

The Death Penalty: On the Verge of Extinction

My name is Timothy James Young. I am a wrongly convicted prisoner and an innocent man on Death Row. I write to you directly from the belly of the beast—San Quentin State Prison—where I am forced to spend the majority of my time confined to a 4.5'x10' cell. It is from this coffin-sized space that I navigate my way through the appellate court system¹ in hopes of proving my innocence and regaining my freedom.

I am also the UC Santa Cruz Solitary Gardener, taking part in a project begun by artist jackie sumell in which I work with students, faculty, and staff on campus to, as jackie puts it “imagine a landscape without prisons.”² You can visit my garden and a sculptural approximation of my cell by the Baskin Art Studios.

The garden we are growing together gives my ideas, my hopes, and my dreams a place to take root. I am a writer, and *Solitary Garden* also allows me a chance to be heard, as I write to the students who sow the seeds and grow the garden on my behalf. It also provides a platform for me to raise awareness and speak truth to power. I would like to take the opportunity now to enlighten you about the current status of the death penalty.

As you know, prison abolition will not happen overnight, nor will it happen all at once. If we, the people, are to imagine a landscape without prisons, then we must begin to chip away at the very foundations on which they stand.

We know that prisons are an extension of the slave trade, and we also know that the death penalty is just a more evolved way of lynching Black folks.

When it comes to these long standing atrocities, the people who benefit from them, and the people who turn a blind eye to them, are just as culpable as the people who set them in motion.

Here in California, we now have a governor who is not only morally, ethically, and fiscally opposed to the death penalty, but he is actually taking steps to abolish it!

On March 12, 2019, less than 90 days after being inaugurated, Gov. Gavin Newsom placed a moratorium on the death penalty. The following day, on March 13, 2019, a large group of lawmakers took the moratorium to the next level, by filing a bill in the California Assembly to abolish the death penalty.

The bill is called ACA(12). It sets out to do two things: 1) To amend the California Constitution so that the death penalty can no longer be imposed as a punishment. 2) To place an Anti-Death Penalty Initiative on the 2020 ballot, thereby giving voters a third opportunity to finally get this right!

This is proof that Gov. Gavin Newsom not only has the courage to bring about change, but he is also staying true to his word. During the campaign, he stated that abolishing the death penalty would be a major priority. He also stated that he plans to back his ballot measure with the “money and the manpower that it needs to succeed.”

I applaud Governor Newsome and the authors of ACA (12) for getting the ball rolling, but as of now, ACA (12) has yet to make it out of the Public Safety Committee and the Anti Death Penalty Initiative the governor promised to bring forth has yet to be placed on the 2020 ballot.

We, the people, now have to seize the chance to take the lead on this issue. And, this means applying a healthy dose of public pressure!

This is a call to action. This is a call to all students, scholars, and activists: Do you believe in prison abolition? Do you believe that a better world is possible? Then I ask you to organize, mobilize, and vote the death penalty out of existence. Let’s together make the imaginary real.

©Timothy James Young. Send our brother some love and light: Tim Young, F-23374, San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin CA 94974. And visit his website, Timothyjamesyoung.com.

¹ Appellate courts are the part of the judicial system that is responsible for hearing and reviewing appeals from legal cases that have already been heard in a trial-level or other lower court. Appellate courts do not retry cases or hear new evidence. They do not hear witnesses testify. There is no jury. Appellate courts review the procedures and the decisions in the trial court to make sure that the proceedings were fair and that the proper law was applied correctly.

² More information about jackie sumell and UC Santa Cruz's *Solitary Garden* can be found at ias.ucsc.edu