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What was the project? Thoughts on genre and the project form

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ABSTRACT

The project form—the very model of ‘a project’ as a type of purposive and transformative action—animates social environments the world over. As a social form, projects constitute a versatile, organizational structure predicated on the management of time, tasks, and resources toward some pre-determined, non-routine goal. Projects combine *logistical* practical reasoning with *visionary* aspirational ends. They readily appear across fields of science, education, business, government, and the arts. This essay inquires into the conditions and consequences of the project form, asking: how have norms and practices of project making shaped historical formations, social environments, and our understanding of them? In answering this question, the essay contextualizes the project form within a history of the modern world system. It then develops a theory of the project form, illustrating how the logistical and visionary aspects of projects emerge as effects of genre-mediated processes of project making. Finally, the essay considers how social theories that are blind to the project form risk naturalizing its logics. Through these steps, the essay reflects on the limits and limitations of the project form. *This essay is part of the special issue, ‘Genre Work in the New Economy,’ edited by Ilana Gershon and Michael Prentice.*

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Projects are ubiquitous in today’s world. As a social form, projects provide an amazingly versatile organizational structure that is predicated on the management of time, tasks, and resources in pursuit of some pre-determined, non-routine goal. Indeed, projects can range widely in purpose and scope, from the construction of a neighborhood playground to the construction of a hydro-electric dam, from humanitarian relief missions to tech start-up ventures. Certainly, dear reader, you have created, participated in, and been the object of a project, whether a research project, a business launch, a building or renovation project, an electoral campaign, a reform project, a marketing campaign, a project of artistic creation, or a project of self-improvement. Across social and cultural contexts, one can find innumerable examples, formulations, and applications of projects. Yet, reflection on the project form itself—its history, its versatility, its ubiquity—is scarce. Projects are all around us, but only rarely have scholars asked: why is this so, and how did it come to be?¹

This essay presents some provisional thoughts on the social form called ‘the project.’ To describe projects as a social form is to recognize that projects share several features, assumptions, and organizational logics that distinguish them from other types of action, such as routines or rituals. For example, projects depend on genre repertoires of planning, organization, and management that define purpose and structure action and collaboration. These project genres presuppose

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understandings of agency and history predicated on the possibility of social transformation. That is, projects assume that one can bring about a reality that is consciously and uniquely different from the present, and they position human actors as the primary agents of such change. Projects manifest distinct temporalities. They are future-oriented and temporary (Lundin and Söderholm 1995) and they partition time, via schedules and deadlines, to regiment progress toward desired ends (Graan and Rommel 2022). The project form can thus be understood as a recognizable style of purposive action that tethers genres of logistical planning and management to visions of the world made somehow different.

The social form of the project is remarkably capacious. The project form can be adapted to different scales and heterogeneous ends, resulting in projects that are small, big, or ‘mega.’ Projects span fields of science, education, business, government, and the arts, and also appear readily within everyday life. Some projects are thoroughly professionalized, requiring ornate forms of project management. Others are amateur, including only those features of projects that are necessary to the task at hand. For example, a pharmaceutical company’s project to develop a vaccine during a global pandemic requires complex systems of project management to coordinate the activities of a large, differentiated workforce variously focused on: vaccine development, testing, government relations, production, sales, distribution, communications, and so on. In contrast, a personal project of weight loss might include a plan (one of nutrition and exercise), a schedule, record keeping, and a commitment to bring forth a new reality (such as a slimmer you) but not require budgeting or much labor coordination. Nevertheless, despite their vast differences, both pursuits, the vaccine and weight loss, are conceived and recognizable as *projects*.

Ubiquitous, yet taken-for-granted, the project form animates and structures social environments the world over. This essay therefore seeks to perform a classical anthropological operation on the project form itself: to make the familiar strange. To do so, the essay examines how projects combine two core aspects: *logistical* practical reasoning and *visionary* aspirational ends. The first section elaborates on and contextualizes these aspects of the project form within a history of the modern world system. The second section draws on linguistic anthropological approaches to genre to develop a theory of the project form. In particular, this section illustrates how the logistical and visionary aspects of projects emerge as effects of genre-mediated, contingent processes of project making. The third section considers how social theories that are blind to the project form risk naturalizing its logics. Ultimately, through these steps, the essay works to provincialize the project so as to reckon with the limits and limitations of the project form.

Historicizing the project

A comprehensive history of the project form has yet to be written.² Arguably, this is because the concept of a project has become so commonsensical that the project form can appear as old as humanity. Writing in 1697, Daniel Defoe (1897 [1697], p. 14) could state that, ‘The building of the Ark by Noah, so far as you will allow it a human work, was the first project I read of ...’ Contemporary literature on project management often echoes this claim, invoking structures like Stonehenge or the Pyramids of Giza as evidence for the timelessness of projects (Morris 2011, Davies 2017). Such assumptions, however, risk anachronism.

Groups have, of course, engaged in cooperative, coordinated activity and completed complex tasks across human history. It is also undeniable that past societies accomplished remarkable feats of engineering and construction (Kostof 1977). What I am interested in, however, is not the bare fact of singular, complex works—aqueducts, temples, palaces, monuments—but the very possibility of thinking in terms of *projects*, of understanding projects as an organizational form that can be equally well adapted to a diversity of goals, whether building a temple, draining a swamp, conducting an experiment, or producing an artistic work. I therefore distinguish between the ability to conceive of and complete complex tasks—an age-old phenomenon—and the ability to conceive of and

structure tasks within the temporal, aspirational, and managerial logics of a project—a historically specific phenomenon.³

In this sense, the history of the project form is not coterminous with the history of architecture or engineering. Rather, the project form refers to a historically specific way of conceptualizing and approaching complex, non-routine tasks (cf. Lévi-Strauss 2000). Projects presuppose particular mindsets, tools, and genres that can structure the time-sensitive coordination and execution of unique, complex tasks. Importantly, these project making procedures are applicable to a wide array of ends.

One of the earliest known reflections on projects in this general sense is Daniel Defoe's 1697 'An Essay Upon Projects' (see Novak 2008). In the essay, Defoe picks out speculative, commercial sea voyages, in which so-called 'projectors' would procure trade goods, contract a ship and crew, assess expected costs and profits, raise funds from private investors, purchase insurance, and so on, as his exemplar of a project. (Note how these mercantile voyages encompassed practices and genres of planning, management, and accounting that also characterize projects today). Significantly, however, Defoe follows his discussion of sea voyages with his own proposals for *other kinds* of projects, ranging from banking reform to highway construction to the education of women. By Defoe's time, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, projects were understood as a recognized style of activity that could be applied toward diverse goals. Defoe (1897 [1697], p. 9) goes so far as to name his historical moment a 'Projecting Age,' distinguished by its unique 'humour of invention.'⁴

This time period, of course, was also one of accelerated state centralization and societal administration. Not surprisingly, then, studies of the modern state often second as insightful but unwitting analyses of the project form. For example, James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998) seeks to explain and criticize the hubris of 'high modernism,' that is, the state-led experiments in social engineering that populated the 19th and 20th centuries. In effect, however, the book amounts to a study of several misguided projects, from scientific forestry in Germany to compulsory villagization in Tanzania.

