

Enlightenment Assemblages: Mapping Material Relationships in 18th-Century France

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This dissertation explores manifestations of assemblic connectivity in literary, philosophical, and epistolary texts of 18th-century France. In scientific treatises, encyclopedias, novels and personal correspondence, early modern writers imagined increasingly complex interconnections between phenomena, both material and otherwise. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage, I demonstrate the illustrative and exploratory power of "assemblic imagination" as a conceptual framework for envisioning proto-network connectivity across a range of cultural and intellectual contexts. I study how four different types of assemblage--corporeal, epistemological, epistolary, and sexual--work to organize, imagine and connect material phenomena within their respective texts. My analysis of corporeal assemblages focuses on Julien-Offray de La Mettrie's 1747 medical/philosophical treatise *L'homme machine*, which problematizes the Cartesian idea of mind-body separation by drawing connections between multiple human and nonhuman factors that influence human subjectivity. My investigation of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772) reveals the epistemological assemblage, a web of intertextual references and novel organizational schemes connecting articles on a wide range of subject matter. The epistolary assemblage is contained within a series of letters between the Chevalier de Boufflers and his longtime lover, the Countess of Sabran. It encompasses written letters, material objects, enslaved humans and other elements, creating links across great distances. My fourth and final assemblage, the sexual assemblage, manifests in the anonymously published

1748 libertine/pornographic novel *Thérèse philosophe*. The sexual assemblage considers the impact of external and internal factors upon human sexual desire, mapping pathways of stimulation between individuals, objects, and ideas. These assemblages illustrate the evolving nature of 18th-century materialist thought towards an ever-increasing awareness of the interconnected nature of humans, objects, ideas, and other phenomena and prefigure the curated and controlled networks of the 21st century.

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Preface

I would like to thank my friends and family, all of whom helped motivate me to finish this dissertation. I would also like to thank the Faculty and Staff of the Department of French and Italian for their many years of support. Above all, I would like to extend a special thanks to Dr. Chloé Hogg, whose endless patience and enthusiasm allowed me to finally complete this study.

1.0 Introduction

As denizens of the 21st-century, our lives are heavily influenced by the omnipresent reality of a world defined by interconnectivity. An increasingly wide spectrum of networked machines communicate, facilitate and complicate human existence, providing those with enough access to them an ever-expanding panoply of services, distractions, and dangers. It might be easy to point to these phenomena as manifestations of an entirely contemporary revolution, not only in the domains of technology but also in the underlying epistemologies and ontologies that form the foundation of a networked society. While the technology required for the amalgamation of computerized networks such as the ubiquitous “Internet of Things” arose primarily within the last century or so, philosophical explorations of different forms of interconnectivity abound, from Democritus’ classical imagining of atomic particles to Diderot’s vision of a swarm of bees. This dissertation explores early modern manifestations of these epistemological investigations as they existed within various literary, philosophical, and epistolary texts of 18th-century France. I’ve chosen this particular period as it represents the acceleration of an ontological shift that moved away from the rigidity of medieval doctrinarian knowledge and towards a more empirical approach to understanding the natural world. Allowing observations of reality to dictate one’s ontological positions rather than the inverse creates the potential for the elaboration of cause and effect relationships between phenomena to extend far beyond A to B interactions into a nearly infinite field of possible connections. After all, if you aren’t looking for interconnectivity, it becomes that much harder to perceive it.

Numerous scholars have investigated interconnectivity in the 18th-century from the perspective of disciplines from history to literary studies to the digital humanities. These

explorations consider not only the ebb and flow of economics, but also the course of communications, people, and cultural practices. The exchange of letters in the 18th century exemplifies this tendency, as Dena Goodman shows through her examination of the power of the letter and the salon in forming intellectual networks of exchange and debate that not only facilitated the propagation of knowledge but also laid the groundwork for a new form of French government.¹ Stanford University's *Mapping the Republic of Letters* project tracks webs of correspondence and communication through the creation of interactive visualization tools and the collection of metadata.² Scholars such as Christopher Miller delve deeply into France's historical participation in the transatlantic slave trade, following the flow of trafficked human beings from Africa to the French Caribbean, illustrating the complex mesh of interests, money, and material goods that propelled the barbaric system forward.³ Others such as Simon Gikandi move beyond the movement of people and goods in order to consider the ways in which slavery shaped 18th-century high culture in North America and Europe.⁴ Each of these approaches, from the concrete to the abstract, underlines the growing ubiquity of far flung relationships and their ability to impact a wide range of different people and their economic and social systems. In this way, early modern assemblic relationships portend today's ever-expanding swathe of institutions, individuals and nation states bent towards the elaboration and subsequent monetization of contemporary networked reality.

¹ See Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*.

² See Stanford University's digital project *Mapping the Republic of Letters*.

³ See Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*.

⁴ See Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*.

Drawing on this scholarship, this dissertation examines the ways in which 18th-century cultural and literary production imagines interconnectivity, from both materialist to less concretely defined forms of connection. How do 18th-century notions of interconnectivity contend with the heterogeneity of the material world? How do early modern texts envision how disparate elements move, constrain, and transform not only themselves, but each other? In what ways do these heterogeneous juxtapositions challenge established ontological orthodoxies? How do material objects play a role in both inspiring as well as maintaining human relationships, thoughts, and desires? How and to what degree are these causal connections mapped by 18th-century thinkers? In scientific treatises, encyclopedias, novels, and personal correspondence early modern writers imagined increasingly complex interconnections between phenomena, both material and otherwise, through different kinds of assemblages—corporeal, epistemological, epistolary, and sexual.

1.1 Assemblage Theories

In order to illustrate the multifaceted and disparate connections that underlie the writings that compose this study, I turn to the concept of assemblage theory as developed in Deleuze and Guattari's 1980 work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. An assemblage is an organizational model that illustrates degrees of nonlinear connectivity and interactivity between different phenomena, including both human and nonhuman elements. The assemblage has been presented in many different forms throughout many different fields of inquiry, including political science, occupational science, and consumer research among others, which is appropriate given

the inherent flexibility of the system.⁵ In Brian Massumi's 1987 English translation of *A Thousand Plateaus*, he translates the French word "agencement," meaning "arrangement" or "fitting," into assemblage, which also exists in French. However, the terms "assemblage" and "agencement" are not synonymous, as John Phillips notes:

Agencement implies specific connections with the other concepts. It is, in fact, the arrangement of these connections that gives the concepts their sense. For Deleuze and Guattari, a philosophical concept never operates in isolation but comes to its sense in connection with other senses in specific yet creative and often unpredictable ways. This *in connection with* already provides something of the sense of *agencement*, if one accepts that a concept arises in philosophy as the connection between a state of affairs and the statements we can make about it. *Agencement* designates the priority of neither the state of affairs nor the statement but of their connection, which implies the production of a sense that exceeds them and of which, transformed, they now form parts. (108)

While it is true that the two words do not have the same meaning in French, much of the original meaning of "agencement" as a philosophical concept has been absorbed into "assemblage" in its most philosophical sense. As Phillips writes, "assemblage" and "agencement" share a similar focus upon connection, including, I would argue, the importance of the connection itself over the

⁵ For a consideration of the potential uses of assemblage theory in politics, see Joris Van Wezemael, "The Contribution of Assemblage Theory and Minor Politics for Democratic Network Governance." For a study on assemblage theory's use to occupational science, see Ben Sellar's "Assemblage Theory, Occupational Science, and the Complexity of Human Agency." For information on assemblage theory's use in reframing consumers' relationships with their smart devices, see Donna Hoffman and Thomas Novak, "Consumer and Object Experience in the Internet of Things: An Assemblage Theory Approach."

elements that it connects. Phillips also discusses another potential drawback of “assemblage” by connecting Deleuze and Guattari’s use of “agencement” to Spinoza’s idea of the “common notion”:

A common notion represents the situation when two or more bodies have something in common. All bodies have in common states of extension, motion and rest; but when two or more bodies come into contact or otherwise enter into a relationship they form a composition. A *common notion* is the representation of this composition as an independent unity. (109)

Here too, as we shall see in this dissertation, the word assemblage carries at least a degree of this meaning within it. Assemblages, be they between bodies and food or competing ontologies, only function *perceptibly* as a result of their coming to form, even momentarily, an independent unity. As we shall see in Chapter 2, when Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* dares to include a reference to Catholic communion in an article about cannibalism, the uncomfortable ontological assemblage formed between these two practices is only noticeable because of their brief existence as a “common notion,” as they’ve been juxtaposed within the mind of the reader. Consequently, though the meanings of “agencement” and its translation are perhaps not exactly the same, the importance of connection and commonality persist between the two terms.

This connection and commonality can sometimes be difficult to ascertain, especially given the enormous number of potential elements that might be connected assemblically. Assemblages form between people, items, ideas and anything else graspable with the hand or the mind. They are those touches of connection that create perceivable relationships between disparate elements, material or immaterial, and transforms them from isolated phenomena into part of a gathering of relationships. Uncovering these links is akin to exploration, following whatever paths that open up

before you regardless of preconceived notions about their compatibility. Fittingly, the creation or unveiling of an assemblage is, to use a Deleuzian term, the “mapping” of these otherwise invisible connections. The map itself is defined as being “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modifications. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation” (Deleuze and Guattari 12). This inherent assemblic adaptability often bridges considerable gaps between phenomena, sometimes through material interactions but also through epistemological associations, ontological dissonances, and the vagaries of love, to name a few possibilities.

The power of the assemblage lies in its capacity to engender and/or reveal causative interactions between things whose connections might otherwise have remained impervious. In order to illustrate the concept practically, I turn to Jane Bennett’s 2005 article “The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout.” In this article, Bennett discusses a widespread electrical power failure in the North-eastern United States in 2003 whose cause was quite difficult to ascertain. Bennett frames the electrical grid itself as an assemblage due to its extremely complicated nature. The *International Herald Tribune* described the grid on the day after the blackout as a “vast but shadowy web of transmission lines, power generating plants and substations...the biggest gizmo ever built” (Glanz). As Bennett notes, James Glanz anthropomorphizes the grid: “At exactly 10 minutes 48 seconds after 4 p.m. on Thursday [August 14, 2003], the grid’s heart fluttered. . . .the grid -- complicated beyond full understanding, even by

experts -- lives and occasionally dies by its own mysterious rules.”⁶ This episode encapsulates the nature of the assemblage, a vast, intricate, and mysterious web of human and nonhuman elements, whose internal workings give rise to unexpected and often confounding occurrences. Furthermore, Bennett raises the question of the agency of the various elements that constitute the electrical grid assemblage. In pointing out the newspaper article’s anthropomorphizing of the grid itself, Bennett highlights this problem, posing the questions: “How does the agency of assemblages compare to more familiar notions, such as the willed intentionality of persons, the disciplinary power of society, or the automatism of natural processes? How does recognition of the nonhuman and nonindividuated dimensions of agency alter established notions of moral responsibility and political accountability?” (“North American Blackout” 446). Indeed, the question of agency is of central importance to the notion of assemblage.

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett frames her discussion of assemblagic agency with a political theory approach. She offers a newly formulated take on assemblage: “Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-24). This idea that assemblages are “living” imbues her image of assemblage with its own assemblagic vitality, a term she uses to describe the agency of assemblage. Relating a chance encounter with a disparate grouping of objects in the street, Bennett describes her role in the assemblage:

⁶ A version of this article was originally published in the *International Herald Tribune*, however that newspaper has since become part of the *New York Times*. Therefore, it is cited as such in my bibliography and the citation here reflects the version currently published by the *New York Times*. Bennet quotes from the original version of this article in “North American Blackout” (446).

When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and sparkle, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me. For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on...In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. (*Vibrant Matter* 45)

Bennett illustrates both the diversity of assemblic elements as well as the depth of their unanticipated vibrancy, all while highlighting the process of discovery inherent to the elaboration of assemblages. Bennett's language itself reflects the importance of the seeing of the assemblage, of being in physical space oriented in such a way as to notice the connections before oneself. Assemblic elements and the assemblages themselves therefore have their own form of alien agency that exists outside of human subjectivity and yet is reliant upon it in order for certain assemblic relationships to be fully realized. Each of Bennett's artifacts and the context in which she found them might exist assemblically without her, yet her witnessing of their arrangement solidified their assemblic relationship into something mappable.

Within the texts of my corpus, agency is persistently questioned, qualified, and modified. Much of this interrogation stems from the manner in which human subjectivity is framed. As we shall see in chapters one, three, and four, much if not all of what moves an individual in life (as represented by these 18th-century texts) is found outside of the self, imposing itself upon the subject or being thereupon imposed by others. These exterior influences do not entirely eliminate those movements that come from within an individual, but they do reframe them, placing them into a relationship with external impacts upon the subjective self. This dynamic creates another sort of

alien agency, an amalgamation of free will and external impulses that is difficult to qualify in general terms and is highly contextualized within each assemblic relationship that I examine. Despite this, agency as represented by these texts is undoubtedly fragmented, pushed and pulled in all direction by forces both within and without.

Beyond philosophical explorations of agency and subjectivity, other scholars such as Manuel DeLanda apply assemblage theory in order to explore societal structures by reexamining the relationships between social entities on a variety of scales, from individual relationships, to wider transnational associations.⁷ DeLanda's work illustrates not only assemblage theory's wider potential for assorted applications, but also the flexibility of scale inherent in the model, allowing both micro and macro observations to exist within the same sphere. In addition to his sociological approach, DeLanda's work also constitutes a sort of compendium of Deleuze and Guattari's writing on assemblages, about which, DeLanda notes, "The definitions of the concepts used to characterize assemblages are dispersed throughout Deleuze's work: part of a definition may be in one book, extended somewhere else, and qualified later in some obscure essay. Even in those cases where conceptual definitions are easy to locate, they are usually not given in a style that allows for a straightforward interpretation" (*New Philosophy* 3). In acknowledging the complexity and wide textual dispersal of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage, DeLanda opens the door to a range of possible assemblic analyses while also creating a broader potential field of assemblic interpretations and definitions.

DeLanda pursues his engagement with assemblage by foregrounding his definitional work:

⁷ See Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*.

I will give my own definitions of the technical terms, use my own arguments to justify them, and use entirely different theoretical resources to develop them. This manoeuvre will not completely eliminate the need to engage in Deleuzian hermeneutics but it will allow me to confine that part of the job to footnotes. Readers who feel that the theory developed here is not strictly speaking Deleuze's own are welcome to call it 'neo-assemblage theory', 'assemblage theory 2.0', or some other name. (*New Philosophy* 4)

DeLanda therefore forms a sort of precedent wherein the notion of assemblage itself becomes infused with its own assemblic vitality, transforming the initial notion into something broader, with a larger degree of applicability as well as evidence of more practical applications. In his more recent work on assemblages, *Assemblage Theory* (2016), DeLanda expands his take on assemblage, framing military organizations, scientific communities, and other groups as assemblic entities. He notes that this expansion of assemblic thinking:

yields a view of reality in which assemblages are everywhere, multiplying in every direction, some more viscous and changing at slower speeds, some more fluid and impermanent, coming into being almost as fast as they disappear. And at the limit, at the critical threshold when the diagrams of assemblages reach escape velocity, we find the grand cosmic assemblage, the plane of immanence, consistency, or exteriority. (DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* 7)

Not only does DeLanda signal the vast potential of assemblic analysis, he also articulates the ontological question as to the difficulties or even impossibility of knowing the limitations of a given assemblage. My own work reflects DeLanda's approach in that I am taking Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage and building on it by including other interpretations of

assemblage. This allows me to form my own vocabulary around assemblages as well as formulating my own assemblic concepts, as we shall see in detail later in this introduction.

I further chose the concept of assemblage as my theoretical cornerstone in order to avoid the 21st-century connotations inherent in much of the terminology of interconnectivity. Terms such as “network” inevitably invoke images of laptops, routers, telephones, server farms, and smart refrigerators to name but a few examples. As Christopher M. Kelty argues, “Today, network means the Internet.” According to Kelty, the 21st-century notion of network is rather different than the one formulated by earlier 20th-century thinkers associated with Actor-Network Theory and science studies. This earlier idea of network was meant to provide a tool with which science might better understand the world and by which the work of science, of scientific knowledge, might be understood. This definition of network greatly resembles assemblage theory in a number of ways:

the networks of science studies consist *only* of relations, nodes emerge based only on the links formed – it was not intended to be a classification, or an arrangement of ontologically stable objects – as a result, the claim goes, they therefore come with no predetermined categorical associations that would determine the structure of scientific action or knowledge; they do not privilege humans at the nodes over machines, animals, statements, documents, formulas or organizations. Networks are material, traceable, and phenomenal – but they are not to be mistaken for the world, they are the tool that the analyst uses to make sense of the world. (Kelty)

Yet Bruno Latour notes that the common perception of network has moved beyond the network of science studies, such that the word has developed an entirely new meaning:

At the time, the word network, like Deleuze’s and Guattari’s term rhizome, clearly meant a series of *transformations*- translations, transductions-which could not be captured by any

of the traditional terms of social theory. With the new popularization of the word network, it now means transport without deformation, an instantaneous, unmediated access to every piece of information. That is exactly the opposite of what we meant. What I would like to call ‘double click information’ has killed off the last bit of the critical cutting edge of the notion of network. (15-16)

Within the context of my study, the assemblage reveals the same sense of epistemological ambiguity implied in Latour’s lamented idea of network and subsequently functions as a navigational tool, facilitating both the conceptualization and subsequent exploration of seemingly unrelated phenomena. In this way, I argue that the assemblage is as much a tool of discovery as it is a method of articulating interconnectivity. Contemporary networks, by comparison, are less abstruse and more practically functional in that their connections are ideally understood and curated. Indeed, in the 21st century massive corporations exist and thrive as a result of the necessity that networks remain understandable and therefore controllable. In 18th-century texts from the encyclopedic to the epistolary, the philosophic to the pornographic, the assemblage teases out the gossamer threads of connection. It explores bodies, challenges ontologies, conveys emotions, and impacts subjectivities. The early modern assemblages that I explore here thus hint at the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the ubiquitous networks that define, or at least underlay, many 21st-century lives.

1.2 Assemblic Imagination

Though my dissertation focuses largely on different manifestations of the assemblage in materialist terms, assemblic lines of connection often bring elements into dialogue with one

another that are not strictly definable in materialist terms. Ideas, philosophies, ontologies, epistemologies, theologies and other less grounded phenomena make up an important part of the potential elements of an assemblage. These concepts often find themselves connected to more banal material elements, such as sexual education or quotidian expressions of affection. Consequently, the assemblages that I study are not formed entirely of material elements and I frequently interrogate the relationships between materially composed artifacts and individuals and other, more cerebral notions or diffuse forces.

Across this dissertation I examine the role that these assemblages play within a number of 18th-century literary and historical works. Each of my chosen texts reflects a different form of assemblic connectivity, from the anatomical to the epistemological. In considering disparate genres of philosophical treatises, pornographic novels, epistolary exchanges and encyclopedias, I demonstrate the assemblage's illustrative and exploratory power as a conceptual framework for imagining proto-network connectivity across a range of cultural and intellectual contexts. The notion of "assemblic imagination" incorporates those assemblages that transcend the limitations of the purely material, whose nodal points lay within the curious concept that is imagination in the early modern era. Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* has this to say in volume 8 in the article "Imagination, imaginer" written by Voltaire himself:

c'est le pouvoir que chaque être sensible éprouve en soi de se représenter dans son esprit les choses sensibles ; cette faculté dépend de la mémoire. On voit des hommes, des animaux, des jardins ; ces perceptions entrent par les sens, la mémoire les retient, l'*imagination* les compose ; voilà pourquoi les anciens Grecs appellerent les Muses *filles de Mémoire*. (560)

Imagination thus represents more than the mere ability to conceive of what is not there, rather it performs an almost transubstantiative task, somehow restructuring the body's conception of the world, fixing it into something less chaotic and more easily digestible. 18th-century imagination functions like a virtual machine within a computer, creating a sort of virtual emulation within the material mind that replicates the physical characteristics of the imagined object or individual. Assemblic-imagination therefore functions similarly in that it positions observations and ideas within this virtual machine, endowing them with a virtual materiality that can then be explored. This decidedly empirical process illustrates the exploratory power of the assemblage while hinting at potential avenues of assemblic exploration to be uncovered by further scrutiny. Assemblic imagination unifies not only the diverse materialist perspectives considered in this study but also places them into a framework wherein causative connections to immaterial phenomena can shine through. An itch in a non-existent leg might not be quite the same as the overwhelming thrill of receiving a long-awaited letter, yet each of these actions and their consequences find their geneses within the same overarching schema of cause and effect, both material and otherwise.

These materialist perspectives stem from a number of 17th and 18th-century thinkers whose work sought to challenge epistemological and ontological orthodoxies by re-contextualizing the material plane, consequently moving beyond the ontological hierarchy of the day. Baruch Spinoza in his *Ethics* (1677) rejects Cartesian dualism and imagines that a divine creator cannot be separable from its creation, consequently opening the door for more explicitly materialist works like those of La Mettrie. Later thinkers like Denis Diderot imagined the material causes behind human reproduction and an individual's personality, explicitly linking the eventual creation of a

sentient being with certain physical aspects of their parents.⁸ Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's seminal *Traité des sensations* (1754) considers the formation of human consciousness through a materialist model that continually adds different sensory inputs to an otherwise inanimate statue. While these philosophers' individual approaches may differ, each finds a way to challenge traditional ontologies that concern the nature of the material universe or the composition and function of the human mind. While not necessarily assemblage, such questions further expand the horizon of potential analysis, making even radical ideas feel possible.

Contemporary scholars of 18th-century French materialist thought explore the themes unveiled by early modern philosophers through a variety of approaches. Aram Vartanian traces the histories of materialist influences on thinkers such as Diderot, d'Holbach and La Mettrie in order to find the common origins of their respective worldviews.⁹ More recently, Natania Meeker examines the shifting representation of human bodies in the 18th century as materialist attitudes

⁸ For a particularly explicit example of this notion, note this passage from Diderot's "Entretien entre d'Alembert et Diderot": "Je veux dire qu'avant que sa mère, la belle et scélérate chanoinesse Tencin, eût atteint l'âge de puberté, avant que le militaire La Touche fût adolescent, les molécules qui devaient former les premiers rudiments de mon géomètre étaient éparses dans les jeunes et frêles machines de l'un et de l'autre, se filtrèrent avec la lymphe, circulèrent avec le sang, jusqu'à ce qu'enfin elles se rendissent dans les réservoirs destinés à leur coalition, les testicules de son père et de sa mère. Voilà ce germe rare formé; le voilà, comme c'est l'opinion commune, amené par les trompes de Fallope dans la matrice; le voilà attaché à la matrice par un long pédicule; le voilà, s'accroissant successivement et s'avancant à l'état de fœtus; voilà le moment de sa sortie de l'obscur prison arrivé; le voilà né, exposé sur les degrés de Saint-Jean-le-Rond qui lui donna son nom; tiré des Enfants-Trouvés; attaché à la mamelle de la bonne vitrière, madame Rousseau; allaité, devenu grand de corps et d'esprit, littérateur, mécanicien, géomètre" (*Œuvres complètes* vol 2, 109).

⁹ See Aram Vartanian, *Diderot and Descartes: A Study of Scientific Naturalism in the Enlightenment*.

became more prevalent.¹⁰ Through a study of La Mettrie's work, she also reveals the 18th-century materialist tropes that this doctor/philosopher relied on in constructing his own arguments.¹¹ Stephen Gaukroger considers the evolution of a science-centered world view across the 17th and 18th-centuries and its impact on changing attitudes towards secular and religious thought.¹² Similarly to Dena Goodman, Geoffrey Sutton studies the role of women in the propagation of materialistic and scientific ideas, noting how elite French women both engaged with natural philosophical texts while also conducting demonstrations of novel phenomena in their own homes.¹³ Each of these scholars shows the deep impact that materialist thought had upon the 18th century while also hinting at the assemblic reality behind such philosophical shifts. Assemblic materialism draws together different currents of early modern materialist thought to suggest not a systemic manual for understanding material interconnectivity, but instead a method for expanding empirical perspectives to include interactions between different material phenomena regardless of their geographical position, ontological hierarchy, or epistemological categorization.

¹⁰ See Natania Meeker, *Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French Enlightenment*.

¹¹ See Natania Meeker, "The Materialist Tropes of La Mettrie."

¹² See Stephen Gaukroger, *The Collapse of Mechanism and the Rise of Sensibility: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1680-1760*.

¹³ See Geoffrey Sutton, *Science for a Polite Society: Gender, Culture, and the Demonstration of Enlightenment*.

1.3 Genre and Material Embodiment

Each text that I chose for this dissertation centers the immediacy and unavoidability of the material world and this world's fragmented composition, both intentionally and otherwise. The texts studied here further represent different instances of 18th-century materialism, distinguished by the particular sort of material construct that they consider and the literary genre to which they belong. Works such as La Mettrie's materialist treatise *L'homme machine* (1747) and the anonymously published libertine novel *Thérèse philosophe* (1748) present their materialism not only as explorations of the physical world but also as explicitly ontological statements framed within the conventions of each text's respective genre. They directly challenge traditional religious ontologies and present their understanding of a material world in which the metaphysical plays little or no role. Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772), on the other hand, does not make the same bold claims directly; rather it elevates the material world through its own empirical methodology and exhaustive subject matter. By including entries on a vast range of both abstract and practical subjects, the work creates a sense of equivalency between fields of inquiry, mostly achieved through the structural and organizational features of the material text itself. Importantly, these same elements also perform this epistemological leveling between the sacred and profane while underlining certain dogmatic oddities within the Catholic religion. Finally, the letters of Stanislas de Boufflers, the French-appointed governor of Senegal, do not offer ontological challenges or empirical investigations but rather elucidate the impact of 18th-century epistolary exchanges, both in terms of the letters themselves as well as the many other objects and forces to which the letters and their writers are assemblically linked.

Each of these works imagines (relatively) complex webs of assemblic interaction, their subjects exploring avenues of interconnectivity from the epistolary to the corporeal, the

epistemological to the sexual. Each of these assemblages forges different kinds of connection, and asks different questions. The corporeal assemblage expands the notion of the body, problematizing the distinction between material body and immaterial soul. It considers the impact of things outside of the body upon both the body itself and the mind within it. The corporeal assemblage blurs the line between bodies, transplanting parts and reconfiguring hierarchies. The epistemological assemblage challenges methods of organizing and presenting knowledge by juxtaposing ostensibly divine truths with blasphemies, and the mundane with the enlightened. It questions the limitations of overly rigid categorical structures within human knowledge systems and brings to light uncomfortable epistemological associations and ontological implications present in religious dogma and other domains. The epistolary assemblage delves into the relationship between the written word and the human subject. It reframes human subjectivity by ontologically elevating the material object closer to the status of human while sometimes imposing the status of object upon human beings in turn. It crosses great distances, conveying heartfelt emotions, and mundane missives, while having no less impact as a result of geographical separation. Finally, the sexual assemblage interrogates desire, searching for pathways of connection that arouse, seduce, and manipulate. It offers sexual tableaux that include material objects and religious theology, as well as other human beings. It complicates free will, suggesting an inevitable conclusion awaits every path, regardless of the efforts one takes to avoid such an end. Though each of these assemblages stem from different authors and represent different genres, they contain equally compelling examples of assemblage in action.

The assorted genres of my corpus create a sort of literary assemblage within my dissertation. Each text represents a decidedly different form of literary production that couches its assemblic explorations and materialist questions within the particularities of its respective genre.

This diversity of genre might initially seem problematic, especially given the high degree of difference that exists between the texts. However, in choosing different works with different authors that represent different genres, I seek to illustrate the general applicability of the assemblic model and tease out epistemological and ontological commonalities between my chosen texts. When deciding on the texts that compose this study, I sought to assemble a corpus that would reflect the same level of applicability that can be found, as we've seen, in other domains of knowledge. The ability of the assemblage to function within such a range of disciplines is one of the more intriguing aspects of the model to me, and consequently I felt the need to reflect this within my own work.

This of course gives rise to the question, could any work, early modern or otherwise, be included among the texts that I chose for this study? From a certain perspective, one could argue that most texts could likely be analyzed assemblically, in that all texts build upon and are influenced by works that came before them. Tropes sometimes connect texts that otherwise have little in common, and other influences like religion and culture often create assemblic connections between even texts in different genres. For the purposes of this dissertation however, my focus on materialist assemblages complicates the analysis of certain texts from a materialist perspective. The example of *Le sophia, conte moral* (1742) by Claude-Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon shows that not all texts would fit within my particular framework of assemblic analysis. Crébillon's work approaches the question of bodies, souls, and the transplantation of a particular soul into a different body, yet its portrayal of this transplantation lacks La Mettrie's tendency to pursue the implications of such an event to their radical conclusions. Crébillon's libertine novel presents an orientalist framework story wherein the narrator Amanzei regales the Sultan with tales of his assorted reincarnations.

Nous autres sectateurs de Brama, nous croyons la métempicôse, continua Amanzei...C'est-à-dire, pour ne point embarrasser mal à propos votre Majesté, que nous croyons qu'au sortir d'un corps, notre Ame passe dans un autre, & successivement ainsi, tant qu'il plait à Brama, ou que notre Ame soit devenu assez pure pour être mise au nombre de celles qu'enfin il juge dignes d'être éternellement heureuses. (18)

Notably, Amanzei recalls having been reincarnated, at times voluntarily, as different sofas until two virgins who loved one another consummated their love upon the sofa that he currently embodied. Taken alone this narrative conceit suggests assemblage themes, and yet the material insinuations of reincarnation remain undeveloped such that it is easy to forget at times that the narrator speaks as a piece of furniture.

Where the novel differs from the transposed assemblage bodies of La Mettrie's *L'homme machine* and *L'homme plante* is in the portrayal of the removed souls' interactions with their new bodies. Crébillon's characters do not pursue the implications of their physicality to nearly the same extent of La Mettrie, who contemplates similarities between different organs and imagines entire reconfigurations of societal hierarchies to match those new bodies. In *Thérèse philosophe*, the assemblage model of sexual desire encapsulates objects, ontologies, theologies, and people to the point that the notion of free will stands in the balance and the body becomes a mere vessel for the desires of others. Crébillon focuses instead on rather less materially expressed changes, as seen in the passage wherein the novel's narrator discusses having once been reincarnated as a woman: "Il me semble que, lorsque j'étois femme, je me moquois beaucoup de ceux qui m'attribuoient des idées réfléchies, pendant que le moment seul me les faisoit naître, cherchoient des raisons ou je n'avois pris de loix que du caprice, & qui pour vouloir trop m'approfondir, ne me pénétoient jamais" (27). While *Le sofa*'s narrator recounts having experienced a degree of change with

regards towards certain social expectations, the actual material embodiment that occurs remains unexplored. Whereas La Mettrie exchanges organs between lifeforms and imagines new organic frameworks for interpreting the world, Crébillon enacts a much more Cartesian form of transplantation, moving the soul from body to body without going to the same lengths in considering the corporeal impact itself upon an individual's subjectivity. It is this expression and interpretation of subjectivity as an assemblage that ultimately separates Crébillon's work from those texts included in my dissertation. Subjectivity is expressed in La Mettrie as it is in d'Argens and Boufflers, not as a unified singularity existing *ex nihilo*, but as an assemblage of organic parts, inorganic objects, social expectations, and many other elements. Likewise, Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* presents itself as a strictly organized and categorized compendium of knowledge, yet it is full of subversive elements that destabilize its status as an epistemological unity. It is this fragmented, spread-out, multifaceted assemblic presentation of human subjectivity and other ostensibly unified phenomena that distinguishes the assemblages that I'm studying in my dissertation. These assemblic subjectivities, epistemologies, and ontologies as imagined by 18-century thinkers hint at the increased awareness of assemblic systems across the decades and centuries to come.

1.4 Chapter Overview

Each chapter of my dissertation approaches the question of assemblage from a different textual standpoint that allows me to tackle different, if parallel, epistemological and ontological investigations. Through assemblic imagination, both material objects and beings transmit and transmute immaterial notions, thus elaborating wider assemblages. My first chapter focuses largely

on Julien Offray de la Mettrie's 1747 medical/philosophical treatise, *L'homme machine*. Within this chapter I examine La Mettrie's analysis and observations regarding the link between the human mind and the body. La Mettrie's exploration of the mind/body connection is a profoundly assemblic one and consequently acts as an ideal starting place for my analysis. I examine the assemblic structures that La Mettrie evokes as causal elements behind a number of human cognitive phenomena, from the universal sensation of falling asleep, to the rarer experience of phantom-limb syndrome. The corporeal assemblage portrayed in La Mettrie's work also searches for causal relationships that spring from outside of the body itself, including food, drugs, and sexual desire. This complex web of cause and effect ultimately problematizes the very notion of a single, definable origin for any given human behavior, illustrating the assemblic nature of humanity itself.

Chapter 2 focuses on Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (published between 1751 and 1772). Whereas the inquiry of my first chapter focuses on the corporeal assemblages underlying the conscious human experience of living, my second moves towards the more abstract notion of what I call the "epistemological assemblage." This term encompasses the various epistemological and ontological connections, contradictions, and parallels that permeate the *Encyclopédie's* content and organization. Within this assemblic framework, I explore how the work's different organizational structures from intertextual *renvois* to alphabetization serve as textual roadmaps that both facilitate textual navigation while at the same time revealing points of ontological contention between certain articles. Furthermore, I consider how these same structures destabilize the *Encyclopédie's* imagined role as a purveyor of knowledge through the frequent juxtaposition of contradictory ontologies and epistemic categories.

My third chapter shifts my point of focus from questions of epistemology and ontology towards the elaboration of a form of assemblic connectivity that impacts human subjectivity across great distances through the epistolary assemblage. This chapter considers a portion of the correspondence between longtime lovers, Sir Stanislas de Boufflers (1738-1815) and the Comtesse Eléonore de Sabran (1749-1827), from late 1785 to late 1787, during which time Boufflers served as the French-appointed Governor of Senegal in Saint Louis and the island of Gorée. Here, I examine how the letter functions not only as a means to communicate basic information, but also how it comes to contain and elaborate a broader materially based assemblage that complicates the divide between human beings and material objects.

My last chapter shifts focus again, this time recentering on questions of materialism and the human body. In this chapter, I consider the 1748 libertine/pornographic work *Thérèse philosophe*, a novel attributed to Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens. This work resembles Julien Offray de la Mettrie's *L'Homme-machine* in that it is concerned with questions of free will, bodily autonomy, and the impact that external forces has upon human subjectivity. Unlike La Mettrie's work, however, d'Argens frames these subjects within a fictional narrative rather than a medical treatise. Due to the work's pornographic nature, I label its assemblic structures as "sexual assemblages." This assemblage explores sexual desire, seduction, and coercion, all couched within a decidedly material narrative universe.

These different assemblages, corporeal, epistemological, epistolary, and sexual, not only elaborate connections between phenomena but often reveal the very existence of these phenomena at the same time. They pull the world together, drawing the myriad elements of life into a more approachable whole, finding understanding and confusion in equal measure. In the 21st century the pursuit of assemblic connections continually proves to be a path towards wealth and power,

especially those connections that exist between and within human beings. Whole identities are born algorithmically as vast machines seek to understand and eventually curate the human experience into an entirely networked reality. In this way, the assemblages considered in this dissertation foretell above all the *potential* of these endeavors not only to further the understanding of the world, but also how they might come to move humanity in ways in which we cannot imagine.

2.0 Chapter 1: Corporeal Assemblages: Mapping the Biological Imagination

Of the many diverse figures who contributed to, fought against, compiled, collected, and distributed the various works of the Enlightenment period in France, few achieved the notoriety of the *medecin-philosophe* Julien Offray de la Mettrie. La Mettrie was born on December 19, 1709 to a bourgeois family in Saint-Malo, Brittany. After abandoning a brief career as a student of theology, La Mettrie dedicated himself to the pursuit of medicine.¹⁴ The study and practice of medicine in France at the time remained entrenched in the centuries-old system of applying the thoughts and ideas of long-dead antiquarian doctors to treat a multiplicity of symptoms; a method of medical intervention almost entirely bereft of anatomical knowledge and experimentation. These classically trained physicians represented the pinnacle of respectability within French medicine and largely treated only the more elite members of society.

Opposed to these prestigious individuals were surgeons. They were considered little better than barbers (which they often doubled as) and provided healthcare services to the vast majority of the population. While one could discuss at length the differences between physicians and surgeons, here it suffices to note that surgeons most often intervened surgically, which was something that the physicians generally avoided (Wellman 18). As such, they cultivated a more developed interest in human anatomy, observation and experimentation. Towards the beginning of the 18th century surgeons became embroiled in a lengthy campaign against the entrenched physicians in order to receive at least some recognition from society for their work.

¹⁴ For more information on La Mettrie's life and philosophical development, see Thomson.

Upon deciding to side with the surgeons, La Mettrie adopted the first of many polemical stances that would define almost everything about him until long after his death (Wellman 7). This decision was influenced by his own interest in human anatomy and his frustration with the French medical establishment for their resistance towards new empirical models of epistemology. This initial interest in human (and also animal) anatomy provided the basis of the mechanical materialist philosophy that La Mettrie would develop over the remainder of his life.

Of La Mettrie's various writings, his 1747 work *L'Homme machine* best encapsulates his materialist notions. The treatise engendered an immediate and overwhelming negative response due to its unabashed atheistic bent and rejection of canonical ideas such as the existence of a human soul. Throughout this chapter, I will illustrate La Mettrie's reframing of the position of the human being within the material universe, and his retooling of the concept of the machine such that organic material becomes the central figure within his notion of the human machine. This reconfiguration of the machine as corporeal assemblage leads to La Mettrie's radical reimagining of human consciousness and humanity's hierarchical position within the material universe. My reading focuses on La Mettrie's work within *L'Homme machine* as exemplifying the burgeoning 18th-century awareness of the interconnected, causal relationships that exist within the material universe. Later, I expand my analysis into La Mettrie's 1748 work *L'Homme plante*. I put La Mettrie's investigations into dialogue with the Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, an assemblic epistemological model which permits causal connections to be understood as non-linear relationships whose origins and terminuses remain unclear and potentially unknowable.¹⁵ Through

¹⁵ See Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. A more profound explanation of this theory is discussed in section 2 of this chapter.

the lens of this philosophical notion, I illustrate how La Mettrie's machine-man can be conceived such that the label of machine becomes problematic, even as La Mettrie remains within a purely material and mechanistic framework. This is achieved through the power of assemblic imagination which permits the conception and elaboration of assemblic connections in moments where such connections are not immediately apparent. This consequently leads to the rise of what I call the corporeal assemblage, a vision of the human body that includes not only components of the self interacting with one another, but also with a multiplicity of outside forces that move and mold the human subject in countless ways.

Existing scholarship on La Mettrie varies in approach. While critics within the 18th century focused almost entirely on La Mettrie's rejection of metaphysics (and therefore, of the Christian god)¹⁶, modern scholars such as Aram Vartanian have used *L'Homme machine* to create an almost evolutionary philosophical chain of thought which begins with Descartes and passes subsequently through La Mettrie (*L'Homme machine* 97). In his 1641 work *Méditations sur la philosophie première*, Descartes lays out a case for the separation of the body and mind.¹⁷ This position provides La Mettrie with a point of departure for his own main thesis within *L'Homme machine*; if humans possess a soul, it is not composed of any different materiel from the body itself: "Concluons donc hardiment que l'Homme est une machine; & qu'il n'y a dans tout l'Univers qu'une seule substance diversement modifiée" (197). This appropriation and subversion of Descartes by La Mettrie has been traced and accepted by a large number of 18th-century scholars,

¹⁶ See chapter six of Vartanian's edition of *L'Homme machine* for examples of the work's critical response.

¹⁷ In particular, see Descartes's Meditation VI.

such as Aram Vartanian and Natania Meeker, and forms much of the central narrative of scholarship on *L'Homme machine*.

Other interpretations consider *L'Homme machine* within a more literary context. In her book *La Mettrie: Medecine, Philosophy, and Enlightenment*, Kathleen Wellman studies *L'homme machine* as a single facet of La Mettrie's wider, largely ignored, literary writings, such as *La Faculté Vengée* (1747), and *Ouvrage de Pénélope* (1748). Through the comparison of *L'Homme machine* with these other, often satirical texts, Wellman argues against the conclusion that *L'Homme machine* be taken immediately as an extension of Cartesian philosophy, and that it functions, at least on some level, as a satire of Descartes and serves to destabilize the Cartesian concept of the *bête-machine* (182). Natania Meeker considers La Mettrie's portrayal of the machine-man as embodying materialist tropes ("Materialist Tropes" 245-262). Drawing on this scholarship my work examines how *L'Homme machine* imagines, explores, and subsequently expands the idea of the human body and the self, recontextualizing humanities place within the wider material world through assemblic imagination.

2.1 Undoing the Machine in *L'Homme machine*

In the 18th century, the image of the machine was a multifaceted construct whose manifestations included the practical as well as the fantastical. In *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines*, Minsoo Kang explores different versions of the machine throughout European history, specifically that of the automaton. The automatons that he considers are those constructed to mimic

animals, such as the famous automaton duck created by Jacques de Vaucanson (1709-1782).¹⁸ This mechanical duck was capable of mimicking a number of duck-like behaviors, such as eating, moving, and defecation. Within 18th-century French scientific and philosophical circles the duck was a famous figure of much discussion. As part of the general realm of 17th and 18th-century intellectual phenomena, automatons such as Vaucanson's duck indicate a wider interest in automatons, both as mechanical creations and mechanistic metaphors for the universe itself:

Starting from the mid-century [17th]... "automaton" denotes specifically a self-moving machine, completely mechanical in function with no place for magical or any other kind of preternatural force. The word was then used to describe the detailed workings of the natural body, the government, and the entire world that was constructed by the mechanically oriented God. The automaton, in other words, became the central metaphor of the age. (Kang 112)

How then does La Mettrie's *L'Homme machine* fit into the 18th-century framework of this cultural obsession with the automaton? Can one consider the man-machine an automaton? Firstly, it should be noted that La Mettrie does not directly refer to his machine model as an automaton within *L'Homme machine*, and yet we know that he was aware of Vaucanson's work, as he mentions it within his text:

S'il a fallu plus d'instrumens, plus de Rouïages, plus de resorts pour marquer les mouvemens des Planètes, que pour marquer les heures, ou les répéter; s'il a fallu plus d'art à Vaucanson pour faire son *Fluteur*, que pour son *Canard*, il eût dû en employer encore

¹⁸ See Kang, Chapter 3, "The Man-machine in the World-machine, 1637-1748."

davantage pour faire un *Parleur*; Machine qui ne peut plus être regardée comme impossible, surtout entre les mains d'un nouveau Prométhée. (190)

As La Mettrie was aware of Vaucanson's work and found himself in a particular time period wherein the concept of the automaton was a popular point of discussion, why then does he employ the machine, rather than the automaton as his central figure? Perhaps La Mettrie had seen the various ways in which the figure of the automaton was employed by earlier scholars, such as Descartes, who envisioned the automaton as a soulless, mechanistic construction, but one that was specifically designed and put into motion by a Prime Mover (Kang 112). La Mettrie largely ignores the question of a creator within *L'Homme machine* and is interested less in the origins of mechanistic organic bodies, and more in their specific functionality. By avoiding the term automaton, La Mettrie distances himself ontologically from previous thinkers whose automatons continued to function at least somewhat within a non-observable metaphysical realm, an epistemological vantage point of which La Mettrie was disdainful. Furthermore, the position of the machine itself within *L'Homme machine* is not particularly stable, nor is the term itself easily definable. By escaping the framework of the automaton, La Mettrie allows himself to explore new realms of materialist epistemology.

If the figure of the automaton is largely absent from *L'Homme machine*, the machine itself, while textually present, remains difficult to conceptualize in that La Mettrie never really defines his usage of the term. Furthermore, La Mettrie rarely uses literary devices to explain his machine model. Within the text, La Mettrie employs only a handful of different machine metaphors which he subsequently compares to human beings. One of the more central metaphors contained within *L'Homme machine* is the image of the clock:

Le corps n'est qu'une horloge, dont le nouveau chyle est l'horloger. Le premier soin de la nature, quand il entre dans le sang, c'est d'y exciter une sorte de fièvre, que les Chymistes qui ne rêvent que fourneaux, ont dû prendre pour une fermentation. Cette fièvre procure une plus grande filtration d'esprits, qui machinalement vont animer les Muscles & le Cœur, comme s'ils y étoient envoies par ordre de la Volonté. (La Mettrie 186)

The image of the clock allows us to grasp both the satirical as well as the philosophical goals of the text. The comparison of the human body with the clock is a deliberate choice, as the clock and watch represent relatively common machines. They are precise, delicate instruments whose outer functionality seems simple, yet they contain within themselves a complex array of moving parts that would be impossible for a non-clockmaker to understand, let alone construct. Given La Mettrie's interest in anatomy and his frequent insistence that only medically trained professionals could truly be philosophers (*L'Homme machine* 147), the clock serves as an appropriate stand in for the human body: anyone who knows how to read a clock can ascertain whether or not the machine is in working order simply by observing the movement of the clock's hands, however only someone truly trained can access and understand its inner workings.¹⁹

The problem with La Mettrie's usage of a clock metaphor to describe the human body is not contained within the textual comparison itself (as the parallels between the digestive fluid that is chyle and the winding of a clock are logically drawn) but rather within the clock's tonal position within the text. With the exception of the winding that must occur, a clock is an entirely self-

¹⁹ For more information on La Mettrie's notion of what a *philosophe* should be, see Vartanian's "Le 'Philosophe' selon La Mettrie."

contained machine. It is capable of being understood mechanically, beginning from its most basic, deconstructed elements (individual gears for example), through intermittent stages of functionality (gears turning one another) until it operates as a single, united machine.

This seems to be how La Mettrie imagines the machine: a construction that is a closed, functionally consistent, and purpose-driven material object. It is mostly closed in that its functionality does not depend upon external factors (other than perhaps some sort of energy source); functionally consistent, as barring some physical calamity, it will continue to fulfill its envisioned mechanical role; and purpose driven due to the fact that it has been designed and constructed specifically with a certain task in mind. Furthermore, as the clock is an image capable of being understood as an epistemological totality, we can also view the machine as something largely devoid of ambiguities. The machine can be understood completely by those trained in the machine arts as a functional construction; every piece has its place and its own individual, observable utility.

Yet the clock, as the model of the La Mettrian machine, presents a known, quantifiable and graspable epistemological unity that the body does not. Indeed, throughout *L'Homme machine* La Mettrie constantly returns to the numerous, oftentimes enormous gaps that mar human understanding of the body. Curiously enough, in the paragraph that follows La Mettrie's pronouncement that the body is a clock, he admits a certain degree of ignorance as to how exactly chyle perpetuates the motion of the human machine: "Mais qui peut dire si les solides contribuent à ce jeu, plus que les fluides & *vice versa*? Tout ce qu'on sait, c'est que l'action des premières seroit bientôt anéantie, sans le secours des seconds" (*L'Homme machine* 187). Throughout his work La Mettrie oscillates between humility and a much more confident style. La Mettrie seems to play with the readers' expectations of his own arrogance or humility as he is quite fond of

juxtaposing absolutist claims about the biological truth of human and animal bodies with statements that show that he, in fact, remains quite ignorant about large swathes of anatomy, especially when it relates to the causal chain that links different organs and their subsequently generated sensations.

2.2 An Epistemology of Uncertainty

In addition to his own admissions of ignorance, La Mettrie repeatedly takes others to task for their own absolutist statements about the nature of existence: “Je n’ignore pas que cette opinion n’a pas été goûtée de tous les Savans, & que Staahl sur-tout l’a fort dédaignée. Ce grand Chymiste a voulu nous persuader que l’Ame étoit la seule cause de tous nos mouvemens. Mais c’est parler en Fanatique, & non en Philosophe” (*L’Homme machine* 187). One could consider La Mettrie’s use of the word “fanatique”²⁰ here as denoting a criticism of the chemist and physician George Staahl’s idea of “anima” as a vital force responsible for all motion and processes within the body.²¹ La Mettrie’s objection seems to concern itself less with the Staahl’s vitalism and more with the intellectual hubris that such a statement manifests: “Pour détruire l’hypothèse Staahlienne[...]Il n’y a qu’à jeter les yeux sur un joueur de violon[...]Or je prie, ou plutôt je défie les Staahliens de me dire, eux qui connoissent si bien tout ce que peut notre Ame, comment il seroit possible qu’elle exécutât si vite tant de mouvemens...” (*L’Homme machine* 187). La Mettrie’s emphasis here on Staahl’s (and by extension others like him) certainty about the accuracy of Staahl’s world view

²⁰ The article “Fanatisme” in the *Encyclopédie* focuses on the superstitious nature of the *fanatique*.

²¹ See King’s study on Staahl and eighteenth-century animism.

forms the primary focus of this passage; in the following paragraph he moves to more specific physiological and anatomical observations that problematize the idea of the soul as the central organizing force, but his first, immediate disapproval focuses not on Staahl's specific ideas, but rather on the hubris of his absolute certainty.

L'Homme machine's tendency to reject systematized, solidified, and codified epistemological structures is amplified through La Mettrie's medical investigations and positions.²² As Wellman notes, La Mettrie was educated in a system that was almost entirely based on single, specific, doctrinarian responses to every conceivable human malady. La Mettrie began to reject such rigidity especially after his time in the Netherlands with Herman Boerhaave: "The arguments against chemists also shaped La Mettrie's philosophical works, enabling him to work toward an Enlightenment epistemology in the sense that his arguments are staunchly opposed to *esprit de système* or any sense of the occult and rigorously modest in their sense of the limits of human knowledge" (Wellman 116). As noted previously, it is often difficult to deduce at multiple points in *L'Homme machine* the degree to which La Mettrie is being serious. His writing style communicates a wide range of different tones regarding not only his contemporaries but also towards the reader and at times, nature itself. Indeed, the instances of direct statements, unmodified by irony, humor, insults, or admissions of his own partial or total ignorance with regards to the nature of humanity are rare, such that they stand out visibly from the majority of the text.

It is curious then, that one of the single most direct statements of the entire text is contained within the title: *L'Homme machine*. This particular formation of the phrase, wherein nothing

²² For more information on Enlightenment attitudes about epistemological systems, see notably Eliassen and Jacobsen.

separates the word “man” from “machine,” only occurs in the title, and is not repeated in such a blunt fashion in the text itself. Vartanian notes this stylistic oddity and assigns it a satirical role:

La Mettrie’s isolated use of the locution [l’homme machine] as the title of his work has the rhetorical function of highlighting a satirical intent. Its initial force, instead of being dissipated through repetition in the text, is conserved and casts, so to speak, its ironic tonality on the arguments that follow...in developing the satire of *L’Homme machine*, he was bent on opposing the mechanical to the spiritual rather than to the living. But this mattered little insofar as the comedy of representing man as a machine was concerned. What did matter was the direct apposition of *homme* and *machine*, which throws the two concepts so abruptly and closely together that no space is left, as it were, to qualify, explain, or nuance the relation between them; man and machine seem locked in a sudden, incongruous embrace. (*Science and Humanism* 57)

Vartanian proposes that this satirical weapon serves to destabilize the hierarchical position of man, removing him from a position of primacy on Earth towards a more humble reality (*Science and Humanism* 56). One can take Vartanian’s analysis of the work even further. He notes that the satirical title “casts...its ironic tonality on the arguments that follow” (*Science and Humanism* 57). How then does one mark the point at which La Mettrie’s arguments begin to lose their satirical tenor? As Vartanian is discussing the title of the work itself, it follows therefore that this suggested satire can be imposed to some degree onto the entire work. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of “man” and “machine” underlines the assemblic nature of La Mettrie’s analysis, as this ontological confluence explicitly challenges notions of what these terms signify metaphysically. The title then becomes something of its own mini-assemblage, the first hint of the deeper assemblage explored by the text.

