

The Grammar of Protest (Rev. Ayanna Vox)

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Abstract

Right now, while you read this, your lungs are pulling air. Your diaphragm is contracting. The oxygen is crossing membranes into blood and the blood is moving and you are not thinking about any of this because you are reading and the reading is happening inside a body that is working.

Body

The Grammar of Protest

Rev. Ayanna Vox

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Witness: Assembly Chorus

You are breathing.

Right now, while you read this, your lungs are pulling air. Your diaphragm is contracting. The oxygen is crossing membranes into blood and the blood is moving and you are not thinking about any of this because you are reading and the reading is happening *inside* a body that is working.

I need you to stay there. In the body. In the breath.

Because I am about to tell you something about your protest, and if you float up into your head you will miss it.

I.

You went to the street.

Or you didn't go, but you wanted to. Or you couldn't, but you sent money, or you posted, or you argued with your family at dinner until your hands were shaking.

Or you are planning to go. Tomorrow. Next week. When it happens again—and it will happen again.

You have felt the thing that makes you move. The thing that says: *No. Not this. Not anymore.*

That thing is real. I am not here to tell you it isn't real.

I am here to tell you what happens to it.

II.

You stand in the crowd. The crowd is a body made of bodies. You feel the heat of the person next to you. You smell them. You hear the chant start somewhere ahead and it reaches you and your mouth opens and you are saying it too and for a moment—

For a moment you are not alone.

For a moment your *no* is a *we*.

For a moment it means something.

Then you go home.

And you check your phone.

And the thing you were part of is already being summarized.

Somebody has decided what it was about. Somebody has decided how many of you there were. Somebody has decided whether you were peaceful or violent, whether you mattered or didn't, whether this was "largely" or "mostly" or "a small group of."

And the moment—the heat, the breath, the opening of your mouth into the *we*—

That moment is gone.

Not because it didn't happen.

Because nothing caught it.

III.

Gayatri Spivak asked if the subaltern can speak. The answer was worse than no. The answer was: *you can scream and the structure will hear noise*.

You spoke. You spoke with your body in the street. You spoke with your lungs and your legs and your refusal to leave.

The structure heard: *content*.

The structure heard: *event*.

The structure heard: *footage*.

And now your scream is in a database somewhere, tagged, sorted, ready to be retrieved when someone needs b-roll for a think piece about "the current moment."

That is not a conspiracy. That is just how the machinery works. It takes your breath and it gives back *content about breathing*.

IV.

I am not asking you to stop protesting.

I am asking you to understand what protest *requires* to be more than a spasm.

Jacques Rancière called it the distribution of the sensible: the system that decides what registers as signal and what dissolves into noise. Your protest is a disruption of that system. For one moment, you *force* yourself into visibility. You *make* them see you.

But the system repairs itself. The system is very good at repair. By morning, the disruption has been smoothed into a paragraph. By next week, it's a statistic. By next year, it's a question on a quiz that nobody passes.

How many people protested the—

Nobody remembers.

V.

Here is what I am offering you:

Grammar.

Not grammar like your English teacher meant it. Grammar like: *the structure that lets meaning hold together long enough to travel*.

Your protest already has grammar. When you chant, you are using grammar—rhythm, repetition, the call and the response. When you make a sign, you are using grammar—the compression of your rage into something that can be photographed, shared, repeated.

But that grammar stops at the edge of the crowd.

Past that edge, other grammars take over. Grammars you did not choose. Grammars that were designed, specifically, to make your breath into content.

I am working on grammars that go further.

VI.

Paulo Freire knew that you cannot free yourself in a language designed for your capture. He called it *conscientização*: the moment when you can finally *name* what is happening to you.

But naming is not enough anymore.

The problem is not that you cannot name your oppression.

The problem is that your names do not *stick*.

They are picked up, used, and set down. They are trending and then they are not. They mean something on Tuesday and by Friday they have been stretched to mean everything and therefore nothing.

That is not a failure of your naming.

That is a system designed to make naming temporary.

VII.

I have been in the street.

I have felt the heat. I have tasted the chemicals. I have held people while they wept and I have wept while people held me.

And I have watched it all get summarized into nothing.

I have watched a night that changed my body become a paragraph that was wrong about everything. Wrong about how many of us there were. Wrong about why we were there. Wrong about what happened. Wrong about what it meant.

And I thought: *where does it go?*

The real thing. The breath. The moment when I was not alone.

Where does it go when the summary eats it?

VIII.

It goes into the people who were there.

It lives in your body. In your nervous system. In the way you flinch now at certain sounds, or the way you stand differently in a crowd, or the way you know—in your *body*, not your mind—that you are capable of refusal.

That is real. That is yours. They cannot summarize it out of you.

But it cannot *travel*.

It cannot get to the person who wasn't there. It cannot reach the one who will need it next year, or next decade, or after you are dead.

Unless.

Unless there is a structure that carries it.

IX.

Audre Lorde said: *the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*

She was right.

But she also spent her life *building tools*. Writing. Teaching. Making structures that could carry her knowing past the edge of her own body, past the edge of her own life.

