Making Tracks: Chris Cokinos

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

“Finding How to Say It”

By **Chris Cokinos**

Intention is a funny thing, especially when it comes to creative work. Intention can become something forced; it can become an attachment to outcome at the expense of actually giving into the work itself. There’s a phrase from Taoist philosophy—*wu wei*. Wu wei means working without effort. Flow.

For the past few years I’ve been intensely interested in what technological optimism might look like under the right (that is, socially just) circumstances. Given our failure to adequately address the present and looming impacts of climate change, technological approaches (or, more negatively “fixes”) may be all that’s left. After I finished a 2009 book on meteorites and meteorite hunters, **The Fallen Sky: An Intimate History of Shooting Stars**, I became interested in climate engineering and wrote a cover story on it for *The American Scholar*. At about the same time, my wife and I moved to Tucson, Arizona, from northern Utah, and I took a job at the University of Arizona.

Henry David Thoreau once spoke of needing to have “a wide margin.” For a variety of reasons, my margin narrowed and my work suffered. I burned through two or three research-based nonfiction project ideas and, by the time I arrived at the Rachel Carson Center, had decided to focus on divisive technologies in the Anthropocene—everything from climate engineering to synthetic biology. I soon realized that rather than pursue these topics in a long-form book, I should approach them as shorter pieces . . . articles, op-eds and the like. There are several advantages to this. First, such work gets into the conversation faster. I am a slow nonfiction book writer. I was concerned that taking the

kind of time I did for the meteorite book and, before that, **Hope Is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanished Birds**, would mean that the conversation might have moved on. What could I contribute if I took seven or 10 years—or more—to write a book?

Further, I wasn't feeling the wu wei. I'm also a poet, and the poems kept arriving before, during, and after my fruitful stay in Munich. Poems that, in their way, were explorations of temporality, technology, and self. The older one gets, the more one can respect what arrives instead of forcing an intention into an unhealthy attachment.

So while in Munich in the fall of 2017, it became clear to me that my project really ought be pursued in more immediately consequential ways. Not long after I returned home, I tied the anniversary of the death of the last Carolina Parakeet to what I called "**Global Last Resort Day**"— the first of such attempts.

My interactions with other fellows, LMU faculty, and graduate students provided further evidence that rather than pursuing a book on what I've called "the long tomorrow"—a play on Stewart Brand's the long now—I can produce work that intervenes more quickly in different ways. That might be more valuable and, from a writerly perspective, better for me too.

But there was more. **Jeroen Oomen**, an RCC-LMU doctoral student, and I began talking about the need to address what we and others see as excessive reactivity to long-tomorrow technologies. We hit upon the idea of an international conference co-hosted by the RCC (and Deutsches Museum) and the University of Arizona to be held in February 2019 at **Biosphere 2**. The meeting will cut across disciplines and focus on idea-roundtables with an eye toward talking through much of the difficulty in thinking about large-scale and controversial technologies in the Anthropocene.

So, yes, intention is tricky. Thinking I would work again on a hefty monograph on these questions, while at the RCC, other priorities, such as planning a conference—which is, really, a kind of conversation—came to the fore. I like that flexibility.

While I can trace the journey that got me to an incredibly stimulating three months at the RCC—from becoming obsessed with the stories of extinct birds some 20 years ago to rebooting my undergraduate teaching with a focus on science fiction literature, all of

which informs me as a writer today—for me the journey is always more interesting in the moment.

I look forward to working with RCC students, fellows, and LMU faculty as the conference gets planned. And I look forward to drawing on this community as I work on essays, articles, and opinion pieces that explore hard questions—from the status of the precautionary principle to whether we can economically and socially justify space-faring.

Being at the Carson Center was a bit like being at a summer camp with people who are smarter than me. Okay, more like a fall camp. The presentations, the challenges, the discussions all melded into a sense of fellowship there and then and here and now. How lucky I was to have that—and to have it still.