

The World Humanities Report

# The Rhetoric of the Humanities in Japan: Euphemism, Hyperbole, and Community

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Shuta Kiba



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# The Rhetoric of the Humanities in Japan: Euphemism, Hyperbole, and Community

Shuta Kiba University of Wisconsin–Madison

On June 8, 2015, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of Japan (MEXT) issued a notice to the presidents of national universities. It asked that they take active measures to “abolish” (*haishi*) departments of teacher training, humanities, and social sciences and to reform them into the areas of instruction that meet society’s demands. After much backlash from the media, the Science Council of Japan (SCJ), and the Japan Business Federation, MEXT later issued a clarifying statement, in which it said that the notice sought only the abolition of teacher training programs, not all humanities and social science programs, whose value it had not meant to diminish. The ministry claimed that people had misread the government’s request, while emphasizing that the “importance of versatility cultivated by liberal arts education is indeed growing in an era that calls for the autonomous ability to seek out solutions to problems without definite answer.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it also added that the notice was based on the reform plans initiated by the National University Reform Plan in 2013, and it concluded its statement by saying that each university should “tackle in a proactive manner a shift in priority toward areas of high social need by reorganizing undergraduate and graduate programs in order to enhance further the quality of education and research.”<sup>2</sup> In short, while insisting that it had not asked national universities to abolish the humanities and the social sciences, MEXT strongly maintained a need for reform.

These explanations quieted the backlash, but MEXT did not actually withdraw the controversial notice. More important, the way in which MEXT presented the reaction of humanities scholars as a “misreading” of the notice

<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology–Japan (MEXT), “National University Reform for the Coming Era,” October 1, 2015, 2–3, [https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/highered/title02/detail02/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2015/10/01/1362381\\_1\\_1.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/highered/title02/detail02/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2015/10/01/1362381_1_1.pdf). Vague and ambiguous language (such as “autonomous ability”) characterizes MEXT’s document, which does not help to clarify what MEXT truly wants from the humanities; rather, as I discuss in this essay, the language aggravates the linguistic condition of humanities in Japan through the propagation of euphemism.

<sup>2</sup> MEXT, “National University Reform,” 3.

demonstrates a symptom of the past thirty years of education reform in Japan: the constant attempt and failure of university reform propelled by the government's vague and confusing request.<sup>3</sup> As I elucidate later in this essay, the misreading of the notice is not an isolated incident but a product of a larger project of Japanese education reform initiated by the government's often unclear and elusive language.

The Japanese government's elusive language is inseparably linked to the neoliberal orientation of its education reform. First, the elusive language does not force specific policies upon universities but presents them as vaguely aspirational ideals, thus nudging (not forcing) universities to undertake reform on the government's own terms. As with any neoliberal project, this indirect nudging creates an illusory sense of individual freedom and choice while delegating responsibilities to the individual actors (i.e., universities). Whether it is the failure of interpretation or actualization of the ideals, the individual scholar or university is blamed for the failed reforms, not the government. Second, the Japanese government's vague and confusing language stems from its frequent use of neoliberal keywords (e.g., impact, efficiency, talent, competitiveness). These keywords are borrowed from the business discourse that measures the worth of knowledge solely on the basis of market values—words become a mere means for marketing detached from (and even contradictory to) the ideas that universities must embody, protect, and inculcate (e.g., freedom, truth, justice, equality). Due to the lack of educational values and legitimacies, these keywords can be smuggled into the language of education reform only in a vague and indefinite form.

The deliberate use of elusive, indirect, and vague words has a name in rhetoric: euphemism. Euphemism is commonly understood as a “figure of speech which consists in the substitution of a word or expression of comparatively favorable implication or less unpleasant associations, instead of the harsher or more

<sup>3</sup> Japan's global research presence has been in decline for the past thirty years. For instance, Japan was in second place in the number of publications in 2003–5 but fell to fifth in 2013–15. As to the number of the highly cited papers (top 10 percent), Japan fell from fourth in 2003–5 to ninth in 2013–15. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology–Japan, “White Paper on Science and Technology,” 2018, 1, [https://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/hakusho/html/hpaa201801/1398098\\_001.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/hakusho/html/hpaa201801/1398098_001.pdf). MEXT launched a “Top Global University Project” in 2014 with the aim of making more than ten schools rank in the top one hundred in the world university rankings within ten years. As Sato points out, the government's neoliberal “selection and concentration” strategy, which offered very low financial support, led to its failure—as of 2022, for instance, only two schools, University of Tokyo (thirty-fifth) and Kyoto University (sixty-first), ranked in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. Third in place is Tohoku University, which was ranked in the 201–250 tier. See Ikuya Sato, *University Reform Getting Off Track* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobou, 2019), chap. 2, 3.