La Mettrie's narrative voice further adds to the assemblage nature of the text as he rarely stays within any single register for very long; his declarations of truth are almost always tempered soon after by admissions of ignorance. Even in *L'Homme machine*'s opening pages, La Mettrie carefully establishes limits upon his own model's ability to provide understanding of the human being: "L'Homme est une Machine si composée, qu'il est impossible de s'en faire d'abord une idée claire & conséquemment de la définir" (151). The differences between this particular expression of La Mettrie's thesis and that contained within the title are striking as they seem almost to come from two different writers, especially when the totality of the sentence that follows "L'Homme est une machine..." is taken into account. La Mettrie establishes that man is a machine only to begin to erode his own pronouncement. When compared to the image of the clock that we saw previously, this man machine as it is described seems almost too nebulous to be worthy of such certainty.

Despite *L'Homme machine*'s satirical elements and tonal shifts, however, it is impossible to read this text as being purely satirical. The powerful emotional reactions that La Mettrie's works inspired in his contemporaries seem almost proof that at its core, *L'Homme machine* contains a steel blade, destined to puncture the organs of the intensely religious and superstitious society that La Mettrie inhabited. One such denunciation of the text which appeared in a review of the English translation in a 1749 edition of the British publication *The Monthly Review*, exemplifies the fear of subversion that *L'Homme machine* created among large swathes of European society:

Writers of this kind, who advance principles of such malignant influence and so evidently subversive of the interests of society, and of every individual...can be looked upon in no other light than as public enemies. And surely every one, who has the spirit of a man, and any regard for the interests of truth and virtue in the world, will feel a generous indignation

rise in his breast, against every puny infidel, that would endeavor to weaken or undermine those fundamental principles which are their only support...(124)²³

Interestingly enough, this reaction does not focus upon affronts to God or religion, nor does it engage in the common tactic of the time wherein critics would simply reject La Mettrie's ideas as simply being too ridiculous to engage with (Vartanian, *L'Homme machine* 96). Rather, it expresses a deep fear of the intrinsically subversive aspects of *L'Homme machine* and presents them as being dangerous to every member of society.

The danger of La Mettrie's work does not lie within the book's heretical, blasphemous content, but rather with the perceived ability of this work (and others like it) to create, direct, and propagate a sort of massive, society-wide paradigm shift. La Mettrie would not necessarily create a new branch of scientific inquiry (as his work is, despite its empirical framework, not all that scientific) but rather (and perhaps more dangerously) a philosophical paradigm shift. The epistemic instabilities of *L'Homme machine* create a situation wherein one must be incredibly cautious when dealing with any given passage or idea presented by the text. The text operates such that it forces the perceptive reader to perform a rather dangerous balancing act between the core of serious philosophical and scientific theory and the uncertain tone of the work. As I have shown, it would be impossible to fully embrace one of these two facets, as the text presents serious arguments with serious implications even as it satirizes, destabilizes, and problematizes its own

²³ Amusingly, the review erroneously attributes authorship of *L'Homme machine* to the Marquis d'Argens. A correction is noted on page 131. Another note at the end of the volume's table of contents makes the same correction, noting that d'Argens, perplexed by the fact that the English translation of *L'Homme machine* bore his name, took out an advertisement in the General Advertiser in Potsdam on October 2, 1749 in an attempt to pin authorship on a "Physician who has been obliged to quit France" as the note puts it. See *The Monthly Review's* "Man a Machine."

point of view. What is needed therefore, is a way of perceiving *L'Homme machine* in such a way that these two polarizing points of attack can be compared, contrasted, and perhaps even synthesized. In doing so, we can move on from the notion of “machine” and embrace the multifaceted, disparate nature of the corporeal assemblage.

2.3 La Mettrie's Imagination and the Rhizome Assemblage

The epistemological uncertainty of *L'Homme machine* complicates any analysis of the text that seeks to uncover an internally consistent epistemological and ontological thesis within the work. The Lamettrian organic assemblage is one replete with contradictions, problematizing its own ideas often as soon as it makes them and yet in doing so reveals the assemblage's ability to function as a tool of discovery. The juxtaposition of truth claims and their contradictions forces the reader to consider opposing possibilities, subsequently putting ideas into the same kind of epistemic dialogue that we will see more explicitly elaborated by the *renvois* of the *Encyclopédie* in Chapter 2. In this way, La Mettrie pushes much of the burden of deciding the truth onto the reader themselves by creating a materially centered framework meant to invite questions and inspire reflection rather than dictate reality. How then can we assemblically visualize these contradictory connections such that their inconsistencies become complimentary rather than conflicting?

Our assemblic model must fulfill several criteria in order to function within the particular framework designated by *L'homme machine*: primarily, it must be able to contain, highlight, and decode this text's frequent paradoxical juxtapositions in such a way that neither opposing element can be entirely nullified by its opposite. If La Mettrie declares that man is a machine and then in

the next paragraph pronounces this same machine as being inherently impossible to understand, the model must be able to make sense of both of these otherwise contradictory claims. Secondly, the model must provide a basis for the elaboration of lines of connectivity between disparate, seemingly unlinked entities within a wider, largely nebulous body of objects. This will allow La Mettrie's own mapping of the relationships between different organs, senses, emotional states, exterior living bodies, nonorganic materiel, and performed actions to be elaborated in such a way as to avoid pure A to B to C causal chains. The epistemological uncertainty inherent within La Mettrie's work necessitates that this method also be capable of creating these links despite the various gaps (and at times chasms) that exist between points A and B within the bodies' causal relationships. Finally, our desired model must be able to continue to function outside the bounds of scientifically oriented epistemology and, at the same time, be able to reincorporate the non-scientific into the overarching materialistic tone of the work. La Mettrie's use of imaginative analogy, wildly hypothetical explorations, and explicitly elaborated corporeal transplantations (such as in the case of *L'Homme plante*) form an extensive part of both his *oeuvre* at large as well as playing key roles within the arguments that he wishes to make. These moments of poetic imagining must also be incorporable into and work alongside La Mettrie's more anatomical and empirical tendencies.

Our model must ultimately be capable of producing truth claims that, while fragmentary due to their inherent epistemological deficiencies and categorical differences, can still be said to show *something* of the truth. It is into this unique gap that the Deleuzian/Guattarian notion of the rhizome seems almost specifically designed to inhabit. The rhizome is not concerned with root causes, nor with ultimate terminations; rather it permits the freeform placing of points anywhere upon even the most fragmentary line, circle, triangle, or any other conceivable geometric shape.

The rhizome and the assemblage function in the same manner; they bring together varied and disparate phenomena, consequently revealing nonlinear hidden relationships. A can both link to B and to C but can just as easily loop around the usual progression of variable markers until Ff or Zz become implicated well outside of their traditional notational sequence. In this way, the rhizome is an assemblage as it eschews linear connectivity in favor of unexpected, undiscovered modes of interaction between phenomena. The body as presented in *L'Homme machine* reflects this rhizome-assemblage model, an ever-expanding chaotic web of cause and effect, flowing from parts of the body to non-parts outside of it.

Traditional variable progression is designated within Deleuzian philosophy with the image of the tree, or root structure (Deleuze and Guattari 5). The tree is the model that the rhizome-assemblage seeks to oppose; whereas the rhizome-assemblage *maps* asymmetrical connections between desynchronized objects, the tree structure, like the network *traces* an underlying, understandable framework (Deleuze and Guattari 12). Tree structures form linear causal chains that can only connect specific series of points, in a specific order. Furthermore, the act of tracing is inherently one that seeks to describe a system that already exists; it carefully follows, in an attempt at objective reproduction, what it perceives as extant truth. In this way tracing has an ultimate beginning in that it is possessed of a specific goal whereas the rhizome-assemblage follows a freeform approach to causality and interaction and does so with no other goal than to explore visible relationships.

The lack of beginnings and endings (or even, for that matter, the lack of their merest *suggestions*) exemplifies, in this case, the rhizome-assemblage's greatest strength as an explorative tool as its lack of certainty permits the existence of chains that are capable of branching into two (or more) juxtaposed paradoxes that otherwise would be impossible to reconcile. Because the

rhizome-assemblage is not based upon inherently linear flows of causality, not only can these flows branch into paradoxes, but the flows can also be reversed, meaning that the entire notion of “first principles” can be abandoned, as much of the sense of the word “first” is lost. This permits La Mettrie to focus less on questions of specific cause, consequently reframing his approach from a more holistic perspective.

An important aspect that Deleuze and Guatarri attribute to both the rhizome and the root models is that each of them is capable of containing smaller versions of each other as part of their overall rhizomatic or root structures: “There exist tree or root structures in rhizomes; conversely, a tree branch or root division may begin to burgeon into a rhizome...A new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch. Or else it is a microscopic element of the root-tree, a radicle, that gets rhizome production going” (15). The possibility of a double, interlacing existence of rhizome-assemblage and tree allows for La Mettrie’s own work to slide back and forth between the two models, depending on what is happening upon the page itself. One can understand the rhizomatic aspect of La Mettrie’s work by considering the particular vantage point of La Mettrie and (and the reader) vis-à-vis the corporeal description of a given passage. La Mettrie’s written style is so chaotic that his seeming lack of a particular organizing principle is considered by Vartanian to be one of the more defining features of his work: “Instead of the chastened, disillusioned, spiritless, and pessimistic voice that would befit someone for whom man, and therefore he too, is a robot, we find just the opposite. The affective key in which La Mettrie philosophizes is typically sanguine, animated, amusing, playful, ironic, self-confident, defiant and ludic” (*Science and Humanism* 84). La Mettrie skips from subject to subject like he is giving a rather poorly organized lecture and not at all as if he were attempting to create a serious scientific text. This aids in rhizomatic creation precisely because, while he does have the end goal of

eventually tracing the human body (which he of course admits as being impossible) (*L'Homme machine* 151) the method that he employs is far too chaotic to truly be called a tracing.

In order to fully appreciate this sort of pin the tail on the donkey approach, the consideration of a similar text, yet one that is highly organized should prove useful. In Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's *Traité des sensations* published in 1754, Condillac also undertakes to explore the sensational structures of the human body. Unlike La Mettrie, Condillac's investigation is highly organized, beginning with an entirely blank "body" and slowly adding different means of perceiving the world until the described being is all but complete. The rootlike A to B linear relationships of this text are obvious from the start. The seemingly blind jumping from organ to organ and phenomenon to phenomenon that characterizes *L'Homme machine* is replaced by a much more logically understandable tracing, greatly resembling a somewhat reversed vision of the popular anatomical atlases of the period which tended to begin with drawings of the human being as a whole and then proceeded to deconstruct them piece by piece until single organs or separated parts stand alone on the page.²⁴

The rhizome-assemblage within La Mettrie's work exists within the chaos of his approach. Were he to attempt to deconstruct the human in a systematic fashion, we would be unable to consider his work as exemplifying the rhizome structure, as it would go against one of the most basic facets of the rhizome: "a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is a stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure. A genetic axis is like an objective pivotal unity upon which successive stages are organized; a deep structure is more like a base sequence

²⁴ See Berkowitz for more information about anatomy folios as well as several examples of these sorts of illustrations.

that can be broken down into immediate constituents...” (Deleuze and Guattari 12). Through the lens of what a rhizome-assemblage cannot be, we can understand how La Mettrie’s machine man and plant man are rhizomatic models that represent incomplete attempts at tracing, delineating, and reproducing a full understanding of the human being as a material subject. If his works were converted into illustrations in a children’s paint-by-numbers book, the pre-traced outline denoting the borders of the finished product would be visible, just as it is understood that La Mettrie seeks to trace the material existence of human kind. The interior of the drawings would be a chaos of half completed, poorly understood, and sometimes completely empty and isolated fragments, barely even approaching the imagined unity of the finished drawing. In this way, La Mettrie, though seeking the complete understanding (tracing) of an existing system, is only able to perceive the smallest, unrelated, unorganized fragments of his corpus. The centrality of these epistemic shards to La Mettrie’s analysis further destabilizes the notion of the integrated and graspable machine, consequently underlining the assemblic nature of the Lamettrian body.

2.4 The Organic Interior

Though much of La Mettrie’s analysis focuses on elements outside of the physical body, his understanding of the body’s own interlocking systems is itself profoundly assemblic. Through mapping the interactions between different internal mechanisms of the body as well as the connections between certain corporeal components and the conscious mind, La Mettrie illustrates the profound interdependency of these constructs. Not only does the body move the mind and vice-versa, their constant interactions problematize the very notion of their separation by blurring the internal lines of cause and effect. This aspect of the corporeal assemblage is what I call the organic

interior, the mapping of the body's internal assemblic structures and their respective interactions. The entry entitled "*Corps*" in the *Encyclopédie* illustrates that 18th-century imaginings of the body already acknowledged the variegated, assemblic nature of the body's assorted parts. It even notes the gaps of knowledge that mar a greater understanding of the body:

Le *corps* humain étant considéré par rapport aux différentes motions volontaires qu'il est capable de représenter, est un assemblage²⁵ d'un nombre infini de leviers tirés par des cordes; si on le considère par rapport aux mouvemens des fluides qu'il contient, c'est un autre assemblage d'une infinité de tubes & de machines hydrauliques; enfin si on le considère par rapport à la génération de ces mêmes fluides, c'est un autre assemblage d'instrumens & de vaisseaux chimiques, comme philtres, alembics, récipients, serpentines, &c. & le tout est un composé que l'on peut seulement admirer, & dont la plus grande partie échappe même à notre admiration. Le principal laboratoire chimique du *corps* est celui du cerveau. (Tarin 264)

Consequently, by beginning his *L'Homme machine* with a consideration of the internal corporeal assemblage, La Mettrie positions his readers in a familiar space, even if this familiarity will almost immediately be destabilized through his analysis of the mind/body connection.

²⁵ The 1694 edition of *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* defines assemblage as "Amas & union de plusieurs choses. Un batteau se fait de l' assemblage de plusieurs aix. toutes les parties de ce bastiment ne sont pas fort regulieres, mais l' assemblage ne laisse pas d' en estre beau. Assemblage, en terme de Menuiserie, se dit de la maniere d' assembler le bois de Menuiserie. Il se dit aussi des pieces principales qui servent à soustenir & à lier certains ouvrages de Menuiserie. Bois d' assemblage. porte d' assemblage. l' assemblage de cette porte ne vaut rien."

La Mettrie justifies this by appealing to the importance of empirical analysis within the realm of scientific inquiry:

C'est pourquoi toutes les recherches que les plus grands Philosophes ont faites *à priori*, c'est à dire, en voulant se server en quelque sorte des ailes de l'Esprit, ont été vaines. Ainsi ce n'est qu'*à posteriori*, ou en cherchant à démêler l'Ame, comme au travers des Organes du corps, qu'on peut, je ne dis pas, découvrir avec évidence la nature même de l'Homme, mais atteindre le plus grand degré de probabilité possible sur ce sujet. (*L'Homme machine* 152)

This sort of epistemological framing has the double effect of explicitly stating both La Mettrie's proposed starting point as well as outlining his empirical approach. As noted, La Mettrie's positioning of his analysis of the interworking of the body's organs at the beginning of this work seems to fulfill certain potential expectations of his contemporary readers, yet the examples that he uses are, at first, rather confusing. Instead of beginning his investigation with an exploration of organic body parts that exist, La Mettrie chooses to focus upon corporeal examples wherein particular parts of the corporeal assemblage are *absent*:

Ici c'est un Paralytique, qui demande si sa jambe est dans son lit: Là, c'est un soldat qui croit avoir le bras qu'on lui a coupé. La mémoire de ses anciennes sensations, & du lieu, où son Ame les rapportoit, fait son illusion & son espece de délire. Il suffit de lui parler de cette partie qui lui manque, pour lui en rappeler & faire sentir tous les mouvements ; ce qui se fait avec je ne sai quel déplaisir d'imagination qu'on ne peut exprimer. (*L'Homme machine* 152)

This citation contains the entirety of La Mettrie's interest pertaining to phantom limb pain, and yet despite its conciseness, the passage's key placement towards the beginning of the text illustrates

what he seeks to accomplish with his subsequent examples. Within this passage, La Mettrie effectively destroys the very notion of the dualistic mind/body model through his deft realignment of the primary attributes of the material body and the supposedly immaterial mind. The arm loses those very elements that constitute its material essence and yet, as is seen even in contemporary cases of phantom limb syndrome, the *perception* of the material existence of the missing limb persists.²⁶ This material yet immaterial, absent yet perceived limb leaves us with the inescapable conclusion that the sensations which form our own corporeal subjectivity are themselves just as uncertain and ungrounded in the material (unless of course the mind is material) as are our own thoughts.

La Mettrie was not the first empiricist to include phantom limbs within their model of the body. Descartes, as part of his investigation into the physiological materialism of the body, found phantom limbs to be a somewhat perplexing phenomenon:

dans une infinité d'autres rencontres, j'ai trouvé de l'erreur dans les jugements fondés sur les sens extérieurs ; et non pas seulement sur les sens extérieurs, mais même sur les intérieurs : car y a-t-il chose plus intime ou plus intérieure que la douleur ? et cependant j'ai autrefois appris de quelques personnes qui avoient les bras et les jambes coupées, qu'il leur sembloit encore quelquefois sentir de la douleur dans la partie qu'ils n'avoient plus ; ce qui me donnoit sujet de penser que je ne pouvois aussi être entièrement assuré d'avoir mal à quelqu'un de mes membres, quoique je sentisse en lui de la douleur. (330)

For Descartes, the explanation of phantom limb pain must be understood in two parts. Firstly, sensations themselves are generated on a purely physiological level. The brain, functioning as a

²⁶ For more information on phantom limb pain, see Nikolajsen and Jensen.

sort of sensational nexus receives signals from various parts of the body through the nerves and is then able to decode these signals to discover from whence they came. Tommy Lott notes that Descartes seems to ascribe an “intrinsic quality of locality” to individual sensations, a quality which immediately identifies the source of the sensation to the brain (248). Consequently, these location-coded sensations can only be incorrectly processed (such as in the case of phantom limbs) when the mind half of the mind/body duality becomes involved:

The amputee’s acquisition of a false belief that she still has a foot, however, is a matter of judgment which, for Descartes, is a *mental* operation [...] This distinction between mental operations of the mind, or intellect, and mechanical operations of the brain, or nervous system, lies at the heart of Descartes’s account of the deception which sometimes results from the occurrence of phantom limb phenomena. (Lott 249)

Descartes attributes this failure of the mental to a simple misreading of the sensorial mechanisms that endow sensations with locational awareness. La Mettrie himself does not explore the phenomena to nearly the same depth as does Descartes, but we can use this particular parallel to allow us to better envision the differences and similarities between these models.

The Cartesian brain operates as a sensorial depository wherein all sensory data ultimately is incorporated into the immaterial consciousness. It stands at the center of being and yet, when compared to the La Mettrian mind, is also strangely alone. Its role as a coordinating endpoint, not to mention its inherent immateriality, stations it in a singular position within the causal chain. Unlike the La Mettrian mind, which, as we shall see, both moves and is moved, the Cartesian mind does enact cause, yet it does so in a clearly graspable A to B fashion, where causal flows are easily traced from beginning to end and lack the chicken-or-egg conundrum implied by La Mettrie’s model. When La Mettrie discusses the phantom limb phenomenon, he does so in such a way that

illustrates his own ignorance of the mechanisms behind the event. La Mettrie leaves us with two conflicting possibilities: firstly, that the material is actually immaterial and vice-versa (an interpretation which renders both of these terms essentially meaningless); or secondly that the category of the immaterial does not exist and that all sensation and perception exist upon the level of the material.

La Mettrie, of course, seeks to promote the latter of these two possibilities. While this conclusion is explicitly stated throughout the text in various ways, La Mettrie also provides less-direct empirical and subjective examples to promote this idea of the body as a material assemblage. The amputated limb allows for a highly specified deconstruction of the mind/body duality, yet as a result of this specificity, the general applicability of such an example might be somewhat hindered as it does rely on the reader being aware of the existence of phantom limb syndrome (not to mention the degree to which this syndrome is common amongst amputees and stroke victims²⁷). La Mettrie seems aware of the fact that this example can really only be appreciated by a limited number of individuals, as he playfully proposes an investigation of human beings who believe themselves to be other than what they are, and then subsequently abandons this line of questioning: “Que dirois-je de nouveau sur ceux qui s’imaginent être transformés en *Loups-garoux*, en *Coqs*, en *Vampires*, qui croient que les Morts les sucent?²⁸ [...] Je dois légèrement passer sur des choses connues de tout le Monde” (*L’Homme machine* 153). One has the impression that La Mettrie is purposefully presenting and then dismissing these interesting avenues of thought precisely

²⁷ See Antonello, Kluger, Sahlein, and Heilman for more information about this phenomenon.

²⁸ He continues in this vein for several sentences, each example being somewhat more incredible than the last

because, while they might be more exciting investigations, they, like phantom limb syndrome, are experienced by very few people. La Mettrie's work is curious in that he tends to fluctuate between two investigative extremes: on one hand he rejects more fanciful empirical examples in favor of the mundane, and yet on the other he goes as far as to imagine a human as a plant.

L'Homme machine's overall organization (such as it is) seems to frontload the more relatable examples of the corporeal assemblage before diving into the abstract. La Mettrie follows his discussion of amputated limbs and vampires with the much more universally applicable assemblic relationship that exists within the body when it is attempting to sleep:

L'Ame & le Corps s'endorment ensemble. A mesure que le mouvement du sang se calme, un doux sentiment de paix & de tranquillité se répand dans toute la Machine ; l'Ame se sent mollement s'appesantir avec les paupières & s'affaïsser avec les fibres du cerveau : elle devient ainsi peu à peu comme paralitique, avec tous les muscles du corps. Ceux-ci ne peuvent plus porter le poids de la tête ; celle-là ne peut plus soutenir le fardeau de la pensée ; elle est dans le Sommeil, comme n'étant point. (*L'Homme machine* 153)

Whereas La Mettrie's example of the amputee rendered the material immaterial and could therefore be interpreted as signaling a primacy of the mental over the physical, his discussion of sleep serves to illustrate, to a much less ambiguous degree the fact that these systems cannot be viewed as linear cause and effect chains. Within this example, both the slowing of the flow of blood and the feeling of peace and tranquility happen simultaneously. La Mettrie does not suggest that the origin of sleep is hidden, rather he implies that the concept of an origin is impossible. The body and mind fall asleep together, and act consequently as the origin of each other.

One could point out La Mettrie's usage here of the separate terms soul and body as being indicative of a continued reliance upon Cartesian dualism, yet these somewhat anachronistic terms

(at least for La Mettrie) can be understood as fulfilling a stylistic role. Primarily, as is often the case in *L'Homme machine*, much can be read through La Mettrie's use of juxtaposition. Within this particular example, he begins with both the dual subjects of body and soul, which are further separated through his use of the third person plural of the verb "to fall sleep" (*s'endormir*). This sort of stylistic choice might otherwise pinpoint the importance of mind body dualism within human subjectivity were it not for the next sentence. Here, La Mettrie continues his exploration of the mechanisms that drive human sleep, and yet the dual subjects of body and soul have been synthesized into "the machine" ("un doux sentiment de paix & de tranquillité se répand dans toute la Machine"). An interpretation of this "machine" as an object which symbolizes either the body or the soul uniquely is rendered untenable as La Mettrie returns to employing "soul" and "body" as his primary subjects as the sentence continues. The insertion of "machine" then functions to establish a sort of terminological hierarchy within *L'Homme machine* wherein terms like body and soul become subordinate to the overall classification of the machine. "Peace and tranquility" represent the physiological effects of the human sleep process, which spread throughout "toute la Machine." This juxtaposition of "all" with "Machine" not only underlines the importance of "Machine" as the vessel through which these feelings spread, but also highlights the absence of the terms "body" and "soul" which otherwise figure heavily within the example of sleep. Their absence in this context is inexplicable, unless of course they have been synthesized into the singular assemblic concept of the Machine. The result of both this conceptual synthesis and the bilateral body/mind causative flow elicited by sleep illustrates, at a macro level, an abstract map of the Machine rhizome-assemblage. The term "Machine" can be understood, not as a purely mechanical metaphor of materialism (a concept that Wellman has already contested) (181) but as an assemblage born of assemblic imagination within which concepts such as body and mind are

mapped. This allows these terms to be used as functioning categories without recreating Cartesian duality, as these dual categories are themselves subsumed within a single conceptual unity.

From a lexical standpoint, the word “soul” (*âme*) must be taken within its historical context in order for La Mettrie’s usage of the term to be properly grasped. The *Encyclopédie* proposes a definition of the word in the entry “AME” which contains two meanings, which while similar in certain aspects, are ultimately divergent with regards to their metaphysical implications:

Il y a eu une foule d'opinions sur son origine; & cette matiere a été extrêmement agitée dans l'antiquité, tant payenne que chrétienne. Il ne peut y avoir que deux manieres d'envisager l'*ame*, ou comme une qualité, ou comme une substance. Ceux qui pensoient qu'elle n'étoit qu'une pure qualité, comme Epicure, Dicéarchus, Aristoxène, Asclepiade & Galien, croyoient & devoient nécessairement croire qu'elle étoit anéantie à la mort.
(Diderot and Yvon 327)

It would seem then that La Mettrie is almost certainly employing “soul” as denoting a quality rather than a separate substance. This renders his constant usage of *âme* much less destabilizing with regards to his central thesis as it permits the soul’s existence at the material level. This is something that La Mettrie has already indicated within *L’Homme machine* yet given the loaded connotations of the word soul, a consideration of its contemporary definition helps avoid misinterpretations of the word.

Furthermore, La Mettrie argues that even if an immaterial soul did exist, it would not automatically be superior to a material version of itself: “Ainsi une *Ame de boue*, qui decouviroit, comme d’un coup d’œil, les rapports & les suites d’une infinité d’idées, difficiles à saisir, seroit évidemment préférable à une *Ame sote & stupide*, qui seroit faite des Elémens les plus précieux” (*L’Homme machine* 150). Again, we see an insistence on the value of the soul being based upon

not what it is, but rather what it does. Even an imagined concept such as the soul can be judged, to a certain degree, from an empirical perspective. As we shall see throughout the remainder of my analysis, La Mettrie often works towards a hierarchical leveling out of different material entities; more precisely, he seeks to remove humanity from its predominant position above other material bodies. This comparison of material and immaterial souls is but one facet of this project.

This vision of La Mettrie's hierarchal categorization structure is useful in that it explains his continued usage of terms like body and soul, terms whose existence within this text might undermine his central arguments that man is a machine. When La Mettrie uses "body" and "soul" he seems to be employing them not as ossified Cartesian relics, but rather as indices of the multifaceted nature of human subjectivity. La Mettrie's exploration of the subjective experience of amputees illustrates the necessity inherent in maintaining these separate categories as subordinate terms even in the face of denying that they are objectively different. Regardless of whether or not the soul can or cannot be differentiated objectively from the body, the subjective experience of an individual human lends itself, in many ways, to a non-dualistic conception of the self.

2.5 A Fascination with Food

While La Mettrie seeks to explain the material nature of the human being through the tracing and mapping of interactions occurring internally within the human body, he also spends a significant amount of time mapping the interactions of influences outside of the body and their subsequent impacts upon the physical and mental states of hypothetical individuals. While we previously discussed the *internal* rhizome structures created through causal relationships between

corporeal phenomena, this particular vein of analysis allows for a truly assemblic understanding of the estuary that is the human “soul.” Consider the first example that La Mettrie presents of an outside force that has noticeable effects upon the soul of a human being

L’Opium a trop de rapport avec le Sommeil qu’il procure, pour ne pas le placer ici. Ce remede enivre, ainsi que le vin, le caffé &c. chacun à sa manière, & suivant sa dose. Il rend l’Homme heureux dans un état qui sembleroit devoir être le tombeau du sentiment, comme il est l’image de la Mort...L’Ame n’en voudroit jamais sortir. Elle étoit en proie aux plus grandes douleurs ; elle ne sent plus que le seul plaisir de ne plus souffrir, & de jouïr de la plus charmante tranquillité. L’Opium change jusqu’à la volonté ; il force l’Ame qui vouloit se divertir, d’aller se mettre au Lit malgré elle. (*L’Homme machine* 154)

The example that La Mettrie gives of the effect of opium upon the body is the first among a long list of different substances, from coffee, to alcohol, to simple meals, and raw meat (*L’Homme machine* 154-155). Each of these, like the cited paragraph discussing opium presents broadly mapped connections between the consumption of these different substances and clearly visible changes on both the physical and mental planes. Wherein lies the dissimilarity then, between a person whose “soul” keeps their body awake and a person whose temperament is mutated through the consumption (or the deprivation) of different external substances?

The difference lies within the physical relationship of these substances to both the material soul and the material body. Obviously, they come from outside of the body, whereas the problem of the sleeper tormented by their own mind represents a phenomenon that is *of* the body. Opium here embodies an aspect of the material universe that is capable of enacting profound changes upon other, ostensibly closed material beings that can have as great an effect on their subjectivity as do components of the body itself. This contrast combined with La Mettrie’s other analyses of

multiple external influences upon the physical and mental state of the human shows that he considers these external forces to be just as important to the internal status of the machine as are their concurrent internal parts. How then do they fit into the corporeal assemblage?

From an initial, practical perspective, these external elements form part of a rhizomatic assemblages because they are largely untraceable. This untraceability exists as an implicit result of these objects' spatial relationship vis-à-vis the human body. Whereas the internal organs of a given human body can generally be expected (with occasional exceptions) to follow the same configuration (and therefore be traceable as a tree structure), external objects such as opium cannot be so reliably linked to humans. After all, one can never be certain that any one person will ever consume opium so much as a single time during the course of their life, which leaves opium operating only theoretically as a behavioral possibility for a specific human being. These external factors are rhizomatic ultimately because they can be tied to physical and mental modifications of the human being, all while potentially being absent from the corporeal assemblage entirely. Consider La Mettrie's impressions of the effects of the consumption of raw meat upon humans and animals: "La viande crue rend les animaux féroces; les hommes le deviendroient par la même nourriture. Cette férocité produit dans l'Ame l'orgueil, la haine, le mépris des autres Nations, l'indocilité & autres sentiments, qui dépravent le caractère..." (*L'Homme machine* 155). In each of these cases, both for humans as well as animals, he implies that all members of both of these categories of being will undergo these mental and physiological changes when fed raw meat. Yet like opium, it is never certain that a person will eat raw meat, consequently endowing the meat with the same cloak of uncertainty that the drug enjoys.

As we have just seen, La Mettrie tends to employ generalized portraits related to different cause and effect relationships, yet following his discussion of man and meat, he proceeds to give

a very specific, individualized example of a similar phenomenon: “On a vu en Suisse un Bailif, nommé Mr. Steiguer de Wittighofen; il étoit à jeun le plus intègre, & même, le plus indulgent des juges; mais malheur au misérable qui se trouvoit sur la Sellette, lorsqu’il avoit fait un grand diner! Il étoit homme à faire pendre l’innocent, comme le coupable” (*L’Homme machine* 155). While both the proposed eaters of raw meat and this Bailif are similarly affected after having eaten their food of choice (they both become more bloody minded than they might otherwise have been) the problem lies within their respective causes. In our first example, it is specifically raw meat which renders man ferocious and in the second, it is simply “a big meal.” Furthermore, a subsequent paragraph proposes that humans become particularly violent when they are deprived of food (La Mettrie, *L’Homme machine* 156). Each of these potentialities then could be part of the corporeal assemblage, each one having a strong possible effect upon the subjective mind.²⁹

All of this is not to say that La Mettrie does not, at times, utilize a more tree-like tracing structure during his explorations of the human body and outside elements. In launching this investigation, La Mettrie begins with a very general statement about the interaction of the human body and food: “Le corps humain est une Machine qui monte elle-meme ses ressorts; vivante image du mouvement perpetuel. Les alimens entretiennent ce que la fièvre excite. Sans eux l’Ame languit, entre en fureur, & meurt abattüe. C’est une bougie dont la lumière se ranime, au moment de s’éteindre” (*L’Homme machine* 155). The differences between this example and the previous

²⁹ During the 18th century, there existed the wide-spread belief that a person’s diet modified their temperament and could be tailored to their environment. Shapin notes that: “The causal link between constitution and aliment could go down to the county level. Cider and perry are common beverages in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire, and they are ‘cold and windy’ drinks...” (383). For more on the Galenical diet, see Shapin. For more information on old regime era food practices in general, see Spary.

ones exist at the level of their applicability to the human body. Whereas the previous examples are geared more so to either specific individuals or to a limited class of human bodies, here we have a cause and effect relationship that can be applied to all living human bodies and presumably to all animal bodies as well. La Mettrie avoids the rhizome structure in this instance by presenting an image that largely ignores the specificities of how this process occurs within the body itself although, as we have already seen he does outline how he images the digestion of food into the body must work. He creates, then, a particular form of tree tracing that must, within its own structure, be composed of different rhizomatic assemblages that he does not discuss until arriving at his subsequent examples.

It would be possible to envision this transition from tree/root tracing to rhizome-assemblage mapping through the examination of La Mettrie's passages on meat and food consumption, but he arrives at this transformation within the exact paragraph discussed above: "Mais nourrissez le corps, versez dans ses veines des Sucs vigoureux, des liqueurs fortes; alors l'Ame généreuse comme elle, s'arme d'un fier courage, & le Soldat que l'eau eut fait fuir, devenu féroce, court gaiement à la mort au bruit des tambours. C'est ainsi que l'eau chaude agite un sang, que l'eau froide eut calmé" (*L'Homme machine* 154). Again, we return to a generalized model of cause and effect that cannot reasonably be applied to all humans, even within La Mettrie's own imagined structures of the human body. Furthermore, this particular citation provides an excellent example of La Mettrie's chaotic (and sometimes almost arbitrary style) in that La Mettrie introduces, discusses, and promptly moves on from the notion that cold water has a noticeably calming effect upon the material human, all within a single sentence.

The implications conveyed by these extra-corporeal factors functioning as profoundly impactful elements in human and animal behavior signify much more than a vague cause and effect

relationship existing between human and substance. Once it is made clear that these objects can be mapped onto the exact same rhizome structure that the human body itself inhabits, the barriers between human and object begin to break down. Up until this point, we have been discussing causal chains that exist within the body (primarily as an organ to organ phenomenon) and those, as we have just seen, that can be connected with exterior influences. Despite this *a priori* division, the coexistence of both internal, organic causal chains and external causal relationships upon the same rhizome plane (and therefore within the same assemblage) immediately begins to degrade this once fundamental divide.

La Mettrie also explores some of the interesting implications that his Spinozist tendencies suggest. When taken into context with his mapping of external material factors and their impacts upon the corporeal assemblage, the phrase “Concluons donc hardiment que l’Homme est une Machine; & qu’il n’y a dans tout l’Univers qu’une seule substance diversement modifiée” (La Mettrie 197), which occurs in the conclusion of *L’Homme machine*, conveys that, at the very least, the difference at a material level between the internal organic parts of the human machine and the external material universe are non-existent. When taken into context with his mapping of external material factors upon internal organic states, this reformation of Spinoza’s central thesis of the unity of substance provides us with a different interpretation of La Mettrie’s conception of what it means to be human. In order to further delve into the implications of a Spinozistic theory of unified matter within the La Mettrian context, we must consider La Mettrie’s model of the soul and how it, through its ability to further blur the line between material and immaterial, allows for an even further exploration of the material reality of organic life.

2.6 The Imagined Soul

Throughout *L'Homme machine*, La Mettrie frequently employs the verb “to imagine” (*imaginer*) or the noun “imagination” within his discussions of phantom limbs, language, and, as we shall see, the functioning of the soul.³⁰ La Mettrie’s use of these terms is not accidental as he explicitly outlines how the human imagination works within his particular understanding of the material soul:

Je me sers toujours du mot *imaginer*, parce que je crois que tout s’imagine, & que toutes les parties de l’Ame peuvent être justement réduites à la seule imagination, qui les forme toutes; & qu’ainsi le jugement, le raisonnement, la mémoire, ne sont que des parties de l’Ame nullement absolües, mais de véritables modifications de cette espèce de *toile médullaire*, sur laquelle les objets peints dans l’œil, sont revoüés, comme d’un Lanterne magique. (*L’Homme machine* 164)

La Mettrie illustrates how the soul operates as an assemblic structure through the juxtaposition of a series of specifically mental constructs (judgment, logic, and memory) which, according to his model, stem from different parts of the soul itself. He centers imagination, the most embodied of mental faculties, within the material space of the *toile médullaire*, noting how it recreates and recasts what the mind has perceived. Within the wider 18th-century, the imagination was understood (among other things) as fulfilling the important role of concretizing the abstract

³⁰ For more on how imagination functions both in *L’Homme machine* as well as in other La Mettrie works, see Gladfelder.

elements of human language. The *Encyclopédie's* article on imagination written by Voltaire defines the faculty as:

...le pouvoir que chaque être sensible éprouve en soi de se représenter dans son esprit les choses sensibles; cette faculté dépend de la mémoire... Vous prononcez le mot de *triangle*, mais vous ne prononcez qu'un son si vous ne vous représentez pas l'image d'un triangle quelconque; vous n'avez certainement eu l'idée d'un triangle que parce que vous en avez vû si vous avez des yeux, ou touché si vous êtes aveugle. Vous ne pouvez penser au triangle en général si votre *imagination* ne se figure, au moins confusément, quelque triangle particulier. (560)

Imagination's powers of concretization rests at the heart of this particular 18th-century definition of the imagination; a concept which, again, serves to materialize the immaterial. While the *Encyclopédie* entry does not go so far as to imply the nonexistence of the metaphysical soul (and consequently the materiality of the imagination), from a practical standpoint, the implications of these two models seem largely the same. Both are described in highly visual terms, the *Encyclopédie* in terms of representing and seeing, whereas La Mettrie employs the image of the magic lantern projecting an image upon the mind.

Ultimately, the Encyclopedic understanding of the imagination separates this mental function from other faculties, such as reasoning. La Mettrie, however, suggests that the imagination *is* the soul, albeit composed of a variety of mental subcategories that together fulfill all of the roles that the soul is understood to perform: "Mais toujours est-il vrai que l'imagination seule aperçoit; que c'est elle qui se représente tous les objets, avec les mots & les figures qui les caractérisent; & qu'ainsi c'est elle encore une fois qui est l'Ame, puisqu'elle en fait tous les Rôles" (*L'Homme machine* 165). This notion of the material soul as the materialized faculty of

imagination is one of the few moments within *L'Homme machine* wherein La Mettrie provides the reader with information regarding the capabilities and attributes of the material soul. At the same time, he once again strays from the path of science and empirical epistemology, and onto more philosophical and literary grounds.

Indeed, it is through La Mettrie's discussion of the imagination that we see another example of his optimism, even when faced with the somewhat bleak existential implications that one could pull from a purely mechanistic worldview. As he elaborates his model of the imagination, he chooses very specific examples of what the imagination produces, examples which reflect a certain degree of optimistic humanism: "Par elle [the soul], par son pinceau flateur, le froid squelette de la Raison prend des chairs vives & vermeilles; par elle les Sciences fleurissent, les Arts s'embellissent, les Bois parlent, les Echos soupirent, les Rochers pleurent, le Marbre respire, tout prend vie parmi les corps inanimés" (*L'Homme machine* 165). These artistically embellished examples reconfigure the subjective position of humans by placing the imagination at the center not only of the human soul, but also as a sort of animating force with the ability to infuse rigid, dead material with the same vibrancy of potential interaction contained within his portraits of human and animal subjects. His use of verbs here places the impetus not on the philosopher, artist, or scientist but rather upon the material objects themselves. The sciences flower, forests speak, and marble breathes, and in each of these cases, they do so because imagination has infused them with a different kind of materiality than they previously possessed. Rather than being silent, cold and motionless, forests and stones exhibit the same living materiality exhibited throughout La Mettrie's work.

The soul as imagination then is a notion that further blurs the line between the singular, organic, living subject and the outside material world. As we have seen, the material universe

contains the capacity to modify the human subject through the introduction of various material factors that affect the functioning of the material being. Yet, with the introduction of the imagination as the soul, we can perceive a reversal of this causal flow. Through the assemblic creation of a multifaceted imagination, this same imagination in turn imbues the inert material with an almost anthropomorphized vitality that permits these objects to flower, speak, and breath. The imaginative soul creates not only an internalized, almost Platonic idea of material form, open to the perusal of the human that it inhabits but also pushes its own immaterial materiality into the world itself, such that actual, physical modifications of other material bodies become not only possible but seemingly inevitable.

2.7 Modular Man

Throughout La Mettrie's *L'Homme machine* one finds numerous attempts, both implicit and explicit, to not only explore the organic nature of humankind as an assemblic construction but also to blur the boundaries between what constitutes human and animal. In the 18th century, once rigidly maintained divisions between different categories of life were themselves being challenged, primarily due to empirical analysis of newly discovered lifeforms. One such lifeform, referred to at the time as "Trembley's Polyp" (known today as the *hydra*) engendered controversy as a scientific curiosity due to its dual animal and floral attributes.³¹ Vartanian notes that these

³¹ While Trembley was the first to investigate the curious proprieties of the *hydra* genus, it was actually discovered by Antonie van Leeuwenhoek in 1703. For more information, see Vartanian's article "Trembley's Polyp, La Mettrie, and Eighteenth-Century French Materialism."

controversies existed primarily because neither philosophy, theology or science had ever been faced with such an ambiguous lifeform:

It was owing to the force of this *biological teleology* that the polyp, by shattering the accepted patterns of “animal economy,” could insinuate itself into questions of theology and metaphysics. According to Lesser, whose attitude was traditional and typical of the age, God had established the distinction of the three realms of nature and restrained their operations in such a manner that none could encroach upon the others. Moreover, it was a general law, having theological overtones, that reproduction resulted from the coupling of the sexes, to which insects were no exception. (“Trembley’s Polyp” 268)

The destabilization of the “animal economy” occurred due to the polyps’ previously ignored ability to regenerate new versions of itself when cut into pieces, much like the hydra of Greek mythology that regrows heads when they are cut off (Vartanian, “Trembley’s Polyp” 259). The interest generated by Trembley’s polyp was such that it is mentioned repeatedly in different texts, by different thinkers throughout the 18th century. Voltaire reportedly observed a vase full of polyps owned by a friend, and, as Vartanian notes, was unconvinced of their animality (“Trembley’s Polyp” 260). In the *Rêve de d’Alembert* Diderot employs the notion of the “human polyp” as a potential candidate for the exploration and colonization of other planets (51). In a letter from French scientist Réaumur to Tremblay, he wrote that “If people in Paris did not talk too much about war at present, they would be talking only about the insects which, being cut in two, become complete animals” (qtd. in Vartanian, “Trembley’s Polyp” 262).

The importance of Trembley’s polyp led to its inclusion in the *Encyclopédie*. The article “Polype, Poulpe” articulates the degree to which this creature problematized the classification of either plant or animal:

...lorsqu'on les voit attachés à la tige d'une plante aquatique & immobile, ils ressemblent à une plante parasite, à des brins d'herbes, ou à l'aigrette de la semence de dent de lion; mais lorsqu'ils retirent leurs bras & qu'ils les font disparoître, lorsqu'ils se contractent subitement & si fort que le corps ne paroît être qu'un grain de matiere verte, lorsqu'ensuite les bras reparoissent & s'étendent, & que le corps reprend sa premiere forme, enfin lorsqu'on les voit marcher, on ne peut plus douter qu'ils ne soient des animaux. (945)

This particular description of the polyp gives it a highly contextualized identity. Its geographical location not only influences its behavior but creates an almost entirely separate *mode de vie* that renders it more plantlike or more animalistic depending on its actions and environment. The polyp's classificatory identity then relies upon an assemblic contextualization wherein the existence of other, exterior lifeforms and circumstances become the deciding factors with regards to the polyp's observable traits.

Much like how La Mettrie infuses certain material objects such as food with the power of physiological determinism, the polyp becomes what it is as a function of what surrounds it. Within *L'Homme machine* and *L'Homme plante*, La Mettrie problematizes the concept of rigid organic classification systems by exploring the various similarities and differences that exist between different forms of organic life. By concentrating on similarities, La Mettrie is able to imagine hypothetical materialisms wherein certain animals (such as orangutans) live and function competently within Western society. By highlighting contrasts, he illustrates ways in which the assumed superiority of humanity becomes significantly less certain. Furthermore, he begins to discover certain limitations of the rhizomatic universe in that he tests and dismisses certain rhizomatic assemblages within and between organic lifeforms.

Within the context of our established assemblic vein of inquiry, La Mettrie's transorganic imaginings move from a much more biologically centered focus to a more philosophical and literary lexicon. While biology and anatomy are never far from La Mettrie's mind, his organic juxtapositions with *L'Homme machine* rely as much on anatomically unattributed behaviors as they do direct biological comparisons. Within this framework, the mapping of the rhizome-assemblage becomes less of an endeavor concerned with the elaboration of cause and effect relationships and more oriented towards the elucidation of commonalities between different points within the wider assemblage of life. Furthermore, through his comparative anatomical and botanical analysis, La Mettrie's work contains another trait of the rhizome-assemblage in that it manifests the ability to be constantly reconfigured: "The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modifications. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting..." (Deleuze and Guattari 12). This sort of modular materialism is present within *L'Homme machine*, yet its flexibility and usefulness will become truly apparent within the much more concise *L'Homme plante*.

One of *L'Homme machine's* earliest considerations of this kind of modular assemblage is articulated when La Mettrie attempts to reconfigure the traditional human/animal hierarchy by illustrating various ways in which animals are superior to humans:

Malgré toutes ces prérogatives de l'Homme sur les Animaux, c'est lui faire honneur que de le ranger dans la même classe. Il est vrai que jusqu'à un certain age, il est plus animal qu'eux, parce qu'il apporte moins d'instinct en naissant. Quel est l'Animal qui mourroit de faim au milieu d'une Rivière de Lait ? L'Homme seul...Faites biller pour la première fois la lumière d'une bougie aux yeux d'un Enfant, il y portera machinalement le doigt, comme pour savoir quel est le nouveau Phénomène qu'il aperçoit...Mettez-le encore avec un

Animal sur le bord d'un précipice : lui seul y tombera ; il se noye, où l'autre se sauve à la nage. (*L'Homme machine* 169)

These comparisons focus on the frailties of humanity with regard to its animal cousins which, given the Biblical verses that permit the indiscriminate domination of nature put La Mettrie at odds with yet another immaterial explanation of the universe.³² By illustrating the shortcomings of humans, La Mettrie reconfigures their hierarchical status (at least in the context of children) with regards to other lifeforms.

Furthermore, within *L'Homme machine* this moment marks one of several turns wherein La Mettrie veers somewhat more into the realm of literary imagery than empirical discovery. The scenarios that he invokes construct a multifaceted image of the fragility of humanity, in that they approach the question of human/animal parity not only from the perspective of empirical observation (the candle flame for example) but also from an imagined vantage point, such as that of the child starving in a river of milk. Natania Meeker gives a particular importance to the employment of literary figures within La Mettrie's work, noting: "As La Mettrie suggests in his writings on literature, in order to begin to understand all aspects of our experience as fully materializable, we must begin thinking figurally. This shift entails not just a reformulation of what machine-man himself is meant to signify as an emblem of materialism, but a reevaluation of his current place at the center of La Mettrie's oeuvre" (*Voluptuous Philosophy* 90-91). Throughout

³² "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." (*King James*, Genesis 1:26)

this section, we will examine how La Mettrie employs figurative language and imagery, not only as a means to strengthen his own arguments but also as a means to test them.

Figurative thinking not only allows the reader to contextualize themselves and their universe materially within the confines of La Mettrie's work, but also has the curious effect of revealing *L'Homme machine* and *L'Homme plante* as works that themselves function as textual assemblages whose vocabulary, imagery, and tones oscillate between multiple discursive layers. The texts exist as both scientific explorations as well as literary creations, a phenomenon which places the reader in the position of having to navigate between the different writing modes and stylistic tropes. As we shall see during our discussion of *L'Homme plante*, the power of literary devices within scientific exploration allows for an even more radicalized modular materialism to be developed.

Within *L'Homme machine*, this modular materialism forms an important part of La Mettrie's work, yet does not manifest the modular precision of *L'Homme plante*. Perhaps his most interesting transorganic reconfiguration within *L'Homme machine* stems from his ontological juxtaposition of humanity and great apes. La Mettrie creates a modular assemblage through these hypothetical cross-breedings by imagining an ape that has been raised from a young age within human society and taught to speak using sign language:

Je prendrais le grand Singe préférablement à tout autre, jusqu'à ce que le hazard nous eût fait découvrir quelqu'autre espèce plus semblable à la nôtre, car rien ne répugne qu'il y en ait dans des Régions qui nous sont inconnües. Cet Animal nous ressemble si fort que les Naturalistes l'ont apellé *Homme Sauvage*, ou *Homme des bois*. Je le prendrais aux mêmes

conditions des Ecoliers d'Amman³³ ; c'est-à-dire, que je voudrais qu'il ne fût ni trop jeune, ni trop vieux...Je choisirois celui qui auroit la physionomie la plus spirituelle, & qui tiendrait le mieux dans mille petites opérations, ce qu'elle m'auroit promis. (*L'Homme machine* 160)

While La Mettrie's hypothesis regarding the education of apes is certainly radical, it is only one example of a general trend within the 18th-century that questioned the hierarchical position of apes with regards to humanity. Patricia Fara notes that Linnaeus, the very foundation of modern taxonomy shared a similar perception of these animals: "Although Linnaeus still put Europeans at the summit of creation, to his opponents' horror he placed people in the same order-*Anthropomorpha* (human like creatures)-as apes" (102). Linnaeus himself justified his categorization by indicating the physical similarities between the two species: "No one has any right to be angry with me...as a natural historian according to the principles of science up to the present time I have not been able to discover any character by which man can be distinguished from the ape" (qtd. in Fara 102). While similar, Linnaeus' approach to the question of the ape is somewhat different in that it does not go so far as to posit an ape integrated into human society. Furthermore, Linnaeus also subdivided different human ethnicities into different classifications, with the European version as the superior (Fara 102).

Within this discussion of the "*homme sauvage*" La Mettrie, by contrast attempts to further level the playing field between human and ape through the precise categories that he chooses to consider amongst his hypothetical ape candidates. Within this imagined scenario, La Mettrie omits

³³ La Mettrie is referring to J. C. Amman who is credited with developing one of the first methods with which children born or made deaf could be brought to communicate with others.

debate on the ape's possible ontological status, avoiding any discussion of potential metaphysical traits that could be associated with this particular animal. Rather, as has been the case throughout the majority of *L'Homme machine*, La Mettrie focuses upon physiological attributes as they relate to mental function. By focusing on the age of the creature as well as certain undefined "clever" physiological attributes, La Mettrie neatly sidesteps the question of the existence of souls amongst animals. Indeed, by putting such an emphasis on physical traits, the entire question of the animalistic soul becomes moot, since the question itself isn't even being considered. Through the obfuscation of a specifically ape soul, La Mettrie manages to adroitly pull the reader to his vantage point, therefore mapping an instant rhizomatic line between the hidden material soul of the human and the unknown status of the ape soul.

