

# A Political Medicine: Trust and Power in Ferguson

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What is honored at any time is practiced, and what is dishonored is neglected. (Plato)<sup>1</sup>

## Intro: Help This Woman!

On the internet you can find a dramatic video of a terrifying clash in Ferguson, Missouri last fall. Protesters—mostly young black people—carry a black woman’s body to very white and male police lines. Close your eyes as the video plays. All you hear is panic and confusion. Rising above the other sounds, scared voices cry out, “She’s having a heart attack! She needs help!”

Open your eyes so you can see the unswayed line of militarized police respond. An officer raises his 40mm grenade launcher and fires on the crowd with tear gas canisters. Another officer fires round after round from a shotgun. The armor-clad police jostle the people. The commander yells: “Let her go! Back up!” The gas and impact ordinance drives back some of the people who had been carrying the woman. The most determined persist, though blinded and coughing and crying. One shouts, “That’s my mama!”

The police line aggressively lunges forward, suddenly forming a bulge like the violent bumper on a pinball machine. This maneuver forces back and scatters the blinded, coughing people who remain. The teargas rises up in a dense cloud, obscuring the camera’s view. The woman they were carrying lies on the pavement, and the police build an armed perimeter around her body. The camera is unable to capture what happens next.<sup>2</sup>

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\*See [agk.wikidot.com/hundred-days](http://agk.wikidot.com/hundred-days) for more of the author’s work on conflict healthcare.

<sup>1</sup> *Republic* VIII, 551a.

<sup>2</sup> Pool, Tim. “Police Fire Tear Gas, Rubber Bullets at Group Carrying Unconscious Woman in Ferguson” (video), 24 Nov 2014.

The 2014 uprising in the northern St. Louis suburb of Ferguson erupted after white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black youth, and left the young man's dead body in the street for hours. Marches, clashes, encampments, blockades, and creative protests continued for months. Police from across Missouri converged on Ferguson and practiced policing rooted in less-lethal terror tactics. Across the United States, people were outraged and chose sides.

The video of the crowd's attempt to get help for the woman is one of thousands of experiences produced by the Ferguson movement. People who joined the protests, lived near them, or watched the livestream on the screens of their phones or televisions have their own Ferguson experiences. Some of those witnesses joined in trying to help people like that woman; they tried to improve the outcome.

In this paper I document and analyze the political impact of people organizing into groups to provide first aid and wellness care to protesters and protest-affected residents. The window I looked through opened August 9, 2014, when a crowd began to assemble around Michael Brown's body in the street of his grandmother's suburban apartment complex. I only looked at what happened where the protest movement assembled in the Greater St. Louis area. This is still a lot, including churches and protest sites in Ferguson (Canfield, Quik Trip, the Ferguson Police Department headquarters, West Florissant, Emmerson Electric corporate headquarters, the mayor's office), St. Louis (Shaw neighborhood, Mokabe's coffeeshop, Downtown, the St. Louis Police Department Headquarters, the Cardinals stadium, St. Louis University, City Hall, Frontenac Plaza Mall, Galleria Mall, three Walmarts, four jails, a theater, the Interstate 70 freeway), and the western suburb of Clayton. I only looked at what happened in the four months after the killing of Michael Brown, a period encompassing the August uprising, scattered actions leading up to and including Ferguson October, the response to additional police killings of young people in the St. Louis area in those months, and the popular response to the grand jury's decision not to indict Michael Brown's killer. Many major victories were won outside this study's window, including significant victories in local elections in April of 2015.

Before beginning this study, I participated in the health mobilization by screening and orienting healthcare workers who wanted to travel to Ferguson, training first-aiders in Ferguson and Clayton, and pulling shifts as a medic dispatch operator. This study is built on close analysis of medics' internal documents, and on interviews with medics and movement leaders. It is deeply informed by my experiences and observations in the Ferguson movement and informal conversations with others who participated in the movement. The documents I collected from the health support mobilization represented the experiences of 27 medics. From these documents, I tried to develop a comprehensive picture of medic practices and their concept of the political. Another medic and I collaboratively line-by-line coded the documents. Together with advisors who were accountable members of the organized group of medics that came out of the Ferguson movement, we generated interview questions from our initial analysis.

Medics local to the St. Louis area assembled a purposive sample of people involved in the health mobilization who might be able to answer our questions, and invited those people to participate in this study. I used written surveys to gather demographic information from interviewees, then conducted five recorded focus groups in April and May 2015, in which a total of eight people participated.

In the focus groups we co-investigated why people joined the voluntary health corps of the Ferguson movement, how medics in this corps built relationships and networks of support, what precisely medics did, and how medic practices advanced or retarded the political power that was growing there. I transcribed and analyzed the focus group recordings. I presented on my analysis to medics and activists who were not focus-group participants, and noted their feedback.

In this paper, I show how medics intervened in the militarized Ferguson crisis and how participants conceived of the process of becoming politically powerful beings. From medic practices, participant concepts of the political, and political theory, I suggest a conceptual model of how political power grew in the Ferguson movement. Finally, I consider the role medic practices may have played in people's politicization. This paper will provide theoretical and practical guidance to medics and others who want to unseat entrenched necropolitics.

## **First Distinction: Nursing, Medicking, Ministering**

Rev. Donna Smith-Pupillo is white and local to St. Louis. During the first four months of unrest after Officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown, Donna mobilized people and provided care through organizations including Deaconess Community Nurse Ministries, Gateway Region Action Medics (GRAM), and Metropolitan Congregations United. Donna's multiple affiliations illustrate the many "hats" worn by most committed participants in the Ferguson rebellion. Her affiliations also suggest a distinction that situates the rest of this study.

Donna is a practicing registered nurse. She practiced nursing in her work with Deaconess and GRAM. In the course of the Ferguson movement, Donna was also trained as a "street medic" protest first-aider by medics from Chicago Action Medical and Rosehip Medic Collective. She practices these competencies in her work with GRAM. Finally, Donna's work with a clergy formation, Deaconess, and GRAM reflected her pastoral counseling competencies and her stature as an ordained minister.

In this study, I was only able to begin to answer the question "What did *medics* do?" I had to leave aside what nurses and ministers did in the Ferguson movement. There was plenty of crossover. Donna and another ordained minister are members of GRAM, and many street medics were also nurses or nursing students. However, Donna compartmentalized her roles, and I intend to follow her lead.

When overviewing her movement work in a focus group, Donna first described her nursing work. It was based on prior relationships, focused on the well-being of senior citizens, and assumed the forms of home visits and drop-in centers.

[I'm] a nurse and... I run a nonprofit that's all nurses. We do all low-income [care] in Ferguson already [that is, before Officer Wilson killed Michael Brown]. We worked [for] two weeks after the [uprising began]. We were on the ground making sure that seniors who were afraid and weren't able to get out—weren't able to get cared for—that they were being seen, that they were getting their medicine. We were visiting them in their homes...

We did a drop-in center where we worked four days in a row. People came from anywhere from 5:30 in the morning until 5:30 at night. Did screenings; care. Every day sent two people to the hospital, including a five-year-old. Did that kind of drop-in center three times... It was at the Delwood [Recreation] Center [and] at different locations.

Next, Donna overviewed what she did as a street medic; practices that united her with other medics in the Ferguson movement whose experiences I share, whose documents I collected and read, and who shared their analysis and stories with me in the course of this study. Donna's street medic service—in contrast to her nursing work—was based on new relationships made through participation in the rebellion. Her street medic care focused on protester well-being, and assumed the forms of health education, tactical first aid, and giving refuge.

With the medic piece... I did do some street work... I worked at the sanctuary at Greater Grace... helped get GRAM together... [and] helped them do the trainings...