Although Scott does not focus on projects as a social form, his analysis of high modernism does suggest ways to historicize the project form. First, Scott consistently highlights *the logistical dimension* of project making, that aspect of projects articulated through practices of planning, organization, record keeping, and management (see also Poovey 1998). As Scott shows, such practices developed alongside and through new tools to produce, collect, and represent data: cadastral maps, censuses, fixed surnames, urban plans, and standard languages. These tools and genres of representation were a necessary backdrop to state-led projects of social reform and management. Other forms of statistical measurement, representation, and accounting followed suit. Technical knowledge premised on the classification, quantification, and documentation of social worlds conditioned actors' very ability to conceive, represent, and execute projects.

Here, the project form lies within a history of state governmentality and techniques of social management. As Foucault (1991, p. 39) described, the 'art of government' centers on 'how to introduce economy – that is to say, the correct manner of managing individuals, goods, and wealth ... into the management of the state.' Reading Scott alongside Foucault, one can see how the 'forms of management' emblematic of governmentality often crystalized through projects and the representational genres that projects both depended on and helped to develop. That is, the project form both operationalized and generalized logistical approaches to data collection, planning, budgeting, and scheduling that anchored new practices and domains of social management.

Second, Scott's book examines how high modernist projects emerged alongside and through new modes and genres of social reflexivity. This line of argument serves to contextualize the *visionary dimension* of project making, that is, the aspirational aspect of projects articulated through visions or promises of future realities made consciously different from the present (Sunder Rajan 2006, Rommel 2021 on 'project dreamwork'; cf. Abram and Weszkalnys 2013). As Scott (1998, p. 91) writes, 'One essential precondition of this transformation [toward modern statecraft] was the discovery of society as a reified object that was separate from the state and that could be scientifically

described.’ Rabinow (1995, p. 19) similarly argues that new, reflexive conceptions of ‘man,’ ‘as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows,’ were foundational to the practices of social reform, regulation, and intervention that characterize the modern state.

High modernism thus presupposed a conception of society as a bounded, recognizable entity that could be studied and therefore remade. And, projects emerged as high modernism’s favorite vehicle for social engineering. When society is understood as an object on which actors can intervene, then it becomes possible to conceive of projects of all sorts, not just the building of a cathedral or palace, but also the reform of a prisoner’s soul. The ambitions for social and personal transformation that projects host and structure, that is, the visionary dimension of projects, depend on such a social imaginary.

When contextualized in a history of the modern state, projects are not simply a model or method by which actors can pursue non-routine goals. Rather, projects appear as a historically specific social form that depends on particular representational genres and that presupposes an imaginary based on the possibility of social transformation. Within this imaginary, not only are projects not routine operations, they are meant to partake in ‘the humour of invention,’ to ‘improve’ things (Li 2007), to generate value, whether in service of profits or the common good – albeit through structured and managed action. This conjuncture between the logistical and the visionary, between ‘rational’ planning and implementation and the promise of transformative action, lies at the core of the project form as we recognize it today.

Beyond the nascent governmentality of modernizing states, however, there is another genealogy of the project that connects to commerce in the early modern period and hence to practices of colonial speculation. This, after all, was the primary focus of Defoe’s writing on projects (1697, p. 11): ‘Every new voyage the merchant contrives is a project.’ Defoe’s essay places projects at the center of a commercial revolution: the birth of capitalism within a political economy premised on colonial extraction, settlement, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, the ‘Projecting Age’ fueled the emergence of joint stock companies, commercial lending, and the insurance industry, which were all deeply entwined in colonialism and its projects.

Within this genealogy, the connection between the project form and the colonialism-capitalism nexus dovetails with established studies of early capitalist production and the intensified regimentation of labor, tasks, time, and resources, whether on the plantation (Mintz 1986) or in the factory (Thompson 1967). Moreover, this genealogy of the project illustrates the thesis that racism, colonialism, and capitalism have always been co-constitutive (Robinson 2000). The project, like other capitalist forms of production, is marked by this legacy. It was not born in ‘the West’ and diffused elsewhere, but was itself the product of a colonialist world system. During the early modern period, the promise of projects generated vast, uncalculated expenses that were born by unfree, colonized, and exploited labor, the very populations that high modernist elites later sought to manage through projects of social transformation.⁵ The project form, with its marriage of the logistical and the visionary, the managerial and the promissory, thus shaped not only social imaginaries but also material realities of labor and life. This aspect of the project form is one that extends into our time.

Projects today

While the project form traces its origins through the early, trans-Atlantic world system and high modernist social engineering, projects today are a global phenomenon. They belong to the world. It is not only that the project form has expanded into an even broader range of domains, but that the project form has been taken up and remade in distinct ethnographic settings. From American project managers who coordinate the design and production of intercontinental ballistic missiles (Morris 2011) to young Egyptian men launching *mashari*⁶, or small-scale business projects, within a precarious labor market (Rommel 2021, 2022), the project form takes on different resonances as it is embedded and articulated in distinct social contexts. The projects around us are ever

more diverse and pervasive, suggesting that, as Rommel (2021) states of Egypt, ‘adaptable and temporally bounded projects have today become *the* axiomatic way to coordinate competences, investment and labour, and work out improved futures.’

The projects of today have, however, undergone a qualitative shift. High modernist projects were often tethered to ‘grand narratives’ of progress, civilization, and revolution. Of course, projects of sweeping ambition continue to exist, for example, focusing on climate change, disease eradication, and even the colonization of Mars. Yet, these days projects are more likely to orient to middling goals: innovation, efficiency, conservation, and social impact (Graeber 2012). Such projects remain ‘visionary’ but in a minor key. They dream less of mass social transformation and more of ‘improvement.’

