In the foregoing, I developed a performative constructionist theory and tested it on a variety of literary texts. Expanding the theories of Austin, Searle, Derrida, Althusser, Kristeva, Hillis Miller, and Butler, among others, and applying them to the reading of American literary texts, I have differentiated between two large types of performative mechanisms: (i) strong or logocentric and (ii) discursive. (i) I call strong or logocentric those cases of performativity, explored originally and overwhelmingly by linguistic speech act theories, where the word or the performative utterance is “strong,” or binding: it brings about changes, or seems to bring about changes, in the world we experience as real. These are performative constructions of “reality” (or “things” in the Foucauldian sense). (ii) I call and describe as discursive those cases of performativity, explored by poststructuralist theories of literature and culture, whose exclusive context is language and other systems of signifiers. These are performative constructions of the subject, for it is ultimately the participants of discourse who get made, so to speak, through discourse.

I see two reasons for the joint yet differentiated discussion of these two types of performativity. First, they have become the objects of attention of two epistemically disparate theoretical approaches, theories of language, pragmatic theories, and speech act theories, on the one hand, and poststructuralist theories of literature and culture, on the other. Second, the performative mechanisms which I identified in literary texts as logocentric or strong seem to always take this trajectory to discursive construction. As I emphasized in the first chapters discussing instances of the logocentric version of performativity, changes by the “power of the word” are not made directly in spatial-temporal reality (be it historical or narrated); the strong or logocentric performative does not bring about “things” in the Foucauldian sense, or “outside the text” (the hors-texte) in the Derridian sense, as had been assumed before the poststructuralist paradigm change. In fact, only “words” (and not “things”) change even in the strongest logocentric cases; it is in this sense and for this reason that whatever is brought about by performative mechanisms can be interpreted as catachresis. At the same time, one can also claim that although this entity is made in discourse, it can depart from discourse metaleptically, to find its context of operation in the “real”
They Aren’t, Until I Call Them

world (which, in my case studies, is either the historical world of historical texts or the narrated world of fictional texts).

Performative constructions of subjectivities form a neat class of social construction cases: they are such where the conceptual category interacts with the thing itself. For example, the concept of “womanhood” affects women, their construction and self-construction. Therefore, the subject is typically textual; it is a discursive construction in support of the Derridian thesis refuting outside-the-text existence. The subject’s textuality is evidenced by the fact that it can construct itself through performative mechanisms; in the example cited above, woman makes herself into woman by quoting the ideal of womanhood. As I have demonstrated in my work, the subject is able to metaleptically (re)enter the physical world, the hors-texte, as text. As such, performativity has the ability to signal the borderline, ambivalent and receding, between text and outside-the-text.

While accepting social construction in the case of discursive subjectivity, I also critique the fashionable theories of social construction. Indeed, as I emphasize, only in those cases can we talk about the social and discursive constructedness of “things” where these things can be said to interact with their conceptual categories, binary categories in particular. In my work I explore the social constructedness of subjectivities as inflected by supposedly binary identity markers, considering them contingent cases, whose contingency is well demonstrated by performatively analysis. I read texts where gender, womanhood in particular, sexuality, and “race” get performed. I differentiate between the performance of gendered, sexualized, and raced subjectivities, where the subject performs by following existing norms, and performative subjectivities, where social norms are resisted and the subject produced does not fit into well-rehearsed roles. I present both these types of cases as testifying to the claim that subjects do not pre-exist discourse but are produced in performance and performative processes. As such, they are catachreses, signifiers without pre-existing signifieds, which might move metaleptically from discourse into the physical world, where they behave as if they were signifieds, when actually they retain all along their inbuilt discursivity.

Why does all this matter? Probably because these issues concern some truly pertinent questions, which also cut very deep into our postmodern culture. Performativity offers a new angle on how we perceive the nature of the reality around us and on how we comprehend our becoming who we are. It contributes to our understanding of the constructedness of the real and the reality of the constructed world, and of how we can know, if at all, where the boundaries are. It also helps us understand how man is different (or not different) from woman, white from black, straight from gay, as well as understand the degree to which such difference is given and the degree to which is it done, performed, or played. Performativity provides us with the scripts which we follow when we “do” gender, race, and sexuality—and leaves us ponder whether we can “not do”
gender, race, and sexuality. What if these scripts were only scripts, without an “original” referent—signifiers without signifieds? What if there is no “original” behind the many copies of our performances?

And finally, performativity, whether the performative construction of the “real” or performative subjectivity, tells a whole lot about how we live and think, how we act, how we participate in acts, how we live through language. Understanding the discursive subject, whether brought about by performance or performative processes, will give a new meaning to the idea of Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem, or the Shakespearean topos of “[t]his wide and universal theatre,” where we are all actors playing many parts.

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man, in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.
(As You Like It II, vii)

Because this is, indeed, what, knowingly or unknowingly, human beings do and enjoy doing, whether “out there” in the “real world” or in the textual world of literature: acting and performing, putting on masks and toying with masquerade, playing and replaying, imitating and inventing. Because performative subjectivity is really just another name for our ever-present—and all-pervasive—comédie humaine.