To say, however, that the ape does not possess what La Mettrie might consider a soul, is problematic, as La Mettrie seems to assume that one exists through his proposal to educate the ape in the same manner that deaf children were brought to communicate with hearing people:

Enfin, ne me trouvant pas digne d'être son Gouverneur, je le mettrois à l'Ecole de l'excellent Maître que je viens de nommer³⁴ ou d'un autre habile, s'il en est. Vous savez... tous les prodiges qu'il a sù opérer sur les sourds de naissance, dans les yeux desquels il a, comme il le fait entendre lui-même, trouvé des oreilles; & en combien peu de tems enfin il leur a appris à entendre, parler, lire, & écrire... mais le Singe voit & entend; il comprend ce qu'il entend & ce qu'il voit. Il conçoit si parfaitement les Signes qu'on lui fait, qu'à tout autre jeu, ou tout autre exercice, je ne doute point qu'il ne l'emportât sur les

³⁴ J.C. Amman.

disciplines d'Amman. Pourquoi donc l'éducation des Singes seroit-elle impossible?
(*L'Homme machine* 160-161)

Without explicitly stating his goal, La Mettrie has not only rhizomatically linked human and ape through supposing that one is at least intellectually equal to the other, but also has presented another subtle argument for the inherent material nature of the soul. If the ape can be made to communicate with other, similarly trained humans, the question as to whether or not an ape can be said to have a soul must therefore be understood as having the same response as the same question posed about human beings. While this linkage cannot be said to be illustrative of a particularly causal relationship (as most of our other examples have been), it does generate an empathetically unavoidable connection whose implications challenge the notion of humanity's dominion of the animal kingdom.

Indeed, when extrapolated outside of the context of a learned ape, the possibility for other lifeforms to possess this same potential for trans-species social integration destabilizes the established hierarchy, not just between human and ape, but between human and all other living things. La Mettrie states that, while the ape is the best candidate for human instruction, other, unknown lifeforms may exist that would exhibit an even greater potential for humanization (*L'Homme machine* 160). This approach throws almost every aspect of human/animal interactions into turmoil due to the fact that if the ape can be said to have a similar material soul to that of humans, how can the rigid hierarchies of organic life be maintained? This conundrum presents us with further evidence of La Mettrie's project of realigning humanity's place among other forms of life, as, by illustrating the possible existence of a material soul within any number of animals, humanity's unique place on Earth has been even further undone.

2.8 Conclusion: Flowering Humanity

When considering his usage of comparisons between humans and animals, one could potentially misconstrue *L'Homme machine* as exhibiting certain anti-human tendencies, and yet when one reads *L'Homme plante*, it becomes apparent that while these explorations have a destabilizing effect upon humanity's hierarchical position, they do so because of the many similarities that occur in nature. The opening lines of *L'Homme plante* underline this: "Nous commençons à entrevoir l'uniformité de la nature : ces rayons de lumière encore foibles sont dûs à l'étude de l'histoire naturelle ; mais jusqu'à quel point va cette uniformité?" (La Mettrie 5) *L'Homme plante* seeks to explore the limits of the assemblic nature of life, pushing the corporeal assemblage into entirely new organic constructs. I will conclude my chapter with this text as it is La Mettrie's most radical instance of assemblic imagination, illustrating potential breadth of assemblic relationships.

After two short paragraphs and the preface which illustrate the basic premise of the work, La Mettrie launches himself immediately into his comparative analysis: "Il y a dans notre espece, comme dans les végétaux, une racine principale & des racines capillaires. Le réservoir des lombes & le canal thoracique, forment l'une, & les veines lactées sont les autres ... Les poumons sont nos feuilles. Elles suppléent à ce viscere dans les végétaux, comme il remplace chez nous les feuilles qui nous manquent" (*L'Homme plante* 6-8). The language and tone of this text are different from that of *L'Homme machine* in that they remain remarkably consistent throughout the first chapter. *L'Homme machine*, as we have seen, undergoes frequent, sometimes radical tonal shifts, often occurring from one sentence to the next, which is perhaps due to the work's chaotic, multi-genre approach to materialism. *L'Homme plante* is a more condensed exploration, as not only is it much shorter, but it also employs a more objective and direct writing style, at least in chapter one. La

Mettrie draws comparisons, notes similarities, and underlines differences, all while avoiding most of the thematic digressions and bombastic language that characterize the style of *L'Homme machine*.

Despite these stylistic differences, Ann Thomson notes that the end result of *L'Homme plante* remains largely the same as that of *L'Homme machine*: “La Mettrie’s interest here in this topos is to insist on the uniformity of all living beings and to insist, as he had done in *Machine Man*, on the similarities between humans and animals and on the claim that human superiority is only the result of physical organization. The end of *Man as Plant* is thus rather similar to *Machine Man* and specifically refers to the debate on animal souls” (*Machine Man* xx). Thomson’s observation is supported by the text’s radical approach of juxtaposing such different lifeforms. La Mettrie explicitly addresses his novel tactic within the preface to *L'Homme plante*:

L’Homme est ici métamorphosé en Plante, mais ne croïez pas que ce soit une fiction dans le goût de celles d’Ovide. La seule Analogie du Règne Végétal, & du Règne Animal, m’a fait découvrir, dans l’un les principales Parties qui se trouvent dans l’autre. Si mon imagination jouë ici quelquefois, c’est pour ainsi dire, sur la Table de la Vérité; mon Champ de Bataille est celui de la Nature, dont il n’a tenu qu’a moi d’être assés peu singulier pour en dissimuler les varietés. (3)

He explicitly states his goal of re-contextualizing animal and plant bodies by intermingling their components, stabilizing his claim through a call to the natural. His examinations are further concretized through his usage of remarkably precise comparisons. Rather than employing more generalized metaphors, such as the clock in *L'Homme machine*, La Mettrie uses a scientific nomenclature as the basis of most of his examples:

On peut regarder la Matrice Vierge, ou plutôt non Grosse, ou, si l'on veut, l'Ovaire, comme un Germe qui n'est point encore fécondé. Le *Stylus* de la femme est le Vagin ; la Vulve, le Mont de Venus avec l'odeur qu'exhalent les Glandes de ces parties, répondent au *Stigma* : et ces choses, la Matrice, le Vagin & la Vulve forment le *pistille* ; nom que les Botanistes Modernes donnent à toutes les Parties Fémelles des Plantes. (*L'Homme plante* 12)

Gone are most of the more literary devices that populated *L'Homme machine*. Whereas the educated ape was spoken in of in a more generally comparative fashion and the created rhizome-assemblage was therefore more of an implicit creation, here there is no ambiguity and little room for interpretation. The human and plant parts connect such that they almost seem tree-like rather than assemblage and yet one must remember that microscopic botany remained a somewhat novel investigative method, and that certain anatomical and botanical terms were new inventions themselves (as La Mettrie himself notes).³⁵

This solidified, categorized language allows the modular function of the rhizome-assemblage to operate in that it permits La Mettrie to assemblageally imagine this plant-animal corporeal assemblage. Each element can be pinpointed accurately in such a way that the reader (assuming they are familiar with these terms) would grasp the exact desired meaning. In the context of the rhizome-assemblage, this allows the mapping of disparate connections to seem much more concrete, as most examples have an explicit counterpart. If we return to our previous example of sexual organs being compared between humans and plants, these one to one relationships become

³⁵ La Mettrie mentions a number of botanists in *L'Homme plante*, including Malpighi whose 1675 work *Anatome plantarum* was considered as marking the foundation of the microscopic study of plant anatomy. For more on the life, times, and profession of Malpighi, see Meli.

immediately apparent. The virginal womb becomes the unfertilized seed, the stylus transforms into the vagina, and the vulva and mons veneris incarnate the stigma. These lines are mapped so exactly and so clearly that the reader can begin to imagine an ever-expanding trajectory for *L'Homme plante*, connecting and encompassing large swaths of organic life and yet, surprisingly, La Mettrie's analytical arc moves in a different direction.

As we saw in the opening lines of the text, La Mettrie searches not only for signs of uniformity within nature, but also seeks the edges where this same uniformity no longer becomes possible and, therefore, at which point modular reorientations become untenable. This element serves as a sort of methodical foreshadowing that predicts the ultimate limitations of the work itself. Organizationally, *L'Homme plante* is divided into three chapters: the first, which explores similarities between humankind and plant, the second, which denotes their differences, and the third, which functions as a philosophical synthesizing of the two previous divisions. It is within the third chapter that La Mettrie's rhizomatic approach reassumes a more tree-like structure. La Mettrie's conclusions are markedly different from those of *L'Homme machine* in that he seems to retreat from some of the more radical positions that he held previously with regards to the soul:

elle est bien certainement de la même pâte & de la même fabrique ; mais non, ni a beaucoup près de la même qualité. C'est par cette qualité si supérieure de l'Ame humaine, par ce surplus de lumières qui résulte visiblement de l'Organisation, que l'Homme est le Roi des Animaux, qu'il est le seul propre à la Société, dont son industrie a inventé les Langues, & sa Sagesse, les Loix & les Mœurs. (*L'Homme plante* 51)

While La Mettrie never explicitly espoused total ontological equality between different species in *L'Homme machine*, the imagery of an educated ape capable of almost full functionality within

human society suggests such a possibility on at least a limited scale. Here though, the hierarchy is fully reestablished, as La Mettrie imparts the unambiguous title of “king of the animals” to humans. It would be unfair, of course, to regard La Mettrie as having given up on his materialist philosophy; as even as he puts humanity back at the top of the food chain, he does so in materialist terms. The question of humanity’s corporeal organization being their primary source of dominancy returns, a position which we also saw in *L’Homme machine*. Furthermore, both human and animal souls retain not only their inherent materiality, but also their shared building blocks of which they are constructed.

Curiously enough, even as La Mettrie proposes the impossibility for different kinds of connections to exist, there is a notable stylistic shift that occurs from his exploration of similarities. As we have seen, these similarities are described using precise, scientific language and generally avoid his more literary tendencies. However, in chapter 2 of *L’Homme plante* figurative language returns to the fore: “La Terre n’est pas seulement la Nourrice des Plantes, elle en est en quelque sorte l’Ouvrière; non contente de les allaiter, elle les habille. Des mêmes sucs qui les nourrissent, elle fait filer des habits qui les enveloppent” (La Mettrie 34-35). When contrasted with the language of chapter one, La Mettrie’s employment of metaphor and simile underlines the ontological audacity of his corpus. Directly comparing human and plant phenomena in such concretized terms implies above all a high degree of conviction as to the validity of his proposed modular substitutions. Within the second chapter of *L’Homme plante*, figurative language has an even greater effect, expanding the corporeal assemblage far beyond the human body. The text accomplishes more than just elaborating assemblic connections, it also further destabilizes the supremacy of humanity over other forms of life. Furthermore, his use of metaphor shows us that

while human and plant may not entirely transposable, a sort of biological empathy forms even in the face of acknowledged incompatibility.

Within the context of La Mettrie's implicit goal of reconfiguring organic hierarchies, even a declaration of humanity's supposed superiority does not entirely defang his ideas. Through the juxtaposition of man and ape, we are able to envision an (admittedly hyperbolic) example of an explicit ontological reconfiguration within organic hierarchies. *L'Homme plante*, illustrates how humanity can be conceived in terms of other lifeforms while at the same time underlining certain biological differences. The lines mapped within these discursive fields elucidate the interconnected nature of organic life, destabilizing their respective ontological positions. The rhizomatic corporeal assemblage ultimately reveals much more about humanity than would a mere anatomical tracing. It unveils the fragility of human/animal classification through juxtaposition and transposition and ties together lines of cause and effect that otherwise might have gone ignored. The corporeal assemblage shows then not just the body, but hints at the body's context and position within the vast material assemblage that is the universe.

3.0 Chapter 2: The *Encyclopédie*: Diderot and d'Alembert's Epistemological Assemblage

As we saw in chapter one, the discovery and demystification of the universe was an important focus for many 18th-century thinkers, a concern tangential to questions surrounding the transmission and preservation of acquired information. Previous historical periods saw diverse ontological classification systems, often using branching structures as the basis for epistemological hierarchies. According to Richard Yeo, the tree structure serves as a reference to the biblical Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and is very common as an organizational motif throughout the late medieval period (23). This format was one of a number of different attempts to organize human knowledge into overarching thematic categories, many of which followed organizational structures which relied upon biblical references (such as the *Fons Memorabilium Universi* an early encyclopedia in Latin written composed in the late middle ages which was divided into five parts to reflect the five wounds of Christ) or drew upon the Aristotelian distinction between the practical (*actualis*) and the theoretical (*inspective*) (Yeo 22-23). Each of these different organizational schemes provides insights into the epistemological worldview of their creators and of the societies within which they gestated. The early modern period saw the birth of new forms of epistemological structuring, such as alphabetization which reframed notions of epistemic classification away from religion-focused ontologies towards more secularly based systems. This chapter will focus specifically upon Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond de d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (published between 1751 and 1772). This seminal text provides a unique look at a number of different, and at times contrasting, organizational frameworks as it melds both more traditional classificatory structures (such as the Tree of Knowledge) along with newer systems (such as alphabetization) which ultimately problematize its status as a stable epistemological compendium.

The *Encyclopédie*'s adoption of novel epistemic schemes reflects a more general 18th-century shift towards new ways of understanding the relationship between different subjects. Foucault writes of the century's new attitude towards epistemology, suggesting that the change occurs due to a desire for the organization of knowledge to better reflect nature:

La conservation de plus en plus complète de l'écrit, l'instauration d'archives, leur classement, la réorganisation des bibliothèques, l'établissement des catalogues, de répertoires, d'inventaires représentent, à la fin de l'âge classique, plus qu'une sensibilité nouvelle au temps, à son passé, à l'épaisseur de l'histoire, une manière d'introduire dans le langage déjà déposé et dans les traces qu'il a lassées un ordre qui est du même type que celui qu'on établit entre les vivants. (143-144)

This move towards an order that reflects life indicates not only a restructuring of long-established domains of knowledge, but also hints at a new awareness of the potential impossibility of those domains' total separation. The 18th-century understanding of life and nature, as we saw in chapter one, began to incorporate visions of the material world which contained increasing awareness of the assemblic interconnectivity underlying material phenomena. Therefore, as models of epistemology began to mirror this trend, it stands to reason that they would also acknowledge previously ignored connections at work within their field of inquiry. For the *Encyclopédie*, this phenomenon manifests itself in the work's various classificatory systems which both strengthen and problematize existence as a stable epistemological compendium.

Beyond its role as repository of knowledge, the *Encyclopédie* was also conceived of as a sort of abstract spatial structure, meant to be explored and subsequently discovered through the act of reading. In his article "Encyclopédie" published as part of volume 5 in 1755, Diderot describes two, seemingly contradictory organizational schemata which form the conceptual core of the

Encyclopédie's structure. The first, which we shall examine in greater detail subsequently, is the famous *Système Figuré des Connaissances Humaines*, a structure which functioned as the public face of the *Encyclopédie's* organization. The second manifests itself through what d'Alembert called the *labyrinthe*, the study of which usually focuses on the work's employment of inter-article *renvois* or references:

Le système général des Sciences & des Arts est une espece de labyrinthe, de chemin tortueux où l'esprit s'engage sans trop connoître la route qu'il doit tenir. Pressé par ses besoins, & par ceux du corps auquel il est uni, il étudie d'abord les premiers objets qui se présentent à lui; pénètre le plus avant qu'il peut dans la connoissance de ces objets; rencontre bientôt des difficultés qui l'arrêtent, & soit par l'espérance ou même par le desespoir de les vaincre, se jette dans une nouvelle route; revient ensuite sur ses pas; franchit quelquefois les premieres barrieres pour en rencontrer de nouvelles; & passant rapidement d'un objet à un autre, fait sur chacun de ces objets à différens intervalles & comme par secousses, une suite d'opérations dont la génération même de ses idées rend la discontinuité nécessaire. (Discours Préliminaire xiv)

Each of these images, the *Système Figuré* and the *labyrinthe*, implies that the *Encyclopédie* is, at least organizationally, conceivable as a spatially framed construct, existing as something which, due to its configuration, must be viewed as *navigable*. In an analysis which focuses on the *Encyclopédie's* role as a map, David Bates notes that the work: “was a map of knowledge, one that represents a hidden reality concealed in the complex and labyrinthine terrains of mind and nature” (20). The images of the *Système Figuré*, the map, and the *labyrinthe* together visualize the *Encyclopédie* as a conceptually flat, 2-dimensional space that can only be traversed laterally. Within this chapter, I will explore the multitude of ways in which this limited space can be explored

outside of a 2-dimensional framework. By conceptualizing the *Encyclopédie* as a work whose composition and interpretation are profoundly assemblic in nature, I will show that the *Encyclopédie* exists in a multitude of temporal, spatial, epistemological and ontological states, both within its 18th-century context and onwards through its continued evolution in the 21st century. Each of these assemblic pathways provides a unique avenue of analysis for the *Encyclopédie* and when taken together, begin to recast the work's role as an epistemological and ontological *machine de guerre* created to promote Enlightenment values.³⁶ Rather than standing as a paragon of Enlightenment thought, the *Encyclopédie's* assemblic nature reveals it as a work of anti-gnosis, offering an ever shifting series of epistemological and ontological perspectives such any single interpretation of the work becomes unstable while paradoxically enabling a multitude of other readings possible.

I will accomplish this goal by examining a number of different assemblages that exist within the *Encyclopédie*. I begin with the *Encyclopédie's* primary organizational framework, the *Système Figuré des Connaissances Humaines* and the work's stated epistemological goals. Moving on I explore the internal *renvoi* system which connects certain articles through intertextual references, investigating *renvoi* connections which scandalized 18th-century readers as well as those that did not. I then consider the work's alphabetical presentation system and the juxtaposition of largely different subjects that alphabetization allows. Subsequently, I delve further into the role of the reader in the encyclopedic assemblage, and imagine potential assemblic connections that a curious reader might discover within the many volumes of the *Encyclopédie*. In

³⁶ Véronique Le Ru explores the idea of the *machine de guerre* through an analysis of the *renvois* system, illustrating its frequent promotion of Enlightenment values.

my penultimate section, I discuss how certain editorial processes and temporal considerations influenced the creation of the oeuvre. Finally, I move beyond the 18th century and contemplate one of the *Encyclopédie's* newest forms, that of the University of Chicago's ARTFL *Encyclopédie* project, a digitized version of the first Paris edition of the text that breathes new life into the compendium and creates the opportunity for brand new assemblic connections to be elaborated.³⁷

3.1 The Assemblic Roots of the *Encyclopédie*

In my previous chapter, I relied heavily upon the Deluzian notion of the rhizome as the conceptual center point of assemblic analysis and, while I will continue to employ this image to a certain degree within this chapter, I will also branch out into different, *Encyclopédie* specific forms of assemblage. The idea of the tree/rhizome dichotomy proves most useful within the analytical framework of the *Système Figuré*, as this particular organizational structure can be made to serve as a more practical model of an otherwise abstract concept. Beyond the rhizome I will explore assemblages born from shared subject matter, alphabetized juxtapositions, shared vocabulary, authorial connections and the pervasive role of the reader themselves as an important vector of the encyclopedic assemblage.

At the basic level of assemblic analysis possible within the *Encyclopédie*, the *Système Figuré des Connaissances Humaines* exists as the face of the *Encyclopédie's* organizational

³⁷ Nearly all of my readings of *Encyclopédie* articles come from ARTFL, as it contains both digitally transcribed reproductions of the text, as well as scanned facsimiles of the original printed pages, the page numbers of which I include with each citation.

structure along with the *renvois*, and alphabetization. It is within this tree of knowledge that we begin to see the first aspects of the *Encyclopédie's* spatial structure, notably through how the *Système* exemplifies one of Diderot's more metaphorical descriptions of the *Encyclopédie's* function:

... l'ordre encyclopédique général sera comme une mappemonde où l'on ne rencontrera que les grandes régions; les ordres particuliers, comme des cartes particulieres de royaumes, de provinces, de contrées; le dictionnaire, comme l'histoire géographique & détaillée de tous les lieux, la topographie générale & raisonnée de ce que nous connoissons dans le monde intelligible & dans le monde visible ; et les renvois serviront d'itinéraires dans ces deux mondes, dont le visible peut être regardé comme l'Ancien, & l'intelligible comme le Nouveau. (641A)

Diderot's description of the *mappemonde* illustrates the branching and linear flow of the *Système*, each category fitting into a wider classification according to a predetermined hierarchy in the same way that geographic regions are repeatedly subdivided into more graspable units. Conversely, the *renvois* serve both to forge additional logical connections while, as we shall see, at times radically subverting the *Système*. Furthermore, Diderot's deliberate use of cartographical imagery mirrors 18th-century metaphorical tendencies, as noted by Bates: "In an age of discovery, the map was a popular eighteenth-century image, used to describe the progress of scientific inquiry" (1). Of course, even if the *Système's* epistemic categories remained unviolated by the *renvois*, elements of an ontological assemblage are already at play within its ostensibly objective categories.

This system unfolds into both philosophical and empirical domains of human knowledge, often times linking these otherwise separate domains such that their juxtaposition caused a fair

amount of controversy. Robert Darnton discusses the risks involved with this ontologically mixed structure, noting the dangerous challenges that the *Système* could be seen as promoting:

Setting up categories and policing them is therefore a serious business. A philosopher who attempted to redraw the boundaries of the world of knowledge would be tampering with the taboo. Even if he steered clear of sacred objects, he could not avoid danger; for knowledge is inherently ambiguous...It has bite. Thus Diderot and d'Alembert took enormous risks when they undid the old order of knowledge and drew new lines between the known and the unknown. (*Cat Massacre* 193)

As we can see here, even at the conceptual stage, the *Encyclopédie* contained elements of both the tree and rhizome structures. It is based upon a tree structure that conforms to Deleuze's rigid mode. Yet, as Darnton noted, within its own contemporary social and epistemological climate, this set framework serves as a destabilizing tool, in part due to the classification of theological subjects within the same category as philosophy. We have therefore, a systematic construction whose outwardly rigid appearance becomes destabilized not only due to the problematic organization itself, but also because of a series of internal and external factors which largely elide the classificatory configuration of the *Encyclopédie*. This reconfiguration transforms the *Encyclopédie's* status as a repository of knowledge towards that of an epistemological assemblage, a wide-spread series of interconnected nodes of knowledge (here represented by the articles themselves) that, according to the context and contents of the specific nodes, compliment or complicate each other's position within the assemblage.

The notion of the encyclopedia in a more general sense also relies on a vision of interconnected epistemology. Jason König and Greg Woolf attribute the concept of the encyclopedia, along with the word itself, to humanists in the late fifteenth century, who were

“convinced that they were reviving an ancient Greek term, ‘enkuklopaideia,’ designating the circle of learning” (379). The encyclopedia therefore, can be understood as a text which seeks to not only encompass all human learning, but which also strives to map a degree of interconnectivity between the diverse disciplines of human knowledge. The *Système Figuré des Connaissances Humaines* provides one way in which the *Encyclopédie* fulfills this desire to map these connections to a certain degree.

As we shall see throughout this chapter Diderot was interested in highlighting elements that suggested both commonalities and conflicts within epistemology. However, despite the work’s melding of diverse classificatory systems, the *Encyclopédie* focuses on transcribing and transmitting information. Diderot’s article “Encyclopédie” illustrates his epistemological goal for the project, particularly emphasizing the necessity that the work transmit information across generations:

En effet, le but d'une *Encyclopédie* est de rassembler les connoissances éparses sur la surface de la terre; d'en exposer le système général aux hommes avec qui nous vivons, & de le transmettre aux hommes qui viendront après nous; afin que les travaux des siècles passés n'aient pas été des travaux inutiles pour les siècles qui succéderont; que nos neveux, devenant plus instruits, deviennent en même tems plus vertueux & plus heureux, & que nous ne mourions pas sans avoir bien mérité du genre humain. (635)

As one might expect, Diderot declares that the acquisition and transmission of human knowledge is of central importance to his *Encyclopédie* project, thereby repeating the claims made in previous, largely religious publications such as Johann Heinrich Alsted’s 1630 work, *Encyclopaedia Septem Tomis Distincta*, which Yeo notes is considered as the “last and best of the Latin neo-scholastic encyclopedias” (3). According to Yeo, Alsted’s work existed as part of a genre which

sought to preserve human knowledge against the Apocalypse, believed to be imminent. From a more secular perspective, Diderot saw himself and his contemporaries as shaping and defining the legacy of the Enlightenment (Yeo 3). The more interesting aspect of Diderot's self-defined goal with regards to the *Encyclopédie* is seen through the implications of the kind of human knowledge his work would eventually reveal and transmit. Diderot suggests that through assembling and compiling "knowledge scattered about the surface of the Earth" humans might arrive at not only a better understanding of the universe but would also uncover a more fundamental "general system" applicable to multiple epistemological domains. Knut Ove Eliassen and Yngve Sandhei Jacobsen note the preoccupation that many early modern philosophers had with the creation of a systematized epistemology, and therefore Diderot's hypothesizing about this general system of knowledge is not in itself particularly surprising (76).

It is rather the methodology with which he proposes that this system be discovered which sets him apart somewhat from other philosophers. This difference is located primarily in how Diderot and d'Alembert conceived of the transmission and acquisition of knowledge.³⁸ Diderot suggests a profoundly assemblic understanding of knowledge in that he highlights repeatedly the need for a wide range of individuals and organizations to include their individually acquired knowledge:

Un seul homme, dira-t-on, est maître de tout ce qui existe, il disposera à son gré de toutes les richesses que les autres hommes ont accumulées. Je ne peux convenir de ce principe; je ne crois point qu'il soit donné à un seul homme de connoître tout ce qui peut être connu;

³⁸ For a more in-depth reading of Diderot's article "Encyclopédie" and its implications for the structure of the work, see Starobinski.

de faire usage de tout ce qui est; de voir tout ce qui peut être vû; de comprendre tout ce qui est intelligible ” (“Encyclopédie” 635).

This attitude contradicts the polymathic tradition of the renaissance, wherein scholars attempted to obtain more generally oriented knowledge about their world, which Anthony Grafton explains thusly:

The polyhistor was a figure very alien to us [scholars in a 21st-century context], with our close-fitting specialties and our contented refusal to have anything to do with our intellectual neighbors...He wanted to cover every base on the intellectual field...The scholar had to know the structure and relations of all disciplines, the titles and contents of all books, the character traits and oddities of all significant earlier scholars. (37)

This stepping away from the idea of a universal knowledge graspable by a unique individual was hardly a new notion, yet the fact that Diderot felt it necessary to articulate it as part of the *Encyclopédie*'s methodology (and repeat this concept in various forms throughout his article on the *Encyclopédie*) illustrates that there remained a degree of debate around the epistemological potential of a given individual.³⁹

Diderot's insistence upon the necessity for a multiplicity of sources implies a change in how 18th-century French thinkers understood the nature of epistemology. The fact that one person cannot conceivably grasp all human knowledge suggests not only the vastness of potential knowledge, but also the degree to which this same knowledge becomes subjective when filtered

³⁹ Daniel Brewer explores the individuals who composed the *Encyclopédie* not through biographical particularities, but rather by considering what it meant to be a *philosophe* in the 18-century. Frank Kafker examines many other aspects of the *Encyclopédie*'s contributors, from their education to their varied ideologies.

through the diverse amalgamation of a nearly infinite number of possible interlocutors. Therefore, even from a simple methodological perspective, the *Encyclopédie* invites an assemblic interpretation, as its authors will, due to the work's very nature, stem from an enormous range of disciplines, worldviews, and societal backgrounds whose tracing is therefore rendered all but impossible. The very creation of the *Encyclopédie* is ultimately the elaboration of an assemblic model, as any one person, including the work's chief compilers, could not possibly trace every single article (of which there are approximately 74,000) to each unique author (of whom there are around 145) and then on to each individual's credentials, background, biases, and ontological perspectives.⁴⁰

As an added complication to the large array of individuals who contributed to the *Encyclopédie* is the fact that the quality of many of these scholar's contributions was at times wildly incongruous. Diderot himself lamented this problematic lack of uniform quality within the work of which he himself was one of only two editors (and for later volumes the only editor). In a speech about the project, Diderot noted that

Parmi quelques hommes excellents, il y en eut de faibles, de médiocres, et de tout à fait mauvais. De là cette bigarrure dans l'ouvrage ou l'on trouve une ébauche d'écolier à côté d'un morceau de main de maître; une sottise voisine d'une chose sublime, une page écrite avec force, pureté, chaleur, jugement, raison, élégance, au verso d'une page pauvre, mesquine, plate et misérable. (*Œuvres Complètes* 130)

⁴⁰ There are a number of articles whose authorship is uncertain. For a full list of known contributors, see ARTFL *Encyclopédie* Project.

This sort of criticism leveled at the *Encyclopédie* by its own chief editor raises a number of questions not only about the contributors themselves, but also about the effects that their potentially poor quality articles had upon the overall value of the work as a tool seeking to encapsulate human knowledge. A reader aware of these shortcomings would find themselves in a position not all that dissimilar to a contemporary scholar who employs crowd-sourced publications such as Wikipedia in order to give themselves an idea of a subject. How does one know what to trust?

While there were numerous articles with which Diderot and d’Alembert took issue, they were often unable to modify or eliminate problematic texts, sometimes as a result of social conventions.⁴¹ In November of 1756 Voltaire, a frequent contributor to the compendium, complained in two different letters to d’Alembert about the recently published and much circulated article entitled “Femmes” published as part of volume 6 in 1756. On the 13th of November 1756 Voltaire wrote that: “On vient d’imprimer dans un journal l’article *Femme*, qu’on tourne horriblement en ridicule. Je ne peux croire que vous ayez souffert un tel article dans un ouvrage si sérieux” (*Correspondence* 196). Shortly after, on the 29th of November, Voltaire railed against the article yet again: “On a encore mis ce maudit article *Femme* dans la *Gazette littéraire* de Genève, et on l’a tourné en ridicule tant qu’on a pu. Au nom de dieu, empêchez vos garçons de faire ainsi les mauvais plaisants: croyez que cela fait grand tort à l’ouvrage” (209). D’Alembert responded not long after, on the 13th of December:

⁴¹ In Chapter 3 of *The Republic of Letters* Dena Goodman discusses the problem which faced the *philosophes* in situations such as these and notes that while the *philosophes* were most often trained debaters and adept at disagreeing, it was sometimes difficult to express these instances of disagreement due to certain social mores.

Vous avez, mon cher & illustre maître, très grande raison sur l'article *femme* et autres, mais ces articles ne sont pas de mon bail...je dois d'ailleurs à mon collègue la justice de dire qu'il n'est pas toujours le maître ni de rejeter, ni d'élaguer les articles qu'on lui présente. Cependant le cri public nous autorise à nous rendre sévères, et à passer dorénavant par-dessus toute autre considération, et je crois pouvoir vous promettre que le 7^e volume n'aura pas de pareils reproches à essuyer. (Voltaire, *Correspondence* 218-219)

While from a 21-st century perspective, the article "Femme" depicts a simplistic and misogynistic image of women, Voltaire's letters suggest that the concerns with this article were at least partially stylistic and methodological in nature: "On se plaint généralement de la longueur des dissertations : on veut de la méthode, des vérités, des définitions, des exemples : on souhaiterait que chaque article fût traité comme ceux qui ont été maniés par vous et par m. Diderot" (*Correspondence* 209). An excerpt from the article in question reads as follows : "Une *femme* se faisoit peindre; ce qui lui manquoit pour être belle, étoit précisément ce qui la rendoit jolie. Elle vouloit qu'on ajoûtât à sa beauté, sans rien ôter à ses graces; elle vouloit tout - à - la - fois, & que le peintre fût infidele, & que le portrait fût ressemblant: voilà ce qu'elles seront toutes pour l'écrivain qui doit parler d'elles" (Desmahis). Other than revealing Desmahis' troubling idea of what a woman is, what exactly does this article contribute to humanity's understanding of women? Obviously from our own perspective we can potentially employ it as a small window through which we might get an idea of what an 18th-century image of the woman might have been and yet the language is so abstract and generalized that it would be difficult to really learn anything about women from this article. The 18th-century reader such as Voltaire who read the *Encyclopédie* as it was published might have been even more frustrated; after all, the work was supposed to be founded upon an empirically based, logic-centered epistemology and yet in articles such as

“Femmes” readers are presented with trite observations as well as an exploration of the life of a (I am assuming) hypothetical woman.⁴²

Due to their problematic styles and questionable content, articles such as “Femme” create a different sort of destabilization for the *Encyclopédie*. As we have seen, the structure of the work itself already subverts certain aspects of pre-existing Western epistemology, and the diversity of the *Encyclopédie*'s authors makes finding any type of primary source of knowledge impossible. When taking into consideration the more poorly written articles, it becomes apparent that even the identity of the *Encyclopédie* as a compendium of human knowledge becomes less tenable. The Deleuzian tree structure of the *Encyclopédie* allows for the clear elaboration of lines of connectivity between linearly placed nodes that are themselves individually distinguishable. Each article (and therefore each node) theoretically represents a morsel of human knowledge, created and distilled by the authorial and editorial processes that drove the creation of the *Encyclopédie*. Within the constraints of the Deleuzian tree structure, each node becomes endowed with a certain degree of *a priori* not only textual, but universal authority created as a product of its inclusion within the *Encyclopédie*. When this authority itself becomes questionable, not only from a generalized exterior perspective, but from the internalized position of each article, the entire structure begins to unravel. If each article must be examined microscopically in order to ascertain its individual validity, they all therefore exist within a state of flux and the nodal role of every article becomes uncertain.

⁴² For an in-depth analysis of how the article “Femme” functions within the *renvois* network of the *Encyclopédie* see Vanpée.

3.2 The Clandestine Assemblage

The *Encyclopédie* maps and traces lines of connection in a variety of different ways, particularly through the *renvois* system which creates explicit, intertextual references between certain articles. Suggested in d’Alembert’s discussion of the *labyrinthe*, the *renvois* primarily serve to link texts which contain similar or related subject matter, with the goal of expanding the readers’ knowledge about a particular field of study.⁴³ Diderot explains that there are three primary types of *renvoi*. The *renvois des choses* which ties together closely related concepts, the *renvois des mots* which offers explanations of discipline-specific jargon, and *renvois* which seek to explore new concepts and modes of thinking. How then can we understand articles whose intertextual references *do not* follow any of these patterns? Diderot offers a fourth type of *renvois* dedicated to satire and other forms of critique. He explains their importance thusly: “Je ne voudrois pas supprimer entierement ces *renvois*, parce qu'ils ont quelquefois leur utilité. On peut les diriger secretement contre certains ridicules, comme les renvois philosophiques contre certains préjugés” (“Encyclopédie” 643). One particular entry illustrates the critical potential of the *renvoi* system in that it creates an unavoidable juxtaposition between two disparate subjects. The infamous article is entitled “Anthropophages” and appeared in the first volume, published in 1751. As the title implies, the article focuses on human beings who consume other human beings. It seems, at first, to be a fairly straightforward (and rather short) examination of several mythical examples of cannibalism as contained within Homeric epics as well as a brief mention of the fact that there are

⁴³ For more information on the history of the *renvois* system and their evolution within subsequent epistemological compendiums, see Zimmer.

still occasional contemporary examples of cannibalism in Western society. Following the mythical examples of cannibalism, one finds an example of a historical moment wherein Christians had been believed to be cannibals by pagans: “Les payens accusoient les premiers Chrétiens d'*anthropophagie*...Ils tuent, ajoûtoient les payens, un enfant, & ils en mangent la chair; accusations qui n'étoient fondées que sur les notions vagues qu'ils avoient prises de l'eucharistie & de la communion, sur les discours de gens mal instruits” (Mallet 498). From a purely textual standpoint, the juxtaposition of these two examples of historical/mythical cannibalism might well strike the reader as odd. Given their status within the Western literary canon, the inclusion of examples from Homeric fiction seems appropriate. One could expect an educated reader to understand these references; moreover, by employing literary instances of cannibalism rather than contemporary accounts of the practice, the *Encyclopédie* avoids the possibility of this article being seen as merely lurid and shocking, rather than instructive.

Why then follow these literary references with historical accounts of Christians having been mistaken for cannibals? It could perhaps be understood as a means of illustrating to the (presumably Christian) reader that they could, in fact, remain assured that they themselves were not cannibals, despite the potentially problematic interpretation of the Catholic belief in transubstantiation as designating a profoundly cannibalistic act. It is also possible, however, that this juxtaposition exists in order to illustrate the exact opposite interpretation. One can imagine that the idealized, erudite version of an *Encyclopédie* reader would have read this sort of textual ploy as a signal that one of the most important rites within the Catholic tradition is in fact strongly cannibalistic, which might therefore lead them to question not only this particular Catholic doctrine, but potentially others as well. An additional potential implication of this Christian example following that of mythic cannibals can be read as an attempt to put Christianity and

literature onto the same ontological footing. By employing this automatic comparison, the article invites its readers to understand Christian tradition as existing within the same epistemological realm as legend, essentially implying that Christianity is just as mythically based and therefore possesses just as contested a historic claim as the Homeric legends.

We still remain, however, within the article itself and have not yet considered how “Anthropophages” fits within the wider structure of the *Encyclopédie*. The version of the article that appears in first edition of the *Encyclopédie*, which is the version used by the ARTFL project, lists “Anthropophages” as categorized within the domain of ancient and modern history, which given its Christian subject matter seems appropriate. Even its inclusion of Greek legend could be understood as historical in a sense, as these fictitious accounts of cannibalism were written in the distant past. If “Anthropophages” was taken as a unique, isolated article, we would have to classify it amongst those articles of potentially questionable validity due to its epistemic and ontological eccentricities which would render its nodal position within the tree structure problematic. The article in question however, cannot be viewed as singular, as at the end of the article it contains a number of intertextual links to other texts elsewhere within the *Encyclopédie*, notably articles on the *Eucharistie* (volume 6, 1756), *Communion* (numerous versions appear in volume 3, 1753), and the *Autel* (volume 1, 1751).

These *renvois* connections allow for ontological critique not only as a result of the thematic differences between the article “Anthropophages” but also as a result of their circumvention of the *Encyclopédie*’s primary organizational structure. As previously noted, “Anthropophages” is classified within the historical category, which according to the *Système Figuré des Connaissances Humaines*, is subsumed within the branch entitled “Memory.” The articles “Eucharistie” and “Communion” are situated within the classification of “Theology” which in turn belongs to the

domain of “Reason”, an entirely different realm of encyclopedic knowledge. This textual linkage therefore, ignores the entire structure of the *Système Figuré des Connaissances Humaines*, allowing criticism of certain Christian practices not only through their blasphemous implications, but also through the juxtaposition of a more religiously oriented category with a decidedly secular one. Interestingly enough, the articles “Communion” and “Eucharistie” only contains references to other theological texts and do not reference “Anthropophages” at all, creating an assemblic connection that is only visible from one specific angle within the work. Furthermore, both of these articles are quite lengthy and discuss a wide range of different Christian versions of Communion and the Eucharist, including brief discussions of Protestant attitudes towards transubstantiation. Comparatively, “Anthropophages” is comprised of only a few short paragraphs.

Not only does this kind of potentially controversial cross-referencing illustrate instances of critique in the *Encyclopédie* but it also permits us to view the process through which the assemblage is mapped. Due to the sheer number of articles (and therefore of nodes) contained within the multiple volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, an individual could only truly grasp elements of the assemblic nature of the work through the act of reading itself. When contemplating just the *Système Figuré des Connaissances Humaines*, the organizational schemata contained within the *Encyclopédie*'s front matter, the assemblage remains almost entirely obscured (with the controversial exception of certain elements of the work's epistemological classification system). An individual who purchased the *Encyclopédie* merely to display it for reasons of conspicuous intellectual consumption would be left entirely unaware of the potential controversies implied by the assemblic relationship elaborated between certain articles unless, like Voltaire, they read about them in other publications. Even in these cases, it is only through the act of reading the work that one begins to understand these relationships. Furthermore, for an 18th-century reader to map these

connections, they would have to not only read very specific articles, but also be curious enough to find the referenced articles, all without so much as an indexing system which would have facilitated the navigation of the text, albeit at the expense of both the alphabetical ordering of the articles, as well as the classificatory structure of the *Système Figuré*.⁴⁴ As an added complication, the discovery of the assemblage sometimes necessitated patience, as *renvois* often refer to articles in distant, perhaps as of yet unpublished volumes such as the reference in “Anthropophages” to “Eucharistie,” the latter’s publication occurring five years later than the former. The reader takes the role of the vehicle of assemblic discovery, elaborating paths of epistemological interconnection between articles, pages, volumes, years.

3.3 Mapping the Mundane

Not every article in the *Encyclopédie* serves as a mode of critique. Indeed, Robert Darnton has noted that the large majority of articles within the *Encyclopédie* are hardly controversial at all and represent a myriad of the more mundane aspects of human knowledge: “For every remark undercutting traditional orthodoxies, it contains thousands of words about grinding grain, manufacturing pins, and declining verbs” (*Cat Massacre* 191). These articles must be considered as important as they fulfill the function of the safeguarding and transmission of knowledge to

⁴⁴ Happily for some readers of the *Encyclopédie*, Pierre Mouchon published a *Table analytique et raisonnée du dictionnaire des sciences, des arts et des métiers* in 1780, which functioned as an index for one particular edition of the *Encyclopédie*. For more information on this index see see Werner.

future generations, while avoiding many of the problems inherent with more philosophical explorations.

Consider this brief excerpt on that most French of agricultural products, cheese, penned by Diderot: “Nos *fromages* ordinaires sont de lait de vache. Les bons *fromages* se font au commencement du printems ou au commencement de l'automne. On prend le lait le meilleur & le plus frais. On fait le *fromage* avec ce lait, ou écremé ou non écremé” (“Fromage” 333). There is very little within the whole article that could generate the sorts of debate as did articles like “Anthropophages” or “Femme.” The article presents a fairly straightforward explanation of what cheese is, common contemporary manufacturing techniques, what one might reasonably do with cheese, as well as a *renvoi* to the article on milk for more information. As a representation of a node within the *Encyclopédie*'s tree structure, the article entitled “Fromage,” appearing in volume 7 in 1757 fulfills its role admirably. Its authenticity and accuracy are not immediately challengeable, the information it contains is of a clear and concrete nature, and it successfully draws a logical connection to another node (the article “Lait”) within the work that, due to the unambiguous nature of the connected articles' mutual subject matter, can be said to be linearly linked.

Within articles such as “Fromage” and “Lait,” which incarnate the less-controversial creation of links between subjects, the assemblic nature of the *Encyclopédie* is still evident in that these intertextual references often create their own miniature linkages within the text itself. Even if these webs remain within similar categories of the *Système Figuré des connaissances humaines*, as one maps the connections created by the *renvois*, they begin to become more assemblic the further out that they are elaborated from a given starting point due to their increasing epistemic and ontological distance from the reader's original entry into the *labyrinthe*. If we take my

previously cited article “Fromage” and follow the nodal map began by its reference to “Lait,” we find ourselves very quickly departing the realms of food and drink for other, less linearly linked epistemic categories. While “Fromage” contains but a single *renvoi*, the article that it links to, “Lait” (volume 9, 1765) contains a surprising 23 different *renvois*, and a number of repeats. These *renvois* include, with a number of references being repeated, *mixtion*, *beure*, *muqueux*, *fromage*, three links to *petit-lait*, three links to *sucre de lait*, one to *fermentation*, *coagulation*, *pressure*, a different category of *lait (economie rustique)*, *distillation*, *manuel chimique*, *sel volatile*, two links to *nourrice*, one to *correctif*, *regime*, *digestion*, *concombre*, *médicament*, *enfant*, *rafinerie*, *rafinage du sucre*, and finally, *sucre*. All of these *renvois* are contained within the initial article “Lait” and do not include *renvois* within the different variations on the subject as milk such as *lait virginal*, *crème de lait*, or *maladies qui dépendent du lait*.

Even as the classificatory position of Diderot’s “Fromage” remains uncertain due to its lack of classification, one can imagine that the article would have probably been included within the category of *diète*, as a second article concerning cheese is thusly classified. How then can we map an assemblage with articles which otherwise seem as fitting fully within the *Système*? One possible route of inquiry reveals itself within the contents of the articles themselves. Taken alone, any article seems to explore, to varying degrees, its own proposed subject. When compared, however, even to articles within the same epistemic divisions, the content and structure of these articles illustrate remarkably different perspectives with regards to their individual confidence as to the epistemological value of a specific article’s contents. Differing levels of the “epistemological certainty” factor create a new form of assemblic relationship between different articles of the wider *Encyclopédie*. As we saw with the example of Diderot’s “Fromage,” certain articles present themselves in a decidedly matter-of-fact manner, containing little debate or

controversy. Indeed, for many subjects, this degree of epistemological stability is to be expected. The article “Lait” for example, begins with the blunt declaration that “ Il est inutile de définir le lait par ses qualités extérieures: tout le monde connoît le lait” (Venel). This affirmation that milk exists, at least externally, as an entirely unambiguous epistemological unit is not a trend that one finds either throughout the entirety of the *Encyclopédie* or even within its categories that one might deem as less controversial and more objectively based. If we continue onwards with our exploration of the *renvois* contained within “Lait,” fluctuations of different articles’ degrees of confidence with regards to their proposed subject (which I call the epistemological certainty/uncertainty factor) becomes apparent.

Of the articles referenced within “Lait,” “Médicament” (Volume 10, 1765) best illustrates the internal epistemological uncertainty contained within certain articles. While the article begins with a decidedly unambiguous declaration of what medicine is, this stable definition is almost immediately weakened by the text’s exploration of substantial definitional frailties within the core of the word’s perceived meaning: “Cette diversité d'application établit la division générale des *médicaments* en externes & en internes. Quelques pharmacologues ont ajouté à cette division un troisieme membre; ils ont reconnu des *médicaments* moyens: mais on va voir que cette derniere distinction est superflue” (Venel, “ Médicament ” 295). Already, by the third sentence of the article, the text creates an aura of uncertainty around its proposed subject. This is hardly surprising given that, as we saw in Chapter 1, the field of medicine existed as a volatile discipline of fluctuation and sometimes even radical reconfiguration. These shifting plateaus of epistemological certainty illustrate the assemblic nature of the *Encyclopédie* as certain articles, despite their categorical homogeneity, operate upon largely different epistemological planes. “Médicament” quickly highlights the existence of a debate within its subject, “Lait” makes it explicitly clear that

milk is such an understood subject from an external perspective that a discussion is unnecessary, whereas “Fromage” seems so sure of itself that it is composed of a series of declarations such that it doesn’t even require a statement about a preexisting universal understanding of cheese. Each of these articles manifests a different degree of epistemological certainty which both erode and reinforce the overall stability of the work itself.

The constant shifting of the epistemological certainty factor within different articles creates an assemblage that has two paradoxical effects. As we saw through Voltaire’s concerns about *Femme*’s methodological faults, other articles both within the immediate assemblage and as part of the *Encyclopédie* as a whole become unstable as their epistemological value is lessened through their elongated, or in some cases immediate, association with more problematic texts. After having read an article such as “Médicament” which contains a degree of uncertainty, a cautious reader might well apply this same uncertainty to otherwise epistemologically stable articles, such as “Fromage”, thus weakening the overall explanatory value of the *Encyclopédie* project. The paradoxical flipside of this epistemic ontology is that articles like “Fromage” could also find their epistemic certainty value raised rather than lowered. If certain articles make it immediately and explicitly clear that their denoted subject exists within a certain degree of epistemic fluctuation, articles that do not contain these admissions, either explicitly or implicitly, might well seem stronger in comparison. Therefore, the reader could perceive articles which contain little to no epistemic ambiguity as functioning as a sort of epistemological tent pole. These categorically unified mini-assemblages would then contain the potential to transfer the perceived textual authority of certain articles to other, less-certain entries, an effect which strengthens the overall value of the *Encyclopédie* as an explanatory compendium by relying upon the work’s stronger points while lessening the impact of the more problematic entries. Ultimately, even articles

concerned with simple topics contribute, albeit in a subtle fashion, to the epistemological assemblage as a result of differing levels of epistemological certainty within linked articles.

3.4 Assemblic Subject Clusters

Questions of epistemological validity allow for the creation and elaboration of different kinds of assemblages between articles, and yet even these assemblages can be further elaborated as a result of the multiplicity of articles on the same, or very similar subjects. The existence of multiple articles with the same name sometimes renders the tracing of *renvoi* connections more difficult. As a result of their shared, or highly convergent subjects, certain articles come to form subject clusters, which themselves often contain miniature assemblages that can strengthen or destabilize the epistemic content of their subject neighbors as a result of their similar topics. These subject clusters are revealed when the reader looks up a specific term with multiple entries, either of their own accord or because of the influence of a specific *renvoi*. Within articles that contain *renvois*, the *renvois* generally follow a fairly simplistic pattern. They are presented on the page, usually between sentences, sometimes with brief explanatory notes as to their relationship with the text in which they appear but often not. The article “Liqueurs spiritueuses” (volume 9, 1765), classified within *Chimie et Diete*, and of unknown authorship, contains two distinct *renvois* to the article *Vin*. At first glance, this linkage seems entirely logical given the contents of “Liqueurs spiritueuses” yet the simplicity of the *renvois* system creates a complex, if not immediately apparent, assemblic structure. A reader interested in learning more about *Vin* would not be able simply to find the appropriate text entitled *Vin*, as there are five different articles with that name. This creates a degree of what I call referential uncertainty, meaning the inability in certain

situations to follow a given *renvoi* to a specific article. The ambiguous *renvoi* therefore links to a multitude of potential nodes such that different interpretations of the same subject might engender epistemological interference.

An advantage to the ARTFL system that 18th-century readers would not have had is that it allows modern readers to better visualize the meta-organizational structure that underlies the entire *Encyclopédie*. With the *renvois* connecting “Liqueurs spiritueuses” to *Vin*, ARTFL illustrates this new aspect of the encyclopedic assemblage that is founded upon such instances of referential uncertainty. *Renvois* within ARTFL are presented in hyperlink form, allowing the reader to simply click on them. However, the ARTFL *renvois* do not lead to a specific article, but rather to a search page whereupon all articles containing the *renvois*’ text as part of their title are listed. According to the ARTFL *renvois* within “Liqueurs spiritueuses,” there are 5 articles labeled simply *Vin* as well as another 24 that contain the word *Vin* as part of their title. This proliferation of articles about wine when taken as a whole can be seen as an attempt to exhaustively define and explore the different disciplinary specific meanings of *Vin*. Indeed, Diderot explains the reasoning behind the inclusion of so many different versions of the same concept:

Il y a un quatrieme ordre moins général qu'aucun des précédens, c'est celui qui distribue convenablement plusieurs articles différens compris sous une même dénomination. Il paroît ici nécessaire de s'assujettir à la génération des idées, à l'analogie des matieres, à leur enchaînement naturel, de passer du simple au figuré, &c. Il y a des termes solitaires qui sont propres à une seule science, & qui ne doivent donner aucune sollicitude. Quant à ceux dont l'acception varie & qui appartiennent à plusieurs sciences & à plusieurs arts, il faut en former un petit système dont l'objet principal soit d'adoucir & de pallier autant qu'on pourra la bisarrerie des disparates. (“Encyclopédie” 641A)

In describing the function of this “fourth order,” Diderot expresses an awareness of the destabilizing effect of the juxtaposition of the same term with different meanings. The need to organize different meanings of a term with contrasting meanings in order to avoid epistemological interference is only one part of the function of subject clusters. As we saw earlier in this chapter, articles with different degrees of epistemic certainty are capable of either lowering or increasing the epistemological value of articles related to them, either through juxtaposition or through the *renvois*. In the case of subject clusters’ ties to articles with the same or similar names, the differences in the contents of these juxtaposed articles serve to highlight each other, drawing attention to their shared as well as their dissimilar traits such that the reader’s understanding of either subject deepens. Foucault discusses the importance of highlighting difference when creating classificatory systems in the early modern era:

On peut le définir d’un mot, en disant que dans le savoir classique, la connaissance des individus empiriques ne peut être acquise que sur le tableau continu, ordonné et universel de toutes les différences possibles. Au XVIIe siècle, l’identité des plantes et des animaux était assurée par la marque positive (souvent visible mais cachée parfois) dont ils étaient porteurs : ce qui, par exemple, distinguait les diverses espèces d’oiseaux, ce n’était point les différences *entre* elles, mais le fait que celle-ci chassait la nuit, que celle-là vivait sur l’eau, que telle autre se nourrissait de chair vivante. Toute être portait une marque et l’espèce se mesurait à l’entendu d’un blason commun [...] Mais à partir du XVIIIe siècle, il ne peut plus y avoir de signes que dans l’analyse des représentations selon les identités et les différences. C’est-à-dire que toute désignation doit se faire par un certain rapport à toutes les autres désignations possibles. (157)

This importance that certain designations must necessarily be juxtaposed in order to themselves be truly understood is reflective of Diderot's own justification of assemblic subject clusters. He further enunciates the role of these subject clusters a few sentences later, noting that certain categories of knowledge cannot be separated if they share similar subjects:

Il y a des matieres qui ne se séparent point; telles que l'Histoire sacrée & l'Histoire profane, la Théologie & la Mythologie; l'Histoire naturelle, la Physique, la Chimie & quelques arts, &c. La science étymologique, la connoissance historique des êtres & des noms, fourniront aussi un grand nombre de vûes différentes qu'on pourra toujours suivre sans crainte d'être embarrassé, obscur, ou ridicule. ("Encyclopédie" 641A)

Again he discusses the necessity that these subject clusters serve to articulate different points of view on similar subjects and, perhaps more importantly, like Foucault he suggests that their juxtaposition with different or even opposing meanings of the same term not only facilitate the reader's understanding of every usage involved, but are necessary for proper designation and classification.