The humbling of project aspirations has coincided with what Jensen, Thuesen, and Gerdali (2016) call, ‘projectification of everything.’ Projects are not simply parts of social environments; in an increasing range of domains, project logics organize the social environment. For example, one area where ‘projectification’ is well on display is among non-governmental and international organizations whose activities have proliferated since the Cold War. In fields such as development, humanitarianism, and democracy promotion, projects are the *sine qua non* of organizations (see for example, Ferguson 1994, Mosse 2005, Li 2007; Krause 2014, Dunn 2017, Copeland 2019; Sampson 1996, 2003; Stubbs 2002, Baker 2014). Consequently, as Steven Sampson (1996, 2003) has argued through his research on civil society in the Balkans, NGOs often depend on and perpetuate a ‘project economy,’ in which project competitions mediate organizations’ and individuals’ continual struggle to secure funding from international donors (see also Baker 2014, Krause 2014, Mikhaylova 2018).⁶ In many cases, the resulting NGO projects, often focused on specific problems and with relatively small budgets, substitute for services that had once been governments’ responsibility. In other cases, NGO projects function to re-engineer social landscapes in ways that aid and abet privatization on a larger scale (Jansen 2007). In consequence, NGOization is often linked to neoliberalization, that is, the respatialization of state processes and responsibilities under the auspices of ‘market reform’ that have transformed government and undermined welfare states.⁷ The project form has been instrumental to this process.

Projectification has also transformed the world of business and finance. In the place of the vertically integrated firms that epitomized the mid-twentieth century, which could offer career advancement and career employment, corporations increasingly organize their business through discrete projects. The temporary nature of projects (see Lundin and Söderholm 1995, Graan and Rommel 2022) is understood to grant firms greater flexibility and speed in carrying out business (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). Workers and resources are committed on a temporary basis—with some tasks possibly outsourced—which reduces long-term operating expenses. Project timelines and deadlines also provide a structure that facilitates the redirection or termination of projects that fail to make desired progress. In consequence, as Jensen et al. (2016, p. 7) argue, projects are viewed as both the product and driver of a financialized, new economy that is oriented toward perpetual short-term gain.

For these reasons, projects are frequently ideologized as founts of ‘innovation,’ which stands as guiding value of the new economy and its zeal for entrepreneurship. As Lilly Irani argues in her book, *Chasing Innovation* (2019, p. 16), the embrace of entrepreneurialism among Indian elites in government and development was ‘an engine for proliferating projects,’ where the call to ‘innovate’ masked the goal of producing monetizable solutions to social problems. In such environments, projects, with their delicate balance between the logistical and the visionary, become their own sort of commodity (cf. Sunder Rajan 2006, Krause 2014) as entrepreneurs dream of success, firms hunt profit and individuals build careers. Contemporary ‘startup culture’ takes this logic a step further as the firm itself is often nothing but a project that founders, investors, and executives hope to develop and then sell off.

This integration of the project form into the basic organization of firms has had significant consequences. The restructuring of a corporate economy around projects creates a dilemma for people

who must earn a continuous living when projects are temporary. This has intensified precarity (Rommel 2022) and led to new practices of jobhunting and recruitment (Gershon 2017) that include networking (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, Jensen et al 2016) and personal branding (Gershon 2016). One might also note how the so-called ‘platform economy’ and ‘gig economy’ incorporate the logic of projectification, with operations like Amazon Mechanical Turk and Upwork serving as auction houses that allow managers to outsource project tasks to freelance workers with few labor protections (Irani 2015).

Such transformations both fuel and are fueled by broader political economic shifts. As Odell (2019, p. 14) argues, the weakening of organized labor, especially in the 1980s, was a prerequisite for the idea that ‘we should all be entrepreneurs.’ Drawing on the writing of Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, she elaborates that, with the eradication of secure employment, ‘workers no longer exist,’ rather only, ‘[t]heir time exists ... permanently available to connect, to produce in exchange for a temporary salary’ (Berardi 2011, p. 129). Projects become the ‘temporary organization’ (Lundin and Söderholm 1995) that enables this reconceptualization, restructuring, and re-valuation of work. In this context too, the flexibility and adaptability of projects comes at great risk and expense, fueling stress, instability, and burnout across employment hierarchies. However, as before, it is non-elite workers, often racialized and gendered, who disproportionately bear these risks. Any account of the project form today must thus address the project’s role in creating forms of precarious labor that produce and exacerbate inequality (see also Rommel 2021, 2022).

Theorizing the project: from form to genre

The above arguments amount to the claim that, although virtually unacknowledged, the project form has constituted a primary building block within the historical processes glossed as state centralization, capitalism, and colonialism, as well as within the more recent rise of a ‘new economy,’ based on financialization, outsourcing, and precarious labor (see also Graan and Rommel 2022). Seen from a historical perspective, projects are much more than a framework that facilitates progress on unique goals by organizing labor and resources. Rather, the project form presupposes and animates the possibility of social transformation and of engineering and managing social worlds. The project form combines the logistical and the visionary, planning and promise, reason and hope. Thoroughly embedded in contemporary lifeworlds, the project form has emerged as a default model for human initiative—of purposive, transformative action.

A theory of the project form, however, must account for, rather than assume, the logistical and visionary dimensions of project making. My approach to this challenge is to examine project making as a grounded social activity. Toward this end, I propose that one can productively conceptualize the project form itself as a complex, semiotic genre. Scholars such as Orlikowski and Yates (1994) and Spinuzzi (2003) have illustrated how genre theory can illuminate the semiotic practices that mediate labor, management and collaboration in organizations and workplaces, a theme that this special issue develops further (Gershon and Prentice, this issue). For my purpose, however, genre theory provides a means to move beyond an ideal typical description of the project form to understand how project making is always a contingent achievement that solidifies through genre-mediated social practice and interaction.

In reconceptualizing the project form as a complex genre of social action, one that emerges contingently within processes of project making, I draw on Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman’s groundbreaking 1992 article, ‘Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power.’ Briggs and Bauman are interested in how and to what effect social actors use genred ways of communicating in the course of interactions, performances, and other forms of textual production. For example, a politician might lapse into sermonic language during a public speech, and thereby add gravitas to the performance or convey his, her, or their religious identity. Briggs and Bauman describe such discursive practice as ‘generic intertextuality’ – the politician’s use of sermonic language draws an intertextual link to the genre of the church sermon. Performed examples of generic intertextuality, Briggs and

Bauman continue, accomplish things in the world of social interaction – the politician conveys gravitas or religious devotion. Using socially recognized, genred forms of communication within discursive interaction thus has a performative effect in that the act of saying something, that is, invoking the genred form, also constitutes an act of doing something, for example, of framing the interaction, speaker, or addressee in a particular fashion.

