**The Unalienable Right of Life:
Narratives of Multispecies
Democracies in North American SF (AT)**

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# Keywords

Environmental Humanities, biopolitics, science fiction/speculative fiction, ecocriticism, narratology, American Studies, Declaration of Independence, human rights, critical posthumanism, multispecies democracy

# Project Overview

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The Declaration of Independence is a foundational document for US-American nationhood not only because it lays out the rationale for and performatively enacts secession from Great Britain. The document is constitutive as it lays out foundational rights that are set out as both universal (as general humans rights) and specific (as the ethical foundations of a new form of Enlightenment nationhood). “Life” appears indisputably as the broadest of these three categories, which also makes it a highly nebulous and even contentious category. This is true within the discussions of natural rights and social contract philosophy from which the Declaration of Independence draws. It is even more strikingly the case in the over two centuries of political and legal debates that have mobilized the notion of “inalienable rights” in regard to “life.”

Not only the disciplines of philosophy and law, but literature has grappled with these questions and connections (and maybe even grappled with them more thoroughly through combination of speculation and imagination?)

Reason of rise of spec fic 🡪 revaluation of constitution

Legal interpretations 🡪 facts are based on fiction

Fiction makes facts

Especially in legal discourse the connection between “life” and “inalienable right” locates itself in the realm of Yet, in this project, I propose a study about the inalienable right *of* life.

Schritt 5 / „right of life“ - explain your choice of preposition -> disruption of political slogan, arguably all too simple understanding/reduction of the „right“ + „life“ connection forged in the constitution.

The choice to analyze the right *of* life openness

explored in literature, and, one can argue, opened up by the formulation of the Declaration of Independence.

Literature, fed with the power of the imagination, offers to us yet a different approach to this challenging question by telling us what life is through stories. Especially in the realm of speculative fiction and science fiction we encounter stories that put our definitions about (human) life to test. Framed in a North American historiographical and sociocultural context, my project is a narratological study that analyses the different modes and the meaning of storytelling in the construction of the “right of life.” I explore varying literary conceptualizations of life, looking at textual representations of forms of life in the genre of SF that I will embed in philosophical and biopolitical discussions of the categories of *bios* and *zoe*, *vita activa* and *vita comtemplativa* (Arendt). I will look at how life is being narrated.

I will reflect on the proclamation of life as an inalienable right and its resulting legal implications. Here (= I assume that this will happen in the texts that I will read?), a question arises that opens the floor for a discussion of the human (vs. the nonhuman) condition: Whose life is regarded and thus protected as an inalienable right? I will connect these enquiries to the field of multispecies ethnographies in order to investigate the premises and promises of a multispecies democracy. The study, then, also will contribute to the recently revived discourses about the connection between life and narrative, and the interrelation between fact and fiction, in general.

# State of Research and Objectives

- Provide overview of current, relevant scholarship about SF:

* Outline Posthumanism vs. Critical Posthumanism and relevance of both for SF
* Biopolitics and SF

- status of life as inalienable rightUS LAW and its history

- definition of “multispecies democracy” so far?

- What will be “new” about my study? 🡪

1) my focus on narratology: narrative techniques (who/what is the narrator?), the way fiction provides an answer to “what is life” (through metaphor, etc.)

2) test applicability of concept of multispecies democracy in those narratives: connect to law, particularly the field of human rights 🡪 extension of “more-than-human rights”?
include discourses?: animal rights, euthanasia, eugenics

The idea of multispecies justice as a “solution”, ethical responsibility of humans towards other beings, assertion that there is a “non-human” ethics inherent in nature?! (cf bad article by Rose sth.)

Figure of the “ecological Indian” role of indigenous populations in ideas of “multispecies”; species as a problematic concept in itself

Why would one see MJ as a “solution” when the applicability of democracy hardly given in “human-only” world, social inequality, differences between global south and north etc.

Formulate more precise research objectives that show direct link to primary texts, questions “emerging” from reading the primary literature

# Methodology and Research Areas

My project is rooted in the disciplines of Environmental Humanities and American Studies. As both these research fields share a multidisciplinary character, I will draw from different theoretical and methodological approaches. Though I will mainly conduct an ecocritical close reading of a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts, the analysis of this study will be invested with findings from various disciplines such as political science, sociology, geography, and the life sciences, including biology and genetics. Since any scientific discipline (especially in the 21st century) is related to a smaller or larger degree to the study of life, a multidisciplinary perspective on life appears as the only reasonable approach to a topic as indefinite as the right of life.

The overall aim of the project is to bring examples of North American SF into a fruitful dialogue with the discourse of human rights and notions from Critical Posthumanism. Besides, I will view the readings as a testing ground for biopolitical reflections on theories about multispecies democracy. Through a narratological analysis I will explore how the texts respond to the initial question about the right of life.

The primary text corpus consists of contemporary science fiction writings. (🡪 reading list)

A profound investigation of the philosophical tradition of concepts of life will be an essential part of the study. In a theoretical part, I will first focus on the realm of political science, exploring standard works and recently formulated ideas from the field of biopolitics. In a second step I will connect political theory with the history of U. S.-America. I will especially look at the proclamation of life as an “unalienable right”, which is deeply rooted in the U. S.-American law system and the nation’s cultural imaginary.

