

# Recognizing the Rhetorics of Feminist Action: Activist Literacy and Dr. Jill Stein's 2012 Green Party Campaign

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**Abstract:** Scholars such as Nancy Welch and Susan Jarratt argue that Neoliberalism shapes how everyday citizens are able to take action. Using what Jacquelyn Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch call "social circulation," I analyze how Dr. Jill Stein, the presidential candidate for the Green Party in 2012, used "whatever spaces are left" to challenge the dominant two party system, particularly in relation to the presidential debates. I argue that Stein demonstrates an activist literacy disposition that positions her to use the spaces, the literate and rhetorical means, and opportunities for storytelling to foster social action in our neoliberal climate.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, social circulation, activist literacy, third party politics

In *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*, Nancy Welch argues that neoliberalism has changed not only the topics available for public discussion in the pursuit of making socio-political change, but the venues for having those discussions, as they have also become increasingly privatized. As an example, Welch reflects on her experiences advocating for her husband's health care to their insurance company. She describes the multiple letters she had gotten from her insurance company saying their appeal for his care had been denied, using the same phrases again and again, as if her carefully researched and rhetorical letters were not even being read. This leads Welch to question the amount of power we as teachers and scholars of writing give to language and rhetoric:

These are rhetorical strategies that, mostly in the abstract, have given me comfort – comfort in the belief that I really can wield power in language, that I can empower my students, particularly those subordinate by gender, race, sexuality, and class, to do the same. Today, however, I'm more keenly aware of how much the effectiveness of these rhetorical strategies are contingent upon extralinguistic factors, including social position and credentials. (26)

Welch's storytelling about the limits and possibilities of language and rhetoric within a larger socio-political context introduces the work of this essay because it points to the constraints of our rhetorical actions and the institutional structures that shape how those actions are received and acted upon; even the most committed activist has to have multiple strategies, committed collaborators, and institutional literacy in order to have a chance at making change; even the most engaged community members might have to present their ideas in different places, to different audiences, with different purposes and kinds of evidence, over time. Additionally, Welch's discussion of the constraints of language and rhetoric within a social context takes emphasis away from individual acts and puts activism within a context that includes individuals, groups, institutions, histories, traditions, philosophies, strategies, tactics. As feminist rhetoricians and teachers we need to see the possibilities for action in our neoliberal democracy, which includes not only an attention to language, rhetoric, and socio-political contexts, but also includes an attention to literate and rhetorical tactics needed to recognize the possibilities for feminist action.

Green Party 2012 Presidential candidate Dr. Jill Stein provides a concrete example of these literate and rhetorical tactics, which I call "activist literacy." I define activist literacy as a literate and rhetorical action that deliberately uses and interprets language to analyze and challenge socio-political power structures to make change through the use of collaboration or coalition building. Activist literacy links dialogue to disposition and points to other important forms of action—recognizing the repertoire available to feminists for activism. Activist literacy relates to Wendy B. Sharer's notion of "effective literacy," a

concept Sharer borrows from Catherine Hobbs and discusses in *Vote and Voice: Women's Organizations and Political Literacy, 1915-1930*. "Effective literacy," according to Sharer, is "a level of literacy that enables the user to act to effect change, in her own life and in society ([Hobbs] 1)." Sharer goes on to argue that literacy in this context also refers to "the rhetorical savvy to participate actively in larger, more complex processes of information access and use" (9). Activist literacy goes beyond Sharer's "effective literacy" to advocate for an activist literacy *disposition*, an approach to using literacy and rhetoric, a way of being, a commitment to social action.



Figure 1. Dr. Jill Stein, 2012 Green Party Presidential Candidate.

Dr. Jill Stein and her campaign use activist literacy to try to get heard on the issues important in the presidential race, but to also find strategies to make

her presence known in a neoliberal democracy that privileges two parties. Stein and her campaign challenged neoliberal spaces and found other means—other spaces, other ways to tell their story, other ways of using language—for getting her voice heard. This essay retells the story of Jill Stein's fight to get into the presidential debates, points to the tactics she used to get her voice heard in spite of being left out of the debates as an example of "activist literacy," and practices what Jacquelyn Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch call "social circulation" by historicizing the role of women candidates and politicians as a framework to retell, analyze, and situate Stein's story of activist literacy. I do this work to consider how neoliberalism affects our opportunities for action but to also demonstrate that a disposition of activist literacy can provide tactics for challenging those neoliberal spaces.

