

# OPEEP\_ Empowering Incarcerated...th Mary Thomas and Tiyi Morris

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## SPEAKERS

Mary Thomas, Tiyi Morris, Eva Dale, David Staley

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### T Tiyi Morris 00:04

And if we recognize that dominant ideologies emerge from perspectives, normative perspectives of whiteness and maleness and heterosexuality, then when we bring in those oppressed voices and allow students to understand that their lived experiences have value, and then that can be the basis for creating new theories and new perspectives, then that empowers and transforms the way they see the world and themselves.

### E Eva Dale 00:28

From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences, with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

### D David Staley 01:03

Joining me today in the ASC Tech Studios is Tiyi Morris, Associate Professor of African American and African Studies at the Newark Campus, and Mary Thomas, an Associate Professor in the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. They are co-directors of the Ohio Prison Education Exchange Project. Dr. Morris is the author of "Womanpower Unlimited and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi", and Dr. Thomas is the co-editor of "Settling the Boom: The Sites and Subjects of Bakken Oil". Dr. Morris, Dr. Thomas, welcome to Voices.

T Tiyi Morris 01:41

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

D David Staley 01:43

Well, what brings the two of you together is the Ohio Prison Education Exchange Project, and I'm very interested to learn more about this project.

M Mary Thomas 01:43

So our project, which we refer to as OPEEP, is aiming to expand the number of courses that we are able to offer through OSU, through five campuses, at area prisons, and so, we take campus students to learn alongside incarcerated students. Right now we're working in three central Ohio prisons, and in time we'd like to be able to offer degree options for those incarcerated students at ORW, the Ohio Reformatory for Women in Marysville.

T Tiyi Morris 02:21

At the heart of our project is increasing access to quality higher education for incarcerated individuals, because we believe that access to quality higher education is a human right, and we want to make sure that as a land grant institution, that we are including all people in Ohio in this mission to increase access.

D David Staley 02:39

What's that access look like? What are you doing as part of this project?

M Mary Thomas 02:43

Right now we're emphasizing trying to draw in as many faculty as we can to teach in prison classrooms, and also letting students at all Ohio State campuses know about the classes so that they can find these offerings and have this experience. Part of what we're also doing, then, is to train faculty in our mission and in the practices and pedagogies of prison education, and our mission very much emphasizes Black feminist pedagogies and principles in order to emphasize a social justice approach to education, and also to think about how we can decolonize higher education to provide more radical inclusion for all Ohioans.

D David Staley 03:23

When you say "train faculty in prison education" - what's involved in that, what does that mean?

**T** Tiyi Morris 03:30

It is getting faculty to rethink how they approach communicating information to their students, and to really think about who those individuals are there in that space, in the classroom with them, realizing that many of the individuals who are incarcerated may not have the traditional educational trajectory of the typical undergraduates that they encounter. So, creating a space that is inclusive, one that is democratic in its transference of knowledge, and one that really values the lived experiences of all students, and really all individuals who are participating in that educational space.

**M** Mary Thomas 04:04

One thing that we're also doing is not assuming that all faculty understand what it means to have a mission forward educational project. So, we are including people from all kinds of different disciplines, from math, earth sciences, psychology, women's, gender, sexuality studies, English, etc. And so, we need to not assume that we have a common, you know, framework for how we teach, in fact, and so that's really a big part of what we want to do, is to create that common experience of teaching in a space like a prison because that is fundamentally confronting oppression in a way that we don't necessarily do in our campus teaching, although we would argue that we should in all of our teaching, but that's because we're grounded in feminist practices in our own work and our own teaching styles. So, we're trying to tone the project through that emphasis, and also to allow faculty to have a peer network so that they can go to each other and get good practices, you know, experience to be able to talk about what they're experiencing through their teaching, because it also fundamentally changes us as teachers. It's not just a student experience, it's also a teaching experience, and that, we think, will come to have a bearing on all the classes we teach, not just classes in the prison space. So, we really want to be able to resculpt campus spaces through our project, and not think about this as something that just happens off campus in prison classrooms.