offensive one that would more precisely designate what is intended.”<sup>4</sup> People use it to be polite but sometimes also to avoid personal responsibility—it allows the speakers to distance themselves from the negative associations, whether it is the heinous act of violence (e.g., the “final solution” for the genocide of the Jewish population or the Japanese “internment” for “incarceration”) or negative feeling (e.g., the use of managerial terms such as “downsizing” or “terminating” instead of “firing” to avoid the sense of personal guilt). The avoidance of negative associations often takes the form of repression and denial of what the words typically designated. In this euphemistic repression, the word becomes severed from its shared meaning, and this act of violent severance is forgotten for the very reason that it is a shock-mitigating *euphemism*. This understanding of euphemism is thus more subtle and less deliberate than the more common understanding of the word. As Alexander García Düttmann notes, “euphemisms remain an ambiguous phenomenon, hovering between the active and the passive, between memory and forgetting.”<sup>5</sup> People can express euphemisms passively, without their knowledge. This happens most often when the euphemistic severance occurs not through the substitution of a new word for the old one (which is often deliberate) but through a semantic deviation of a word. This essay pays attention to this less obvious and more obscure form of euphemism as well.

At present, the neoliberal use of euphemism linguistically conditions the humanities in Japan. Worse, humanities scholars themselves have internalized this linguistic condition, undermining the legitimacy of universities from within. This essay delineates not only the sociopolitical but also the linguistic precarity of the humanities in Japan as a product of neoliberal euphemism, and it explores possible critical responses to these predicaments by looking at the alternative rhetoric of hyperbole and the urgent needs of the humanities community in Japan.

## Neoliberal Euphemism

What characterizes MEXT’s notice is its euphemism. It does not directly describe the humanities as useless and unnecessary but clearly implies as much, thereby encouraging humanities scholars to foresee the future abolition of their field without actually confronting it. In an essay titled “Euphemism, the Uni-

<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “euphemism (*n.*),” accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/65021?redirectedFrom=euphemism#eid>.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander García Düttmann, “Euphemism, the University and Disobedience,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 169 (September/October 2011): 43, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/euphemism-the-university-and-disobedience>.

versity and Disobedience,” Düttmann explains that euphemism has become the linguistic condition of the contemporary university. The problem with euphemism is that it presents a crisis under the guise of eternal postponement. As Düttmann argues: “those who live in this condition [of euphemism] know about the reality of their lives without actually confronting it; deception and a belief in some magical power merge in euphemistic speech, and the ability to deceive oneself and others collapses into self-deception as fate.”<sup>6</sup> We are asked to envision the end of the humanities, but the use of euphemism obscures the urgency of this problem and hinders our ability to confront it. The humanities in Japanese universities exist in such a condition of euphemism.

In contrast to this euphemistic condition, Düttmann points to Jacques Derrida’s 1998 lecture, where Derrida proposed the idea of an “unconditional university” and its “fundamental right to say everything.”<sup>7</sup> The idea of “saying everything” is essentially incongruous with euphemism, and Derrida, following Kant, presents humanities as a faculty that conditions this unconditionality of university. The unconditional university, however, always runs the risk of capitulating to market forces, and Derrida elsewhere associated this paradoxical conditionality of university with euphemism: “what extent does the organization of research and teaching have to be supported, that is, directly or indirectly controlled, let us say *euphemistically* ‘sponsored.’”<sup>8</sup> Later in the lecture, Derrida associates this market ideology with the demand for flexibility and competitiveness, indicating the neoliberal nature of euphemism.

Many scholars have described the neoliberalization of universities worldwide. Wendy Brown, for instance, argues that “the neoliberal rationality disseminates market values and metrics to new spheres.”<sup>9</sup> Universities are no exception:

figure of the human as an ensemble of entrepreneurial and investment capital is evident on every college and job application, every package of study strategies, every internship, every new exercise and diet program. The best university scholars are characterized as entrepreneurial and investment savvy, not simply by obtaining grants or fellowships, but by generating new projects and publications from old research, calculating publication and presentation venues, and circulating themselves and their work according to what will enhance their value.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Düttmann, “Euphemism,” 43.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition (Thanks to the ‘Humanities,’ What Could Take Place Tomorrow),” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Thom Cohen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 24–57 (also published as *L’université sans condition* [Paris: Galilée, 2001]).

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, “The Future,” 28 (*italics added*).

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2015), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, *Undoing*, 36–37.