Trainings [were] predominantly teaching folks how to stay safe in actions, what to do with teargas and chemical weapons, pepperspray. It's tailored to how long you have with the group to teach them. Some want you to talk for fifteen minutes, and some want 20 or 30.

In actions, you spend a lot of time walking, a lot of time surveying the scene, making sure everybody's okay. If a chemical weapon is used, making sure you get their eyes flushed out... It's a lot of time walking. And standing. And talking. And listening.

In the sanctuary space[s]... I spent most of my time listening to people. Taking care of folks coming back after chemical stuff. Burns, had a lot of burns. High blood pressure... But it was a lot of listening, because they were coming back very vulnerable and traumatized from what they had experienced, wanting to talk about it.

Donna's description matches my own analysis of the internal documents and my own experience. Practices described by other medics fit well in Donna's

categorization. For example, Andrea Schmidt (a local white nurse and medic) and four other medics described individual and population-level responses to the overwhelming heat of the August uprising in Ferguson. Interventions to fend off the demoralization and coercion of protesters by weather fit tidily into “making sure everybody’s okay” at actions.

Andrea offered a taxonomy only slightly different from Donna’s, that emphasized how medic mobilizing and caregiving practices accommodated a range of abilities and personalities.

One woman... a little older... maybe wouldn’t have been able to physically run. She’s a veteran healthcare worker, so she ended up [in a sanctuary space] treating a lot of people who needed to get out of the immediate area because it was dangerous...

People on the ground had to be more physically fit... There was a lot of running. You’ve got to carry a backpack all the time. The proximity to what was going on was important because it’s not always an option to get out of the area [with a hurt person]...

Then we had people... doing dispatch [from remote locations]..., helping us to understand where we would best be utilized... [and acting on] a vested interest in [our]... safety...

The really big slice would [be]... just being available... Talking with people and building relationships.

Andrea’s construction “just being available” recurs in themes present in every focus group, and strikingly early in the document chain, in transcripts of early post-action medic debriefs. “Being available” is repeated as dependability, consistency, commitment, family, familiarity, and “being helpful.” The striking frequency of this theme is important to hold up—along with the other medic practices—against the affective and relational field from which it emerged.

## The Affective and Relational Field

Public political life is destroyed, made into a desert, by “flight... from the world into the self” (Hannah Arendt)<sup>3</sup>

### Gualaman

The first four months of the Ferguson rebellion were marked by extraordinary tension. While protests rarely spread beyond dozen-block areas, Gualaman (pseud.), a street medic, nursing student, and brown resident of St. Louis,

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<sup>3</sup>*The Human Condition*, p.6.

generalized the tension. Far from terrifying scenes like the one that opened this paper, the whole St. Louis area ached with tension. The tension divided people who trusted police and people who did not trust police, people who wanted Black power and people who feared or hated blackness, people who wanted the protests to spread and people who wanted a return to normal.

The whole city was on edge, people were buying guns like crazy (so said the sensationalist news sources). We were all waiting to know if [Officer] Darren Wilson would be indicted. . . . You're talking about an entire city that was hanging on by a thread of sanity. There were tensions everywhere: work, university, on the bus, in the grocery store. We all felt it.

Gualaman placed street medic practices against the affective field she described. Being with medics felt better than being elsewhere. "The difference I suppose with the medics were that we were all real willing to be open about [the tension]." She stated the tension as specifically racial in describing white medics' response: "The white medics. . . were very conscious about not taking up all the space."

How medics affiliated with one another against this tension illustrates the relational field in which their practices were situated. Donna's work in the movement began from her pre-existing relationships with social service agencies and scared senior citizens in Ferguson, as she described above. Gualaman and Andrea had no pre-existing relationships in Ferguson.

Gualaman saw Mike Brown's death as "one more of too many unjust killings of brown people by police. When I heard there was unrest, I went to see it with my own eyes." She rode the bus out of a south St. Louis that "didn't see anything that we saw firsthand; didn't see the organizing, the beautiful community forming." Once she arrived in Ferguson, she was immediately drawn into the shared experience of the uprising: the "powerful conversations," the lines of police in riot gear, the gas, the loudspeakers, and the knowledge that she was outside the law, that police weren't there to protect her, but to protect the status quo *from* her.

She was in nursing school. She nursed the new friends she met.

In the first ten days after the death of Mike Brown, the police presence escalated day by day, so did their gear. The teargas was terrible. A lot of folks out there had asthma, so the effect on their lungs were very frightening. I knew that I could use my skills that I'd learned in assessment to help. I saw that as my role. I brought milk for the gas, water and fruit in the [hot] daytime to prevent dehydration.

Hands Up United began to offer daily orientation sessions at Greater St. Mark church on the edge of Ferguson. Street medics from New York, Philly, Chicago,

and Missouri participated in the orientations by teaching ten or fifteen-minute protester health and safety lessons. Gualaman attended either one of these trainings, or one of the mass meetings organized by the same coalition. After affiliating with her new comrades in the street, Gualaman also affiliated with the street medics, because they shared her service orientation and political commitments against the intense affective background.

Once I found out that the medics saw too that the police were a dangerous threat to the safety of the citizens, I joined. . . . I met the medics in a meeting for nonviolent action planning and chatted for a while on their role in the protests: it was clear to me that the role of a street medic was in total support of the movement. They were not apolitical. They absolutely supported the protesters and wanted to help them medically, physically, and psychologically.

## Andrea

Andrea described her experience in very practical language. The affective field from the perspective of her interview is a series of little accomplishments against a background of fear and hope.

In the beginning. . . I don't think we did a great job of introducing who we were and why we were there. . . . [Then] we built relationships pretty quick with people. I think people trusted us pretty quickly. . . . In August, we walked around and talked to people. Especially when there was the closed, approved assembly area. . . we'd see people sitting there at all times. . . . We brought food, we brought ice. It was a really hot day and I brought a bunch of popsicles. . . . [During marches] we walked with people and we were part of the group, but we weren't leading chants.

A lot of things have happened around me that scared me, that put me in danger, and everyone else around me as well. I just kept showing up because it was important. . . . Violence is still happening around us. We have to keep pushing to change the status quo. . . if we don't want to keep adding to the list of people who have been murdered by the police. . . . There's no reason you should have an automatic weapon pointed at children, or shooting teargas into people's homes. I think because we had cameras there. . . there's only so much they can do to. . . explain away that.

Andrea affiliated with the medics through her best friend. Her best friend was past president of the St. Louis chapter of the leftist National Lawyers Guild (NLG), a group that takes on a wide variety of political support and defense projects, including legal observing (monitoring police behavior at political

demonstrations) and mass legal defense when hundreds of political dissidents are arrested by police sweeps. Street medics in Chicago have a very close relationship with NLG legal observers, because people injured by police often want both expert testimony for lawsuits and care for their injuries.

When Chicago street medics deployed in Ferguson in August, they initially stayed with NLG members, including Andrea's best friend. Andrea was in nursing school.

I wanted to get involved. . . but I didn't know what to do. I wanted to . . . support people that were fighting for change in our political system. [Through my best friend]. . . I got hooked up with a street medic. Because of my healthcare background, it [street medicking] made sense to me.

She drove to Ferguson, and called me from the road, because I was screening and orienting people who wanted to volunteer with street medics at that time. Then I called a street medic in Ferguson and told him to expect Andrea at the orientation at Greater St. Marks that night.

## **Mama Cat**

Mama Cat is an African-American chef and great-grandmother local to Ferguson. She fed the movement during the four months I studied, and she worked closely with the street medics. In contrast to the tensions Gualaman described as she crossed St. Louis by bus, Mama Cat described the affective and moral field from a Ferguson perspective.

