**Headline:** Abolish Climate Disasters

**Teaser:** We need to apply an abolitionist framework to climate change, pouring money into a safe and resilient climate and out of the oil-based economy.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

**Author Bio:** Sonali Kolhatkar is an award-winning multimedia journalist. She is the founder, host, and executive producer of “[Rising Up With Sonali](https://risingupwithsonali.com/),” a weekly television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. Her books include [*Talking About Abolition: A Police-Free World Is Possible*](https://sevenstories.com/books/4670-talking-about-abolition) (Seven Stories Press, 2025) and [*Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice*](https://citylights.com/city-lights-published/rise-up-the-power-of-narrative-in-pursu/) (City Lights Books, 2023). She is a writing fellow for the [Economy for All](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/) project at the Independent Media Institute and the racial justice and civil liberties editor at [Yes! Magazine](https://www.yesmagazine.org/authors/sonali-kolhatkar). She serves as the co-director of the nonprofit solidarity organization the [Afghan Women’s Mission](https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/) and is a co-author of [*Bleeding Afghanistan*](https://www.sevenstories.com/books/2947-bleeding-afghanistan). She also sits on the board of directors of [Justice Action Center](https://justiceactioncenter.org/), an immigrant rights organization.

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**[Article Body:]**

“Under racial capitalism, land is treated as nothing more than a natural resource to be extracted, and violence is committed against the climate and the waters,” said Leah Penniman, who runs Soul Fire Farm in upstate New York and is the author of the acclaimed book [*Farming While Black*](https://www.farmingwhileblack.org/).

Penniman’s words have been echoing in my mind since January 8, 2025, when I awoke to find myself on the floor of a cramped hotel room in Southern California where I had evacuated, escaping the Eaton Fire. My multigenerational family—parents, kids, and cat—fled our home the night before as ferocious Santa Ana winds whipped around us, threatening power lines and fueling a firestorm that sailed down the San Gabriel Mountains, miles into densely inhabited areas, burning down houses within two blocks of my home.

In my quarter of a century of living here, the fires [never came so close](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-01-17/chaotic-first-hours-eaton-fire-timeline-maps), and they never [raged in early January](https://apnews.com/article/fire-devastation-climate-change-santa-ana-winds-a46e2bb6785b1e325f6076fb22c8fcc5). The Eaton Fire is part of a conglomeration of wildfires across Southern California racking up more than a [quarter of a trillion dollars’ worth of damage](https://ktla.com/news/california/wildfires/cost-of-rebuilding-skyrockets-to-more-than-250-billion/).

Three days after the fires started on January 7, I returned to my north Pasadena home, a structure covered by ash and soot on the outside, but well-sealed on the inside; Los Angeles sheriffs had barricaded all streets entering Altadena. [Local authorities](https://www.cityofpasadena.net/library/library-news/california-national-guard-arrives-in-pasadena-and-altadena-to-assist-with-areas-affected-by-the-wildfires/) had requested National Guard forces to join them, ostensibly to deter “looters,” and prevent homeowners from returning to the toxic ashes of their former homes.

I found myself on the front lines of the world Penniman described in the conversation I had with her a year ago, one of 12 such conversations I had with leaders, thinkers, academics, and activists who describe themselves as “abolitionists.” The conversations are gathered together in my new book, [*Talking About Abolition: A Police-Free World is Possible*](https://sevenstories.com/books/4670-talking-about-abolition) (Seven Stories Press) released on January 14, exactly one week after the most catastrophic climate devastation my community has ever experienced.

The abolitionists interviewed in the book—luminaries such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Andrea Ritchie, Cat Brooks, and Penniman—want to see a transformation of our current economic framework, one that enables the destruction of communities and enforces capitalism’s inequities through policing and prisons. They use the same descriptor for themselves—abolitionist—that people working to dismantle slavery used generations ago.

What does abolishing police and prisons have to do with climate change and the devastating Southern California fires?

The answer is *everything*.

Today’s economic and social status quo [accepts ongoing climate change](https://www.counterpunch.org/2024/05/31/on-climate-change-centrism-means-a-slow-death/) as a necessary price to pay for market capitalism and deregulated industries. This is the same status quo maintaining inequities along lines of race, gender, national origin, and sexual orientation—what Penniman calls “racial capitalism.”

In such a world, climate disasters like the Los Angeles fires are an inevitable part of our lives. We must suffer, see our homes burn, and our air and water turn toxic, to ensure profits for the oil and gas industry.