On the other hand, a system that creates meaning through juxtaposition by underlining definitional differences potentially lends itself to confusion. When discovered by the reader as the result of a referential *renvois*, the volume of articles written about certain subjects leaves the reader unable to know precisely which article they were meant to read. Furthermore, articles entitled *Vin* can be found in a wide range of different epistemic categories as defined by the *Systeme*, including *Diete & Matiere médicale*, *Hist. des boissons spiritueuses*, *Chimie*, *Littérature*, and *Critique sacrée*. The reader is left therefore, with a subject cluster of articles, all linked by their common subject matter, and yet differentiated because of their diverging disciplinarian points of view. From the perspective of the *Encyclopédie's* rhizomatic structure wherein the articles serve as structural

nodes, subject clusters like *vin* serve much the same purpose albeit on a larger scale. Leaving aside passing mentions of wine within other, differently focused articles, the *vin* cluster is the sum total of almost everything that the *Encyclopédie* assemblage knows and subsequently transmits to its readership about the subject of wine. It becomes its own epistemological mini-assemblage subsumed within the greater assemblage of the *Encyclopédie*. The unifying theme of wine does not detract from the nonlinear nature of the assemblage; rather the assemblage becomes amplified due to the diverse classifications that unite these instances of *vin*. In order to further explore the implications of this categorical cluster assemblage, I will examine two specific articles contained within the *vin* cluster whose classificatory positions and ontological vantage points leave them largely bereft of any links other than their shared subject matter, their author, and their presentational approach. Both articles that I will analyze here: “Vin (Critique sacrée)” and “Vin (Litterature)” both in volume 17, published in 1765, not only share the same subject cluster, but also share the same author. Of the *Encyclopédie*'s many authors, Louis de Jaucourt remains a contributor whose name is often overshadowed by those of Diderot and d’Alembert⁴⁵, despite the fact that, according to some scholars, Jaucourt may have written as much as twenty eight percent of the *Encyclopédie* (Schwab 507). The contents of these two articles are similar in terms of their presentation on the page and yet different as to both their subjects and ontological bents.

“Vin (Critique sacrée)” begins on a decidedly straightforward note : “on employoit ordinairement cette liqueur pure dans les sacrifices que l'on offroit au Seigneur; mais l'usage en étoit défendu aux prêtres pendant qu'ils étoient dans le tabernacle occupés au service de

⁴⁵ Diderot dedicated an entire paragraph in his “Advertissement” specifically in order to show his gratitude for the work of Jaucourt.

l'autel, *Lévit. x. 9*. Ce mot se prend par métaphore pour la vengeance de Dieu, *Jerém. xxv. 15*. & pour les biens temporels, *Cantiq. j. 1. ubera tua meliora sunt vino*" (Jaucourt). This article's diction and content are, unsurprisingly, religious in nature and yet more practical than theological. Rather than offering the reader a metaphysical, doctrinal explanation of what precisely the wine is meant to symbolize within communion ceremonies, Jaucourt explains a number of different uses for wine in holy rites in different religious contexts, each context being given its own subsection. Unlike many articles in the *Encyclopédie*, this article sources all but one of its subsections back to Biblical books or in some cases to specific passages in the Bible, which provides it with a larger degree of epistemic validity in terms of relating the subject matter to an original source.⁴⁶ Interestingly enough, Jaucourt also admits a degree of ignorance as to what one specific example of wine is referring to: "Mais quant au *vin* dont parle Zacharie, *iv. 17. vinum germinans mulieres*, c'est une expression métaphorique que je n'ai pas le bonheur d'entendre" ("Vin (Critique sacrée)"). Once again the text presents us with an instance of admitted imperfect knowledge which has the potential to affect both the integrity of the article itself as well as those associated with it. Furthermore, Jaucourt's uncertain reading of the Book of Zechariah problematizes not only Jaucourt's authority as a transcriber/transmitter of human knowledge, but also destabilizes his source material's credibility, as, according to Jaucourt, it is difficult to understand. Finally, the specific passage that Jaucourt wishes to indicate is unclear. It would seem that he is referencing Chapter 4, verse 17 of the Book of Zechariah, however, this verse does not exist, nor do any verses contained within this chapter discuss wine. It is most likely that he is actually referencing Chapter 9, verse 17 which reads: "quid enim bonum eius est et quid pulchrum eius nisi frumentum

⁴⁶ For more information on the question of sourcing in the *Encyclopédie*, see Edelstein et al.

electorum et vinum germinans virgins” (*Vulgate Bible Zechariah 9:17*).⁴⁷ Jaucourt’s usage of sources in this article creates a paradoxical effect for the reader as, due to the previously noted dearth of consistent sourcing within the *Encyclopédie*, his article is initially rendered much stronger due to its reliance on a primary source. However, should the reader be, or become aware of the mistake, the effects might well destabilize much more than this individual article, potentially lowering the epistemological validity of the other articles on wine as well. I myself only became aware of Jaucourt’s mistake through my own attempts to understand the passage for which he professes confusion, which indicates the potential for a previously unforeseen form of epistemic destabilization in that a reader of any given article can potentially, on an individual basis, become aware of mistakes or even falsehoods within the text therefore severely affecting their intellectual journey through the *labyrinthe* as every other article subsequently read becomes similarly suspect, especially one of the many written by Jaucourt.

Sourcing mistakes aside, noticeable differences are apparent when this article is compared with wine in the literature category: “les Romains dans le tems de leurs richesses, étoient très - curieux des grands vins du monde. Les noms des meilleurs vins de leur pays, après ceux de la Campanie, se tiroient du cru des vignobles; tel étoit le vin de Setines, de Gaurano de Faustianum, d'Albe, de Sorrento, qui du tems de Pline, étoient des vins recherchés” (Jaucourt, “Vin (Littérature)” 298). Despite having been written by the same author as “Vin (Critique sacrée)”, this aspect of the *vin* cluster is much longer and more developed in that “Vin (Critique sacrée)” contains

⁴⁷ Jaucourt’s citation uses the word *mulieres* meaning women or wives, whereas here *virgines*, refers more specifically to virgins. Still, it seems likely that they are the same passage which reads: “For what is the good thing of him, and what is his beautiful thing, but the corn of the elect and wine springing forth virgins?” (Kinney 239).

approximately 250 words while “Vin (littérature)” is composed of approximately 650 words. The article notably focuses not on fictional literature, but rather on historical references contained within Greco-Roman histories written by individuals such as Pliny.⁴⁸ The juxtaposition of these two articles provides an opportunity to find another, albeit more subtle example of how different ontological perspectives influence the perception of epistemology. Despite the multiplicity of examined examples, including the secular of “Vin (Critique Sacrée),” the article’s bibliographic foundation rests upon the Bible, whose ostensible metaphysicality somewhat destabilizes the article’s otherwise mundane approach to its own subject. “Vin (Littérature)” embraces its terrestrial nature, reading more like a history of the production of Roman wine than anything else.

Were these two articles to be read concurrently (which given their three-page proximity within the physical volume is not unlikely) a certain degree of epistemological and ontological interference could be expected. We saw the possibility for *renvoi* linked articles such as “Anthropophages” and “Eucharistie” to create destabilizing forms of epistemological and ontological criticism wherein the sacred becomes linked to the profane. In the case of “Vin (Critique Sacrée) and “Vin (Littérature),” this same link is created, not through *renvois*, but rather through their shared subject cluster. As a result of this difference, the epistemological interference is not unidirectional as it was with “Anthropophages” and “Eucharistie,” but rather capable of going either way, as the reader might well pick one version of “Vin” to read first. Furthermore, in the case of these two articles on wine, there exists the potential for epistemological stabilization rather than destabilization to occur. This potential stems not so much from the contents of the

⁴⁸ The *Encyclopédie* article entitled *littérature* (also written by Jaucourt) defines the term as “terme général, qui désigne l’érudition, la connoissance des Belles - Lettres & des matieres qui y ont rapport” (594).

articles than from their usage of source material.⁴⁹ As noted, “Vin (Critique Sacrée)” employs Biblical texts while “Vin (Littérature)” relies upon antiquarian historians such as Pliny the Elder. As Pliny’s texts are considered historical works (and consequently more based within reality) their epistemological validity becomes much less questionable than the metaphysically based Bible, especially among readers of a more atheistic bent. A comparative reading of the two texts could therefore potentially lead to an increase in the perceived epistemological certainty of the religious article, as it becomes categorically associated with the somewhat more empirical historical text. This effect is further compounded when one takes into account the fact that Jaucourt wrote both of them. Ultimately, these epistemic clusters create a form of assemblage which, while not as immediately evident as those implicated by the *renvoi* system, contains its own potential for the introduction of ontological and epistemological interference between otherwise similar articles.

3.5 The Power of the Page: The Physicality of Assemblic Relationships

As a 21st-century researcher of the *Encyclopédie* whose access to the University of Chicago’s ARFTL project greatly facilitates and influences both their research methods as well as their internal visualization of what the *Encyclopédie* actually *is*, it becomes necessary at times to take a step back from the organizational framework of ARTFL in order to refresh one’s view of the work. As Darnton reminds us, the *Encyclopédie* was, above all and before anything else, a physical product, printed, bound, and sold in the rigid, fixed form of the book. Such an observation

⁴⁹ Jaucourt was particularly well-known for employing and citing source material in his many articles. For more information on Jaucourt’s use of source material, see Doolittle.

seems easy enough to make, yet is equally easy to forget.⁵⁰ The digitally facilitated assemblage that we have examined thus far has relied upon a much more meta-encyclopedic perspective wherein the entirety of the work remains both constantly available and easily accessible in its totality. The assemblage that we are mapping within the *Encyclopédie* cannot however be limited to wildly dispersed texts whose only links extend either through their referential *renvois* or their belonging to a particular subject cluster. As with other assemblages, the encyclopedic assemblage contains the potential to exist upon a vast range of differing relative scales, from the volume spanning *renvois* connecting “Anthropophages” to “Eucharistie” to articles within a given subject cluster separated at times by a mere handful of pages. All of these connections rely upon the same assumption that the reader would be willing to “put in the work” of discovering and elaborating these connections, which in many cases, illustrates a certain degree of optimism on the parts of the authors, editors, and researchers such as myself.

There is, however, an aspect of the encyclopedic assemblage whose mapping by individual readers seems decidedly more likely. The ultimate physical subdivision of any book has, with few variations, been the actual page itself and it is towards one specific page that we shall turn to in order to illustrate another variation of the encyclopedic assemblage.⁵¹ The role of any given page shifts throughout the entirety of the *Encyclopédie* with regards to the articles that they contain. Page 650 of volume 5 of the first Paris edition, published in 1755 contains 16 different articles written by 8 different authors stemming from 14 different categories, only 5 of which belong to a

⁵⁰ On the publication history of the many editions of the *Encyclopédie*, and the various controversies and conflicts surrounding its publication, see Darnton’s *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800*.

⁵¹ For more information on the evolution of the printed book see Gaskell.

similar subject cluster.⁵² This page functions as a microcosm of the *Encyclopédie* itself in that it contains a wide number of subjects, all examined by entirely different authors, many of which come from fairly separate epistemological categories. Their predominant unifying element exists in the simple fact that each begins with the letter “e”. In this way we see a degree of assemblage functionality born by the alphabetic organizational system that structures the physical presentation of the *Encyclopédie*. Much as the *renvoi* structure serves at times to unite epistemologically, or even ontologically distant articles, the alphabetization system often fulfills the same purpose albeit from an ostensibly unplanned perspective. Diderot underlines this function of the alphabetic system in his article on the *Encyclopédie*: “L'ordre encyclopedique général jetteroit de tems en tems dans des arrangemens bizarres. L'ordre alphabétique donneroit à tout moment des contrastes burlesques; un article de Théologie se trouveroit relégué tout au - travers des arts mécaniques” (642). Diderot justifies these ontological juxtapositions as necessary to avoid “l'ennui de l'uniformité”, and again employs the metaphor of ambulatory navigation:

Il en est de la formation d'une *Encyclopedie* ainsi que de la fondation d'une grande ville. Il n'en faudroit pas construire toutes les maisons sur un même modele, quand on auroit trouvé un modele général, beau en lui - même & convenable à tout emplacement. L'uniformité des édifices, entraînant l'uniformité des voies publiques, répandroit sur la ville entiere un aspect triste & fatigant. Ceux qui marchent ne résistent point à l'ennui d'un long mur, ou même d'une longue forêt qui les a d'abord enchantés. (“Encyclopédie” 642)

This citation forcefully suggests that the diversity of the *Encyclopédie's* entries fulfills the important, if perhaps easily overlooked goal of insuring that the reader not become bored with the

⁵² The other eight articles are unattributed.

text. Assemblage juxtapositions of subjects, style, and even quality through alphabetization serve to insure that the reader continues to explore the text, thus facilitating their assemblage discoveries. Furthermore, whereas the *renvois* exist as explicitly placed, purposefully designed human-created phenomena, alphabetization seems more objective, as it ultimately relies on the vagaries of spelling for its structure. In addition, alphabetization transmits a sense of novelty to the work, as alphabetization was generally employed in dictionaries rather than epistemic compendiums.⁵³

With the exception of a single line from an article beginning on a previous page and a single line which continues onto the following page, this micro-*Encyclopédie*, framed by the physical page, exists as a nearly epistemological whole whose epistemological self-sufficiency is only diluted by a handful of *renvois*. The majority of its contents, whose immediate and complete epistemological digestion relies only upon the ability to read French, stand composed upon the page in their totality. Of course not all pages within the *Encyclopédie* followed this particular structure of alphabetically generated subject juxtaposition due to the simple fact that, as we have seen, not all articles are created equal. Page 650 of volume five achieves a high degree of subject juxtaposition as a result of the relative brevity of the articles contained therein. The longest of them which exists in its entirety on page 650 is “Endossement”, written by Boucher d’Argis, which is composed of a full 21 lines in the printed edition and six on ARTFL. The shortest, “Endnig” contains two lines (one on ARTFL) with nine words.

The alphabetized, page-based epistemological assemblage that manifests itself on pages like number 650 volume five exposes an altogether different aspect of this same assemblage

⁵³ Annie Becq examines the justifications employed for alphabetization within both the *Encyclopedie* as well as an earlier British encyclopedia known as the *Cyclopedia*.

through the relationship engendered by the length of the articles which share a given page. The *renvoi* structure, as we have seen, allows the curious reader to move from one subject to another, even at great textual distance, all with the goal of exploring the *labyrinthe* in order to intellectually enrich themselves. The *renvois* epistemological assemblage is best served by articles that have been well-researched, correctly sourced, and developed to the point where one or more *renvois* can be logically understood as fitting within the presented framework of the article. However, in order for the alphabetic, page-based epistemological assemblage to work, the opposite must be true. For a given page assemblage to truly function as such, it is necessary that the articles on the page contain very little of substance. If the articles contain too much development, the assemblage goal of juxtaposing “*des contrastes burlesques*” becomes less likely for that page. This illustrates an inner conflict between the desire for the work to create epistemological and ontological friction and its stated goal of knowledge transmission.

While these short articles might not be particularly well developed, to state that they indicate a *failure* of epistemological transference and therefore a failure of that aspect of the *Encyclopédie's* purpose would be not be true. In his analysis of the interplay between the *Encyclopédie's* usage of alphabetical organization and of the *Système Figuré*, its central categorical structure, Jean Starobinski notes that choosing alphabetization fulfills a different sort of need from that of a more traditional (at the time) encyclopedia:

Sa commodité, si volontiers alléguée par d'Alembert et Diderot, consiste dans le gain de temps dont bénéficie le lecteur entre le moment de l'éveil d'un mot-question et la réponse qu'y apporte le discours du savoir. En ce sens, l'on peut dire que l'*Encyclopédie* appartient bien à une époque caractérisée, en Europe, par l'amélioration des *voies de communication* l'on voit se manifester, dans tous les domaines, le même besoin de promptitude et de sûreté

dans les échanges : il s'agit d'arriver vite où l'on veut aller, et de conjurer la solitude des connaissances séparées...(286).

This desire for a speedier flow of knowledge illustrates a different assemblage role for heavily populated pages in that they facilitate the entry of the reader into Diderot and d'Alembert's *labyrinthe*. While the encyclopedic assemblage stretches far beyond the physical volumes themselves, those volumes exemplify the point at which most readers might begin to perceive the assemblage at work. These small, dictionary-like entries, ostensibly built for quickly clarifying a specific term, serve as gateways into the wider encyclopedic assemblage, as they can be consumed efficiently and, due to their likely proximity to other epistemologically and ontologically distant texts, provide a strong enticement for the reader to begin their own wider explorations.

Longer articles both problematize Starobinski's "*voies de communication*" due to their limited juxtaposition with other articles while at the same time creating new pathways for assemblage analysis as a result of their density. In the same volume, beginning on page 635, we find the famous article "Encyclopédie" written by Diderot wherein he outlines and explores the very concept of his own work. In contrast to page 650, which held 16 different articles alone, "Encyclopédie" manages to occupy 28 entire pages by itself.⁵⁴ Whereas many other articles that we have explored are barely composed of a few lines, "Encyclopédie" seems more suited to its own individual pamphlet, such is the effort implied by the information that it contains. The epistemological assemblage becomes much less evident within longer articles, as unlike page 650, were any given page encompassed by "Encyclopédie" removed from the book and presented alone,

⁵⁴ Page numbers in the physical edition of the *Encyclopédie* employed by ARTFL do not follow a 1, 2, 3 sequence but rather a 1, 1A, 2, 2A, schemata.

the page's value as an explanatory device would diminish. Not only would the page be bereft of the epistemological and ontological context that the knowledge of its title would provide, unearthing the context on one's own would also likely be difficult, as within the article Diderot explores many related subjects in order to explain his work.

This is not to imply that shorter articles serve a larger role in the overall assemblage that is the *Encyclopédie*. In addition to the prevalence of *renvois*, lengthy articles such as "Encyclopédie" contribute to the encyclopedic assemblage as a direct result of their length. While a 28-page article might seem more daunting than one composed of a few lines, the sheer volume of words therein (approximately 34,696 words in total) creates a huge potential for encyclopedic exploration, as any given word might necessitate further research in order to be fully understood. The conceptualization of the *Encyclopédie's* role as similar to that of a dictionary, built for quick references, complicates the *renvois* structure, as within this conceptual framework every word becomes a potential *renvoi*, albeit an unintentional one. The implications of the dictionary system render the encyclopedic assemblage functionally limitless without even exploring the vast web of outer influences and impacts that both built the text and were, in turn, inspired by it.

3.6 The Reader's Assemblage

In addition to the potentially destabilizing consequences of ontologically opposed alphabetical juxtapositions, these same juxtapositions can also open assemblic connections to much more distant encyclopedic articles as well as literary texts. This aspect of the encyclopedic assemblage illustrates another example of the *Encyclopédie's* reliance on reader engagement to further their epistemological enrichment by exploring assemblic connections. This particular

assemblage often relies on more than the text itself, relying not only on the act of reading but also on the reader's preexisting knowledge, biases, and curiosity to forge new labyrinthine pathways. These reader-created assemblages have the capacity of transcending any notion of intent on the part of the authors and have the potential of anachronistically modifying their analytical conclusions beyond 18th-century ideas and attitudes and reframing them within their own 21st-century context.

To further delve into this aspect of alphabetically juxtaposed articles, we shall turn to two specific articles, "Jouissance (Grammaire, Morale)" written by Diderot and "Jouissance (Jurisprudence)" written by Boucher d'Argis, both appearing in volume 8 in 1765. These two articles belong to the same subject cluster in addition to being juxtaposed on the same page. Despite this added similarity they still manage to illustrate the potential for epistemological interference between similarly juxtaposed articles as their respective versions of *jouissance* stem from entirely different epistemological domains. One of the first immediately visible differences between these two articles is their difference in length. Boucher d'Argis's contribution is composed of 16 lines on the physical page whereas Diderot's has 93. "Jouissance (Jurisprudence)" presents itself in a decidedly straightforward manner, arriving immediately at its investigation of the function of the word *jouissance* within the legal framework of 18th-century France: "[Jouissance] est ordinairement synonyme de *possession*; c'est pourquoi l'on dit communément *possession & jouissance*; cependant l'on peut avoir la possession d'un bien sans en jouir. Ainsi la partie saisie possède jusqu'à l'adjudication, mais elle ne *jouit* plus depuis qu'il y a un bail judiciaire exécuté"(Argis). This legalistic definition does not stray from its field of inquiry, and while it does employ a number of legal terms whose meanings might not be immediately clear, it also contains four *renvois* to "Fruits", "Possession", "Possesseur", and "Restitution".

Diderot's "Jouissance (Grammaire, Morale)" on the other hand is much less direct, and unlike Boucher d'Argis's text, immediately provides an implicit reference to the (only) other article on *jouissance*:

jouir, c'est connoître, éprouver, sentir les avantages de posséder: on possède souvent sans jouir. A qui sont ces magnifiques palais? qui est - ce qui a planté ces jardins immenses? c'est le souverain: qui est - ce qui en jouit? c'est moi. Mais laissons ces palais magnifiques que le souverain a construits pour d'autres que lui, ces jardins enchanteurs où il ne se promene jamais, & arrêtons-nous à la volupté qui perpétue la chaîne des êtres vivans, & à laquelle on a consacré le mot de *jouissance*. (889)

Diderot's embedded reference to Boucher d'Argis article creates an intertextual connection between the two that goes beyond their juxtaposition in that it highlights this juxtaposition by foregrounding its own version of *jouissance* with that of d'Argis. Given their physical proximity on the page itself, this similarity seems difficult to miss. Another of the more immediately noticeable stylistic differences between the two becomes manifest in the article's differing diction. Diderot's "Jouissance" employs a surprisingly literary and at times almost whimsical tone:

Mais lorsque la femme commença à discerner; lorsqu'elle parut mettre de l'attention dans son choix, & qu'entre plusieurs hommes sur lesquels la passion promenoit ses regards, il y en eut un qui les arrêta, ... Lorsque les voiles que la pudeur jetta sur les charmes laisserent à l'imagination enflammée le pouvoir d'en disposer à son gré, les illusions les plus délicates concoururent avec le sens le plus exquis, pour exagérer le bonheur; l'ame fut saisie d'une enthousiasme presque divin; deux jeunes coeurs éperdus d'amour se vouerent l'un à l'autre pour jamais, & le ciel entendit les premiers sermens indiscrets. (889)

When compared to Boucher d'Argis' legalistic language and manner, Diderot's touching, sentimental ode to heterosexual love stands out even more. It would of course be a bit strange had Boucher d'Argis attempted to employ a similar style in his article, and yet the tonal differences, combined with Diderot's *clin d'oeil* (intentional or not) to "Jouissance (Jurisprudence)" implies the existence of an assemblic relationship between the two texts.

These articles' explorations of the dual meaning of *jouissance* are not the only examples of epistemological interference occurring between the two definitions. In an article examining the portrayal of Tahitian sexual mores in different 18th-century texts, Lynn Festa illustrates that the double meanings of *jouissance* are strongly reflective of each other within 18th-century Western civilization. Festa argues that the status of the woman as property of the Western man is intrinsic to his ability to experience sexual pleasure:

For Bougainville, Rousseau, and Diderot alike, the unchecked plenitude of Tahiti poses questions about the ways the arrogation of another—proprietary *jouissance*—irrevocably alters the nature of sexual *jouissance* or enjoyment. Inasmuch as reserve—manifested in property, in modesty, in clothing—generates a model of sexuality in which desire cannot be sated because its object cannot be fully possessed, it unleashes the imagination to contemplate the delights of the hidden, the elusive, the withheld [...] the constraints imposed on civilized sexuality simultaneously restrict possession and generate a scandalous surplus in the form of imaginary pleasures that supersede the delights of present possession. ("Jouissance" 305)

While an explicit link between the two meanings of *jouissance* is only hinted at in Festa's primary texts, her argument hinges largely on Diderot's 1788 publication *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*. Festa shows that in writing this text, Diderot was aware of the necessity of possession

in order to achieve complete *jouissance*. In his work, Diderot images certain social changes born as a result of the interactions between the French and the Tahitians and in doing so, lays a finger on the epistemological overlap at play within *jouissance*:

Aussitôt que la femme devint la propriété de l’homme, et que la jouissance furtive d’une fille fut regardée comme un vol, on vit naître les termes *pudeur, retenue, bienséance* ; des vertus et des vices imaginaires ; en un mot, on voulut élever entre les deux sexes, des barrières qui les empêchassent de s’inviter réciproquement à la violation des lois qu’on leur avait imposées, et qui produisirent souvent un effet contraire, en échauffant l’imagination et en irritant les désirs. (*Supplément Au Voyage* 575)

The *Supplément* was published over twenty years after the article “Jouissance” and no direct causal link can be made between the article and Diderot’s eventual description of Tahitian sexual practices. However, an erudite reader might well notice the lexical connection between Diderot’s two works, therefore strengthening the potential epistemic interference which pervades the two *jouissance* articles.

For a reader with access to only this particular volume and its preceding tomes, it is unclear as to what interpretation that they might have gleaned from this instance of epistemological interference, but a reader with access to the entire work can discover an interesting assemblage connection between “Jouissance (Grammaire Morale)” and Boucher d’Argis’s “Sodomie” (volume 15 1765). Unlike previous examples of assemblage connection, this particular link relies almost entirely on the reader themselves. Other than their shared authors, nothing explicitly links either version of *jouissance* to “Sodomie” therefore leaving the reader as the sole point of contact between the two texts.

While short, “Sodomie” leaves no ambiguity as to Boucher d’Argis’ thoughts on the matter: “[Sodomie] est le crime de ceux qui commettent des impuretés contraires même à l’ordre de la nature; ce crime a pris son nom de la ville de Sodome, qui périt par le feu du ciel à cause de ce désordre abominable qui y étoit familier. La justice divine a prononcé la peine de mort contre ceux qui se souillent de crime, *morte moriatur*; Lévitique, *ch. XX*” (266). The article continues on to list among other things the specific punishment prescribed for the act (being burned alive), highlights the fact that this sentence had been executed as recently as 1750, notes that both women and minors are also held to the same legal standard as men and that ecclesiastical figures suspected of breaking this law must be judged “with the greatest severity.” Boucher d’Argis’ language and source material rely heavily upon biblical imagery, biblical citations, as well as the language of punishment and damnation. His justification for the harsh penalty for sodomy comes from the Bible and yet he also specifically notes that sodomy is a crime against nature.⁵⁵

This particular reference allows us to forge an additional link between “Sodomie” and Diderot’s distant “Jouissance”, which also appeals not only to nature but criticizes the notion that heterosexual sexuality should be something to be ashamed of:

S’il y avoit quelqu’Homme pervers qui pût s’offenser de l’éloge que je fais de la plus auguste & la plus générale des passions, j’évoquerois devant lui la Nature, je la ferois parler, & elle lui diroit. Pourquoi rougis - tu d’entendre prononcer le nom d’une volupté, dont tu ne rougis pas d’éprouver l’attrait dans l’ombre de la nuit? (889)

⁵⁵ Boucher d’Argis is undoubtedly referring to verse 13 of the 20th chapter of Leviticus which in the King James’ Bible reads “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”

The two articles present the reader with two different perspectives on nature, one which defines nature through the lens of that which is unnatural and therefore outside of nature and one which uses nature as an explanatory force which can itself be made to speak in order to explain the inherent goodness of *jouissance*. Despite the physical distance of the two articles, such a comparison puts them into an ontological dialogue which manifests itself in terms of the sharp opposition generated by their respective perspectives on “nature.” In addition to illustrating this manufactured intra-article conflict, my emphasis upon a single word provides us with another example of the profound referential power that even a regular, non-*renvoi* term can hold within the encyclopedic assemblage.

The thematic and vocabulary connections between “Jouissance (Grammaire, Morale)” and “Sodomie” are not the only assemblic relationships that we can map between these two articles as both also arguably contain opposing statements about the metaphysical nature of the universe. Boucher d’Argis’ “Sodomie” creates an explicit link between its contents and the metaphysical domain of Christian theology, both through its referencing of the destruction of the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as factual as well as its aforementioned use of biblical citation. Reading Diderot’s “Jouissance (Grammaire, Morale)” as presenting philosophical arguments necessitates a more profound analysis from both within the article as a separate entity and as a product of its perceivable connection with “Sodomie”. First, let us reexamine Diderot’s initial passage wherein he obliquely references his fellow scholar’s article on *jouissance*: “A qui sont ces magnifiques palais? qui est - ce qui a planté ces jardins immenses? c'est le souverain: qui est - ce qui en jouit? c'est moi. Mais laissons ces palais magnifiques que le souverain a construits pour d'autres que lui, ces jardins enchanteurs où il ne se promene jamais, & arrêtons-nous à la volupté qui perpétue la chaîne des êtres vivans” (“Jouissance (Grammaire Morale)” 889). The language and metaphor that

Diderot employs here seem strangely specific because while he does note, as will Boucher d'Argis, the fact that one can enjoy something without necessarily owning it, his extended usage of this image of the palace whose sovereign (and constructor) remains mysteriously and explicitly absent allows for a philosophical or political reading. The last cited sentence in particular provides a curious juxtaposition in that it puts a strong emphasis on this missing monarch or perhaps, a divine creator. Furthermore, the structure of the sentence provides a linear path wherein Diderot begins by proposing that the metaphor of the palace and gardens be abandoned, an abandonment which he only accomplishes 21 words later with the verb *arrêter*. The bookending of this explicit extension of the palace metaphor with two verbs both of which imply metaphorical termination, further serves to highlight the words between them, words which specifically emphasize not the palace or gardens but rather the absence of their creator and owner. The possibility of a deistic interpretation of this passage would already be fairly strong, and yet the sentence's second half, wherein Diderot proposes that *volupté* is that which "perpetuates the chain of living beings" provides an implication which diminishes the metaphysical aspects of reproduction contained within a religious context, the degree of which rests on the readers' individual interpretations. This contrast between the absent creator and a naturalistic explanation for the propagation of the human species within the same sentence infuses Diderot's "Jouissance" with a profoundly materialistic ontological subtext which, combined with the text's more overtly emphasized discussion of human sexuality, gives the whole article an altogether radical bent.

To map a connection between this materialistic, liberated investigation of *jouissance* and Boucher d'Argis' religiously driven exposition on the evils of sodomy is to create an effect with the potential to destabilize a reading of either text, because as we have seen, epistemological interference can often flow in both directions when *renvois* do not provide the primary, usually

unidirectional vector for inter-article connectivity. After all, whereas Diderot proposes that sexual pleasure should be seen as something entirely natural, Boucher d'Argis' opposing proposition allows for an entirely different reading of this conflict. Whether one article or the other ultimately loses epistemological credibility relies upon the position of the readers themselves relative to the ontological stance of either text. An article might shift a reader's initial ideas if their convictions lack deep roots or the text's arguments are particularly persuasive, yet ultimately the epistemological assemblage can only elaborate these connections through the reader and any examination of subsequent impacts elongates the assemblage unto practical infinity.

The question that can rightly be asked here is whether or not Diderot intended for "Jouissance" to be read as an elaborately developed and physically remote criticism of Boucher d'Argis' definition. According to Louis Crompton, Diderot viewed homosexual activity as primarily a psychological and medical problem, and that despite defining same-sex romantic encounters as existing within the bounds of nature, he was not above accusing those that he attacked as being homosexuals (520-521). Furthermore, in Diderot's own writing he categorizes homosexuality as abnormal. At the very end of *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, Mademoiselle de L'Espinasse asks Bordeu about the origins of homosexuality and both L'Espinasse's phrasing of the question and Bordeu's response indicate a rejection of homosexuality on the part of Diderot:

Mlle de l'Espinasse: Ces goûts abominables, d'où viennent-ils?

Bordeu: Partout d'une pauvreté d'organisation dans les jeunes gens, et de la corruption de la tête dans les vieillards. De l'attrait de la beauté dans Athènes, de la disette des femmes dans Rome, de la crainte de la vérole à Paris. (76)

It would seem unlikely then that Diderot would expressly defend individuals towards whom he had negative opinions, which suggests that the article was not explicitly targeted at Boucher

d'Argis. The real question is whether or not a degree of intent is necessary for the elaboration of this sort of assemblic relationship. I argue that due to the nature of the *Encyclopédie*, the *potential* for the elaboration of these connections becomes just as important, if not more so, than any provable intent. The *renvois* structure permits explicit editorial and authorial assemblage mapping as part of the design of the work while links such as the one denoted here rely more so on the willingness and ability of the reader themselves to forge assemblic connections through the lens of their own subjectivities. In this way, we see a further reinforcement of the role of the reader in the elaboration of epistemological assemblages within the *Encyclopédie*.

3.7 Editorial and Temporal Epistemological Oscillations

In addition to the epistemological and ontological juxtaposition that the *Encyclopédie's* alphabetic organization allows within the work's overall assemblic framework, it also endows the text with a degree of an almost chaotic independence in terms of the epistemological hierarchy that any organizational structure implies. While the *Système Figuré* allows for the creation of a categorical framework into which articles are assigned, the actual order of the physical presentation of different articles exists in both an ordered (due to the alphabetization of its contents) as well as a chaotic structure as a result of the ontological juxtapositioning of different subjects. While the authors and editors of the *Encyclopédie* were certainly able to influence the contents of the compendium through their decisions as to whether or not certain articles should be included, the presentation itself is left almost entirely to the vagaries of spelling. In this way, the

physical presentation of the *Encyclopédie* transcends the plane of designed organization, as the spelling of a word is left almost entirely out of their hands.⁵⁶

There were, of course, moments in the production of the *Encyclopédie* where the structure of the alphabetic order was corrupted by the editors that relied not on the *renvois* but rather on certain editorial processes. In one of the more interesting examples of post-publication modification, the article “Asple”, which appeared in volume one in 1751 and was written by Diderot himself, created a small degree of controversy when one of the principle subjects of the article, celebrated machinist and creator of automata Jacques de Vaucanson, took issue with the article although the reason for this remains unclear.⁵⁷ In response to this complaint, d’Alembert specifically mentions the issue in his “Avertissement des éditeurs” for volume two:

Les seules critiques auxquelles nous nous croyons obligés de répondre dans cet Ouvrage, consistent dans les plaintes de quelques personnes à qui on n'aura pas rendu justice. Nous tâcherons d'y satisfaire d'une maniere digne d'elles & de nous; & nous commencerons aujourd'hui par M. Vaucanson... La confiance avec laquelle M. Vaucanson a bien voulu s'adresser à nous, a été reçûe de notre part avec tous les égards que l'on doit aux vrais talens;

⁵⁶ It must be noted that spelling differences of the same word were not uncommon in the *Encyclopédie*, which can render the task of encyclopedic research much more difficult at times. For more specific examples of this phenomenon, see Stewart.

⁵⁷ The *Encyclopédie* only says that “on a fait sur un simple oui - dire une exposition infidele & peu favorable d'une très - belle machine de son invention, dont il a publié la description depuis, & dont on a paru vouloir partager la découverte, quoique sans aucune intention de la partager en effet, mais par un simple mal - entendu qu'il importe peu de détailler.” See d’Alembert’s “Avertissement des éditeurs T.2.”

Furthermore, an asple was apparently a machine important for the production of silk. See Diderot’s “Asple.”

il nous a paru aussi satisfait de nos procédés, que nous l'avons été des siens; & nous sommes convenus de réformer cet article, & de distribuer avec le second volume la feuille corrigée.

(2A)

This corrected page was presumably meant to be inserted into volume one once the offending page had been removed, which while less of a rupture than including the article out of sequence in volume two would have been, still modifies somewhat the otherwise objective nature of a pure alphabetic structure.⁵⁸ This modification not only indicates an epistemological correction of the article in question, but also of the physical form of the work itself. Furthermore, this act of physical replacement not only necessitates the distribution of the new page, but also implies that the readers themselves become responsible for the physical aspect of the correction. They must remove the original page and subsequently replace it with the newer version. This sort of post-production editorial interference not only contributes to another form of epistemological uncertainty in that it immediately calls into question the validity of potentially every article in the whole work (as it becomes difficult to know just how seriously the editors examined similar complaints) but it also places the reader into the encyclopedic assemblage in a new way. The reader has always been expected to explore the work in their own fashion but now they are endowed with certain editorial responsibilities as well. The possibility that a reader might never purchase volume two, or simply might not care enough to go through the trouble of making the correction creates a vast field of

⁵⁸ This was one method that was proposed for the correction of errors. D'Alembert's "Discours Préliminaire des Editeurs" also allows for small collections of corrections for newer editions: "Nous avertissons aussi au nom des Libraires associés qu'en cas d'une seconde édition, les additions & corrections seront données dans un volume séparé à ceux qui auront acheté la première" (xlv).

uncertainty wherein one cannot even be sure that two examples of the same volume, which ostensibly share the same edition from the same printer, contain the same information.

Even in its printed physical form, the *Encyclopédie* exists in a state of flux. One does not even have to take into consideration the various new editions which sprang from printers throughout the 18th and 19th centuries to view the *Encyclopédie* as a perpetually evolving epistemological and ontological structure whose interconnections and causal links are constantly being remapped, reevaluated, and reinterpreted.⁵⁹ From an epistemological point of view, the editors of the work were aware, even from the conceptual foundation of their *oeuvre*, that a work fully encompassing human knowledge would be impossible to achieve in an expedient and cost-effective manner. Indeed, Diderot entitles an entire section of his article “Encyclopédie”: “Que la premiere édition d'une *Encyclopédie*, ne peut être qu'une compilation très - informe & très incomplete” and then continues in the same section to suggest the possibility of a second edition:

Nous avons jouï d'un avantage rare & prétieux qu'il ne faudroit pas négliger dans le projet d'une seconde édition. Les hommes de Lettres de la plus grande réputation, les Artistes de la premiere force, n'ont pas dédaigné de nous envoyer quelques morceaux dans leur genre. Nous devons *Eloquence, Elégance, Esprit, &c.* à M. de Voltaire. M. de Montesquieu nous a laissé en mourant des fragmens sur l'article *Goût...* (645)

The necessity for future versions of the *Encyclopédie* seems not so much to be a result of any realization of epistemological or editorial errors in the initial volumes, but rather an explicitly

⁵⁹ It is difficult to say just how many different editions of the *Encyclopédie* existed as in addition to the three primary 18th-century editions, there were also a large number of pirated editions, many of which were produced outside of France. For more information, see Darnton's *The Business of Enlightenment*.

admitted concession, both of the assemblic, and therefore epistemic instability inherent to the *Encyclopédie*, but also as a result of the constantly expanding field of epistemological possibilities. Daniel Rosenberg examines the problem of temporality around the *Encyclopédie* through exploring the ways in which the work exists as sort of epistemological time machine even as it attempts to stand as a stable collection of knowledge. He writes that: “Diderot and d'Alembert imagine the Encyclopedia as a kind of time machine, a mechanism to release learning from the periodicity of the academies, the endless cycle of séances without progress” (237). Much of this necessity was due to the ever-shifting nature of human knowledge in the 18th century. Diderot also discusses the temporally problematic nature of the *Encyclopédie*'s preserved 18th-century epistemology, noting that

Les opinions vieillissent, & disparaissent comme les mots; l'intérêt que l'on prenoit à certaines inventions, s'affoiblit de jour en jour, & s'éteint; si le travail tire en longueur, on se sera étendu sur des choses momentanées, dont il ne sera déjà plus question; on n'aura rien dit sur d'autres, dont la place sera passée; inconvénient que nous avons nous - mêmes éprouvé, quoiqu'il ne se soit pas écoulé un tems fort considérable entre la date de cet ouvrage, & le moment où j'écris. (“Encyclopédie” 636)

Diderot expresses a double concern here in that he is very much aware of the quickly evolving nature of human understanding of the empirical universe and its associated philosophical implications, while at the same time expressing the necessity that the *Encyclopédie* be completed in a timely fashion.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Diderot also notes in the same article that the reception of Bayle's dictionary was negatively affected by the time it took him to write it: “Le tems qui a émoussé notre goût sur les questions de critique & de controverse, a

Certain categories of knowledge explored within the *Encyclopédie* were even more temporally tenuous than others. Joanna Stalnaker considers this question of temporal ephemerality from a more precise vantage point through an analysis of the various difficulties associated with articles based on the machine arts. She notes that these articles, more so than most others, were rendered more epistemologically unstable due to not only their uncertain stance in time but also as a paradoxical result of their necessarily complicated nature: “they were the most concretely representational articles in the *Encyclopédie*, describing in painstaking detail the machines, tools and techniques that went into artisanal production...however, they hid that knowledge in a shroud of technical language and artisanal expertise” (102). Furthermore, many of these disciplines were rapidly evolving such that by the time an article was published, its contents were outdated. These factors necessitated therefore that the reader be capable of performing the parallel tasks of textually decoding their discipline-specific jargon while at the same time maintaining a larger, meta-understanding of the state of the machine arts. While these machines represent but one small sliver of the wider epistemological and ontological possibilities implied by the many different encyclopedic classificatory genres, they manifest a microcosm of the work’s overall tendency towards epistemic uncertainty, even when confined to single isolated elements whose connections to the wider *Encyclopédie* remain outside of consideration. From an assemblic perspective, the epistemological uncertainty engendered by the ever-evolving nature of the machine arts illustrates

rendu insipide une partie du dictionnaire de Bayle. Il n’y a point d’auteur qui ait tant perdu dans quelques endroits, & qui ait plus gagné dans d’autres. Mais si tel a été le sort de Bayle, qu’on juge de ce qui seroit arrivé à l’*Encyclopédie* de son tems” (636A).

one of the rare examples of this phenomenon which, rather than being augmented by 21st-century ways of reading, is really only fully appreciable within the 18th century.

These instances of historically based contextual influence upon the production, consumption, and understanding of the *Encyclopédie* are unique in that the singular nature of their temporal specificities leaves this particular example of epistemological uncertainty rather fixed within the context of 18th-century publication and readership. The quickly evolving field of scientific and mechanical understanding within the 18th century matters little to a 21st-century reader other than as a historical curiosity. The potential instability of a given page's contents is of secondary concern as it does not manifest itself as a source of contemporary knowledge, and can therefore be forgiven its faults and eccentricities in that respect. 21st-century readers of the *Encyclopédie* do however find themselves with new challenges due to a new form of epistemological uncertainty as well as the potential for the mapping of even farther-flung assemblic connections.

3.8 ARTFL: A New Encyclopedic Assemblage

Throughout my investigation of the assemblic nature of the *Encyclopédie*, I have noted that much of this analysis exists thanks to the unique and comprehensive perspective that the ARTFL *Encyclopédie* Project allows. The entire work stands poised and prepared, a digital labyrinth fully formed that the curious reader can traverse freely without the constraints of the physical limitations of the book. The *Encyclopédie*'s otherwise ephemeral nature, oscillating between any number of epistemological and ontological realms are captured by ARTFL and, unlike Schrödinger's famous

cat in a box, these various states of being and not-being have the potential of being measured concurrently.

It might seem then that ARTFL removes a degree of the editorially elaborated assemblage as it has succeeded in fixing the text in an ostensibly immutable form. Such an observation is true in that the compilers and editors of the project have decided to focus their efforts on the first Paris edition of the work, which cuts off the many different editions of the *Encyclopédie* from the assemblage explored here.⁶¹ However, a publication in any form, even a digital iteration safeguarded from the dangers of physical deterioration, presents its own unique set of problems. The encyclopedic assemblage, from the perspective of its contents, creates an epistemological and ontological field of uncertainty primarily through the ways in which the articles, their authors, sources, didactic goals, categorical positions, diction, and syntax engender doubt as to the epistemic value of the whole. While certain editorial decisions contribute to this phenomenon, the majority of assemblage ontological and epistemological interference is generated by the articles themselves.

ARTFL creates a new realm of epistemological (although perhaps not ontological) uncertainty within the encyclopedic assemblage in that it destabilizes the work not through the editorial promotion of, or an implied preference for, a specific form of epistemological content or ontological positioning but rather because of how the contents of the original work are *transmitted*. ARTFL's *Encyclopédie's* contents were not, of course, typed in by hand word for word. Rather, its editors employed microfilm to digitize the work: "Le travail de saisie a déjà été réalisé à partir d'un exemplaire microfiché de la première édition de Paris. Le résultat de cette saisie effectuée

⁶¹ For more information about the ARTFL *Encyclopédie* as a project, see Morrissey.

manuellement pourrait être comparé à une transcription dactylographiée de l'ensemble du texte de l'Encyclopédie” (Morrissey et al.). The digitized information was then further processed automatically, without being manually verified (Morrissey et al.). The lack of human intervention at the level of the digitized publication of the *Encyclopédie* allows for the inevitable existence of transpositional errors within the digitized work, a problem compounded by the sheer volume of words and individual characters that the ARTFL program's automatic systems had to correctly identify and transcribe. Indeed, in a small study on 10 pages of the ARTFL *Encyclopédie* done by Serge Heiden and Pierre Lafon which employed a pair of text-parsing programs, they discovered that typographical errors occurring between the ARTFL *Encyclopédie*'s digitized text's format and their facsimile of the original work were numerous: “En attendant donc une étude plus complète qui reste à faire, notre petit travail conduit à estimer provisoirement le taux d'erreur dans le texte électronique à 170/10 (voir tableau 2), soit 17 coquilles en moyenne par page” (99). These typographical errors come in many different flavors, including improper accent usage, the frequent confusion of the letters *s* and *f* and *a* and *o* (due to their original similarity in 18th-century fonts) and a curious tendency towards the omission of the letter *h* (Heiden and Lafon).

While Heiden and Lafon's sample of 10 pages of the *Encyclopédie* is quite small relative to the size of the whole text, it seems likely that similar errors would be present in the remaining 16,000 or so pages of the total work. Assemblically, these sorts of typographical errors have the effect of elongating the encyclopedic assemblage by creating potentially false lines of connection within the assemblage. A 21st-century reader attempting to employ the *Encyclopédie* within its role as an interconnected dictionary might well find themselves unable to find a term within the text, despite its having been included under its original spelling. These broken referential lines create an immediate barrier to further explorations within the confines of the encyclopedic assemblage

itself, although the truly curious reader could potentially perform their search for a definition outside of the *Encyclopédie* and perhaps have the word's spelling be corrected automatically, thus extending the epistemological assemblage far beyond their starting point.

ARTFL's existence as a digitized work gives it the potential not only to elaborate assemblic connections more easily within the *Encyclopédie* itself, but also to move beyond the work, as accessing ARTFL requires that one access the much larger system that is the Internet. Despite their impact on the encyclopedic assemblage's ability to successfully map lines of epistemic connectivity, instances of typographical transmission errors represent only one facet of how ARTFL creates fault lines within the *Encyclopédie's* overall assemblic structure. False connections create the potential for the generation of abrupt boundaries within the assemblage itself, which is further complicated by ARTFL's tendency to separate otherwise intact assemblic relationships through its presentation of the articles themselves. Even if every character within the original facsimile had been perfectly transcribed, ARTFL presents the articles such that they are largely removed from the alphabetically juxtaposed *contrastes burlesques* that we have already analyzed. When an article is selected from among those in a list, the website directs the reader to a page whereupon only the article asked for appears, therefore excising it from its place within the page-based assemblage. Certain articles which share the same subject cluster will sometimes appear on the same page as the originally solicited text, yet this is not always the case. This new presentational framework eliminates one of the primary reasons for which alphabetization was included as part of the *Encyclopédie's* organizational framework and can only be rediscovered if the reader specifically wishes to see it as it was on the page, a feat which can admittedly be accomplished fairly easily by clicking on a prominently positioned hyperlink, which allows the reader to view both a digital version of the original page, as well as a scanned facsimile of the

physical sheet. This extra twist in Diderot's *labyrinthe* has the paradoxical effect of adding to the assemblage while at the same time detracting from it in that it provides another vector wherein the reader themselves becomes yet again an important facet of the assemblage's elaboration.

Yet to suggest that the ARTFL *Encyclopédie* serves only to detract from the encyclopedic assemblage elides the projects' creation of new paths of assemblic connection. In addition to highlighting the reader's role in the extension of the encyclopedic assemblage, ARTFL also allows for a better understanding of the authorial intent which inspires certain articles. Dan Edelstein's work on the Enlightenment illustrates this potential as well as another aspect of the ARTFL project which lengthens the assemblage beyond the *Encyclopédie* and into the larger realm of literature. In a response to Jonathan Israel's assertion that the *Encyclopédie* did not reflect the ideas of mainstream enlightenment figures⁶², Edelstein employs ARTFL to prove the contrary: "But thanks to new research tools developed by the ARTFL Project at the University of Chicago, which can identify uncited and unattributed passages from other works, we know that the opposite is true: Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*, for instance, is excerpted over five hundred times, in more than one hundred fifty entries, mostly without acknowledgment" (*Genealogy* 95). This demonstrates ARTFL's ability to connect the contents of certain articles with the larger philosophical underpinnings of their writers which consequently illuminate larger ideological and ontological currents at work within the conceptual foundation of the work itself. Furthermore, by employing uncredited textual citations, the *Encyclopédie* pushes its readers to uncover their somewhat

⁶² "In inspiration and basic orientation not only did the *Encyclopédie* conspicuously fail to further the Enlightenment of Bacon, Boyle, Locke, Newton, and Clarke, neither did it reflect the views and perspectives of the leading figures of the French moderate mainstream-Voltaire, Montesquieu, Maupeituis, and Turgot" (Israel 849-50).

clandestine inclusion on their own, therefore rewarding the erudite scholar with an exclusive assemblic pathway within the *labyrinth* otherwise hidden to other subscribers.

