recorded in several different versions, but the core message is one of the few things that most of the Autonomous Communities today can agree on—that the health and sacredness of the landbase is primary.

Two curious side items may shed light on this poem. The first is one of the few primary documents from Nikki Velazquez’s notes that is still extant. It is a computer-printed page bearing a single quotation:

Unlike the modern State, Empire does not deny the existence of civil war—instead, it *manages* it. If it denied

## Nikki, DURING THE WAR

### 1.

*Before the war it was true—  
those who owned were debased at bedsides,  
in snickering wealth.*

*Then, we partied our last—  
and that did nothing.  
The cars got small, then the fall—  
scythes and tears and brass casings,  
and no food trucks.*

### 2.

*Then the barricades of some romantic rebellion,  
the open free water, lock and load, the reign of fists,  
the terror—  
those who squint flat with furious faces.*

*The feds wouldn’t save our filthy,  
half-eaten grandchildren’s children,  
so we farmed back of these few fields—  
one someplace of many.*

*Fractures—bone splinters, skulled fascists  
and the Franco and Ford of our poisons,  
the soldiers’ flesh.*

*I sit now with championed men—  
we have many.*

### 3.

*The Diggers had it down—  
homegrown, patches, graffiti,  
careful trade, open free water.*

*Sweeny? Once he’d killed, reached the balance point,  
he began to lead these children of waste and rape,*

it, it would have to do without certain means it needs to steer, or contain, this same civil war. Wherever its networks are insufficiently intrusive, it will ally itself for as long as it takes with some local mafia or even some local guerilla group, on the condition that these parties guarantee they will maintain order in the territory they have been assigned. Nothing is more irrelevant to Empire than the question, “who controls what?”—provided, of course, that *control has been established*.

—“Civil War”

The book from which this quote is drawn may have been the seeds of Velazquez’s astute political understanding of the late Change War. Efforts are underway to see if a copy can be located, but the title is commonplace enough to make such a search, already a challenge, given the state of information systems, very difficult.

The second is the curious, near-religious tone of the final poem in the series. In researching Velazquez’s early activism, Abdul Rahman located several obscure personal web log entries in which the authors fulminated against her activities—accusing her of witchcraft, lesbianism, and other things which were regarded as social evils in that time (the logs are all dated between 2005 and 2013). While the authors of these documents were clearly deranged and hardly credible sources, it can be gleaned from their diatribes that Velazquez’s spiritual beliefs tended towards what today would be called the New Paganism. If that is so, her calling on future generations to revere the “Mother of Chances,” or goddess of luck, would certainly not be out of character.

*our family, a tiny speck.  
a spark.*

*Better luck next time.  
Better blood for discussions—  
use the land as a channel,  
our hands breathed the disease, finally.*

*In his heartless chest he raged at revenge—  
the owners toned up slogans as the sky’s bus fell.*

5.

*In the seventh and bleakest year—  
in the distance, Warplane wings,  
and we, the poems, the protests, the novels,  
our abraded skin, the relentless travel,  
again, we waited for the wind to point.*

6.

*It takes fear—the tighten-up,  
the real killers—it’s true—  
to radicalize the eyes and ears of the prepared—*

*They reach into their heartless chests;  
we breathe, and finally, we eat the toxics.*

*We left several men dead.  
I commanded the lane I needed.*

7.

*Our own learning of famine to blame  
Oh, but how this violence radicalizes,  
having defended “democracy” once,  
the rooting radicals in their graves gave us something to teach.  
the cramped, chafed shovel and the seeds and sweat.*

*Leaping from a burning building—the radiator of despair—  
and the whole bloodwashed bedside tale we are told as children—*

*to be had,  
and to be happy.*

*A glint waits for just-hearted souls.*

**8.**

*So chances lost—the past,  
fire for the ethanol farm owners' thugs.  
Free is anywhere a gun bursts,  
Free is munitions and acreage—  
these will gun the machine down—  
homegrown, this the rust-through of their food chains.*

*The echo chamber,  
that relentless dictionary of speaking souls  
The desert and stomachs of those who have childhood ashes—  
fear in their bones, and eyes.*

**9.**

*Her machete blade calls!  
Fingers in the dirt—*

*Take what Sweeny did not!  
The kind of world he envisioned,  
premature centuries—  
the grave of the Mother of Chances—  
and her lost signs regained,  
every single one.*