In such a world we must also pay our tax dollars to clean the damage *their* carbon emissions have caused and pay to police our own communities against small-time petty criminals while the bigger corporate perpetrators of climate change go free.

In such a world we must also pay out of our pockets to have private insurers protect our homes and health and then accept their refusal to cover the costs of repairing our homes and health.

In such a world, everything is upside down. We pay to be damaged, violated, and policed and we pay to repair the damage, and still we remain broken.

An abolitionist vision for the world turns it right side up. What if we invested in our own safety by paying to prevent harm in the first place?

In *Talking About Abolition*, Andrea Ritchie, a nationally recognized expert on policing and prisons, described abolition as “a call to take resources, power, and legitimacy away from institutions rooted in anti-Blackness, in racial capitalism, and death making: policing, punishment, surveillance, and exile. It’s a call to reinvest in the commons, a society built around the notion of the common good, and everyone’s needs being met.”

This may sound like a pipe dream even to those who agree that our priorities need to be reconfigured. But abolitionists—led primarily by Black women—are not waiting for power brokers to adopt this big idea. After all, progressive change rarely happens from the top-down. Activists such as Cat Brooks in Oakland are already implementing local abolitionist projects. Brooks is the co-founder and executive director of the [Anti Police-Terror Project (APTP)](https://www.antipoliceterrorproject.org/) where she was instrumental in the formation of [MH First Oakland](https://www.antipoliceterrorproject.org/mh-first-oakland), a nonpolice alternative for people experiencing mental health crises.

“We are responsible for creating the world that we want,” said Brooks. “Organizing is what gets the goods. We are responsible for creating these replicable models, and we need to stop begging the state for the money, the resources, etc., to create these models.”

Since the Eaton Fire that destroyed my community, victims, survivors, neighbors, local officials, and leaders have been attempting to identify the culprits, to understand why this horrific, catastrophic disaster happened. Some are fixated on [power lines as the source of the fire](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/electrical-tower-focus-eaton-fires-potential-origin-video-clues-emerge-rcna187451), whipped up by strong winds. Others are angry about the [low water resources](https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2025/01/10/la-fires-fire-hydrants-water-supply/) available for firefighters to douse fires. Still, others are rightly pointing out our reliance on [incarcerated](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/17/la-wildfires-incarcerated-firefighters) and obscenely underpaid firefighters at the same time as fire departments are [severely understaffed](https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/14/us/la-fire-department-resourses-understaffed-invs/index.html).

All of these are important and critical issues. But they do not address the biggest source of the problem—climate change—and its resultant confluence of “[weather whiplash](https://e360.yale.edu/features/daniel-swain-interview),” unnaturally [low humidity](https://calmatters.org/environment/wildfires/2025/01/dry-danger-zone-california-fires-climate-change/), and unusually [strong Santa Ana winds](https://heatmap.news/guides/santa-ana-winds-climate-change?rebelltitem=2#rebelltitem2).

We cannot eradicate fire to protect ourselves from [climate change–fueled wildfires](https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16012025/fire-weather-author-john-vaillant-parallels-fort-mcmurray-los-angeles/). Fire is a part of life. Similarly, there is not enough water in any given place to douse thousands of homes exploding in fire all at once. Fire trucks, even ones with full tanks, sped past burning houses in Altadena, [rightly prioritizing saving lives over homes](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-01-17/chaotic-first-hours-eaton-fire-timeline-maps).

What we *can* do is stop pumping carbon into our atmosphere, right now. We can pour money into the things that keep us safe—renewable energy, energy conservation, public transportation, local economies, and more—and stop investing in things that endanger us, such as oil and gas profits, policing, and prisons.

We human beings are hardwired, especially in times of disaster, to help one another and to work in collective ways to keep each other safe. Such sentiments are visible on the edges of barricaded and burned Altadena, in my community of north Pasadena. On the border between the two towns, the state’s financial priorities are on full display to the north, with police and National Guard forces standing armed and ready to arrest anyone violating curfew. Meanwhile, to the south, community mutual aid hubs have spontaneously popped up, sharing food, water, clothing, toys, and other necessities with those who have lost everything.

As Robin D. G. Kelley said in the foreword to *Talking About Abolition*, “Abolitionists seek to replace death-dealing ugliness with life-sustaining beauty.”

We have been trained to go against human nature and normalize the funding of our own destruction. We must return to our human instinct to think collectively and embrace an abolitionist approach to ensure our world remains standing for our children. If not, today Altadena is on fire; [tomorrow it’s *your* hometown](https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16012025/fire-weather-author-john-vaillant-parallels-fort-mcmurray-los-angeles/).