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Author

Navarro, Geneses

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Parable of the Sower: Mapping Fires, Fiction and Reality

By Geneses Navarro

Abstract

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* has been the foundation of previous literary research before, specifically in terms of science fiction, afrofuturism, and even ecocriticism. Additionally, it has been the topic of previous digital humanities projects. However, earlier works did not have the opportune advantage of including details that occurred within the same time period that Butler projected her novel. My project is one of the first to hold up a mirror to Butler's work and consider how accurate the reflection is. The aim of this project is to make *Parable of Sower* accessible to an audience in a different medium, while also bring together the element of actual California fires. Using spatial storytelling with the Knight Labs StoryMaps tool, 20 fires from both archival California data and the novel were compiled; text and visual elements were included. Further analysis on *Parable* was conducted, synthesizing the discourse on the genres under which the novel falls under and underscoring the environmental themes found in the novel. While the StoryMap does not offer a significant comparison between actual fires and *Parable*, it fulfills its purpose as a spatial retelling of the novel. Traditional literary analysis reveal how Butler's environmental themes work as both the foreground and the backdrop to Lauren's journey, underscoring the relationship between humans and nature.

Methodology

The methodology for the first part is the use of spatial storytelling. Spatial storytelling is done by using geographical data to plot points or events, in this case chronologically, in combination with visual elements and text to tell a narrative. The story map function as guide to the viewer, going through various events in a specific order. This method makes longer narratives like Butler's more accessible; it also allows for external details like actual fires to be included into the narrative.

The methodology for the second part of this project, is a combination of traditional literary genre analysis and ecocriticism of *Parable of the Sower*. This allows for a deeper analysis of the text itself, exploring broad environmental themes and emphasizes the value of the science fiction genre, among the other genres *Parable* falls under.

Mapping

The mapping of this project was facilitated through tools developed by Northwestern University called Knight Lab; I specifically worked with storytelling tool StoryMaps. The aim of the map was to make Butler's narrative more accessible to other audiences, but also expand on the novel by offering actual fire data within the years of 2024 and 2025, the same years the novel is set in. Since the novel is largely focused on Lauren's journey, there is a small selection of fires mentioned throughout the novel. This small selection worked best with the digital representation of the fires, since the goal is to inform the viewer of the environment themes of the novel and trends rather than provide all the data available. Actual California fires were selected from the July 2024 to August 2025 according to the most acreage burned; six fires from 2024 and seven fires from 2025 were selected. This allowed for 20 points, which is the maximum points suggested for a mapping project on StoryMaps.



CAL FIRE_Official, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



Pacific Southwest Forest Service, USDA from USA, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



GOES imagery: CSU/CIRA & NOAA, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Map Trends and Observations

There was no region with the most fires on this map; this was not expected but understandable given the limited selection of fires. Los Angeles county had the Palisades Fire, Eaton Fire, with some overlap on the Bridge Fire. San Bernardino county had the Bridge Fire and the Line Fire. San Luis Obispo country had the Gifford Fire and the Madre Fire; Santa Barbara country shares the Gifford Fire with the aforementioned country, and the Lake Fire. Kern and Tulare, Butte and Tehama, Fresno, Del Norte and Siskiyou, and Shasta county each have one fire attributed to them for this map. However, the slight majority that the LA county claims for this map is similar to what is found in *Parable*. The fires mentioned in *Parable* are centralized in the LA county (only one of the fires plotted occurs outside of this region).

Findings and Future Goals

Referring back to the trends, this project does not have overwhelmingly conclusive trends between the fires I selected and regions in which these occurred. However, the StoryMap allows the viewer to follow both Butler's narrative and the actual fires in a spatial narration, fulfilling the goal to using an accessible tool to share the narrative. In terms of analyzing *Parable* by the genres it falls under, and also using an ecocriticism framework, *Parable* proves to be a rich text. Butler's science fictional work has clear environmental themes, lending itself to being read ecocritically and even as climate fiction, in addition to its science fiction elements.

An ideal version of this project could include more fires, using a more sophisticated tool that allows from more points, and observe trends at the large scale. This project could also look into larger variety of environmental factors, including droughts and rain patterns in California, and atypical storm patterns in other states such as tornadoes and hurricanes as mentioned in the novel. In order to offer an in-depth analysis, these environmental trends could have their own map or even a more complex visual model that allows for these trends to be overlaid over each other and compared. The ideal version of this project could also consider the similarities in political and social unrest depicted in the novel and today's world in depth. This particular element would necessitate a social science analysis, including surveys on public sentiment towards political figures and social problems.

Citations

Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower*. 1993. Grand Central Publishing, 2020.

"Knight Lab." Northwestern University Knight Lab, 21 July 2025, knightlab.northwestern.edu/.

Navarro, Geneses. "California Fires from 2024–2025: *Parable of the Sower*." StoryMapJS, uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/5boa9b6a815018a6e4cfaaba99383798/california-fires-from-2024-2025-parable-of-the-sower/index.html

