

Rosario Arias

University of Málaga

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6252-3956

“I Know that I Exist”: Lorna Gibb’s *A Ghost Story* as an Assemblage of Matter and Spirit¹

Lorna Gibb’s *A Ghost Story* (2015) focuses on the story of the spirit celebrity of the 1880s, Katie (and John) King, narrated by the disembodied voice of the ghost, a first-person narrative voice that moves in and out of time and space.² Her voice is everywhere, being in and out of the narration, providing comments on the spiritualist acts, exposing what she saw in séances and theatrical acts, and only intervening to make her existence meaningful and visible, and sometimes corporeal. She takes up the role of both spectator and actor when she interferes in people’s lives and possesses the body of several mediums and spiritualist believers in their séances and theatrical performances. In parallel to the spirit’s narration, Gibb’s neo-Victorian novel traces the development of Spiritualism since its beginning, from the perspective of the ghost, but also supplemented with other sources. It also deals with female spiritualists, like Florence Cook and Guppy, the Davenport brothers, as well as with the material conditions of séances. One of the first scenes of the novel portrays the spirit’s encounter with a young boy, the Scottish-born Robert Dale Owen, later to be the famous philanthropist, whose life Katie supposedly saved when he was very young and sick. From there, the spirit takes the reader to multiple settings and places (London, New York, France, Russia and Naples), moving to and fro, following Katie from spiritualist circle to psychic event (both private and public), revealing the theatrical tricks employed by Spiritualism, but also at times fuelling the spiritualist belief through her spirit interventions.

Gibb’s *A Ghost Story* is a neo-Victorian novel, mostly set in the Victorian past, but firmly grounded in our current age, as the text is made up of several computer printouts which appear on an Italian bookshop’s printer apparently without human

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² The spirit takes both female and male forms throughout the novel. However, since most of the narrative is taken up with Katie King, the female form, I will address the spirit as a she.

intervention; bits and pieces of “spirit writing” provided by the Magic Circle’s library; analyses of documents by Adam Marcus, an academic who, ill with cancer, took his own life; and correspondence between the Magic Circle’s librarian and Lorna Gibb, the academic who has taken over from Marcus, and who describes the text as “my collage (seems the best thing to call it really!)” (Gibb 295), an assemblage, in a letter she has written to the Magic Circle’s librarian, Bob Loomis. The narrative combines disparate elements and documents, and “is interspersed with real and fake material” (Gibb 2023); then, “the result is a meta-fictional ghost story which explores the boundaries of belief and scepticism”, as stated in a review of the novel (Wilson). Spanning a century and a half, the novel ends in 2013 with the spirit’s impressions of a life that she has “not lived” (Gibb 318), since she has a yearning for connection and physicality. A disembodied form, a spirit, longing for (human) physicality punctuates the novel’s clear rejection of binaries such as human/nonhuman, matter/spirit, embodiment/disembodiment. Moreover, the novel highlights the fluidity of the multiple elements (bodies, parts, terms) involved in Victorian Spiritualism, and in séances particularly, as well as in relation to the ambiguous nature of the spirit. My aim will be to examine the shifting relations between those elements, as well as the tension between human/nonhuman, matter/spirit through the lens of assemblage theory. Thus, I will discuss the protean nature of the spirit, and I will consider it a networked self that floats and inhabits bodies and places, and whose story is retrieved in a self-fashioning mode, gaining agency, and constructing her own story, but also made up of assembled materials, both fake and real, collected by different individuals. Clearly, the novel focuses not so much on the desire of the ocular, tangible (corporeal) proof that testifies to the veracity of the powers of the medium, but on the non-human form (the spirit) which manifests itself through different people and through different phenomena, shaping a “networked self”, an assemblage of matter and spirit.

