



PERSPECTIVE

Aida: Towards a degrowth liminality in-between imperial and regenerative modes of living

Christopher Martin ^{a,*}, Eric Hanada ^a, Maya Katrina Bautista Agana ^a,
Nithyashree Asokan ^a, Yuichi Tsuchibuchi ^a, Zihan Huang ^a

^a Graduate School of Frontier Sciences, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

* Corresponding author. Email address: chris.martin@s.k.u-tokyo.ac.jp

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Abstract

Despite numerous proposals to address the twin crises of ecological overshoot and rising inequality, the structural transformations that degrowth scholars call for remain sparse - typically happening on a small scale and depending on the extractive structures of the present. This perspective reflects on personal experience with Kashiwa-no-Hatake (柏の畑), an experimental project established by an international group of PhD students and early career researchers at The University of Tokyo.

We argue that degrowth and wider sustainability transitions debates would benefit from greater attention to liminality as a mode of existence in itself, rather than a state between states. Drawing on the Japanese concept of aida (間), interpreted through the philosophical framework of lemma, we suggest that in-between spaces offer fertile ground for advancing the praxis of futures beyond capitalism.

Over the past two decades, scholars have developed a rich set of frameworks and policy proposals aimed at addressing the twin crises of ecological overshoot and social inequality (Fanning & Raworth, 2025; Hickel, 2019). Proposals have clustered around the themes of democracy and participation, income and employment, redistributive taxation, consumption regulation, and strengthening social services (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Fromberg & Lund, 2024). Yet despite normative appeal (Krupan et al., 2025), implementation remains limited. Perhaps this is unsurprising when constituent expectations and social institutions, embedded in economic systems that depend on infinite growth for their own stability (Harvey, 2026; Mishan, 1993), narrow political choice and create an institutional myopia, ensuring that a growth-oriented paradigm continues to dominate policymaking.

Globally, this manifests as a fetish-like obsession with gross domestic product (GDP) (Stiglitz, 2009) that has led policymakers to prioritise (or carve out exceptions for) economic growth as if it were sacrosanct, resulting in, among other contradictions, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) where industrial activities are permitted to bypass environmental protections (Moberg, 2015) and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that reallocate social welfare to industrialisation (Ismi, 2004). Examples like these emphasise the political and cultural dimensions of the challenge ahead.

The impasse has led scholars to revisit questions of political strategy. Drawing on Gramscian theory, D'Alisa & Kallis (2020) argue that transformation requires not only institutional reform but the reordering of *common sense* through civil society. The argument follows that successful counter-hegemonic revolutions emerge from practices that prefigure alternative social relations and are aligned with targeted policy interventions. Degrowth, therefore, should not only be understood as a set of proposals or visions, but as a process of cultural and ontological transformation that arises from everyday experiences (D'Alisa et al., 2014; Koch, 2020).

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus is helpful for understanding how a new common sense may emerge. Habitus describes how the *active presence* of past experiences shapes perception, thought, and action—which, in turn, reproduce social order more reliably than rules. However, it is not deterministic, as conscious acts of alternative practice can facilitate difference within, and ultimately alter, historically structured limits. Thus, producing the forms of common sense capable of supporting ecosocial transformation may not require stronger narratives or arguments, but rather space to repeatedly experience (or prefigure) positive degrowth strategies.

However, if transformation depends on reshaping the everyday practices within an institutional environment that has structural or discursive power beyond its own walls, the next question becomes: where can such practices be meaningfully enacted? D'Alisa & Kallis (2020) suggest universities are a key site of contestation. Though beholden to the neoliberal logics of market competition, precarity, and productivity, universities are composed of semi-

autonomous actors capable of experimenting with, and legitimating, alternative forms of organising.

This paper reflects on one such experiment: *Kashiwa-no-Hatake* (柏の畑; Kashiwa Field), a collectively organised agricultural and social space established by an international group of PhD students and early career researchers at The University of Tokyo. It is a project that eludes precise definition, starting as an escape from the pressures of modern academia, before evolving into a prefigurative project, a resistance to neoliberal norms, and a boundary space between imperial and regenerative modes of living. The deliberately loose organisation of the project (lacking fixed goals, hierarchies, and metrics) has enabled it to function simultaneously as all of these.

Based on our experience, we argue the significance of such a space lies in its *liminality*. Rather than viewing liminality as a temporary transition between fixed states, we make the case for conceptualising it as a distinct mode of existence where values, identities, and practices are continuously negotiated. To support this argument, we draw on the Japanese concept of *aida* (間; in-between) and a logical framework rooted in lemma. Throughout the paper, we are guided by two interconnected questions:

1. What might a liminal mode of living between capitalism and post-capitalism look like?
2. What enables and constrains prefigurative projects in academic institutions operating according to neoliberal logic?