The performativity of genres, however, is never guaranteed in advance. As Briggs and Bauman elaborate, when people invoke genres within interactions, the result can never perfectly match the generally recognized model or stereotype of the genre. That is, the token (the performance) can only ever approximate the type (the idealized generic model). In consequence, the use of genred forms within interactions necessarily produces a gap between the abstract model and the specific performance. At times, the gap can result in performative misfires, that is, failed attempts at a genre performance. At other times, actors minimize or accentuate the gaps for their own performative effect. For example, minimizing the gap between a performance and its ideal type can convey authenticity and traditionalism, while accentuating the gap might convey novelty and creativity. Briggs and Bauman thus highlight the performative character of genre performances but also the contingency. These two points are central to my own conceptualization of the project form.

The project form itself can be understood as what Bakhtin (1986) described as a ‘complex genre.’ These are genres which require ‘primary’ genres to be enacted. In this sense, while projects exist as a socially recognized, formally distinct way of acting in many parts of the world, they rely on other genres—of planning, meeting, scheduling, and accounting—to be realized. Of course, not every project requires all possible primary project genres to be understood and recognized as a project. Rather, social actors variously invoke, and align to, project genres for a vast diversity of purposes. Despite their differences, however, such actions reproduce the project form, making it available as a genre for ever-new forms of social activity.

Readers are likely familiar with the many genres of communication and interaction that comprise projects. For example, projects routinely require document genres, such as proposals, work plans, tenders, contracts, statements of objective, and progress reports (Riles 2006, Hull 2012). They might also include genres of planning (Abrams and Weszkalnys 2013) and accounting, such as schedules, budgets, timelines, Gantt charts, and logframes, as well as genres of project evaluation and audit (Strathern 2000). On another level, projects incorporate rhetorical and visual genres, for example, forms of expert assessment (Carr 2010) or quantified, statistical argument (Merry 2016). Furthermore, projects often include interactional genres, such as meetings (Alexander 2017), workshops (Gershon and Wilf, this issue), brainstorming (Wilf 2016), and PowerPoint presentations (Prentice 2019). These project components constitute genres in the sense that they are socially recognized ways of communicating and interacting, to varying degrees of formalization. How a project budget, work schedule, or planning meeting is realized will vary across contexts, but social actors who are familiar with projects can recognize them as examples of the genres that they instantiate.

In several areas, as in the world of NGOs, genres of a ‘project’ are relatively codified. Thus, Monika Krause, in her work *The Good Project* (2014), theorizes humanitarian relief as a form of production, the primary output of which is a ‘project’ that fulfills specific genre conventions in terms of how it frames problems, sets goals, describes activities, divides labor, and budgets resources (see also Mikhaylova 2018, Rogers 2014, Sampson 1996, 2003). For example, in aid work, grant-makers typically forbid projects to include routine tasks (or ‘running’ costs) in their design, instead expecting targeted and temporally bounded inputs, outputs, and goals.⁸ In parallel, Kimberly Chong’s (2018) ethnography of a consulting firm in China illustrates how genre expectations also guide how projects are formulated into ‘billable services’ in worlds of business and commerce.⁹

Projects must thus incorporate expected genres in order to be legible to clients, business partners, bureaucrats, funders, and stakeholders. An important part of learning how to undertake or contribute to a project is gaining familiarity and competence with its genre components. In professional contexts, this has resulted in a slew of trainings in which consultants disseminate knowledge on project genres.¹⁰ In such trainings, projects are readily decomposed into discrete genres and

techniques that can be taught and mastered (for example, how to write a proposal, how to construct a budget, how to write a business plan) while the project form is all the more naturalized as a way to understand work and even the world (Mikhaylova 2018).

Conceptualizing the project form in terms of genre thus provides a powerful way to account for the breadth and diversity of projects and to concretize how project thinking is taught, made legible to others, and commodified. However, let us recall, Briggs and Bauman's arguments (1992) on genre: genres describe socially recognized forms of textual or semiotic coherence, but genre is most interesting when it is viewed from the perspective of social action, which underscores both the performativity and contingency of genre performances. How might these arguments on genre expand a theory of the project?

The representational politics of project genres

First, attention to the genred forms of project making can help reveal how projects achieve the effects of being 'logistical' and 'visionary.' Projects come to materialize these qualities through *genres of representation* that make project motives, goals, and methods tangible and actionable. For example, indicators and benchmarks (Merry 2016, Lie 2020) exist as genres—they combine quantifiable data and rhetorical argument into an evidence type—but they also help frame the aspiration of a project in a way that is amenable to managerial action. Such genres are not merely descriptive—they do not simply represent a self-evident and pre-existing reality—they are also performative. In representing problems and goals, these genres create them, bring them into tangible relief, and thereby authorize particular types of action. As a second-order effect, such genres also signal the logistical or practical quality of a project, as well as its visionary and aspirational quality. It is through the performance of primary genres—indicators, benchmarks, proposals, plans, schedules, and so on—that the logistical and visionary dimensions of the project form are materialized.

How project genres construct an area of intervention, therefore, affects what is or is not considered as possible, appropriate, and important within the project scope. Project genres are thus inherently political. Li (2007) makes this point through her discussion of 'problematization' as an aspect of development projects. Projects are often understood to address some identified problem, but the way in which problems are framed depends on genres of representation—rhetorical tropes, statistical arguments—that bring the problem into relief. For example, in her study of humanitarian organizations, Krause (2014, p. 12) writes, 'In tracing the history of [organizations'] management tools, we see a shift within Western states from development policies with broad goals and expansive yet nonspecific responsibilities assumed toward people to a regime of accountability for specific results on the level of the intervention. Efforts to make aid more responsible have resulted in the abdication of responsibility beyond very specific project aims.' In effect, a shift toward 'definable objectives' in humanitarian work—a genre convention to be sure—resulted in a reduction in organizations' acknowledged responsibilities and hence in a narrowing of the humanitarian field. How genres of project making represent and concretize objectives, procedures, and so on can thereby determine how 'problems' are understood and how fields of legitimate intervention are represented.

Of course, there is no uniform way in which projects' representational genres construct problems or authorize forms of action or intervention. Nevertheless, scholars have identified notable regularities in how some kinds of projects frame problems and appropriate action. For example, Li (2007) shows how development projects produce the effect of 'rendering technical', that is, of framing problems primarily in technical—as opposed to structural or political—terms. The result, Li describes, is an anti-politics, to use Ferguson's (1994) famous term, that exempts political economic structures and inequalities from project-based redress.