Much has been written on Katie/John King, the notorious medium Florence Cook’s materialised spirit, who appeared as female or male in many séances and theatrical acts held in the States, in Great Britain and across Europe during the nineteenth century. Henry T. Child recorded one of those instances in the *Narratives of the Spirits of Sir Henry Morgan, and His Daughter Annie, usually Known as John and Katie King, Giving an Account of their Earth Lives, and Their Experiences in Spirit Life for Nearly Two Hundred Years* (1874), and in the concluding chapter, John King explains the reasons why John and Katie King appear materialised in many countries at the same time:

[Materialisation] is an artistic work requiring a knowledge of the laws by which it is performed, as well as a skill which can only be obtained by repeated practice. The materializations produced by different spirits will vary. There are numerous schools here in which this art is taught... We have been connected with schools of this kind for a long

time, and it is part of our business to go with the students wherever they may find an opportunity to practice, and assist them all we can. This is the reason why our names are so often connected with the materializations in various parts of the world. (Child 93)

William Crookes, the well-known scientist, discoverer of thallium, devoted several years to investigating Florence Cook’s materialisation powers and the real existence of the spirit Katie King, and published his findings in *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism* (1874). Trevor H. Hall and Amy Lehman, among other critics, have carried out in-depth studies on this relationship, which led to a significant controversy between science and spiritualism, in which the prestigious scientist Alfred R. Wallace also played an important part (Shortt). The groundbreaking work carried out by feminist historians in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Alex Owen, Janet Oppenheim, Ruth Brandon, Diana Barsham, on women’s role in Spiritualism, fuelled the imagination of fiction writers, and since then Victorian Spiritualism has become a staple of neo-Victorian fiction (as well as mesmerism, and the occult, broadly speaking). Particularly, the intriguing figure of Florence Cook and her alliance with William Crookes, and other scientists, captured the imagination of women writers like Michèle Roberts and Melissa Pritchard, who published *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) and *Selene of the Spirits* (1998), respectively. Unlike these novels, *A Ghost’s Story* unfolds the narrative of the existence of the spirit Katie/John King from the point of view of the spirit, in a first-person account, which runs in parallel with the narration of the history of Spiritualism since its inception, deeply ingrained in the culture of the spectacle in the nineteenth century: there were private performances, conducted in the safe space of the Victorian household, in the drawing room or parlour, where invited guests sat around a table. In addition, public performances were paying events, taking place in large halls, where the acts caused suspicion and where the audience tried to discover the ruses behind the spiritualist events, or the supernatural occurrences. However, “séances held at home were often not too different from the theatrical versions of this ritual” (Natale 44).

The Spiritualist movement evolved from disembodiment (the connection between the medium and the spirits from the afterlife was first proved to be successful through sound as seen in the Koons’ episodes in the novel) to embodiment with the popularising of spirit cabinets in the late 1860s and of materialisation mediums as with the notorious case of Florence Cook. It cannot be forgotten that contradictions lie at the heart of Victorian Spiritualism as it predicated upon the belief in the unseen, but it also necessitated and relied on the ‘ocular’, material, proof (not only auditory) to convince sceptics of the existence of the other world. This is evinced in the evolution and development of the séance, and its links with technology i.e. the use of electrical tests and photography to prove the matter of the spirit, especially when the medium had materialisation powers, as Florence Cook and Eusapia Palladino (also featuring in Gibb’s novel). Although many aspects concerning Victorian

Spiritualism and the occult have been amply discussed by critics, as seen in Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn's edited collection *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the Occult* (2012), as well as in publications by Christine Ferguson, Marlene Tromp and Patricia Pulham, to name a few, there are some areas that remain somewhat neglected, and there are other aspects that they would acquire an added meaning when approached from different angles i.e. the material turn in Victorian studies with a renewed focus on objects, and on sensory perception. Precisely, in the prologue to Kontou and Willburn's edited collection, Jennifer Tucker states that regarding Victorian Spiritualism "the past became 'present in the present' by its articulation through smells, touch, sounds and tastes" (xv). Interestingly, *A Ghost's Story* privileges sensory experience in Spiritualism through the spirit narrator's story: "In the years when I was developed enough to borrow human bodies...I learned what it is to feel the pleasure of *human touching* and the heaviness, the terrible weight of flesh that seems in contrast to its utter vulnerability" (Gibb 10; emphasis added).