On August 9th, most people like me was looking at TV. We saw the young man lying in the middle of the street that was killed by a police officer. As time went on, we in shock about this situation, right? And after shock comes anger. So with anger you have the protests, that anger just hanging on and our frustration. . . at the judicial process slowly crawling. . . .

This is a lot of hurt, mistrust, anger, all of this balled up, and it made for a firey doodoo storm. Meanwhile you are taunting us, telling us that we're nothing, [that] we have nothing to say.

Mama Cat evokes an isolated multitude driven into action as a necessary outlet for intense emotion, becoming an "us" through the shared experience of being taunted for their protest. Her narrative dwells on indignity, not on militarization. After becoming an "us," the multitude gets willpower and good sense.

We see what you did. You decided that he could kill and not be accountable. We didn't even get to go to court. . . . We realize at this point that we can do nothing about what you did. What we can do is change the face of the political system. When we went to the polls on April 7th, we made some changes. Now we have a little more of a voice than we had before. . . .

We could keep standing there, yelling at bricks. We could still keep allowing [officers] to mishandle us, or we can change things.

When she saw the killing on TV, Mama Cat felt shock and then anger, and she got up and joined neighbors she did not yet know in the street. Over the months that followed, she brought snacks and drinks, cooked Sunday dinners, and became a leading voice of the movement as well as a godmother to her new family.

Before August 9th, I promise you, I did not know not one person that I [now] call my family. . . . This, this is my family. We've been through so much in nine months—more in nine months than a lot of people go through in a lifetime.

Mama Cat met the medics “on the front line.” Street medic Marta walked up to her and asked, “Are you Mama Cat?” Mama Cat said, “I am.” Marta said, “Ohh, so nice to meet you!” and hugged her. Mama Cat said to me, “You cannot, like, deny the realness right there!”

Over time the medics worked together with her to care for protesters in the streets and to organize wellness events. Andrea is dependably available to help Mama Cat prepare food for the repasts that follow the funerals of young people in the north suburbs of St. Louis. “I feel like they are my kids,” Mama Cat said about the street medics.

This revolution started because they killed a young African American. Since then they killed eight more [in St. Louis]. Most of GRAM is caucasian, but they came with their whole hearts, and they come with this serious medical power and medical knowledge. . . . One of them put a picture on facebook, “Here I am at Mama Cat's table!” Other medics wrote, “We all want to sit at Mama Cat's table.” I only wish my table was big enough.

## Internal Conflict

Documents and focus group participants consistently described a total field of intense affect against which the whole field of new relationships grew. The new

relationships inevitably generated conflict. Despite intergroup conflict in the wider Ferguson movement, medic conflict was minimal and generally resolved well. Medics were numerically a small part of the movement; there were rarely more than a dozen even in crowds of hundreds. Maybe more medics would have generated more conflict, or maybe medics had good conflict navigation strategies. Questions like these go beyond the focus of this paper. It is within the purview of this paper to collect and organize the practices medics used to navigate conflict.

Donna and Gualaman both said some medics initially lacked understanding of what it means to be low-income. For example, it took time for medics to build accessible training locations and rides into all of their planning. As late as the November aftermath of the grand jury decision not to indict Officer Wilson, new people joined the medics and faced cross-class and cross-racial difficulties. Two white medics and a black movement leader mentioned a situation where a medical volunteer at a sanctuary space had conflict with someone who sought refuge there. One medic said that the conflict was because the volunteer was new to the movement and “didn’t have a street experience.” The movement leader more explicitly named class and racial difference.

It was about people having misunderstandings between their own experiences with police and the use of language. . . . A medic was at a safe space and was talking to someone whose language about what was happening in Ferguson disturbed the medic. . . . The medic felt uncomfortable dealing with the person. . . . It had less to do with the function of the medics as it had to do with. . . white people have different experiences than black people; poor people have different experiences than people with means; age.

Scott Mechanic, a white street medic and nurse from Chicago Action Medical, described some of the organizational churn he witnessed, and how medics worked closely with some but not all of the emergent organizations. He began with a frame of the general tensions around race and outsiders.

There’s always going to be tension when outsiders are coming into a local city, for a million super-valid reasons. There’s going to be tension when white people are becoming involved in a movement that’s mostly led by black folks, and that’s explicitly addressing issues of race and policing and power in this country.

What he called tension played itself out with medics in pretty innocuous ways—not arguments, gun-buying, or fights. Just voluntary association, which is a pretty basic anarchist principle, and not difficult in general for street medics.

SCOTT: There were groups that just weren’t interested in working with the medics in general.

DONNA: Yeah, that is true.

SCOTT: There was never, like, any *problem*, or like, big issue. . . . When Hands Up United stopped being a coalition group and became its own group after Ferguson October, they were. . . just. . . doing something different, and [weren't]. . . interested in working with us. Teff Po and his crew, same thing. . . .

I will also say, I don't think it's a problem that people don't want to work with street medics. We did some good work with the groups we supported and worked more closely with, but I think that the groups that weren't really interested in working with us were like, totally fine without working with the medics—and did good work also!

Scott described a medic training that happened at the same time as “a meeting for arrestees who had gotten bailed out through the bail fund.” The medic training was “sexier,” so “more people went to [it], even though it may not have been as important.” I asked Scott why the arrestee meeting was important.

Having a group of arrestees together is pretty important. Especially if they're not people who have been part of movements before. It's just a shame that wasn't as successful as it could have been.

Gualaman described Scott, though not by name, as a location of one of the conflicts that occurred against the field of relationships emerging within the Ferguson movement.

The out-of-town medics were more experienced in medicking. Only one St. Louis medic [Marta] of the many had been a part of a medic collective before. . . . Outside medics—non St. Louisians—[like Scott] took the reins which made it difficult when they were gone!

After a pause, Gualaman reconsidered her criticism, and like many other medics did when discussing conflict, softened it to reaffirm solidarity.

I'd say, though, that we picked ourselves up well, found our footing. . . . Looking back, I'm so glad the out-of-town medics were there. . . . They gave us the tools of how to organize that we still use today.

Medic narratives of negotiating conflict deserve closer analysis than I give them in this paper. I am searching only for broad patterns and practices: What did medics do? What did “becoming political” mean in the Ferguson movement? How did *what medics did* help or hinder people *becoming political*? In these first four sections, I sketched out what I found of what medics did. Now I turn to the political.

# Becoming Political

## The Status Quo

Since the August uprising in Ferguson, many columns of ink chronicled the movement's material interests and political desires. The uprising was about the indignity of Michael Brown's killing. It was about a once solidly union working class municipality in which the car factories had all closed and the few union jobs left, those of police, were monopolized by whites who lived in other municipalities. The uprising was about the city's budget, which handed out tax exemptions and grants to the white business district and the Fortune 500 company's corporate headquarters while the municipality ran a deficit, gutted public schools, and let the black business district collapse. It was about how the city aimed to balance its budget on traffic and parking fines extorted from its black population, like an Old Testament pharaoh ordering bricks without straw. It was about the mass dispossession of Ferguson's black homeowners and tenants by subprime foreclosures; the tenants' security deposits and the homeowners' downpayments permanently disappearing into the pockets of people wealthier, and usually whiter, than the victims, people who also got bailed out with the robbery victims' tax money.

The status quo in the north suburbs of St. Louis had been a long, and mostly one-sided, race war. White residents had long been shamelessly robbing black residents blind. Protected by the apparatus of the law, they met any resistance—like refusing to pay a fine or refusing to move out of a foreclosed house—with police action, jail time, further loss of property, and sometimes loss of life. White and black residents of greater St. Louis may not have known all the recent details well, but much of the history of the race war was well-known—a history of sundown towns where blacks could work but not live, customary segregation of education, housing, employment, public benefits, and public accommodations, mass dispossessions including the construction and demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects and the terrorist burning of the entire black community of East St. Louis by the thugs of real-estate politicians, all the way back to the ultraviolent “border wars” guerrilla campaigns on the Western Front of the Civil War.