Requiring the readers' input in order to view the original page-based assemblage is not the only modification employed by ARTFL which incorporates the reader's epistemological desires and exploratory proclivities into their new version of the encyclopedic assemblage. The system also permits specific keyword searches which allow for previously impossible assemblic connections to be mapped between articles which otherwise share no connections at all other than certain instances of shared vocabulary. If, for example, a researcher wished to see all correctly spelled occurrences of the word *nature* within the entire *Encyclopédie* and proceeded to perform a keyword search, they would be presented with a list of 11,303 different instances of this word. Furthermore, while they are initially presented in batches of 100, if one has the patience and necessarily robust hardware, they can all be compiled onto a single, massive page. Each manifestation of the word contains two or so lines from the article which contains *nature*, the title of the article, its author, page and volume number, which are themselves accessible via hyperlink. Parsing these results immediately reveals the impressive potential of this system as it links not only articles, but also the various *planches* which provide illustrations to certain encyclopedic concepts. The first mention of *nature* occurs on the very first page of d'Alembert's *Discours préliminaires des éditeurs* and the ultimate appears in the *planche* description of "Soierie". This keyword search maps assemblic connections between articles which have no content or authorial-based relationships at all, which creates the potential for new pathways of textual comparison and analysis.

This final form of the encyclopedic assemblage, the digital assemblage, illustrates not only the evolution of an 18th-century physical work into a 21st-century digital compendium but also the

potential of the *Encyclopédie* to continue towards a new, unforeseeable form whose assemblic connections can only be imagined. The possibility (and indeed, perhaps inevitability) for continued textual mutation exists as proof of the work's continued existence as a manifestation of anti-gnosis; perpetually questionable, consistently evolving, and conceptually unstable. When one reads the *Encyclopédie*, one must be prepared to unlearn even as one learns due to the persistent epistemological and ontological challenges that the text presents its readers in addition to the editorial and organizational particularities that form the conceptual core of the opus. Diderot's image of the *labyrinthe* conveys an image of a decidedly flat, 2-dimensional plane which can only be traversed laterally in a very spatially constricted manner, yet the *Encyclopédie* as it exists in its 21st-century form moves beyond even 3-dimensional constructs towards the 4-dimensional abstractions of temporal space. Modern technological advances in text parsing allow for even the original, comparatively simplistic 2-dimensional field of the *labyrinthe* to be converted, permitting the destruction of the maze's original walls and the excavation of previously inexistent pathways. The possibility for the continual elaboration of new assemblic connections endows the *Encyclopédie* with a rare form of textual vitality in that it permits what might otherwise be a decidedly geriatric work to continue to exist not only as a historical artifact but also as an example of the power of different forms of textual analysis, both in the traditional sense of close readings and the contemporary notion of computer-assisted keyword searches and text-parsing programs.

4.0 Chapter 3: Epistolary Assemblages: Exploiting the Written Word

What is a letter and what does it do? At first glance this might seem like an easy question to answer, after all, letters have been part of the human experience for a very long time. A letter might be a declaration of love, or a declaration of war, a joyful celebration of life, or a lamentation of death, along with a myriad of other epistolary potentialities. The act of reading a given letter narrows down this interpretive field, hopefully fixing its meaning into an understandable final form. Yet this focus on the letter as a tool centered on the conveyance of an explicitly desired message overshadows the letter's ability to create other kinds of meaning. By writing about where we are, what we are doing, and through describing the world that surrounds us, we begin to paint an image in our minds of the identity and personality of the writer. This internalized model comes not only from explicit self-description but also from those other, unrelated elements which populate the narrative of a letter. In this chapter, I examine how material objects and human beings along with literature and philosophy form assemblages through the lens of the letter. I argue that these epistolary assemblages infuse the letter writer with a particular form of vitality such that the distant reader's internalized model of that person becomes dependent on these epistolary assemblages in order to maintain coherency. I define the epistolary assemblage as an assemblage which, while transmitted through the written letter, can potentially be composed of material objects, immaterial concepts, and the subjectivities of other human beings. The effects of this assemblage are wide ranging; at times they enact profound change on the reader's subjectivity while in others they elaborate complex affective relationships between writer, reader, and other inorganic phenomena. These connections have the potential to impact not only the reader and writer's subjective models of each other, but also of the people, land, and culture which surround

their physical bodies and inform their personal identities. My examination of epistolary assemblages centers on a series of correspondences between longtime lovers, Sir Stanislas de Boufflers (1738-1815) and the Comtesse Eléonore de Sabran (1749-1827), notably during the period from late 1785 to late 1787 during which Boufflers was the Governor of a series of slave-trading outposts in what is now Senegal.

Tracing an epistolary assemblage between metropolitan France and West Africa gives rise to questions of global connection and interaction. While globalism is perhaps too loaded of a term to be useful here, there nonetheless exists a variety of both contemporary and 18th-century models which imagine different kinds of material and immaterial intercontinental connections between societies, individuals, and nature. The 18th century marks a moment wherein the power of global interactions is explored philosophically as well as practically. Voltaire examines the implications of far-flung material interaction in his essay “Chaine ou Génération des évènements” wherein he images the implications of such long-distance interactions:

Examinez les situations de tous les peuples de l'univers ; elles sont ainsi établies sur une suite de faits qui paraissent ne tenir à rien, et qui tiennent à tout. Tout est rouage, poulie, corde, ressort, dans cette immense machine. Il en est de même dans l'ordre physique. Un vent qui souffle du fond de l'Afrique et des mers australes amène une partie de l'atmosphère africaine, qui retombe en pluie dans les vallées des Alpes : ces pluies fécondent nos terres; notre vent du nord à son tour envoie nos vapeurs chez les Nègres ; nous faisons du bien à la Guinée, et la Guinée nous en fait. La chaine s'étend d'un bout de l'univers à l'autre. (*Œuvres complètes* 126)

Not only does Voltaire imagine material causality from a global perspective, his vocabulary indicates that he understands this phenomenon as functional on a universal scale. The language

describing the materiality of these interactions relies upon machine parts much in the same way as did La Mettrie's vision of the human body, indicating a profoundly materialist understanding of global relations.

Certain 21st-century scholars map less materially focused forms of interconnection during the Enlightenment. Lynn Festa approaches 18th century proto-globalism in terms of imagined, sentimental connections that: "created the tropes that enabled readers to reel the world home in their minds. By designating certain kinds of figures as worthy of emotional expenditure and structuring the circulation of affect between subjects and objects of feeling, the sentimental mode allowed readers to identify with and feel for the plight of other people while upholding distinctive cultural and personal identities" (*Sentimental Figures* 2). Simon Gikandi considers the relationship between slavery, the goods associated with slavery, and expressions of 18th-century sentimentality and aesthetics, showing how these seemingly separated concepts are in fact profoundly interconnected during the Enlightenment.⁶³ Christopher Miller thinks about 18th-century global connections through the concept of the French Atlantic, which includes France, parts of Africa, the French Caribbean, and occasional references to Louisiana and the Indian Ocean. In using this concept, he says that: "I want to think of this as a whole in which the various parts are interpreted in relation to each other: France in relation to Africa, Africa in relation to the Caribbean, and so on. These multiple relations are reflected and refracted in literary texts, images, films, and a variety of other documents ranging from the seventeenth century to the twentieth" (4). Each of these models illustrates both the importance of visualizing the 18th-century as a period of expanding connectivity not only in material and economic terms, but also as an interpersonal and cultural

⁶³ See *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*.

phenomenon. Through assemblic imagination Boufflers' correspondence allows each of these different models of connectivity to work together, showing, from a very intimate perspective, the impact of these diverse interactions upon the human subject.

Over the course of his life, Stanislas Jean de Boufflers was known among his contemporaries primarily for his writing and artistic pursuits. François Bessire notes that Boufflers wrote a number of different works, most notably a utopian *conte* entitled *Aline, reine de Golconde* (1761), another collection of letters, *Les Lettres de M. le chevalier de Boufflers, pendant son voyage en Suisse à Mme sa mere*, first published in 1771 and later reissued in 1776 in a new version edited by Voltaire.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Boufflers contributed an article to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* entitled "Généreux, Générosité."⁶⁵ He was also a frequent contributor to literary journals such as the *Journal de Paris*, often writing poetry. In addition to his literary output, Boufflers was quite popular among the European elite. In a letter written to the Duc de Richelieu, Voltaire, in the midst of generally complaining about old age suddenly writes of Boufflers' artistic talents: "Le chevalier de Boufflers est une des singuliers créatures qui soient au monde; il peint en pastel fort joliment; tantôt il monte à cheval tout seul à cinq heures du matin, et s'en va peindre des femmes à Lausanne; il exploite ses modèles ; de là il court en faire autant à Genève, et de là il revient chez moi se reposer des fatigues qu'il a essuïées avec des huguenotes" (Volume 57, 64).

⁶⁴ *Aline, reine de Golconde* was quite popular and generally well-received by critics upon its publication. The Marquis de Sade was one notable fan of the work, and writing to Boufflers said: "On eut rarement un esprit plus agréable, et les plus jolis contes du siècle ne valent pas celui qui t'immortalise". Furthermore, the text was eventually developed into an opera, which in 1771 was presented at Versailles before Louis XVI and his court. For more information on the *conte* see Davie's edition of the work.

⁶⁵ See The University of Chicago's ARTFL project.

While spending time in Ferney, Boufflers also met the Scottish writer James Boswell, who also spoke highly of Boufflers: “I then went to Ferney where I was received with complacency and complimented on my letter. I found here the Chevalier de Boufflers, a fine, lively young fellow and mighty ingenious” (Pottle 286). In addition to his other activities, Boufflers also had a reputation for “sa triple passion des femmes, des chevaux et des voyages” (Boufflers, *Œuvre complètes* Viii). After Boufflers’ death in 1815, the Comte de Ségur delivered the Chevalier’s eulogy, painting another positive image of the man:

Modèle de grâce, de douceur, d’esprit, de bravoure, et de bonté ; la vivacité de son imagination, la variété de ses talents, l’engouement singulier de sa verve brillante, le sel piquant de sa conversation, l’élégante facilité de ses lettres, son inimitable talent de raconteur, l’esprit gracieux et original de ses poésies légères, sembleraient exiger qu’autour de sa tombe on ne vit que des fleurs, et qu’on n’entendit que des chants. (qtd. in Davies xi)

Each of these observations about Boufflers highlights the multifaceted nature of the man behind the letters. His artistic and creative background resound throughout his correspondence with his lover, augmenting the power of his amorous declarations while sharply contrasting with his function as the master of a slave-trading outpost.

Boufflers’ creative pursuits allowed him an artistic outlet but did not provide him enough financial stability to accomplish his social goals. For most of his life, Boufflers viewed his literary output as little more than a hobby, and, according to Nicole Grangeat Vaget was well aware of his status as a literary dilettante (175). During his adult life, his profession shifted repeatedly. His mother was the preferred mistress of the King of Poland, Stanisław I Leszczyński and consequently

Boufflers spent his early life at the King's court in Lunéville where he was educated.⁶⁶ During his early adulthood, Boufflers first endeavored to become a member of the clergy, although his time in the seminary was short-lived. He subsequently joined the Knights of Malta, fought in the Seven Years War, and then served in the military, although he apparently was not much of a soldier and never managed to truly distinguish himself as a warrior (Bessire 7). After returning from Senegal, the Chevalier managed to become the representative of the nobility of Nancy at the *états-généraux* preceding the Revolution, although he accomplished little and was “un politicien réactionnaire et médiocre” (Vaget Grangeat 76). Boufflers' ambitions were, as Antonio José de Vicente-Yagüe Jara claims, “totally bourgeois, consisting in establishing himself in society with enough money to marry the woman that he loved, the Countess of Sabran” (154).⁶⁷ Boufflers' met Sabran roughly a year after the coronation of Louis XVI, which itself took place immediately before the death of Sabran's husband, the Comte de Sabran leaving her a widow in her mid-twenties. This meeting began a love affair which led to their marriage much later in 1797, ending with Boufflers' death in 1815.⁶⁸

Unfortunately for Boufflers, he had acquired a significant amount of debt, which complicated his desire to marry Sabran. For an unknown and somewhat contested reason, Boufflers was offered the position of the Governor of the French possessions in Senegal, a post which would potentially allow him to erase his debts and make himself financially worthy of

⁶⁶ For more information about Bouffler's early life at the court in Luneville see Maugras.

⁶⁷ The text was originally written in Spanish and translated by myself. It read “totalmente burgués; consistía en establecerse en la sociedad con bastante dinero para casarse con la mujer a la que amaba, la condesa de Sabran”

⁶⁸ For more biographical information about the pair and their romantic relationship see Webster.

marrying Sabran.⁶⁹ Two explanations exist on the circumstances surrounding Boufflers' appointment to this post. Certain scholars, such as Francois Bessire, frame the position as a fortuitous turn of events enacted largely by Sabran through her connections at court. Others, like Jara, view the situation as more of an exile meant to punish Boufflers for a literary indiscretion regarding the Princess Christine de Saxe.⁷⁰ Regardless, Boufflers was placed in charge of a series of small towns and fortifications which were important to the French slave trade, notably the island of Gorée and the commune St. Louis which are part of modern-day Senegal.

Boufflers departed France on either December 7th or 8th 1785 and did not return definitively to metropolitan France until Christmas 1787.⁷¹ During this two year period, Boufflers wrote to Sabran almost every day that they were separated, creating a correspondence of which 592 letters remain.⁷² This body of correspondence forms the majority of the primary texts which I study during

⁶⁹ Léonce Jore notes that while Boufflers was paid in advance for his services, the money that he received (24,000 pounds a year) would have allowed him to pay off his most serious debts, but would have left him with a remaining debt of around 60,000 pounds (84).

⁷⁰ In the first half of 1785 the *Journal de Paris* published a well-known song written by Boufflers some twenty years prior which mocked an attempt by the Princess to remove the editors of the *Journal*. This past attempt ultimately ended with the original editors maintaining control after they essentially bribed Jean Baptiste Antoine Suard, an important member of the *Académie Française* for his protection. After republishing the song, The *Journal* had its *privilège du roi* revoked and was suspended from the 4th to the 27th of June 1785 at the request of the Comte de Lusace, brother of Christine. For more information surrounding this episode, see Grimm et al.

⁷¹ Boufflers did return to France for a period of five months, ending in December 1786 after which he returned to Senegal until the end of his appointment.

⁷² A number of letters have since disappeared and Boufflers did not of course write to Sabran during their reunion in mid to late 1786.

the course of this chapter, although I also analyze several of Sabran's letters in order to elaborate another axis of the epistolary assemblage between the Sabran and Boufflers. Many of these letters were published long ago, with a selection published in 1875 entitled *Correspondance Inédite De La Comtesse De Sabran Et Du Chevalier De Boufflers 1778-1788*. The examples of Sabran's writing that I include were taken from this first edition and from Carrell's more recent collection.

4.1 An Assemblage on the Page

Whereas La Mettrie's corporeal assemblage manifested itself within and around the human body and the encyclopedic assemblage contained a massive encyclopedia as its focus, the primary vehicle for the epistolary assemblage of chapter 3 is, of course, the letter. From a conceptual standpoint, different kinds of 18th-century letters fulfilled widely varied roles, from simple interpersonal communication to the transmission of new forms of knowledge and philosophy. Overall, the letter was one of the most prevalent discursive genres which served to mediate subjectively experienced events during this period. In *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*, Dena Goodman underscores the letter's philosophical and epistemological role, noting that:

Although conversation was the governing discourse of the salon-based Republic of Letters, it was not the only form of discourse. Rather, it was the matrix within which and out of which the written word flowed. If conversation shaped the discursive space within the boundaries of the salon, writing moved the Enlightenment out of that circumscribed world and into the public world beyond it. (136)

If salons existed as both generative loci and/or perilous proving grounds for new forms of epistemology, letters were the means with which the success or failure of these ideas were eventually transmitted to a wider audience beyond the physical salon. Much work has been done on the subject of salons and salon culture, although, as Goodman laments, the majority of the analyses on this phenomena center more on the *philosophes* and less on the salons and *salonnières* which ran them.⁷³ Yet, Goodman's study *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, explores both a number of female letter writers as well as the practice and culture of epistolary exchange. Goodman highlights the intrinsic duology responsible for the formation of a letter:

The power of writing stems in part from its dual nature as both a material and an intellectual practice; it is neither mere transcription of words already formed nor the formation of those words in the mind alone. In order to traverse the cultural boundary between private and public and the physical distance marked by absence, the letter incorporates the mind, making the spiritual material. (*Becoming a Woman* 9)

Much as with the human being in La Mettrie's *L'Homme machine* the letter represents the combination of two otherwise conceptual opposites, here represented not in terms of the body and the soul, but as the material and the intellectual. Its foundation as a product of this fusion lends it the same sort of assemblic structure as the machine-man in that the final product (the letter) results from an incalculable number of different social, culture, physical, intellectual, and contextual factors. When combined with the myriad of other processes intrinsic to the writing and delivery of a given letter, this communicative device reveals itself as profoundly assemblic.

⁷³ See Chapter 2 of Goodman's *Republic of Letters*, "Philosophes and Salonnières: A Critique of Enlightenment Historiography."

The conceptual framework of the letter aside, the French early modern system for the delivery of letters was itself a curious hybrid of network and assemblage. The 18th-century French mail structure stands on the boundary between earlier medieval and renaissance ad hoc message delivery assemblages and the fully realized, designed, and largely state-controlled postal networks of the modern era.⁷⁴ This perilous position results from the juxtaposition of the French post's planned network of mail carriers, relays, and depots alongside its reliance on a series of diverse private actors to ensure the delivery of the mail. Jay Caplan describes the early modern post as:

a business that collected and delivered mail and transported passengers along fixed routes; it was continuously available to the public, and it was a system, composed of post offices, relays and workers [...] In the 1840s, when steam-driven trains began to replace the post as a means of passenger transport and prepaid postage stamps came into general use, the early modern postal era came to an end. (7)

Furthermore, he notes that while mail delivery between cities and towns was largely reliable, systems for mail delivery between residents or institutions within the same city did not exist uniformly until the French state took over the function after the revolution. From the mid-century until that point, a number of private businesses established in different cities and known as *petite postes* fulfilled the function (Caplan 42). Furthermore, for individuals such as Boufflers' and Sabran, the increased degree of geographical separation inherent to living on different continents rendered the entire assemblage that much more fragile as one could never be certain that a given packet of letters would actually reach their intended recipient. This series of different delivery

⁷⁴ For more information on the evolution of the French postal system throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, see Racevskis.

vectors and general uncertainty, even when couched within the wider postal network, transmits a degree of assemblage connectivity to that same network, such that even in metropolitan France the sending and delivering of mail cannot be entirely understood as belonging entirely to either the classification of network or assemblage.

Outside of epistolary exchanges between intellectual organizations, personal correspondences communicated another form of subjective experience. In her work on fictional epistolary texts, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook challenges certain assumptions made by Foucault regarding the role of the author, specifically with regard to letters and contracts. She notes that: “In the eighteenth century [...] on the cusp between manuscript and print cultures, both these forms came into prominence in the cultural imagination. Functioning symbolically as well as semantically, they operated not to reflect a preexisting subjectivity but rather to produce and organize it in various ways” (Cook 7). Within Boufflers’ letters, this notion of the letter as a producer and organizer of Boufflers’ own subjectivity lies at the heart of my assemblage analysis. These letters meld together a wide range of factors that constitute Boufflers’ epistolary self, which is the version of Boufflers communicated through his letters.

The content of Boufflers’ varied correspondence encompasses geographical description, declarations of love, general lamentations, as well as philosophical and literary observations. In his preface to the 1998 edition of a selection of Boufflers’ correspondence, *Lettres d’Afrique à Madame de Sabran*, François Bessire highlights the multifaceted aspect of Boufflers’ letters, specifically noting their differing rhetorical goals:

Le soin se manifeste dans l’élaboration du style. Selon la théorie épistolaire, les lettres hybrides comme celles-ci, à la fois lettres de voyage et lettres d’amour, supposent au moins deux styles différents. L’un rhétorique –nécessaire pour persuader de la permanence de ses

sentiments, s'assurer de ceux de l'autre, justifier son départ et se le faire pardonner -, l'autre narratif ou descriptif. (16)

By expanding Bessire's categories I seek to illustrate the letters' ability to create an assemblage model of Boufflers' epistolary self. Each letter contains one or more of several different kinds of epistolary content including: solitary expressions of love and nothing else, a discussion of his day, expressions of misery, philosophical musings about something he has witnessed, or explorations of an idea with no mention of his physical surroundings. These categories are often layered together in the same letter, and with a few exceptions, all contain at least some mention of his love for Sabran. These narratives individually represent specific facets of Boufflers' epistolary self, which when combined assemblage, illustrate the spectrum of his experiences, both as phenomena internal to his subjective mental perceptions as well as descriptions of his material reality.

The majority of these epistolary narratives tend towards either the expression of Boufflers' feelings of love for Sabran or descriptions of his travels. Of these two narratives, nearly every single one of the almost daily 592 letters written by Boufflers within this collection contains at least one statement which reinforces his emotional relationship with Sabran. The very first letter, dated November 27, 1785 and sent from Rochefort, exemplifies Boufflers' love-stricken character: "Surtout je pensais à toi, et comme je connais trop bien ton bon cœur et ton imagination ardente, je sentais tout ce qui se passait au-dedans de toi, et mon malheur s'accroissait du tien...Adieu amour. Adieu toi, car tu es encore plus jolie et plus tendre que l'amour" (*Lettres d'Afrique* 25-27). Here we can see a number of common rhetorical patterns that repeat themselves throughout Boufflers' correspondence with Sabran, primarily in that Boufflers tends to express his love in almost emotionally opposing terms. Love for Boufflers manifests itself paradoxically as a source

of joy and great suffering, both of which are generally framed in hyperbolic statements. Given the lengthy (both geographical and temporal) separation of the couple, the central importance of declarations of love, hyperbolic or otherwise, is hardly surprising, and forms one of the central thematic axes of the epistolary assemblage explored within this chapter. In an article largely concerned with Boufflers' literary production, Lydia Vázquez Jiménez proposes that much of the Chevalier's personality can best be understood through the lens of his avowed libertinage⁷⁵, noting specifically that for Boufflers: "The only refuge, other than the world of seduction, is therefore being a writer" (403).⁷⁶ With this in mind, Boufflers' letters become tools with which, if not to seduce, then at least to maintain a previously achieved seduction.

Boufflers' descriptions of his current situation are equally prevalent, although the amount of description in any given letter varies widely. These descriptions can themselves be further subdivided into different categories according to the forms of description found across Boufflers' correspondence. The first and most common type, the purely descriptive is also the simplest: "Et bien, je l'avais bien dit, mon pauvre petit, *Sénégal* (c'est le nom du bâtiment) n'à point pu revenir. Il a été éloigné des autres vaisseaux de la rade par un coup de vent ; il a travaillé tant qu'il a pu hier pour regagner le terrain perdu, mais la mer est trop forte...(Boufflers, *Lettres d'Afrique* 94). Descriptions such as the one contained in letter 88 occupy at least a portion of most of Boufflers'

⁷⁵ When referring to Boufflers' libertinage, I am using the term in its 18th-century sense, as noted by Michel Feher: "after 1715, libertinism pertained almost exclusively to erotic matters [...] As of that moment, the term 'libertine' suggested only a way of conducting one's love life – even as the latter came to be the almost exclusive concern of the declining aristocracy" (15).

⁷⁶ The text was originally written in Spanish and translated by myself. It read "El único refugio, a partir del mundo de la seducción, es, pues, el ser escritor."

letters and fulfill the basic role of recounting his travel narrative. One could divide these sorts of quotidian description-based narratives into two somewhat separate categories, those which describe events happening to someone or something who is not Boufflers and those which recount what Boufflers himself is doing: “Je viens d’une promenade à la grande terre où j’ai mené des officiers de marine à la pêche et à la chasse” (*Lettres d’Afrique* 217). Descriptions centered entirely on the current state of Boufflers’ material surroundings are complimented with further explorations into Boufflers’ interior state. Boufflers manifests a relative ease with and motivation for the expression of what seem to be his most intimate emotions: “J’ai le cœur serré, je sens un malaise, un chagrin, un humeur, dont tu n’as jamais vu que de faibles esquisses, même dans mes plus mauvais moments...” (*Lettres d’Afrique* 223). These emotional descriptions, while not as common as materialistic recreations, form the second part of the description based epistolary narrative.

While these two wider categories (love and descriptions) compose the majority of Boufflers’ letters, another type exemplifies the Governor’s penchant for philosophy and literary consumption. Again, within his first letter to Sabran, Boufflers illustrates both his tendency for amorous hyperbole and an example of his often philosophical tone, especially when faced with adversity: “Si jamais j’ai cru à un être qui dirige les autres, c’est dans ce moment-ci: car c’est lui qui a tout fait; il fera encore le reste. S’il existe, s’il observe, s’il prend garde à cette poussière animée, s’il lit dans les cœurs, si les plus belles âmes lui plaisent le plus, il ne te laissera pas dans les larmes, il ne t’arrachera point pour jamais celui qui t’aime, celui que tu aimes” (*Lettres d’Afrique* 26). This particular example not only provides us with evidence of Boufflers’ philosophical discourse, but also illustrates his complicated, often ambiguous relationship towards religious belief. As we shall see through subsequent examples, Boufflers does not limit his

philosophizing merely to complicated expressions of his love for Sabran, but at times comments on the barbaric nature of the slave trade and his place within it.

In addition to his own personal philosophical observations about the universe, Boufflers also proves himself as having been well-read through his frequent usage of literary citations in order to highlight a particular aspect of his emotional or physical situation: “Il y a longtemps que je le dis à tout propos: *la vie est trop courte*. Mais je le dirai encore bien plus quand nous nous verrons, quand nous ne nous quitterons plus et que nous n’aurons point d’autre affaire, *but strive in offices of love*” (*Lettres d’Afrique* 156).⁷⁷ Citations such as this one link Boufflers not only to the vast literary assemblage elaborated by various works, but also demonstrate his ability to understand and employ English, which he does so frequently along with other languages throughout his correspondence with Sabran.

Taken alone these literary references indicate that Boufflers has undergone a high degree of literary education. However, the literariness of Boufflers’ letters goes beyond mere citations and manifests itself through his writing style. Many of his letters contain multiple literary devices such as simile, metaphor, synecdoche, allegory and many more. For example, in letter 129 penned on May 12, 1786, Boufflers, looking forward to returning to France in the autumn, writes of an imagined future with Sabran:

C’est pour nous que sont faits les beaux jours d’automne : ils commenceront dès l’automne prochain, et ils dureront tout l’automne de la vie, et, comme l’automne aura conservé la

⁷⁷ This appears to be a quotation from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: Book X: “But rise, let us no more contend, nor blame/ Each other, blamed enough elsewhere, but strive/ In offices of love, how we may light’n/ Each other’s burden in our share of woe” (580).

chaleur de l'été, l'hiver conservera la douceur de l'automne ; et j'aime à croire qu'après cet hiver-là nous verrons naître un printemps perpétuel, où nous existerons l'un près de l'autre, l'un pour l'autre peut-être sous d'autres formes, mais qu'importe, pourvu que nous nous aimons ; peut-être serons-nous des dieux, peut-être encore des hommes, peut-être des oiseaux, peut-être des arbres⁷⁸, peut-être serai-je une plante, et toi ma fleur ; je m'armerai d'épines pour te défendre, et je t'ombragerai de mes feuilles pour te conserver ; enfin, sous quelque forme que tu sois, tu seras aimée. (*Lettres d'Afrique* 128)

Boufflers' use of literary devices in this letter reflects a literary stylistic trend that exists throughout much of his correspondence with Sabran, therefore imbuing the majority of these letters with a degree of genre oscillation, shifting continuously from accounts of material reality couched in material terms to fanciful, abstract reframings of the same reality. This manifestation of a paradoxical dual-existence as both literature and empirical reporting renders the texts difficult to classify, ultimately infusing Boufflers' own epistolary self with the same dual nature.

From an 18th-century perspective, Boufflers' blending of the empirical with the literary exists as part of larger societal expectations with regards to epistolary style. As Dena Goodman explores in *Becoming A Woman in the Age of Letters*, the writing of letters developed into an intrinsic part of upper-class life throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, becoming, especially for women, a central aspect of their education.⁷⁹ She signals the broad stylistic expectations which motivated French letter writers at the time noting that: "Letter writing, however, fell somewhere

⁷⁸ Bessire notes that this is likely a reference to the Ovid fable of Baucis and Philemon, an old married couple who were both turned into intertwining trees after their death as a reward for their service to the Olympian gods. Another, more explicit reference to this same fable occurs in letter 85, written on March 27th 1786.

⁷⁹ See in particular Chapter 2 "Designing an Education for Young Ladies," for more detail on this subject.

between speech and writing. Defined as conversation with someone who is absent, it was ordinary language simply placed on the page; it was writing the way one speaks” (Goodman, *Becoming A Woman* 140). Goodman further highlights that while both men and women wrote letters, the genre was primarily seen as women’s domain, and consequently, men and women developed, and were subsequently expected to adhere to very different writing styles which mirrored wider communicative expectations: “In the eighteenth century, men and women had their complementary modes of both speech and writing: conversation and correspondence for women, oratory and literature for men” (*Becoming A Woman* 141-142). These expectations are further exhibited in 18th-century texts, such as in Jaucourt’s article “Style” in the *Encyclopédie* wherein he praises the genre’s lack of artifice.⁸⁰ On the 5th of May 1787 Boufflers laments that he does not have the time to quickly read a recent packet of letters sent by Sabran writing that:

Adieu, mon enfant, il faut te quitter pour des lettres d’affaires, pour des procès-verbaux, pour des ordres d’embarquement, ect., ect., car le vaisseau qui portera ma lettre part demain et j’ai ma chambre pleine de papiers que je n’ai point encore lus. Encore s’ils valaient tes lettres, mais comme ils sont d’une autre écriture, ils ne les valent surement point, car je défierais Mme de Sévigné et Mme de Lambert et Mme du Deffand réunies d’entrer en lice. (*Lettres d’Afrique* 283)

⁸⁰ Le *style épistolaire* n’est point assujéti aux lois du discours oratoire: sa marche est sans contrainte: c’est le trop de nombres qui fait le défaut des lettres de Balzac. Il est une sorte de négligence qui plaît, de même qu’il y a des femmes à qui il sied bien de n’être point parées. Telle est l’élocution simple, agréable & touchante sans chercher à le paroître; elle dédaigne la frisure, les perles, les diamans, le blanc, le rouge, & tout ce qui s’appelle fard & ornement étranger. La propreté seule, jointe aux graces naturelles, lui suffit pour se rendre agréable.

Boufflers' literary style is not therefore unique to him but rather exemplifies the overarching duality of 18th-century letters, creating a sort of empirical literariness within these texts wherein fiction and reality overlap such that each style informs and transforms the other. Furthermore, by invoking the famous Mme. de Sévigné, he shows, quite clearly, that he is aware of the literariness of letters, most specifically that they can be understood as having a quantifiable literary value.

The literariness of Boufflers' letters to Sabran becomes further enunciated when they are compared with other communiques that he sent out. In addition to Sabran, Boufflers maintained regular correspondences with a wide number of people and organizations, from immediate family like his sister Catherine de Boisgelin and his uncle the Marechal de Beauvau, to various friends and acquaintances. Furthermore, he also sent regular reports to the French government and at times even sent letters to the various neighboring African nobles with whom he developed important alliances during his tenure. Through these letters we can see different versions of Boufflers' epistolary self, from the literary lover, the colonial administrator, and at times, the representative of the King of France Louis XVI. In a letter dated the 15th of September 1787 Boufflers, writing to his employers, recounts a previous incident involving a ship that had run out of supplies:

Le navire le Renard de Nantes expédié de France le 22 décembre 1785 pour la traite des nègres à Gorée et le long de la côte d'Afrique après avoir séjourné plus de huit mois tant aux Iles de Los qu'à parcourir la côte jusqu'à la rivière de Serralione est revenu ici le 27 juillet dernier manquant absolument de vivres pour son équipage et pour les captifs. Ne pouvant s'en procurer ailleurs que dans les Magasins du Roy il a demandé à M. le Chev. de Boufflers de lui accorder 30 barils de farine. ("Le Navire")

This letter serves as a purely functional form of communication, completely devoid of the literariness seen in his exchanges with Sabran. Furthermore, Boufflers himself becomes somewhat

effaced within the letter, referring to himself in the third person. The different tone, language, and purpose of letters similar to this one illustrates the importance of the recipient within the framework of the epistolary assemblage. The recipient of the letter is just as important to the framing of Boufflers' epistolary self as the other elements which motivate its writing. In another letter, this time addressed to one Achmet Moctar, the king of a nearby tribe whose recent conduct angered Boufflers, Stanislas writes in the voice of an authoritarian. The concluding sentences of the letter reveal this version of the Chevalier not seen in his other correspondence:

Achmet Moctar, voici mes dernières paroles : si tu reconnais ta faute, je l'oublierai...mais si tu persistes dans tes folies, je romps tout commerce avec toi ; dès ce moment tes coutumes seront retirées, je te regarderai toi et les tiens comme des ennemis, mes bâtiments passeront de force entre tes camps et c'est alors que tu te ressouviendras de ce qui t'a été prédit, si tu cessais d'être l'ami des Français [...] reviens donc à moi pendant qu'il est encore temps et tu préviendras de grands malheurs pour toi et ton peuple (qtd. in Vaget Grangeat 67-68).

Each of these different versions of Boufflers' epistolary self show that the addressee of a letter forms an influential part of the epistolary assemblage in that they redirect nearly every other element of that assemblage towards a particular configuration. Other contextual elements also form inherent parts of the epistolary assemblage, but their presentation rests largely on Boufflers' imagined expectations of his eventual reader.

Examples of literary quotation, style, tone, and envisioned recipient illustrate the wide-ranging nature of those ideas and concepts which form the epistolary assemblage. Each letter becomes in a sense a distilled, rough outline of precisely who the Chevalier de Boufflers is on any given day. On February 6, 1786 for example, Boufflers writes of his boredom and melancholy,

both frequent subjects in his letters: “Rien ne va mieux, parce que rien ne va. Cette colonie-ci est un corps étique où la circulation ne se fait pas. Si cela dure, j’ai bien peur que le mien ne devienne de même, à force de faire de mauvais sang. Adieu, je te baise pour me distraire” (*Lettres d’Afrique* 59). Each letter therefore becomes not only an assemblage created through the thematic layering of differing epistolary narratives, but also offer a vision into the author’s own assemblage nature.

While letters are generally planned and perhaps even revised, a number of Boufflers’ writings suggest that some of what he writes has not been composed with a great degree of planning. Indeed, a number of his letters appear to have been written more or less as events unrolled around him, such as in letter 71, dated March 13, 1786 wherein Boufflers awaits news about the potential drowning of one of his officers: “Voici mon aide de camp qui arrive hors d’haleine. Il est sauvé, il est à bord d’un gros bateau que j’ai fait tenir à l’entrée de la rivière... Des six hommes qu’on croyait perdus, il n’y en a que deux de noyés. C’est une espèce de bien qu’un moindre mal” (*Lettres d’Afrique* 82). The majority of these letters however appear to have been written after the events that they describe, particularly those which contain disasters or other important events, such as a fire which began on January 27, and was written about on the 28th: “Je n’en peux plus, ma fille. J’ai passé la nuit au milieu des flammes, à porter le peu de secours qui dépendait de moi à ces pauvres malheureux. Je me suis brûlé une jambe et meurtri l’autre. Faute de moyens, j’ai au moins voulu encourager par mon exemple” (*Lettres d’Afrique* 51). This letter’s function as a device for retelling a story rather than documenting it moment to moment is further underlined by the fact that in the previous letter dated January 27th, Boufflers abruptly ends his otherwise unremarkable letter (he mostly talks about how bored he is) with a sudden “On m’avertit que le feu est dans l’île” (*Lettres d’Afrique* 51). This sort of temporal juxtaposition highlights the

assemblage role of Boufflers' letters in that they function both as chronicles of the past as well as documentation of the present.

Each letter then exists within a state of flux in that one can never be sure as to the conditions of the letter's composition. While it is fairly obvious in certain cases that a letter was written well after or even during a given event, for many others an explicitly designated temporal relationship between an event and its transformation into an epistolary narrative is not given. Were Boufflers' letters examples of correspondence in the succinct sense as it is defined by Alain Pagès, this sort of temporal uncertainty would matter less, as the delay between the moment of its composition and reception would tighten up the potential window of occurrence for any given event: "La lettre et l'article ne sont pas des actes de communication isolés, ponctuels. Il se suivent, se répondent, sont pris dans un mouvement non d'intertextualité...mais en quelque sorte de 'contextualité'. Le texte s'écrit en présence d'autres textes, par rapport à ceux qui ont précédé et à ceux qui vont suivre" (345). The difference between this definition of the letter and Boufflers' example lies within the curious physical format that both his and Sabran's letters adopted. As Bessire notes: "Les lettres du chevalier partent par paquets; celles de la comtesse lui arrivent de même. Il n'y a donc pas d'échange régulier. Elles s'écrivent au contraire chaque jour, à la suite les unes des autres, sur le même papier. Ces conditions spécifiques rapprochent ces lettres de l'écriture réflexive du journal" (17). The effect of this journalistic format destabilizes somewhat Boufflers' writing's genre classification as epistolary. Pagès' statement that "letters follow one another" implies that a letter has a certain temporal window in which it can both be written, sent, and read in order to conform to the contextual conditions placed upon it by previously existing correspondence. While some correspondence might manifest a much more open-ended chronological framework in order for a response to be considered "timely" or not, Boufflers' daily writings suggest that, were the

transmission capabilities of the 18th century greatly augmented, he would have expected much more frequent responses from Sabran, especially given his numerous complaints about her periods of epistolary silence. This particular epistolary configuration pushes these letters further into an assemblage role as a result of the temporal uncertainty surrounding their sending and eventual reception. The letter-as-assemblage therefore not only frames and subsequently projects the letter writer's epistolary self, but does so as a function of societal expectations, the envisioned recipient, and temporal uncertainty. Alone these factors suggest that a letter's composition and contents are almost entirely dictated by these factors, however material objects ultimately have the potential to reconfigure and confuse these otherwise straightforward relationships.

4.2 Worth A Thousand Words: Sabran's Portrait in the Epistolary Assemblage

While Boufflers' letters incorporate a wide range of themes, observations, philosophical musings and sentimental lamentations, the primary motivation for their existence rests in Boufflers' love for Eléonore de Sabran. As we have already seen, Boufflers' feelings for Sabran often manifest themselves textually through hyperbolic amorous declarations which themselves tend to function as a sort of epistolary framework for the other forms of content within his letters. In addition to these more metaphysically conceived statements of love, we find throughout the narrative that Boufflers transmits these sentiments through the materially based medium of objects. They permeate the narrative within a multiplicity of different tonal registers, contextual fields, and implied forms of material connections and sometimes serve as materially composed symbolic stand-ins. In many ways Boufflers' objects function similarly to the broader, less sentimentally focused entities within the letters in that they inform and often control certain aspects of a letter's

composition. However, due to the centrality of love within these texts, these objects become endowed with a meta-materialistic vitality that largely escapes other physical elements within the letters. From the perspective of assemblic analysis, these objects and the human beings that their existence impacts become interconnected, not only through their symbolic associations with one another, but also through the palpable, materially focused changes that their existence enacts upon Boufflers and Sabran.

One item in particular enacts an impressive degree of material change upon Boufflers. This object, found primarily within the earlier letters of the correspondence, is a portrait of Sabran that he commissioned shortly before his departure for Senegal. The portrait initially appears in the first letter of Boufflers' African correspondence, wherein he briefly discusses what he expects from it:

Mais si j'apprends de bonnes nouvelles de ma femme⁸¹, si je vois arriver demain son image suppliante, je croirai encore au Bonheur, je pardonnerai au sort et je ferai face à tout. Embrasse bien fraternellement ta meilleure amie de la part de son bon frère. Ayez bien soin que son portrait m'arrive à bon port. Il suffira qu'il lui ressemble un peu pour que je le regarde beaucoup, et que j'y voie des yeux de l'esprit plus que je n'ai encore vu dans la nature humaine. (*Lettres d'Afrique* 27)

Even in this initial, brief mention of Boufflers' portrait of Sabran, we can already feel the power contained within this object. Not only will the arrival of the portrait permit Boufflers to "believe

⁸¹ Throughout his correspondence with Sabran, Boufflers' frequently employs third-person pronouns when talking about Sabran or himself. This occasionally leads to confusion when pinpointing who he is talking about. Here, it is likely that he is referring to a portrait of Sabran given his continued focus on the portrait across many letters. He also has a tendency to refer to Sabran as his wife "*femme*" and she frequently calls him her husband "*mari*" despite the fact that they were not married and would not be until 1797.

in happiness again”, which given Boufflers’ nonreligious worldview is rendered a profoundly materialistic operation, but its continued absence will have an altogether opposite effect upon Boufflers.

In the very next letter, the first sentences illustrate the impact of this materially composed and yet symbolically imbued object; however in this case, happiness is not the final result of these material interactions:

Je suis dans une inquiétude mortelle: la diligence ne m’a rien apporté, les vents remontent au nord et je tremble de partir sans ton portrait. Je meurs de peur qu’entre ton peintre et M. Doazant il n’y ait eu de grandes bêtises...Puisse-t-elle [la diligence] apporter cette chère image qui m’est présente jour et nuit, et sans laquelle je me croirais en proie à tous les malheurs. Adieu, je me sens d’une tristesse mortelle. (Boufflers, *Lettres d’Afrique* 28)

Boufflers’ language assigns an almost divine level of influence to the missing portrait. In a single letter, Boufflers refers to his own mortality and death three different times. Not only is he feeling both a “mortal sadness” as well as a “mortal worry”, he is also “dying of fear”. Each of these instances illustrates the power that Boufflers gives this portrait, allowing it an ostensible mastery over his own life and happiness. These examples also provide a degree of ontological fluctuation in their specific formulation in that each pairing employs terms which can be conceived both materially as well as metaphysically. Jaucourt’s article entitled “*Peur, Frayeur, Terreur*” in the *Encyclopédie* encapsulates the words’ dual ontological potential: “...ces trois expressions marquent par gradation les divers états de l’âme plus ou moins troublée par la crainte. L’appréhension vive de quelque danger cause la *peur*; si cette appréhension est plus frappante, elle produit la *frayeur*; si elle abat notre esprit, c’est la *terreur*. La *peur* est souvent un foible de la machine pour le soin de sa conservation, dans l’idée qu’il y a du péril”. The dual existence of fear

as affecting both the “soul” as well as being a foible of the “machine” allows us to understand Boufflers’ words as implying not only that Sabran exercises control over the knight’s “machine” but also on his soul itself, which given his skepticism suggests more of emotional impact. Finally, we can see a much more concrete example of the portrait’s material power in that the thought of leaving France without it causes Boufflers to tremble.

Were this narrative fictional or an autobiographical work destined for a wider audience, moments such as these two would serve primarily as illustrations of Boufflers’ professed devotion to Sabran. However, the pseudo-journalistic letter form employed by the Chevalier once again forces us to reframe this particular observation within the extended boundaries of the epistolary assemblage. In admitting to Sabran the enormous degree of affective potential that this portrait contains for him Boufflers reinforces the material bonds between himself and Sabran through the immaterial-material medium of the letter. By immaterial-material, I signal a material object’s ability to transmit immaterial concepts, such as love, which in turn enact material change upon the reader. The letter, like other objects that we shall consider within this chapter allows for a form of materially focused substitution, which combines the two otherwise opposed concepts into a paradoxical union that serves as a conduit for the transmission of material phenomena. The portrait serves as another such object, both in its absence as well as its presence. Despite a number of delays and a high degree of worry on the part of Boufflers, the portrait does finally arrive: “Je l’ai vu enfin ce cher et charmant portrait, mais je ne l’ai vu qu’un instant. Comme j’étais entouré de monde qui m’aidait à le déclouer, dès que j’ai eu jeté les yeux sur ta figure, ils se sont remplis de larmes et j’ai été obligé de me retourner brusquement, sans pouvoir revenir de plus d’un quart d’heure” (*Lettres d’Afrique* 29). Again we witness this object’s influence over Boufflers, this time to an arguably greater degree. Whereas before he was merely trembling and afraid, here we see a

much stronger physical response that does not only cause him to cry, but pulls him away from his duties.

My examples up to this point have focused on Sabran's portrait existing as a material object which enacts physical and emotional change upon its primary beholder, Boufflers. The portrait however functions upon multiple planes within the epistolary assemblage. Beyond its ability to influence Boufflers', the portrait also begins to blur the line which differentiates the material portrait from Sabran herself. A number of different instances within their correspondence serve to highlight the portrait's powers to blur boundaries between the materially present object and the absent interlocutor notably those moments wherein Boufflers' usage of pronouns becomes confused: "Je viens de faire dépendre ce charmant portrait pour le faire embarquer pour Gorée, et quand en entrant dans ma chambre, j'ai trouvé la place vide, j'ai eu un serrement de cœur: il me semblait que tu avais abandonné la colonie..." (*Lettres d'Afrique* 234). Within this brief letter, the portrait's substitutional role moves beyond the mere B for A substitution implied by such a relationship and into a more unstable realm wherein symbolized and symbolizer fluctuate from one object to another. The initial half of the first sentence remains conventional in that it describes Boufflers' physical interaction with a material object. Events necessitated that the object be moved and Boufflers, interacting with the portrait within its role as pure object whose symbolic function has been momentarily suspended, recounts his having done so. It is only within the second half of his description that the symbolic relationship between portrait and the distant Sabran becomes reestablished and at the same time destabilized. Boufflers, upon remarking the absence of the portrait, immediately begins to refer to the portrait no longer as it (*le*), but rather you (*tu*).

From a certain perspective, this sort of material substitution has always been the true source of the portrait's material influence; Boufflers allows it such control because it functions as a

symbolic substitute for the absent, and therefore immaterial Sabran. Within this letter, this role manifests itself more explicitly due to Boufflers' parallel pronoun substitution. As the letter continues however, Boufflers' signifiers shift again, such that the role of the portrait as pure substitution becomes less certain, particularly within the last sentence: "Mais je t'irai bientôt retrouver à Gorée et je crois même que j'y retournerai par mer si je le puis, afin de tenir compagnie à ton portrait" (*Lettres d'Afrique* 234). Here Boufflers himself seems uncertain as to the actual object of his affections. Given the role that he has assigned to the portrait, his referencing to the portrait as *tu* and therefore as a stand-in for Sabran seems hardly surprising, and yet his shift from signifier to signifier within the space of a single sentence problematizes the substitutional status of the relationship. His initial reference to the portrait here comes in the *tu* form, indicating that the portrait has, for the moment, embodied Sabran. The end of the sentence however returns the portrait to its status as an object albeit an object freshly-infused with a new significance. Here, the portrait has moved beyond its initial, symbolic function and has taken up the function of *both* symbol and symbolized. Boufflers' personification of the portrait endows the object with a degree of internal vitality, beyond its symbolic relationship to Sabran. He states that he wants to return to Gorée by sea, specifically to "keep the portrait company" thus implying that the portrait itself functions as more than a symbolic stand-in, perhaps even as a material object which must in turn be equally as cherished outside of its visual association with his distant mistress.

This episode is not merely indicative of Boufflers' sometimes peculiar writing style; rather it illustrates the frequent ontological confusion underlying his relationship to Sabran and her portrait. Indeed, there are other moments throughout their correspondence where this symbolic blurring between Sabran and her portrait become so problematic that the reader must search through multiple letters in order to ascertain where each of these objects are currently oriented

with regards to Boufflers' subjectivity. Somewhat earlier in their correspondence, Boufflers, who is at this point (June 25th 1786) under sail and heading for France for a brief vacation, writes of the stresses of his voyage and of course, of Sabran : "Tout cela serait insupportable sans l'espérance qui me montre sans cesse ton joli portrait, qui te peint à moi dans ta joie, dans ton empressement, dans tes humeurs, dans tes injustices, dans tes retours, dans tous tes charmes et dans tous tes défauts, que j'ai la bêtise d'aimer aussi" (*Lettres d'Afrique* 157). While it is not explicitly stated within this letter, both the fact that he is aboard ship and therefore unlikely to have room for a portrait, and the degree of detail that he assigns to this portrait suggest that he is discussing a metaphorical rather than an actual portrait.⁸² Indeed, we see some letters later, again after several complaints about his voyage, that in this instance, this portrait exists only within Boufflers' mind: "N'importe, l'espérance ne me quitte point. Elle te montre à moi à une distance énorme, à la vérité, mais chaque jour la diminue, et le joli portrait intérieur que je garde au fond de ma pensée prend chaque jour des couleurs plus vives et des traits plus dessinés. Adieu, je te serre dans mes bras" (*Lettres d'Afrique* 163). Boufflers' evocation of the portrait here is undoubtedly meant to indicate Sabran herself, and yet once again Boufflers' usage of signifiers problematizes a more direct metaphorical interpretation of this passage.

Within this letter, Sabran is first mentioned explicitly as the direct object in *tu* form. Again, this is unsurprising as all of Boufflers' various metaphorical substitutions and elaborate stylistic decisions are dedicated to invoking a more embodied Sabran within his imagination. While this

⁸² In letter seven (December 7th 1785, page 33) Boufflers writes that he himself put the box containing Sabran's portrait on the ship, such that it would be the first thing unloaded upon their arrival. The necessity that it be placed in the cargo hold is likely due to the fact that passenger cabins in 18th-century ships were generally tiny.

passage certainly accomplishes this goal, Boufflers moves beyond merely substituting a material portrait for Sabran, adding an additional layer of substitution into the dynamic. In his search for the materially absent Sabran, rather than invoking particular aspects of Sabran herself as he did in letter 176 (which even then was framed within the vocabulary of the portrait) he moves his focus, at least linguistically, away from Sabran and onto her material stand-in. Furthermore, this object is itself materially separated from Boufflers, adding an entirely new, and this time entirely immaterial, connection to this aspect of their epistolary assemblage. Not only has the absent Sabran become re-embodied within a non-living object, now the object's own materiality has been stripped away, creating an immaterial, substitutional construct that despite its existence entirely within Boufflers' subjectivity, remains a materially focused entity. His descriptions of this internalized image further emphasize the portrait as this new, albeit momentary center of Boufflers' amorous imagination of Sabran, as he underlines the portrait's increasingly bright colors and detailed traits, all without invoking those traits as they manifest themselves materially through the conduit of the actual living Sabran.

Other instances within Boufflers' correspondence reflect the portrait's uncertain ontological status through his epistolary style, which renders the recipient of certain physical acts ambiguous. In letter 159, dated June 8th 1786 Boufflers again recounts spending time looking at Sabran's portrait in order to calm himself: "Je regarde en ce moment ton charmant portrait. Il a l'air d'être exaucé, cependant ne nous flattons pas encore [...] Mais tout ira bien, je vois cela sur ton portrait. Adieu je te baise de toutes mes grosses lèvres" (*Lettres d'Afrique* 148). Here, both Boufflers' word choice and his history of anthropomorphizing Sabran's portrait infuse the letter's altogether common final sentence with ambiguity. Instead of an uncomplicated "je te baise", Boufflers chooses to highlight the physical nature of the kiss by enunciating the size of his lips. In

the context of this letter, this material focus suggests that perhaps Boufflers actually kissed the portrait. For letter writers during the 18th-century, this potential kiss between a human and a portrait has a precedent within the literature of the era. Indeed, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's epistolary novel *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, published in 1761, contains a similar relationship between distant lovers and their portrait substitutes: "Je m'imagine que tu tiens mon portrait, et je suis si folle que je crois sentir l'impression des caresses que tu lui fais et des baisers que tu lui donnes ; ma bouche croit les recevoir, mon tendre cœur croit les goûter. O douces illusions ! ô chimères ! dernières ressources des malheureux ! ah ! s'il se peut, tenez-nous lieu de réalité !" (268). In this excerpt, the female protagonist (Julie) sent her lover (Saint-Preux) a portrait of herself much in the same way that Sabran sent hers to Boufflers. The Chevalier, if he did kiss the portrait, would therefore be recreating this iconic scene, appropriately from the position of Saint-Preux. Indeed, Sabran and Julie's respective portraits parallel one another from a conceptual standpoint as well. Slightly earlier in Rousseau's work, Julie sends her lover a locket containing a small portrait of herself and explains her reasons for doing so in a separate letter:

C'est une espèce d'amulette que les amants portent volontiers. La manière de s'en servir est bizarre ; il faut la contempler tous les matins un quart d'heure jusqu'à ce qu'on se sente pénétré d'un certain attendrissement ; alors on l'applique sur ses yeux, sur sa bouche, et sur son cœur : cela sert, dit-on, de préservatif durant la journée contre le mauvais air du pays galant. On attribue encore à ces sortes de talismans une vertu électrique très singulière, mais qui n'agit qu'entre les amants fidèles ; c'est de communiquer à l'un l'impression des baisers de l'autre à plus de cent lieues de là [...]. (242)

While Boufflers' does not frame the role of Sabran's portrait as explicitly as in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the actual function of Sabran's portrait seems the same, albeit with less scripted ritual.

