

Clarissa After Haiti, or Autonomy as the Right to Die

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In my paper, I will argue that the Enlightenment concept of a right to individual autonomy, while often thought of as inherent or inalienable, was nonetheless understood in several crucial instances as attainable only in death. Two of the key eighteenth-century texts exploring rights and individual autonomy are Baron Lahontan's *Dialogues with Adario* (1703) and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747). David Graeber and David Wengrow argue in *The Dawn of Everything* (2021) that Adario is not merely a fictional persona, but rather the vehicle for the "indigenous critique" of European society by the great Wendat orator Kandiaronk.

Adario/Kandiaronk bluntly offers many Enlightenment ideas, including the right to individual autonomy and the dangers of hierarchy and institutional religion, but also goes beyond familiar Enlightenment limits by attacking money, property, and proscriptive views of female sexuality.

Many key enlightenment figures—Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, Raynal¹—engaged with Adario's dialogue, but often did so more to contain its radical implications than to embrace them, for instance by creating stadial theories of social development that place Kandiaronk's account of indigenous freedoms safely in the past of "advanced" societies. One aspect of Adario's critique more often ignored than engaged is the case he makes for female sexual autonomy—for women to have the rights to choose, reject, and even divorce sexual partners. Richardson may not have been aware of Adario, but more than the philosophers, he shares the concern with female sexual autonomy. In *Clarissa*, female sexual autonomy is so important that it transcends life itself; indeed, the sincerity of Clarissa's desire for autonomy is best proved by her death. Voltaire, in his 1767 novella *The Huron* (or *L'Ingenu*) brings Adario and Clarissa together in the story of a young man, raised as a "Huron" (i.e. Wendat), returning to France and offering a blunt critique of the corruption of French society. The hero falls in love with a beautiful young French woman, but society keeps the young lovers apart. Ultimately, his beloved must sacrifice her virtue to rescue "the Huron" from the Bastille, but she also must then die to prove the sincerity of her love and her sacrifice.

Ultimately, I will argue that Enlightenment concepts of autonomy for oppressed people become increasingly double-edged, as a Clarissa-like model of dying to prove that one values--and deserves--autonomy becomes crucial to late century considerations of slave's rights, and at the same time, Clarissa's autonomy ultimately is opposed to that of colonial slaves. Raynal, in an early edition of *the History of the Two Indies*, invokes Richardson's *Clarissa* to elucidate his view of slaves' rights. Raynal criticizes Clarissa for defending herself against Lovelace with a threat of suicide, arguing that unlike her, slaves should stab their masters because "the death of a criminal is more conformable to justice than that of an innocent person." Still, Clarissa's ultimate fate—dying to validate her claims to autonomy—echoes, unintentionally, with Raynal's underlying view of rebel slaves. In later editions, Raynal replaced the passage critiquing Clarissa with a conjectural, stadial history of political liberty, explaining why Africans in particular lack liberty. Only those people who have matured into a desire for political liberty, and are willing to fight for it, Raynal contends, can escape the drift of leaders toward tyranny. Hence, liberty may

¹ While scholars largely agree that a group including Raynal, Diderot, Juan de Pechmeja and possibly others actually wrote the *History of the Two Indies*, publishing under Raynal's name partly to avoid censorship, I refer in this proposal to the group with the single name they choose for their corporate authorship for the sake of clarity.

be one of the rights of man, but it only applies to those who are willing to claim it by paying whatever price is necessary. By implication, Africans in Africa who are ruled by despots have failed to claim their liberty and are therefore ultimately responsible for their own enslavement. Once enslaved they still must claim their right to liberty or forfeit it. For Raynal, then, slaves must rebel to establish their desire and qualification for individual autonomy. And yet, by the basic precepts of natural law, when slaves rebel, they must be killed to preserve society itself.

As Jay Fliegelman has documented, *Clarissa* gained a new political dimension in being taken up by American colonists to justify their rebellion against the parent nation that failed to respect their right to autonomy. And yet, after Haiti, *Clarissa* also came to symbolize the threat to white colonists posed by rebel slaves. Propagandists for West Indian planters and white supremacy, most influentially Bryan Edwards, promoted a view of the Haitian Revolution as a race war characterized by rebels' genocidal fixation on raping white women and murdering their children. This propaganda was shockingly successful, leading once radical British novelists to embrace this white supremacist account and to challenge their readers to choose sides. Charlotte Smith in *The Letters of Henrietta* (1802), with Edwards' account of Haiti clearly on her mind, reimagines *Clarissa* in a Jamaican setting as a young white woman who escapes from her tyrannical planter father only to find herself at the mercy of lustful slaves and maroons. While Kandiaronk described a life of personal autonomy made possible by a society valuing mutual respect, mutual care, and equality (even for women), European writers responding to his vision appeared to embrace his principles, but nonetheless saw the right to personal autonomy for those most in need of it—such as slaves and vulnerable young women—as available, and validated, only at the cost of death.