Knowledge of the parts of this long war that were remembered in black people's personal and family histories in Ferguson generally did not motivate action before the August uprising. Mama Cat said it took the uprising to waken the “sleeping giant.”

Before. . . , [people] wouldn't have gotten involved in the political process. . . . Now, post-Michael Brown—since August ninth, let me put it like that—they are seeing that if you get involved in the political process, you can change some things. If you go to the polls you can change some things. If you lobby the legislature you can

change some things. . . . Here in St. Louis, a lot of African-American people didn't think they had *any* kind of say, so they just sat back and let things be.

Donna discussed the status quo as it played out for whites in the western suburbs of St. Louis. In the racial order that prevailed before the August uprising, whites with money, power, knowledge, and connections could easily be thoughtlessly greedy thieves.

When we treat people with no respect. . . , when we. . . [make people] targets and pawns and we don't respect them, then we don't have to pass Medicaid here. We don't have to fund their schools. We don't have to worry about where the jobs are. We don't have to worry about the infrastructure of transportation, so they're locked in neighborhoods.

The politics here going back years politicized that black people are bad and black lives don't matter. They couldn't buy, here, houses and it politicizes them. It puts them as a pawn in the political system. One that they don't necessarily have to pay any attention to here at all.

While it may have obtained a particularly oppressive form in Ferguson, I'm far from the first to point out how oppressively normal this status quo race war is in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Ferguson is not special for its pre-August ninth status quo, but for its rebellion in which the meek became powerful, articulate, organized, and influential. In order to discover if medics helped or hindered this process, I have to look close at how this happened.

## **The Concept of the Political**

The first internal street medic document from the Ferguson movement to address the concept of the political in depth is Scott Mechanic's report-back from the Ferguson October mobilization. Scott described "the rise of a generation of new leaders, mostly all made up of Ferguson and St. Louis youth," and discussed the tensions between these youth and older people. The youth organized into groups which exerted power and influence within the protest movement, though not yet over municipal or state government.

The leadership and direction of almost all the action on the streets has been from these youth, with established organizations. . . struggling to catch up and join in. Tensions between the generations were most dramatic when young voices took over the stage. . . at Schaefer Arena. . . . The organizing is more horizontal than even anarchist street medics are used to.

Most focus group participants described “the political” as the process by which tensions between groups are eased. Michael McPhearson, a local black organizer who co-chaired the Don’t Shoot coalition, expressed it more directly than other focus group participants.

When I say political it is a matter of there being . . . conflict between groups. That conflict manifests itself in the political level, meaning through how resources are controlled and accessed, how the government treats one group versus another, and how each one of these groups has control of the government apparatus [and] where resources are allocated. . . . When I think about political, I’m thinking about the tensions between groups and their struggles to ease those tensions.

Michael held that politics is also played out beyond the notice of government, in interpersonal division of power and resources.

Organizing isn’t necessarily what [politics] is about. If you have three people in a room, there’s probably some politics being played out in some way between the three people—and there’s no organizing necessarily there.

Mama Cat saw things differently. She firmly identified interpersonal dynamics with family. Family “corrects” family when it is wrong.

In Ferguson. . . we are one big dysfunctional family. Every once in a while you may have a situation where somebody don’t get along with somebody, or somebody approach somebody in a way they shouldn’t, so they have to be corrected.

In contrast to family’s “correction,” Mama Cat identifies politics with government and intergroup negotiation. Political power “shakes hands with” political power.

We call it being political, working with the system. The system is the political process. When we work with the system, we, in turn, become political. That’s what you got to do to get something to change. We have to reach out a hand across the table to the people that’s in power. When we reach our hand and we hold their hand, we make them understand that the power of the people is greater than the people in power. That’s what we do, and we’ve become politicized.

## Persuasion and Coercion

A crucial distinction in street medic practice, dating back long before the Ferguson uprising, is the distinction between persuasion and coercion. Scott Mechanic and Marta and I have taught this distinction to all of our students, as it was first taught to me in 2001, Scott in 2003, and Marta in 2011. Responsible to anarchist and feminist conceptions of the political, street medics are duty-bound to never force care on a patient. On this point, street medic ethics go far beyond the legal requirements of informed consent.

In circumstances where an injured or ill person refuses street medic care, as for example, people with head injuries or people hopped-up on adrenalin are wont to do, we use our powers of persuasion. We stay with the person to let the adrenalin wear off, explain our concerns to the injured person or her friends, and watch for drops in the person's level of responsiveness. We act as the person's mirror: "Your head is bleeding, and I'm concerned about you. You were hit very hard, and have been acting different since you got up."

Street medics who earn their bread on ambulances or in hospitals are generally critical of how frequently they are compelled to coerce patients at work. In our role as street medics, we are free to use persuasion instead, to shake our patients' hands, as Mama Cat might say.

It is difficult to build a political theory from a handful of one-hour focus groups, so I searched extant political theory for systematically-developed concepts that strengthened arguments made about the political in the focus groups. In Hannah Arendt's lectures from the 1950s collected in *The Promise of Politics* I found this crucial distinction between persuasion and coercion.

Arendt suggested that politics, in the classical Athenian sense of politics, could only be practiced between people who were equal before the law and equally welcome to speak. In the Athenian agora, the place where public discourse was conducted, politics happened between equal men who used speech and acts to persuade each other. Foreigners, women, slaves, and youths were not their political equals. Consisting as it did of subordinates, the household was governed like livestock through coercion.

J.R. (pseud.), a white Emergency Medical Technician and street medic local to St. Louis, referenced Arendt's ideas without saying her name when J.R. talked about making black deaths at police hands "political" (that is, deaths of human beings), not merely "personal" (that is, the deaths of things within the household).

Look at politics and polity, using the roots of those words and how we govern ourselves. . . . We have to move these conversations, not just conversations, these needs, these are literally life and death needs, from the personal to the larger political. As long as it stays personal,

nothing's going to change. It's one thing, and it's one thing, and it isn't an epidemic. . . .

It moves from the personal to the more political and more politicized. . . when some people change their minds over things. . . . When. . . Tamir Rice comes up and people go, "Wait a second, you can do something like that to a twelve-year-old and not have anything happen to you?"

. . . I've talked to people who. . . saw it. . . with Eric Garner. . . . The killing was on camera and nothing happened. They went, "Oh, I gotta rethink this." People have. . . changed their minds. . . here in St. Louis because of what happened with Eric Garner and the no indictment there.

J.R.'s faith in politics and the power of persuasion was consistent with positions taken in all the focus groups. The general commitment to nonviolent direct action in the Ferguson movement was based less in moral opposition to hurting enemies than in faith in the power of politics. The crucial distinction made by Arendt depends on the fact that opponents can be persuaded, that those in the polity, those in the agora, can willingly change their minds. Persuasion, Arendt insisted, is the technique of politics. Coercion is the technique of war.

## War

Marx, of course, conceived of feudalism and capitalism as war between classes. Poststructuralists including Foucault and Deleuze broadened class war into civil war as they tried to understand the events in Paris of 1968. Class wars, race wars, wars between groups that share no obvious relations of production or identity but have other conflicts of interest; the world is full of wars that often don't involve weapons but sometimes do. War also involves fines, harassment, eviction, imprisonment, deportation, training and support, propaganda, and other less-lethal war techniques.