The amulet and portrait both serve as materially centered intermediaries that, despite their own materiality, manage to transcend material space through the creation of immaterial assemblic connections.

The historical significance of the 18th-century portrait underscores these continually shifting instances of Boufflers' material focus through the particularities of the portrait genre. Within his seminal work *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), Michael Fried examines the function of the 18th-century beholder within the context of several artistic genres. According to Fried, one of the fundamental differences between the 18th-century portrait and other artistic genres lies in the imagined role (or lack thereof) of the viewer within the design of the work. Fried notes that among many 18th-century painters a primary concern was the "...demand that the artist bring about a paradoxical relationship between painting and beholder-specifically, that he find a way to neutralize or negate the beholder's presence, to establish the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas" (108). For Fried, this negation becomes at least partially achievable through the elimination of the more theatrical elements of a painting that demand attention in order to move towards a more inclusive dynamic wherein the viewers themselves become part of the work. The portrait however, is oftentimes unable to achieve this negation, due to aspects inherent to the genre: "...the conventions...of the portrait call for exhibiting a subject, the sitter, to the public gaze; put another way, the basic action depicted in a portrait is the sitter's presentation of himself or herself to be beheld. It follows that the portrait as a genre was singularly ill equipped to comply with the demand that a painting negate or neutralize the presence of the beholder..." (Fried 109-110). Fried does allow that there were certain portraits that did achieve this absorptive goal but stresses that most portraits were far too aware of their role as a presentational device.

While I have not yet found any detailed descriptions of this particular portrait of Sabran, it seems likely that it would have followed the general trend of 18th-century portraits towards a more theatrical mode of presentation. We can imagine then that Sabran exists on canvas very much as a presentational subject, prepared and willing to be seen and aware of her status as a theatrical object. Were this portrait destined for a more conventional presentational setting, such as in an ancestral home⁸³ in metropolitan France, this theatricality would seem less important, as it would undoubtedly exist as but one example of a portrait among many others.⁸⁴ Its inherent necessity to be seen would be diminished as it would probably exist more as part of an assemblage of decoration than as a singular object demanding attention. However, as we have seen within Boufflers' writing, this portrait's conceptual foundation is framed as part of a one-on-one presentational schemata. The portrait exists because of and specifically for Stanislas de Boufflers. Not only is the beholder non-negated by the portrait, its very purpose revolves around the perception of a unique beholder.

This direct relationship between Boufflers and the portrait works, as we have seen, to reinforce the material bond between Sabran and Boufflers as part of the epistolary assemblage. However, within the context of a pure portrait/beholder relationship, this reinforcement only flows in a single direction; for a conventional beholder/portrait/subject relationship, the subject, while

⁸³ At the time of this correspondence, Sabran lived in a *hôtel* on faubourg Saint-Honoré near the Champs Elysées. Boufflers mentions her home in letter 222, page 187.

⁸⁴ Fried notes as well that the popularity of portraits had rendered their production an "exercise of merely mechanical skills" and that most individuals who commissioned portraits of themselves "were relatively obscure and unimportant persons whose likeness could be of interest only to their friends" (109). It seems likely then that the residences of the nobility would probably have had many portraits of family and friends.

perhaps aware of the presentational design of the portrait, are themselves unable to perceive the beholders' perception of the portrait unless they happen to witness the interaction themselves. Given that there are over 5,000 kilometers separating the two during the time of this particular chapter of their correspondence, Sabran would have been unable to witness these instances of beholding through conventional means. However, the portrait's important position within the epistolary assemblage allows, through a materially substitutional framework, for Sabran to be implicated more fully within the dynamic instigated by the portrait. She becomes, albeit at a rather significant chronological delay, not only aware of the existence of Boufflers' gaze but also of the material impact of the portrait on Boufflers, as well as its effects upon his emotional state.

There existed within the 18th-century a peculiar relationship between materiality and expressions of the immaterial which mirrors the assemblic relationship between Boufflers and Sabran. Remarking upon the interplay between ghosts and material objects Barbara Benedict writes that: "Things and ghosts seem opposites: the first all material form, the second all immaterial spirit. Both things and ghosts, however, lie on the margins of form and formlessness, materiality and meaning: things metaphorically connote the soulless body, ghosts the bodiless soul, and both express the problem of finding selfhood in the nexus of spirit and form" (19). While the absent Sabran is not of course a ghost, her manifestation within Boufflers' imagination is very ghostlike. As Boufflers' internalized model of Sabran is only updated sporadically due to their geographical separation, his self-constructed version of Sabran gradually becomes closer to a ghost than to the living Sabran, as whatever imagined Eléonore he holds within his mind reflects a woman who, in a certain sense, no longer exists due to the changes affected upon her subjectivity by the vicissitudes of life.

From this perspective, the various instances of Boufflers' linguistic confusion as to the exact object of his affections become more comprehensible as he, as a result of his own writings, is well aware of the relationship engendered through both his viewing of the portrait and his subsequent recounting of specific episodes of this beholding. The absorptive space that 18th-century art sought to create becomes ultimately viable within Sabran's portrait for Boufflers due to this communicative exchange that permits the portrait to function as a two-way channel. Sabran herself becomes aware of her own position within Boufflers' object-centered epistolary assemblage not only as the source of the portrait's power as a material relay, but also as a human being who has become truly objectified. As the line between Sabran and her portrait blurs, the true source of the power of the epistolary assemblage becomes obscured, masked behind material substitutions. Ultimately, this multitude of subject/object substitutions becomes so confused that the object of Boufflers' exact affection is lost within specific instances. Boufflers can no longer know from whence come these moments of emotional and physical turmoil, as his own writing illustrates his confusion as to their source.

Sabran's awareness of her own objectification manifests itself through her sense of geographical displacement relative to both Boufflers and her physical location. In one letter dated June 6th, 1786, Sabran attends a garden party at the home of a friend. During this party, Sabran separates herself from the group:

...je me suis éloignée pour être avec toi sans distraction. Je te voyais, je te parlais, je te serrais contre mon cœur, je me rappelais, dans l'amertume de mon âme, tant de pareilles soirées que nous avons passés ensemble...je songeais, prête à en mourir de regret, que ces moments délicieux étaient passés pour toujours...Ma vie est finie; tu l'as terminée le 22 novembre 1785...Adieu, mon cher mari; tu vois que tout me ramène à ton idée, et que,

malgré la distance qui nous sépare, je sais, en dépit de tout et en dépit de toi peut-être, te rapprocher de moi. Il est vrai que je fais plus souvent que toi ce voyage, car je quitte rarement le Sénégal, et sans savoir où je suis ni où je vais, je suis aveuglément tes pas.

(Correspondance Inédite 129)

Whereas Boufflers' letters indicate an attitude centered on having Sabran *with* him, as indicated by his personification of the portrait, the effect of the epistolary assemblage upon Sabran functions more as an out-of-body experience that generates not only the sense that she "rarely leaves Senegal" but also (ostensibly) engenders a degree of social isolation as indicated by the distance that she puts between herself and the other party goes.

Much of this attitude is probably due to Boufflers' frequent focus on bringing Sabran into his material reality through his letters. By describing his surroundings and openly hypothesizing her presence in those same surroundings, Boufflers envisions a recalibration of Sabran's own physical reality. In one of Boufflers' earliest letters in the correspondence, written just as his ship departs from Rochefort (December 17, 1785) the Chevalier imagines Sabran's presence in his cabin: "Je ne puis que t'embrasser, encore ne sais-je point si tu pourrais tenir dans ma pauvre petite chambre et dans le petit lit d'enfant ou je viens de dormir. Mais comme il ne faut pas beaucoup plus de place pour ton petit corps que pour ton idée, il me semble que nous finirions par nous arranger et que la traversée me paraîtrait courte" (*Lettres d'Afrique* 41). Whereas in other moments throughout his letters Boufflers uses detailed description in order to recreate his material surroundings, here he pulls Sabran into his reality, not only through implying her presence, but also by creating illusory material interactions between her transposed material self and the material object of his bed. In another such scene Boufflers further focuses his descriptions and transforms literary suggestion into explicit orders, such that Sabran's material alignment becomes more in

tune with his own. In a letter dated the 21st of January 1786, Boufflers gives Sabran specific instructions as to how she should physically orient herself in order to be marginally closer to Boufflers:

C'est une pratique religieuse qu'il faut que nous suivions. Tu dois te tourner vers le midi un peu à droite, c'est-à-dire qu'en prenant un cadran solaire pour te régler, tu dois regarder vers une heure et quart. Si tes yeux étaient aussi bons qu'ils sont beaux, et s'ils perçaient tout ce qu'ils rencontrent, comme tout ce qui les voit, tu me verrais ici dans ma maison hideuse, délabrée, dont aucune porte ne ferme, dont aucun plancher ne se soutient, dont tous les murs se réduisent en poudre, dont toutes les chambres sont meublées de haillons couverts de poussière...(*Lettres d'Afrique* 46)

This moment in their correspondence marks perhaps the most unambiguous example of the power of the epistolary assemblage to enact material change in that unlike other moments, Boufflers attempts to shift material reality purposefully and directly. His commands to Sabran center almost entirely on Sabran's specific place in reality, and the epistolary assemblage serves the purpose of permitting this long-distance material manipulation. Boufflers' invocation of connection through the relay of material objects and through attempts at direct and indirect material manipulation of Sabran illustrate the power of the epistolary assemblage to transcend time and distance in order to bring two individuals closer together despite their separation.

4.3 Please Mr. Postman, Look and See, Is There a Letter, A Letter for Me?

Within Sabran's writing, an object-centered epistolary assemblage exists initially on a more direct level, approaching material substitution from a different point of view than that of

Boufflers' confused relationship with the portrait. For Sabran, the central object of her end of the epistolary assemblage rests, fittingly enough, on the very letters that she receives from Boufflers. From an initial perspective this seems hardly surprising, given that these letters encompass the sum total of Boufflers' and Sabran's interpersonal relationship during his time in Africa. However, Sabran puts a heavy emphasis not only on the contents of the letters, but on the letters themselves as physical objects, often on their absence as much as their arrival and subsequent presence. Altman notes that within fictional epistolary narratives, both the moment of the reception of the letter as well as their absence serve as highly visible features of the genre:

Because the notion of reciprocity is such a crucial one in the epistolary narrative, the moment of reception of letters is as important and as self-consciously portrayed as the act of writing. The hastily torn-open envelope makes as frequent an appearance as the pen and ink. In no other form of dialogue does the speaker await a reply so breathlessly; in no other type of verbal exchange does the mere fact of receiving or not receiving a response carry such meaning. (121)

While Sabran's correspondence with Boufflers is of course non-fiction, she places a similar importance upon the letters that she receives from her lover. Yet much in the same way that Boufflers' affection shifts between a material representation of his lover and his actual human companion, Sabran endows the mere physical existence of letters from Boufflers with a high degree of material power even without having read them. One particular episode which Sabran recounts to Boufflers illuminates a dynamic wherein both the presence as well as the absence of letters from her lover occurs. Among Sabran's many friends and associates stands Boufflers' sister, Catherine de Boisgelin, a woman with whom Sabran, despite professing a complicated

relationship, spends a certain amount of time.⁸⁵ On April 27th, 1787, Sabran mentions having invited Catherine to supper, and expresses concern that Catherine will have received letters from Boufflers while she has not. The following day, the sister arrives, not having received any letters, thus calming Sabran's fears. After eating however, a gentleman arrives with a packet of letters from Boufflers to Catherine, with nothing for Sabran: "...on lui apporte un gros paquet...C'était de toi! Elle me le montre, le lit, veut me le faire lire. Pendant tout ce temps, je ne sais où j'étais, à la suite d'un mouvement violent que j'avais éprouvé dans la tête et au cœur. Je sentis une sueur froide s'emparer de tous mes membres, et pour quelques minutes, je fus certainement pétrifiée" (*Correspondance Inédite* 221). Given that Catherine was rather aggressive both in reading as well as in making Sabran read these letters, it is surprising that Sabran makes no mention as to their actual contents. Indeed, Sabran says that: "Elle me montra ta lettre, que j'eus l'air de lire; mais la vérité est que je n'en pus lire un mot, telle envie que j'en eusse. J'avais un nuage sur les yeux, et un tel trouble intérieur que je perdais le fil des idées quand j'avais pu en déchiffrer quelques lignes" (*Correspondance Inédite* 221). Sabran's choice of metaphor here is particularly curious as letters, being written down, are primarily perceivable and comprehensible as visual phenomena. Much in the same way that Boufflers' writing style and tone were dictated by the recipient of a given letter, Sabran's reception of a letter also transforms depending on the addressee. These letters' shared provenance if not ultimate destination could be expected to infuse them with at least a degree of assemblage connectivity and yet Sabran is unable to even decipher their contents. As these particular

⁸⁵ Webster describes Catherine as: "not an amiable character; she was, in fact, what we should call in modern speech a "cat," and she found it difficult to forgive another woman for being as attractive as Madame de Sabran" (229).

letters are assemblically positioned within and explicitly destined for Catherine, their value for Sabran is rendered entirely negative, such that her internally held representation of her “husband” becomes confused, to the point where she suggests having doubted that he loves her: “J’entends par mauvais principes, ces vilains soupçons qui sont comme autant de vautours, qui me rongent le cœur, et cette colère sourde, qui me change en furie en un instant” (*Correspondance Inédite* 222). While Sabran’s focus on these letters does not elaborate the A to B substitutional relationship that we witnessed between Boufflers and the portrait of Sabran, it becomes apparent in such scenes that the physical letters that she receives from Boufflers allow for the manifestation of multiple, juxtaposed versions of Boufflers within Sabran’s own mind.

While both Catherine and Sabran exist within the same epistolary assemblage and are receiving letters from the same source which are likely passing through nearly identical lines of communication, their geographical position within the epistolary assemblage relative to Sabran herself has the feedback effect of modifying Sabran’s own internal, immaterial model of Boufflers. Altman examines the question of location, both geographical and otherwise from the perspective of the writer of the letters, therefore approaching the notion from the opposite position of Sabran in our example:

The I of epistolary discourse always situates himself vis-à-vis another; his locus, his “address,” is always relative to that of his addressee. To write a letter is to map one’s coordinates-temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual-in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time and how far one has traveled since the last writing. Reference points on that map are particular to the shared world of writer and addressee: underlying the epistolary dialogue are common memories and often common experiences that take place between the letters. (119)

Altman's observations mirror much of what we find in the more thematically conventional of Boufflers' letters, and yet from the perspective of a distraught Eléonore, there seems to be another dynamic at play. Despite having, in her immediate physical presence, letters which would allow Sabran to update her model of Boufflers', "coordinates" she completely rejects this information. This other, hidden dynamic rests upon a form of intentionality of the letter writer, specifically upon whom the letters were originally destined. This illustrates that the letter-as-object, regardless of its actual contents, contains the potential not only of inflicting intense physiological and psychological modifications upon Sabran, but also of modifying her model of the imagined materiality of Boufflers. All of these possible effects stem from the position of the letter-as-object within material space as it becomes divided into the separate spheres of possession and perception created by the human subjects within the epistolary assemblage.

Sabran's internalized recasting of her imagined image of Boufflers is not permanent, despite the almost immediate doubts that the absence of letters engendered within her. The phantom image that they create soon becomes effaced within Sabran's imagination, albeit involuntarily. During the same evening, Sabran manages to collect herself until her guests leave, at which point she falls apart until suddenly "...j'étendais une voix intérieure, qui était sans doute la tienne, qui me disait: Il t'a écrit, il t'aime; qu'as-tu fait pour qu'il ne t'aime plus, depuis ce dernier jour où il t'affirma de si bonne foi qu'il t'aimerait *toujours*?" (*Correspondance Inédite* 222). Again we witness a moment wherein the geographical distance separating Sabran and Boufflers becomes momentarily suspended for the Comtesse in a similar fashion to what we saw during the garden party. While this particular episode was not engendered through the intermediary of an immediately present material object, the phenomenon's origins lay with the explicitly materially focused effects of the presence of Catherine's letters earlier in the evening. The

epistolary assemblage becomes therefore somewhat elongated in that the precise effects of the letter-as-object necessitate a certain amount of time for their full impact upon Sabran's subjectivity to make itself felt. Furthermore, the combination of Catherine's letters with Sabran's lack of same creates a measurable sequence of cause and effect. Sabran's initially shattered vision of Boufflers' subjectivity eventually resets, albeit through an internalized intermediary that exists both as Boufflers (as the voice was "undoubtedly" his) as well as explicitly not being her specific Chevalier's voice due to its employment of third-person pronouns in reference to the materially existent Boufflers. This reveals the epistolary assemblage's ability to reproduce internally maintained images of a given individual, which, even in their idealized form serve purely substitutional roles.

The centrality of the letter-as-object for Sabran becomes even more evident the following day, when unsurprisingly, a packet of letters from Boufflers arrives at Sabran's home. Her joy at the arrival of this correspondence is palpable and yet surprising in its recollection: "Que je suis heureuse, mon enfant! les voilà, ces précieuses lettres qui ont failli me faire mourir d'impatience et de chagrin; elles me rendent à la vie, et il est impossible d'exprimer ce qui se passe en moi dans ce moment. Je n'ai pas le loisir de les lire; ma chambre est pleine d'importuns; mais je les vois, je suis contente" (*Correspondance Inédite* 223). After all of her melodramatic, highly detailed descriptions of the negative physical and emotional reactions to seeing Catherine's letters, one might expect Sabran to immediately launch herself into the reading of what she has received from her lover in order to find solace. Whereas the night before she was forced to content herself with an assembly-generated imagining of Boufflers' comforting voice, she has now in her possession communicates that almost certainly would prove, emphatically, that he does in fact love her. Sabran's reaction however indicates that this sort of textual evidence of Boufflers' feelings is,

while perhaps not quite unnecessary, can be somewhat deferred until she has time to confirm the evidence. The existence of the letters-as-objects serves as proof enough and, even devoid of their communicative value within the epistolary assemblage, still contain much of their assemblic power, to the degree that not only do they “rendent [Sabran] à la vie” but they do so in such a manner that she claims the sentiments that they create impossible to describe, all despite the fact that she hasn’t even so much as opened them. Sabran’s final declaration: “...je les vois, je suis contente” contains a succinct summary of the power of the letter-as-object’s positionally dependent assemblic power. While the letters could possibly contain any number of messages, their position within Sabran’s epistolary sphere allows for at least a momentary and seemingly total re-stabilization of Sabran’s world.

In this moment within Sabran’s correspondence, we once again witness the substitutional potential of material objects within the epistolary assemblage. Here, unlike Boufflers’ portrait of Sabran, which despite the occasional instance of ontological confusion on the part of the Chevalier remained a mostly substitutional relationship, Sabran’s focus on the material presence of these letters creates a different sort of dynamic. In addition to their primary substitutional role wherein they represent the distant Boufflers, the letters also come to represent an idealized version of *themselves*. Sabran’s primary concern expressed by her perception of the absence of letters destined specifically for her is that Boufflers no longer loves her as he once did. As nearly every letter written by Boufflers contains at least one, if not multiple declarations of love for Sabran, one can imagine that the letters that she did eventually receive contained a similar degree of amorous declarations. Despite her professed pain, she does not immediately read them, and yet this pain is assuaged nonetheless. Therefore, the letter-as-object becomes not only a material vehicle for the textual expression of Boufflers’ subjectivity, but also a substitutional stand-in for this same

expression. For Sabran, these objects seem to manifest, through their very existence, the textually communicated sentiments that they contain within their pages. Consequently, Sabran creates three degrees of assemblage substitution, wherein the letters-as-objects represent her imagined projection of their assumed contents, which in turn serve as substitution for Boufflers himself.

While Sabran's focus on the power of the letter is more explicitly centered on the letter itself, Boufflers also manifests a high degree of concern about the material makeup of the letters that he sends to Sabran. In a letter dated February 12th 1786, Boufflers remarks that one of his officers made the mistake of drawing a picture on paper explicitly destined for the Chevalier's letters to Sabran:

Imagine-toi, mon enfant, que cette feuille-ci étant restée par hasard sur mon bureau, un officier s'en était servi pour faire le dessin de deux flambeaux que je voulais faire tourner en bois du pays. Quand je l'ai vu, j'ai tout de suite effacé le dessin⁸⁶, parce que ce papier-ci est sacré: il est timbré de ta main, et il ne peut servir qu'aux actes que nous pourrions passer ensemble. (*Lettres d'Afrique* 42)

Even more so than Sabran, Boufflers' vocabulary emphasizes specific physical aspects of the paper, such that he frames the paper's ontological status in the way of a holy relic by referring to it as sacred. Moreover, the paper's sacrosanct being comes not from abstractions but rather from the material world, becoming inviolate at the moment that Sabran put a stamp upon the page. The structure of the episode confirms this as Boufflers states its unique function only after he has declared the paper sacred as a result of Sabran's material intercession.

⁸⁶ In a footnote, Bessire writes that there is no trace of this drawing on the physical letter.

In another letter, dated later during his tenure in Senegal (January 18, 1787), Boufflers again writes of the importance of the paper that Sabran gave him for his letters:

Enfin ma chère enfant, je commence à me servir de ces feuilles, arrangées avec un soin que tu n'as jamais pris que pour moi. En ouvrant ce joli portefeuille vert, en feuilletant cette masse de cahiers, en admirant toutes ces pages numérotées comme les papiers d'un homme d'État, je me suis attendri pour toi, j'ai oublié mon âge et mes défauts et je me suis dit: Il est pourtant vrai qu'elle m'aime et sans doute qu'elle souffre d'une absence dont mon esprit ne voit encore que le commencement. (*Lettres d'Afrique* 214-215)

Boufflers' language mirrors somewhat that of Sabran's in her earlier letter from April 27th, 1787 in that the presence of a specific material object stands in Boufflers' mind as an expression of love. Furthermore, Boufflers extends the power of these objects beyond a mere feeling of love and consequently finds himself transported outside of his material reality and forgets his age and faults. Once again, it is not the actual contents (or in his case the potential contents) of the letter that engender this impact but rather their existence as pure objects. This power suggests that within the epistolary assemblage certain objects can ultimately be understood as just as important as the contents of the letters themselves, and in some cases, even more so.

4.4 Captives, Slaves, Chains, and Irons

Framing Boufflers' and Sabran's correspondence as exemplifying the textual manifestation of a profound love story has long been a central axis of analysis for these texts. While the amorous intentions of these letters remain their central purpose, it is easy to forget that outside of The Chevalier's and Eléonore's overly-dramatic prose, Boufflers was in Senegal in order to improve

one of France's primary slave-trading hubs. While the majority of his letters to Sabran make no mention of slavery at all, hints and undertones of the infamous West-African slave trade at times make their presence felt and occasionally leap directly from the page. Within the framework of the epistolary assemblage, these people come to represent both a further elaboration of the assemblic connections between Boufflers and Sabran as well as an extension of the same assemblage beyond the epistolary spheres of the letter writers. The epistolary assemblage manifests the tendencies of the era to semantically shift the ontological classification of human slaves onto that of objects and animals, a phenomenon which I shall investigate shortly. Even when this kind of objectification is avoided in the case of a particular slave, that individual finds herself ontologically reconfigured in entirely different ways.

The 18th-century African slave trade was, in many respects, an assemblic construction involving not only human beings and money, but also a myriad of agricultural, industrial, and military products.⁸⁷ Generally referred to as the Atlantic Triangle, ships would depart from French ports such as Nantes or Bordeaux laden with European exports bound for Africa. Upon arriving, the captains of these ships would exchange these goods with African slave traders and, upon completing their cargo of human beings, would then depart for islands such as Hispaniola in the Caribbean Sea.⁸⁸ The slaves would subsequently be sold to plantation owners, the ships would take on a cargo of New World products and return to France. Boufflers served as the Governor of the

⁸⁷ For a more in depth take on this system, see Miller, Gikandi, Postma, and Klein respectively.

⁸⁸ Certain factions within the Senegambian aristocracy profited from and were complicit in the Atlantic slave trade. For an in-depth look at the slave trade with a focus on the Senegambian region, see Barry.

island of Gorée and the commune St. Louis which were part of modern-day Senegal.⁸⁹ While the populations of these areas were decidedly small, (around 1,800 and 6,000 people respectively), St. Louis and to a lesser extent Gorée, were important to the French slave-trade.⁹⁰ While the centrality in the slavery system of L'île de Gorée has perhaps been overstated, it retains a high degree of impactful symbolism, as is manifested through the *Maison des esclaves* with its Door of No Return through which slaves passed as they were loaded on to ships bound for the Americas.⁹¹ Given the role of these territories managed by Boufflers, the specter of slavery begins to haunt even those letters which avoid the topic altogether. In one of the first 20th-century explorations of Boufflers' and Sabran's relationship, Nesta Webster wrote in 1910 that:

I have no desire to whitewash Boufflers; judged from the moral point of view, he was a bad man, yet he had something in him that many of his more virtuous contemporaries lacked...a soul that, too often stifled by evil passions, found itself at last in a great

⁸⁹ For more information on these locations from a historical and economical perspective, see Røge, Chapter 4. Røge also examines Boufflers role in the area's affairs beginning on page 193.

⁹⁰ In the preface his collection, Bessire also notes the ethnic demographics of Boufflers' domain: "Leur population est composée de Français pour un dixième et, pour le reste, d'à peu près autant de 'nègres et de mulâtres libre' que de 'captifs de case' (esclave sédentaires, par opposition aux 'captifs de traite' qui ne restent dans les 'captiveries' qu'en attente d'embarquement)" (11).

⁹¹ Much scholarly debate exists around the subject of Gorée and many modern scholars conclude that it was significantly less important than was previously thought. See Austen for an examination of this controversy as well as Gorée's role as a *lieu de memoire*.

love...This is the Boufflers I have tried to show, the Boufflers to whom the woman he loved could say: “C’est mon âme qui t’aime!” (vii)⁹²

Other, more contemporary scholars have highlighted the fact that Boufflers’ was more concerned with the establishment of a proper colony which focused on natural resource production rather than existing purely as a waypoint for the slave trade: “According to his correspondence, Boufflers, contrary to his predecessors had no intention of profiting from the slave trade, rather, he wanted to establish a colony in order to take advantage of the land’s natural resources. The knight considered the slave trade a barbaric business” (Vicente-Yagüe Jara 176).⁹³ Sue Carrell supports this notion by pointing out at a letter written by Boufflers to his sister wherein he states that: “Ces mots de captifs, de captiveries, d’esclaves, de chaînes, de fers, etc, me font toujours saigner le cœur” (17). Even if he is being honest about his feelings with his sister, Boufflers chooses to remove a large degree of the element of human suffering implicit in the slave trade by focusing not on the misery of actual living human beings but rather on the words associated with them. This brief and all-too-rare glimpse into Boufflers’ thoughts regarding slaves illustrates how humans become replaced through a form of synecdochical substitution wherein they are figuratively objectified in a sentence decrying their literal objectification, a process which we shall see repeated

⁹² It must be noted that Webster may well be referring less to Boufflers’ direction of a slaving colony and more so to his libertine past and atheistic tendencies as explanations for his ‘evil passions.’

⁹³ The original text was written in Spanish and translated by me. It read: “Según su correspondencia, Boufflers, contrariamente a sus predecesores, no tenía intención de sacar provecho del comercio de esclavos, sino que quería establecer una colonia con el fin de aprovechar los recursos naturales del país. El caballero consideraba la trata de negros como un comercio bárbaro. ”

on several occasions throughout this correspondence. Simon Gikandi notes that this was a common rhetorical tactic used when discussing slaves in the 18th century:

In the prose of the period, the slaves who had become the cog around which trade and social relationships revolved were conceived as mute and invisible objects, available to their interlocutors only as synecdoche, parts standing for the whole, subject to monetary additions and deductions, valued solely in terms of guilders, or, in the English case, guineas. (3)

Gikandi's observation regarding the tendency of slaves to be reduced to quantities of money illustrates one angle of the assemblic nature of the slave trade which Lynn Festa widens substantially. Festa's *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* examines the various goods which were employed as valid currency within the Atlantic Triangle, by discussing the "bar," an invented unit of exchange which served as a transactional baseline for the exchange economy at the heart of the acquisition of slaves by European slave traders. Festa notes that the bar: "contains no intrinsic properties; it is an abstract unit contained "in" objects as diverse as fringes and gunpowder, silver and slaves. The democratic interchangeability of objects undermines the bar's role as the measure of value; the bar as governing metaphor disintegrates into chains of metonymic detail: 'Spread-Eagle Dollars, Crystal Beads, Iron Bars, Brass Pans'" (*Sentimental Figures* 157-158). Boufflers' own recounted actions illustrate a similar relationship between the value of certain slaves who, in their turn, come to manifest a similar disintegration as they become further dehumanized and increasingly objectified within the epistolary assemblage.

While Boufflers' professed opposition to slavery (or at least to its symbols) illustrates that he might philosophically desire abolition, such intellectual exercises did not stop him from

engaging directly in the buying and selling of human beings. As we see in letter 34, Boufflers was not at all above human trafficking if he saw potential personal gain in the transaction:

...dis-lui que j'ai toujours attendu le bâtiment que M. Beudet devait m'envoyer pour elle de Bordeaux, que s'il arrivait, je pourrais, malgré la cherté actuelle, lui donner une cinquantaine de beaux nègres, à moins de moitié du prix auquel elle les paye, en sorte que, rendus à Saint-Domingue, ils reviendront à peine à cent pistoles. Souviens-toi de cette commission-là, et surtout de lui rappeler que son mari m'a promis leurs deux portraits conjoints. J'espère qu'elle ne m'aura pas oublié, tu peux lui dire combien elle sera ingrate.
(Lettres d'Afrique 57)

Here, the status of the enslaved person as a commercial object for Boufflers is even further underscored by the repayment that he eventually expects, not in the form of financial gain, or even political favors but rather two portraits that had already been promised to him.⁹⁴ There is something decidedly unsettling about this transaction in that the lives of these individuals are reduced to something worth less than even money, as the value of these portraits likely exists almost solely for Boufflers. This moment illustrates one example of the unexpected role that human beings in bondage play within the epistolary assemblage that Boufflers elaborated during his time in Africa. In this particular instance, the lives of these fifty or so slaves serve to forge a new immaterial-material relationship between Boufflers, the aforementioned portraits, and the individuals that they

⁹⁴ In addition to his personal business interests, Vaget Grangeat notes that during the two years of Boufflers' administration the number of exported slaves increased substantially. By 1787 "Les Français assuraient la vente contrôlée de 31.000 esclaves, les Anglais de 38.000, les Portugais de 25.000 et les Hollandais de 6.000. Il est donc indiscutablement établi qu'en tant que gouverneur du Sénégal, Boufflers non seulement toléra la traite des Noirs mais y contribua par ses fonctions officielles qu'il s'appliqua à bien remplir" (70).

represent. Boufflers trades human lives not for money, but for new assemblic connections that will allow him to reinforce the internalized models of his distant friends that he already holds. The human slaves within this dynamic exist purely as a form of currency, specifically aimed at further extending Boufflers' epistolary assemblage and consequently his sentimental connections. Furthermore, even Boufflers seems uncertain as to whether or not this deal which he has arranged will even obtain the results that he desires, since the financial beneficiaries seem to have already forgotten what they had previously promised. Consequently, the uncertain nature of this deal transforms the lives of these African women and men into less than even pure currency and into something more akin to betting chips.

The people that Boufflers exploits here serve as a means to extend the epistolary assemblage, yet other than their function as exchangeable objects, they do not factor into the actual operation of the assemblage in that they themselves do not fulfill a specific nodal role. In other cases, the enslaved individual actually fits within the wider assemblic structure as a functioning part of the whole with a specific task to perform. Another of the few instances where Boufflers directly implicates himself in the buying and selling of slaves occurs somewhat later in the text when he purchases a young girl that he wishes to gift to a French noblewoman:

J'achète en ce moment une petite négresse de deux ou trois ans pour l'envoyer à madame la duchesse d'Orléans...Elle ne parle pas encore, mais elle entend ce qu'on lui dit on yolo: *kay filé*, viens ici; *toura man*, baise-moi. Si tu la vois au Palais-Royal, ne manque pas de lui parler son langage et de la baiser en pensant que je l'ai baissée aussi, et que son visage est le point de réunion de nos lèvres. (*Lettres d'Afrique* 60)

Here, the child-slave is given without mention of any specific recompense expected on the part of the Duchesse d'Orléans. Rather, the child is sent out in order that she might become an important

part of the epistolary assemblage. She becomes a potential material link between Boufflers and Sabran through the act of transferring an instance of physical intimacy from one distant lover to the other. While their letters do allow for a certain degree of assemblic connection which does occasionally lead to professed physiological responses, these moments are ultimately grounded in the abstractions of the written letter. Consequently, the nameless girl's status as assemblic node only exists once Sabran herself becomes aware of this same status. In order for the girl to function as a material (and therefore concrete) relay between Sabran and Boufflers, her very materiality must first be communicated through the abstractions of language and the letter. Were this particular branch of the epistolary assemblage left unelaborated, the girl's role would become nonexistent, as its function relies on the dual cooperation of the material (the transmitted kiss) and the immaterial (the information in the letter).

The girl, while still acting as a transfer point for a symbolic amorous gesture, manifests a high degree of materiality in the manner with which she is described by Boufflers. Her status as human subject is only visible through Boufflers' brief description of her physical appearance and mannerisms: "Elle est jolie, non pas comme le jour, mais comme la nuit. Ses yeux sont comme de petites étoiles, et son maintien est si doux et si tranquille, que je me sens touché aux larmes en pensant que cette pauvre enfant m'a été vendue comme un petit agneau" (*Lettres d'Afrique* 60). Even in this brief, somewhat humanizing portrait of the nameless slave, the material aspects of her being take center stage, obfuscating her individuality. The final sentence solidifies her status as material object, even as it paradoxically denounces this exact practice which, as we have already seen, is rather common for Boufflers. Consequently, her status as an externally validated human subject persists only for the briefest of moments before she is ultimately recast into the role of vehicle for Boufflers' long-distance amorous gestures.

Further evidence of the extent of Boufflers' reliance on this child as a stand in for himself can be gleaned from his humanizing description of her. Michèle Bocquillon writes that Boufflers, unlike many of the men in his entourage, never seems to admit to admiring the beauty of African women and generally compares them to animals, even those women in positions of power (226-227). In one particular letter dated April 2nd 1786 Boufflers describes an important African queen that he is hosting as though she were an animal:

La reine est grosse comme madame de Clermont. Elle a deux dents de sanglier, et le tour des yeux barbouillé d'une vilaine graisse noire. Je lui ai donné de l'eau sucrée, du vin, de l'eau-de-vie, des biscuits, elle a tout avalé, et je me serais donne-moi-même qu'elle m'aurait avalé aussi. C'est une seconde Gargamelle, femme de Grandgousier [...] elle veut revenir demain, et cela me gênera beaucoup à cause de toute sa cour, qui pue comme un troupeau de boucs. (*Lettres d'Afrique* 96)

Bocquillon also comments on another letter wherein Boufflers describes a group of dancing African women as immoral and indecent whereas several of his companions discuss similar moments in much more positive terms (225-226). Why then does Boufflers adopt such a seemingly atypical attitude towards Senegalese women? One would be tempted to explain the phenomenon as resulting from racist attitudes held by the white French towards the Africans, but as Cohen notes, relations between the French and the free African locals were much more egalitarian than in France and on French plantations.⁹⁵ Bocquillon suggests that these harsh descriptions were less

⁹⁵ He states that "Unlike the other French possessions, Senegal was characterized by the lack of rigid racial categories; the groups intermingled with ease. Colored persons were given the status of honored citizens, rather than being reduced to a marginal existence, as had been the case of freedmen in the Antilles" (120).

about the African women themselves and more of a strategy to reinforce Sabran's own beauty while at the same time showing her that she had no reason to be envious of these women who saw Boufflers much more frequently than she did (234). Of course, given the role that Boufflers expected of the young slave child (a romantic surrogate for himself) it would hardly serve his purposes if she were perceivable as animalistic. Her status as a living stand-in for himself necessitates that she manifest certain positive qualities such as physical beauty. This indicates that not just anyone could fulfill this particular substitutional position and that in order for this aspect of the epistolary assemblage to function, certain criteria must be met.

While material substitutions for living beings have been a central figure within my analysis of these texts, this episode marks a rare moment wherein an actual living person fulfills this function. As a result of this phenomenon, the status of the little girl becomes vastly more complicated in that she operates on three different ontological planes at once within the epistolary assemblage: as a human subject, as a material object, and as a material object serving as a living stand-in for another human subject. While Boufflers could admittedly afflict any living being with various degrees of ontological fluctuation as a result of his objectification of that being, the child's status as a slave adds the ultimate, and perhaps most alienating level of her objectification. In serving as a materially founded assemblic node between Boufflers and Sabran, she is subjected to a form of immaterial possession, in that were Sabran to meet and kiss this child, the child would, within that instant, become ontologically perceivable not as herself, but as Boufflers. While this moment would likely be fleeting, the temporary erasure of the child's individual subjectivity exists as a particularly subtle form of slavery.

This episode, while remarkable for its ontological confusion, is not ultimately a singular event. Boufflers repeatedly sends very young children back to France, seemingly as gifts for other

nobles. Thérèse de Raedt notes that “child-slaves, when brought to France, pleased only while they were young. When they had outgrown being playthings for children (and adults), some of them (males) enrolled in the army, while others became runaways. There was no real future for any of them” (59). In his 1781 work *Tableau de Paris*, Louis-Sebastien Mercier describes these children as though they were domesticated animals, while at the same time comparing their fates to that of other enslaved people sent to sugar plantations:

Un petit nègre aux dents blanches, aux lèvres épaisses, à la peau satinée, caresse mieux qu’un épagneul et qu’un angora... Tandis que l’enfant noir vit sur les genoux des femmes passionnées pour son visage étranger, son nez aplati ; qu’une main douce et caressante punit ses mutineries d’un léger châtement, bientôt effacé par les plus vives caresses, son père gémit sous les coups de fouet d’un maître impitoyable ; le père travaille péniblement ce sucre que le négriillon boit dans la même tasse avec sa riante maitresse. (1464)

In drawing a comparison between the distant field slave and his pampered yet captive child, Mercier highlights the assemblic connections between not only the two imprisoned Africans but also between these individuals and other material and immaterial factors. This assemblic connection reveals that the fates of both father and child were assemblically determined as a product of the assemblic interconnections between both the nascent consumer culture in France (manifested here by the laughing mistresses’ consumption of sugar) and by the production of a semi-exotic agricultural product half a world away. Both of these individuals exist in their current situations as a result of these complex interplays between consumer demand, agricultural production, and the desire of the nobility to possess African children as a form of domesticated pet.

While these children might not be directly implicated in the epistolary assemblage, their removal from their home continent to Europe relies upon the same assemblic pathways as intercontinental communication. However, unlike Boufflers and Sabran, the epistolary assemblage does not preserve, augment, or update their subjectivity; it changes them utterly, from human beings into little more than fashionable animals. In a letter dated some one hundred days after his first mention of an appropriated child-slave, another appears, albeit this time discussed purely in material terms, omitting the more humanizing language surrounding the initial child. During the course of Boufflers' first return journey to France, he laments the hardships of the ocean voyage, particularly the status of his ever-diminishing menagerie of exotic animals which he intended as favors for his numerous friends and associates. A young African child numbers among these living gifts: "Il me reste une perruche pour la reine, un cheval pour M. le maréchal de Castries, une petite captive pour M. de Beauvau, une poule sultane pour le duc de Laon, une autruche pour M. de Nivernois, et un mari pour toi" (*Lettres d'Afrique* 170). Here, nearly every aspect of the girl's humanity has been stripped away. Even the place of relative prominence which her predecessor enjoyed in Boufflers' previous letter has evaporated; she has been relegated to the position of yet another animal among animals. Furthermore, at the moment that this letter was written, Boufflers reports that, due to the inherent difficulties of 18th-century sea travel, scurvy and other such maladies run rampant amongst the voyagers and yet no mention of the child's status (beyond the implication that she is alive) is put forward by the Chevalier. Indeed, in the same letter he seems far more concerned with the death of a yellow parrot than anything else:

...enfin, hier au soir, j'ai vu mourir un pauvre perroquet jaune, le premier qu'on eut encore vu en Afrique, et comme il était seul de son espèce, je comptais l'associer à quelqu'un qui est seul dans la sienne, et qui est à l'espèce humaine est à celle des perroquets. J'ai eu la

bêtise de le regretter sérieusement, parce que c'était le meilleur enfant de l'Afrique. (*Lettres d'Afrique* 169)

The only humanizing moment within this episode occurs with Boufflers' usage of the terms "petite captive," which at the very least admits a partial truth about her ontological status. Furthermore, the parrot and the child seem to have been switched, at least semantically, between their respective ontological classifications of human being and animal. Here, Boufflers refers to the parrot specifically as a child, while as we saw earlier, the actual child appears in a list of animals. This is not the only moment wherein Boufflers' vocabulary creates ontological confusion between animals and human beings. Earlier in his correspondence, the Chevalier laments the capture of some birds and the deaths of others by his hand:

Je suis un barbare, ma fille, je viens d'une chasse aux petits oiseaux. J'en ai pris une douzaine dans les filets, ils sont absolument comme les tiens. Je me reproche de les tenir en captivité jusqu'à ce que je les envoie en France au péril de leur vie. Mais ce n'est pas là ce que j'ai fait de pis : j'ai tiré un grand coup de fusil, et du même coup j'ai tué deux charmantes tourterelles. Elles étaient sur le même arbre, se regardant, se parlant, se baisant, ne pensant qu'à l'amour. (*Lettres d'Afrique* 76)

While there is no explicit mention of human slaves within either this paragraph or the larger letter, the parallels between these birds and human captives are palpable. Boufflers' diction again combines the lexical field of human and animal, as well as slavery and freedom, especially in the last sentence wherein he describes the anthropomorphized turtledoves as thinking only of love.

This sort of ontological confusion between human and animal fits within the generally dehumanizing trends that, as we have already seen, permeate much 18th-century language and attitudes surrounding slaves and their ontological and axiological position in society. Boufflers'

similar tone serves as further evidence of the existence of this trend. From the perspective of the epistolary assemblage however, Boufflers' casual intermingling of people and animals both transmits this attitude to his readers, while subsequently reinforcing any similar prejudices that they might hold. Furthermore, Sabran herself hosted a slave-child for a time. Her brief writings on the subject illustrate the potential for the transmission of this sort of ontological blurring between human and animal:

Je te parlerai de ton petit sauvage que mes enfants ont appelé Vendredi ; il fait leur bonheur, et il n'y a pas de joie pareille à celle qu'il a éprouvé le jour qu'il s'est vu un bel habit sur le corps ; il est si emprunté dans ce nouveau vêtement qu'il fait mourir de rire ; il ressemble à ces chats auxquels on met des papillotes à la queue ; il tourne, il se regarde, il n'ose pas remuer, crainte de se salir, à peine peut-il marcher avec ses souliers, enfin, il nous donne la comédie toute la journée et il nous paraît d'autant plus piquant qu'il est en fait de plaisir et de distractions notre unique ressource. (*Correspondance inédite* 94)

Sabran's own categorical shifting resembles Boufflers' in that she employs the same form of human/animal simile. Curiously enough, she also uses language which implies captivity and constriction in her comparison of Vendredi with those cats with "des papillotes à la queue", both signifying his status as a captive while at the same time softening this ontological position rhetorically.

Given the rhetorical trends surrounding the discussion of enslaved human beings in the 18th century, it seems unlikely that Sabran's analogies would have stemmed entirely from her correspondence with Boufflers. This particular letter, along with those sent by Boufflers to Sabran, illustrate rather the epistolary assemblage's *potential* for spreading certain ontological perspectives about both other people and the myriad of assemblic factors that contextualize them, such as their

food, geographical environs etc. Attitudes surrounding anyone not perceivable as fitting within the category of “French” owe a large degree of their origins to the perceptions of and subsequent communiqués about the mysterious other whom the majority of metropolitan citizens would never actually meet.⁹⁶ Individuals like Boufflers serve as the point of contact between these distant cultural assemblages, informing both sides of the divide as to what sort of attitude to adopt with regards to the other group. Removing and subsequently relocating children from Africa to Europe seems to serve therefore both as a method for strengthening these tenuous assemblic ties while consequently prompting otherwise distant Europeans like Sabran to undertake their own analysis of a foreign people.

I return therefore to the young girl whom Boufflers brought with him to France, as she exemplifies the assemblic power of this sort of cultural transplantation. Once in France, the girl’s situation shifts considerably. Whereas the lives of the majority of the individuals who were enslaved or otherwise removed from the land of their birth end in total oblivion, Boufflers’ “little captive” was adopted by Madame de Beauvau, who reportedly raised her as though she were a member of her own family. She was named Ourika, and, after the Duchesse de Duras published a novel of the same name in 1823 wherein she imagines a fictionalized version of the girl’s life as part of a noble French family, she became a popular literary figure.⁹⁷ Duras’ imagined Ourika seems to view the event as fortuitous rather than tragic:

⁹⁶ William Cohen contends that the number of people of African descent living in France during the 18th century was miniscule, a population fluctuating from between 1,000 and 5,000 individuals (100-129).

⁹⁷ The real Ourika died at 16, probably of tuberculosis, and her life as an adult is therefore purely imagined. For a more in-depth look at the novel *Ourika* and the circumstances surrounding its writing, see Little’s introduction to his edition.

Je fus rapportée de Sénégal à l'âge de deux ans, par M. le chevalier de B., qui en était gouverneur. Il eut pitié de moi, un jour qu'il voyait embarquer des esclaves sur un bâtiment négrier qui allait bientôt quitter le port: ma mère était morte, et on m'emportait dans le vaisseau, malgré mes cris. M. de B. m'acheta et, à son arrivé en France, il me donna a M.me la maréchale de B. sa tante, la personne la plus amiable de son temps...(6)

Certain scholars argue that the real Ourika's post-Boufflers life was a materially and intellectually pleasant one. Roger Little states that "Elle jouissait en apparence d'un sort on ne peut plus enviable. Matériellement, rien ne lui manquait; intellectuellement, le salon de Mme de Beauvau était des plus brillants; et sur le plan des affections, la petite négresse n'était entourée que de tendresse et d'amitié" (vii). Indeed, Madame de Beauvau's journal entry dated 21 July 1799 shortly after the teenager's death manifests genuine emotional angst, albeit of a somewhat selfish variety: "J'ai perdu cette enfant chérie, objet de mon intérêt, de ma tendresse, et de ma seule distraction. Elle me rappelait sans cesse celui qui l'avoit tant aimé. Sa perte m'est toujours présente, et rien ne put ni me la rendre, ni la remplacer" (qtd. in Raedt 65). Unsurprisingly, it would seem that even in the heart of someone who professes to have loved her greatly, Ourika became something of yet another living stand-in for an absent, albeit in this case dead, individual. The young Ourika did escape the life of bondage, misery, and labor that most slaves could expect, provided that they survived the horrifying conditions of the Middle Passage.⁹⁸ Despite this fact, Ourika was ultimately resigned to a different sort of obscurity than that of the millions of others taken from their home in that her

⁹⁸ It is estimated that between 5 and 15 percent of enslaved Africans died during the voyage from Africa to the New World, with those numbers decreasing somewhat with the progression of time. For detailed information on these statistics and on the causes of slave mortality, again see Postma and Klein respectively.

externally perceived subjectivity was eventually coopted and subsequently mutated by a number of white, French writers who could only imagine the complexities of such a life.

5.0 Chapter 4: *Thérèse philosophe* and the Sexual Assemblage

Within the context of 18-century literature, pornographic works and libertine texts occupy a similar and often parallel space. Each of these genres seeks to engage a different aspect of the subjective human experience in order to stimulate either the body or the mind. Jean-Marie Goulemot differentiates them by contrasting the exhibitionist nature of pornography with the discursive role of libertine fiction: “Where the pornographic novel exhibits, libertine fiction seeks to convince, and discourse in the latter is primarily addressed to a character who is to be won over, which explains the use of the rhetoric of argumentation, and at times of authoritative speech replete with maxims, and of exercises in the art of convincing” (144). Within the framework of this definition of libertine fiction and pornographic novels Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens' *Thérèse philosophe ou Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du P. Dirrag et de Mlle Éradice*, first published in 1748 sits somewhere at their intersection. The novel functions both as a narrative of physical and philosophical seduction while at the same time voyeuristically illustrating the mechanical intricacies of the consummation of sex much as the work of Sade would accomplish later in the 18th century.

If *Thérèse philosophe* cannot be grasped as entirely pornographic or as a purely seduction-based narrative, it must consequently follow something of a hybrid path in its exploration of a purely material universe. Diane Brown classifies *Thérèse philosophe* as fitting within a more specifically defined niche than that of more generalized materialism, noting that:

Thérèse philosophe and the body of texts like it worked out in a fictional register quandaries typically associated with sensationist philosophy, which saw physiological sensation as the source of human understanding. As will be shown, sensationist experiments and

pornographic texts frequently addressed similar philosophical concerns, albeit by very different means. Both construct a fictional body to personify a sensory tabula rasa as a site of inquiry: a hypothetical statue in the case of sensationist philosophy and a curious young girl isolated in a cabinet in the case of pornography. (99)

Brown explores how Thérèse becomes better educated through her employment of the sense of sight, notably how she builds upon her own corporeal understanding through her visual perception of other bodies and their various interactions with themselves and one another. While Brown's sensationist reading is certainly compelling and convincing, the role of both Thérèse's body as well as other human bodies has not been entirely discovered. In addition to Thérèse's sensationally driven sexual awakening, the human bodies at the center of this work manifest a wide range of potential corporeal experiences, including passionate eroticism, mundane concerns around health and hygiene, rape, and bodily control. This section focuses its attention on both the portrayal of other, mostly female bodies within the narrative while analyzing these bodies' material and immaterial impacts upon Thérèse's being.

In a study of different models of materialist bodies, Natania Meeker frames *Thérèse philosophe* as complementary to Julien Offray de La Mettrie's *L'Homme machine*, noting that the erotic novel "seems to complement machine-man by offering what he, in his abstraction into pure metaphor cannot provide: a how-to manual for the philosophically inclined in which literary fiction becomes the arena for an enactment of materialist doctrine in a series of erotic tableaux meant to spark readerly desire" (*Voluptuous Philosophy* 127). Meeker's findings serve as the starting point for my own analysis of the work which in its own turn seeks to understand the implications of the novel's materialist ontology both for its characters as well as for its underlying didactic goals. My reading of this text focuses primarily on the carnal and social interactions that occur between the

various characters of the text as well as its materialistic portrayal of these characters' bodies. These specific analytical goals seek to frame *Thérèse philosophe* as a work which serves as a sort of narrative experiment that provides the reader not only with a how-to-manual on materialism through the lens of Thérèse but also as a study on the impact of a material universe on other, less philosophically enlightened individuals. It ultimately becomes an assemblically generated, empirically oriented probe of the practical application of materialist ontology.

