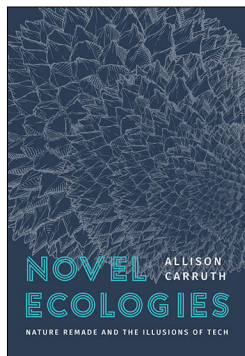


ECOLOGY

Novel Ecologies: Nature Remade and the Illusions of Tech

By Allison Carruth. 2025. University of Chicago Press. 224 pages, 20 colour plates, and 14 halftones, 35.95 CAD, Paper. Also available as an E-book.

In 1959, C.P. Snow (1905–1980) delivered the Rede Lecture at Cambridge University. Entitled *The Two Cultures*, the lecture proposed that university campuses, and academia in general, were divided into the sciences and humanities, and never the twain shall meet. Snow knew these things first-hand. He earned degrees in chemistry and physics and was employed for decades in the upper levels of the British civil service. He also wrote a series of popular mystery novels. He knew science; he knew the humanities; he knew that the two did not overlap. Much debate over the two cultures theory has been heard in the ensuing decades. What can analysis of literature and art teach us about the workings of the natural world? Can we apply scientific principles to questions of poetry and drama? Whether or not Snow was correct in the 1950s, in the 21st century there are many efforts being made to bridge any possible gap that exists between these two fields.



One project that seeks to bring together academic research in both the arts and sciences is Blue Lab. This project is based at Princeton University, and its stated goal is:

Our multidisciplinary team investigates and creates original stories and creative projects about lived experiences of large-scale environmental challenges—from climate change and green energy to multispecies justice and food and water futures. (Blue Lab 2025)

The project is led by Allison Carruth and staffed by students and postdoctoral researchers from a variety of academic disciplines. *Novel Ecologies* is the third book from Carruth, following *Literature and Food Studies* (co-authored with Amy L. Tigner, Routledge, 2018) and *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Novel Ecologies is a combination of Carruth's stated interests in the environment, storytelling, modern art, and technology. The book presents a series of case studies interwoven with the story of Carruth's own journey from Colorado to California to New

Jersey. The chapters take the form of analyses of novels, poetry, and artworks as well as recent technological developments including synthetic wildlife, the digital cloud, and space colonization.

Some chapters take as starting points novels or art projects from the 21st century. In each case, references to current scientific principles are woven into the examination of fiction or art. For example, one chapter is a detailed analysis of Ruth Ozeki's 2013 novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (Viking Press). Through her retelling of the novel, Carruth explores connections to the many-worlds theory of quantum mechanics and art installation/reforestation projects in the Pacific Northwest. In other sections of the book, Carruth explores recent scientific initiatives and illuminates creative intersections with them. For instance, one chapter looks at generative artificial intelligence (AI) technology. Carruth experiments with using generative pre-trained transformer (GPT) systems to create a narrative of a future AI mechanism directly experiencing the Amazon rainforest. She then contrasts this with the *Monk and Robot* series of books (Tor Publishing Group, 2021–2025) by Becky Chambers.

Novel Ecologies presents a new effort to bridge the gap between the sciences and humanities. Carruth begins from the literary analysis side of the divide and makes a valiant effort to reach across to the sciences. She employs poignant examples of new literature and art as well as engineering and technological advancements. The level of detail in her discussion of the novels definitely outweighs the level of detail of her discussion of ecology. There is also not much of an attempt to put either science or art in a historical perspective. That is not Carruth's aim. She is presenting what she sees as a current overlap between artistic and technological interpretations of the environment. Be sure, Carruth is not afraid to be critical of many of the claims of modern techno-eco-corp startups. She takes the promises of Silicon Valley gurus to task and uses modern art, literature, and poetry to do so. This book is perhaps the most powerful part of Carruth's own work at bridging the two cultures.

Literature Cited

Blue Lab. 2025. Blue Lab, overview. Accessed 7 August 2025. <https://bluelabmedia.org/about/blue-lab/>.

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