The paper proceeds in four stages. First, we introduce key conceptual foundations. Second, we introduce the history of Kashiwa-no-Hatake. Third, we reflect on liminality as a mode of living, interpreted through the lens of *aida*. Finally, we examine how this perspective reshapes our understanding of the tensions inherent in prefigurative projects. We conclude with a simple proposition: embracing liminality can free projects from expectations of coherence, scale, and transformation, enabling them to function as open-ended, relational processes. In this sense, in-between spaces offer fertile ground for advancing degrowth praxis.

1. Conceptual foundations

Here, we introduce the conceptual foundations underpinning our case: universities as sites of neoliberal hegemony, Satoyama as socio-ecological in-between spaces which inspired our project, and current literature on liminality in social transformation.

The university: a site of neoliberal contestation

As has happened across much of the civil and public sphere, market logics have increasingly crept into the administration of higher education. In recent decades, universities have been subject to a process of marketisation that has led to academic capitalism, competing for students, rankings, and prestige (Croucher & Lacy, 2022; Jessop, 2017). Informed by the theory of human capital (Olssen & Peters, 2005), this has reoriented their central function away from public provision towards revenue-generating activities and creating a pipeline of market-ready labour.

Specific reforms have included the introduction of performance metrics, audit cultures, and competitive evaluation systems that encourage academics to operate as self-interested actors (Feldman & Sandoval, 2018). Our experience suggests a financially extractive dimension also defines the relationship between academic institutions and their epistemic communities, as labs pay rent and administrative management fees are drawn from research funds. Nonetheless, as D'Alisa & Kallis (2020) note, higher education also serves as a core site of the degrowth movement—where scholars comfortably advocate for ecosocial policies and study grassroots action. Such institutions, with their legitimating capacity, should therefore also be capable of serving as sites of neoliberal contestation and resistance. To explore how we, as postgraduate students and early career researchers, might be able to do so within the constraints by which we are institutionally bound, we turned to boundary spaces for inspiration.

Satoyama: socio-ecological in-between spaces

Satoyama (里山; mountain village) are landscapes that account for approximately 40% of all land in Japan (Ministry of the Environment, 2001, 2022). They are a boundary in-between arable flatland and dense mountain forests which have been built on a longstanding mutual

inter-dependence between humans and nature. As studies have repeatedly found, not only are Satoyama landscapes harmed by the population booms of urbanisation, but also by population decline and abandonment (Kato et al., 2009; Uchida et al., 2025), creating a dynamic in which human and nature exist in a delicate balance that supports and nourishes each other.

In creating Kashiwa-no-Hatake, we found initial inspiration in the concept of *boundary spaces* that flourish uniquely because of the interdependence between humans and nature. We sought to create a space that supported both human and ecological health without compromising either, that was deliberately protected from the effects of productivist, neoliberal logic. What we did not expect, as we will detail in our reflections, was for the act of organising an *in-between* space to also challenge our epistemological and ontological assumptions about social reality.

Liminality in social transformation

Coined by ethnographer and folklorist Van Gennep (1909), the concept of liminality refers to the transition state “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969) two fixed social states, such as the ritual of initiation from adolescence to adulthood. Söderlund & Borg (2017) summarise three forms of liminality that have been studied since: acting as process, position (individual or collective), and place (like Satoyama). Common across all is the interest in the experience of liminality itself (Thomassen, 2009) and the characteristic of temporality (Lundin & Soderholm, 1995), which facilitates the emergence of behaviours unrestrained by the banality of status quo and ordinary social structures (Johnsen & Sorensen, 2015).

It is an experience that is often described as unsettling (Barrow et al., 2020; Rattray, 2016), as individuals detach from known social reference points and pass through a state of ambiguity. Thomassen (2016) notes that in liminal moments the relationship between structure and agency is unclear, which Carson (2016) posits may serve as a source of transformative power.

Based on our experience, we propose that institutionalised (Bamber et al., 2017; Thomassen, 2015) and place-based (Söderlund & Borg, 2017) liminality can serve as a strategic tool for advancing long-term social transformation by creating permeable spaces in which established

norms are suspended, alternative social relations can be rehearsed, and emergent meanings are negotiated. In our reflections, we highlight the dissolutive quality of *in-between* spaces, how they are understood through lemma, and their transformative potential.