Sometimes these war techniques are called insurgency or counterinsurgency. They are both older and more widespread than professional armies killing each other on battlefields or besieging walled cities. By reframing the political according to its technique, I can argue that the death of Michael Brown and the militarized response to the August uprising were intensifications of a long-running war. In Ferguson politics broke out in the midst of that war.

During my short time in Ferguson, I did not see politics played out between police and protesters in the streets. There was no break in the coercive presence of police to allow space for politics. Indeed, the officers in the street were themselves coerced through their command chain. They were not empowered to have opinions, so it would not have been of much use to persuade them to adopt new ones. What played out between police and protesters was less-lethal war.

Michael McPhearson stressed the police role as soldiers in a war waged against people like Michael Brown, then against participants in the uprising and protesters.

The police's reaction to the Canfield community,<sup>4</sup> not just the killing, but the reaction; if you look at the dynamics, the tensions in the community were there. Over the years of police actions, but also the systemic oppression of the court system, and then even further, lack of educational opportunities, creat[ed] a class of people who don't have any way to move forward or seek a future for themselves.

The police are a guard at the gate, so to speak, between the groups that have the resources, or at least see themselves [as having the resources]. Some of the people don't have any more resources than the poor black people, but unfortunately, many, many, many poor white people want to affiliate themselves socially, and in their minds, economically with people with means. The police play that enforcer role, even [though]. . . they're working class people who actually have more in common with the poor group than the ruling class.

In the midst of this less-lethal war, people perpetually and passionately orated in the streets, in mass meetings, in jail, and across twitter, facebook, instagram, snapchat, and sms, persuading each other to change their opinions. In the new agora they had wrought, youth argued about everything from whether to back up from police lines or sit down in the street to more consequential questions like whether to assemble an armed fighting force, and how to stop police from plundering black residents with traffic and parking fines that furnished 1/5th of the municipality's budget.

Against the coercive, warlike status quo in the north suburbs of St. Louis, people became political. Protesters largely disavowed coercive practices in favor of the persuasive practices that constitute politics. In the space they held the status quo was interrupted, so war could not be waged through the laws and norms within which it was conventionally waged. Instead war became naked, visible, and shocking. It produced images that evoked intense affective needs in witnesses. The affective resonance of the crisis drove witnesses out of passivity into participation in bodies that became political and powerful.

The Ferguson movement gained power rivaling that of police unions and teacher's unions. It became powerful enough to change laws, policies, norms, and elected representatives. How did the movement's power grow? How did it recruit its numbers and build trust and solidarity between them? Those questions are examined in the next section.

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<sup>4</sup>Canfield Green was the apartment complex where Michael Brown was killed.

## Becoming Powerful

MICHAEL: The political fractures or tensions are there already. What protest does is surfaces them. . . . But the outcome. . . depends on many factors. . . . Movements get crushed too.

J.R.: . . . These continued protests and street actions and the movement that has not subsided. . . brings it to a place where it has to be dealt with. Now whether it's dealt with in ways that we on this side want it to be dealt with have yet to be seen.

## Political Power

The Ferguson movement sought to prevent a killer cop from escaping the law. In the process, it created an emergency and its participants found themselves excluded from the law. First, informally as public assembly and limited property destruction were met with openly militarized policing—armored vehicles, automatic rifles, body armor, and grenade launchers. Then Missouri governor Jay Nixon formally suspended the law when he declared a state of emergency in order to call up the national guard.

The people who affiliated against the status quo through the Ferguson movement established their power in this space of legal exclusion. All the focus groups addressed the relationship between legal exclusion and political power. Scott anchored the Ferguson agenda's power in the August uprising and the youth groups that came out of it.

In Missouri you can already point to a number of changes that have taken place, mostly within the government, that will directly benefit people [who protested]. Including the recent win they had around their court reform legislation.<sup>5</sup> They're going to get an independent police review board. Changes in county governance. Those are some pretty big and tangible wins. And there's been others and there will be more.

I don't think any of that would happen without the protest movement. Without the first days of riots that happened and without the more organized nonviolent protest movement that happened. . . . Both those things needed to happen for those changes to occur.

Mama Cat also rooted the movement's political power in the August uprising, even as she said that power was exercised in voting booths, the State House, and funding for community programs.

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<sup>5</sup>The court reform legislation addressed the municipal funding-stream of racially discriminatory traffic fines.

If we keep going, we'll keep on being able to make changes. April 7th showed us our power, you see? So we went up to the legislature with Pastor Pierson, who's [now] also Representative Pierson, to help support a bill that he put forward about community policing.<sup>6</sup> We got change.

We just formed a coalition called Generations of Change, where we are working on empowering our own community. . . . You have some of these young girls out here; before this movement they didn't have a direction. This one young lady Ebony has a program she started. They thought Ebony was going to be locked up and everything else. Ebony has a lot of young girls in her program, called Diamonds in the Rough, young girls that been through some things like she been through. . . . That's change. . . .

We got the Community Civilian Oversight Board in St. Louis now. . . . This is what's angering them, because they thought we was going to keep on yelling at bricks. We're not doing that. But if we have to turn up, we will.

How the Ferguson movement gained the power to persuade not only each other, but also the apparatus of government, can be clarified by Arendt's two genealogies of the polis. In her first genealogy, she described the conflict within the philosopher himself that Socrates so brilliantly exposed with his public questioning. This conflict developed into conflicts between philosophers, conflict like that I observed in the streets of Ferguson: How ought we to live? How ought we to be governed? Philosophical conflict erupted into the public at large, challenging tradition, causing upheaval, and changing the "common sense" of right and wrong. Philosophy became politics as it became a means by which to guide human affairs. This first genealogy of politics obscures the role of material interests in human affairs, emphasizing as it does the power of desiring and persuasion.

Arendt's second genealogy of the political was more materialist. She rooted the agora in collective decision-making by war parties as described in Homer's *Iliad*. Warriors and adventurers, returned home, wanted to continue the collective self-governance they were accustomed to in their camps and on their ships. Their way of life was threatened by bandits and invaders from without and by the need to labor for their food and comfort from within. They could no longer sustain themselves by raiding, so they walled their cities to prevent coercion by foreigners and subjugated their households to prevent coercion by labor or hunger. Then they could spend their days pleasantly debating their affairs in the public square, equal before the law and equally able to speak.

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<sup>6</sup>HB602: "This bill requires that when a law enforcement officer uses deadly force against an unarmed individual, who is 20 feet or more from the officer, therefore posing no immediate danger to the officer, the officer must be immediately suspended and removed from duty, without pay, until a full investigation of the incident has been completed."

In both of Arendt's genealogies, political power grew in a space outside the law before being exercised within it.

### **Trust: How Power Grows Outside Law**

Suspension of the rule of law does not directly cause political power to grow. In fact, a body of recent political theory examines how exclusion from legal protection, civil society, and history results in powerlessness.<sup>7</sup> This body of theory is useful for understanding how Michael Brown died outside the law.

The state does not dispute that Officer Darren Wilson shot Brown and left his dead body in the street, but it maintained that the killing was not a criminal act. The grand jury agreed that Brown's death was the end of a non-human biological life. It was as if it was the affair of an ancient Athenian household and Brown was merely property, or if the killing happened outside the walls of the city and Brown was a barbarian.

In pursuit, police gain the sovereign power to suspend law. In this state Officer Wilson was able to commit a non-criminal killing. Brown's power did not grow outside the law. Alone as he was, his line of flight did not join up with other lines. It became a line of death.

The image of Brown's dead body in the noonday sun was shocking and infuriating, as Mama Cat explained above. It made things real clear, and the crisis recruited people.