In Japan, Shintaro Kono has described the progress of the marketization of Japanese universities. According to Kono, the 1991 Deregulation of the University Act was a significant first step toward neoliberalization with its promotion of market-driven deregulation. Before this deregulation, it was mandatory for national universities to dedicate the first two years of the undergraduate program to general education (it was in this part of the program that many humanities scholars worked) and the second two years to professional education. The Deregulation of the University Act was nonbinding, which meant it left each university to decide whether or not to enforce it, but at the same time the government was encouraging the reform—thus, the Act is yet another example of euphemism. Taking their cue from the government, most universities dissolved their general education programs, which led to the diaspora of humanities scholars into other departments. The dissolution of the general education program continued in the 1990s when the government encouraged universities to enlarge their graduate programs and put more stress on the professionalization of students.<sup>11</sup> The marketization of universities further intensified in 2004 when the government introduced the National University Corporation Act (NUCA) and reorganized the national universities as corporations. In 2015, the same year MEXT’s “notice” was issued, the NUCA was revised to remove the rights of professors to vote at faculty meetings, further weakening the university’s autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

As has happened at universities across the globe, neoliberal education reform has drastically changed the teaching and researching environment of universities in Japan—the commodification of knowledge, the increased exploitation of precarious laborers (i.e., nontenured faculties, part-time teachers, and graduate students), and the promotion of cutthroat competitions for grants and university fundings, to list a few.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, these neoliberal reforms have also changed the linguistic condition of Japanese universities through the propagation of euphemism. As Düttmann points out, the “euphemistic speech severs the link between the word and the idea”;<sup>14</sup> it turns the word into a mere floating signifier that can be easily co-opted into the neoliberal rhetoric of marketization and commodification. Furthermore, the euphemistic severance works in

<sup>11</sup> I discuss the negative consequences of the enlargement of graduate programs later in this essay.

<sup>12</sup> Shintaro Kono, “The University Reform Was Another Name for ‘Marketization,’” Kobunsha Web Series, 2020, <https://shinsho.kobunsha.com/n/n600d60952e97>.

<sup>13</sup> As another example, the reform increased the amount of unnecessary paperwork and the number of administrative jobs while also reducing the number of full-time workers, decreasing the time that scholars can spend on their research. See MEXT, “White Paper,” 2.

<sup>14</sup> Düttmann, “Euphemism,” 44.

a way that vaguely retains the semantic trace of the old tie between the word and the idea, thus obfuscating the violence enacted by the neoliberal reform. For instance, in the neoliberal condition, the word “freedom” comes to mean economic freedom, the freedom of consumer choice or enterprise that is severed from the traditional idea of autonomous freedom to which the modern universities and humanities are inseparably linked.<sup>15</sup> But the semantic trace of the word “freedom” vaguely retains its old tie to the idea of autonomous freedom, thereby hiding the fact that universities and humanities have already been deprived of their freedom under the regulative control of the neoliberal market.

The Japanese government effectively appeals to this double logic of neoliberal euphemism. The NUCA, for instance, was introduced as a policy to increase the autonomy and freedom of national universities by giving them independence from the government, but, in actuality, it has made universities more dependent on the government and the market. In fact, it has been MEXT that finalizes the national university’s medium-term (six-year) plan for the improvement of its academic and financial performance. According to the approved plans, each university prepares and submits its annual plan to MEXT; a third party evaluates the university’s performance, and the evaluation determines the amount of funding it receives from the government. In order to secure financing, therefore, universities are likely to make plans that look “good” in the eye of MEXT. Japan’s spending on higher education is extremely low compared to that of other developed countries.<sup>16</sup> Since the NUCA, the operational support funds for national universities have decreased at an annual rate of 1 percent. This lack of public funding forces universities to look for financial support from private corporations, making universities further subjected to the neoliberal market.<sup>17</sup> In short, universities are “free” as long as they remain subjugated to the neoliberal state/market apparatus; nonetheless, the Japanese government’s euphemistic use of “freedom” somewhat obfuscates its fierce neoliberal agenda. Mitja Sardoč

<sup>15</sup> See also Brown, *Undoing*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data, Japan spends only 0.4 percent of its GDP on higher education, which is less than half of the OECD average of 1 percent. See Sato, *University*, chap. 4.

<sup>17</sup> See Kiyoshi Yamamoto, “Corporatization of National Universities in Japan: Revolution for Governance or Rhetoric for Downsizing?,” *Financial Accountability & Management*, no. 20 (May 2004): 172–73; Tom Christensen, “Japanese University Reform—Hybridity in Governance and Management,” *Higher Education Policy*, no. 24 (2011): 24–25; Futao Huang, Tsukasa Daizen, and Yangson Kim, “Changes in Japanese Universities Governance Arrangements 1992–2017,” *Studies in Higher Education* 45, no. 10 (2020): 2065.



suggests that the recent semantic shift in neoliberalism has even co-opted ideas such as “fairness, equality, well-being, equality of opportunity and justice,”<sup>18</sup> commodifying ideals that are closely tied to the principles of modern universities and humanities into marketable buzzwords. Once detached from the ideals, these words all now work as part of a euphemism that disseminates the neoliberal agenda.<sup>19</sup>

Those who employ euphemism leave words intentionally ambiguous so as to avoid accountability. Sardoč describes the calculated use of conceptual confusion by policymakers as a common tactic of neoliberal management.<sup>20</sup> In the context of policy formation in clinical governance research, Michael Loughlin also notes: “the lack of clarity [in their language] allows policy-makers to shift responsibility for the problems of the health service onto the workforce, who are required to interpret the deliberately vague and platitudinous statements of management in order to implement the policy.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the policymakers within the Japanese government transfer responsibility for policy changes to university scholars and administrators by using deliberately vague and unclear language; the controversial MEXT’s notice is one among many examples. Ikuya Sato, for instance, points out the frequent use of the passive voice and vague terms in the rhetoric of Japanese ministries as a way to avoid responsibility and blame.<sup>22</sup> Masao Miyoshi also describes the Japanese policymakers’ use of incomprehensible terms and undecipherable ambiguities as “deliberate political strategy to turn all issues into ad hoc negotiations among the insiders.”<sup>23</sup> The lack of transparency further allows policymakers to avoid accountability and to shift the entire responsibility to the university scholars and administrators.