While especially the “pursuit of happiness” has been central to a number of analysis of the Declaration of Independence…

**Provide time frame**, first one connected to question: when (and then answer how) did our “definitions/representations” of life change?

Currently undecided how to proceed:

begin 18th century (Declaration of Independence, etc.) 🡪 jump to 21st century, compare contemporary legal status with back then?

Look at decisive changes of our “definitions/representations” of life between 18-21st century? 20th century? Leave out 19th?

Difficulty: linking time frame of evolving legal discourse of “life as an unalienable right” to examples of SF 🡪 mostly 20th or 21st century SF examples

## Life in SF

“It’s stories. It’s fiction that plays with certain subjects for their inherent interest, beauty, relevance to the human condition. Even in its ungainly and inaccurate name, the ‘science’ modifies, is in the service of, the ‘fiction.’” (Le Guin)

SF places life and biopolitics – often in connection with environmental crises – in the center of attention. In my study, SF is meant to refer to more than merely science fiction; in the manner of Donna Haraway, I understand SF also as “speculative fabulation,” “string figures,” and “so far.”

Next to questioning genre conventions of SF, I will investigate in which ways the present outlooks on or even our current experiences of eco-catastrophes create imagined futures/memories of the future. Today, we find a growing number of dystopic literatures located in the SF subgenre cli-fi – mostly referred to in the context of literatures of the Anthropocene. They present bleak visions of (future) life on planet earth due to the environmental crises we find ourselves in. Yet, we can also observe a “counter-response” to the crises: Fiction and non-fiction writers like Octavia Butler, Ursula Le Guin or Donna Haraway openly challenge anthropocentric structures by offering narratives of multispecies existence. These forms of multispecies storytelling can be read as tropes of hope.

With a particular interest in narratives about genetic and biological diversification – “starring” DNA, the symbolical as well as corporeal fabric of all organic life forms –, I will examine, among others, Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-89), Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* (1989), Nancy Kress’s short story *Beggars in Spain* (1993).

The examples offer an open space to reflect upon the intertwinement of naturecultures and the crucial role of narratives in the construction of knowledge, life itself, and knowledge about human and more-than-human lives.

Looking at metaphor and metamorphosis, my study comprises a narratological analysis of *fabula* and *syuzhet* of the chosen primary readings. Furthermore, the above listed theories (biopolitics, posthumanism, human rights) ought to be synthesized with works of SF, i. e. I will, among other things, offer a critical rereading of what O. Butler calls the “human contradiction” (the human species’ conflicting simultaneity of cognitive intelligence and hierarchical thinking) alongside Arendt’s reflections on the human condition and posthumanist theories.

## Life in Theory: The “Unalienable Right” of Life, Biopolitics, and (Post)Humanism

An overview of major writings in the field of biopolitics will serve as theoretical foundation for further parts of the study. Though a part of my project’s discussion of the right of human life starts out from Foucault’s and Agamben’s elaborations on biopower and scrutinizes what Hannah Arendt described as the “human condition,” I will not limit the analysis of the right of life to the category of the human. Rather on the contrary, a proper study of the human condition is inextricably linked to a study of humankind’s environment and therefore any view on life from a strictly anthropological or anthropocentric perspective needs to and will be critically reviewed. Especially against the backdrop of the Anthropocene, as our current epoch has come to be called, Arendt’s notion of the human condition, then, calls for a reinterpretation and prompts a discussion of the category of the posthuman, which will consequently form a further part of the study. The research field of critical posthumanism (N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman*, Cary Wolfe’s *What is Posthumanism?*, Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman*) will then feed into a discussion of biopolitical aspects of multispecies justice. Achille Mbembe’s elaborations on necropolitics and the thoughts on biopolitical production and democracy from Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000) will contribute to an analysis of the status of the individual subject, the sovereign and the roles they play in the public and the private sphere. In addition to the aforementioned standard references this study draws attention to more recent biopolitical writings that put stronger emphasis on environmental aspects, namely Andreas Weber’s theory of “Enlivenment” (*Biopoetics* 2016), and Stephen Collis’s Neomarxist proclamation of the “Biotariat.” (2013)

An analysis of the meaning of the right of life in the cultural imaginary of the U. S. Established as an “unalienable right” in the *Declaration of Independence,* “life,” next to “liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” has come to be the emblematic embodiment of *the* American democratic values. The presence – or, perhaps even more than that, the absence – of “life” in cornerstones of American historiography will foreground that the discussion of theories about life is embedded in (and admittedly, due to formal requirements restricted to) a Western discourse of democratic rights and a politics of participation. The constitution of the American unalienable right to life will be reviewed critically under consideration of a “(post)humanist condition.”

“notions such as life, or man, or science or knowledge are prescientific by definition, and the questions is whether or not the actual development of science which has led to the conquest of terrestrial space and to the invasion of the space of the universe has changed these notions to such an extent that they no longer make sense.” (Arendt)

# Readings

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