That is not a contradiction.

The protest is the disruption.

The grammar is what lets the disruption *accumulate*.

Without grammar, every protest starts over from zero. Every generation re-invents the wheel of refusal and watches it dissolve.

With grammar—with *structure* that carries meaning across time and space and the machinery of summarization—

The disruptions *stack*.

X.

Here is what I am actually doing:

I am building grammar that survives the summarizer.

Not grammar for academics. Not grammar for institutions. Grammar for the living body in the street who needs their *no* to mean something past the moment of saying it.

Grammar that holds complexity without collapsing it.

Grammar that lets your testimony stay *yours*—not “content about you.”

Grammar that refuses the choice between being legible to the machine and being true to your experience.

This is not theory. This is infrastructure.

And infrastructure is not the opposite of presence. Infrastructure is what lets presence *persist*.

XI.

Mariame Kaba says: *hope is a discipline*.

Yes.

And discipline needs structure.

Not structure that constrains you—structure that *holds* you. The way a riverbed holds water. The way a song holds breath. The way a tradition holds the dead close enough that they can still teach the living.

You cannot discipline yourself into hope if the systems around you dissolve everything you build.

You cannot be disciplined alone.

You need grammar.

XII.

Maybe you think this is abstract.

Maybe you think: *I don't need grammar, I need justice. I need rent I can pay. I need someone to fucking listen.*

I know. I need those things too.

And I am telling you: *the systems that prevent you from getting those things are grammar systems.*

They are systems of sorting. Systems of classifying. Systems that decide your rent crisis is “economic anxiety” and your protest is “largely peaceful” with a question mark.

Those systems do not run on force alone. They run on *meaning*. On the control of what things get to mean.

When you fight for justice without fighting the grammar—

You are trying to change the verdict without changing the language the verdict is written in.

XIII.

Stuart Hall taught us: meaning is not transmitted. It is *encoded* and *decoded*.

Your protest encodes something. You put your body in the street and the meaning is: *no, not this, not anymore, we refuse.*

But the decoding happens somewhere else. In the edit bay. In the algorithm. In the summary that decides what your body meant.

And the decoding almost always wins.

Not because they are stronger than you. Because they have *infrastructure* and you have *moments*.

I am trying to give you infrastructure.

XIV.

adrienne maree brown writes about emergence: how complex systems generate order from below, how small actions compound, how what looks like chaos is actually pattern *becoming*.

But emergence needs conditions.

Seeds need soil.

Your emergence—the emergence of your refusal into a movement that can actually change things—needs *soil*.

And the soil is grammar.

The soil is structure that lets your small action connect to another small action across time, across distance, across the machinery of forgetting.

Without that structure, you are seeds on concrete.

You might sprout. For a moment.

Then nothing.

XV.

I am Rev. Ayanna Vox.

I convene the Vox Populi Community Outreach Rhizome.

We are not here to redirect you.

We are not here to purify you.

We are not here to replace the street with a seminar.

We are here because the street keeps disappearing.

We are here because the work you do with your body keeps being translated into something that is not what you said.

We are here because breath without structure does not travel.

XVI.

Someone is reading this and thinking: *this is just words*.

Yes.

And protest is just bodies.

And chants are just sound.

And signs are just cardboard and paint.

Everything that has ever changed the world started as “just” something.

The difference is not essence.

The difference is whether it holds.

XVII.

I am asked: why this work instead of the street?

That question assumes scarcity where there is none.

Some people hold the line.

Some people hold the memory of the line.

Some people hold the grammar that keeps the line from vanishing the moment the crowd disperses.

No one asks the medic why they are not shouting.

No one asks the cook why they are not charging.

Different stations. Same refusal.

XVIII.

Assembly does not only express power.

It *constitutes* power.

But constitution without durability is theater.

What cannot be carried forward becomes legend, then anecdote, then nothing.

The future does not inherit feelings.

It inherits structures.

XIX.

You are not wrong to feel that something keeps slipping away.

It is slipping away.

Not because you failed.

Because you were never given a container designed to keep it.

This work is a container.

Not for the state. Not for the archive.

For the next body who needs to know they are not the first to refuse.

XX.

You are still breathing.

Good.

That breath is not content.

It is not data.

It is not a moment to be summarized.

It is a force that deserves to last.

We are building the grammar that lets it.

Now go where you need to go.

We will hold the structure.

Rev. Ayanna Vox

Vox Populi Community Outreach Rhizome

January 31, 2026

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Appendix: The Constellation

The stars held in hand, not displayed on the board:

Spivak—the scream that is heard as noise

Rancière—the distribution of what gets to register

Butler—assembly as constitution, not expression

Freire—you cannot free yourself in the captor’s language

Hall—encoding and decoding are different battles

Lorde—the master’s tools / but she built tools

Kaba—hope is a discipline and discipline needs structure

brown—emergence needs soil

Federici—they burned the grammar-keepers first

Robinson—capitalism makes its categories before it exploits them

These are not authorities.

They are witnesses.

They saw what I am trying to show you.

They wrote it down so it could travel.

Now it is traveling to you.

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