

## At the Sources of the Anthropocene: Ecology, Technoscientific Progress and Literature

**Field of Study :** Literature

**Mandatory training needed to apply for this research topic :** Master's degree in French Literature

### SUPERVISORS

	First name	LAST NAME	University	Research Unit
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### KEYWORDS

Ecopoetics – Anthropocene - scientific progress – french literature – history of ideas

### ABSTRACT

This project examines the literary representation of the relationship between ecological crisis and technoscientific progress. It specifically explores the fundamental ambiguity that persists between progress as a catalyst for the Anthropocene crisis and the myth of technosolutionism as a potential pathway out of it. Drawing on the historical context of the Anthropocene provided by Fressoz and Bonneuil, and on the theoretical insights from Hans Jonas on the principle of responsibility, Ulrich Beck on risk, and Bruno Latour on the representation of modernity, the project aims to construct a long-term history of cultural representations of the relationship between technoscientific progress and the environment. The primary field of inquiry is Francophone literature, utilizing innovative methodologies from ecopoetics. The project will investigate cultural representations of the impact of progress on the environment across a wide temporal range, from the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution to the present day, drawing on the works of authors from various periods, such as George Sand, Marcel Proust, Jean Giono, Pierre Gascar, Jean-Loup Trassard, and Léonora Miano, with particular attention to the issue of resource exploitation and environmental justice.

Thus, the project aims to provide a historical and conceptual framework for a fundamental issue in environmental studies that is currently missing from academic literature, while also contributing to the development of intellectual tools for the defense of natural heritage.

## Research aims and methodology

This project aims to trace the history of literary imaginings of the relationship between scientific progress and environmental crisis, particularly focusing on the coexistence between scientific advancement as a source of Anthropocene damage and the myth of technosolutionism as a remedy to these problems. While this issue lies at the core of environmental humanities and is highly relevant today, it has not been systematically examined within the field of literary studies. The main objectives of this project are threefold:

1. To conceptualize the imaginative expressions of this dialectic, with a specific attention the conflicting literary models of Utopia and Dystopia, within both the registers of realism and speculative fiction. This analysis of literary forms will be complemented and challenged by insights from the social sciences, especially reflections on technology and responsibility (as articulated by Jonas<sup>1</sup>), critiques of modernity (from Latour<sup>2</sup>), and the concept of ecological risk (as developed by Beck<sup>3</sup>).
2. To explore the depth and evolution of this issue over a long temporal perspective. While ecocriticism has engaged with these questions, it has mainly done so by studying recent literature that has focused on ecological devastation (what Schoentjes calls "brown literature"<sup>4</sup>). We build here on the research of historians Bonneuil and Fressoz<sup>5</sup>, who deconstruct the idea that awareness of the damages of the Anthropocene is a recent phenomenon, demonstrating instead that it has developed gradually over the past centuries. Thus, this research seeks to provide historical depth to the contemporary debate by examining the developments that led to an explicit ecological awareness on the subject, which were already present in post-industrial revolution literature.
3. To problematize representations of the relationship between scientific progress and environmental justice, highlighting how scientific progress establishes relations of domination between humans and the environment, and how the benefits and damages of progress are unequally distributed among populations, thereby exacerbating the vulnerability of certain areas and communities. From this perspective, it will be necessary to complicate the discourse on environmental justice by investigating the representations of the relationship between scientific progress and colonial enterprise, using tools from postcolonial studies.

### Methodological Approach:

This research will be firmly rooted in the innovative field of environmental humanities, particularly in ecopoetics, which studies the relationships between literature and ecology with specific attention to literary form. However, it will combine a formal approach with a historical one by studying the evolution of the representation of this dialectic and examining representative case studies from different periods. The corpus may thus cover a long-time span, including examples from different authors such as George Sand, Marcel Proust, Georges Bernanos, Jean Giono, Pierre Gaspar, Jean-Loup Trassard and Léonora Miano.

This research will also draw on contemporary social science scholarship, especially in the field of francophone science studies, concerning the evolution of techno-scientific progress and its impact on our frameworks of thought (notably the works of Isabelle Stengers<sup>6</sup> and Bruno Latour), as well as Ulrich Beck's work on the concept of risk.

