CSW recently organized a panel discussion to precede a performance of Wendy Wasserstein’s final play *Third* at the Geffen Playhouse in Westwood, California. In the play, Laurie Jameson, a professor of English literature at an Ivy League-type college in New England, gives vent to her liberal views on the canon. In an analysis of *King Lear*, for example, she castigates the virtuous Cordelia while championing Lear’s bloodthirsty daughters, Regan and Goneril. When faced with an athletic student who appears to be the scion of a wealthy family, she assumes he is a “dumb jock.” When the young man, whose nickname is “Third,” turns in a thoughtful paper on *King Lear*, she accuses him of plagiarism. Consequently, Jameson is forced to re-examine her role as professor, her liberal politics, and herself.

Wasserstein’s satirical portrayal of a feminist classroom offered a perfect opportunity to discuss issues related to performance studies and feminist pedagogy. Frinde Maher, Professor of Education at Wheaton College, and Jill Dolan, Zachary T. Scott Family Chair in Drama at University of Texas at Austin, were the panelists.

The morning before the panel, Professor Maher kindly agreed to chat about the trajectory of feminism and the changing role of feminist pedagogies in the university.
How has performance studies affected the development of feminist theory?

Feminist theory has gone through a lot of changes in the past twenty years. In the early 1980s, feminist theory was all about discovering women and reversing the bad things about women that Western literature, history, and culture seemed to focus on when they did focus on women. This was followed by the discovery of separate identities available (black women, women of color, so on and so forth). Deconstructive and postmodern approaches and all the other anti-essentialist moves in feminist theory have created ideas about identity that actually mark it as in flux, relational, situational, contingent, and all the other things that deconstruction does when confronted with the unitary subject.

Feminist theory is now contending with global feminisms in a way that it didn’t even five years ago. The transnational and transsexual movements have taken over and have made the question of identities even more contingent, fluid, and up for grabs in feminist theory. Judith Butler says there is no identity except as we continue to perform it and get challenged through it to keep re-identifying ourselves.

**If identity is so fluid, why declare that your pedagogy is “feminist”?**

Theory provides a framework for the classroom, and practitioners of feminist pedagogies are seeking to explore and dismantle these structures of inequality. Regardless of discipline, the feminist classroom is a place for interrogating those discourses that carry those structures into people’s heads and lives. In my teaching, I pay much more attention to language and ideology because of deconstructive theory, because of people like Judith Butler, Joan Scott, and Linda Martin Alcoff. It’s called “feminist” because attention to gender, race, class, age, or sexuality as categories for interpretation don’t happen in other places. Feminist pedagogies mark the classroom as a zone for interrogating those inequalities.

You can not engage in something as theoretically dense and complex as the kind of pedagogical approaches I’m talking about unless you stipulate in the classroom that different perspectives are going to be heard and that the students carry those perspectives, which is why giving lectures doesn’t work. What is interesting to me is the filters available in students’ difference that interpret the text. Everyone reads the text in a different way.

That is the locus of the pedagogical moment. The more diverse your student body is, the better, but even when classes are homogeneous, to mark where students are coming from in relation to the text, and then to explicate where they can go in relationship to the text around these issues of language, difference, deconstruction, and so on, is where feminist pedagogy gains its power.
How do you defuse the potential for reverting to assumptions about the students?

People don't like the idea that who is in front of you matters because it is all about the text. Well, it’s not. It’s about relationships that are constructed around the text. At the end of a semester in which I had been doing everything I could think of about identity—how to construct, how to deconstruct it, how to think about it, what do all of these issues tell us about the way the world operates—a Dominican student said to me, “Okay, I get it.” She went up to the blackboard, drew a vertical line, and said, “At Wheaton College [which has a predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle-class student body] in Norton, Massachusetts, I am black or a woman of color.” And then she drew a line. “In New York City, where I live, I am Dominican.” She drew another line down. “In the Dominican Republic when I go home, I'm a gringo. I’m white.” She was marking a journey in which the deeper she went into her origins, the more white she became, and the deeper she went into white America, the more woman of color she became. She wouldn't have said that at the beginning of the semester.

Since many of these courses revolve around becoming more intimate with these minute, relational negotiations of identity, how do you attempt to garner a comparable level of reflexivity in someone whose perspective falls closer to the norm? I’ve been doing this work for about 27 years. The problem in the feminist classroom used to be evoking the voices of women and students of color, including their perspectives, doing the homework, finding the texts, learning how to teach *The Bluest Eye*. Now, the most important problem in feminist pedagogy is excavating the position of privilege and getting those who occupy positions of power to recognize how other people’s marginality is a function of their grabbing and holding onto the center. I have a lot of material that suggests that white students become, at best, very sympathetic. They understand it intellectually, but they don’t identify with the position of privilege. They do not recognize their own complicity in the frameworks of inequality.

I attended a talk on teaching *Boys Don't Cry*. The speaker read at great length from a journal entry by a white male student whose take on the film was to blame Hilary Swank’s character, Brandon. “If Brandon hadn’t lied about her sex, then everything would have been fine.” I was on the edge of my seat waiting for the speaker to tell us how he handled it, and he didn’t. He only said, “This is what I am dealing with. Here’s the journal entry.”

How would you have dealt with it?

You have to go back to the text: the film and the purposes of the filmmaker. You have to ask the students to reflect on the creation of this
fictional character. What dynamics in this society are going on? Why would she choose to become a male? Instead of fixating on victim and blame, go back to the social/cultural framework that is producing the story so that the students can begin talking about the film and the conditions that would create the need to tell this story. Not only is it a matter of excavating why the film was made in the first place, you also have to ask, “Why did you choose to teach it? What did you think was going to happen? Why do you want the students to encounter this film under your care?”

You need to think through for yourself what your goal is in teaching this film. Is it just supposed to be that the students are outraged?

Why do you think paying close attention to the text is still important?

If you are going to teach students to explicate how society works, if you are going to use this work to make the world a better place, then you have to be really careful what vehicles you choose. It is easy to teach King Lear, for example, because King Lear is in the canon and it is an important moment in Western culture. You can pay attention to language and the character development and never get to what King Lear should mean today. In the realm of feminist pedagogy, if you’re teaching King Lear because you want to talk not only about the language, not only the relationships, but the wider engagement with issues of life and death that Shakespeare is writing about, then you have to have an idea in advance of what that encounter will mean for your students and what you want it to mean for your students. Otherwise, you should not teach it.

You should not teach Boys Don’t Cry unless you are prepared for a constellation of opinions. And then you have to figure out how handling that constellation of opinions is going to get you to the place where your students will see Boys Don’t Cry as an evocation of a certain kind of viciousness in American popular culture that you want them to engage with. Otherwise, don’t teach it. And don’t expect that everyone will love it.