<sup>18</sup> Mitja Sardoč, “The Language of Neoliberalism in Education,” in *The Impacts of Neoliberal Discourse and Language in Education: Critical Perspectives on a Rhetoric of Equality, Well-Being, and Justice*, ed. Mitja Sardoč (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2021), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Gale de Saxe et al. point out neoliberal education reform’s deliberate attack on the female-dominated teaching practice under the guise of neoliberal buzzwords such as “equity” and “social justice.” See Jennifer Gale de Saxe, Sarah Bucknovitz, and Frances Mahoney-Mosedale, “The Deprofessionalization of Educators: An Intersectional Analysis of Neoliberalism and Education ‘Reform,’” *Education and Urban Society* 52, no. 1 (2020): 51–69.

<sup>20</sup> Sardoč, “The Language of Neoliberalism,” 4.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Loughlin, “On the Buzzword Approach to Policy Formation,” *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, no. 8 (2002): 229. Howard Stein identifies corporate medicine’s “impersonal, bureaucratic, depersonalized, anonymous” language with euphemism that allows corporate people to avoid responsibility. See Howard Stein, *Euphemism, Spin, and the Crisis in Organizational Life* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1998), 95.

<sup>22</sup> Sato, *University Reform*, chap. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Masao Miyoshi, “The University and the ‘Global’ Economy: The Cases of the United States and Japan,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 681.

For the sake of survival, however, university scholars and administrators must respond to official policy statements by turning themselves into a neoliberal workforce that happily carries the onus of entrepreneurial responsibility. And this adaptation also happens at the linguistic level. Japanese university scholars must familiarize themselves with neoliberal keywords to successfully write syllabi, scholarship and grant applications, or job applications.<sup>24</sup> They thus exacerbate the marketization and commodification of language by using such words not of their own choosing and contrary to their own values.

Clearly, Japanese universities have long lost their unconditionality, their

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**Japanese universities are now fluent in euphemism . . . and humanities scholars are put into a precarious double bind.**

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“fundamental right to say everything.” They are now fluent in euphemism. The monetization of universities is in progress, and, as a result, unprofitable fields (i.e., the humanities) are

verging on extinction.<sup>25</sup> At this advanced stage of neoliberalization, humanities scholars in Japan are put into a precarious double bind. For the sake of survival, they are encouraged to accede to the demands of the neoliberal public by becoming more “useful”; at the same time, acceptance of this reality undermines the unconditionality of the university that humanities must fight for.

### **Urgent Disobedience—Hyperbolic Abolition and Conservation**

In response to this dilemma, Düttmann proposes the importance of “urgent disobedience” to the restrictive fiction of neoliberal euphemism. As a linguistic practice, Düttmann describes urgent disobedience as “calling things by their

<sup>24</sup> While pointing out the Japanese government’s tendency to blindly follow and praise the North American education system, Sato refers to the failed introduction of the syllabus system into Japanese universities, which ended up nudging teachers to produce a uniform, degraded version of syllabi without any educational benefits for students. Sato associates this introduction of the syllabus system with the government’s neoliberal education reform. In 1992, around the time when the government initiated the Deregulation of the University Act, only 15 percent of universities in Japan had the university-wide syllabus system. This figure rose to 32 percent in 1994 and to 100 percent in 2005. MEXT did not force but nudged universities toward this reform by asking them to respond to “progress reports” that include MEXT’s “recommendation” for a university-wide uniform syllabus system. See Sato, *University Reform*, chap. 1.

<sup>25</sup> In 2017, the government announced that it was outsourcing the English standardized test to private companies beginning in 2020. In 2019, after numerous criticisms from experts, it decided to postpone the plan until 2025. Kono argues that this change, even if delayed, is another example of the marketization of education and proves that the situation is getting worse and worse. See Kono, “The University Reform.”

names”;<sup>26</sup> however, in the context of this essay, I would like to call it by another name in rhetoric: hyperbole. In his *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler illustrates lyric poetry’s hyperbolic performance as a linguistic event that disrupts the linear time of the narrative.<sup>27</sup> While euphemism represses the urgency of a crisis by dissolving the “now” to the narrative inertia of eternal postponement, the practice of urgent disobedience seeks to disrupt this amnesia— this is exactly what lyric poetry’s hyperbolic performance achieves.

