


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Holy Infrastructures: Catholicism, Detroit Borderlands, and the Elements

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## Abstract

Through an ethnographic rendering of the Catholic Church at the Detroit-Windsor borderland, this article foregrounds the ways elemental forces, including water, earth/soil, and air, form an interconnected entity that constitutes part of the theopolitical and religious scaffolding of Holy Infrastructures. We argue that the repetitive inscription of social and affective flows within an urban terrain generates infrastructure projects that contract forces of variable intensity into alliance or disjuncture. The interrelation of these forces as Holy Infrastructure, offers vital information on (dis/en)abling racialized forms of hosting and being hosted by the divine within urban settings, specifically as it pertains to theological labor at multiple scales. Indeed, we understand holiness in Catholic Detroit as a performative sovereignty of partition that mediates a desire for unbrokenness and spatiotemporal rapture. The topologies of Holy Infrastructure thus give rise to overlapping but divergent “wholes” within the racialized urban terrain, offering insight into the Church as a loose network of horizontal alliances that may enforce or subvert hierarchy. Our focus on elemental forces allows us to move beyond abstractions and focus on how theological projects take shape in physical space within an urban ecology. Indeed, Holy Infrastructures come into focus most clearly in relation to the intersection of theology with environmental, climatic, and territorial projects. By approaching Church and State as co-constitutive, we show how Holy Infrastructures offer insight into the racialized and gendered terrain of contemporary Detroit.

**Keywords:** borderlands; Catholic Church; Holy Infrastructures; elements; Detroit; Windsor; migration; secularism

In Memory of Father/Reverend Norman Thomas (1930–2023)

The Michigan summer heat rises from cracked pavement as we stand at the corner of a fenced-off block in the La Salle neighborhood of Detroit in August 2019. Behind the fence sits the shuttered Church of St. Agnes and what remains of a hospital

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compound to which it was once attached. The historic Rosa Parks Boulevard flanks St. Agnes. Once an important transit corridor, the road was also a key site of the 1967 Detroit racial uprising, marking a turning point in the history of the city (Meloy 2017). Mounting racial tensions had erupted violently once before, in 1942, as housing conflicts followed an influx of Black immigrant labor from the south. By the 1950s and 1960s the city had become a central node of a Black, Catholic, “Sacred Heart” that geographically and theologically spanned Detroit, the border city to Canada, and a borderland buttressed by bodies of water. From those liminal earth-meets-water spaces, emerges a luminous Black Christ (see *imag 1*). In Christian theology, light and darkness carry problematic racial connotations (Prevot 2016). However, in this instance, a Black Christ holding a heart of light signals a desire on the part of the Church to invoke racial emancipation.

This post-war migration to the Detroit-Windsor borderland coincided with a slow shift to suburban agglomeration. Since the late 1940s, armament production at the city’s periphery had already begun to draw workers away from the thriving Fordist Motown industrial center. A concerted effort by the (white, mainly of Polish and Italian descent) population to move to “safer” suburbs accelerated and racialized this process following the large-scale migration of African Americans from the South. The grid of Catholic parishes, many established by ethnic enclaves of European immigrants, began to fragment, leaving a patchwork of active parishes sometimes sustained only by the nostalgic visits of newly minted suburbanites. Many Catholic schools, workers’ associations, and charities (inspired by the twentieth-century subsidiary welfare model of the Roman Catholic Church) dissolved, and the social projects that they facilitated began to unravel. Since the early 2000s, the physical infrastructure of the Detroit Catholic Church that had sustained the Sacred Heart Seminary became the subject, willingly or unwillingly, of mediatic incursions generating an almost fetishistic commodification of Detroit’s “ruination.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, the St. Agnes compound was bought by Parkstone, an investment company based in Detroit. A few years later it was sold to the Detroit-based Artisan Contracting Firm.<sup>2</sup> The company planned to transform the space into a new clinic and hospital site, extending a growing node of new private clinics and health services around the Henry Ford Hospital to the west along Grand West Boulevard. In 2023, a city planning permit was granted to Artisan Contracting Firm for a mix of new residential and commercial uses.