This material turn has led to a consideration of Victorian materiality, bodies, and things through the lens of material studies, object-oriented ontology, and thing theory, where the emphasis is on the object having meaning, as well as on the relational nature of subjects and objects, and the relevance of sensory perception. Therefore, the Victorian fascination with the body's materiality, as well as the blurring of boundaries between subject and object, have attracted critical attention in the last twenty years. The Victorian notion that the body "as an assemblage of matter, embodied perception, and lived experience...that links the object world and the self" (Boehm 5) ties in with twentieth-century phenomenological concepts of the body, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), emphasising the affective currents between subjects and objects, embodied subjectivities, and the fluid interaction between inside and outside. In keeping with contemporary concerns, many Victorian writers and intellectuals challenged binaries as regards the human, questioning the dichotomy of mind/body: "the body has the capacity to *unmake* the human...and opens possibilities for mutable ways of being in the world, both materially and politically" (Cohen xvi; emphasis in the original). Crucially, *A Ghost's Story* shows a rejection of binaries such as human/nonhuman, matter/spirit, embodiment/disembodiment, and I contend that this tension between those elements and aspects, understood as relational and processual, can be explored from the perspective of assemblage theory, since "[a]ssemblage thus bypasses old binaries between material/discursive, form/function, and language/society by shifting the focus to relationships and interactions between elements" (Pietikäinen 236), being part of the network turn.³

³ *A Ghost's Story* easily lends itself to an examination through the framework of Jacques Derrida's hauntology, since the protagonist is a spectre, rather than a spirit, in Derrida's

The network turn was heralded by scientists like Albert-Lászlo Barabási in his model for network science at the turn of the century, as described by Ruth Ahnert et al. in *The Network Turn: Changing Perspectives in the Humanities* (2020), reflecting our networked age. However, Ahnert et al. further claim that the network turn should be considered in the humanities as our opportunity to cross disciplinary boundaries, and to bring together various disciplines when carrying out research in the humanities. More interesting, these critics’ contention is that “the critical skills native to humanistic inquiry are vital to the theorisation and critique of our networked world” (Ahnert et al. 4). Following up on this statement, I wish to argue that assemblage theory, as part of the network turn, provides an apt notion to analyse Gibb’s *A Ghost’s Story*, which, as a neo-Victorian novel, not only deals with the past, but also it mobilises current issues in a globalised, networked, world. Assemblage thinking derives from social theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as Bruno Latour who also used the image of the network in his first formulation of the concept of Actor-Network Theory, holding “the potential of connecting people across disciplines” (Rodríguez-Giralt, Marrero-Guillamón and Milstein 3). Both Deleuze and Guattari offered variants of the notion of assemblage in several works such as *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), where they acknowledged that “[a] book is an assemblage” (4), later refined by Bill Brown, the founding critic of thing theory, stating that “[t]he novel has an assemblage mode of existence” (271). Generally speaking, Deleuze and Guattari agree in defining an assemblage as involving various elements (bodies, parts, terms), that has the capacity to function by means of co-operative and shifting relations in a constant dynamic and transformative mode, both allowing for and respecting the heterogeneous nature of those elements (Deleuze and Parnet 69-70). Thus, the concept ‘assemblage’ escapes any fixed definition as what characterises the assemblage is the constant flux, an ongoing process of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, with centripetal and centrifugal forces at work (Brown 271), in permanent change, assembling and disassembling. Two important features of the assemblage cover the abstract and the concrete, that is to say, the concrete assemblage and the abstract assemblage. In short, the abstract encompasses the conditioning relations (abstract machine) or “the network of specific external relations that holds the elements together” (Nail 24),

terminology: “what distinguishes the specter or the *revenant* from the *spirit*, including the spirit in the sense of the ghost in general, is doubtless a supernatural and paradoxical phenomenality, the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible...” (Derrida 7). In fact, the theorist is obliquely referred to at the end of the novel: “*I am reminded of a philosopher and his notion of hauntology*” (Gibb 119; emphasis in the original), which shows the theoretical backdrop that supports the novel. However, as I have written on haunting and spectrality quite extensively elsewhere, I wish to provide an altogether different reading of the novel.

whereas the concrete machine refers to “the concrete elements of an assemblage [which] are the existing embodiment of the assemblage” (Nail 26).