2. Introducing Kashiwa-no-Hatake

Kashiwa-no-Hatake is a 950 square-metre experimental field located in (and used with negotiated permission from) the Graduate School of Frontier Sciences at the University of Tokyo. Established in Spring 2025, the project is managed by a group of seven former and current postgraduate volunteers from diverse disciplines, including environmental sciences, agriculture, political science, economic geography, and indigenous knowledge systems. Its origins lie in multiple conversations between the organisers on degrowth, the publish or perish culture of modern academia, and the challenge of transcending neoliberal logics from within.

Our common interest was a sense of unease arising from knowledge and experience of the structural disconnections that define modern life: what Marx (1844/2016) described as alienation from the products and processes of our labour, our human potential, and one another. These aspects might be considered what environmental scholars have since developed into a theory of metabolic rift (Foster, 1999; Saito, 2020), and they also reflect dynamics described by Brand and Wissen (2017) in their account of the *imperial mode of living*, specifically the argument that capitalist societies are sustained by patterns of production and consumption that commodify the nature and labour of *elsewhere*. More insidiously, this separation also inscribes desire: even the exploited seek integration into the attractive imperial life. In this way, the capitalist logic of accumulation dialectically draws on the wishes of the populace and becomes part of the identity that shapes it.

At the core of the Kashiwa-no-Hatake project is the recognition that the imperial mode of living thrives on separation and disconnection: human and nature, intellectual and physical labour, individual and collective agency. Such recognition is facilitated by the privileged position of detaching land-use from rent pressure (Harvey, 2009). With this freedom, we recognised the opportunity to explore what a different mode of living might look like: one

that directly rejects separation, addresses the multi-century decline of nature connectedness (Richardson, 2025), and stimulates deepgrowth transformations (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2024) capable of bridging structural division.

3. Reflections: liminality and lemma

What follows is an autoethnographic account of our first year collectively managing the field, interpreted through the lens of aida. During this time, a diverse program of activities emerged, including collective farming, bamboo management (竹伐り), seed exchanges, workshops, fieldtrips, place-based community building, and seasonal events (Agana et al., 2025). The year culminated in a public showcase during May 2026, which began with a screening of *Satish's School: Everyone is a Special Artist* (サティシュの学校 みんな、特別なアーティスト). The film introduced attendees to Satish Kumar's philosophy based on the interconnectedness of "soil, soul, and society" and was followed by an afternoon of activities without a predefined agenda or outcome. Together, we enjoyed lunch, a tea ceremony, music, planting sweet potatoes and edamame, building permaculture plant beds, harvesting beetroot, and more.

Reflecting on the experience, it became clear that what we had built was not scalable enough to replace the dominant system in a linear revolution (Hall, 1993; Kuhn, 1962). Our activities were voluntary. Time was limited. Funding was dependent on philanthropic donations. And the land we used, armoured by a narrative of experimentation, was detached from capitalist economic logic. Rather, Kashiwa-no-Hatake existed in a state of permanent liminality between the normative principles of today and those we envision will guide tomorrow – given meaning by the overlap between them.

We have come to interpret this liminality through a concept introduced to us by Shinichi Tsuji (personal communication, May 22, 2026) during our end of year reflections: aida. Whilst often translated as "in-between," aida carries a deeper meaning that points to a dynamic field of relational existence (Watsuji, 1961) that is grounded in interdependence and a logic of lemma (Kioka, 2014; Kobayashi, 2025). It suggests subjects and objects do not possess inherent meaning but that it arises through their relations. In contrast to the binary logic of logos,

distinctions are understood as provisional and co-constituted, resisting fixed distinctions and holding multiple, non-exclusive possibilities.

Of course, it is important to recognise that such relationality is not a unique Japanese construct. The philosophies of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism consistently resist the human tendency to transcend nature. Similar interconnectedness is also found in the rich tapestry of Indigenous ontologies (Gould et al., 2023).

Berque (2013) summarises these forms of relationality through the example of humans and their milieu, or environment. The logic of logos holds that humans respond to their environment. It is predicated on the separation of the two and leads to the natural conclusion that one may dominate or subjugate the other. Attempts to overcome this anthropocentric worldview with a bio- or ecocentric alternative simply alters the definition of the subject and the object but leaves the philosophy of separation structurally intact.