More recently, Irani (2019) builds on Li to analyze the problematization effects stemming from India's new entrepreneurship-focused development policy. Irani coins the term, 'rendering entrepreneurial' to describe how entrepreneurial project genres frame 'failure' not as a 'problem' to be

fixed by technical solutions, but as ‘chances to learn, modify the attempt, and try again’ as one refines one’s project-product (Irani 2019, p. 16). In consequence, ‘These projects made life itself a site of enterprising experiment’ (Irani 2019, p. 16). The genres by which one mounts a project, as these examples show, can yield distinct problematization effects.

Contingency and process: rethinking projects through genre theory

When people deploy representational genres in project making, this has performative effects that variously authorize and constrain project interventions. These genres mediate how practices of conceiving, planning, arranging, and managing projects takes place, and thereby also produce ‘rational action’ and ‘visionary aim’ as project qualities. However, as Briggs and Bauman (1992) emphasize, the efficacy of genres within performances, interactions, or other forms of textual production are never guaranteed in advance. Rather, the meaning and consequence of genre instantiations develops contingently within and across discursive events. The contingent nature of genre performances provides a second useful ground upon which to rethink the project form.

In particular, from this genre theory perspective, projects appear not as a decontextualized organizational structure or as a template for coordinating purposive, transformative action, but as a concatenation of genre performances and hence as a contingent process that unfolds as participants invoke and align to the various genres required to manifest any one project. As Bruno Latour (2002) argues in his account of a mass transit project in Paris, projects begin as fictions, as promises of some-as-of-yet-unrealized thing, but this ‘what could be’ engagement with reality only comes to be concretized as it is translated into genred forms that make the project tangible (cf. Mosse 2005, Abram and Weszkalnys 2013). For example, Latour describes how the signing of a contract serves to materialize the project, at least temporarily, as the project’s potential is translated into and bound within in a new representational form. Through such processes, following Mosse (2013, p. 233), ‘projects become real (i.e. produce coherence) through the work of generating and translating interests, enrolling supporters, and stabilizing interpretations and representations ...’ The ‘projectness’ of a project thus emerges through such a series of genre alignments and performances; it is an effect of these alignments and performances.

When we consider projects as a genre-mediated process, then, we can see how the work of project making is not only the work of completing some non-routine task. In addition, the work of project making also builds, or attempts to build, the very coordination structures that define the project form as an ideal type. For example, Mosse (2005) shows in his study of a British funded development project undertaken in India that project documents often function to contain contradictions and disagreements within the project design. Such document genres thereby produced the illusion of a coherent, structured, and unanimously supported initiative, despite the inevitable compromises, hierarchies, and disputes that both precede and manifest in project implementation.

In addition, we can also see how project genres serve to materialize the ‘promissory vision’ (Sunder Rajan 2006) of projects. Genres such as proposals, pitches, contracts, PowerPoint presentations, Gantt charts, and so on, concretize the shape and potential of a project. Thus, when Boltanski and Chiapello (2007, p. 104-5) write that, ‘Projects make production and accumulation possible in a world which, were it to be purely connexionist, would simply contain flows, where nothing could be stabilized, accumulated or crystallized,’ I would add that this stabilizing labor materializes through a contingent, genre-mediated process.

Through genre theory, then, we arrive at an understanding that distinguishes between the project form as a historically specific template for purposive, transformative activity, and the project form as a specific achievement, that is, as the contingent outcome of an often messy, socio-political process (see Li 1999, Latour 2002, Mosse 2005) that manifests through genre-mediated claims to expertise, organization, and authority. When genre performances are successful, they define problems as manageable while also concretizing the promise and hope of a project. In doing so, they also (re)produce the model of the project as a rational approach to transformative goals. In

short, such genre performances, across so many different instances and variants, reproduce both the logistical and visionary dimensions of the project form.

Project genres and the projectification of theory

The project form, as both a historically specific model and a complex genre, elevates a particular kind of labor, that of setting goals and pursuing them methodically through planning, organizing, and management, and it presents that labor as a basic form of human action. Hence, even though projects are mounted to achieve exceptional, non-routine goals, the project form itself has become a commonplace. Indeed, in so many world contexts, it has become natural, and even necessary, to have projects. (What, dear reader, is your project?)

In working to historicize and theorize projects, I have sought to denaturalize the project form, by emphasizing its historical specificity as a ‘rational’ approach to transformative, ‘aspirational’ ends, and by showing how project genres produce ‘rationality’ and ‘aspiration’ as performative effects within the contingent process of project making. Yet, there is another level on which project logics have been naturalized: that of social theory. In this section, I examine some of the ways that the project form permeates contemporary understandings of agency and power (see also Graan and Rommel 2022).

For example, the project form, especially when considered in terms of its logistical dimension, presupposes a rational human agent. Such an agent, whether individual or collective, does the work of planning, organizing, and managing a project. In this light, projects constitute what Timothy Mitchell describes in *The Rule of Experts* (2002) as ‘techno-politics:’ the view that social problems can be solved through technological fixes. As Mitchell formulates it, techno-politics is not simply an approach to social problems but, like the project form, it implies a method of problematization, of conceiving and constructing a domain of intervention:

Techno-politics is always a technical body, an alloy that must emerge from a process of manufacture whose ingredients are both human and nonhuman, both intentional and not, and in which the intentional or the human is always somewhat overrun by the unintended. But it is a particular form of manufacturing, a certain way of organizing the amalgam of human and nonhuman, things and ideas, so that the human, the intellectual, the realm of intentions and ideas seems to come first and to control and organize the nonhuman. (2002, p. 42-3)

In short, techno-politics constructs problems such that a rational human agent can and should work on them. Projects, one can see, are an elementary form of technopolitical life.

When, then, Mitchell argues that much contemporary social science reproduces techno-political models of agency, we have new grounds to evaluate this charge. Mitchell writes:

Overlooking the mixed way things happen, indeed producing the effect of neatly separate realms of reason and the real world, ideas and their objects, the human and the nonhuman, was how power was coming to work in Egypt, and in the twentieth century in general. Social science, by relating particular events to a universal reason and by treating human agency as given, mimics this form of power. (2002, p. 52).

From the perspective developed here, ‘social science’ mimics not only ‘techno-political power,’ but more specifically, it mimics a project form that privileges rational human agency within purposive, transformative action. As Mitchell concludes, such presuppositions are constraining of both theory and research: ‘No explanation grounded in the universalizing force of human projects and intentions can explore whether the very possibility of the human, of intentionality, of abstraction depends on, at the same time as it overlooks, nonhuman elements’ (2002, p. 29).