With the benefit of Düttmann’s and Culler’s insights, I offer two examples of hyperbolic discourses—abolition and conservation—that try to disrupt the linguistic tyranny of neoliberal euphemism. Nevertheless, we should also note the risk that the praxis of hyperbole always entails—the risk of falling into another euphemism. While Culler presents the lyric hyperbole as a performance that brings about real events, its exaggerated effects always accompany a sense of fictionality, which has the potential to hide the urgency of the event. The hyperbole of the “unconditional university” is also conditioned by the same risk.

At the same time, this risk is exactly what conditions the possibility of the unconditional university as well. As Düttmann explains: “an unconditional university is, inherently, a university open to risk, to the risk of being subverted, while a university dominated by power, charlatanry and euphemistic speech is a university that has ceased to expose itself or that seeks to minimize such exposure.”<sup>28</sup> Paradoxically, then, the only way out of the double bind of neoliberal euphemism for universities is to take the risk of losing its unconditionality for the very reason that it is unconditional—that it has the fundamental right to say everything. This necessarily entails its dialectical opposite, or the right to say *no* to the universities. If euphemism, as in the example of MEXT’s notice, allows us *not* to face the risk of abolition under the guise of eternal postponement, hyperbole disrupts this rhetorical repression by calling the possibility of abolition by its name.

In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten provide an excellent example of hyperbole when they call for the

<sup>26</sup> Düttmann, “Euphemism,” 46.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Düttmann, “Euphemism,” 45.

abolition of the society that facilitates the racial project of the university.<sup>29</sup> They point out that “Universitas is always a state/State strategy”<sup>30</sup> that reproduces the self-same racist subject and the homogenous “safe” space for the Enlightenment racial project. While challenging the conservative inclination of universities, however, Harney and Moten do not call for the elimination of universities per se. In my reading, this is because their target is not merely racist universities but also the racist society that makes universities serve its racist agenda. In this sense, Harney and Moten resist the conditionality of the racist university, thereby pushing the idea of the university to the edge where a new anti-racist society, or what they call the “undercommons,” can emerge from within universities.<sup>31</sup>

Harney and Moten’s call for the undercommons thus works as hyperbolic resistance to the euphemistic condition of the university. They associate this conditionality with the neoliberal professionalization of “good” entrepreneurial scholars at universities. In contrast, the subversive intellectuals in the undercommons are disobedient—they are “unprofessional, uncollegial, passionate and disloyal.” Instead of neoliberal individuation, they demand unconditional solidarity against racist states/markets/universities. While calling the undercommons the “underground of the university,” Harney and Moten contrast subversive intellectuals’ unconditional embrace of community with the solitary figure of the critical academic: “The critical academic questions the university, questions the state, questions art, politics, culture. But in the undercommons it is ‘no questions asked.’ It is unconditional—the door swings open for refuge even though it may let in police agents and destruction.”<sup>32</sup> As the phrase “police agents and destruction” indicates, the unconditionality of the undercommons invites the risk of its potential subversion. But, as Düttmann describes, this risk goes hand in hand with the hyperbolic disobedience to the rhetoric of risk-avoiding euphemism. The idea of the undercommons illuminates the space that one might call the unconditional underground of the university where euphemism

<sup>29</sup> Hyperbole is prevalent in Harney and Moten’s own language, which also plays with a sense of “unprofessionalism.” For instance, they curse extravagantly: “The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us. I don’t need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?” Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2013), 140–41.

<sup>30</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Harney and Moten thus explain their abolitionist project as “not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.” Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 10, 28, 38.

cannot enter because “the door swings open” for everyone, and there, all people have the “fundamental right to say everything” without having their authority questioned.

The undercommons’ unconditional welcoming reflects its vision of a new society, a community of subversive intellectuals that challenges the neoliberal individuation. But the author’s critique is also a rhetorical one. In the following quotation, Harney and Moten’s hyperbolic language disrupts the linguistic condition of the current neoliberal university by prophetically presenting the vision of community:

The object of abolition then would have a resemblance to communism that would be, to return to Spivak, uncanny. The uncanny that disturbs the critical going on above it, the professional going on without it, the uncanny that one can sense in prophecy, the strangely known moment, the gathering content, of a cadence, and the uncanny that one can sense in cooperation, the secret once called solidarity. The uncanny feeling we are left with is that something else is there in the undercommons. It is the prophetic organization that works for the red and black abolition!<sup>33</sup>

The literally disruptive “cadence” of the long second sentence is organized around the firm repetitions of the hyperbolic emphasis on the “uncanny,” which, while gently guiding us through the vertiginous catalog of modifiers, firmly lands us onto the secret promise of “solidarity.” By the end, when we read the final emphatic exclamation of abolition, the lyric hyperbole turns the “uncanny feeling” into something collective and sharable, revealing the sign of a prophetic organization against the individuating impetus of neoliberal universities.