Within a non-binary relational logic, humans and their environment are inseparable. Existence is not given meaning by the interaction of discrete entities, but by relational processes that exist between and because of non-discrete entities (Yamauchi, 1974). In other words, if logos says we are human-beings that stand apart from our environment, lemma counters that we are human-becomings entangled within its flow (Kobayashi, 2025). To think of it another way, logos operates on the premise of a gap between entities, enabling them to reflect each other or form commonality that is distinct, whilst lemma adopts a premise of in-between where entities share dimensions formed together. For us, aida came to represent this in-between space—a kind of ongoing liminality where the boundaries between human and nature, or structure and agency, dissolve.

This has important implications for how we understand capitalism and its alternatives. As many scholars argue, capitalism is built on the processes of separation (Escobar, 2018). Yet even well-intentioned alternatives easily reproduce separation by refining boundaries, rather than dissolving the boundaries between them. What, then, might a permanent dissolution look like, and what are the strategic implications?

4. Reflections: towards a degrowth liminality

Our experience developing the field in the midst of a space shaped by neoliberal interests can be interpreted as an act of defiance towards the entrenched dispossessive development logic (Harvey, 2009). It also resonates with strands of scholarship that emphasise the role of prefigurative organising in the struggle to instigate social transformation (Monticelli, 2018; Schiller-Merkens, 2024) and nowtopias in which principles of an envisioned future are instantiated in the present (Demaria et al., 2019). Yet it also remains a product of what it seeks to eschew and leads us to question whether such contradictions are an inevitability of dualistic ontology.

Much existing literature on degrowth strategy focuses on the interplay between the state and civil society (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Koch, 2022). Whilst these debates are important, they operate on the assumption that actors remain separate from, yet reflective of, their institutions and domains, caught in a cycle of responding and adapting to one another. From the relational perspective, however, the reflection between actors and their environment is less relevant, as they are given meaning by each other. Reframing subjects and objects in this way opens up a new way to understand the tensions commonly associated with civil society projects that we also faced.

Time scarcity, the reliance on philanthropic funding, and fragility of voluntary commitment are typically viewed as constraints imposed by a hostile system to overcome (Kallis et al., 2018). But for projects understood as existing within *aida*, they are not external pressures to be conquered. They are expressions of the relations between things that exist in a state of co-awaitingness. In other words, they are interdependent. For resistance could not happen without something to resist.

Similar observations could be made about our relationship to the land. From a neoclassical perspective, the absence of property rights, and the very real possibility of losing access once funding expired, should have discouraged our effort and ambition. Yet rather than stymie participation, a lack of clear proprietorship (Ostrom, 2003) appeared to loosen the grip of

instrumental motivations and enabled contributions to be grounded in the reflexive unfolding relations of the project (Popa et al., 2015).

However, if every constraint is interpreted as a relation internal to *aida*, then a circularity and potential non-falsifiability to our argument emerges. No experience could readily count against the framework, as constraints to transformation are simply reconfigured into expressions of co-awaitingness, shaping and reproducing the liminal state. This tension sits at the heart of the distinction between logistic and lemmatic logic, representing a cleavage along the lines of causality. It is not a tension that we resolve here, and the circular nature of interdependence remains a valid critique of our account. Nonetheless, we do suggest that *aida* may serve as a useful tool for interpreting experience as structural certainty dissolves during socio-economic transitions and warrants further critical engagement.

These realisations also helped us understand something else over the course of the year: that the success of Kashiwa-no-Hatake is determined less by *what* we achieved, and more by *how* we achieved it. Measured by the degree to which we escaped academic pressure or transformed institutional norms—the project is an abject failure. But judged by its impact on how our practices and habits were constantly rehearsed in the process of organising, and have bled beyond the project itself, it has had remarkable influence.

Of course, the implication that escaping the imperial mode of living requires greater attention to how alternatives are organised (Escobar, 2018) is not new. The advent of capitalism, for example, did not structurally transcend racialised coloniality. Instead, it perpetuates the same logics of land and labour expropriation (Mignolo, 2007). Decolonial scholars, including Quijano (2002) and Mignolo (2020), describe how modern imaginaries are impacted by the nexus of capitalism and coloniality. However, degrowth imaginaries, transformations, and spaces like Kashiwa-no-Hatake offer an opportunity to explore radical alternatives to the racialised and exploitative structures of expropriation (Lemos, 2025).