**T** Tiyi Morris 05:32

So, our disciplines are based on bringing people from the margins to the center and really expanding the scope of study and including those marginalized and oppressed voices, and so what we want to get other faculty to do is to decolonize their curricula, and do the same regardless of what their discipline is.

**D** David Staley 05:50

When you say "decolonize", explain to us what that means.

**M** Mary Thomas 05:54

I think that many of us who come from humanities disciplines understand that the legacies of knowledge and the legacies of higher education, of teaching and learning, come out of a colonial history. Neither Tiyi nor I would have been able to teach at Ohio State University

decades ago, right? It's a very recent history that our voices are actually able to be a part of the project of higher education. But we also need to remember that it's not just about our subjectivities being in campus space that can decolonize education, but it's also rethinking what we consider to be canon, what is a valid subject that we should teach our students to really challenge how we're thinking about what students need to know, right? And that way, we also center subjectivities, experiences, histories, theories, voices, that might not already be present in higher learning; for example, offering incarcerated students a platform to claim their own voices as theorists.

**D** David Staley 06:55  
As...

**M** Mary Thomas 06:55  
Theorists.

**D** David Staley 06:56  
Theorists. How so, in what ways?

**M** Mary Thomas 06:59  
Theory is grounded in one's perspective and position in the world. An act of decolonial thinking is to frame theorists' own subjectivities as a part of what they do, so that we don't then come to understand and normalize existing theories as universal, because they do come from colonial legacies of exclusion, marginalization, dispossession of land, dispossession of one's value in the world. And I think people who are incarcerated know that only too well, but they haven't been given necessarily a platform to understand their experience as having a valid power of knowledge, to be able to put it into a different way of understanding.

**T** Tiyi Morris 07:39  
And if we recognize that dominant ideologies emerge from perspectives, normative perspectives of whiteness and maleness and heterosexuality, then when we bring in those oppressed voices and allow students to understand that their lived experiences have value, and then that can be the basis for creating new theories and new perspectives, then that empowers and transforms the way they see the world and themselves.

**M** Mary Thomas 08:03  
I think one thing that we center as well in our teaching is a critique of carceral spaces of learning, and by carceral I mean that we center punishment, right? So one thing that I always talk to my students about is even just how they come into the classroom afraid, worrying about

disappointment, worrying that they're going to sit in the wrong place, worrying that they're not going to understand the syllabus, and all of that is taught in public... in all education from the very beginning of schooling, from preschool. We're taught that education is a site of punishment, of expectations that are always constantly, maybe, we're going to fail to meet, right? So, there's that anxiety that is girded by this threat of punishment. And so, if we can begin to, you know, rethink about how we teach our students and to challenge and push against these carceral ideas, that punishment is always there waiting, then they begin to understand that teaching and learning and being in community with others who are very different from them can be a practice of abolition, can be a way for us to think about society that's not framed around punishment, but rather around relationality, around connection, around elevating other voices and perspectives, and around making sure that we diminish oppression in our world, right? Our project is about eliminating suffering and about creating spaces for thriving.

**T** Tiyi Morris 09:23

And that process also challenges the way that we typically think about how knowledge is transferred. So, in the classroom, we typically think about a professor standing at the front, lecturing and imparting their knowledge to the students, and the students are these open vessels that just soak it all up. In our classrooms, we think about the way that knowledge can be transferred from student to student, from teacher to student, and from student to teacher, and really taking that whole educational process as a collective endeavor that is built on community making and then empowerment collectively.