## COMMENTARY ON “SWEENY: DEDICATION OF THE STRUGGLE IN LATIN AMERICA”

In the shortest sequence in this volume, these poems expose the roots of Sweeny’s ideological evolution. Prior to his sojourn in Mexico, his actions are largely desperate, a lashing out rather than a revolution. The Mexico of 2020 was a turbulent place. In the face of the escalating global crises of war, famine, disease and climate change, the government of the United States called a summit of all nations of the western hemisphere in Mexico City. The Carta Colloquy was to be a venue for solutions, but it quickly turned into a fiasco. Mexico, in the grip of several internal rebellions from both drug gangs and regional left-wing and indigenous rebel groups, was not a secure place to hold such a summit. Sweeny arrived in the Mexican left-underground just as preparations were underway to alternately welcome and disrupt the Colloquy.

Ultimately the meetings failed, and Mexico passed the Debt Restitution Act, which instated a de-facto slave system for farmers and peasants to assume the Mexican national debt and pay it off with labor. Predictably, the country rose up in anger, and Sweeny was in the midst of political organizing and underground activity again.

Two individuals figure largely in Sweeny’s time in Mexico: Rolando, and Elena Garcia. Rolando was a Zapatista delegate in Mexico City, a man of some stature, insofar as one who is masked and self-effacing in matters of authority can be. Rolando was also Sweeny’s second-in-command for much of the Change War, having come north with him at the end of his Mexican exile. Not much is known about his personal life, except that he had been the one to guide Sweeny in navigating Mexico’s complex political culture.

After the war, he settled in the community of Chance and taught at the community school, and Ruima’s memoirs remember him as a gentle old man who was fond of sternly admonishing the youngsters of Chance about the nature of freedom. His biggest contribution to post-Change culture is the series of children’s books titled *You May Not*, all of which endeavor to teach the value of dignity and mindfulness in the face of bullying and oppression.

For all his tenderness towards children, during the war he was known as a fierce and merciless fighter. Many prefer to blame him, and not Sweeny, for the Georgetown Massacre, though most serious historians will assert that responsibility for that event is not determinable based on currently available documentation.

More is said of Elena Garcia in the comments to the next poem.

## Sweeny: DEDICATION OF THE STRUGGLE IN LATIN AMERICA

### 1.

*The stitching was coming out and,  
looking back at Nikki, I went to save the Other.*

*We are willing, from another country.  
The resistance the same; the ethanol corn.*

*Rolando, the insurgent medical lieutenant,  
respected his ancestors, and cared for them with a fragile crystal arm.*

*I asked him, one cloud to another,  
if the guerrero should dedicate his struggle, or become a faraway recluse.*

*He responded, “We are... Always are we so Given.”*

*We saw the boots of waste and of violence, of death.  
Beset by the den of thieves in the Mexico of that day,*

*Rolando wanted Her fortunate vision,  
what it took to be a woman,*

*mashed in without papers,  
without coasts.*

### 2.

*The Luddite mountains of Mexico tell you to go home.  
Rolando had no price.*

*The politics, the wide, beautiful lesson in contemporary nationalism,  
the fundamental problem remains:*

*Rolando’s government had made a chaotic reordering of the ruins of his face.*

### 3.

*The promise,  
the sign,  
as Zapatistas,  
we didn’t know.*

*Two teams would be erased, disappeared.  
This was a rebel territory, and a clumsy intruder would be created.*

*I didn't believe their simple terms, as they flailed about,  
solving the unknown in the skin and bone they hadn't yet taken off.*

*They, the same ones of life's government, in charge again.  
I ran from the mountains in a shadow of a doubt,*

*What is intelligent offends by selling itself out,  
the impossible geometry of our times, not shined.*

**4.**

*It was the guerrero for me, and I acted.*

*Long gone provocateurs, we loaded up to learn about path of death.*

*Why? Because of you, Ruima?*

*Well, with us, here at the table, well, you already understand,  
now in the Communities.*

*It was a laboratory for a rougher day,*

*Latin America, in Zapatista hands.*

## COMMENTARY ON “SWEENEY: A COMMUNIQUE FROM THE DESERT”

After the failure of the Carta Colloquoy, Rolando and Sweeny retreated from Mexico City to Southwestern Mexico, home of Rolando's paramilitary band, the Death Eyes. It was there that Sweeny met Elena Garcia, an activist involved in several organizations agitating for the respect of human rights by the Mexican government. These groups were generally termed “non-government organizations” due to their multinational scope, and they often served as intermediaries between oppressed peoples and their governments. In Oaxaca, drought and famine had become so severe that some resorted to cannibalism, which, once reported in the world press, spurred the Mexican government to release a small amount of aid. Part of Garcia's work was administering to the food and medical needs of the people of Oaxaca.