Moreover, Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2010) further examines assemblages, advocating for the vital materiality “that flow[s] through and around us” (xii). In so doing, Bennett calls our attention to the ethical dimension and responsibility of the human towards “vibrant matter,” and develops a theory of action and “responsibility that crosses the human-nonhuman divide” (24), doing away with dichotomies and binaries (stressing non-hierarchical arrangements). The non-human spirit voice that narrates their own life story in Gibb’s novel, the first-person narrative voice, seems to represent the agentic power of vital materiality, only that it is a spirit that moves in and out of bodies, matter, objects, spaces, and, in so doing, the novel dramatises the affective currents between them. By focusing on networks of connections, the spirit shows a capacity to function by means of co-operative and shifting relations with her environment in a constant dynamic and transformative mode, thus proving the assemblage mode of her nature, and exploring further possibilities with binaries such as spirit/matter.

As regards spaces, the spirit populates various environments: Robert Dale Owen’s bedroom, Koons family’s cabin, the Davenport family’s parlour, domestic settings as well as theatrical stages, houses, palaces, countries, and continents. The spirit voice travels across space (and time): she is constantly on the move, searching for a body, and she compares herself with the incessant movements of the sea: “...the sight of the sea, which I found that I loved, as, like me, it did not physically change with the years but, like my thoughts, moved ceaselessly, incessantly” (Gibb 305). Her constant mobility facilitates border crossings, and promotes her in-between status, and involvement, in the spiritualist acts, keeping her both in proximity in the phenomenal space, but also at a distance, being disembodied.

Those shifting relations with her environment become more obvious when it comes to the dichotomy matter/spirit, whose borders are blurred in the networks of connections the spirit nurtures throughout her existence. In fact, contradictions constitute a staple of the séance, and of Spiritualism at large, where boundaries of all sorts are dissolved, notably those pertaining to matter/spirit. One specific moment illustrates this contradiction: Eusapia Palladino, the notorious Italian medium who became very popular in the nineteenth century, and who attracted the scientific interest of the Society for Psychical Research, and that of relevant names including Cesare Lombroso, managed to generate and produce spirit matter, ectoplasm, that oozed from her body in her spiritualist acts, thus representing Bennett’s agentic power of vital materiality. In fact, ectoplasm, as the interface between sitters and producer, has recently been signalled as a key factor in the history of Spiritualism when the movement reached momentum because, to a certain extent, it became “an artistic and technological avant-garde” (Vilaplana de Miguel 10). Then, ectoplasm, or spirit matter, a term given by the occultist Dr. Richet in 1894 (Gunning 56), has been

interpreted as a pre-historic cinematic technology of the time, as part of new media practices, “in terms of embodiment and interactivity” (Vilaplana de Miguel 10), and in relation to “expanded modes of vision which refuse the supremacy of the eye as the only visual organ” (Vilaplana de Miguel 11). The novel portrays several fictional representations of Palladino’s mediumistic powers and of the ectoplasm she was able to produce:

Mme Curie knelt in front of Eusapia’s wide-open legs and gently began to pull the ectoplasm that was coming forth...still thought about the vaginal fluid which was starting to form a much more recognisable shape. I thought of a real birth, the outline of a human child...and the substance rose away from Mme Curie and took form in the air. But I could not hold it there for long because the sensations were overwhelming. (Gibb 275).

Thus, ectoplasm breaks down dichotomies such as inside/outside, matter/spirit, occupying a liminal position between the spirit and the human world. In extruding ectoplasm, Palladino gives birth to, shapes and resuscitates, in an embodied form, the dead spirit in front of the sitters at the spiritualist séance. Clearly, the séance, as an intertwined space of production of flows, and multiplicity of bodies, spaces, matter, objects, allowed for the circulation of vital materiality between the medium-producer and the sitters.