**M** Mary Thomas 09:56

One thing that's really unique about our classes is the intergenerational learning that happens. This is something that often that campus students don't experience because so many of our campus classrooms are made up of people of similar ages. We get the occasional 60 Plus or non-traditional student, as we refer to them in our classes, but in the classes we teach in the prisons, we have people who are in their 60s and 70s - we have people who are 18, right? And across the classroom then, you have such a rich exchange of knowledge across intergeneration, across racial categories, we have many more Black students in our classes than we do, certainly, on the Columbus campus. We have gender diversity, sexual diversity, we create space to be able to talk about how all of these experiences impact learning. But, one of the things my students have talked about is just how they didn't really expect... like, they were so worried about going to prison to take a class, they weren't thinking about the fact that so many of their classmates would be a lot older than them. But that's one thing that they always walk away realizing, that they learn a lot from those older people, and the older people are delighted to be learning with youngsters. Many of them are parents, and they take what they're learning in our classes back to their conversations with their children, and it's a way to connect with their kids and in ways that they hadn't been able to do before they took a class with us.

**T** Tiyi Morris 11:14

And despite those generational differences, they also see similarities in their experiences within the educational system. So, recognizing how, regardless of the decades between their schooling experiences, they were miseducated in the same way.

**D** David Staley 11:30

You were talking about punishment, that classrooms, since we start school, seem to be sites of punishment. Does that include grading, and what does grading look like in the spaces that you've established?

**M** Mary Thomas 11:42

Grading is really... I mean, one thing that we should emphasize is to any faculty out there who would like to get involved is that you don't have to do everything exactly like we do it. We provide frameworks for thinking about pedagogy. Some course material is easier to ungrade than others, it really depends on the faculty and the subject you're teaching.

**D** David Staley 12:02

Define ungrading a course.

**M** Mary Thomas 12:03

Ungrading... I don't know if I feel comfortable defining ungrading, it's a new word people are using to talk about ways to stop evaluating student work through these kind of expected metrics, but to instead offer students multiple opportunities to engage with course material that's not so highly evaluative in a hierarchy.

**D** David Staley 12:22

Learning outcomes, right.

**M** Mary Thomas 12:24

Yeah, well learning outcomes...I'm a true believer of learning outcomes, actually, but it's how we measure the learning outcomes, which doesn't necessarily need to be done in this strictly hierarchical way. For instance, I am much more interested in seeing a student's progress over the semester, rather than what grade they get on an assignment. So, I really tend to deemphasize grades as a way to evaluate, but you know, people have different philosophies about how they approach grading. But, I do think that one thing that we want our faculty to have in common is to understand that the space of the classroom can be really different if we think about what we want to accomplish there and how we want to bring voices in, and then I think it's a natural place to go, next, to think about how you're then evaluating your students.

**D** David Staley 13:12

The source of anxiety for my students oftentimes has to do with grading and notions of perfection, right? I have to get an A, if I get anything other than an A, I failed, and they're terrified of failure.

**M** Mary Thomas 13:24

I don't blame them. This is a cruel world for young people, and they are actually being evaluated all the time in ways that our generation never had to contend with. Their records are much more public than ours ever were, they have lasting imprints in the memory of... digital memory is forever. And I think that students are outperforming each year, they are amazing, they do so much work, and they are so brilliant, they know so much more, it seems to me, every year. But, I don't think that that means they should be anxious about what they know. One of my jobs, I think, is to let them know just how much they already know, but if we think about joining together in our knowledge, think about elevating our knowledge through the collective experience, then we can try to have different kinds of outcomes to improve the world, because feminism teaches us that social movements are necessary for change.

**T** Tiyi Morris 14:16

And I think those pressures are there for the incarcerated students too, because they feel like they have a lot to prove that they deserve to be in that space, that they deserve to be learning and working alongside college students, that they have to demonstrate that they have the intellectual capacity to work on par with those students. And so, I think there's anxiety for them as well.

**D** David Staley 14:36

Tell me more about the Ohio State college students that are going into these spaces, that are taking these classes as well. How many of them, what's their experience?

**T** Tiyi Morris 14:45

We try to have an even number of students, incarcerated students and campus students in each class. So, ideally, that would be sixteen of each. We have students from a variety of majors, we have students from a variety of campuses, and across disciplines, we have faculty teaching in the Fall in English and psychology, women's studies.