Garcia had been organizing, building connections among a collection of groups in Oaxaca when she met Sweeny. Not much is known about the relationship between Garcia and Sweeny. After several months of organizing, the two took a trip back to Mexico City, ostensibly for Garcia's organizing, and Garcia was killed. The authorities arrested Sweeny and charged him with her murder, though no records of evidence can be found for either his innocence or guilt.

Sweeny was mysteriously released, and a short time later, returned north with Rolando and several dozen of the Death Eyes for a meeting with the newly formed River Commission. The timing of these events would seem to indicate that the US state department saw an opportunity to retrieve Sweeny, but there is no indication in any records as to why he was recruited as a mercenary rather than arrested and tried for his crimes prior to his Mexican sojourn. It should be evident to any student of the history of the US State Department and the River Commission that such records, if they ever did exist, have since been destroyed.

One reason for Sweeny's swift recruitment may have been the near-simultaneous secession of Vermont, Texas, and West Oregon from the Union, coupled with the global fuel strike by oil-producing countries, which stranded US soldiers all over the globe. [Currently, Chestnut Autonomous University has research, electronic and real world, underway to discover the fates of these far-flung men and women, due to be published in a year's time.] These crises left the US government with no option but to hire on privately contracted mercenary fighters to “restore order.”

This sequence of poems illustrates the bipolar quality of River Commission propaganda during the middle period of the Change War, before the mercenaries turned on the Commission. Sweeny

## Sweeny: A COMMUNIQUE FROM THE DESERT

### 1.

*From the desert of the American Southwest to the world!  
From the free community of Chance  
to many other communities united in struggle!*

*Some believed that such an effort would  
save their own Continent, Planet Earth.  
To those who word and worm among the powerful,  
those ones who sigh and leave us,  
we do not surrender!*

*Resist! Do not let the “nation model”  
rule the land of morals.  
In their thin skins,  
which critics and advisors say change is enough?*

*Resist! Contravene the cries of those who command!*

*Convince me not to surrender! Resist!*

*Do not bow to international greed!*

### 2.

*Conscientious, the patriot was denied. The Death Eyes squinted.  
All were besieged: more alternatives for humanity,  
we need more campaigns!*

*In my letters, basic pose, to say anything, but be quite fierce.  
Hastening uncertainty, the theoretical analyses.*

*We didn't just face the Army of the South.  
We communicate with smoke signals.*

*However, it may be that we are that Other:  
to love that which is nothing that we are.*

and his newly-named Diggers were lauded in the elite's press as a heroes and protectors, and indeed, Sweeny was often working as protection for the ones he later called "The Owners" of the planet. It is my belief that the proximity to those in power was one of the experiences that led Sweeny to call for the final mercenary march on Washington. In the final poems in this sequence, his disdain for the American government's last attempts at parlay and negotiation are evident. The irony of the River Commission holding mock-negotiations with a few splinter groups and declaring peace as Sweeny's ragtag mercenary march advanced across the Appalachian ridges of Virginia towards Washington is obviously not lost on him. In this sequence, he actually seems to relish it.

The Mid-Change War period is most controversial with regard to Sweeny's legacy and raises more questions than it answers. These poems do not shed light on many of them: Was Sweeny truly working for the government, or was he just taking advantage of a bizarre opportunity for weapons and access to power? Did he actually murder Elena Garcia? Was he rescued from Mexican custody by Rolando's left-underground contacts, or by the US government?

Less relevant politically, but still unanswered: Was his involvement with Garcia a romantic one? Was his relationship with Velazquez maintained during the Mexican years? The tone of these poems, when Garcia or Velazquez is mentioned, and particularly the last poem, is troubled—translucent but not transparent. In these moments we can see Sweeny's humanity most clearly.

3.

*In our principles, or in our hells.*

*The way is real—hunger is not some intellectual's discernment.*

4.