In tending to the field, we are reconfiguring everyday values of labour, value, and ownership into a somewhat anarchic set of relations. Planting cycles are defined by shared interests, not crop values. The product of our labour is distributed by need among ourselves and the local

community, not sold. External partnerships are based on solidarity and collective rituals, like eating together, rather than monetary transactions. Work is organised by availability and convenience, not schedule. Knowledge is scrawled in notes, passed onto whoever visits next and transcending individual accumulation. Art, music, farming, eating, learning, and teaching are valued equally (and without measure), each contributing to the identity of the project. Rules define minimum responsibility, rather than limit possibility. Ultimately, the precarity of continuing access to land, time, and resources has not undermined the project but become integral to it—loosening personal attachments to monetary value or permanence and instead fostering an adaptive form of engagement committed to the present.

We posit that by embracing liminality not as a transitional phase, but as a mode of existence in itself, a new set of degrowth aligned possibilities emerge. Why? Because in-betweenness challenges us to move beyond the search for an endpoint and instead engage with the ongoing relational processes through which social reality is constructed. In other words, it encourages us to be *present*. To scholars and practitioners interested in building a similar, liminal boundary space, we offer the following pieces of advice. (1) Seek inspiration from the present; (2) Prioritise the practices of organisation over measurable outcomes; and (3) Do not fear the contradictions or tensions that may arise in your project.

The final point is the most challenging. Because from the lens of logos, tensions are the risks that bend movements and organisations back, in the style of passive revolution (Spash, 2021), towards the assimilative might of capitalist domination. However, from a lens of lemma, there is no discrete separation. Tensions are not insurmountable frictions of a degrowth experiment bound by neoliberal institutions. They are a part of *aida*: inherent to a relational becoming and the ambiguity of dissolution.

What we sought in Kashiwa-no-Hatake was an escape from the pressure of a growth-oriented academic system, armoured by a narrative of experimentation. What we found was something more transformative: a co-evolutionary process that reshaped, through our practices, how we relate to the world.

The habits built through practices of democratic coordination and ecological stewardship have begun to dissolve the boundaries between us and our environment. And they have spilled beyond the edges of the experimental field itself. Because of this experience, we posit that the liminality of aida offers a distinct mode of political praxis consistent with a critical realist theory of degrowth (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2024), and we invite others to join us in exploring spaces in-between as more than a stage of transition, but a transformative mode of living itself.

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Use of artificial intelligence

In accordance with Degrowth Journal policy, generative AI was not used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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The authors

Christopher Martin is a PhD student at The University of Tokyo and Fellow of the ANU Planetary Health Equity Hothouse, specialising in post-growth political economy. Drawing on a professional background in marketing communications, his research investigates how social movements mobilise to contest neoliberal hegemony, and the conditions that enable and constrain paradigm shifts. He also leads the Kashiwa-no-Hatake project and operates a consultancy that supports the development of regenerative business.

Eric Hanada is a visiting researcher at The University of Tokyo. His primary research concerns regional development under tourism from an Evolutionary Economic Geography perspective, focusing on growth-land conflicts arising from tourism-driven development. He furthermore holds a Master's degree in International Relations and regularly comments on economic and military disputes. He is a member of the Kashiwa-no-Hatake student initiative.

Maya Katrina Bautista Agana is a PhD student at The University of Tokyo. Her research focuses on Indigenous and Local Knowledge in higher education, particularly in the Luzon island region of the Philippines. Her work engages with decoloniality and epistemic justice in knowledge production. She is a member of the Kashiwa-no-Hatake student initiative that is centred around community farming.

Nityashree Asokan is a Master's student at the University of Tokyo. Her research focuses on sustainable food system policies and their role in promoting environmentally responsible agricultural practices. Currently, she is working on a case study of Japan's Strategy for Sustainable Food Systems (Midori Strategy), examining its framework, implementation mechanisms, and potential contributions to achieving sustainable agriculture and strengthening food system resilience. She is a member of the Kashiwa-no-Hatake student initiative.

Yuichi Tsuchibuchi is a PhD student at the University of Tokyo. His research aims to develop a degrowth-oriented policy mix for elderly care in Japan, addressing the challenges of rapid demographic changes (an aging and shrinking population), prolonged economic stagnation, and climate change. He has engaged with several degrowth collectives in Malmö, Sweden; Copenhagen, Denmark; and Tokyo, Japan. He is a member of the Kashiwa-no-Hatake student initiative.

Zihan Huang is a PhD student at The University of Tokyo, specializing in environmental sciences and marine geochemistry. Her research utilizes isotope frameworks in abalone shells to decode the physical and biological memories of the ocean. Her broader interests span sustainable food systems, science communication, activism, and the cultural heritage of coastal communities, particularly the traditional ecological knowledge of ama divers. She is a member of the Kashiwa-no-Hatake student initiative.