Rebecca Comay notes that “Hyperbole is the signature of the dialectic; it expresses the brinksmanship of an approach that reduces every position to its most impossible extremity. It brings every situation to its breaking point. Its strategy is not to instigate change but to precipitate crisis.”<sup>34</sup> Following Comay, I argue that hyperbole reclaims the dialectic tension against the crisis- and conflict-avoiding tendency of neoliberal euphemism.

Caroline Levine’s conservationist project provides a dialectical counterpart to Harney and Moten’s abolitionist project. Levine contends: “You could say that institutions are conservative, or instead, you could call them *conservationist*: they allow us to safeguard knowledge, for example, that might otherwise

<sup>33</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 42–43.

<sup>34</sup> Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 98.

be in danger.”<sup>35</sup> Sheldon Pollock makes a similar remark in his introduction to the “Columbia Global Humanities Project”: “One of the most astonishing developments in the past fifty years across the globe is the endangerment of the world’s humanities capacity. . . . The loss of humanities knowledge bears striking resemblance to the loss of biological species.”<sup>36</sup> Knowledge, especially the knowledge of the humanities, is an endangered species—for the sake of survival, the

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Hyperbole reclaims the dialectic tension against the crisis- and conflict-avoiding tendency of neoliberal euphemism.

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humanities need universities to conserve them from the wild capitalistic force. While emphasizing the urgent crisis of humanities, Levine challenges Harney and Moten by saying that they “favor fugitivity—the improvisational, the unfixed, the wild—and see value only in the fleeting, spontaneous, and unstable. But one of the crucial affordances of institutions as social forms is *sustainability*—the capacity to keep things going over time.”<sup>37</sup> When we confront the multiple crises caused by neoliberal capitalism, the hyperbolic language of *The Undercommons* starts to appear as a utopian fiction that ends up working as a euphemism that obscures the reality: neoliberal force has already invaded the commons.

Levine’s criticism of Harney and Moten comes from her concern about the current critical tendency of both the Right and the Left to question any type of institutional and normative knowledge (e.g., Brexit and Trumpism). To the leftist scholars who have been critiquing the normative force of institutions for years, Levine’s appeal to the power of norms and institutions might appear to be an outrageous gesture of conservatism: more hyperbole. The rhetoric of crisis and survival as well as the prosopopoeia of a dying humanities also showcases its lyric extravagance.

In this way, Harney and Moten’s abolitionist project and Levine’s conservationist project introduce a dialectical tension and opposition into the discourse of humanities; their hyperbolic rhetoric heightens our sense of crisis, thereby pushing us to awaken from the restrictive fiction of neoliberal euphemism.

<sup>35</sup> Caroline Levine, “SCT: Moten and Harney Follow-Up,” message to the School of Criticism and Theory (SCT) seminar mailing list, June 28, 2020. I thank Caroline Levine for allowing me to refer to her follow-up messages on *The Undercommons* during the 2020 online summer seminar at SCT at Cornell University.

<sup>36</sup> Sheldon Pollock, “The Columbia Global Humanities Project,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 37, no. 1 (2017): 113.

<sup>37</sup> Levine, “SCT: Moten and Harney Follow-Up” (italics in the original).

## The Urgent Need for Community

As mentioned earlier, Derrida describes the humanities as the faculty that conditions the unconditionality of university: the “principle of unconditionality *presents itself*, originally and above all, in the Humanities.”<sup>38</sup> Derrida even calls its unconditionality “hyperbolic invincibility.”<sup>39</sup> Fluent now in neoliberal euphemism, however, humanities scholars in Japan have lost touch with the rhetoric of hyperbole. Moreover, they also lack what Harney and Moten, Levine, Düttmann, and others consider an essential countervailing force against the encroachment of neoliberalism: community. This lack is partly a result of the meritocratic tendency of the university, common across the world, which is highly susceptible to neoliberal individualism and entrepreneurship. But when we look at the isolation, both psychological and socioeconomic, that many graduate students experience in Japan, the urgent need to organize the humanities community in Japan becomes clearer.

In Japanese society, universities are considered a means for gaining cultural capital and becoming competitive in the job market, and undergraduates typically begin job hunting in their third year of college. Choosing to go to graduate school in the humanities cuts against this enormous normative pressure and leads to isolation. The general public treats graduate students much as the market treats neoliberal workers: they are on their own. Indeed, few universities offer financial support for MA students, and, although PhD students can work as teaching assistants, they are paid much less than their North American counterparts and universities do not cover teaching assistants’ tuition, as most North American universities do. Furthermore, with fewer and fewer faculty positions available in the humanities, many Japanese graduate students face a brutal return to the nonacademic job market. Japanese companies tend to prefer students fresh out of college, so the decision to go to graduate school can decrease one’s chance of getting a good job outside of universities (especially for humanities students, whose knowledge and skills are often deemed “useless” by the market).