*Whether or not she saved me in the Mexican Southeast,  
she and I were on the street; it became apparent our dead  
were half-eaten.*

*Confusion and fear, and hostility towards the politicians,  
were all it took.*

*We were worthy of a more serious lot  
These, our kisses denied, became an assembly of disagreement.*

*Opposed to having democracy eaten up, I asked,  
anticipating Elena's explanation that we share, like some self-help book,  
the international body.*

5.

*And she disappeared.  
Ah! Finally, the legal dirty business,  
the judicial circus, this city  
in foreign debt tried me for murder!*

*It wasn't her who silently applauded the repression,  
she who had been sitting in a reflection.*

6.

*I take delight in each letter from Chance,  
but Nikki's shadow was not a national sovereignty.*

*I am abandoned. A have-not.*

*The River Commission is selling an illustrious "retirement" for me,  
remaking my voice, cultivating the science,*

*and the speed of dreams.*

7.

*I'm not going to slowly, or quickly, lose the real rebellion.*

*Old hippy labels like “intolerant”, “Stalinist”, the same fundamentalism.  
The mountains of objection in your letters.  
The soldiers, to escape, say I am wrong,*

*but I am every honest candidate!*

**8.**

*At Guadalajara, scribbling sketches, odd phrases, in the halls.  
To destroy/depopulate lands, to rebuild/reorder the notebook of dreams,*

*I stay.*

*In sneakers, flip-flops, we are stewards, I believe.  
It means open free water, confronting the hubris  
of those who own the planet,  
the neoliberal destruction of humanity.*

*The one concise principle of the indigenous;  
harassed, eager for handouts and pity,*

*we have arrived, the disappeared and the dead.*

**9.**

*The fragile transience of food,  
not a crumb of freedom when we will not sell ourselves,  
our dead, our hospitals, churches, our burned buildings.*

*We are the ones who slowly look, and become hard.  
The Commission lacks intelligence, they will die.*

*It occurs that the political players are shameless.  
Below them, we shadows, curled up but never dead,  
the kind that the owners don't give a damn about,  
without any boots, are worn-out.*

**10.**

*Enforced, embodied, the war had ended?  
Even now, with all of this peace,*

*a less regular army sells the illustrious true word:  
Resist!*

**11.**

*She never said so openly, but leave for us the secrets I told her.*

**12.**

*I don't quite remember, but just a few weeks prior to this war,  
a glorious peace was called.*

*We see their work: a thirst for profits.  
For the commoners, the wretched, the president,  
the news shows broadcast relieved sighs.*

*We remain silent in the face of the sky falling.*

*The truth is now we have the only honorable home.*

**13.**

*Once, our paramilitary groups offered the impossible mirror,  
the Segundo Piso, the bullet indigenous, Mexican, and American.*

*Whether we take back the guerrillero's dreams/nightmares,  
we'll come to the dinner table when our indigenous land is liberated,*

*We say that we reject the whole catalogue of arguments.  
Without shame.*

*Despite the meddling risings of the fascists and Franco,  
I see that Elena was my repudiation, my wedge—*

*emerging from exile, conscientious,  
I am breaking the ties.*

**14.**

*The sky falls.  
The same problem:*

*I don't know the world.*

## COMMENTARY ON “SWEENY’S DEATH SPEECH”

Whether these words were recorded near the end of Sweeny’s life is not determinable by archeological evidence, though the tone is one of wistful farewell. This final piece is directed to a specific audience, presumably the youth of Chance.

In this sequence, Sweeny revisits many of the political themes we have already seen, but particularly poignant is his conscious contrast between the “Owners’ patriotism,” and “Autonomy.” The line: “*keep America’s promise (APPLAUSE) and delusion—*” is particularly telling in this regard. In the texts of Sweeny’s preserved mid Change War communiqués, while the Diggers were still fighting on behalf of the River Commission, his American patriotism is evident—his belief in grassroots democracy and the legacy of the Constitution and representative government. About the time he united the Diggers with the community of Chance, his rhetoric shifts to a more authentically autonomy-oriented world view. We might attribute this shift to his increasing contact with Nikki Velazquez; references to her politics in the secondary literature, and certainly Ruima Velazquez’s better-known political writings would seem to support this.

I would have liked to offer a summative statement at the end of this commentary, some sort of cap to explain and delimit what these poems uncover. However, I find myself more inclined to allow the reader to her or his own conclusions, in proper autonomous style. I believe that is what the authors would have wanted, “open, free water,” allowing space and resources for the kind of change that is necessary in each situation to be made real.

