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# A Defense of Obscurity, or Stones from Other Hills: Translating Judith Butler





# Juntao Yang

Edited by Tai Nakamura



Membrane



**A**s a writer and a researcher, my most restless moments come when communication clogs. The air tightens, the body itches, and I am desperate to open a passage. I long to understand and to be understood, to reach a fluency that could pierce the membranes between languages, cultures, and minds. This desire is hardly mine alone, yet it has a peculiar consequence: clarity becomes a fixation, an obsession, as if meaning were a pane of glass that could be smoothed in a single stroke between two ends. The goal begins to look obvious—eliminate the fishbone that might catch in the throat during exchange and translation. But the discomfort persists, and moments of failed expression seem only to multiply in an age of ever-smarter translation tools. Sentences start to burn, blur, and give off a sour smell; strange words rub against habit, their coarse grain keeping me awake at night.

This is precisely the touch of the membrane—a metaphor that constantly haunts the discipline of media studies where I am situated. The medium, as a membrane, is an entity between two things, “a thin, practically invisible kind of tissue... that both separates and connects distinct domains, permeable

and impermeable at the same time.”<sup>1</sup> The membrane controversially implies or presupposes that the world consists of two sets of objects or subjects, while it participates in mediating their onto-epistemological tension. However, as a third party, the membrane is both necessary for the task of perception and potentially hinders utopian immediate access to the real thing. In other words, it is considered essential for the act of mediation, yet in its long history, it has also been seen as a nuisance that needs to be improved to be as neutral, invisible, and non-interfering as possible. As we can realize, language is always a membrane: it excludes the environment, filtering in only what the system needs for survival; its verb forms are “enclosing,” “shielding,” and “filtering.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the ideal of eliminating it always lingers, demanding attention.

In my own experience, this mix of desire, anxiety, and linguistic burden came to a head as I translated essays by Judith Butler into Chinese. Butler—so often a recipient of the notorious “Bad Writing Award”—already signals a difficulty of transmission. Translating Butler makes me uncomfortable: terms like sex and gender refuse smooth equivalence, and these hard



terms seem to exceed the local language's carrying capacity. In a way, this is an intentional difficulty, as Butler has always aimed to play with the internal tensions of language and the stubbornness of its boundaries: in 2003, she published "The Value of Difficulty," an (ironically) clearly structured and elegantly worded defense of the "obscure" and the "unclear," which, in a different key, revisits this very obsession with clarity and fluency. There, Butler stands with Adorno (and, indeed, the literary modernists), whose view is that since language—especially reactionary traditional language—has already prescribed a hegemonic scheme for understanding and describing the world, making us ventriloquists for language through "common sense," critical language must deploy alternative, novel vocabularies to challenge, disrupt, and set itself at a distance from everyday usage.<sup>3</sup>

However, although Adorno correctly identified the power of alienated language to break through the multiple blockades of hegemony in cultural traditions and everyday vocabulary, Butler notes that in his correspondence with Benjamin he also sanctified the clarity of totalizing interpretive frameworks and theoretical abstrac-

tions (deployed against the totalizing culture industry) in ways that could become toxically authoritative. He downplayed metaphors that are not limpid, that detour and delay—precisely those figures Benjamin regarded as "theory in the strictest sense." Like Benjamin, Butler laments that Adorno never grasped how metaphor is the means by which concepts are realized; in this respect, he reverted to the position he criticized.

Regardless, from this starting point, Butler explores a paradox dear to the left: "mass-accessible" language often turns out to be the very idiom through which rulers secure hegemony. The pursuit of clarity and universality can itself congeal into a new hegemony—the utopian ideal of no membrane alienates itself into a fascist state that rejects the foreign. In this sense, "obscurity" becomes an ethical posture of respecting the other's unknowability—and thus their unmasterability. I suggest we accept a counter-intuition here: a sentence that reads too easily often sands down the friction the theory depends on. A line that resists domestication slows, hardens, even feels impolite—and that is where critique begins.