## Highlighting the Spaces Left through Social Circulation

Jill Stein is situated within a historical context as a presidential candidate. Describing this historical context points to the implications of what Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch call "social circulation," one of four terms of critical engagement in their book *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons in Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. In particular, my essay focuses on ". . . rhetorical processes, in effect, [that] have the capacity to envelop broadly defined uses of language as a symbolic system, with rhetoric being constituted in this schema as culturally informed social actions that participate recursively in the circuit of culture" (1392). Social circulation is about how—and where—meaning is made—and where it isn't made. It is about highlighting those rhetorical and literate spaces that are not normally part of the Western tradition of rhetoric, literacy, or composition studies. And it is about looking beyond the surface for how rhetorical action is received, responded to, or silenced, and then thinking about what those responses or lack of responses mean not only for the rhetor but also for those who use that story for purposes beyond the original experience.

Jill Stein's campaign is an example of social circulation because she engages activist literacy at many different levels as a tactic in our current neoliberal climate; she works at the local level addressing and riling a base of supporters, she works at the legal level using legal discourse and processes to exercise her rights, she works at the media level, inviting journalists to tell her story to others, and she works with the general public, using what Royster and Kirsch, drawing on Jessica Enoch's work, describe as "whatever spaces are left" to critique those in power with the purpose of persuading the general public to see her point of view (1404) . But Jill Stein is not the first woman rhetorician

to take up these tactics—though some of her tactics are specific to neoliberalism. Situating her within a historical context of other women politicians and candidates demonstrates the breadth and depth of how social circulation applies and changes over time.

Social circulation is a method of analysis that highlights how spaces, culture, and use of language has changed the way feminist scholars have understood the role of women rhetoricians over time. Dr. Jill Stein comes from a long tradition of women presidential candidates sponsored by third parties. For example, according to the film "The Rhetoric of Women in Politics," Victoria Woodhull was the first woman nominated to run for president by the Equal Rights Party in 1872<sup>1</sup>—50 years before women gained the right to vote. Jo Freeman in "The Woman Who Ran for President" asserts that while Woodhull was nominated, it is not clear if she ever really campaigned. Belva Ann Bennett Lockwood, Freeman argues, was the first woman to actually campaign for president in 1884, also nominated by the Equal Rights Party (86). The significance of Woodhull and Lockwood being nominated for the highest public office in a space where women could not vote points to the ways that women broke socio-cultural rules—and took up the spaces available to them to make change—in the process of taking action.

It's significant that third parties nominated these women, as third parties often provide the space for alternative ideas to be voiced. Evan Spencer Jones in his dissertation entitled "The Politics that Make Presidents" argues, "The [theory of] conventional wisdom states that third parties do not win elections, but third party candidates may exert issue influence on one or both of the major parties. By contesting elections, third parties act as 'issue educators' and 'issue and reform innovators' (Hazlett 20)" (20). Third parties create a space for nonmainstream issues to be heard and for mainstream issues to be challenged. They also create a space for unlikely candidates to be nominated and support campaigns for the highest political office.



Figure 2. Victoria Woodhull, first woman Presidential Candidate, Equal Rights Party, 1872.

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1 Frederick Douglass was her running mate.

Moving from the spatial and cultural elements of social circulation, Royster and Kirsch focus additionally on the language using potential by arguing that ". . . we propose social circulation as a critical term of engagement to suggest that this sense of the fluidity of language use—as well as the fluidity of the power those uses generate—can help us see how traditions are carried on, changed, reinvented, and reused when they pass from one generation to the next" (1369-1377). Woodhull and other women candidates and elected officials—in third and major parties—pushed the boundaries of our cultural ways of doing and knowing by using their position to argue for equal rights and issues that apply to groups beyond just women. While Woodhull challenged women's lack of a right to vote through becoming a presidential candidate, she also used her newspaper *Woodhull and Clafin's Weekly* to share her position on national issues. According to "The Rhetoric of Women in Politics," "She became a committed activist and reformer concerned with human rights issues as well as women's issues, national public education, institutionalized welfare for the poor, opposition to all laws that encroached upon individual freedom, support of labor reform." Patsy Mink, the first woman of color to be elected to US Congress in 1965, used her position to introduced bills such as, ". . . the Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Act, the Women's Educational Equality Act, including Title IX. . ." and Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to be elected to US Congress (also in 1965), opposed the draft and Vietnam War, cosponsored a bill to guarantee a minimum income to all families, opposed federal cuts in public education, and fought for labor and women's rights.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the history of women running for and being elected to political positions, women have shared their perspectives and experiences on what it means to be a woman in the civic public. But they have also demonstrated how their perspectives and issues were not just about women, but about the poor and working class, about children, and about equality for people of color and gays and lesbians. And yet, according to "The



Figure 3. Shirley Chisholm, first Black US Congresswoman, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> These two women were also the first two women who were considered in a major (Democratic) convention for presidential candidacy in 1972.