**M** Mary Thomas 15:06

I think our campus students find us because they're interested in making a change in the world, and they are interested in not being afraid of being in new spaces, they are interested in pushing themselves and getting outside of the campus space into new areas of learning. I think that with the Black Lives Matter movement over the last few years or decades that students are also more aware of the oppressive criminal justice system in the United States. They're more cognizant of harmful policing practices leading to over incarceration in our country, and I think

that they're bringing that awareness to their college education, they want to know what to do with the passion they have. And so, our classes provide them a space to be able to apply their passion in a real way, it's not just about learning about it, they're actually doing it, they're meeting people who are really different, they're going into context where they're learning behind a barbed wire fence and feeling what that is like. They often contend with the guilt of having to leave their incarcerated classmates behind, so that's something that they always are talking together with each other about, what that experience is offering to them. But, we're very careful in our faculty training, and also in how we talk to our students, that we never settle with this idea that they are there to learn from their incarcerated students - they are there to learn with other students who are incarcerated, right? It's not a field trip, this class is not a field trip. We always talk about how to contend with the site, but also to make sure the site doesn't determine our relations once we're there and learning together. And even though many of our classes are not specifically about incarceration, because we are in that space, students learn that material, you know, firsthand, and from talking with their incarcerated classmates.

D

David Staley 16:57

You were both talking about resculpting campus spaces, I guess, taking lessons or experiences from OPEEP and bringing them to our campus - in what ways, how have you been resculpting our spaces?

M

Mary Thomas 17:11

OPEEP is a campus space, and so one thing that we want to emphasize is our incarcerated students are enrolled at The Ohio State University, they receive credit, they are here. They may not be here in body, but they're definitely of our campus, they are part of our campus. We also want to make sure that our campus is more welcoming to families that are touched by incarceration. Most of our students, almost all of our students, will return home to their communities, they may want to finish degrees on our campuses. We want to make it easier for them to access our campus spaces, our classrooms, enrollment. We're working to ban the felony conviction disclosure box upon enrollment, that's the "Ban the Box" initiative. Ohio State does not now require felony disclosure for admissions, but it does for enrollment, and so we're working to get rid of that process. We're also working to make sure that we have policies around inclusion that aren't just focused on those affected by incarceration, but also thinking about what racial justice movements we need to have on campus so more students can imagine themselves in the Buckeye nation.

D

David Staley 18:20

How has OPEEP affected or changed either or both of you?

T

Tiyi Morris 18:26

It has been amazing. Teaching with OPEEP was my first introduction into the carceral system. It was something that I wanted to do for a long time, but didn't have the time or really the opportunity to engage in working with incarcerated individuals. But, I saw this opportunity as a



way to connect theory and practice, and thinking about the discipline of Black studies or African American and African Studies and knowing that it needed to be connected to improving the human condition, uplifting the community in some way. And so, this is how... this is what brought me to working with incarcerated individuals. And the changes that I had to make to my curriculum because of teaching in the prison are sometimes things that I bring back to my classes on campus, it really makes you rethink how to be completely inclusive to people who don't have the same type of experience that the majority of your students do and how you need to transform your pedagogy or transform your curriculum in order to make sure that it is fully accessible to all of your students.