For me, Butler's article is an



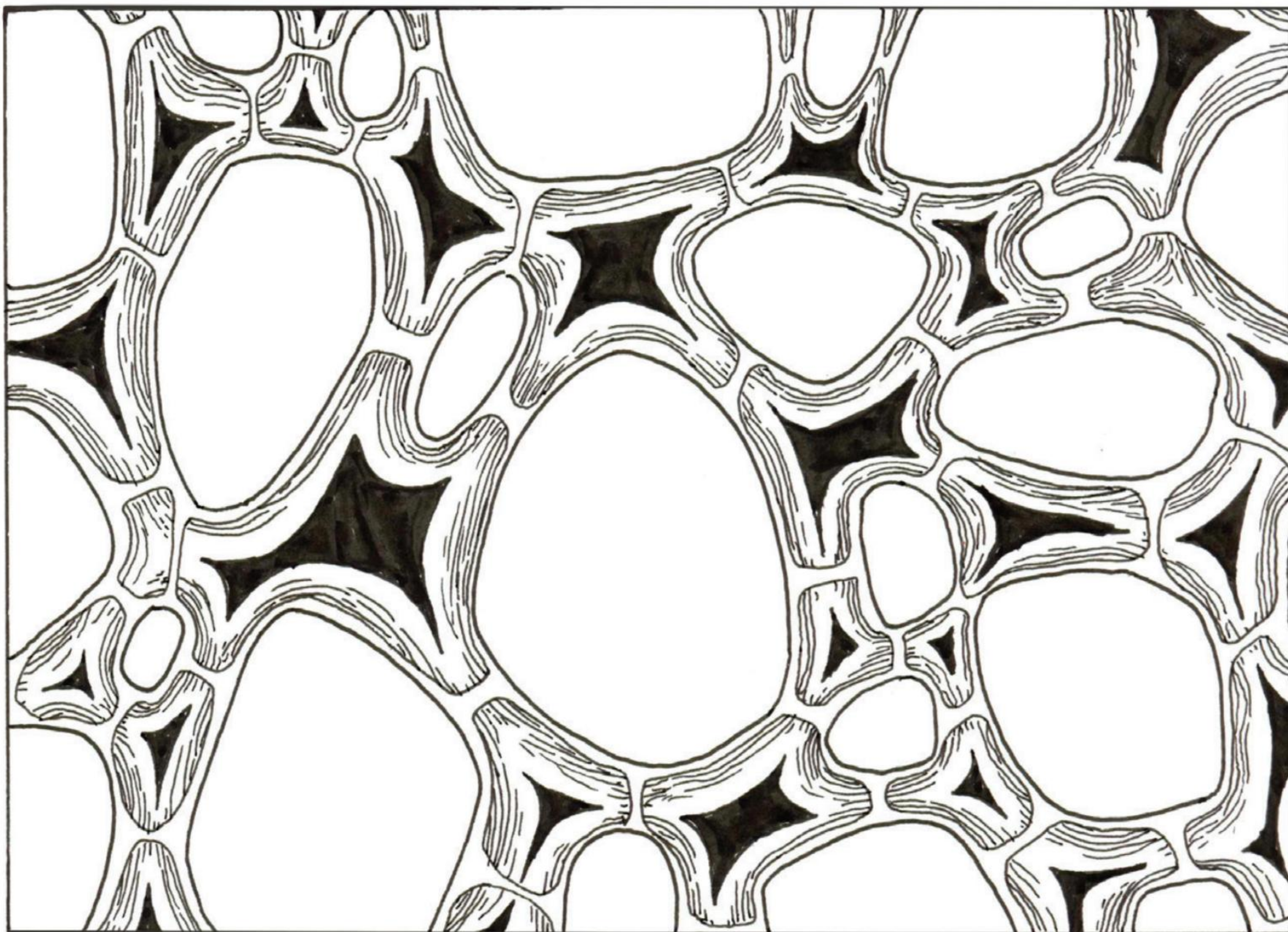
important warning: be wary of reading and writing that move too smoothly, and be wary of demands and limits that blunt the provocations of language. This article asks us to understand that: clear language means language that is already familiar. This language weaves the methods by which we describe the world; therefore, it is, in fact, the grammaticalization of ideology. We establish our relationship with the world by acquiring vocabulary and grammar; in other words, we are constructed by language—Interpellated, as Althusser would say—as subjects.<sup>4</sup> When we use fixed language, it means we can only see and describe predetermined perspectives of the world, and these limited perspectives are precisely what those in power want us to see. The key questions are: Where does the signifying chain break? And how can it be skillfully broken?<sup>5</sup>