The role of the assemblage in *Thérèse philosophe* reveals itself on multiple, often juxtaposed levels. On a general, narrative-wide scale, the novel's presentation of human sexuality is profoundly assemblic. This sexual assemblage underlies nearly every sexualized scene within the text, from descriptions of masturbation, rape, consensual sex, and basic expressions of sexual desire. The novel frames sex as including not only one or more persons and their sexual organs, but also material objects, the positions and configuration of bodies and objects, as well as an undercurrent of materialistic determinism that leaves the novel's characters at the whims of forces both outside and inside of themselves. It is in this way that *Thérèse philosophe* most closely resembles the work of Julien Offray de la Mettrie, as noted by Meeker. Much like *L'Homme machine*, the novel imagines a world where human behavior flows from the relationship between organs within bodies, those bodies and external material phenomena. Whereas La Mettrie seeks to explain elements of human behavior, *Thérèse philosophe* takes its sexual assemblage in a different direction, creating not only a how-to-manual on libertinage, but also providing a vehicle for the exploration of the application of materialist ontology within a world composed not only of material objects and bodies, but also of social etiquette, gendered expectations, manipulation, and exploitation.

The assemblage also manifests itself through the novel's exploration of two conflicting ontologies: religion and materialism. In addition to expositional explorations of the philosophical implications of these opposed worldviews, *Thérèse philosophe* folds these same conversations into a number of its sexual tableaux, illustrating the existence of a wider ontological assemblage alongside (and often complementing) the novel's examination of the assemblic nature of sexual desire. This ontological assemblage in turn plays an important role in the novel's early depictions of sexual desire, as we shall see in our discussion of the character Éradice.

With this in mind, my analysis of the assemblages within this chapter focuses less on elaborating *Thérèse philosophe's* philosophical exploration of materialism and more so on precisely how its different characters embody specific lessons in Thérèse's (and therefore the reader's) empirically centered education. I argue that the narrative's characters, inseparable from their material forms, come to constitute assemblically determined epistemological templates, allowing the juxtaposition and interaction between different models for living as part of a materially-centered universe. The genesis of this inquiry was born out of the novel's juxtaposition of hedonistic libertine philosophy with the novel's surprising practicality with regards to the realities of following an actual libertine lifestyle. Meeker notes this dynamic as well, writing that:

the narrative also explores specific (and sometimes contradictory) mechanisms for configuring the relationship between, on the one hand, sexual practice as the compulsive acting-out of natural desires and, on the other, the constraints consistently placed upon this practice by religious dogma, philosophical principle, noncompliant partners, and, finally yet paradoxically, the autonomous exercise of individual choice. (*Voluptuous Philosophy* 130)

Instances of this phenomenon occur throughout the work with varying degrees of insistence on the importance of specific actions and attitudes. Some of these moments focus on larger, more philosophically oriented didactic goals, whereas others center entirely on concerns surrounding the material realities of sexual liberation in 18th-century France.

An example of such pragmatism occurs early in the text when M. l'Abbé T... instructs Thérèse on how best to enjoy masturbation without causing future problems for herself:

Ce sont des besoins de tempérament, aussi naturels que ceux de la faim et de la soif : il ne faut ni les rechercher ni les exciter ; mais dès que vous vous en sentirez vivement pressée, il n'y a nul inconvénient à vous server de votre main, de votre doigt, pour soulager cette partie par le frottement qui lui est alors nécessaire. Je vous défends cependant expressivement d'introduire votre doigt dans l'intérieur de l'ouverture qui s'y trouve ; il suffit quant à présent, que vous sachiez que cela pourrait vous faire tort un jour dans l'esprit du mari que vous épouserez. (d'Argens 53)

It would be easy to read these pragmatic instances as being examples of an entirely selfish drive for social survival and yet at other moments in the work, a different, more generalized libertine ethos begins to reveal itself. There is, at the heart of M. l'Abbé T...'s instruction, a form of elitism that manifests a near-religious attitude surrounding the libertinage lifestyle, succinctly expressed by the cleric in the early stages of Thérèse's education after Mme C... asks why libertine philosophy should not be openly promoted, as it leads to happiness:

gardons-nous bien de révéler aux sots des vérités qu'ils ne sentiraient pas, ou desquelles ils abuseraient. Elles ne doivent être connues que par les gens qui savent penser, et dont les passions sont tellement en équilibre entre elles, qu'ils ne sont subjugués par aucune. Cette espèce d'hommes et de femmes est très rare : de cent mille personnes, il n'y a en a pas

vingt qui s'accoutument à penser ; et de ces vingt, à peine en trouverez-vous quatre qui pensent en effet par elles-mêmes, ou qui ne soient pas emportées par quelque passion dominante. (d'Argens 86-87)

M. l'Abbé T... delivers this advice at the end of a discussion surrounding theological and other metaphysical notions such that it marks a clear endpoint for this particular instructional episode. From within the context of the narrative, this moment essentially serves as more practical advice to Thérèse regarding the potential dangers of disseminating her newfound knowledge; however, from a wider perspective, this miniature materialist manifesto seeks to engage the reader themselves by hinting at certain subversive goals implied by this paragraph. By suggesting that few individuals are capable of free thought and the appreciation of a materially grounded lifestyle, d'Argens delivers a sort of ontological challenge to his readers, essentially daring them to count themselves among this elite number. By reading the novel, they have already exposed themselves to the most perfidious of ontologies, an act which carried real risk, thus suggesting that the readers were at least partially prepared to take the plunge into free thought.⁹⁹

Furthermore, and more relevant to my analysis are the didactic implications, not only of the semantic content of M. l'Abbé T...'s exposition but of his specific diction in this paragraph. Words such as "révéler" and "vérité" not only mirror religious language, but also outline the central

⁹⁹ A number of printers were arrested for printing *Thérèse philosophe*. In 1749, at least three printers were ordered arrested by *lettres de cachet*. Of these three, the only woman is listed as having been transferred to the infamous Salpêtrière, a prison for women convicted of a huge range of crimes from prostitution to apparently printing clandestine texts. For more information, see entries 4068, 4069, and 4083 in Funck-Brentano's study on the *lettres de cachet*.

importance of the work's epistemological pursuits. In addition to its subversive role, the work also performs a sort of empirical experimentation through its exploration of its three central female characters. The three women, Thérèse, Mlle Éradice, and Madame Bois-Laurier each play different, often complementary roles in the narrative, existing as both didactic lessons as well as embodying specific models of materialist ontology. Each acts as a node within an ontological assemblage which, through its varied composition, maps a wide range of materialist configurations in order that the broader potential of applied materialism becomes visible. Furthermore, certain of these nodal characters illustrate the dangers of the spread of atheistic materialism, either through their individual actions or through what others inflict on them

While Thérèse serves as the eponymous protagonist of the narrative, her position within this ontological assemblage is less that of a node and more cartographical in that it is through her subjectivity that the novel's assemblic map ultimately becomes understandable. She serves in many situations as the eyes of the reader, empirically mapping the work's ontological juxtapositions, its materialist lessons, its libertine excesses and its underlying cautionary practicality. My analysis of each of these characters will follow the order of their appearance within the narrative, beginning therefore with Mlle Éradice and ending with Madame Bois-Laurier.

Mlle Éradice stands more so than the others as a cautionary tale, marking the potential dangers of a material universe, notably that due to certain material truths, a devious mind can, with a degree of material conditioning, commit terrible crimes on their unwitting victims. Consequently, I begin my analysis of Éradice by first considering her narrative counterpart, le Père Dirrag. From the perspective of my inquiry, individuals like Dirrag perform a central role in the formation and presentation of the narrative's central female characters. While true to a degree for all of these characters, in the case of Éradice her nodal role within *Thérèse philosophe*'s wider elaboration of

a materially centered ontological assemblage is only fully realized during her material interactions with Dirrag. While Éradice does appear separated from Dirrag on occasion, the importance of their interactions are central to the novel, as is displayed by the full title of the work: *Thérèse philosophe ou Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du P. Dirrag et de Mlle Éradice*.¹⁰⁰ From the perspective of certain libertine and pornographic texts like *Thérèse philosophe*, it becomes even more difficult to separate certain characters as much of their importance in the narrative comes from their placement within erotic tableaux which often necessitate one or more other individuals. Jean-Marie Goulemot explores the power of the erotic tableaux by considering the tableau as fulfilling an important narrational goal that restructures the narrative space of the text:

The visual power of the erotic tableau is essentially a product of the distance produced by the narrative strategies of the erotic tale. The words of the various partners create a closed narrative space, devoid of any broader horizon and limited to the characters themselves. It also allows for the momentary elimination of the narrator (even if he is taking part in the activity depicted), in order to accentuate the effect of closure and the complete devotion to the act. (131)

While my personal take on erotic tableaux in *Thérèse philosophe* takes issue with Goulemot's understanding of the tableau as "a closed narrative space, devoid of any broader horizon and limited to the characters themselves", the importance of material interaction between bodies in these moments remains paramount, as much of the work's explorations of materialist ontology are

¹⁰⁰ Dirrag and Éradice's story explicitly references the infamous *affaire Girard-Cadière*, which took place between 1728 and 1731 in Aix-en-Provence. Cadière, a young penitent was investigated for witchcraft while her confessor, Girard was suspected of numerous crimes including having undertaken sexual relations with his charge. For more information on this historical incident see Lamotte.

seen through the lens of these tableaux. Indeed, in the context of a materialistically centered work such as *Thérèse philosophe*, nothing can really function as a closed narrative due to the multitude of other material forces that act upon each other. As this chapter advances, I will revisit this notion, ultimately showing that the erotic tableaux presented in *Thérèse philosophe* are anything but closed narrative spaces.

Le Père Dirrag's manipulation and ultimate violation of Mlle Éradice contains something of a pedagogical paradox for aspiring materialists in that it illustrates both the dangers of materialist knowledge in the wrong hands (as it allows P. Dirrag to easily rape his victim) as well as demonstrating the threat of complete ignorance of the material universe. Furthermore, while the rape of Éradice remains his most serious and explicitly explored crime, P. Dirrag achieves his lascivious goals through a sort of ontological emulsification, blending certain metaphysical aspects of Catholic theology with an understanding of materialist determinism.¹⁰¹ This allows him to ultimately achieve material carnal satisfaction within the framework of Catholic ontology that itself has been projected into the material realm. As he prepares Éradice for his clandestine violations, he justifies his actions to her through this particular avenue:

C'est un mécanisme certain, ma chère fille : nous sentons, et nous n'avons d'idées du bien et du mal moral, que par la voie du sens. Dès que nous touchons, que nous entendons, que nous voyons, ect. un objet, des particules d'esprits se coulent dans les petites cavités des nerfs qui vont en avertir l'âme. Si vous avez assez de ferveur pour rassembler, par la force de la méditation, sur l'amour que vous devez à Dieu toutes les particules d'esprits qui sont

¹⁰¹ Clergy were frequently the focus of such novels. For more on this trend, see Chammas.

en vous, en les appliquant toutes à cet objet, il est certain qu'il n'en restera aucune pour avertir l'âme des coups que votre chair recevra : vous ne les sentirez pas. (d'Argens 28)

While P. Dirrag tends to employ both materialist as well as ecclesiastical language throughout his appearances in the novel, this moment marks one of the more explicitly detailed instances of this practice, such that the approach itself is rendered another instance of an ontological assemblage. Even from an initial lexical analysis, P. Dirrag's highly varied vocabulary combines ideas and concepts which otherwise seem decidedly out of place as part of the same argument. Dirrag's first sentence immediately lays bare his materialist bent through his use of the word *mechanism*, a word whose meaning would have been difficult to extricate from its associations with *Thérèse philosophe's* materialist contemporaries like *L'homme machine*. Setting aside vocabulary related blasphemy, the materialist and sensationist implications of the same sentence undermine one of the two most important aspects of all of Christian theology through P. Dirrag's declaration that human beings understand good and evil "que par la voie du sens". The monumentally important notion that morality can only be dictated by the divine and its agents on Earth is completely annihilated here, rendering Dirrag something of a heretic, if not a total apostate.

The more theological (and therefore immaterial) elements of Dirrag's ontological assemblage appear in the second sentence, this time fully implicated within the material system with which he snares Éradice. P. Dirrag's invocation of "des particules d'esprit" forms a perfect microcosm of this particular assemblage in that the very notion that Dirrag explores here is born out of entirely different ontologies. Further on, he continues in this fashion through his pronouncement that religious fervor is capable of reconfiguring material structures such that the material impacts of his abuses become either devoid of pain or at least psychosomatically elided. Éradice expresses her subjective understanding of Dirrag's actions to Thérèse using much more

conventional religious language such that the materialist elements of the act become more subsumed to her religiously centered ontology, although even in its earliest expression it is not entirely devoid of materialist elements:

Éradice, d'un air ému, m'offrit de me rendre, dès le lendemain matin, témoin oculaire de son bonheur. « Vous verrez, me dit-elle avec feu, quelle est la force de mes exercices spirituels, par quels degrés de pénitence le bon Père me conduit à devenir une grande sainte, et vous ne douterez plus des extases, des ravissements qui sont une suite de ces mêmes exercices. Que mon exemple, ma chère Thérèse, ajouta-t-elle en se radoucissant, ne peut-il opérer dans vous, pour premier miracle, la force de détacher entièrement votre esprit de la matière par la grande vertu de la méditation, pour ne les mettre qu'en Dieu seul ?
(d'Argens 26)

In this passage, which marks Éradice's only physical separation from Dirrag within the narrative, her primary ontological orientation is made manifest, solidifying her nodal role within the ontological assemblage as representative of the immaterial ontology of religion. Her references to the material are few here, yet important as they continue the overarching theme of materialism as an empirically verifiable phenomenon. In a scene which I shall explore shortly, Éradice's desire that Thérèse act as "témoin oculaire" becomes ironic, as rather than providing her with empirical proof of the immaterial intercession of the divine in the material world, it ultimately only further pushes Thérèse towards the adoption of a materialist and libertine lifestyle.

P. Dirrag's assemblic reorientation of the material with the metaphysical goes beyond his theological and philosophical justifications of his actions; even the purely material act of sexual violation becomes infused with evocations of the immaterial plane. One of the central narrative devices born from this assemblage is P. Dirrag's use of a "holy relic", an item which itself is

ostensibly a product of the intersection of the material (being that it is a materially composed object) with divine, immaterial favor. This “cordon de St. François” serves as one of the many assemblic nodes with which P. Dirrag both justifies and realizes his rape of Mlle. Éradice. As the reader might have suspected, the “holy relic” is shown to be neither holy nor a relic, unholy or otherwise. Rather, the “cordon” that Dirrag employs comes from a rather more terrestrial origin: “Il lui montra enfin ce prétendu cordon, qui n’était autre chose qu’un assez gros morceau de corde de huit pouces de longueur, enduit d’un mastic qui le rendait dur et uni. Il était recouvert proprement d’un étui de velours cramoisi, qui lui servait de fourreau. En un mot, c’était un de ces meubles de religieuses que l’on nomme *godemichis*” (d’Argens 41). Given the materialist philosophy promoted by the novel, the carnal origins of Dirrag’s “relic” fit within the text’s dominant ontology. However, the *godemichis*’ status as assemblic node is itself highly unstable, as it ultimately serves in a materially substitutional role, much like certain objects we saw in Chapter 3. In a rather paradoxical move, the novel, through P. Dirrag, shifts the material existence of the cordon from one material object to another, such that the cordon becomes more of an immaterial concept than an actual materially founded creation. In this scene, the cordon exists in three simultaneous ontologies, the immaterial/material of a holy relic as understood by Éradice and two entirely material manifestations of the object whose material existence can be split into different material planes. In addition to Dirrag’s sex toy, the cordon also comes to represent Dirrag himself, or rather a specific part of him: “Après un instant de contemplation de la part du cafard, il humecta de salive ce qu’il appelait *le cordon*, et en proférant quelques paroles, d’un ton qui sentait l’exorcisme d’un prêtre qui travaille à chasser le diable du corps d’un démoniaque, Sa Révérence commença par son intromission” (d’Argens 31-32). Far from the sort of closed narrative space described by Goulemot, this highly detailed, sexually explicit scene opens

outwards into two entirely different ontologies, pitting them against each other through its ontological juxtaposition of the holy and the profane. The scene almost demands that the reader escape the narrative confines of pornography, leaving behind the interactive material nature of the relationship between the pornographic text and the reader so that they might elaborate, however incompletely, dangerous assemblage connections between Catholic theology and material reality.

The effect increases when the text's descriptions and dialogue move from Dirrag to Éradice, who continues to throw these two ontologies into an ad hoc assemblage. Furthermore, Éradice's *belief* in Dirrag's explanations renders her articulation of the same ontological assemblage even more powerful, as the juxtaposition of the holy and the material remains despite the fact that she is unaware of the carnal nature of Dirrag's "intercession":

Quel plaisir m'aiguillonne! Oui, je jouis du bonheur céleste ; je sens que mon esprit est entièrement détaché de la matière ; chassez, mon Père, chassez tout ce qui reste d'impur dans moi. Je vois...les...an...ges ; poussez plus avant...poussez donc...Ah!...Ah! bon...saint François! Ne m'abandonnez pas ; je sens le cor... le cor...le cordon...je n'en puis plus...je me meurs. (d'Argens 35)

Éradice's rapturous ejaculations intermix the two ontologies to an even greater degree both in terms of lexical content as well as how different words are presented on the page. In the second sentence, Eradice employs the verb "*jouis*" next to "*bonheur céleste*", which despite *jouis*'s multiple meanings (as we saw in Chapter 2) leaves little room for a non-sexualized interpretation given the context of the scene.¹⁰² Other instances of religious vocabulary such as her invocation of

¹⁰² There have been Catholic saints whose recorded expressions of faith are often considered as rather more erotically charged than is usual, yet these instances do not involve a second, materially composed individual. The

angels, Dirrag's clerical title, St. Francis, and the "relic" increase the semiotic boundaries of the scene's ontological assemblage. Furthermore, certain words like "*anges*" and "*cordon*" are fractured on the page, illustrative therefore of the ontological destabilization created by Éradice's eroticized religiosity.

From the perspective of a dedicated materialist, much of Dirrag's ideas, if certainly not his actual actions, make a certain kind of materialist sense. They seem to contain the same ontologically corrosive potential as do certain of the *Encyclopédie's renvois*-linked articles, as Dirrag's lightly mapped ontological assemblage greatly weakens certain aspects of Christian theology. While Dirrag's intermingling of materialism and religious doctrine does have this potential, his thoughts and actions are ultimately condemned by the text such that another element of d'Argens' personal materialist philosophy becomes apparent. As we have already seen, M. l'Abbé T... describes the materialist worldview as being a closely guarded secret, available only to select individuals who know how to think. In addition to this criterion, M. l'Abbé T... adds that the potentially enlightened must be people "dont les passions sont tellement en équilibre entre

writings of the 16th-century Spanish Saint Teresa de Avila exemplify this brand of Catholic mysticism, especially when they recount supposed holy visions that she experienced: "He was not tall, but short, marvelously beautiful, with a face which shone as though he were one of the highest of the angels, who seem to be all of fire: they must be those whom we call Seraphim.... I saw in his hands a long golden spear, and at the point of the iron there seemed to be a little fire. This I thought that he thrust several times into my heart, and that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew out the spear he seemed to be drawing them with it, leaving me all on fire with a wondrous love for God. The pain was so great that it caused me to utter several moans; and yet so exceeding sweet is this greatest of pains that it is impossible to desire to be rid of it, or for the soul to be content with less than God. (qtd. in Peers 197)

elles, qu'ils ne sont subjugués par aucune" (d'Argens 86-87). During the course of a conversation explicitly centered on Dirrag and his predations, M. l'Abbé T... opines that "Le Père Dirrag est un fourbe, un malheureux, qui se laisse emporter à la force de ses passions ; il marche à sa perte et il entrainera celle de Mlle Éradice" (d'Argens 53). In the eyes of M. l'Abbé T..., this loss of control to his passions seems to be Dirrag's primary fault as it is the only one that he really discusses and it corresponds to later declarations about the dangers of overly propagating their mutual philosophy. However, M. l'Abbé T...'s libertine materialism projects a degree of concern with regards to the well-being of other individuals: "Concluons donc, ma chère amie, que les plaisirs que nous goutons, vous et moi, sont purs, sont innocents, puisqu'ils ne blessent ni Dieu ni les hommes, par le secret et la décence que nous mettons dans notre conduit. Sans ces deux conditions, je conviens que nous causerions du scandale, et que nous serions criminels envers la société" (d'Argens 86). The necessity that an individual's libertinage not hurt anyone by practicing "decency" is Dirrag's other failure according to M. l'Abbé T...'s materialist criteria as in addition to physically harming and raping Éradice, he also puts her future in society in danger, which given M. l'Abbé T...'s concern with upholding certain societal norms, only further adds to Dirrag's crimes.

While Éradice eventually discovers the truth of Dirrag's actions, even this revelation comes from the same sort of ontological assemblage as did her previous humiliations. Éradice finds herself romantically involved with a monk who reveals to her the true nature of the cordon:

Dès qu'Éradice eut reconnu l'illusion du feint cordon de Dirrag, par l'application amiable du membre naturel du moine, l'élégance de cette démonstration lui fit sentir qu'elle avait été grossièrement dupée. Sa vanité se trouva blessée, et la vengeance la porta à tous les excès que vous avez connus, de concert avec le fier moine qui, outre l'esprit de parti qui

l'animait, était encore jaloux des faveurs que Dirrag avait surprises à son amante.
(d'Argens 42)

While not nearly as explicitly detailed, implications of the same ontological assemblage are visible here, primarily through the prism of the unnamed monk. By choosing this particular vector, d'Argens reinforces the religious aspect of the man both by making him a monk and even further by not giving him a name other than his monastic designation. Furthermore, it is not a philosophical or anatomical discussion that reveals the perfidy of Dirrag, but rather “l'application amiable du membre naturel du moine”. Consequently, even after having been made aware of the material truth surrounding the actions of Dirrag, Éradice seems unable to safeguard herself either from the lustful advances of the clergy or the materially driven compulsions which motivate her sexuality.¹⁰³ She therefore continues to exemplify M. l'Abbé T...’s admonition that only a select few are truly capable of understanding materialism and living a proper libertine lifestyle, although Éradice’s life has vastly improved since her escape from Dirrag’s sphere. Ultimately, Éradice’s assemblically composed nodal role within the ontological assemblage of *Thérèse philosophe* remains a cautionary example of the consequences of manifest ignorance of the material universe fused with a predilection towards the veneration of the immaterial. Her life and experiences as they were empirically absorbed by Thérèse form an intrinsic part of the wider assemblic framework of Thérèse’s assemblically generated ontological position.

¹⁰³ For a deeper study on feminine compulsion in *Thérèse philosophe*, see Meeker’s “I Resist it no Longer.”

5.1 The Assemblic Prostitute

Whereas the nodal role of Éradice serves as an assemblic depiction of the fusion of material ignorance, metaphysical inclinations, and sexually abusive clergy, the second female character that I consider here represents an entirely different manifestation of materialist ontology. After a series of unfortunate events, Thérèse finds herself abandoned and penniless in Paris, a city far from her friends and largely unknown to her. She eventually befriends an older woman named Manon Bois-Laurier (referred to usually as simply Bois-Laurier) who makes her living as a prostitute, albeit of a rather unconventional sort. Much like Éradice, Bois-Laurier's character is defined by her material reality, although unlike Éradice, Bois-Laurier's life has made her much more aware of the material composition of the universe. Bois-Laurier's defining material trait manifests itself through the particular configuration of her genitalia which she explains to Thérèse thusly:

La nature, capricieuse à mon égard, a semé d'obstacles insurmontables la route des plaisirs qui font passer une fille de son état à celui de femme : une membre nerveuse en ferme l'avenue avec assez d'exactitude pour que le trait le plus délié que l'amour ait jamais eu dans son carquois n'ait pu atteindre le but ; et ce qui te surprendra davantage, on n'a jamais pu me déterminer à subir l'opération qui pouvait me rendre habile aux plaisirs, quoique pour vaincre ma répugnance, on me citât à chaque instant l'exemple d'une infinité de filles qui, dans le même cas, s'étaient soumises à cette épreuve. (d'Argens 103)

Given the peculiar nature of Bois-Laurier's situation and the position of her intercession in the novel, one would imagine that much has already been said about her role in the narrative. However, existing scholarship on *Thérèse philosophe* tends to omit detailed discussion of Bois-Laurier to the point that in Robert Darnton's translation of *Thérèse philosophe*, Bois-Laurier's entire section is omitted. In his analysis of *Thérèse philosophe*, Darnton says that "Actually, this part does not

harmonize well with the rest of the book, because it is merely a catalogue of the curious sexual practices that Bois-Laurier has encountered in her career as a prostitute” (*Forbidden Best-Sellers* 97). He adds later on the page that: “Bois-Laurier’s narrative-within-the-narrative takes the reader on a tour of Parisian brothels but adds little to the development of the novel until it introduces a new character, the Count, who provides a transition to part four”. This dismissive attitude regarding Bois-Laurier’s appearance in the novel is perplexing given the placement of the woman’s narrative at the heart of the larger work. Furthermore in labeling Bois-Laurier’s character as merely: “a stock figure of obscene literature: the warm hearted whore” (*Forbidden Best-Sellers* 97), Darnton completely ignores the multitude of traits, such as her impenetrable hymen, which render her at least worthy of a higher degree of consideration. Furthermore, Darnton’s reduction of Bois-Laurier as a mere trope goes against one of the very first descriptions of the woman that she herself gives: “Tu vois en moi, ma chère Thérèse, un être singulier. Je ne suis ni homme, ni femme, ni fille, ni veuve, ni mariée. J’ai été une libertine de profession, et je suis encore pucelle” (d’Argens 103). This sentence, which is the very first sentence of Tome II immediately destabilizes Darnton’s reading as it shows that Bois-Laurier, at the very least cannot be conceived as merely tropical. We shall return to this passage shortly, as it provides the initial framework for Bois-Laurier’s own assemblage nature.

In another article on *Thérèse philosophe*, Anne Richardot frames Bois-Laurier’s role as marking a transition in the sexual education of Thérèse: “Le récit de la prostituée apparaît comme la charnière du roman: outre sa position centrale, il constitue en effet le point de passage qui mène l’héroïne de la passivité érotique, cantonnée qu’elle était précédemment dans une position de voyeuse-attoucheuse, à un engagement qui la fait accéder à la maturité sexuelle” (90). This reading provides at least an actual interpretation of Bois-Laurier’s role rather than an automatic dismissal.

Natania Meeker also considers the position and importance of Bois-Laurier in her writings on *Thérèse philosophe* noting that:

Indeed, if the novel is understood as organized around a progressive movement towards emancipation – rather than as an increasingly complicated negotiation between physiological compulsion...and the desire for a philosophically grounded autonomy of willed action – the central position occupied by the encounter with Bois-Laurier can seem at odds with the more obviously pedagogic thrust of the remaining three-quarters of the text. (*Voluptuous Philosophy* 138)

Both Meeker and Richardot's readings of Bois-Laurier's character fit within the context of their particular analytical approaches. My own assemblically oriented analysis necessitates an entirely different approach that considers a number of possible interpretations operating concurrently, both from a focus centered entirely on Bois-Laurier as well as from a wider angle that includes Thérèse herself. Within the wider context of the novel, Bois-Laurier's recounted personal history functions similarly to that of Éradice, albeit reflecting a facet of materialist ontology on the extreme opposite end of the spectrum. Whereas Éradice serves as something of a practical cautionary tale, exploring the social and physical dangers of the ignorance of materialism, Bois-Laurier embodies a sort of libertinage-infused materialism taken to a hypothetical extreme. While Éradice certainly evolved into a more materially aware libertine (as was indicated in her relationship with an ostensibly chaste monk) her principal textual representation was that of an ignorant, misled girl manipulated by another more informed than herself. Bois-Laurier on the other hand is very quickly presented in terms which underline her material composition which, due to her very ability to articulate these material elements, signal at the same time that she is aware of material reality to a far greater degree than Éradice. From this initial perspective, it might seem possible to classify her as serving

the same role as M. l'Abbé T... in that her function in the novel could be construed as yet another point along the linear path of Thérèse's sexual education. While this is true to a certain extent, such an interpretation overly simplifies Bois-Laurier's role, reducing her to a function entirely reflective of Thérèse's philosophical progress rather than as a part of the wider materialist experiment undertaken by the novel.

Before delving into the differences between the libertine characters of Bois-Laurier and M. l'Abbé T... it would be worthwhile to first consider their similarities. Each of these two individuals does represent a point on the linear narrative progression of Thérèse's sexual education. M. l'Abbé T... provides philosophical justification and practical advice, as well as an accidental instance of a more explicit sexual demonstration, witnessed clandestinely by Thérèse. Bois-Laurier also imparts a degree of basic instructional knowledge while also recounting parts of her own sexual history in order to improve Thérèse's understanding of sexuality. While they perform somewhat complementary didactic roles in the novel, the characters themselves diverge in a number of ways. M. l'Abbé T..., like Bois-Laurier represents a sort of perfect libertine, although whereas her libertine perfection stems from her physiological singularity and its ability to shield her from the worst fears of a libertine woman (loss of virginity and pregnancy), M. l'Abbé T...'s embodied libertinage is more cerebral than physical. From the perspective of the narrative itself, this particular difference becomes visible through each of the characters' textual manifestations of their libertine tendencies. M. l'Abbé T...'s libertinage reveals itself primarily through his philosophical exposition during his interactions with both Thérèse and Mme C... examples of which we saw in the previous section of this chapter.

Additionally, whereas Bois-Laurier avoids the pitfalls of libertinage as a result of her material makeup, M. l'Abbé T... claims to have achieved a high degree of mastery over his own

sexual compulsions. During a scene wherein Thérèse spies on M. l'Abbé T... and Mme C... during a conversation surrounding proper libertine sexual etiquette, the cleric attempts to convince his lover to allow him to enjoy the most conventional form of heterosexual copulation by explaining the mechanical process that he would employ:

Alors, l'amant sage, maître de ses passions, retire l'oiseau de son nid, et sa main, ou celle de sa maitresse, achève par quelques légers mouvements, de provoquer l'éjaculation au-dehors. Point d'enfants à craindre dans ce cas. L'amant étourdi et brutal pousse au contraire jusqu'au fond du vagin, il y répand sa semence, elle pénètre dans la matrice, et de la dans ses trompes, ou se forme la génération. (d'Argens 66)

Philosophical explorations of materialism and materialist sexuality come to define the character of M. l'Abbé T..., and while the text does illustrate two sexual encounters between M. l'Abbé T... and Madame C... they are not as materially detailed. Furthermore, the first of the two encounters ends rather anticlimactically when Mme. C... suddenly declares that "Ah! finis, villain Abbé, retire ton doigt, je ne suis pas en train aujourd'hui, je me ressens encore de nos folies d'hier, remettons celle-ci à demain" (d'Argens 69). Furthermore, questions regarding the origins of both characters' libertine tendencies further serve to distinguish their positions within materialist ontology. Thérèse describes the clergyman in terms of his physical appearance, his age, his charming personality, his intelligence and his high social status among his peers. Conversely, the causes of Bois-Laurier's particular lifestyle are well-documented in the novel. During her extended conversation with Thérèse about the older woman's life, Bois-Laurier recounts that due to rather sinister circumstances, she was forced into prostitution by the woman who adopted her after her parents disappeared (although she later discovers that she was actually kidnapped as a child). After she

arrives at physiological sexual maturity, her guardian Mme. Lefort informs her that Bois-Laurier must go out into the world and support herself through prostitution:

C'est à vous, présentement, à être vous-même l'instrument de votre fortune. Voici, ajouta-t-elle, ce qui me reste à vous proposer pour y parvenir. Vous êtes bien faite, jolie, plus formée que ne l'est ordinairement une fille de votre âge. M. le Président de..., mon protecteur et mon voisin, est amoureux de vous. Il s'est déterminé à vous faire plaisir et à vous entretenir honnêtement, pourvu que de votre part vous ayez pour lui toutes les complaisances qu'il exigera de vous. (d'Argens 105)

Already, the materialistic determinism that pushed Bois-Laurier towards her libertine lifestyle is on display here, visible through Lefort's material description of Bois-Laurier's physical appearance. This deterministic attitude is further highlighted through Lefort's pronouncement that Bois-Laurier is "plus formée que ne l'est ordinairement une fille de votre âge". This suggests that Bois-Laurier is perhaps even more suited, and therefore implicitly destined, to her life as a sex worker. Despite this overt signaling of materially motivated determinism, it is not the first time that such inevitability reveals itself in Bois-Laurier's personal narrative. Indeed, on the very first page of her personal account and immediately following the description of her physiological singularity, Bois-Laurier notes that she was "Destinée dès ma plus tendre enfance à l'état de courtisane" (d'Argens 103). This mirrors earlier observations made by Thérèse wherein she notes that her own sexual proclivities manifested themselves when she was but a child, a scene which we will examine in the next section of this chapter. Within the materially deterministic universe of *Thérèse philosophe*, Bois-Laurier's admittance that she had been destined for prostitution even as a child implies a strong, albeit difficult to map assemblage foundation behind her existence. Simply put, if everything in *Thérèse philosophe* can be understood as materially predetermined, Bois-

Laurier's own impenetrable hymen must also fit into this same deterministic realm in that its very impenetrability must have been preordained by some other unknown material factor. Given the wide range of factors which contribute to phenotypical genetic expressions, the assemblage model's ability to hint at unknown nodal connections exists as the ideal framework for exploring these causative possibilities.

While each of these observations about the character Bois-Laurier serves to problematize Darnton's declaration that she is simply "a stock figure of obscene literature: the warm hearted whore" (*Forbidden Best-Sellers* 97), even this designation of Bois-Laurier as that of an easily understood prostitute does not stand up under the scrutiny of textual analysis. While it is true that Bois-Laurier is a prostitute and identifies herself as such, her ontological position as a prostitute is difficult to grasp, as she occupies a rather unique position between the two dominant literary depictions of prostitutes in the 18th century. In a fascinating analysis of literary prostitutes, Kathryn Norberg opines that there are two primary forms of such individuals in 18th-century literature. The first of these two images would be recognizable both within the context of the 18th century as well as in 20th and 21st-century instances of cultural production: "the whore with a heart of gold" or the "virtuous courtesan". Within 18th-century French literature, Norberg describes this particular version of the prostitute by referring to one manifestation of the trope that appears in Restif de la Bretonne's 1790 work *Le Palais Royal*. Norberg examines this text's portrayal of prostitutes, noting several elements found within a number of similar works:

Here it would seem vice should flourish but, in fact, most of the prostitutes are virgins, victims of evil mothers and fathers who have sold them into their disreputable trade. Despite all odds, these hapless children have preserved their natural modesty and managed to retain their virginity...women are naturally modest, childlike and asexual and even a

prostitute (or, rather, a woman forced into prostitution since none would choose this life) will retain her virtue. (228)

At first it might seem strange to include Bois-Laurier within this category, as she does not really manifest any of the traits listed above. If, however, one puts aside the *spirit* of what this description conveys, one finds that in a very literal sense, Bois-Laurier fulfills several of these criteria. At the very beginning of her miniature autobiography, Bois-Laurier describes herself in a peculiar way which explicitly foregrounds her status as an assemblically generated character, consequently laying the groundwork for her complicated ontological existence as a prostitute: “Tu vois en moi, ma chère Thérèse, un être singulier. Je ne suis ni homme, ni femme, ni fille, ni veuve, ni mariée. J’ai été une libertine de profession, et je suis encore pucelle. Sur un pareil début, tu me prends sans doute pour une folle ; un peu de patience, je te prie, tu auras le mot de l’énigme” (d’Argens 103). Of course, as we have already seen, Bois-Laurier’s *pucelage* remains only as a result of her physiological incapacity to be anything else and her unwillingness to undergo surgical correction of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the particular circumstances which lead to Bois-Laurier’s adoption of the sex-worker profession resonate with the “evil mothers and fathers” which forced La Bretonne’s child-slaves into prostitution. The text notes however, that Mme. Lefort is not Bois-Laurier’s actual guardian and eventually reveals her as a kidnapper, pushed towards the act by the same M. le President de... that eventually attempts to seduce Bois-Laurier: “C’est par ses ordres, continua ma mère [Mme. Lefort] que je t’ai enlevée il y a huit ans. Il m’a payé depuis ce temps une pension très modique que j’ai bien employée, et au-delà, pour ton éducation. Il m’avait promis qu’il nous donnerait à chacune cent louis lorsque ton âge lui permettrait de prendre ton pucelage” (d’Argens 108). Both Bois-Laurier’s technical designation as a virgin and the particular context which led to her libertine lifestyle mirror (while admittedly distorting) these tropes composing this

particular vision of the 18th-century prostitute. Additionally, the kindness that she shows Thérèse further reinforces her existence as this sort of innocent prostitute.

To label Bois-Laurier as simply a “virtuous courtesan” would be indefensible as she also displays a number of traits which include her within the other realm of literary prostitute examined by Norberg, that of the “libertine whore” which she describes thusly:

The libertine whore is a creature of the rococo, of an age enamored of materialist philosophy and comfortable with sensual pleasure, especially “varied” pleasure. She owes little to the new notions of sexual difference...She knows nothing of woman’s supposedly inherent modesty and cares little for her role in the family...She belongs to the passions, to the sexual and to sexually explicit literature. Unlike the virtuous courtesan, she knows no shame or guilt and never denigrates her trade, except to suit the censors. (228)

Again, much as with the label of virtuous courtesan, Bois-Laurier manifests a number of traits contained within this tropical description of the libertine prostitute. Within the wider context of the novel, this particular appellation seems more easily applicable to Bois-Laurier given the repeated sexually explicit tableaux in which she finds herself. Furthermore, as we saw in her own description of herself, she explicitly self-identifies as a libertine. Rather than picking out specific examples of what makes her fit into the libertine category, it would perhaps be more interesting to focus my analysis on those elements of her character which actually problematize the total application of this title. One of the primary traits that Norberg attributes to libertine prostitutes lies not only in their willingness to engage in sex for money, but also in the carnal pleasure that they themselves are capable of experiencing from the act. As we have seen, Bois-Laurier’s physiological limitations hinder at least one common pathway to female sexual pleasure, signaling

that while sexual pleasure may not be totally impossible for her, it is at least restricted to other sources.

Bois-Laurier's inability to experience vaginal sexual pleasure marks yet another element of her assemblage personality while also reflecting a mid-step in a wider shift in 18th-century attitudes towards female sexuality. Thomas Laqueur writes of changing perceptions of the importance of the female orgasm during sex, noting that prior to the latter half of the 18th century, the female orgasm was understood as fulfilling an intrinsic role in the generative process. This was linked to a generally held notion that women, not men, were the more carnally oriented of the two sexes. However, medical science during the period moved away from this position, fundamentally reframing the conception of female sexuality in the process in ways that still persist in the 21st century:

The commonplace of much contemporary psychology-that men want sex while women want relationships-is the precise inversion of pre-Enlightenment notions that, extending back to antiquity, equated friendship with men and fleshiness with women. Women, whose desires knew no bounds in the old scheme of things, and whose reason offered so little resistance to passion, became in some accounts creatures whose whole reproductive life might be spent anesthetized to the pleasures of the flesh. When in the late eighteenth century, it became a possibility that "the majority of women are not much troubled with sexual feelings," the presence or absence of orgasm became a biological signpost of sexual difference. (Laqueur 3-4)

Taken in this historical framework, the duality of Bois-Laurier's sexuality as both highly sexualized libertine and asexual virgin positions her yet again between two opposed sexual ontologies. Her profession requires her to engage in sexual activity quite frequently, mirroring the

behavior, albeit in a different context, of that pre-Enlightenment idea of women as entirely insatiable. Conversely, as Bois-Laurier reveals when introducing herself to Thérèse and to the reader, she is incapable of experiencing conventional sexual pleasure, the form of pleasure previously associated with reproduction, therefore relegating herself to the relative passivity of later imaginings of female sexuality.

Another of the primary roles assigned to prostitutes is the rather obvious necessity that they bring sexual pleasure to their clients. Furthermore, Norberg notes that this charge often necessitated sexually arousing men who, due to various reasons, might not be quite as up to the task from a physiological perspective as they would have liked:

Upon receiving a client, the whore is faced with a challenge: How to ‘animate’ the ‘flabby,’ ‘overworked’ and ‘lethargic’ organ before her? Here is the pornographic whore’s task par excellence, one that absorbs most of her story. She is, after all, a professional who, as La Cauchoise proclaims, ‘knows the superior art of how to make a man fuck even when his prick doesn’t want to’... (232)

While Bois-Laurier does occasionally aid in the fulfillment of both sexual arousal and sexual climax, the text highlights certain moments wherein she does not succeed in these tasks. While instances of literary prostitutes refusing certain sexual services do exist, these moments of carnal reluctance usually stem from a visible physiological defect on the part of the client or as a result of an unreasonable, overly debauched request.¹⁰⁴ Bois-Laurier’s own moments wherein she does not fulfill a sexual request are born less from a refusal to do so and more from her physiological

¹⁰⁴ Norberg signals two instances of a woman’s refusal to comply with specific sexual demands. In these cases, oral sex and the refusal to copulate with a client possessed of a ‘diseased organ’ (231).

inability to engage in vaginal sexual intercourse. One particular episode towards the end of her personal narrative underlines this fact in a decidedly explicit fashion. In this scene, Bois-Laurier has been conscripted by a colleague to aid in the servicing of a trio of clergymen, who, as the text demonstrates emphatically, do not suffer from the impotence which plagues many other men in these sorts of texts. Rather, they are more than prepared to consummate the act, but find their efforts stymied by Bois-Laurier's impenetrable vagina, which leads one of their number to an explicitly articulated declaration of his frustration:

N'êtes-vous pas trop heureux, s'écria la Dupuis...de jouir du Plaisir de voir un minois comme celui de la charmante Manon?' 'Non, ventrebleu ! répliqua Père Ange d'un ton de fureur bachique. Je ne suis point venu ici pour voir un minois : c'est pour f... un c... que je m'y suis rendu ; j'ai bien payé, ajouta-t-il, et ce v... que je tiens en main n'en sortira ventre-Dieu pas, qu'il n'ait f..., fut-ce le diable.' (d'Argens 122)

Bois-Laurier's inability to complete the central function of a professional sex worker further problematizes her classification as a purely libertine prostitute. This, combined with the equally difficult notion of categorizing her as a virtuous courtesan leaves her positioned between these two poles. Were she an entirely new breed of literary prostitute, we might be able to create a new literary identity for her that would stand alongside the labels of virtuous courtesan and libertine prostitute. However, her position is not one that is entirely divorceable from either of these two categories. Rather, she exists as an assemblically generated prostitute whose ontological status vacillates between one extreme and the other. Ultimately, the character of Bois-Laurier manifests far more complexity than Darnton's dismissive attitude about her indicates. Far from being a mere stock-character, she embodies a particular form of libertine materialism born from her material singularity, her narrative position, and her assemblically formed ontological status as an

unclassifiable prostitute. In a sense, Bois-Laurier mirrors the mixed identity of the novel itself, as it too pulls from different labels in order to position itself between two different classifications.

5.2 Assemblic Stimulation

The differing perceptions and sexual attitudes demonstrated by the stories of Éradice and Bois-Laurier manifest two aspects of *Thérèse philosophe*'s assemblically driven exploration of materialist ontology. Alone, they offer a binary understanding of the implications of a purely material universe and yet, when combined with other narrative elements of the novel, begin to illustrate a wider potential for materially determined existence. This coming together of disparate material elements occurs within the character of Thérèse herself, motivating and educating the young woman's nascent materialism. Furthermore, Thérèse comes to embody the synthesis of the opposing material realities displayed by the experiences of Éradice and Bois-Laurier. Throughout the course of the narrative, she travels and maps the ontological assemblages exemplified by her fellow characters and in turn, realizes the elaboration of her own assemblic identity, ultimately offering a new perspective on materialist ontology.

The novel frames Thérèse's character as assemblic from the onset of the narrative. As we saw elsewhere in this chapter, certain scholars like Darnton and Brown frame *Thérèse philosophe* as portraying the libertine education of a young woman, with Brown going so far as to suggest that Thérèse is a *tabula rasa* in the manner of sensationalist tropes like the senseless statue in

Condilliac's 1754 treatise *Traité des sensations*.¹⁰⁵ While she certainly does learn much from those around her, Thérèse's initial characterization is not that of a *tabula rasa*. While other characters and experiences drive her assemblic development, certain aspects of her finalized persona are present from the opening of the text. Among the reader's first visions of Thérèse outside of the story's autobiographical framework (to which I will return), the young woman already exhibits a materially determined consciousness, and consequently, an assemblically generated self. Immediately following her description of her parents and their lives, Thérèse describes a mysterious illness that leaves her weak and sickly: "J'avais à peine sept ans lorsque cette tendre mère [...] s'aperçut que je maigrissais à vue d'œil. Un habile médecin fut appelé pour être consulté sur ma maladie ; j'avais un appétit dévorant, point de fièvre, je ne ressentais aucune douleur, cependant ma vivacité se perdait, mes jambes pouvaient à peine me porter" (d'Argens 12). The description of the malady immediately elicits questions as to its origins, especially given the profound changes occurring within the field of medicine at the time, which I discussed in chapter one. Any number of mysterious causes could lay at the root of Thérèse's illness such that their discovery might become impossible. However, upon the same page a curious new symptom, which ultimately proves an effective cure, is revealed, forming the foundation for the assemblic development of Thérèse's individuality: "[...] une nuit, me croyant endormie, elle [her mother] s'aperçut que j'avais la main sur la partie qui nous distingue des hommes, ou, par un frottement bénin, je me procurais des plaisirs peu connus d'une fille de sept ans, et très communs parmi celles de quinze! Ma mère pouvait à peine croire ce qu'elle voyait" (d'Argens 12). The reaction of

¹⁰⁵ Condilliac explores the nature of consciousness by imagining a senseless statue which slowly acquires sensation.

Thérèse's mother to her daughter's unconscious nocturnal activities stems from the same religious ontological framework as that of *Éradice*, albeit one better informed about human sexuality. Curiously, while the mother does denounce the activity as a mortal sin her actions suggest a certain practicality underlining her character. Having witnessed her daughter's masturbation, she embarks upon a brief, empirically motivated quest to understand the true nature of the act after Thérèse continually repeats it: "Enfin après quelques nuits d'observation attentive, on ne douta plus que ce ne fut la force de mon tempérament qui me faisait faire, en dormant, ce qui sert à soulager tant de pauvres religieuses en veillant" (d'Argens 13). In order to curb Thérèse's unconscious actions, her mother binds her hands at night rendering her unable to continue. This restriction has the desired effect, returning Thérèse to good health.

In addition to illustrating the complex, assemblage interworkings that motivate human behavior, this episode also foreshadows yet another soon-to-arrive 18th-century attitude regarding human sexuality. Prior to the 18th century, masturbation was generally considered sinful because of the myth of Onan, a minor Biblical character found in the book of Genesis.¹⁰⁶ However 1764, 16 years after the publication of *Thérèse philosophe*, saw the first appearance of a more medically oriented reason to forbid masturbation. A Dr. Tissot¹⁰⁷ published a work entirely dedicated to the

¹⁰⁶ In Genesis Chapter 38, a man, Onan is ordered by Judah to impregnate his elder brother's wife in order to preserve his brother's lineage, as the brother is dead. Rather than doing so, Onan spills his seed upon the ground and is subsequently killed by Yahweh as punishment. This episode provides Catholic theology with biblical justification for both the sinfulness of masturbation as well as sex without a reproductive agenda.

¹⁰⁷ Tissot is mentioned a number of times in different medical articles in the *Encyclopédie*, notably the article titled "Manstupration ou Manustupration," a rather lengthy text written by Jean-Joseph Menuret de Chambaud which

dangers of self-pleasure, entitled *L'onanisme, dissertation sur les maladies produites par la masturbation*. While largely focused on the dangers of masturbation for males, Tissot reserves one section for women wherein he lists a lengthy series of additional maladies to which women are susceptible:

Outres tous les symptômes que j'ai déjà rapportés, les femmes sont plus particulièrement exposées à des accès d'hystérie ou de vapeurs, affreux ; à des jaunisses incurables ; à des crampes cruelles de l'estomac & du dos ; à de vives douleurs de nez ; à des pertes blanches, dont l'âcreté est une force continuelle de douleurs les plus cuisantes ; à des chûtes, à des ulcérations de matrice, & à toutes les infirmités que ces deux maux entraînent ; à des prolongements & à des dartres du clitoris ; à des fureurs utérines qui, leur enlevant à la fois la pudeur & la raison, les mettent au niveau des brutes les plus lascives, jusqu'à ce qu'une mort désespérée les arrache aux douleurs & à l'infamie. (57)

This paragraph denotes only a small fraction of a much larger sequence of feminine ailments, supposedly (although not uniquely) caused by masturbation with a particular focus placed on the degradation of the face and therefore of beauty and youthfulness. In d'Argens' narrative, Thérèse's cessation of sexual self-stimulation reinvigorates her, thus suggesting that her frailties were caused by that behavior. However, as she gets older, her problems return and on this occasion, the cure proves not to be abstinence but rather indulgence.

The relapse of Thérèse's illness coincides with her mother's decision to undertake a more radical solution to the problem of her daughter's nascent sexuality. However, rather than

offers a number of salacious examples of the dangers of masturbation and several dubious treatments for the "problem."

reaffirming the previous episode's suggestion that abstention is the best answer, the narrative approaches the problem from the opposite direction. Some years after the discovery of her masturbatory habits, Thérèse finds herself sequestered within a convent with the hopes that religion will ameliorate her affliction. She remains cloistered therein for many years, relying upon certain Catholic practices to cure her of her unwanted thoughts: "Le jeûne, le cilice, la méditation étaient ma ressource" (d'Argens 18). Curiously, two of the three proposed methods focus not on the immaterial aspects of convent life, such as prayer, but rather on material items and phenomena meant to destabilize one's relationship with one's body, either through constant corporeal pain in the case of the hair-shirt, or overcoming basic physical drives as one must when fasting. Moreover, Thérèse expresses the effects of her new regime in mechanistic terms that highlight both the reduction of her sexual desire and simultaneously, the return of her previous illness: "Ces remèdes, en détraquant la machine, me guérèrent à la vérité tout à coup de ma passion mais ils ruinèrent ensemble mon tempérament et ma santé. Je tombai enfin dans un état de langueur qui me conduisait visiblement au tombeau, lorsque ma mère me retira du couvent" (d'Argens 18). Thérèse's descriptions of her symptoms mirror somewhat those found in Tissot's treatise, albeit applied to a woman who has forsaken masturbation entirely: "Toute la machine languissait, mon teint était jaune, mes lèvres livides. Je ressemblais à un squelette vivant. Enfin, la dévotion allait me rendre homicide de moi-même, lorsque je rentrai dans la maison de ma mère" (d'Argens 23). A doctor is summoned and this time, rather than desiring abstinence, suggests that Thérèse get married, as once again her symptoms are caused by an aspect of her sexuality:

Cette liqueur divine qui nous procure le seul plaisir physique, le seul qui se goute sans amertume, cette liqueur, dis-je, dont l'écoulement est aussi nécessaire à certains tempéraments que celui qui résulte des aliments qui nous nourrissent, avait reflue des

vaisseaux qui lui sont propres dans d'autres qui lui étaient étrangers, ce qui avait jeté le désordre dans toute la machine. On conseilla à ma mère de me chercher un mari, comme le seul remède qui pût me sauver la vie. (d'Argens 23)

In this instance, the narrative has reversed its position on illnesses caused by sexuality, indicating that stimulation would cure rather than cause Thérèse's affliction. Indeed, somewhat later in the novel Thérèse begins once again to indulge her proclivities as instructed by her mentor M. l'Abbé T... and this time finds her state of being much improved by the practice:

je m'y arrêtai, je frottai, et bientôt j'arrivai au comble du plaisir. Quelle heureuse découverte pour une fille qui avait dans elle une source abondante de la liqueur qui en est le principe ! Je nageai pendant six mois dans un torrent de volupté, sans qu'il m'arrivât rien qui mérite ici sa place. Ma santé s'était entièrement rétablie ; ma conscience était tranquille...(d'Argens 56)

This reversal places Thérèse in a similar ontological position with regards to her sexuality as we saw with Bois-Laurier. The narrative positions her between two different conceptions of material reality with one foot in each. On the one hand, she falls victim to the material dangers of masturbation and then some 40 pages later, is relieved of a similar condition through self-pleasure. This sort of ontological tug-of-war reflects the novel's overarching exploration of materialist ontology in that similar conflicts come to survey various different materialistically oriented understandings of the world as we have seen. In this sequence, the novel delves into the question of the potential dangers of masturbation from both sides, ultimately deciding that the practice has no medical downsides other than the potential that an overly excited indulger might create social difficulties for herself should she desire to get married as M. l'Abbé T... explained as part of Thérèse's sexual education.