Rhetoric of Women in Politics," the media—as recently as 2008—still trivializes women candidates, by focusing overwhelmingly on a presidential candidate's hair, for example, rather than the important issues she brings to the national conversation. This emerges from the neoliberal idea that a person must be authorized to speak in particular spaces. Below I demonstrate how Jill Stein seeks out ways to be heard—and taken seriously—on the issues in the media.

Social circulation is about social circles across time—over generations, as well as space—locally and globally. It is not about understanding individual social relationships but instead, social networks. It is not about looking for public and private opportunities for women's rhetoric; it is about seeking women's rhetoric that has been previously invisible. Royster and Kirsch write about current trends in women's rhetorical analysis: "...we shift attention more dramatically toward circulations that may have escaped our attention, that we may not have valued (and therefore neglected to study)..." (1369). Much of the scholarship on women's rhetoric has focused on women candidates and elected officials in dominant parties. Additionally, women's rhetoric has focused on women's organizations and clubs or it has focused on women's rhetoric during key times of struggle, such as suffrage or the women's rights movement of the 1960s. I focus on a third party candidate for president because running for office is another opportunity for women to use rhetoric and literacy—activist literacy—to make change, and third parties have been one of the social networks that have created a space for women's ideas and issues to be heard presently and historically.

Jill Stein is situated within a theory of social circulation that points to a history of women who have run for national offices, who have used the spaces, language, and culture that they emerge from to find ways to make change in "whatever spaces are left" (1404). To this, I add the affects of and challenges to neoliberalism as a way of peeling apart the layers of Stein's literate and rhetorical actions in order to understand her exigences for taking action, as well as analyzing how the extralinguistic contexts shaped both her action and how her action was received and acted upon. In other words, Dr. Stein, as a third party candidate, represents positions on the issues that are very different from the mainstream political parties. Additionally, while she tries to work within the system by attempting to get into the presidential debates and using legal means to stop the debates, these attempts go silent in the larger scheme of things. While her activist literacy uses good arguments and tactics, argument and reasoning are not enough to get her into the debates—even as she plays by the rules of the Commission on Presidential Debates! She misses the authority and the purchasing power to force the Commission to play by the rules. But her action, on the other hand, helps to rile a base of supporters

because she shows she is willing to fight for the rights of the people to hear from all of the presidential candidates that meet the key criteria for debate.

Royster and Kirsch describe the particular kind of paying attention I am attempting to highlight through Jessica Enoch's work in "Survival Stories: Feminist Historiographic Approaches to Chicana Rhetorics of Sterilization Abuse" where Enoch uses three feminist historiographic approaches and creates one of her own, the latter of which, as Royster and Kirsch describe, applies to this analysis:

Between the task of contextualizing the rhetorical performance within its immediate context and the task of theorizing in order to open new spaces for analysis, [Enoch] disrupts the flow of analysis and identifies as a particular challenge the way in which normalizing processes function to silence the voices of nontraditional participants . . . rendering them not-hearable and invisible within the norm of possibility and expectation . . . By this reckoning, rhetors who do not conform to normalizing processes are ultimately forced to occupy and function in whatever spaces are left. (1404)

Royster and Kirsch's description points to the power dynamics between "normalizing processes" as in dominant structures for creating justice, such as court rooms or legal documents that challenge the rules for Presidential Debates, and the ways those spaces can create injustice, such as denying a request for an injunction for third party candidates to get into the debates. In this regard, the rhetorical performances still exist and are still meaningful, particularly when these stories of injustice are used for different purposes, such as the retelling of this story to others, to highlight those nonnormalized spaces, and to point to the value and potential for new understandings through observing and listening to those alternate spaces and stories of injustice. The story of Jill Stein not getting into the presidential debates—and the retelling of that story through the lens of activist literacy—is a way of broadening—and limiting—our notion of the reading and writing practices available to activists within socio-political neoliberal contexts while also helping to define what dispositions activists take up in these contexts. And this storytelling is a form of social circulation that demonstrates connections to the stories, tactics, and issues raised by women political candidates both historically and presently.