The few options available to survive this adverse economic environment are all predicated upon the spirit of neoliberal meritocracy. For example, the University of Tokyo (where I received an MA) hires a few students to become

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, “The Future of the Profession,” 29. Foreshadowing Düttmann’s “urgent disobedience,” Derrida also describes humanities as the “principle of civil disobedience, even of dissidence in the name of a superior law and a justice of thought,” 29.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, “The Future of the Profession,” 27.

“Excellent Research Assistants.”<sup>40</sup> These positions provide a monthly stipend of about ¥150,000 (two years for MA and three years for PhD). Doctoral students can also apply for a Research Fellowship for Young Scientists, sponsored by The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), which offers a monthly stipend of around ¥200,000 for two to three years and an additional research grant, but the selection rate is only about 20 percent, as of April 1, 2021.<sup>41</sup> Both programs create competition among young scholars, further aggravating the sense of isolation. Around the time of the Deregulation of the University Act in the early 1990s, MEXT urged national universities to expand their graduate programs to promote scholars’ professionalization. As a result, the number of graduate students in the humanities increased between 1990 and 2005, but the number of tenure-track faculty positions remained the same. The result has been the intensification of competition in the job market and, by extension, a deepening of neoliberal individuation.<sup>42</sup>

Because of this isolation and the precarious position in which neoliberal individuation puts them, the number of students who decide to go to graduate school in the humanities in Japan has been decreasing since 2005.<sup>43</sup> The precarious situation of graduate students in neoliberal universities is now well known, and, given the decrease in the youth population of Japan, the number of graduate students in the humanities will likely decline further. Consequently, research communities across the nation will struggle to recruit future generations of humanities scholars. Neoliberal individuation also leads to the production of future scholars who are susceptible to the “survival of the fittest” mentality and who disregard the importance of mutual aid and cooperation in the research community. Worse, they will be more and more fluent in neoliberal euphemism, thus dismantling the unconditionality of university and humanities from within. The struggle of graduate students is only one case that illustrates the

<sup>40</sup> The term “excellent” here is directly tied to the “academic excellence” of universities; as Bill Readings points out, “excellence” has become the “watch-word of the University” in the neoliberal era, when universities have become bureaucratic, transnational corporate entities that must prove their value on the basis of statistically calculable data. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>41</sup> Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), “Research Fellowship for Young Scientists,” <https://www.jsps.go.jp/english/e-pd/>, accessed September 26, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> The number of new MA students was 2,400 in 1990 and 5,783 in 2005; the number of new PhD students was 917 in 1990 and 1,621 in 2005. National Institute of Science and Technology Policy (NISTEP), *Japanese Science and Technology Indicators 2021*, 134, 136, <https://www.nistep.go.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/NISTEP-RM311-StatisticsJ.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> The number of new MA students dropped from 5,783 in 2005 to 4,035 in 2020, and the number of new PhD students decreased from 1,621 in 2005 to 892 in 2020. NISTEP, *Japanese Science*, 134, 136.



crisis facing the research community in Japan. Still, the lack of care and support for the most vulnerable and precarious workers is significant enough to show that the neoliberal education reforms are causing the humanities in Japan to crumble from within.

Despite their shared struggles, the lack of institutional solidarity and mutual aid among the disciplines of humanities is striking. There is no major consortium of organizations in Japan that fosters cooperation of humanities scholars across universities. There are a few interdisciplinary humanities centers at major universities, but they are relatively new—

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the Humanities Center (HMC) at the University of Tokyo, for instance, was founded just in 2017—and do not seem to have the capacity yet to bring together humanities scholars. The National University Corporation Act (NUCA) of 2004, mentioned earlier, launched the Inter-University Research Institute Corporations to facilitate collaboration among researchers across universities. Among them are the National Institutes for the Humanities, but its scope is limited to Japanese history, literature, language, and culture, environmental humanities, and ethnology; hence they do not have enough breadth to bring humanities together.

Against the ever-increasing tide of neoliberal individuation, Japan is in dire need of an interdisciplinary and interinstitutional community around the humanities. Yet again, this effort of community development must accompany linguistic fidelity to the hyperbolic rhetoric of humanities, without which the unconditionality of university will be lost. In other words, we should be careful not to fall into the euphemistic use of the word “community.” In the current linguistic condition of the neoliberal university, the idea of community can be used as a façade to hide its market-driven agenda, in which the products of academic labor, such as knowledge resources, are ruthlessly exploited in the name of community development. This euphemism would turn “universities” into “corporations” and make them forget their role as educators and instead exploit the most vulnerable workers, including graduate students. The formation of a scholarly community must not be a mere sociopolitical development—it must also be a linguistic practice that relentlessly insists on the necessity of the

humanities and fundamentally resists corporatization. The change in the role of the humanities might be inevitable and even necessary, but it should not change its linguistic unconditionality, that is, its unconditional right to say everything. Without this hyperbolic resistance to neoliberal euphemism, the humanities community will not be able to survive the deluge of neoliberal education reforms.