<sup>1</sup> Jonas, Hans. *Le principe responsabilité: une éthique pour la civilisation technologique*. 3. ed. Passages. Paris: Éd. du Cerf, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Latour, Bruno. *Nous n'avons Jamais Été Modernes: Essai d'anthropologie Symétrique*. Paris: La Découverte, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Beck, Ulrich, éd. *La société du risque: sur la voie d'une autre modernité*. Champs essais. Paris: Flammarion, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Schoentjes, Pierre. *Littérature et écologie : le mur des abeilles*. José Corti, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Bonneuil, Christophe, et Jean-Baptiste Fressoz. *L'événement anthropocène: la Terre, l'histoire et nous*. Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Stengers, Isabelle. *L'invention des sciences modernes*. Armillaire. Paris: La Découverte, 1993.



## Relevance and added-value of the proposed research in relation to the current state of knowledge

Serious academic work on literary imaginaries of science and technology over time has been published in the 21st century (see Chassay<sup>7</sup> and Krzywkowski<sup>8</sup>). However, although useful insights can be found in recent studies (such as Chelebourg<sup>9</sup>), in the field of ecopoetics, a comprehensive study on the imaginary of technoscientific progress in relation to ecological questions remains unprecedented.

Thus, this study would be particularly significant in the expanding field of ecopoetics, which need to explore the convergences between literary studies and science studies to examine ecological imaginaries. A work of this kind could become an important reference from both a theoretical and historical perspective for this area of study.

## Interdisciplinary nature of the research together with the alignment with the CHORAL programme and complementarity expertise of the teams

Drawing on the contributions of the social sciences and examining the imaginary of technoscience, this literary thesis presents a high degree of interdisciplinarity, which also represents one of the challenges of such an ambitious undertaking.

To mitigate this risk, the candidate will benefit from the expertise of two teams that, starting from French literature, are fully engaged in interdisciplinary research relevant to this study. On one side, at the University of Pau, they will be integrated into the research team "Literary Anthropocene: Circulation between Experimental Sciences and Literature in the Age of Ecological Crisis," funded by the ANR and linked to the chair "Contemporary Ecopoetic Issues" held by Professor Riccardo Barontini, who is engaged in a five-year program of scientific activities on the relationships between science, ecology, and literature. On the other side, they will benefit from the expertise of Professor Franca Bruera at the University of Turin, where she is the Principal Investigator of a PRIN research project, "Declinations of Risk: Toward an Archaeology of Aesthetic-Literary Imaginaries from the 20th Century to the Present in French-Language Literature," which, by centering on the question of risk, intersects with many of the issues relevant to this thesis.

Regarding the objectives of the CHORAL program, this doctoral project investigates the relationship between the preservation of natural heritage and cultural imaginaries, particularly reflecting on the impact of progress on environmental justice issues, with specific attention to marginalized territories (objective no. 3).

## Output plan including publication and dissemination activities

The candidate will be fully integrated into the activities of the "Contemporary Ecopoetic Issues" chair at the University of Pau. They will publish at least two articles in scientific journals during their doctoral studies. The publication of their thesis is planned, with financial support from the chair's endowment after the defense. The candidate will present the progress of their research within the framework of the doctoral seminar "Ecology and the Circulation of Knowledge" at UPPA and during two study days/conferences before their defense. They will contribute to the organization of the conference on science, ecology, and literature linked to the chair's activities in 2027 and will be involved in the dissemination activities of the chair, particularly in the creation of a podcast and a website.

<sup>7</sup> Chassay, Jean-François. *Imaginer la science: le savant et le laboratoire dans la fiction contemporaine*. Montréal, Québec: Liber, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Krzywkowski, Isabelle. *Machines à Écrire*. UGA Éditions, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Chelebourg, Christian. *Les écofictions mythologies de la fin du monde*. Bruxelles: Les impressions nouvelles, 2012.



## Estimated schedule

### First Year:

- In-depth reading related to the corpus; creation of a detailed thesis plan
- Participation in the doctoral seminar
- Integration into the scientific activities of the "Contemporary Eco-poetic Issues" chair

### Second Year:

- A 9-month stay at the University of Turin and integration into the local team
- First presentation of the research project at an external conference/study day
- Submission of a scientific article, which will also serve as the basis for writing a thesis chapter

### Third Year:

- Writing of the thesis
- Participation in the organization of the conference linked to the chair
- Presentation of research at the Pau conference