## **Challenging the Commission on Presidential Debates**

The Green Party has been a presence in American politics since the 2000 election when Ralph Nader and Winona LaDuke ran a national campaign for President (Nader's first campaign with the Green Party was in 1996). Since



Figure 4. [Click here](#) to watch video. Democracy Now's report on Dr. Jill Stein and Cheri Honkala being arrested at the second Presidential Debate, October 2012.

then, the Green Party has run a candidate for election in every presidential race. The United States Green Party was founded in 1984 (GreenPartyUS), but Green parties have existed internationally in Australia and New Zealand since the 1970s (Zelko 1). Dr. Jill Stein has been a key player in Green Party Politics for over 14 years. She ran for the Massachusetts gubernatorial election (against Mitt Romney) in 2002. During that election, her most prominent campaign message was that she would address the needs of the people. In a campaign speech given after the second televised debate, Stein argued: "Suffice it to say that the other campaigns are not people powered campaigns and I felt like it was our special mission to speak to the needs that people urgently feel are not being addressed in this campaign, not being addressed in the closed debates, and not being addressed up on Beacon Hill." Stein also ran for governor again in 2010. 2012 was her first run for President (again, against competitor Mitt Romney). She was the second woman to run a national campaign for president for the Green Party and in that election, according to the GreenPartyUS, Jill Stein "received the most votes for a woman in a presidential election in US history." She is currently running for president again in 2016.

In the 2012 campaign, Dr. Jill Stein, and her Vice Presidential candidate, Cheri Honkala, challenged the debate process and structure in regard to democratic elections and got the word out about these unfair practices by getting

their story into the media. The video to the left, featuring *Democracy Now's* Amy Goodman, shows Stein and Honkala protesting and being arrested at the second Presidential debate at Hofstra University in Long Island on October 16, 2012.

Stein speaks to three audiences in this moment: to the media (so they have a story to tell), to voters, and to those in power, including the police and the representatives of Hofstra University who were at the scene. She argues:

Our Green campaign is on the ballot for 85 percent of voters. Eighty-five percent of voters deserve to know who their choices are in this election and what the real solutions are that can solve the desperate problems that we're facing. The Commission on Presidential Debates makes a mockery of democracy by conducting this fake and contrived debate.

Stein speaks to the average voter, showing how their rights are being taken because they do not have all of the information. She ends her statement by more strongly critiquing the institutions that have the power to make these decisions, to show they do not have the best interest of the voters in mind. She clearly has an argument to make, but also speaks in response to a key question in her campaign—the right of voters to be informed. Stein goes on to speak for the average voter, to point to the ways they are being disenfranchised, and to draw on a well known voting rights organization to build her authority with the American people (and, again, to make a story for the media who are covering this moment):

We're here to stand ground for the American people, who have been systematically locked out of these debates for decades by the Commission on Presidential Debates. We think that this commission is entirely illegitimate; that if democracy truly prevailed, there would be no such commission, that the debates would still be run by the League of Women Voters, that the debates would be open with the criteria that the League of Women Voters had always used, which was that if you have done the work to get on the ballot, if you are on the ballot and could actually win the Electoral College by being on the ballot in enough states, that you deserve to be in the election and you deserve to be heard; and that the American people actually deserve to hear choices which are not bought and paid for by multinational corporations and Wall Street.

Stein continues to speak to the average voter, to show that there are other options to what is currently in place. She appeals to the voters by suggesting an alternative organization, one who has proven to be nonpartisan, and

in making this suggestion, shows the partisanship of the Commission on Presidential Debates. In this video clip, she speaks through the media, and the media outlets decide what to clip and what to keep. Stein's message must be strong enough to appeal to the media who are covering her story, to be sure that her story is heard. In this case, she is successful. And *Democracy Now* does an 8-minute segment on her arrest, her containment, and the unfairness of the debates. She has appealed to this media outlet and to their audience, as *Democracy Now* continued to give her and other third party candidates airtime for debates throughout the time leading up to the presidential election.