5.3 Material Inevitability

While to classify Thérèse as a *tabula rasa* would be incorrect, a diverse range of material objects, human beings, philosophical investigations and empirical observations also form large parts of her character. Her life and ever-evolving ontological attitude reflect the multitude of assemblic connections that mold and motivate her both as a material being and as a philosopher. The opening pages of the novel's framework narrative explicitly present Thérèse's existence in assemblic language as she considers the Count's offer to write the story of her life. Thérèse is initially apprehensive about the project, as she wishes to protect those people that she knew while at the same time admitting their importance for the development of her personality: "Tahirai-je la confiance de gens à qui j'ai les plus grandes obligations, puisque ce sont les actions des uns et les sages réflexions des autres qui, par gradation, m'ont dessillé les yeux sur les préjugés de ma jeunesse?" (d'Argens 9). She also notes the impact of her life's experiences on her existence as well, framing them in terms that suggest a degree of inevitability guiding her path: "vous verrez tous les replis de son [Thérèse's] cœur dès sa plus tendre enfance, son âme tout entière va se développer dans les détails des petites aventures qui l'ont conduite, comme malgré elle, pas à pas, au comble de la volupté" (d'Argens 10). Curiously, Thérèse's language here implies an even greater degree of assemblic connectivity in her personality, as rather than uniquely talking about her adventures as whole units, she underlines the importance of the *details* of those experiences, opening up each of those larger episodes into smaller moments that are equally capable of exerting a lasting influence. Other examples of the assemblic connections that inform Thérèse's sexual desires and behaviors are equally explicitly elaborated, often using mechanical terminology reminiscent of the work of thinkers like La Mettrie. Still, each of these assemblic relationships,

explicit or otherwise, functions as a result of their connection to Thérèse's own innate sexuality, which as we have seen, exists seemingly *a priori* to our heroine's other assemblage influences.

While the novel largely leaves the origins of Thérèse's desires unexplored, certain elements such as the sexual activities of her parents hint at a possible foundation for her behavior. The narrator version of Thérèse notes that both her mother and father were, while perhaps less libertine than Thérèse herself would become, certainly not strangers to aspects of that lifestyle: "Mon père payait une jeune veuve, marchande dans son voisinage, sa maitresse ; ma mère était payée par son amant, gentilhomme fort riche [...] Tout se passait avec un ordre admirable : on savait à quoi s'en tenir de part et d'autre, et jamais ménage ne parut plus uni" (d'Argens 11). Thérèse's mother adopts a much more religious attitude following her daughter's birth, the act of which: "causa une rupture qui la mit dans la dure nécessité de renoncer pour toujours aux plaisirs qui m'avaient donné l'existence" (d'Argens 11). In addition to the implication of an inherited tendency towards libertine behavior, the particular configuration of her parents' extra-marital relationships leaves the question of Thérèse's parentage somewhat ambiguous. While neither explicitly stated nor thematically pursued, the possibility of two separate paths of paternity for Thérèse is compounded by the novel's repeated insistence on the dangers of pregnancy for libertine women. From a medical perspective, the novel's materialist focus suggests that an explanation might be found through considering the 18th-century version of the 'humor' as defined by the *Encyclopédie* that gives a high degree of importance to sperm and mother's milk:

Les *humeurs* de la seconde classe sont recrementielles de leur nature, quoiqu'elles soient destinées à être portées hors de l'individu dans lequel elles ont été préparées; mais elles n'en sont pas expulsées ou tirées à titre d'excrément, & seulement pour servir à des fonctions utiles & nécessaires dans d'autres individus; ainsi la semence virile sert à

féconder la femme, & le lait à nourrir les enfans, qui sont une suite de cette fécondation.
(351)

Furthermore, in a study exploring the 18th-century concern with the moral degradation of young women through the lens of medical works, Mary McAlpin notes that with regards to humors: “The health of a child is directly affected by the quality of the sperm his father secretes and the milk produced by his mother’s body” (16). This concept, combined with what we know about Thérèse’s parents implies that even without their libertine proclivities they are, in an 18th-century sense, directly responsible for Thérèse’s precocious sexuality. Furthermore, McAlpin also writes of the 18th-century’s concern with insulating children, particularly girls, from any kind of sexual knowledge:

The danger for prepubescent girls was the eruption of early puberty due to exposure to lascivious influences, but even girls going through puberty had to be carefully protected in order to keep them quite thoroughly ignorant of the sexual nature of the (quite powerful) physical stirrings they were said to be experiencing. Only when their wombs were “fully formed” were they to be enlightened (by the events of the wedding night) as to what their bodies were said to crave so desperately. Adolescent boys were also said to be in need of protection from the cultural forces at work upon them, although they were presented as by no means as vulnerable as their female counterparts. (2)

When taken together with the particulars of the narrative, these two 18th-century concepts suggest that Thérèse’s life was predicated on and driven by materialistic determinism even before her birth. Through the humors of semen and mother’s milk, Thérèse absorbs the libertinage of her parents before being born and, once part of the world, stands highly vulnerable to carnal influences from

both inside and out. Consequently, Thérèse's inevitable future may well have been obvious to an educated 18th-century reader, especially one with a more materialistic attitude.

While Thérèse's sexual desires have assemblage links to her parents and their activities, her pre-existing proclivities are themselves exacerbated and expanded through her perceptions, usually visual, of sexual acts performed by others. The novel underlines the power that this act of witnessing has on Thérèse on multiple occasions, sometimes leading her to abandon all caution while in other moments allowing her a degree of control. Furthermore, the narrative communicates, both implicitly and explicitly, the wide-ranging and often concealed influences that drive her desire in addition to seen sex. In the first explicit sexual tableau illustrated by *Thérèse philosophe*, Thérèse shuts herself into a cabinet wherein she witnesses Pere Dirrag's duplicitous rape of Éradice. Far from being horrified from what she sees, Thérèse finds herself nearly willing to reveal her presence and demand the same treatment:

Quelle mécanique ! Quel spectacle, mon cher Compte, pour une fille de mon âge, qui n'avait aucune connaissance de ce genre de mystère ! Que d'idées différentes me passèrent dans l'esprit, sans pouvoir me fixer à aucune ! Il me souvient seulement que vingt fois je fus sur le point de m'aller jeter aux genoux de ce célèbre directeur, pour le conjurer de me traiter comme mon amie. Était-ce mouvement de dévotion ? Était-ce mouvement de concupiscence ? C'est ce qu'il m'est encore impossible de pouvoir bien démêler. (d'Argens 34)

This particular passage and the episode that surrounds it exemplifies the complexity of *Thérèse philosophe's* portrayal of both sexual and ontological assemblages, in that unlike other moments wherein the cause of a given desire is more or less clear, this instance portrays such a blurring between the sexual and ontological assemblages that the true cause is lost.

Je vis qu'environ la longueur d'un travers de pouce du saint instrument fut constamment réservée au-dehors, et n'eut point de part à la fête. Je vis qu'à chaque mouvement que le croupion du Père faisait en arrière, par lequel le cordon se retirait de son gîte jusqu'à la tête, les lèvres de la partie d'Éradice s'entrouvraient et paraissaient d'un incarnate si vif qu'elles charmaient la vue. (d'Argens 33)

This passage and much of the longer account of sexual penetration are purely descriptive and the usage of religious terms and concepts momentarily suspended as Thérèse, and consequently the reader become immersed in the sexual tableau. However, later musings surrounding the act reintroduce ontological concerns. When the voice of Thérèse the Narrator returns, she remembers not only the torrent of emotions and desires that passed through her mind, but also expresses confusion as to the origins of these thoughts even in the “present tense” of the framework narrative. Like Éradice whose violation she witnesses/witnessed, she finds herself unable to separate erotic desire and religious ecstasy, even after years of living a libertine lifestyle and undergoing numerous forms of sexual education. This confusion, particularly when expressed by the older, worldlier Thérèse suggests that religion, at least for Thérèse and Éradice, forms a significant part of the sexual assemblages that drive their sexualities, at least in their youth. Later the text largely abandons sexualized religiosity but here, Thérèse's first sexual tableau is as much dominated by religious concepts as it is carnal desires. This instance marks an important step on Thérèse's ontological exploration of materialism as well as providing another example of the assemblagic nature of her character. In witnessing the rape of Éradice, she expresses similar conclusions about the source of her sexual desires in that moment, noting the possibility that they stem more from a religious ontology and less from a purely carnal perspective. In this way, her thoughts and desires resemble those of Éradice, despite Thérèse's awareness of the actual nature of Dirrag's “religious

ritual”. Through the act of witnessing this sexual encounter, Thérèse not only comes to elaborate a sexual assemblage between herself, Éradice, and Dirrag, but also adopts the same sort of dual ontology as those she witnesses, with one foot in materialism and another in religion.

This double influence continues to show itself once Thérèse returns home. Alone in her bedroom, she obsesses on what she has seen, which ultimately leads her to attempt to mimic the act of penetration:

Dès que je fus rentrée dans ma chambre, je me prosternai à genoux, pour demander à Dieu la grâce d’être traitée comme mon amie. Mon esprit était dans une agitation qui approchait de la fureur, un feu intérieur me dévorait [...] Je tombais enfin dans une rêverie profonde, pendant laquelle il me sembla que ce même membre [Dirrag’s], détaché de tout autre objet, faisait son entrée dans moi par la même voie. Machinalement, je me plaçai dans la même attitude que celle où j’avais vu Éradice, et machinalement encore, dans l’agitation qui me faisait mouvoir, je me coulai sur le ventre jusqu’à la colonne du pied de mon lit, laquelle, se trouvant passée entre mes jambes et mes cuisses, m’arrêta, et servit de point d’appui à la partie où je sentais une démangeaison inconcevable. (d’Argens 43)

Again the passage reveals to us the dual nature of Thérèse’s nascent sexuality in that its expression juxtaposes mechanistic (and thus materialistic) words with religious terminology. Furthermore, the passage directly references what she has just seen, going so far as to both reproduce the image of Dirrag’s “member” within her mind and to cause her to take up the same position in which she saw Éradice. Added to both the empirical motivation for her desire and her confusion as to that desire’s terrestrial/divine origins stands her bedpost, marking another material element at play within Thérèse’s sexual assemblage. Much like with Éradice and the *cordon*, the bedpost’s substitution for Dirrag reveals another example of assemblic substitution between different

material objects further complicating the already intricate assemblage composing Thérèse's sexuality.

As the narrative develops, the religious influences on Thérèse's sexuality begin to fade and are largely replaced with a more empirically oriented causality. After befriending M. l'Abbé T... and Madame C..., Thérèse's education becomes much more skeptical and materialistic which consequently leads her expressions of sexual desire to reflect this ontological shift. In another of the novel's erotic tableaux, Thérèse, recounting her experience, again places a particular emphasis on the position of sexualized bodies and on her own position relative to the act:

Jamais tableau ne fut placé dans un jour plus avantageux, eu égard à ma position. Le lit de repos était disposé de façon que j'avais pour point de vue la toison de Mme C... Au-dessous se montraient en partie ses deux fesses, agitées d'un mouvement léger de bas en haut, qui annonçait la fermentation intérieure ; et ses cuisses, les plus belles, les plus rondes, les plus blanches qui se puissent imaginer, faisaient avec ses genoux un autre petit mouvement de droite et de gauche, qui contribuait sans doute aussi à la joie de la partie principale que l'on fêtait, et dont le doigt de l'Abbé, perdu dans de la toison, suivait tous les mouvements.
(d'Argens 75-75)

Thérèse's removal of religious terminology mirrors her recent education in materialist philosophy. Furthermore, when she is again driven to masturbation as a result of what she witnessed, all mention of a potential religious origin of her desires is removed, although even Thérèse -as-Narrator continues to express ignorance as to the deeper origins of her actions: "J'entreprendrais inutilement, mon cher Comte, de vous dire ce que je pensais alors : je ne sentais rien pour trop sentir. Je devins machinalement le singe de ce que je voyais ; ma main faisait l'office de celle de l'Abbé ; j'imitais tous les mouvements de mon amie" (d'Argens 76). Here, the mechanical has

entirely replaced the religious; no gods are asked to intercede and there are no notions of the divine that would otherwise extend Thérèse's sexual assemblage beyond the material and the empirical. This readjustment of Thérèse's ontological position underscores the almost overwhelming inevitability of d'Argens' materialism in that Thérèse finds herself unable to exert control over her own actions, going so far as to cross the forbidden line proposed by M. l'Abbé T... previously in the novel, the example of which we saw earlier in this chapter. Despite the fact that she was ordered to exercise caution in her activities, the tableau that she witnesses proves too much and totally supersedes the limits imposed upon her: "Toujours parfaite imitatrice de ce que je voyais, sans réfléchir un instant à la défense de mon directeur, j'enfonçai mon doigt à mon tour ; une légère douleur que je ressentis ne m'arrêta pas, je poussai de toute ma force, et je parvins au comble de la volupté" (d'Argens 76). This passage encapsulates the sexual assemblage in that it shows the power that outside influences exert over an individual's subjectivity. Furthermore, in this scene, much of the ambiguity of Thérèse's earlier sexual urgings disappear and the sexual assemblage refocuses from larger questions of human sexuality (such as the dangers of masturbation) onto a single instance of human intimacy. This descriptive precision highlights the inherent materiality of the sexuality contained within *Thérèse philosophe*, forcing the reader to momentarily recalibrate their focus away from a more macro perspective on human sexuality and morality and towards two (and sometimes more) human beings transformed into purely material portraits of skin, limbs, faces, and sounds.

5.4 Expanding the Sexual Assemblage

Each of the assemblic elements composing *Thérèse philosophe*'s sexual assemblages have, up until this point, suggested that the material is not only a motivator of human behavior, but that its influence, both from within the body of an individual like Thérèse as well as that body's *perception* of other material interactions exists as a nearly inescapable force. Each of the three primary female characters, Éradice, Bois-Laurier, and Thérèse illustrates in her own way the overwhelming power of an entirely materially composed universe in that they have proven unable to escape the circumstances of their physical composition.¹⁰⁸ As we have seen and as scholars like Meeker have noted however, the novel repeatedly offers the reader advice on strategies and rules that one, particularly libertine women, can follow in order to avoid falling victim to certain corporeal changes that would negatively affect their lives. Furthermore, the narrative supplies Thérèse (and therefore the reader) with a metaphysical framework that discounts the dangers of divine retribution for acts otherwise considered as sinful.¹⁰⁹ In one of the novel's many moments of philosophical reflection, l'Abbé (who serves as the primary vehicle for such exposition) explicitly states in response to a question posed by Mme C... regarding religion and sin: "Madame, répondit l'Abbé, vous ne vous souvenez donc pas que nous ne sommes point libres, que toutes nos actions sont déterminées nécessairement? Et si nous ne sommes pas libres, comment pouvons-

¹⁰⁸ For more on the female body's portrayal in this text, see Roy.

¹⁰⁹ One particular passage appears as part of a deconstruction of religion by l'Abbé which encapsulates the novel's wider attitude towards organized religion, particularly Catholicism: "Tous les changements de religions, depuis Adam, faits par Moïse, par Salomon, par Jésus-Christ, et ensuite par les Pères, démontrent que toutes ces religions ne sont que l'ouvrage des hommes. Dieu ne varie jamais, il est immuable" (d'Argens 79).

nous pécher ?" (d'Argens 77). Despite all of these compounding factors which indicate that materialist ontology leaves no room for any kind of free will, a few other examples suggest that an individual properly grounded in a materialist/libertine ethos may well be able to master at least those elements of the body that compose a person's sexuality. Shortly after meeting Manon Bois-Laurier and before hearing her life story, Thérèse and Manon spend an evening with a pair of men who hold lustful intentions towards the two women. For Thérèse, this episode marks the first moment wherein she finds herself in a situation where non-solitary sex may occur. Just as her companion R... exposes himself with the goal of fulfilling his desires, Thérèse notices the similarity between R... 's manhood and the *cordon* of P. Dirrag:

Lorsque, portant les yeux sur le monstre dont j'étais menacée, je reconnus qu'il avait à peu près la même physionomie que le goupillon dont le Père Dirrag se servait pour chasser l'esprit immonde du corps de ses pénitentes. Je me souvins, en ce moment, de tout le danger que M. l'Abbé T...m'avait fait envisager dans la nature de l'opération dont j'étais menacée. Ma docilité se changea sur-le-champ en fureur ; je saisis le redoutable R... à la cravate et, le bras tendu, je le tins dans une position qui le mit hors d'état de prendre celle qu'il s'efforçait de gagner. (d'Argens 96)

This moment marks a rare occurrence wherein Thérèse exercises control over her material circumstances due to both her empirical experiences and philosophical education. Thérèse's rejection of R... proves that l'Abbé's materialistic program can indeed work and that it is not impossible to escape materialist inevitability. However, despite Thérèse's invocation of her instructor's cautionary advice, the scene largely focuses not on philosophy, but rather on the material. While important, the words of Thérèse's teacher do not provoke her initial hesitation.

The sight of R...’s *goupillon* rests within the domain of her empirical experiences, which themselves allow for the recall of l’Abbé’s council and the rejection of R...’s advances.

From another perspective however, one could argue that this scene rests within the realm of pure materialist causality. The defining feature of Thérèse’s various solitary sexual adventures rests in her own sexual desires, be they seemingly innate as described in her youth, or empirically inspired by the sexuality of others. However, nowhere in this scene does Thérèse express any kind of sexual desire. Rather, she describes herself as increasingly docile and, until her ultimate rejection of R...’s advances, she more or less goes along with R...’s project of seduction. The materiality of this episode deviates somewhat from other examples of material description in that rather than focusing entirely on manifestations of corporeality, it also highlights objects that, rather than invoking explicit sexuality or religion (or both) as in previous episodes, reorient the sexual assemblage to include manifestations of material wealth.¹¹⁰ Indeed, Thérèse’s initial description of R...underscores his conspicuous display of wealth much more so than his physical appearance: “Celui-ci était un homme de trente-huit à quarante ans, d’une figure assez passable, richement habillé, affectant de montrer tour à tour ses bagues, ses tabatières, ses étuis, jouant l’homme d’importance” (d’Argens 94). These luxury items frame the larger episode such that their inclusion points to a different material dynamic at play. Thérèse has, until this point, lived a life of relative austerity, and consequently finds herself unprepared to navigate a world whose materialism is based not in philosophy, but in objects themselves. This unfamiliarity, combined with different

¹¹⁰ The 18th-century marks a moment wherein luxury goods became important within European society. In a collection of essays, various scholars tackle different perspectives on the consumption, circulation, and moral arguments surrounding this nascent consumer culture. See Berg, Maxine, and Eger.

social expectations transforms the usually perceptive Thérèse: “[...] j’étais totalement déplacée, je ne disais mot, ou si je parlais, c’était dans des termes qui parurent si maussades aux deux financiers que la première vivacité de R... se perdit” (d’Argens 95). However, R...’s initial disappointment is soon assuaged by several glasses of champagne after which the sexual assemblage reorients itself again towards the corporeal, albeit in a manner that underlines a more direct form of material connection:

Il devint plus pressant, et moi plus docile. Son air d’aisance m’en imposa : ses mains laronesses voltigeaient un peu partout, et la crainte de manquer à des égards que je croyais d’usage m’empêchait d’oser lui en imposer sérieusement. Je me croyais d’autant plus autorisée à laisser aller les choses leur train, que je voyais sur un sofa, à l’autre bout de la sale, M.B... parcourant encore un peu plus cavalièrement les appas de Mme sa nièce. Enfin je me défendis si mal des petites entreprises de R..., qu’il ne douta pas de réussir, s’il en tentait de plus sérieuses. Il me proposa de passer sur un lit de repos qui faisait face au sofa. (d’Argens 95)

Furthermore, this episode largely reflects Éradice’s earlier experiences as the hands of Père Dirrag in that each of the attempts at rape/seduction rely on the relative ignorance of the young women. Éradice has neither awareness of the material realities of her own body nor a particularly developed understanding of Catholic practices and as such submits to Dirrag’s desires without even being conscious of her submission. Thérèse, while somewhat better educated about sexuality, finds herself equally destabilized by the rituals and relics of a different social milieu.

When taken together, these two similar moments illustrate the larger inclusive potential of the sexual assemblage. Consequently, it seems that nearly any material object or cultural singularity can, given the right circumstances, factor into the sexual assemblage, either as an

element of sexual fulfillment as we saw earlier with Thérèse's bedpost, an inspiration of lust, or as an artifice of seduction. Furthermore, Thérèse's near-seduction and Dirrag's rape of Éradice are both framed, and therefore partially enacted by, different forms of societal pressure that facilitate the carnal projects of R... and Dirrag. In the case of Éradice, she understood her violation not as a sexual encounter, but rather as a means to achieve spiritual purity with an eye towards eventual Catholic sainthood: "Vous verrez, me dit-elle avec feu, quelle est la force de mes exercices spirituels, et par quels degrés de pénitence le bon Père me conduit à devenir une grande sainte, et vous ne douterez plus des extases, des ravissements, qui sont une suite de ces mêmes exercices" (d'Argens 26). For Thérèse, the societal framework that nearly pushes her into the arms of R... is rather more mundane in nature, in that she seeks financial stability, ideally through a traditional marriage arrangement with the help of Bois Laurier, who promises to aid the younger woman: "Est-ce qu'avec du mérite, une taille, une mine comme celle que vous portez là, une fille est jamais embarrassée, pour peu qu'elle y joigne de la prudence et de la conduite? Non, Mademoiselle, ne vous inquiétez point : je vous trouverai ce qu'il vous faut, peut-être même un bon mari" (d'Argens 90). Scenes such as these illustrate not only the material impacts on the sexual assemblage, but also the wider socio-cultural influences that often precede actual sexual encounters, especially for individuals who are relatively sexually and socially ignorant.

5.5 Final Thoughts

It might seem that *Thérèse philosophe* portrays an existence wherein free-will yields before material realities without exception. Each of the three characters explored within this chapter exemplifies a different assemblage reality as framed within a materialistically determined universe

and as such the women abide by the same rules despite their differing circumstances. Thérèse ultimately proves no more able to deny her desires than either Éradice or Bois-Laurier, despite possessing a deeper understanding of materialist philosophy. In d'Argens' narrative universe, there appears to exist no means of escaping the overwhelming power of material causality. The diversity of elements that compose an individual's larger sexual assemblage serves as further evidence of the novel's fatalistic version of materialist ontology as even the most mundane objects contain the potential to entice and satisfy. Each character's actions and subsequent circumstances seem almost written in stone, a narrow possibility of escape only viable if an individual stands as one of the elite few, exposed to and educated in materialist philosophy. Even this window remains uncertain as Thérèse herself yields to her own desires in the end.

However, one element of the novel's implicit explorations of materialist ontology provides a more materially centered means that mitigates the effects of this causality to a degree. The primary vehicle for such an escape rests in the novel's usage of confined or hidden spaces, a number of which permeate the novel at various narrative levels. While writing about the sensationalist philosophy underlining much of *Thérèse philosophe's* premise, Diane Brown also discusses the role that certain architectural novelties play in libertine texts, particularly the *cabinet* noting that:

The eighteenth-century *cabinet* is at once a site of seduction and observation, of privacy and the invasion of privacy, and of philosophical and sexual experimentation. The precision with which eighteenth-century erotic literature invokes interior design details points to a function beyond the figurative. Alongside the sexual and anatomical minutiae that might have served to arouse the reader, these texts sometimes included exhaustive architectural detail that had its own effects on readers' sensibility. (98)

Within *Thérèse philosophe* however, the role of confined or hidden spaces serves another purpose beyond providing a place for voyeurism in that they also allow the observer to become momentarily insulated from the material world.

From an immediate and practical perspective, this insulation protects them from the reciprocal view of those that they spy upon, therefore permitting a more objective perspective on the part of the spy. Brown presents this notion as a common literary trope that permits the hidden character to educate themselves rather than pursue carnal stimulation:

While the isolated, intentionally decorated *cabinet* often inflames desire and allows for libertine seduction, in some literary contexts it is imbued with more instructional aims. The emerging literary character who is the subject of this study, the "female *philosophe* in the closet," inhabits interior spaces that allow for observation and education. Her *cabinet* does not elicit desire so much as it allows the isolation required for her sensory experimentation.

(102)

The importance of isolation for libertine education reflects wider societal trends occurring during the 18th-century in the domain of women's education. The increasing prevalence of private, often interior rooms increased the rate of solitary reading, allowing women to educate themselves in epistemological domains otherwise reserved for men.¹¹¹ Consequently, for an individual inclined to libertinage like Thérèse, the act of witnessing sexual congress of any sort becomes a form of reading not of books, but rather a decoding of the assemblic mysteries of material sexuality through empirical experience.

¹¹¹ For information on the rise and function of private spaces in the 18th century see Lilley.

In *Thérèse philosophe*, Thérèse's isolation not only protects her from the perception of others while simultaneously educating her, but also limits the material universe's impact upon her actions. When spying on Dirrag and Éradice, Thérèse admitted to her lover the Comte that she had very nearly revealed her presence with the hopes of undergoing the same treatment as her friend: "Il me souvient seulement que vingt fois je fus sur le point de m'aller jeter aux genoux de ce célèbre directeur, pour le conjurer de me traiter comme mon amie" (d'Argens 34). While the novel does not explicitly indicate why she was able to control her impulses, the text makes a point of highlighting the cabinet wherein she hides herself: "Je me sauvai dans le cabinet dont Éradice prit la clef. Un trou large comme la main, qui était dans la porte de ce cabinet, couverte d'une vieille tapisserie de Bergame, très claire, me laissait voir librement la chambre en son entier, sans risquer d'être aperçue" (d'Argens 26). Here, the text is careful to underline certain material aspects of the makeup of the cabinet, both in terms of what it allows (her to see through a keyhole) as well as what it does not allow (her to be seen). In doing so, the work brings a focus not only to the importance of concealment for the sake of enlightenment/stimulation but also to the materiality of the confining space, suggesting that this same materiality plays another insulating role beyond mere camouflage.

Furthermore, this scene lays the framework for the notion that material separation from licentious behavior mitigates, to a degree, the sorts of social dangers such as pregnancy or the perceivable loss of virginity that might otherwise harm a young woman like Thérèse. In another scene, Thérèse once again finds herself witness to a couple's sexual congress, in this case l'Abbé and Mme. C.... Here though, her material insulation is of a different nature, as rather than existing as a solid material barrier between herself and the amorous couple, it obscures her vision of their activities: "Je résolus de les prévenir dans le bosquet et de m'y cacher de manière à pouvoir les

entendre. Comme je n'avais pas l'ombre du soupçon de leurs amours, je ne prévoyais point du tout ce que je perdrais en ne les voyant pas. Je fus donc reconnaître le terrain, et m'assurer une place commode à mon projet" (d'Argens 58). Later, once the carnal nature of l'Abbé and Mme C... 's forested liaison becomes clear, Thérèse attempts to reorient herself in order to better witness the unfolding tableau, but, because of the material nature of her surroundings, is unable to do so: "J'essayai vingt fois de me lever, pour tâcher de trouver quelque ouverture par où je pusse découvrir les objets, mais le bruit des feuilles me retint toujours. J'étais assise ; je m'allongeai de mon mieux, et pour éteindre le feu qui me dévorait, j'eus recours à mon petit exercice ordinaire" (d'Argens 67). In this instance, the material restrictions placed on Thérèse have a dual effect in that they force her to remain entirely hidden, thus guarding her from discovery as well as pushing her towards her "petit exercice ordinaire", which, while not explicitly stated, most likely refers to an act of responsible masturbation wherein she follows the precepts handed down by l'Abbé. This second effect of material insulation might not seem as important, as Thérèse illustrates frequently that self-pleasure of one form or another is her default reaction to sexual stimulation, however the precise nature of the act is itself significant. While witnessing another tableau somewhat later in the text, Thérèse places herself such that she can actually see what is going on and consequently engages in the same behavior, although in this instance the act of witnessing the material interactions of the two bodies pushes her to forego the Abbé's rules: "Toujours parfaite imitatrice de ce que je voyais, sans réfléchir un instant à la défense de mon directeur, j'enfonçai mon doigt à mon tour ; une légère douleur que je ressentis ne m'arrêta pas, je poussai de toute ma force, et je parvins au comble de la volupté" (d'Argens 76). In my previous exploration of this passage, I investigated the mechanistic inevitability contained within this scene. Had Thérèse however been unable to actually see what was going on, she would not have "perfectly imitated" what she saw,

and consequently would not have broken the rules of socially conscious masturbation. These two scenes ultimately illustrate an important element to consider when consciously living within a material universe: one must use material elements in order to safeguard against the more dangerous types of material causality.

The most telling example of the power of mitigating one's exposure to the wider assemblic influences of a material universe occurs at the end of the novel, after Thérèse falls in love with the nameless Comte who inspires her to record her experiences. From the onset, the novel's ultimate sequence approaches the question of assemblic materialism in terms that highlight the uncertainty (at least from an individual perspective) inherent to a universe constructed around nearly inescapable causality. Thérèse, whose financial and social situation remains tenuous falls in love with the Comte, who offers to insulate her from this uncertainty by taking her as his permanent mistress. While debating this opportunity, the young woman invokes the image of the labyrinth to describe the uncertainty of her situation, however unlike the realm of discovery and learning implied by Diderot's encyclopedic *labyrinthe*, Thérèse's invokes fear of an unknowable future:

Je sentis un plaisir inexprimable à imaginer que je pouvais contribuer à celui d'un homme qui pensait comme vous. J'aperçus en même temps le labyrinthe dont j'étais menacée et sur lequel votre générosité devait me rassurer. Je vous aimais ; mais que les préjugés sont puissants et difficiles à détruire ! L'état de fille entretenue auquel j'avais toujours vu attacher une certaine honte, me faisait peur. Je craignais aussi de mettre un enfant au monde...Il n'y avait donc que la perspective d'une misère prochaine, ou l'envie de me rendre heureuse en faisant votre bonheur, qui pussent me déterminer. (d'Argens 136)

The Comte himself employs this same term in expressing his concerns about Thérèse's situation: "Enfin cher Comte, au bout d'un mois, vous me dites un jour, assez laconiquement, que ma

situation vous avait inquiété dès le jour même que vous m'aviez connue ; que ma figure, mon caractère, ma confiance en vous, vous avaient déterminé à chercher des moyens qui pussent me tirer du labyrinthe dans lequel j'étais à la veille d'être engagée" (d'Argens 134). Were the novel's solution to the problem of the labyrinth merely a question of the Comte's assuring Thérèse an income and taking her as his lover (both of which he does), the presence of the material world in the labyrinth might seem less apparent. However, as part of his proposed arrangement, the Comte also desires that the two remove themselves from society and retreat to his rural estate: "Je suis garçon, dans la ferme résolution de ne jamais me marier, et déterminé à quitter le grand monde, dont les bizarreries commencent à m'être trop à charge, pour me retirer dans une assez belle terre que j'ai à quarante lieues de Paris" (d'Argens 134). Once she accepts his proposal and the two decamp to his provincial home, the narrative concludes within that space, suggesting that once removed from the wider world, the Comte and Thérèse remain thusly isolated.

Paradoxically, this episode of the narrative both continues to illustrate the influence of the material on Thérèse's sexual assemblage while at the same time allowing for the possibility of a partial mitigation of such effects. Despite Thérèse and the Comte's status as lovers, Thérèse remains resolutely opposed to vaginal intercourse, as she is quite terrified of pregnancy. The Comte, well aware of her lustful temperament and desirous of conventional sexual congress proceeds to convince her to ignore her fears and submit to her (and his) desires. The Comte employs a novel strategy in his seduction of Thérèse, as rather than attempting to talk her into sex, he instead wields Thérèse's own sexual assemblage against her:

Vous aimez donc Mademoiselle Thérèse, me dites-vous en plaisantant, les lectures et les peintures galantes ? J'en suis ravi : vous aurez du plus *saillant* ; mais capitulons, s'il vous plaît : je consens à vous prêter et à placer dans votre appartement ma bibliothèque et mes

tableaux pendant un an, pourvu que vous vous engagiez à rester pendant quinze jours sans porter même la main à cette partie qui en bonne justice devrait bien être aujourd'hui de mon domaine, et que vous fassiez sincèrement divorce au *manuéélisme*...Je parie ma bibliothèque et mes tableaux, contre votre pucelage, que nous n'observerez pas la continence pendant quinze jours, ainsi que vous le promettez. (d'Argens 141-142)

Thérèse, quite sure that she can control herself accepts the wager. However, rather than simply allowing her access to his collection of pornographic works, the Comte places them in Thérèse's private bed chamber, such that she might have them available at any time.¹¹² In doing so, the Comte subverts the concept of the private space, rendering it less of a protective refuge and more of a prison and does so specifically with material objects. Rather than being separated from her sexual assemblage, Thérèse now finds herself partially sequestered with it.

By decorating Thérèse's private chambers with pornography, the Comte tightens the boundaries of his mistress' sexual assemblage, all but rendering the sort of material separation that previously served as insulation against her desires impossible. This material immediacy comes to eventually manipulate Thérèse in exactly the same fashion as did the other displays of sexuality illustrated throughout the novel. When her resistance to her own nature finally falters, her actions are once again imitational: "L'imagination échauffée par les attitudes qui y étaient représentées, je me débarrassai des draps et des couvertures, et, sans réfléchir si la porte de ma chambre était bien fermée, je me mis en devoir d'imiter toutes les postures que je voyais. Chaque figure m'inspirait

¹¹² The novel explicitly mentions a number of pornographic works including the novels *Histoire de Dom Bougre*, *Portier des chartreux* (1741), *Histoire de la tourière des Carmélites* (1745), *l'Académie des dames* (1680), *Les Lauriers ecclésiastiques* (1747), *Thémidore* (1745), and *Fertillon*. She also mentions the paintings *les Fêtes de Priape*, and *les Amours de Mars et de Venus*.

le sentiment que le peintre y avait donné” (d’Argens 143). Here we see how representations of sex can enflame just as much passion as the real thing, thus further extending the sexual assemblage.

Furthermore, in addition to exciting Thérèse these material recreations of sex literally open up her otherwise insulated space. Not only does the narrator remark on having been unaware of whether or not her door was open (it was), she also notes that before striking various sensual poses, she removes the bed linens that had previously covered her. The possibility of an open door would reveal her weakening resolve to avoid masturbation, thus underlining her struggle with the wager. At the same time, uncovering herself both permits easier movement of the body, consequently facilitating the assemblic manipulation of Thérèse while also removing a barrier to her hands which nearly leads to a lapse of her resolve: “Machinalement ma main droite se porta où celle de l’homme était placée, et j’étais au moment d’y enfoncer mon doigt, lorsque la réflexion me retint. J’aperçus l’illusion ; et le souvenir des conditions de notre gageure m’obligea de lâcher prise” (d’Argens 143). Here for a moment Thérèse exercises control over her sexual desires, mastering her usual impulse and, unlike previous moments, does so uniquely for an immaterial reason: she wants to win a bet. For the briefest of instances, d’Argens’ rigid determinism softens, presenting the possibility that the material might be escapable. However this attitude soon reinserts itself, as Thérèse proves unable to resist the assemblic impact of the paintings. Ultimately, rather than masturbating she yields herself entirely to the Comte who, unbeknownst to her, witnessed the entirety of her struggle through her open door: “Quoi ! m’écrirai-je, les divinités mêmes font leur bonheur d’un bien que je refuse ! Ah ! cher amant, je n’y résiste plus. Parais, Comte, je ne crains point ton dard : tu peux percer ton amante ; tu peux même choisir où tu voudras frapper, tout m’est égal, je souffrirai tes coups avec constance, sans murmurer ; et pour assurer ton triomphe, tiens ! voilà mon doigt placé” (d’Argens 144). Thérèse’s final surrender in this scene illustrates the

paradoxical duality of d'Argens' materialism. On one hand it is through the material that an individual's sovereignty over themselves might be preserved while on the other, the material exists as the ultimate manipulative tool for subverting that very sovereignty. In this way, both the preservation of one's own agency and the manipulation of another's rely on knowledge of the assemblic nature of reality for their fulfillment. Éradice cannot escape the predations of Dirrag as a result of her ignorance despite otherwise pursuing a life defined by a strict moral code. Bois-Laurier declares herself a libertine and yet her materiality endows her with a permanent *pucelage*, both shielding her from potential side effects of her profession while at the same time robbing her from any conventional sexual pleasure. The sexual assemblage both predetermines and controls its subjects, pushing and pulling them both towards what they want as well as towards what they do not.

6.0 Conclusion

Though each assemblage considered for this dissertation approaches different subject matter from within different genres, these dissimilarities ultimately prove to be the most revelatory aspect of the power of assemblic thinking. Each assemblage studied in these chapters, corporeal, epistemological, epistolary, and sexual finds commonality in their shared materialist perspectives, either through their language, a focus on material items, or through an overall materialist ontological bent that pervades the work. When placed together, it is easy to understand how these common elements create a unified corpus of diverse materialist assemblages, each differently tuned but still oriented in the same general materialist direction. Those elements that differentiate them from one another serve to further highlight the applicability and adaptability of the assemblic model as they do not hinder the elaboration of assemblic connections despite containing elements that might otherwise confound comparison. Thus, for example, while certain elements of Crébillon's *Le sophia* problematized its inclusion into my materialism-centered assemblic analysis, other elements of that work would undoubtedly function in an assemblic analysis whose focus was oriented, say towards an investigation composed entirely of libertine texts, or as part of an assemblic study of the role 18th-century furniture in organizing and presenting 18th-century subjectivity.¹¹³ Consequently, assemblic analysis seems nearly limitless in scope and potential such that any given assemblic study must limit itself to certain shared elements to a certain degree in order to avoid the workload becoming overly burdensome and the study overly long. Yet as

¹¹³ See my introduction for a larger discussion of *Le sophia*.

much as the common textual elements between texts in an assemblic study reinforce the examination of assemblic connections, the differences also promote assemblic thinking by forcing both the scholar and the reader to consider how these variances themselves might hint at the deeper power of the assemblage.

From an epistemological standpoint, my assemblic investigations hint at the beginnings of a new epistemological construct emerging in the 18th century, one that not only manifests an awareness of assemblic connections collating relations between human and non-human elements but that since has become entirely reliant on them in order to function. The early 21st century is a moment driven by assemblic connections, above all the desire to discover and exploit them. Invisible machine-minds follow every move a user makes in the digital world, (and increasingly in the physical) seeking for the slightest insight into an individual's social status, age, income level, degree of education, political leanings, and many other things. The aims of these investigations are, from a practical perspective, largely geared towards knowing a person better in order to more efficiently sell products, yet in their elaboration and exploitation they reflect the same sort of assemblic processes imagined by certain 18th-century cultural products. They ask the strange questions, dig for the hidden connections, and try to imagine the mind of another all in order to predict the next great gap in peoples' lives that can be filled with digital or consumerist distractions. The assemblage however is not the end goal of these systems; rather they seek ultimately to transform assemblage into network, desiring epistemological certainty rather than the ambiguity of assemblic connectivity.

These multinational corporations follow similar organizational principles as did 18th-century works like the *Encyclopédie*. Vast tree-like structures classify and categorize every conceivable item that a person could buy into highly defined niches whose placement is often

controversial and heavily debated. Employees spend many hours considering relationships between words and ideas, searching for hidden connections that will allow the machine-minds to better approximate the totality of a hypothetical individual's consumer profile. This assemblic investigation isn't unidirectional, as a significant amount of the data used by these systems comes from the users themselves through the footprints of their movements in digital space. While this information is often collected somewhat clandestinely, it is just as often freely given as part of the user's own assemblic explorations into themselves, their friends and their world. Consequently, 21st-century assemblages form a vast, ever-shifting web of associations between individuals, ideas, products, art and literature, politics, health, and other elements and forces, all transferred through and interpreted by mathematically generated machine-minds, seeking to transform the chaos of the assemblage into the certainty of the Network. When something goes wrong in these systems, attempts to find the problem and solve it are often reminiscent of La Mettrie's hunt for the origins of the mind: uncertain and unorganized, bouncing from one possibility to the next until one either gets lucky or gives up. In this way we see not only the connectivity conveyed by the assemblage, but also the model's inherent uncertainty, as one can never be certain of where a connection might lead, or where a given point of failure might exist. The explorations of 18th-century thinkers like those in my dissertation suggest the scope and impact of assemblic connectivity within the 21st century, hinting at an epistemological progression from 18th-century imaginings of the cause and effect relationships between bodies, objects, ideas, ontological frameworks and beyond to the vast ruminations of machine-minds. They show that the 18th century, in addition to being a transitional moment in a shift towards a somewhat more empirically based society, also contains within itself the seeds of an ontological and epistemological revolution in connectivity, both in how this connectivity is conceived as well as in how it might be exploited.

6.1 Assemblage of Infection

As I write these words in late March and early April 2020, America and indeed the entire planet finds itself in a decidedly assemblic moment. The rise and proliferation of the COVID-19 pandemic forces every government, institution, and individual to think assemblically, not only in order to preserve one's own health and wellbeing, but as a means to protect societal structures as a whole. Vocabulary previously considered as specialized epidemiological jargon fills the airwaves, the internet, the mouths, and the minds of everyday citizens as they go about whatever limited range of activities their governments allow. Terms like fomite, r-nought, and social distancing have become everyday parlance, each highlighting an assemblic aspect of our current reality. Fomites represent one of the smallest possible nodes of epidemiological assemblic structures and seem to be one of the more important transmission vectors of the current viral crisis. *A Dictionary of Epidemiology*, defines fomite as "Articles that convey infection to others because they have been contaminated by pathogenic organisms. Examples include a handkerchief, drinking glass, door handle, clothing, and toys" (Porta 137). While previously this term was understood by those who study epidemics and infection, it has now taken on a new, individualized and highly contextualized life in the minds of individuals. Navigating the everyday world has been transformed from a near-thoughtless task into a much more deliberate action, avoiding not only close contact with others, but also with oneself. One's own body becomes implicated in the struggle against disease as individuals endeavor to avoid touching their faces in an effort to evade an infection that one might otherwise have escaped.

The R-nought or basic reproductive rate is defined in the *Dictionary of Epidemiology* as "A measure of the number of infections produced, on average, by an infected individual in the early stages of an epidemic, when virtually all contacts are susceptible" (Porta 44). This number

represents a qualified rate of assemblic elaboration, illustrating the degree to which a single node in the infected assemblage can spread the disease to others. These processes and behaviors are assemblic in that uncertainty dictates their necessity, as one can never be sure of who has touched what, when they touched it, and whether or not they spread the infection to a given surface. Uncertainty, not only of our future but of the state of our immediate, quotidian surroundings has become the (hopefully momentary) norm, recasting all of reality in an assemblic fog-of-war that paradoxically reveals fault lines in our society even as it hides so much else.

6.2 From Network to Assemblage

One particular revelation about our modern societal structures brought on by COVID-19 concerns the fragility and mutability of the networked systems that drive not only data services, but also the physical logistical networks that fuel cities and society as a whole. As we've seen across the globe in recent weeks, the globalized, networked economy has faltered, and in some cases, failed. The reverberations of these breakdowns create not only economic uncertainty at a macro level, but also lead to increased stress and anxiety for countless individuals whose lives and livelihoods rely on the continued functioning of these systems. In a sense, what we are seeing in the loss of confidence in these global supply chains is a regression from an ostensibly stable and understood network towards an uncertain, tenuous assemblage. The Director of Marketing for a chain of grocery stores in the San Francisco Bay Area writes of their troubles in securing certain items for their stores

Our stores haven't gotten a frozen load in two stores in 2½ weeks. If I could get some frozen in, I would be super happy. And I haven't seen toilet paper in a while. We're

contacting one of the vendors that services our commercial kitchen about individually wrapped toilet paper. This isn't about making money; it's about trying to get people what they need. We're going through every avenue possible to find food. Our grocery buyer has reached out to restaurant supply companies that usually supply much larger commercial-size packaging with the hope that they may have smaller can sizes. Maybe we'll get lucky.

(Draeger)

They go on to note that many other supply problems cleared up once the initial rush of panic-buying subsided, further adding to the already pervasive uncertainty around grocery shopping in the US and globally. For many individuals, the newly revealed assemblic nature of grocery shopping may likely be their most practical personal experience with this form of assemblage, eclipsed only by the assemblic awareness imposed upon the individual by those precautions taken against infection.

Deleuze and Guattari of course wrote of the ability for the rhizome structure that most resembles our notion of assemblage to transform into a more network-like tree structure, as the tree may contain a rhizome: "There exist tree or root structures in rhizomes; conversely, a tree branch or root division may begin to burgeon into a rhizome...A new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch. Or else it is a microscopic element of the root-tree, a radicle, that gets rhizome production going" (15). Yet it can be easy to forget this possibility and moments like this where networks cease to function as intended provide a stark reminder of how easily networks can transform into assemblages. Ultimately, the seeming ease with which these transformations occur underlines not only the fragility of the network, but also reveals that these kinds of categorical oscillations further complicate our understanding of assemblages and networks, making it more difficult to distinguish between them.

6.3 Networks and Imagination

As we've seen across this dissertation, much of the power of the assemblage and of assemblic thinking stems from the power of imagination. In an 18th-century context, as we saw in the introduction, imagination functions similarly to a virtual machine, creating an emulated space that, in conjunction with memory, imbues thoughts and observations with a virtual materiality. This notion facilitates the elaboration of material assemblages as it allows for the virtualization of the material that might not necessarily be present in a purely material sense. Networks on the other hand also rely on a form of imagination in order to operate, albeit of a different, more modern variety. Networks function not only as a result of curated, understood, and traceable patterns of connection, but also because of a universally held faith in both their stability and efficiency. When a manufacturer on one continent sends a shipment to a buyer on another continent, both the manufacturer and the buyer hold within their minds the certainty, or at least the expectation that the items concerned will arrive at their intended destination and be paid for by the recipient. Consequently, while networks can be traced and understood by those individuals and institutions with specific knowledge bases and skill sets, many who rely on these same networks do not possess that same understanding of their more intricate functions. For these individuals then, networks operate not as a result of a complex curated web of cause and effect, but rather because of the individual's belief that the network will function as advertised. Even pre-COVID, any person who used the network of the Internet for any length of time experienced that destabilizing moment when they clicked on a particular link, expecting particular results and instead were presented with some kind of error message. These common everyday disruptions hint at the potential for wider network breakdowns, both in the digital as well as material world.

As a result of these kinds of network failures, we must revisit our notion of network such that destabilizing events of both the minor and major sort are taken into consideration. Networks it would seem, are not only less stable than one might imagine, but they also demonstrate a tendency to fluctuate fairly rapidly between the states of network and assemblage. Sometimes, as in my example of our Internet user, the individual attempts to go back and retry the previously failed link and for whatever reason, the link functions normally when mere moments ago it did not. In cases like this, the network/assemblage delineation blurs such that it becomes difficult to decide the category within which the interconnected system belongs. Consequently, Latour's assertion that network, "now means transport without deformation, an instantaneous, unmediated access to every piece of information" becomes more of a platonic ideal of network, whereas networks as they exist practically, have a tendency to include assemblic pathways as a result of these random failures of connection (15). These elements reveal that networks, especially larger, globalized, and otherwise highly complex examples are far more assemblic than either the institutions that develop and run them or the individuals that use them would care to admit. The perfect network undoubtedly remains the goal of the vast enterprises who elaborate and control the various networks of our day, yet more and more one has the impression that the labor of transforming assemblage to network such that it does not relapse into its previous form is a Sisyphean task.

Despite this instability, networks are still a distinct category ontologically from assemblages and when networks do function as intended, they often do so invisibly. For example, while we've seen logistical networks falter and sputter the world over, the Internet has remained largely intact. Certainly, there are bandwidth issues, increased server strain and the occasional outage, but by and large the vast computer network that permeates our society has remained

whole.¹¹⁴ Much of this is due to hidden systems within the network itself that reroute information, slow or speed its transmission, or bring additional servers online to mitigate the additional stress. Humans represent important nodes in this same network and they too have found themselves reoriented in the material space even as they work to preserve the digital. Moving out of the office and working from home lessens the danger of viral infection, yet also creates its own series of challenges, as once separated professional and private spaces blur together. All these reconfigurations and examples of re-contextualization are possibly only because of the Internet itself, a curious instance of a construct being the target of labor while also providing the medium through which that labor is performed. In this way we begin to uncover a potential facet of the most successful (meaning stable) networks; they contain within themselves certain assemblic elements as part of their overall networked structure. When I say assemblic here, I refer to the ability of these networks to reroute information, reconfigure internal systems, and relocate the human elements of its networked services. The most successful and ontologically stable networks must take into account the potential for points of rupture and breakdown and design their systems with assemblic redundancies built into the network itself.

6.4 Final Thoughts

While the assemblage takes many forms, both in my work and elsewhere, its unifying feature rests in its ability to connect not only objects and individuals, but ideas, belief systems, and a multitude of other phenomena as well. In the 18th century these connections imagined bodies,

¹¹⁴ Or at least it has as of the writing of these words, April 5, 2020.

challenged ontologies, erased distances, and influenced human desire. The uncovering of assemblic imagination at work in early modern texts hints at the rise of our own networked world and its endless pursuit of new connections, meant to exploit human beings while also ostensibly empowering them. Much like the reader of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, we find ourselves drawn towards assemblic *renvois*, effortlessly perusing an infinity of information, yet never sure when we might fall into an ontological trap that will destabilize our worldview. Like La Mettrie's machine-man or the philosopher Thérèse, our appetites are forever externally stoked, not only for food and sex but also for material goods, immaterial experiences and every possible assemblic combination of these elements. This near-ubiquitous connectivity permits an ease of communication that Boufflers and Sabran may have envied, and yet as much as it brings people together, it also fosters anonymous cruelty and paradoxically isolates multitudes from their own communities. The assemblages of the 18th century echo these 21st-century contradictions as while they were often tools of exploration and enlightenment, they were just as frequently weapons of abuse and exploitation. The assemblage exists then both in the 18th as well as the 21st century as a complex construct, revealing and enlightening just as much as it manipulates and controls.

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