MAMA CAT: I think the tragedy of the situation allowed for us to forget that we didn't know each other before August 9th. You know, we're on the same side, we stand side-by-side, and I think that makes a big difference.

The tendency of crisis to organize people isn't sufficient, however, to explain the movement's power. In seeking to understand how Michael Brown's power was destroyed outside the law while the movement's power grew outside the law, I turned to a revision to the Greek philosophical tradition that explicitly examined political and military power outside the law.

The great fourteenth-century jurist and scholar Ibn Khaldun theorized a politics constituted within and outside of laws. He argued that the basic political entity was not the walled city bound by law and containing its citadel, mosque, marketplace, and households. Prior to and outside the city walls, on the steppes and in the desert ranged people bound into clans by trust. The clans were further bound into tribes by trust.

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<sup>7</sup>See Agamben's *Homo Sacer* books, Wilderson's "Gramsci's Black Marx," and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* and *Lose Your Mother*.

My word trust is a translation of Ibn Khaldun's neologism 'asabiyah. Mohamed Talbi defined 'asabiyah as "at one and the same time the cohesive force of the group, the conscience that it has of its own specificity and collective aspirations, and the tension that animates and impels it ineluctably to seek power through conquest." In Ibn Khaldun's political theory, law corroded trust.

If it serves your people, law gains a monopoly of your trust. A practical example is calling police on your loud neighbor instead of persuading them to shut up, accepting their autonomy, or taking up weapons in war against them. If law does not serve your people but abuses you, its tyranny breaks social bonds and causes generalized fear and mistrust.

Ibn Khaldun maintained that political power grows outside the law as people with shared material interests, desires, and experiences grow in numbers and trust. This is the process I documented above in the Affective and Relational Field section. Donna, Gualaman, Andrea, Mama Cat, and thousands of others fled into a lawless place, like Michael Brown fled. Unlike Michael Brown, their lines converged. In the lawless place where they met, they had to depend on each other. Their lines of flight constituted a new power, a power that chose to take a persuasive form.

Once Ibn Khaldun's desert or steppe nomads built their trust and numbers into sufficient power, they set upon the city weakened by law and occupied the citadel, or they walled their tribe into a new city of bricks and laws. People seek stability and comfort, Ibn Khaldun argued. Once bound in cities, law, safety, stability, and security began their corrosive work on the former nomads' social bonds.

Even though power may be constituted differently in the new city, trust is corroded in the same old ways, by both comfort and abuse. In the St. Louis area many of the most influential protesters found themselves newly abused in law-bound places beyond the protest.

GUALAMAN: For many here in St. Louis the police are... more brutal than before on a day-to-day basis. It's no secret that many community organizers and protesters who played major roles in the movement have been targeted and face major jailtime.

Unlike the order that prevailed in Ibn Khaldun's time, today all steppes and deserts are under someone's jurisdiction. Today emergency provides a rare respite from law in which trust can grow. Michael McPhearson's "What protest does is surfaces [already-existing fractures or tensions]," and Mama Cat's "If we have to turn up, we will," are reminders that people can leave the city of laws to regroup.

Outside law is the only place street medics operate. J.R. described how EMTs are trained that protests occur outside the law, in "unsecure" space where street medics operate but emergency medical services (EMS) may not.

Part of the training that we get as EMTs is if the scene is not secure, you don't go into it. . . . In the unsecured part of these protests, there was no actual danger if EMS needed to come in and help somebody because they fell in a hole and broke their leg or they were having an asthma attack. . . . They're told not to go and not to help until the scene is secure—which is gonna then involve. . . a militarized presence going in and surrounding them.

“Securing the scene” is how operations like the one at the beginning of this paper are described in police, fire, and EMS circles. The crowd pleaded, “Help this woman!” The police responded by securing the scene.

In Ferguson during emergency, in unsecured space, already-existing political relationships were strengthened, affinities and hostilities became naked and undeniable, and boundaries and connections were tested. The length of the emergency was proportional to the trust and numbers that grew within it.

## Did Medic Practices Build Political Power?

Arendt distinguished three “categories in which political action can be understood. Its *meaning* lasts only as long as the action lasts, though it can be reproduced by poets and sometimes by judges; its *end* can be known only when the action is over; and its *goals* orient our actions and set the standards by which they can be judged. . . . Human spontaneity, politically speaking, means that we do not know the ends of our actions when we act, and if we did we would *not* be free.” (Jerome Cohn)<sup>8</sup>

In this paper I sketched out categories of medic practices of “medicking,” affiliating, and navigating conflict. I examined the commitment to persuasion that characterizes the political, and the solidarity and numbers that characterize power. All of the truth-claims I make in this paper are summarized in box 1. With medic practices outlined and the practices of political power theorized, I laid a foundation to consider what medic practices are likely to build political power.

This is an exploratory paper, so it deals in conceptualizations, observations, and opinions. Now that my quarry is located and flushed, it is clear I do not have the dataset to evaluate whether medic practices built political power in the Ferguson movement. If that question is answerable, it would require a much wider survey of opinion, or a comparison of situations with medics and situations without medics.

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<sup>8</sup>Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, pp.xxviii–xxix.

Since I am unable to independently establish causality between medic practices and political power, in this section I approach the question of the relationship between medic practices and political power from another angle. Focus group participants evaluated the power of organized, designated medics, not the power of the multitude of practices done by those medics. Following their lead, I look with them at the political impacts of organized medics. In box 2, I summarize my theory of the Ferguson movement's rise to political power. In box 3, I evaluate medic practices by charting practice categories against their intervention in the elements of the theory.

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|------|--|--|
| I.   | People collectively did medical support in the Ferguson movement.  | a) Medics taught preparedness workshops, cared for protesters in the field and places of refuge, organized self-support, "were available."   |
| II.  | Emotional needs drove people together, including medics.   | a) Crisis evoked strong, widespread emotional needs.<br>b) Witnessing shocking images recruited people by spreading the sense of crisis.   |
| III. | Conflict arose in new relationships, including along tensions/faultlines of the crisis (i.e. age, race, local/outsider, income). | a) Medics were honest about tension and affirmed solidarity when conflict arose.   |
| IV.  | The status quo was coercive war. It robbed its losers of collective power over material conditions.                              |  |
| V.   | Becoming politically powerful means building persuasive collective power over material conditions.                               | a) Political power is power that persuades.<br>b) Becoming a collective body happened outside law, in crisis.<br>c) Trust grows outside law, in crisis.<br>d) Trust assembles the collective political body.<br>e) Trust involves desire, material interest, life experiences, and maybe a shared enemy. |

VI.	The Ferguson movement became politically powerful.	a) It changed laws, policies, norms, funding streams, and elected representatives.
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Table 1: Truth-claims made in this paper.

## Evaluating Medics

“Politicization means opening up the mind, awakening the mind, and introducing it to the world. . . . It means. . . the multitude learning that if we stagnate the fault is theirs, and if we progress, they too are responsible; that there is no demiurge, no illustrious man taking responsibility for everything; the demiurge is the people and the magic lies in their hands and their hands alone.” (Frantz Fanon)<sup>9</sup>

Focus group participants said that street medic practices built the numbers, strengthened the trust, and reinforced the antipathy to coercion of the Ferguson movement. Participants said that medics’ political impact depended on their emotional labor, the organized ways that they participated in mobilizations and street action, and the direct care they provided to wounded protesters. Focus group participants said medics’ political impact was limited by the time it took them to build informal cross-racial relationships, and their lack of an independent politics that could withstand demobilization.

### Undermining fear and projecting power

Andrea, Michael, J.R., and Scott argued that visible participation of medics in street actions of the Ferguson movement undermined some of the power of police to scare people out of joining. Some people were scared away despite the presence of medics, said J.R.