Critics like Marlene Tromp have considered the sexual titillation and connotations in the dark room, and this can be seen particularly in the novel when the spirit crosses gender identity and manifests as both male, John, and female, Katie King. Harsh attacks on the spiritualist movement, as well as against the authenticity of spirit phenomena, were based on alleged accusations of sexual promiscuity between the medium and the sitters. An analysis of the body of the medium in terms of desire deserves closer attention, especially in the case of Palladino where the spirit takes on a male identity, thus depicting gender fluidity. The existing sexual titillation between Palladino and the spirit John King contributes to the appeal of her spiritualist acts in several countries, including Italy and France:

Part of our appeal to the Parisian séance crowds lay in the scandalous idea that I was a male spirit entering a female medium...the idea that she might welcome a male phantasm into her shocked men with its impropriety but made her a huge success with women of a similar age, who seemed to revel in the heavy sexual metaphor made respectable within the setting of a séance. (Gibb 269)

Desire flows in the novel in manifold ways: the spirit nurtures the desire to be tangible, physical, throughout the narration, but crucially, the desire to have had an existence: “*I am obsessed by my desire to find a sign of what I have known, a trace of my existence*” (Gibb 319; emphasis in the original). However, this statement also punctuates another reading concerning desire, and circulation of feelings in

the dark room, the desire that blurs the boundaries between flesh and spirit and between self and other: “[d]isruption of identity within Spiritualism...impacted notions of womanly identity and roles...Spiritualism’s assault on the permanence and rigidness of the boundaries between spirit//matter and self/other disrupted other social dichotomies...like those between the mind/body, spiritual/sexual...” (Tromp 27). This deconstruction of dichotomies must be understood, then, as producer of meaning, and transformation, from the point of view of assemblage theory. Thus, desire has an added significance if we turn to assemblage thinking as “assemblages are desired” (Müller 29), and they always have a corporeal existence. This refers to the concrete assemblage, or the embodiment of the assemblage: the spirit is constantly moving in and out the bodies, sometimes having a corporeal existence; in other words, a concrete assemblage. Nonetheless, the spirit’s nature is also dictated by the disembodied existence of her networked relations as an abstract assemblage.

Lastly, following Brown’s statement that “[t]he novel has an assemblage mode of existence” (Brown 271), Gibb’s *A Ghost’s Story* displays such an assemblage mode of existence, from a formal point of view, as seen in the fragmentary structure of the novel. It is made up of bits and pieces, penned by human beings and non-human forms (the spirit), that reads like “a collage”, an assemblage (Gibb 295). This composite text assembles auto/biography, history and fiction, where the reader has access to archival sources, private writings and letters, some of them are real and others are fake, all of them becoming tangible proofs of the existence of the spirit on earth. The result does not cause a distancing effect, as the material interacts with the spirit’s narration but never acquires a predominant role in the novel. Thus, *A Ghost’s Story* moves beyond postmodernist techniques and flattens out the distance between past and present, subject and object, spirit and matter. Here the past is made tangible and conjured up by the dis/embodied, fluid, presence of an absence: the spirit Katie King, who takes ownership of her own story in this first-person narration (“A Ghost’s Story”). In so doing, privileging the disembodied I/eye challenges traditional assumptions of what an autographical narrative should be like, providing a composite I, a networked self, an assemblage. The non-human form (the spirit) manifests herself through different people and through different phenomena, shaping a networked self through performance. As seen before, the psychic event, or the séance, is understood as a spectacle, a staged performance (either public or private), where spectatorship becomes multiple: sitters and audience are spectators, the reader of the text(s) takes up the role of the spectator, and, importantly, the spirit appears as spectator of the séances and the spiritualist acts; all of them representing an embodied eye/I, excepting the dis/embodied I of the spirit: “the embodied I of theatrical spectatorship is grounded...in an embodied eye” (Garner 4; emphasis in the original). Thus, the spirit narrator plays with and deconstructs the embodied I/eye of the theatrical performance.