Echoes of the project form can also be found within intentionalist theories of human agency, that is, theories which define agency in terms of the intentions or aspirations that motivate action. For example, in her influential book *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (2006), anthropologist Sherry Ortner conceives of agency as ‘the pursuit of projects.’ To be fair, Ortner develops an impressive, nuanced account of agency, seeking to interrelate but

also distinguish discussions of intentional action, routine practice, and social power. In the final analysis, however, Ortner emphasizes intentional, purposive, and transformative action as the cornerstone of her conception of agency. For Ortner, social agency is exemplified by (if not limited to) the ability to conceive and implement transformative projects within social landscapes marked by power. In some sense, then, Ortner's theory, as well as other intentionalist accounts of social action, reproduces the theory of agency that is baked into the project form, one premised on a subject who plans, strategizes, organizes, and executes: a subject both visionary and practical, that is, a subject who conceives of and completes projects.

From a quite different direction, one can also detect shadows of the project form within what I call 'managerial theories of power.' Typically, these theories draw on Michel Foucault's writings on governmentality and biopolitics, which conceptualize power as rationalities and technologies of *management* that focus on the population, society, or life itself. An influential set of interpreters (see Burchell et al 1991, Miller and Rose 2008) served as early evangelists of the governmentality concept and helped to popularize 'management' as an analytic of power. Managerial understandings of power have thus seeped into the commonsense of the critical social sciences, with Foucauldian understandings of governmentality and biopolitics often mixing with other concepts and tropes. As if updating Max Weber's famous critique of the bureaucratic rationality in cyberpunk aesthetic, social theorists and critical scholars see not iron cages, but assorted technologies, assemblages, apparatuses, and machines that subtly but consequentially *manage* or *regulate* social life.

In managerial theories of power, the project form appears not in the figure of the human agent, full of intention, but rather as disembodied human reason that manifests in governmental *rationalities*. Indeed, it was scholars of governmentality who popularized the concept of 'governmental rationality' (Burchell et al 1991, Miller and Rose 2008) and who honed analysis on the rationalities of power that inhered within programs, policies, and, yes, projects of government. As Miller and Rose (2008, p. 21) express it, 'governmentality has a characteristically 'programmatically' form.' Yet, through the work of denaturalizing the project form, one can see how these theories recapitulate project genres of problematization and planning. The genres appear not as emblems of human agency, but as forms of management and mechanisms of subjectification.

Whereas intentionalist theories of agency position human actors as creators and leaders of projects, managerial theories of power treat humans and their behavior as the targets of projects. In each case, however, the theoretical approach naturalizes the project form, either as embodied intentions or as disembodied rationalities. Readers might recall Paul Rabinow's argument (1995, p. 19) that new, reflexive conceptions of 'man,' 'as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows,' were foundational to modern practices of social reform, regulation, and intervention, and, I would add, to the project form. Intentionalist theories of power emphasize the figure of 'man' as 'a subject that knows' and who can thus act rationally and aspirationally. In contrast, managerial theories of power build on the figure of 'man' as 'an object of knowledge,' as one who is managed, as one subjected to projects of social reform and regulation.

To observe that theories of agency and power naturalize the project form is not to discredit them outright. Intentionalist theories of agency can be quite useful, and managerial theories of power have produced penetrating analyses of how power operates within contexts of programs and projects. As I argued elsewhere (Graan 2016), it is perhaps not coincidental that theories of governmentality have so often been called upon in anthropological studies of some project, whether of development, humanitarian relief, environmental conservation, and so on. The governmentality concept presupposes a coherent, bounded form of power—a rationality—that matches, and as I suggest here, mimics, the bounded scope and logics presupposed by the project form.

Yet, when theories understand agency or power as projects, they inevitably select certain kinds of phenomena as ripe for analysis and overlook others. Mitchell (2002) has criticized anthropocentric and logocentric social sciences for privileging narratives centered on human intention or human rationality at the expense of analyses that considered non-human factors and agencies. Similarly,

in grappling with theories that incorporate logics of the project form, one should ask not only what kind of analyses do they facilitate, but also: what kind of analyses do they foreclose?

Obviously, there are many possible answers to this question, but I wish to highlight a few. First, when the project form functions as a default mode of agency, it can occlude the struggles and suffering of those who cannot avail themselves to liberal, autological projects (Povinelli 2006), such as persons traumatized by war, displacement, imprisonment, enslavement, poverty, military occupation, discrimination, and patriarchy (cf. Hartman 1997, Bishara 2013). Consider, for example, Elizabeth Dunn's (2017) ethnography of a displaced persons camp in Georgia, which illustrates the limits of project-based agency in the aftermath of war. She shows how projects of humanitarian assistance, although well-meaning, partitioned the experiences of displaced persons into actionable problems (e.g. housing, education, health and sanitation, social integration) and in doing so failed to address the total, existential trauma of lives shattered by war. In this context, the project (or the project alone) was simply not the form of action appropriate to the situation. Rather than structuring efforts to achieve a common goal, projects can dissimulate agencies and pose answers that misconstrue fundamental problems.¹¹

Scholarly works that examine social environments defined by brutality, domination, deprivation, and their legacies thus often focus not on projects, but on forms of action and labor that work to sustain life and relationships amid ongoing structural violence. Conceptualized as 'redress' (Hartman 1997), 'repair' (Thomas 2019), and 'ordinary notes of care' (Sharpe 2016), this social labor includes everyday, quotidian practices by which subaltern subjects attend to and assert their humanity, thereby refusing forces of dehumanization that surround them.¹² Unlike projects, the labor of redress and care is not organized by a visionary claim on the future, nor by methodical planning (although future-thinking and planning are not alien to them.) Rather, as Hartman (1997, p. 76) describes, redressive practices, 'highlight the way in which pleasure or the counterinvestment in the body ... serves as a limited figure of social transformation.' These practices orient to the present, responding to its violences and deprivations, and although always 'insufficient and incomplete,' they can incorporate, channel, and generate traditions of wellbeing and counter-historicities that indict power. Thus, it is significant that scholars such as Hartman, Thomas, and Sharpe each developed their concepts to bear witness (Thomas 2019) to how African-descendent communities responded to the realities and legacies of American and Caribbean slave societies. Redress and care, as forms of social action, also manifest in a historically specific fashion.¹³ The social imaginary that they reflect and perform is distinct from that of projects, as are the social effects, relationships, and forms of value that they are capable of generating.