The militarizing escalation was an attempt to motivate people to not come and get involved, and I think it worked for some people. I think it especially worked for white people who may have been more willing to ally themselves, but got afraid.

Michael suggested that people who would have gotten involved anyway came out in the weather and teargas sooner because of infrastructure that included medics.

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<sup>9</sup>This translation, from the 1968 Argentinian film *La Hora de los Hornos*, is more evocative than Philcox’s translation on p.138 of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Medics empowered people. Overwhelmingly, medics empowered people who had probably already decided to get involved. . . . As more people saw infrastructure in place, which included medics. . . , jail support was a really important piece for people to say, “I can do this,” [and] legal observers. . . , it. . . [became] a lot easier for people to get involved and stay involved.

Once people were in the streets, J.R. said medics helped them feel safer.

You’re not going to be left here to bleed in the street. Somebody’s going to take care of you.

Andrea said that public knowledge that medics were dependably available and “had [people’s] safety at the forefront,” together with medics’ catch-and-release care, helped protesters protest longer.

By Ferguson October and definitely the night of the non-indictment I feel like we. . . enabled people to feel a little safer. . . . Ultimately we motivated people to stay out, certainly by treating people and allowing them to go back out.

Michael said that training continually offered by medics helped people feel safer, and that activists who feel safer within their trusting groups outside the law “act with more clarity and purpose.”

Andrea, J.R., Gualaman, Donna, and Scott said that medics built numbers by directly recruiting healthcare workers to join the movement.

SCOTT: We were a way for folks that work in the healthcare industry to get involved. [We] created a structure for a lot of people who wouldn’t have otherwise gotten involved in the protests to be involved.

J.R. was one of the healthcare workers the medics recruited. J.R. said that it was difficult imagining what to do in the movement as a white person who was relatively new to the area until Donna invited them to use their EMT skills.

As a white person who. . . had only been here two years last August. . . , it gave me a way to contribute a set of skills [to] the bigger movement. Not to be in charge. . . , just to be supportive of people where they are and to be myself. . . . [My medic role] was a motivating factor in getting out of my comfort zone more than I might have otherwise, and empowering knowing that I could contribute something beyond physical presence.

Michael and Mama Cat said that the visibility of the medics strengthened the movement’s public narrative. Michael said that sympathetic and undecided people noticed the presence of medics.

Having medics. . . helps to develop a narrative that the movement is concerned about people. . . . It makes the movement more accessible to people who don’t know what’s going on.

Mama Cat said medics’ presence was also seen and noted by police and civilian opponents.

Even on the other side of the fence they noticed the medics. You can’t miss them and the work that they do. Their role out there in the street, pretty much, it said. . . one of two [things]. . . . “Well, these are people who take care of their own. They’re not looking for us to take care of them,” because you know they always say we lazy bums, right? “At least they got their own medical.” Or they can say. . . , “Um, wow, they got these people with the medical bags, they got people with green hats [legal observers], they coming for business. Maybe we might want to change the way we do things, perhaps.”

Much of their identity is based on providing individualized direct care, but medics’ projection of calm, safety, and power into space is every bit as important to supporting the growth of political power. Nurses do emotional labor with patients, and the family members of patients, but street medics are the only health workers I know for whom mass emotion work is an essential practice. Police project fear into space. Medics, with their presence, work to project safety and confidence that undermines the coercive power of police.

Politicization	Numbers	Trust or solidarity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality before laws, norms; equal right to speak, be heard.</li> <li>• Commitment to persuasion against coercion.</li> <li>• Respects people’s different desires, material interests, experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruited by affective needs of people in collective crisis.</li> <li>• Sense of crisis depends on witnessing signs of crisis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grew along lines of pursuit/defense of shared wants, material interests, and experiences.</li> <li>• Grew when lines converged outside laws and norms.</li> </ul>

Table 2: Theory of Ferguson movement’s rise to political power.

## Being available

In addition to crowd-wide emotion work, focus group participants said medics built political power by participating in movement work in an organized and accountable way. Unlike the avowedly non-partisan medical aid of nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations, medics picked sides in a conflict. They supported their side vocally, with their dependable presence, and by participating in the ever shifting organized support infrastructure of the movement.

Michael talked about how medics participated in the many trainings and briefings organized by movement groups and coalitions, like the one where Gualaman met the medics.

MICHAEL: When going to an organizer training or a street training or briefing, medics would be part of that process to make sure people understood that there are medics. Medics would give good information about what to do under certain situations out in the field.

Gualaman said that medics cooperated with ad-hoc and established protester formations in the street as well as with other people in support roles.

During Ferguson October, I saw that the medics were working alongside small self-organized affinity groups as well as larger established groups. . . . There was a lot of work with the legal observers. . . , clergy, and de-escalators.

J.R., who attended many hours of coalition group meetings as a GRAM delegate, described how medics were requested and how they shared information within movement support structures.

There would be requests. Like the central hub, like the action council: “There’s something going on.” “Do you need a medic?” There would be medics in attendance at an action council where people are figuring out what is going to be happening when, and who would like a medic, and, “How can we get folks to you?”

There’s medic presence for similar reasons at Don’t Shoot Coalition meetings. Information is going back and forth about what medics are doing, when there was a training, and things like that. And the other way, so that medics know what was happening within other circles.

Mama Cat said the medics were dependable.

We didn't have to call and say, "We need five medics over here." It was just a natural, "Hey, there's an action going on and I need to be there. Here, strap up my [red] cross on my backpack, because I'm going."

In the August uprising, before coalitional infrastructure was built, some medics described anxiety in the post-action debrief. From the beginning they wanted to follow movement leadership, but "leadership," such as it was, was initially extraordinarily diffuse and decentralized, consisting entirely of autonomous action by self-organized youth groups.

Medic anxiety expressed in the debrief indicated a desire directly stated by some participants to not be politically independent. They worked from the beginning to build the power of their new friends, not to build their own power or spread their own message. The medics' message was support, said Mama Cat.

Built trust	Recruited numbers	Promoted politicization
(+) Operated outside law	(+) Strengthened image of crisis	(+) Affirmed trust of protesters
(+) "Available" (committed to collective defense)	(+) Represented promise of safety, support, or solidarity outside law	(+) Openly acknowledged tension and intolerable status quo
(+) Responded to abstract needs evoked by crisis with physical care	(+) Offered sanctuary from police and other dangers	(+) Removed coercive force from bodies (hypothermia, pepperspray)
(+) Translated abstract anarchist and feminist principles into embodied practices	(+) Helped protesters extend reach and duration of crisis	(+) Respected autonomy of others, including opponents
(+) Hostile to coercive force	(+) Publicly supported legitimacy of protesters	(-) Only operate in crisis; demobilized, unable to offer substantial support in lawful order of things
(-) Overly simplistic or dependent politics	(+) Directly recruited health workers	(-) Found it easier to support organized nonviolent direct action than autonomous youth

Table 3: Categories of medic practice that may have strengthened (+) or diminished (-) political power.

## **Undermining coercion**

It can't be overlooked that street medics are healthcare workers and first-aiders. Their role in the movement was to tend to the wounded bodies of protesters. Gualaman described her most common street direct-care practices.

During the vigils and marches. . . , what I personally did most frequently as a medic was 1) aid people who had been sprayed by pepperspray or affected by teargas, 2) help people find a way out, away from the violent spaces, 3) consoling those who were in panic, 4) treating wounds.

Practices of tending directly to wounded bodies had their role in building political power too, as was obliquely discussed by several focus-group participants. Most directly, pepperspray-induced pain and blindness are embodied coercion, police-induced fear is embodied coercion, and denial of free movement is embodied coercion. Gualaman and other medics removed coercion from the bodies of protesters, restoring to them the freedom to stay and continue their persuasive speech and acts, or to voluntarily dissociate and go home.