Zizi Papacharissi has lucidly explored the concept of “networked self” in a series of recent edited volumes covering related themes such as identity, online platforms, love, birth, life, death, and artificial intelligence. The second of the series, entitled *A Networked Self and Platforms, Stories, Connections* (2018), delves into storytelling “in the contemporary networked digital environment” (Papacharissi 1), since we, as human beings, survive and make sense of our identity through narration and social connections. Following this critic’s contention that “[p]eople tell these stories on spaces that function as platforms for performativity” (4), the spirit similarly tells her own life narrative in a performative way, to make sense of her identity in a relational mode. Her existence is defined only through relations or networks of connections, through assemblage.⁴ In fact, the disembodied, non-human, nature of the spirit engages with human interaction through dissolving body boundaries when possessing those Victorians who really believed in the spirit world, becoming an assembled/networked entity. The spirit only succeeds on a few occasions: with Florence Cook: “this time I found that, with great concentration, and for only the briefest of times, I was able to inhabit her physical body. I fixed my attention on the rise and fall of her breathing, and then, as if I had been inhaled, I felt myself to be the air that entered her” (Gibb 189–90); with Eusapia Palladino, as seen above, and with Eliza White when she finally manages to have a physical contact with Robert Dale Owen: “And then it happens. I become her. For no more than a few seconds, but I do. I concentrate hard, wish with all my will and then I find I am touching his sleeve, its stiff fabric. The heaviness of a human body imprisons me and I do not know how long it can be this way” (Gibb 218). As seen here, the spirit’s voice acquires a poignancy and some kind of (human) feeling with her yearning for connection and physicality.⁵ If Papacharissi affirms that today “human identity...is performed and networked” (4), it could be argued that the spirit’s identity likewise is performed and networked in the narrative, showing parallels and dis/continuities between the Victorian world and our networked age.

In conclusion, Gibb’s neo-Victorian novel impinges on the fluid relations between matter/spirit, embodiment/disembodiment, subject/object. I have claimed that the notion of the assemblage, as part of the network turn, helps us see this novel as showing an assemblage mode of existence because of the spirit, a non-human entity, whose disembodied voice shapes the narrative, asserting her existence only through connection and relations. The in-between nature of the spirit has been tackled as a networked self, who constructs her own story in a self-fashioning mode, and made

⁴ I am indebted here to Manuel Hueso for his perceptive comments on this section of the essay.

⁵ This is especially clear in her constant devotion to Robert Dale Owen, whose figure looms the narrative from the very beginning until he suffers a mental breakdown, and the spirit decides to leave him alone.

up of assembled materials, both fake and real, collected by different individuals. In addition, assemblage thinking allows us to see beyond static forms and frameworks, by undoing binaries and dichotomies, to offer alternative ways to see the complexities of the past and today's networked age, thus offering a methodological tool to examine multiplicities, relational forms, entanglements and ongoing processes (Pietikäinen). In this sense, *A Ghost's Story* both stages Victorian preoccupations with networked ideas between subjects and objects, as well as addresses dis/continuities between the Victorian past and our current concerns in new and unexpected ways.

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Abstract: Lorna Gibb's *A Ghost Story* (2015) focuses on the story of the spirit celebrity of the 1880s, Katie (and John) King, narrated by the disembodied voice of the ghost, a first-person narrative voice that moves in and out of time and space. The spirit takes the reader to multiple settings and places (London, New York, France, Russia and Naples), following Katie from spiritualist circle to psychic event (both private and public), revealing the tricks employed by Spiritualism, but also at times fuelling the spiritualist belief through her spirit interventions. *A Ghost Story* is a neo-Victorian novel, mostly set in the Victorian past, but firmly grounded in our current age, as the text consists of the spirit's autobiographical narrative as well as several documents and texts, both fictional and real. This way, the novel highlights the fluidity of the multiple elements (bodies, parts, terms) involved in Spiritualism, and in séances particularly, as well as in relation to the ambiguous nature of the spirit. In this chapter I discuss the protean nature of the spirit as a networked self, whose story is retrieved in a self-fashioning mode, gaining agency, and constructing her own story, but also made up of assembled materials, collected by different individuals. Then, I demonstrate that the novel shows an assemblage mode of existence, as part of the network turn.

Keywords: Neo-Victorianism; Spiritualism; ghost; Lorna Gibb; assemblage; networked self