Second, theories that understand human action in terms of projects smuggle in assumptions about logistical, rational planning that can be inappropriate to, and even devalue, initiatives and institutions organized otherwise. For example, Ballestero (2019) describes how water activists in Costa Rica and Brazil were deeply committed to ensuring water as a public good, but their work was not organized by an overriding, promissory vision. The political strategies and devices they used did 'not engage the future as if it were an exhibition, a display you could step into, or even as a narrative figure' (2019, p. 27). Ballestero (2019, p. 27) explains, 'This refusal to treat the future as an image is not capricious,' rather it stems from her interlocutors' awareness that, 'any difference created in the present is unstable and contradictory Rather than talk about the future they want to see come about, they speak about responsibility, principles, and shortcomings in their technical acts.' Akin to Donna Haraway's (2016, p. 4) call to 'stay with trouble,' that is, political praxis that 'eschew[s] futurism' in order to generate accountabilities and mutualities in the here-and-now, the water activists, 'act by setting up 'structures and obligations of the future' (Fortun 2012, p. 449), despite the difficulties they have with producing any specific image of what that future might look like' (Ballestero 2019, p. 28).

The political labor that Ballestero's ethnography brings into relief does not take the form of a project with stated goals and plans for the future, which can render this labor unrecognizable to conventional political analysis. Outside of an articulated agenda, the products of the activists'

labor—‘lists put together without ever becoming law, percentages of surplus never increased, promises aggregated without having their fulfillment verified’ (2019, p. 28)—might seem to lack effects.¹⁴ But, as Ballestero argues, the structures and obligations created through such action can form, ‘pre-conditions to futures that are not calculable from the present’ (2019, p. 33). Ballestero thus defends her study of water activism, arguing ‘that dwelling in what in the present seems to be ineffectual is a worthy analytic endeavor’ (2019, p. 28), one that challenges the analytic preference to focus on forms of action that are tethered to programmatic visions of future.

Third, theories that naturalize the project form misrecognize or ignore kinds of power that are not organized according to managerial logics. For instance, elsewhere (Graan 2016), I examine how in the 2000s, American and European diplomats would regularly and publicly comment on political issues in Macedonia, broadcasting their support for or disapproval of particular policies within an ongoing process of postsocialist and postconflict political reform. Despite an initial attempt to think about this practice as a form of international ‘oversight governmentality,’ I realized that the governmentality prism did not do justice to the ethnographic phenomenon. Although the diplomats’ commentary did influence policymaking and political discussion in Macedonia, the commentary itself was not the result of some premediated project or program, nor did it obviously express some superordinate political rationality. Rather, the phenomenon involved diplomats from diverse national backgrounds who represented non-identical political interests. Furthermore, diplomats’ comments were typically extemporized and multi-vocal, responding to journalists’ questions and dialogic with public statements and retorts by Macedonian political leaders. Thus, in contrast to scholarship that focuses on specific projects of international intervention—bounded by purpose and scope—diplomatic commentary existed as a different kind of interventionist form, one that was dependent on open-ended forms of communication and discursive circulation organized by the Macedonian public sphere on politics. Diplomats’ weighted commentary thus enacted a different form of power compared to interventionist projects: it resulted not in programmatic governmentality but in improvised, serial, and fragile attempts to modulate the Macedonian public sphere on politics (Graan 2016). In analyzing diplomats’ commentary as a practice of publicity, I sought to bring a different kind of international intervention into critical relief, one that did not fit the rigid temporality of the project form.

When scholars bracket managerial theories of power and their projections of governmental *rationalities*, new ways of analyzing projects also open up. The move to reconsider projects in terms of genre theory is one example of this. I emphasize how project genres mediate claims to authority, claims to order, claims to intention, claims to goal-attainment that are always contingent, and in consequence, the project form cannot be reduced to its own promissory vision or logistical plan. Thus, instead of analyses that frame some rationality as an explanatory device and object of critique, focus on project contingency creates a space where project rationalities are not the starting point of analysis, but a question to investigate (cf. Latour 2002). Monika Krause pursues just this sort of tack in her book *The Good Project* (2014), writing ‘[i]n contrast to accounts that analyze and critique ‘humanitarian reason’ based on a reconstruction that attributes coherence based on ideas or interests, I argue that the pattern we see is rather one of a fragmentation of reason.’ (2014, p. 4). Similarly, Dunn’s (2012, p. 2) analysis of ‘adhococracy,’ shows that, ‘although humanitarian actors claim to govern by applying rationalizing techniques of seeing, counting, and managing, in fact humanitarian aid is a process based as much on guesswork, rules of thumb, and “satisficing” as it is on rational planning.’ As these examples illustrate, when we decenter project rationality, we gain insight to the complex, improvised, compromised, contested, and often contradictory ways that project logics unfold despite their programmatic presentation in project genres (see Li 1999, Mosse 2005).

By reckoning with the historical specificity of projects, and by acknowledging how project thinking has shaped contemporary social theory, scholars can more readily recognize the significance of varieties of agency and power that are organized according to different logics. Practices of redress and care—their genres, their presuppositions, their temporalities, their historicities, their ends—not only differ from the project form, but they also illustrate limits of project making. Ballestero’s

ethnography similarly details an approach to concerted action, to political praxis, that is organized otherwise to projects and which produces different kinds of practical and moral orientations. My work on American and European diplomats' intervention into the Macedonian public sphere alerts us to a form of power that is unrecognizable by theories that understand power as projects and programs of prefigured social management. Such examples, of which there could be many more, attest to the limits and limitations of the project form as a default category within social analysis. In turn, a critique of the project form serves to highlight the specificity and significance of these other ways of acting in the world.

Provincializing the project: what comes next?

Throughout this essay, I have sought to puncture the commonsense of projects so as to appreciate their history and consequence as a social form. As I have argued, project logics not only animate contemporary social environments, they also infuse influential social theories on agency and power.

In making these arguments, my aim is not to discourage work on projects, much less to discourage theories of agency and power. If anything, my effort to think through the odd ubiquity/invisibility of projects has only convinced me of the brilliant ethnographic, analytic, and theoretical work that has emerged from scholars' study of and engagement with projects. My aim thus is not to cast down work on projects but, rather, to *provincialize* the project (cf. Chakrabarty 2001). That is, I seek to dismantle the default universality that has so often accompanied the project form in order to historicize and critically interrogate how projects shape the world and how we see it. The move is toward a historically specific account and analysis of projects, a sketch of which I have worked to present here. Moreover, my hope is that in provincializing the project, we might further pluralize ethnographic and theoretical approaches to agency and power. In recognizing the historical specificity of the project form, we more clearly demarcate ways of acting and forms of power that exist outside the convenient frame of project logics.