## Conclusion

On October 1, 2020, the chief cabinet secretary of Japan announced that the Japanese prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, would not appoint 6 of 105 scholars nominated to the General Assembly of the Science Council of Japan (SCJ). SCJ was established in 1949 as the representative organization of the Japanese scientific community and is composed of 210 scholars and about 2,000 affiliated members across disciplines (including the humanities and the social sciences). Unlike similar scientific academies around the world, SCJ is located within the government. Its members offer independent policy advice to each ministry. Its appointment process has been traditionally perfunctory, with the understanding that the government should not intervene in the decisions made by SCJ.

No reason was given for the refusal to appoint the six scholars, all of whom work in the humanities and the social sciences. Because SCJ has been critical of the government's recent promotion of military research and because the six rejected scholars had criticized Suga's political party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), many understood his rejection of the scholars as retaliatory.<sup>44</sup> In response, rather than explain its violation of the norms of academic freedom, the government criticized SCJ for being an elitist institution and called for its reform. In other words, the government, in order to obscure the fact of its own authoritarian intervention, resorted to a populist narrative against academic authority. The major reform the government sought was to make SCJ a separate legal entity and to drastically reduce its budget. These changes would make the SCJ more dependent on the government's financial support and undermine its autonomy, just as happened with the national universities through the NUCA in 2004—while saying this reform would grant “freedom” and “autonomy” to SCJ, the government would increase SCJ's financial dependence, making it

<sup>44</sup> SCJ issued a “Statement on Research for Military Security” in 2017. The statement emphasizes the unchanging nature of SCJ's “commitment to never become engaged in scientific research for war purpose” since its founding in 1949. While expressing concern over the government's recent overstepping of the boundary between scientific research and military endeavors, SCJ underscored the “autonomy of research, especially the unrestricted publication of research results” and reiterated its “concern that government intervention in the activities of researchers might become stronger in regards to the direction of the research and the preservation of confidentiality.” Science Council of Japan, “Statement on Research for Military Security,” 2017, 1–2, <https://www.scj.go.jp/ja/info/kohyo/pdf/kohyo-23-s243-en.pdf>.

subservient to governmental authority.<sup>45</sup>

As with MEXT's 2015 notice to abolish humanities and social sciences, an unprecedented scale of communal outcry (unusual for Japanese scholarly communities) arose against the government's violation of academic freedom. On November 6, 2020, 226 humanities and social science societies issued a joint statement supporting SCJ's demand for an explanation for the refusal to appoint the six scholars as well as their immediate appointment. In addition, more than a thousand scientific societies, labor unions, and bar associations issued statements against the prime minister's decision. On November 17, 2020, the International Science Council (ISC, based in France) also issued a statement supporting the SCJ, emphasizing the importance of promoting SCJ and ISC's "increased communication and closer co-operation to foster the development of science via international exchange and collaboration."<sup>46</sup>

Despite the communal outcry from scholars in and beyond Japan, Fumio Kishida, the current prime minister (who succeeded Suga in 2021), has not yet appointed the six scholars. No explanation has been given for the rejection of these six scholars, either. The government's populist rhetoric against academic elites and its neoliberal agenda for reform have also gathered some support from the general public; some, especially on the internet, criticized the six rejected scholars and their fields of studies (i.e., humanities and social sciences) as "useless," thus claiming the scholars had deserved their rejections. With the help of similar populist sentiment against universities, humanities, and social sciences, MEXT's similarly outrageous, surprising notice in 2015 to abolish humanities and social sciences had been co-opted into the euphemism of neoliberal "reform." This governmental attack on SCJ should not be allowed to follow the same pattern of rhetorical repression as the 2015 MEXT call for "abolition," with which this essay began. Before this outrageous governmental violation of academic freedom becomes co-opted into another euphemism, scholars and communities must further strengthen their cooperation and relentlessly resist the neoliberal rhetoric of reform in order to propel this nascent scholarly community in Japan toward a future of unconditional solidarity.

<sup>45</sup> SCJ's current budget is already extremely small compared to the budget of the national academies in other countries. Kanako Takayama points out that SCJ's current budget is \$9.7 million annually, while, for instance, the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine received \$208 million in 2018. Dennis Normile, "Japan's Top Science Advice Group Battles Government over Independence and Identity," *Science*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.science.org/content/article/japan-s-top-science-advice-group-battles-government-over-independence-and-identity>.

<sup>46</sup> International Science Council, "Concern Regarding the Decision of the Prime Minister of Japan Not to Approve the Appointment of Six Scholars to the General Assembly of SCJ," November 17, 2020, 1, <https://council.science/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ISC-Letter-to-SCJ-17112020-002.pdf>.

**Shuta Kiba** is a PhD candidate at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He earned his master’s degree from the University of Tokyo. His research interest is in the intersections of philosophy, poetics, and politics among British Romantic poets.