## Sweeny’s DEATH SPEECH

### 1.

*Young people end our dependence—you know hunger, you know exchange,  
You understand these challenges, the way the world could see you—*

*our greatest inheritance.*

*I asked for the tactics of terrorism, to do what was necessary,  
that war— it was time for steel.*

*We have, we keep,  
in the 21st century,*

*Autonomy.*

### 2.

*People should run from the news—the flat footed child, compliant,  
was lost.*

*I teach for the coming something.*

### 3.

*Because the killers—the members of Congress—  
had to debate what to say to the people,*

*who signed up the ramp,  
who were hungry,  
who were China-bound slaves,*

*fingering the idiotic, the corroded journey—  
the credit cards, bills they just couldn’t—*

*Those who owned debt in America quieted us into open, armed love.*

**4.**

*Surely we can agree to cast off the known hunger,  
the great radicalizer.*

*You know my story, saw its outcome go up in flames,  
the kids crying, then those sound women planting rows of beans,*

*Nikki, Ruima—many Others,  
We, responsible for ourselves,  
the path that would feed us if we demand it,*

*Once it happens,  
one begins to see that sickness and delusion won't happen—  
in our land the executed executive sprouted mothers.*

**5.**

*Now, I don't believe the Owners' patriotisms:  
when men still re-enlist after losing a limb or hand to terror.*

*Fire, drawing breath into turmoil—*

*I will listen just by talking tough—*

*The young people voted here because we loved what they wanted—  
the freedom-owners thrown.*

*If they ride into town—cut them if they reach for us.  
We've bruises, scrapes, and a country more decent,*

*thanks to the historic slate.*

**6.**

*keep America's promise (APPLAUSE) and delusion—  
it has mashed in our troops—it's this one, the Change War,*

*the war for the coming heart, for those who got that chance.*

*—listen now—  
we are here.*

*the little channels that are nothing,  
a little channel runs to each young student, alone.*

*In every broadcast gun, every machine work and sacrifice,  
They said, "The market will fix it."  
the worn-out ideas and the cynicism—*

*And hungry babies' eyes.*

*Autonomy—because we rise up—our decision will be a Real Grip.*

*We who traveled the farthest, and the young, you are on your own.*

*Teach someone—*

*What—*

*what is—*

*I'll invest in dreams deferred.*

# A note on technique:

When Congress passed the Violent Radicalization and Home-grown Terror act in 2007, I totally lost my shit and wrote an eight page long polemical poem with the same title as the act. It was a wonderfully cathartic exercise, but I could clearly see that the resulting text was not worth anything, really. Not able ever to toss anything out, I kept it around, until I discovered The Cut Up Engine, a lovely website which automatically slices and randomizes texts. So, into the blender when the poem—and some interesting things began to happen with the output. Then it occurred to me that this crappy poem I wrote could be mixed up with anything, and the fun really started.

So I mixed it with the 2008 State of the Union Speech, the Black Bloc Papers, President Obama's nomination acceptance speech, Zapatista leader Sup Marcos' writings, the text of the Violent Radicalization act itself, an essay by Voltairine DeCleyre. Then the voices began to come out.

I wound up with a disjointed poetic diary in the voices of people who lived in a future world. While the poems are no more an accurate prediction than any other science fiction story, I found in the voices a warning of what could happen to us as those in power try to continue on with luxury as usual as the world's resources and patience dry up.

On the other hand, the poems are not a manifesto, or recommendation for action, or a hope for the future. Though the collapse of the corporate petroligarchy is often the starting point for Utopian and Dystopian dreamers, I doubt that such a collapse would result in anything other than violent warlordism and starvation. That a figure like John Sweeny would arise and found an egalitarian autonomous community in such an atmosphere of scarcity and violence is one chance in a million. Which is why, of course, the community he founds in named Chance.

I could have, and may still, reform this story into a novel of sorts, but for now, these poetic fragments paint an impressionistic picture of a future that seems less like science fiction every time I watch the news.

September, 2010



*We will still need some songs, speeches, interpretive dances; we enslaved, our clean rebellious bones, will rise.*

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[WWW.TANGLEDWILDERNESS.ORG](http://WWW.TANGLEDWILDERNESS.ORG)