Through recruiting, mass emotion work, participating in organized, committed, other-directed ways, and direct care, focus group participants maintain that street medics built political power in the Ferguson movement. All of these medic practice categories undermine coercion: police coercion that frightens away participants, medics' own potential to coerce patients or other protesters, and the embodied coercion that persists in traces of violence on the body. When they undermined coercion, medics may have built the movement's numbers, blocked law-maintaining violence's destruction of trust and solidarity, and maintained space where politics was not converted to warfare.

## **Critiques; potentials**

Focus group participants suggested that medics' anti-coercive orientation may have overextended itself in some ways that damaged their ability to support the Ferguson movement's growing political power. Specifically, focus group participants said that it took months for most medics to form informal interracial relationships in the movement, and that medics did not collectively develop an independent politics certain to survive demobilization. I depend strongly on Donna to make these arguments, because she was the most explicit in voicing the first critique, and the only focus group participant to voice the second.

In an informal conversation about the anxiety in the August uprising medic debrief, a medic who did not participate in the focus groups told me that constant self-examination and self-doubt can prevent people from forming relationships. Medics who are too fearful of coercing patients can fail to build the rapport or project the confidence that inspires trust and a sense of safety.

Whites, likewise fearful of being racist, might become too self-involved to build cross-racial relationships infused with the “realness” Mama Cat recognized in Marta. In a focus group, Scott and Donna discussed how much time it took for medics to build informal cross-racial relationships.

SCOTT: Most of our medics were white, and mostly spent time socially with other white folks. . . . A weakness of the medics and the movement as a whole was the lack of cross-racial relationship building on a personal level.

DONNA: Yeah, I don’t think really there was much of that until . . . towards the end. . . . Then it began to become more socially, you know, we were hanging out together. . . .

SCOTT: Towards the [grand jury] announcement [in November], yeah.

DONNA: Towards the announcement.

Donna clarified that the lack of cross-racial friendship may have had multiple causes, including the physical cause that working all day and medicking all night is exhausting! She also questioned the validity of her own observations. If cross-racial socializing was happening while she was asleep, how would she know?

You have to understand. . . , I go to the action, I hang out at the action, I talk to the people at the action. . . . But when if you want to . . . go have coffee and relax afterwards, I want to go home and go to bed.

While the medic who talked to me about August’s anxiety critiqued some medics’ anti-coercive orientation when it resolved into self-doubt that sabotaged cross-racial socialization, Donna critiqued medics’ anti-coercive orientation when it overextended itself into a refusal to develop an independent politics. Rhonda Kotelchuk and Howard Levy levied a similar charge against the 1960s street medics who bandaged feet on civil rights marches, talked down Vietnam veterans on anti-war marches, and worked in Black Panther clinics. Kotelchuk and Levy maintained that 1960s street medics’ politics were wedded to whatever movement was most militant at any given time, instead of an independent analysis of the political situation in which medics lived and worked.

Donna tried to address GRAM’s affiliation with militant tactics instead of political strategy in a meeting, and said she was rebuffed.

I [asked] the question, “When this is finished—and it may or may not be finished—. . . what political pieces do we get involved in? Could we have a discussion about that? . . . The answer right away was

no. (laughs)...so I kind of dropped it.... I think sometimes we need to think about who do we serve.... I don't know, as medics, we necessarily think about this.... I guess I just ask them to think about...political ramifications.

Kotelchuk and Levy argued that lack of an independent politics led the health left to divide against itself and collapse in the 1970s, as militant protest waned. By definition, service-and-support activists demobilize when there is no militant movement left to serve and support.

Donna explicitly called for street medics to anticipate demobilization and to seed in health professionals the possibility for independent political action and speech once they return to the city bound by law.

You go back to your job, and you interact with patients, clients, you interact with other nurses, other providers.... Sometimes they have lots of thoughts about what you're doing and why you're doing it, and what all that means, and want to know how to get involved. I don't think the [street medic] trainings do a good job in helping what I call re-entry.

At one point I was getting just bombarded. I finally said to somebody, "You know, I can't really deal with this today, so can we not talk about it today?" (laughs) ... You're going to re-enter an environment that has a variety of opinions about stuff now, and how do you handle that *and* being [a medic] on the street? ... I don't think the [street medic] trainings do a good job helping you re-enter that [workplace environment].

In his remarks on revolutionary medicine, Che Guevara said politics and commitment alone do not a revolutionary make. Without a revolution, radical doctors find themselves supporting the status quo or tracing a line of flight that ends without joining up with other lines.

For one to be a revolutionary doctor or to be a revolutionary at all, there must first be a revolution.... The desire to sacrifice an entire lifetime to the noblest of ideals serves no purpose if one works alone, solitarily, in some corner of America, fighting against adverse governments and social conditions.

Donna, however, maintains that if one has come from the streets of Ferguson, where lines have converged and trust grows outside the law, one can continue to spread trust in the political insurgents if one is so prepared.

Rabbi Telve asked if I would go to Children's Hospital [Ninth Annual Perspectives in Pediatrics Conference]...and talk about Ferguson.

That, that brings chills up your spine! ... When you size up the audience, it was a bunch of white women who... live in west county, and all work with kids who are low-income, and some of [their patients] live in Ferguson! ... How do you help people understand? ... Jason Purnell's done a wonderful study called "For the Sake of All." I used that study along with everything that I learned in Ferguson, and I put it together so that I didn't sound like a wack-job... How do you [prepare street medics to] do that?

### **"We do not know the ends of our actions"**

Although I was unable to independently demonstrate street medics building political power in the Ferguson movement, focus group participants described how they believed medics contributed to the political power that undeniably grew. Through practices of undermining fear and projecting confidence, being available, and undermining coercion, medics participated in the movement as it became powerful outside the law. Less self-doubt and better-developed independent politics may be lines along which street medics can grow the ability to better support political power when law is re-instated.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I defined the practices of street medics in Ferguson as gathered from their own documents, their words in focus groups, and my memory of participating in the Ferguson health support corps. I documented medic practices of medicking, feeling affect, affiliating, and navigating conflict. I explored opinions of the concept of the political and how political power grew in Ferguson, and stitched these opinions together with an extant body of political philosophy into a theory of political power. I finally evaluated how medic practices may have intervened in the growth of political power in the Ferguson movement by documenting focus group participant opinions of how power grew and charting categories of medic practices against my theory of political power.

The woman who had the heart attack was not helped by street medics, but she did not escape their notice as the scene around her body was secured by police. I don't know who she was. I don't know whether she lived or died. Unlike Michael Brown, her line moved from visibility outside the law into invisibility within it. Seeing her that night or the video later was an experience that stuck with medics who told me they wished they could have helped make the woman's transfer to definitive care less terrifying and horrible.

While they failed that woman, and are not constituted in such a way that they could have helped Michael Brown, participants in the uprising and protests were helped by medics when they could trust that they could be safe outside the law,

that they had a role to play in the movement, and that somebody had their backs. People were helped by having their eyes flushed, their burns assessed and salved, their asthma quieted, and their blood pressure monitored. They were helped by having Thanksgiving dinner and free massages, black psychiatrists willing to listen, and white people who didn't take up all the space.

Street medic practices may have been insignificant had they been practiced in a law-bound regime that damages trust. Outside the law in an insurrection, however, medic practices may have helped cement unshakable bonds and to tend enormous political power as it grew. Medics place their hope in the potential of trust-bound power to invade the law-bound city and transform the war in which we live into the possibility of politics to come.

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