While Stein and her campaign were successful in getting the story about being kept out of the debates onto *Democracy Now*, they wanted to do more, so they challenged the Commission through legal means as well. The Green and Libertarian Parties filed an injunction against the Commission on Presidential Debates and the Federal Election Commission to stop or postpone the third Presidential debate on November 5th, 2012 at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida (Jill Stein for President, Our Legal Fight for Free and Equal Debates; Johnson). The rhetorical function of the injunction was twofold: first, it used the strategies of the dominant culture to try to critique that culture through legal processes and discourse; and secondly, it demonstrated to Dr. Stein's base and to the general public what kind of action she and her campaign would be willing to take to fight for third party voices in a neoliberal democratic context that only values two parties.

Some key critiques of the process to be a part of the debates are listed in the injunction. The lawyer who wrote these critiques, Kathleen Kirwin is clearly doing two things: 1) she is trying to show how the Commission is not following its own rules, and 2) she demonstrates how those rules are not applied fairly based on the judgment of an historically nonpartisan voting rights organization. These critiques are part of the genre of the injunction and can address a legal audience, but more likely, these critiques are most effective for Stein's Green Party base as well as for general voters. The injunction states:

- The Commission for Presidential Debates is actually a collaboration between the Republican National Committee and the Democratic National committee. It is a nonprofit, "nonpartisan" organization "established to ensure that debates, as a permanent part of every general election, provide the best possible information to viewers and listeners" (14). Yet, the injunction goes on to state, the League of Women Voters, who had sponsored the debates since the early 1960s when televised debates began, withdrew their support in the 1988 election because, "... the demands of the two campaign organizations would perpetrate a fraud on the American voter. . .The League has

no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American people" (Jill Stein for President, Our Legal Fight For Free and Equal Debates, 9).

- Even though the Commission for the Presidential Debates, made up of the Republican and Democratic National Committee, made the requirements for being invited to the debates, they did not invite candidates who met their criteria, which included constitutional eligibility, ballot access, and electoral support. Jill Stein met all of their criteria except for electoral support as it was defined as having more than 15% in 5 different polls – even though her campaign received matching federal funds and even though there was a statistical possibility that she could win the presidency (Jill Stein for President, Stein Files Lawsuit Against the CPD). Gary Johnson, the Libertarian Party candidate DID meet all of the criteria and he was also not allowed to participate in any of the debates (Johnson 5).

The injunction is a mixture of both facts and critique, building an argument based on how the Federal Election Commission and the Commission for the Presidential Debates are infringing on the rights of both Jill Stein as a presidential candidate, but also on the rights of the American voters. This injunction and her work with the media demonstrate how Dr. Stein and her campaign attempted to engage in politics on par with the Democrats and Republicans. Rather than stand outside of the political arena and level critiques, Dr. Stein uses the tools of the most powerful to attempt to beat them at their own game.

Dr. Jill Stein was not only silenced during the second debate by being handcuffed and taken to a warehouse for 8 hours, but she was also silenced through the legal process of taking her case through the court system—in other words, her injunction was denied. Her only voice—the only space left available to her—was to go to the people and to the press.

Her campaign created "Occupy the Debates" movements; one of the images they used for this movement appears to the above: it directly links neoliberalism to politics by pointing to the challenges that neoliberalism creates for democracy. The campaign used YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and email to advertise to voters about the unfair debates and to broadcast debates



*Figure 5. 2012 Presidential Race media linking politics with neoliberalism*



Figure 6. 2012 Presidential Race Advertisement to advocate popular media outlets broadcast debates between third party candidates.

between other candidates who were running for president. The mainstream press was not interested in her story, except the one debate between her and Gary Johnson, the Libertarian candidate, sponsored by National Public Radio (NPR Staff). Her stance on issues and the challenges she faced getting into the debates are shared on her website, with her supporters, and on non-mainstream news programs such as *Democracy Now*, *Russian News* and the Al Jazeera Network, as well as articles written in *The Nation* and *The New York Times* (Nichols; Lowrey). The image above demonstrates another avenue that third party candidates took to get their voices heard. If they couldn't get into the "main" debates, maybe they could get the debates between third party candidates broadcast on national networks. Jill Stein's campaign used every available media and social networking avenue to challenge how the debates were working and to get the word out to mainstream America about where she stands on the issues.