An important case is evidently the translation of “gender” and “sex.” Modern Chinese (and some Indo-European languages) cannot directly translate these two concepts,<sup>6</sup> leading to many peculiar, even bizarre, translations in different versions. Yet it is precisely this alienation or invention of terms—this fishbone in the throat, this discomfort—that makes us truly notice their

distinction and constructedness. This is a Brechtian alienation effect.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, this also makes us reconsider the metaphor of the membrane, but no longer as an antagonistic barrier. Instead, it shifts attention to its porosity: a dynamic mechanism of differentiation, internalization, and self-reference, which allows partial penetration at the ambiguous boundary, complicating communication with elastic resistance, and allowing heterogeneity to enter language itself, embedding division and barriers within it, transforming it into a generative site. The porous version of the membrane allows for the imagination of a medium that neither isolates from difference nor flows unimpeded in assimilation, but rather negotiates coexistence in difficulty, or, an ethical proposal for practicing listening in vulnerability.<sup>8</sup>

This paradoxical posture holds a dangerous productivity, or—if one turns to a more unstable lexicon—a seductive force of creation. We need “stones from other hills”—forgive me for using an uncomfortable, foreign term to make this very point—*tā shān zhī shí* (他山之石), a Chinese idiom that names how rough material from elsewhere grinds and sharpens what is at hand. It is precisely this foreign,





resistant, and even awkward language that provides the abrasive needed to tackle hard problems. And this stone—let me guess, a porous volcanic rock generated in the earth’s breathing-like geological process—penetrates the boundaries of things. In fact, when Benjamin, on the rugged landscape of Naples’ coastal cliffs, sought out the interpenetrating, layered architecture growing upon it and the surprising lives of its inhabitants, he approached the same porosity we jointly pursue with the same geological mindset.<sup>9</sup>

When parts of the contemporary left assume that mass or common-sense language constitutes the proper “mass line,” we may need to return to queer

theorists and even literary modernists to imagine a queering of language and thought at a time when political speech is being flattened and vulgarized and an obsession with clarity and communicability grows by the day. In fact, as I briefly mentioned earlier, a utopian imagination of total transparency and perfect cleanliness—an effort that seeks to purge impurities and purify its contents—has often become fertile ground for imperialism and fascism. Consider the Trump administration’s self-proclaimed “immune system” of exclusionary political operations, and how its sprawling walls are built upon an imagined regime of shared language, profitable circulation, and seamless exchange. Here, the membrane is



sealed and rigidified, the ideal of no obstruction is converted into a refusal of understanding, whereas understanding is always difficult, dialogical, and asymmetrical, unfolding over time.

This makes me increasingly believe that our moment's crisis partly stems from such a fixation on clarity: it powers a machinery of exclusion and conversion that forges untranslatable moments—pains still in formation, grievances that evade classification, exceptions that demand to be heard, and lexicons cast out as non-kin—into polite, well-behaved language fit for an orderly system. When a language expected to be “universal” establishes hegemony, it signifies the peak of this paranoia. Of course, I agree that a single hegemony does not exist, but the word “hegemony,” in the sense used by Hall, signifies a certain cultural and linguistic dominance, even if it is temporary and domain-specific.<sup>10</sup> To challenge the fabric of hegemony in a specific domain, we must introduce and generate strange, new, and therefore revolutionary languages from the subtle pores of the membrane.