M

Mary Thomas 19:28

I think one thing that I've noticed to my teaching over time is that I get older every year and the students don't, you know, our campus students really they do stay the same age to us, but we get older. And I think that being in new teaching environments is a way to constantly challenge ourselves to stay fresh, to rethink our teaching, to make sure we're innovating, and also to understand that young people are amazing, complicated, complex people, and when we go off campus and to different spaces to learn and teach, we're really meeting them in a way that you don't when you just pop into a campus classroom and pop out, right? I get to know those students a whole lot more. They're also talking about their lives, I think, in more revealing ways; you're seeing them engage with people who you wouldn't see them engage with in a campus classroom, and so you're getting to know their emotional life and their complexity in much different ways. And that's a joy, that's a joy to experience. I agree with Tiyi 100% that we are completely different teachers because we've taught in prison classrooms. You learn new techniques, you learn new empathies, you learn new passions, and it really does provide a new kind of energy to approach all topics and all classes. I'm definitely not the same teacher I was before I taught these classes. I think it also leveled the playing field a little bit on campus. The classroom is the professor's space, right? We go in with this sense of authority that we own this space, and in the prison, the classroom is neither your space nor the campus student's space, and it's something that's somewhat familiar to both individual, both groups. And so, it kind of balances, I think, that power dynamic a little bit more between students and professor. Incarcerated students often have the most confidence in the prison classroom because they know, how do I go to the bathroom, here do I put this chair when I'm done, hat do I do, you know, in this situation, or in that situation, and so they get to play host, in a way, which also provides a different kind of confidence for them, because they're not allowed to do that in any other situation.

D

David Staley 21:39

What connected the two of you that led to this project?

T

Tiyi Morris 21:42

So, we were both instructors in the Inside-Out Program, and the Inside-Out Program is a program based out of Philadelphia that brings campus students to classes in carceral institutions, and that program has been in existence for over 25 years. And Dr. Angela Bryant, who was a sociology professor at the New York Campus, started teaching those classes at Ohio

State about twelve years ago, and so Mary and I both took the training maybe four or five years ago, and began teaching Inside-Out classes. But, we wanted to create a project that was much more expansive than just a class here or there, we wanted to, again, really think about increasing access to higher education for incarcerated individuals in a sustained way and also provide those supports to create pathways from prison to higher education.

M

Mary Thomas 22:31

I never would have expected when we got started with this project just how close Tiyi and I would now be as friends and colleagues, and so, now we fully participate in this project as co-directors in a 50/50, everything is 50/50. We really are working to bring our mission and values to the very structure of how we administer this project, and it's just a wonderful experience to be able to work so closely with someone who shares these political commitments with me, and I think I can say that I think she feels the same way. It's just a gift to be able to work with someone who you know believes in changing the world, and is going to put the hard work into making it happen. And so, we have come to really rely on each other's dedication, we're able to bounce off ideas in really non-judgmental ways, like sometimes I say crazy stuff, or sometimes she says stuff I hate, and we just, you know, really work it out and it's collaborative. And that is what I really needed in my career, at a certain point, I was just missing having more collaboration, and it's just been such a gift. And so now we're at the point where we're starting to do research together, we are always talking about teaching and learning, but now we're thinking about what a research project, you know, what we're doing there is really exciting because we're also bringing our new expertise on thinking about incarceration and the Ohio Reformatory for Women together with our own intellectual histories and understanding people's experiences of racism and sexism. And so, we're looking at race relations at ORW since 1950, and we're just beginning that project.

T

Tiyi Morris 24:10

And what Mary just described is so important because it can be really taxing, negotiating the bureaucracy of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, as well as Ohio State, and having a partnership where we know we can count on each other, we know that we have the same ideas about mission and vision, it just makes it so much easier.

D

David Staley 24:31

Take me back to the moment that you decided to create OPEEP. You had this program, this class together; when did you decide then, this is what we need to be doing?

M

Mary Thomas 24:40

It was really early on. I mean, we were working with Angie Bryant, and the three of us... so, the three of us founded OPEEP together, and we knew that teaching classes here and there wasn't enough. It wasn't serving our incarcerated students at all, because they're just getting these random college credit bearing classes, but they're not able to build a degree, right? So, they're

at the mercy of faculty who may be teaching this or that, but it's not congealing into a program of sustained study that will lead to a degree. And so, we knew that if we were going to continue teaching, we needed to do so in service to their educational outcomes, too.