While readers might question Jill Stein's success, as she didn't get into the debates, she did get more votes than the two sets of Green Party candidates who came before her. According to the Green Party Press Release entitled "Green Party Advances in State and Local Races on Election Day 2012,"

Dr. Stein's and Ms. Honkala's numbers are more than twice the total of votes [396,684] that Green nominees Cynthia McKinney and Rosa Clemente drew in 2008 (161,195) and three times the total of votes that the Green Party's David Cobb and Pat LaMarche drew in 2004 (119,859). The 2008 numbers were a 59% increase in the popular vote

over 2004, and the 2012 numbers show a 146% increase in the popular vote over 2008.

It is very difficult for third parties to win national elections because of the debate structure, which consists of winner-take-all voting, and laws that affect ballot access. But while third party candidates find it hard to win elections, they can certainly affect elections. Additionally, third party candidates can function to get policy agendas that are invisible into public conversations. Evan Spencer Jones, in his dissertation *The Politics that Make Presidents*, argues "Since systemic hurdles largely prevent third parties from winning elections, the best way to measure third party 'success' in [sic] not on electoral terms, but in terms of issue influence brought to bear on the larger political process" (1). While it is difficult to track any kind of success beyond ballot access, vote totals, and Greens elected to lower offices, Stein's campaign shows that even in a climate where neoliberalism reigns, there are other opportunities for activism, other ways of defining and determining "success" in politics.

## The Rhetoric of Activist Literacy

Practicing activist literacy in neoliberal spaces creates its own set of rhetorical challenges for third party political candidates, but it also points to the key disposition of activist literacy that provides the tactics candidates can use to find and use "whatever spaces are left." In her conclusion to the book *The Public Work of Rhetoric* entitled "The Prospects for the Public Work of Rhetoric," Susan Jarratt compares our current sense of political space and activism to postclassical Greek culture in order to demonstrate a disposition for activist literacy. She describes the "culturally Greek intelligentsia from the eastern provinces of the Roman empire," a group that was previously considered in the scholarship as "declin[ing] into literariness" (286). She argues that in fact, because of the violence and oppression of that time, these Greeks were actually using rhetorical tactics, but they were "coded within an array of unfamiliar genres" (286). Comparing this time in Greek history with our current politics and making a case for the limits of current leaders to hear the voices of the people, Jarratt advocates for a postmodern paideia as a way to continue activist work. A postmodern paideia, ". . . demands the ability not only to take up stances on the part of public rhetoric but to read the postures of those in power and, most important, to engage them, or to play their games or to play some other game that is recognizable across lines of power" (288). For Jarratt, the point is not to isolate oneself in an ivory tower or distance oneself as outside of or above the debate, but to engage the issues in a way that is recognizable.

Part of that recognition is about using the language and spaces that are available for critique and action.

For third party and women candidates, activist literacy includes evaluating the socio-cultural structure and then finding the most effective ways to address that structure. In this case, Stein used her activist literacy to attack one of the most fundamental problems with third parties winning elections: the debate structure. So while historically women have run for president when they were not able to vote, or have created policy and legal documents in their political positions, Stein had to do more than address the issues in her campaign: she also had to fight the socio-political neoliberal structures that kept her voice from being heard. And she did that by using the legal structures in place to make that happen as well as the media and social networking. As a presidential candidate for a third party, Stein had an opportunity to take up a different position than candidates for major parties; on the other hand, as a candidate for president, Stein has a responsibility to use that position to speak and critique national politics in the most effective ways possible.

Resonating with Welch's concept of neoliberalism, Jarrett goes on to argue that one factor of a postmodern paideia are the risks involved in being a free speaker or "parrhsiates" (287) because of the socio-cultural power dynamics involved in this kind of speech. Drawing on Foucault, Jarratt argues, ". . . this 'free-speaker' takes a risk, puts himself or herself in danger, by addressing someone in a position of power. The relationship to the interlocutor is a game, but with risk only to one party: it is a game but also a duty" (286-287). In other words, in contexts of varying levels of power, "free-speakers" have a duty to level critiques against the most powerful—and they take a risk by doing so. Jarratt goes on to discuss these parrhesiastics as men who are also powerful members of a society, either via education or military accomplishment or powerful family. Women who have run for political offices throughout history are located differently than these privileged men. But there is still that element of significant risk in the name of progress that women have had to face as well.