In 2019, we gazed through the steel fence surrounding St. Agnes. Our eyes were drawn to the exposed tree roots, along with debris and rubble. At the time, we noted how the asphalt sprawl of the empty parking lot would require substantial work to keep the storm water at bay, an increasingly pressing municipal issue as climate change intensifies precipitation over the Great Lakes.<sup>3</sup> At one end of the fenced-off area we noticed a small complex that could have been the rectory. It looked inhabited, with a functioning light over the entrance and the windows intact. A young-looking woman approached us, asking guardedly but confidently if we are from the real estate company. When she realized we are not realtors, she hesitated and began making her

<sup>1</sup>To view examples of this fetishization of ruination, see Atlas Obscura (2019).

<sup>2</sup>See <https://www.artisancontractingfirm.com>.

<sup>3</sup>Detroit is imposing fees for impermeable surfaces, but there is a fee deduction if property owners use stormwater management materials. Interview with the Hamilton Anderson Architectural firm, Detroit, June 2019.

way back toward the building. At that moment we experienced an impasse, both parties unable to “recognize” the uniqueness of the other, foreclosing a generative encounter (Lévinas 1992).

All of this was unspoken yet affectively transmitted. We experienced an awkwardness from our ethnographic expectation that the woman was an African American local who was resisting gentrification, or a former church-goer open to a conversation on the memorialization of St. Agnes and its remarkable transformation. As a white-passing research team, we are very aware of the historical, exploitative nature of whiteness and settler colonialism in the politics of urban gentrification in Detroit. Perhaps naively, we hoped to come as allies to participate, document, and give voice to a thread of narratives regarding these profound changes in the urban landscape and the role of the Catholic Church in reproducing the hegemony of capital and labor in the 2020s. Yet, we find ourselves ill-at-ease in this moment. None of us fit each other’s expectations. In fact, as soon as the woman realized we were not from the real estate company, she completely withdrew. We were distracting her from her focus on developing the church property and we realized the un-mimetic nature of our respective expectations.<sup>4</sup>

St. Agnes had once served as a vital node of Black Catholicism in Detroit. The above snapshot offers an ethnographic window into ways in which the Catholic Church here functions as a (un)vital infrastructure intersected by dynamics of racialization and multiple layering of urban transformations. Indeed, we would later find that the closure of St. Agnes in June 2006 was due to an infrastructural failure: excessive heating bills. Yet its closure also followed a long history of the Archdioceses of Detroit’s racial politics curtailing educational institutions and withdrawing dioceses’ support—the hierarchy of the Catholic archdioceses sealing its fate.

In this article we analyze the Catholic Church’s transformation in Detroit as part of a Detroit-Windsor borderland in tension with a history of the Catholic Church, and the ways this transformation has been affected by different waves of migration/immigration and the affective elements of earth, air, and water. This is to say, we begin with infrastructure not as a thing but as a cluster of *elements and affective forces* which enliven spaces of (past) ritualized gathering. We examine the coming into being of infrastructures that sometimes, but not always, take their force through the articulation of elemental and theological substance. Indeed, such articulations and their absence offer deeper insight into the presences and disavowals of the Catholic Church through urbanities in transformation. Most importantly, they shed light on the constitution of an ecumenical sphere through unlikely alliances and the exchange or transfer of properties, in both affective and legal senses, which create what we identify as “Holy Infrastructures.”

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<sup>4</sup>Our ethnographic research in Detroit and Windsor commenced in 2017 with initial extended visits by Napolitano to various Catholic centers in the two regional areas, including the Catholic Centre of the Sisters, and Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe (Gagliardi and Napolitano 2021). Subsequently, the project evolved into a more structured team effort involving repeated visits to diverse sites, including those of various organizations such as Strangers no Longer (SNL), attendance at church masses, conducting interviews with clerics and parishioners, locating and visiting closed and merged churches, and utilizing archives from the Seminary of the Sacred Heart, Detroit as well as the archives of the Diocese of Windsor in London, Ontario. In 2020, the ethnographic work was halted due to COVID-related policies implemented by Canadian universities. It was then resumed and extended via online interviews.