**T** Tiyi Morris 24:42

Yeah. And it wasn't enough for OSU students either, who would take this class and say this was the most transformative class I've had at OSU, and then there was nothing to do after that. And so, this is also a way to build in a stronger way for campus students to continue to engage in the support of abolitionist ideology or the support of ensuring that restored citizens have a place in our community.

**D** David Staley 25:46

I don't know if you communicate with the leaders of other such programs, I know that Bard has an incarcerated students program - are you in communication with these other programs?

**M** Mary Thomas 25:57

Yes, we are part of the Big Ten CHEP. It's the Big Ten Consortium for Higher Education in Prison, and it's a really useful group, we have a once a month meeting. It's a useful group for us to be in conversation because we can talk to other complex, large university contacts and figure out how to go about this work, and there are a couple in the Big Ten that have been around for a lot longer than we have, at the University of Illinois and at Rutgers. But, the University of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Penn State, us, we're all building projects right now pretty quickly, because universities understand that this is the moment that they can't turn away from, in terms of investing in and building up these projects. But, it's been really helpful to be in conversation with them. We also work closely with someone at FEPS, which is Freedom Education Puget Sound Project in Seattle. And so, we draw on our own personal networks, on these professional networks, to try and work to build a really sound project that's based on what has succeeded elsewhere.

**T** Tiyi Morris 27:00

And we're hoping that OSU can become a leader in prison education, both for the state but also within the Big Ten network and the nation as well.

**D** David Staley 27:09

Well, you've anticipated my next question: what do you see as the future of OPEEP, what's next for OPEEP?

**M** Mary Thomas 27:14

We're working really hard right now to start to do our curriculum planning for an Associate of Arts degree at ORW. We've hired a program coordinator, Nicole Edgerton, we're about to hire a second full time staff member program coordinator. It's a very exciting time for us to have two full time staff members to be able to do all of the structuring of making this project happen, including financial aid, the registrar, admissions, disability services, mental health services, I mean, it's just a huge project to be able to offer a degree, imbedded degree option at the same time as we're still administering all of the classes that we administer, OPEEP classes, at multiple prison facilities, right? We have a class that Professor Terri Winnick at OSU Mansfield is teaching up at Richland Correctional in Mansfield. We have classes that operate out of Southeastern Correctional Institution in Lancaster, we may have classes at the Marion Correctional Institution in time as well. Another thing that we're doing is working to think about how other central Ohio colleges and universities can be part of working together and collaborating, because many of our students who are released from prison may not be able to come to OSU directly; they may go to Columbus State, right? So we need to be working with community college partners, as well as other colleges that offer some prison education like Otterbein University, so that we are beginning to understand how we can pool credits and make sure that we're supporting students wherever they land after release.

**T** Tiyi Morris 28:46

After the associate's degree, we want to be able to offer an embedded bachelor's degree at ORW.

**M** Mary Thomas 28:52

And we'd like to be able to offer that in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, which will be, to our knowledge, the first college program embedded program in a women's facility that is a Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Degree.

**D** David Staley 29:05


How can we find out more about OPEEP?

**T** Tiyi Morris 29:08


You can visit our website at [opeep.osu.edu](http://opeep.osu.edu).


**M** Mary Thomas 29:13


We also have an Instagram account that we're trying to use to have students find out about us, so that they know how to enroll in our classes and what classes we have upcoming, and that's @opeep\_osu. Definitely visit our website where we have our classes listed for the next upcoming academic year. We also want to run another faculty training next May, so we're looking for twenty faculty who want to teach our classes, so drop us an email, come get involved.

 Tiyi Morris 29:40  
Any campus, any discipline.

 David Staley 29:42  
Tiyi Morris, Mary Thomas - thank you.

 Tiyi Morris 29:46  
Thank you.

 Eva Dale 29:47  
Voices of Excellence is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. More information about guests on Voices of Excellence can be found at [go.osu.edu/voices](http://go.osu.edu/voices). Produced by Doug Dangler. I'm Eva Dale.

 Mary Thomas 29:47  
Thank you.