In Stein's case, she brings authority to the presidential election as white and as a medical doctor. In some ways, as a medical doctor and a white woman, she holds some privilege and responsibility for speaking out about issues faced by the less privileged. But her campaign certainly does attempt a kind of risk by sending Stein and her running mate, Cheri Honkala, into the debate at Hofstra University; certainly they knew or expected that they would be arrested. Thus, while Stein and Honkala take a serious risk by using their physical bodies and positions as certain kinds of authorities in society to challenge who speaks at the presidential debates; they also create a rhetorical situation that challenges the debate structure in the space of the debate, and in the media.

Then through that risk taking and media coverage—they tell their story again to different audiences.

Thus, risk-taking leads to rhetorical strategizing, as Jarratt goes on to argue and explicate, and she ends her essay by advocating for two important positions as far as the public citizen's rhetorical responsibilities and practices: "First, the situation of the Greek rhetor might suggest the importance of spending more time and attention on ways of addressing those in power and mixed publics in mutually recognizable terms." And "Second, we find in the conjunction of postclassical and postmodern rhetoric a confirmation of 'free speech' as a stance or posture rather than a revelation of the truth itself" (292). Jarratt points to the ideological and social nature of free speech—a literacy practice—pointing to the fact of it being a *disposition* rather than a rhetorical technique.

An example of this rhetorical technique as a disposition is a comparison between an elected presidents' disposition toward the issues and a third party woman candidate's disposition toward the issues. Jeffrey Cohen's essay "Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda" demonstrates a relationship between issues that are raised in State of the Union (SOU) Addresses and issues that the public feels are important. He researched SOUs from 1953 to 1989, which included several different presidents, and compared the policy agendas set in those SOUs with the Gallop's Most-Important-Problem series, a series focusing on issues the public thinks are most important. Focusing on the areas of foreign policy, economics, and civil rights policy, Cohen finds that "Presidents can influence the public's policy agenda" (101). Additionally, Cohen finds that "Presidential leadership of public opinion is analogous to the process of expanding an issue from the formal agenda to the public agenda."<sup>3</sup> The key to this research and approach is that the president has the power to tell voters what to think. And in fact, it is a requirement of office that a "leader" should set the agenda. Cohen, in fact, takes for granted that that is a president's role: presidents shape the national political dialogue rather than listening to it.

Jill Stein's disposition, on the other hand, demonstrates a version of what Krista Ratcliffe calls "rhetorical listening." Rhetorical listening is ". . . a trope for interpretive invention . . . a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture; its purpose is to cultivate conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication, especially but not solely cross-culturally" (25). Stein focuses on listening to

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<sup>3</sup> While Cohen found that presidents can set the public's agendas -- meaning that the public agrees that the president's agenda is a problem that needs to be addressed (not necessarily the way to address the problem) through a speech such as the SOU, Cohen also found that the effects of that agenda setting do not last long, except in the case of foreign policy.

what the American people want, joining their movements, and demonstrating how her platform addresses their needs. Stein listens to voters by engaging in community events and requesting community engagement. For example, she attended Occupy Boston (Stein) and Occupy Madison (Stein); she stood in protest with 300 other people for free assembly in Madison, Wisconsin (Stein); she conducted the "Green Surge" in Chicago, where she and her supporters made a weekend of Green Party activity where they marched with National Nurses United on Saturday; she protested the NATO G8 Summit; she collected signatures to get the Green Party on the ballot in Illinois, and her campaign had a concert on Sunday (Jill Stein for President). She created many opportunities to listen to the issues of real and diverse people. For example, her campaign hosted a public conversation with her and Matt Rothschild, editor of *Progressive Magazine* (Stein), she invited listeners to call in when she was on Portland's Progressive Talk Radio (AM KPOJ) (Stein), and she uses Facebook social media to ask her friends and supporters what the important issues are (Stein; Stein).

In her speeches to the public, she focuses on the issues that affect the people (not corporations). For example, in "Jill Stein's Message of Change, On Which Real Hope Depends," she focuses on three policy changes that President Obama made that were against the best interests of the people in order to offer her hope for change. In the video below, she points to peoples'



Figure 7. [Click here](#) to play the video. Dr. Jill Stein demonstrates her commitment to people of the US.

protests as a way to connect the issues she will fight for as president with the issues they fight for.

Stein shows a commitment to the issues of the people by pointing to the ways people are taking action in their communities, by showing that she can see things from the common person's point of view. She challenges those in power, such as President Obama, corporations, and banking and finance institutions, to show that she is connected to and is aware of the issues that everyday people care about—issues that don't seem to be reflected in the ways our government handled policy. She advocates for the responsible use of power but points to the ways that those in power are not demonstrating their responsibility for the average American over the will of corporations and business. More recently, as Jill Stein has agreed to a 2016 run, she continued her work to listen to the people by conducting a "Listening Tour" in Texas (Jill2016 Team).