So, after we provincialize the project, what then? When we consider projects not as a universal phenomenon, but as a historically specific social form, what other kinds of analysis become possible? First, the historical analysis of the project form, and its co-articulation with formations of racial capitalism, state centralization, and colonialism, can begin. Second, we can all the more appreciate recent theoretical and methodological experiments in anthropology that move beyond anthropocentrism by weaving together different sites and languages of analysis (Matsutake Worlds Research Group 2009, Fortun 2012). Premised on disciplinary combination and miscegenation, these approaches model a kind of methodological and theoretical eclecticism that moves us beyond projects, intentions, and management alike, and toward other ways of acting and being in the world.

Furthermore, the work of thinking beyond the project is not only an academic one. Once we denaturalize the project form, we can more clearly imagine alternatives to it. If not every action or every vision for the future amounts to a project, then what else is there? What kinds of transformation might practices of radical care (Hobart and Kneese 2020) or of 'staying with trouble' (Haraway 2016) yield? Why don't we choose to de-projectify some social environments, for example, to ask what work or development might look like without perpetual projects? Might we create an alternative to the gig economy or the 'projectification of everything' that is more satisfying? Or, as Jenny Odell ponders in her recent book, *How to Do Nothing* (2019), what might a project with no goal look like? Instead of a succession of discrete projects, what might result from 'a view toward the future that doesn't resolve in a point, but rather circles back towards itself in constant renegotiation' (Odell 2019, p. 200-1)? The task of provincializing the project form is therefore also a call to pluralize our practical and theoretical groundings within the world around us.

On multiple levels, then, in provincializing the project form, we interrogate basic assumptions about humanity, agency, rationality, and power presupposed by the project form. It is a move to consider the historical specificity of these concepts and the historical biases encoded within them. Or, to echo Timothy Mitchell (2002, p. 52-3), 'it means making this issue of power and agency

a question, instead of an answer known in advance.’ The call to provincialize the project form is thus a call to interrogate some of our dearest concepts and to imagine and enact social worlds beyond the hegemony of projects.

Notes

1. To say that scholars have rarely inquired into the history or ubiquity of the project form is not to say that scholars have failed to analyze projects at all. Indeed, this essay stands on the shoulders of scholarly work—especially in development studies, NGO studies and organizational sociology—that examines how projects function in particular contexts (e.g., Ferguson 1994, Scott 1998, Mosse 2005, Li 2007, Copeland 2019; Sampson 1996, Krause 2014, Dunn 2017, Mihaylova 2018; Lundin and Söderholm 1995, Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, Jensen et al. 2016). Such studies, however, usually examine projects only as an aspect of a specific professional field, such as aid work or work within corporations. Furthermore, while anthropologists increasingly treat projects (e.g., of development, conservation, or humanitarianism) as fieldsites, rarely is the project form itself an object of study. Instead, the analysis of a project serves as a steppingstone to interrogate some other social formation, for example, high modernism, technoscience, neoliberalism, or policy. My aim is thus to bring the project form front-and-center and to consider its applicability across professional domains.
2. See Söderlund and Lenfle 2013 and Scranton 2014 for recent calls to inaugurate a ‘history of the project.’
3. This argument parallels Postone’s (1993) reading of Marx, which contends that ‘labor,’ a is historically specific to capitalist society. Accordingly, although humans have engaged in forms of work throughout history, to ‘labor’ implies capitalist systems of commodity exchange.
4. Tellingly also, the Oxford English Dictionary dates the word, ‘project,’ in the sense of a ‘planned or proposed undertaking,’ to the late 16th and 17th centuries.
5. Tess Lea (2020, p. 150) offers a poignant, contemporary example of this dynamic. Drawing on the work of Joe Masco, she writes: ‘Reflecting on military bodies, [Masco] notes, ‘In a serious way, to be a soldier is to be an experimental subject, one that is not only tested in terms of physical and mental abilities but also subject to the theories, technologies, ambitions, and miscalculations of others’ (Masco 2013, n.p.). To be an Indigenous policy subject is to be similarly experimented on: in Australia, the Aboriginal arena is where politics comes to audition.’
6. Increasing project economies also organize academic research and careers, as readers of this essay will know intimately well. See Bendix et al 2017 and Trifuljesko 2021 for an analysis of the project in academia. See also Graeber 2012.
7. Similarly Nick Copeland’s *The Democracy Development Machine* (2019) analyzes the joint projectification and neoliberalization of government programs, via municipalities instead of NGOs, in Guatemala, arguing that ‘Projects refocused radical demands for collective redistribution on winner-take-all competition between party factions for insufficient projects, where personal interest demolished collective interest’ (2019, p. 139).
8. Here we see how project genres can explicitly manifest, and capitalize on, the non-routine character of projects. In the aid industry, there is a common assumption that routine work does not lead to sustainable impact but rather causes relations of dependency. As grant-makers want to claim credit for social impact, project genres allow them to discipline, audit but also claim attribution for creating public good by separating it out from normal events. I thank one of the manuscript’s anonymous reviewers for this point.
9. Project management’s emergence as a specialized discipline has also standardized several project genres. See Morris 2011.
10. To wit, the day before I wrote this sentence, I spent my morning attending a three-hour long training seminar that advised researchers on how to write successful proposals for the European Research Council’s annual competition for project funding. However, that I had access to this training—it was sponsored by my university—provides an example of how project economies make for uneven playing fields. Some enter into it with privilege, others at a disadvantage (e.g., due to less training and fewer advisors, hostile reviewers, working in a second or third language, poor internet connection). I thank one of the manuscript’s anonymous reviewers for highlighting this point.
11. See also Copeland 2019, which shows how the projectification of government programs in Guatemala, ‘created an entire domain of politics that sidestepped foundational inequalities’ (2019, p. 151).
12. In an essay on the topic, Hobart and Kneese (2020, p. 2) define ‘radical care’ as ‘a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds.’ They note that because forms of care often arise in conditions of inequality and structural violence, care can entrench power asymmetries by coercing vulnerable persons into uncompensated care/self-care practices. There is thus a danger to romanticizing care. Nevertheless, the authors (2020, p. 3) argue that, ‘reciprocity and attentiveness to the inequitable dynamics that characterize our current social landscape represent the kind of care that can radically remake worlds.’ We might well ask what it would take to scale up ‘radical care’ as a social form in parallel to the ways that the ‘project’ has been scaled up over the last centuries. For example, how might we, ‘create an ‘economy’ that lets us actually take care of the people who are taking care of us’ (Graeber 2021)?

13. All too often, distinct forms of action are translated and understood through the project form and its temporal premises. One goal here is to suspend such translations and the distortions that they produce (Cf. Rifkin 2017, Chakrabarty 2001).
14. Ballestero's ethnography also reveals that not all genre repertoires of problem solving lead to projects, although I contend that all projects exist through genre repertoires.

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