These languages are first and foremost languages of resistance, existing in corners, even

outside the system: they are the languages of the poor and lowly, of slaves, of the mad, of the resentful. It is not that language is inherently critical, but that rejected languages reveal the fissures in the system, and the failures of the metaphors they seize. Standing on the side of the language of resistance, like Butler, gives us the opportunity to grasp this critical potential—these resistant, marginalized, and uncomfortable languages disrupt the seemingly seamless membrane of hegemonic language. This is what de Certeau called the “guerilla tactics” of everyday discursive practice.<sup>11</sup> The key is to discover the non-everyday languages that are subtly excluded yet always loom at the edge of our vision.

The system is not seamless, and the language system is no exception. It is through the system's inherent loopholes and fissures that we can possibly escape. Therefore, beyond the languages of resistance, there are also anonymous languages, which are precisely the chaotic infinity that leaks through the membrane. Although it seems to come from another world, it steals legitimate forms from within the system (existing codes and grammar). Thus, it is not completely incomprehensible like garbled code, allowing



us to approach understanding through great effort and guiding us to see the boundlessness beyond the system. Furthermore, I believe that even garbled code and glitches are still beneficial for critique, as they indicate where the system fails, thereby undermining its assumed validity and authority.<sup>12</sup>

These languages, leaked through the porous membrane, sometimes even transcend our control, making it seem as if they are speaking themselves through our bodies. I do believe that we are, to some extent, ventriloquists for our language. It is not that we speak language, but that language pre-stages our actions, our thought patterns, and our analytical postures. Therefore, to some degree, we discover a true generation, where language not only escapes the control of hegemony, but even our own control. We certainly understand that this would be a language that makes us uneasy, because it is clearly difficult, hard to explain, ambiguous, and metaphorical. The immense energy they contain, which makes even us feel uncertain, can indeed shake the foundations of familiar and everyday language. These emergent, unruly languages also prevent critical language from becoming jargon within a discipline, or even part

of everyday language hegemony. As Deleuze argued that the philosopher's job is to constantly create new concepts and new grammars,<sup>13</sup> a permanent revolution of language is also a necessary, continuous rebellion and transgression, so that in this constant dynamic, language does not return to rigidity.

One final point must be considered, a potential criticism: If any clear attempt to describe and represent the other is an offense, then what we should do is not use confusing language to describe the other, but rather resort to complete silence, because no matter how obscure, a definition is still a definition and will "harm" the other. I think this is indeed the case: I believe silence is a better virtue than the obsession with clarity. However, Queer language has its own function, chief among them being disruption—it tells us that outside the membrane, other possibilities exist. Therefore, critical language is sometimes not an arrow pointing to its signified; on the contrary, it may be a latent metaphor, a mysterious force, a subtle intervention, oscillating between two ends, heralding what is to come. Perhaps, I must admit, critical clarity exists, but to continue using familiar language is to submit to a hostile agenda, a geo-



political move that transforms a living membrane into a wall or barrier. This rhetoric itself implies that everyday language is a flat street on which people walk freely. But this is not the case. The deceptiveness of this very notion is what Butler wants to address—some people are not allowed on the street, and some destinations are unreachable by any street. For this, we must trudge through the mud. Critical reflection is indeed difficult, but this is precisely the purpose of a humanistic education. The current era's rejection of the liberal arts is precisely an attempt to eliminate the opportunity for people to be "trained." We must rise up and resist. To choose difficulty is not to celebrate obscurity for its own sake, but to affirm—as Butler argues—the very terrain where thought can remain unfinished and therefore alive. We must find another path.



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