This disposition of listening to the people—and in some cases the most underrepresented people—is a common approach in Green Party politics. For example, in 1996 and 2000 when Ralph Nader ran with the Green Party for President, he chose an American Indian running mate, Winona LaDuke, who brought her knowledge about American Indian (and women's) rights, culture, living conditions, environmental attitudes to the campaign. Pat LaMarche, who was the running mate for David Cobb in 2004, conducted a tour where she stayed in homeless shelters and encampments across the United States and documented her experiences in *Left Out in America: The State of Homelessness in the United States*. While we can point to the issues that Stein, LaMarche, and LaDuke address in their campaigns for public office as women's issues, in reality, the Green Party values feminism and would expect their presidential and vice presidential candidates to address the issues of women, the poor, people of color, and the environment. Stein, and the Green Party in general, pride themselves on being a different kind of political candidate—candidates whose activist literacy dispositions are connected to the real people in their communities (people powered campaigns, as they call them), candidates that have built their platform on the experiences of the common person and the most disenfranchised, candidates that don't take donations from corporations.

Through listening to the people and going to work on aligned movements that have already started, Stein enacts activist literacy: the literate and rhetorical action that deliberately uses and interprets language to analyze and challenge socio-political power structures to make change through the use of collaboration or coalition building. The disposition of activist literacy recognizes the power dynamics in mixed publics, seeks ways of addressing those power dynamics through speech and writing, and acts as if in a social context with multiple and changing power dynamics. While Jarratt's focus is on the more

powerful class and men of ancient Greece, her points about the dispositions of these free speakers is key to my argument: activist literacy is more than just a set of practices, techniques, or genres. It is those things, but it is more: it is an attitude, a space to do a particular kind of work, it is a making of meaning and use of language that is effective and rhetorical—social circulation—it is a way of being, a culture. And this disposition is what leads a rhetor to evaluate a rhetorical context, draw on their literacy practices to address that context, and make decisions about what genres to use and what audiences to address to best make their case. And, even if that case is not immediately successful, the rhetor's activist literacy disposition will lead her to find other ways to get her story out, to retell the story for another audience and purpose, as that will keep the story alive and keep the story working in and on the culture at large.

## The Disposition of Activist Literacy

Much scholarship on the rhetorical use of literacy for social progress and change, such as Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream*, Wendy B. Sharer's *Vote and Voice*, or Ellen Cushman's *The Struggle and the Tools*, focuses on how women fought to get their voices heard. These texts talk about the rhetorical and literacy moves that women made, how they taught these moves to other women, and how they struggled, in the former two, to make their issues part of a mainstream conversation. Recognizing the rhetorics of feminist action means that we need to describe the different ways that feminists can take action in complicated socio-political contexts where the boundaries between powerful and powerless depend on socio-rhetorical contexts. While we might look at Jill Stein's campaign and say that nothing has changed since her run for office, since she didn't get elected, and third parties still can't get into debates, and the media still won't cover third party candidates in any meaningful way, we can also recognize the challenges to making systemic change. Then we can recognize that even when we don't get the big "win," we are still making some kinds of small changes, whether it be educating people about the unfair debate structure, whether it's having the story of your detainment for challenging the debates being told, or if it's getting almost 400,000 people to support you for president across the nation.

Considering Dr. Jill Stein's activist literacy in the context of neoliberalism demonstrates how she is building from the foundations that women in politics have already carved out but is also finding new ways to get her message out and to be taken seriously. While some scholars such as Susan Jarratt and Linda Flower have argued that our scholarship has much to say about critique and not much to say about collaboration and coalition building, I argue that we need to think about how to prompt *dispositions* of activism, which can

then lead to choosing *how* to use literacy to respond to particular contexts and audiences, as well as thinking about *who* are our allies and *how* can we engage them. Activism is not just about dissent, but it is about a commitment to making change and drawing on the literate resources and rhetorical contexts for making that change. While there are certainly extralinguistic factors that limited the kinds of power Dr. Stein's actions had, the disposition of her and her campaign means that they anticipate those factors and find other opportunities, venues, genres, and practices to get their ideas out in spite of those factors.

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