Over the last three decades, anthropologists have increasingly interrogated the Enlightenment partition of nature and culture by examining entanglements of people, and “things,” space and social contract as exemplified by the “infrastructural turn” (Dalakoglou 2016). Yet, as originally theorized by Bruno Latour (1993), the effort to divest the social world of transcendent authority also extracted the “supernatural” or theological into a separate realm, an excision heretofore analyzed primarily (though certainly not exclusively) in discursive terms and embodied regimes of truthfulness and life forms (Asad 1993; 2020). Claims to religious sovereignty carve out affective and discursive exceptions from secularized politics. As anthropologists working within different denominations have begun to emphasize, such dominion must operate within physical space, between human actors through *media* such as breath and rhythm (Crowley 2016). If we follow such *media outward*, as flows contract substance into affective force, “religion” faces the same *material* messiness as “nature” and “culture” and its entanglements may prompt similar sorts of discursive “separations.” How, and whether, such purification unfolds often depends on theological traditions, particularly in Catholicism, which remains in constant relation with pre-Enlightenment (and thus pre-partition) embodiment and materiality of the sacred.

With an approach centered on Holy Infrastructures, we offer an invitation to de-secularize studies of urbanities in transformation, contra the sometimes-unhelpful study of urban infrastructures through a taken-for-granted divide between the religious and the secular. To study “Holy Infrastructures” is instead to focus on how a *material and kinesthetic hosting-of and being-hosted by the divine orients desire and promise, while simultaneously mediating ritual praxis and shaping dynamics of interconnected scales of theology, urbanity, the elements, race, and labor*. The promise, then, is always incarnated through specific bodies and particular spaces, in inclusionary and exclusionary forms (Grimes 2017), in affective vectors that can be oriented otherwise (Ahmed 2008). The “elements” here offer their own (analytical) promise in terms of theological potency, but also in their omnipresence in both everyday life and projects of urban management. By focusing on “elemental” forces, we seek to demonstrate how material-semiotic infrastructures contract the virtual into structured and structuring flows of affective force and materialities. Therefore, natural elements serve as a point of articulation, infusing localized theologies and actualizing them—as Holy Infrastructures—through racialized terrains of urban management. The flow and interruption of elements and resources shape life’s parishes differently, easing or compounding urban racial relations.

In a city such as Detroit, birthed through Jesuit missions, shaped by Catholic Workers’ Unions, and reborn through immigrant labor, an ethnographic analysis of the material entanglements of religious sovereignties, and the “holy” spaces and substances that host them, offers purchase on urban processes effaced by a focus on the separation of nature and culture. Thus, the partitions between the two are permeable and the inscription of holiness into certain (infra)structures brings new flows of people, affect, and elemental force into relation, while the sovereign cut purifies and separates (or attempts to) these relations. This it to say, that the hosting of and being hosted by the divine are movements intrinsically connected to a concomitant habitation of humans, the more-than-human, and the super-natural that is mediated by flows of elements and substances. Physical architecture serves as the node through which “Holy Infrastructure” passes, through elemental flows that

have profoundly transformed and are still transforming the urban terrain of Detroit and its borderland.

### On the Detroit-Windsor Corridor

The ecumenical sphere this article investigates requires a lens of borderland analytics. Lingered shared histories are deeply embedded in the Catholic heritage of both Detroit and Windsor, shaping interconnected histories of labor and mobility from the French-Canadian settlement of Detroit onward. Indeed, as Father Gilbert Sunghera reminded us, Detroit constituted a major terminus of the underground railroad due precisely to its proximity to the border. The Canada-United States Automotive Products Agreement of 1965 intensified these connections by removing tariffs and boosting automotive production in Windsor until the early 2000s (Pryke and Soderlund 2003). Our older interlocutors in both cities fondly remembered their frequent border crossings as casual, routine affairs.

This borderland interconnection is especially evident in the historical narratives, the contemporary pastoral presence, and the connectivity between the Minor Basilica of St. Anne on the Detroit side of the Ambassador Bridge and, directly across from the Assumption Church on the Windsor, Ontario side of the bridge. A recent expansion on the south, Windsor side of the Ambassador bridge, on a stretch of land originally belonging to the Basilian-lead Assumption University,<sup>5</sup> was contested by Windsor residents in the neighborhood of Sandwich, over which the bridge traverses. During our fieldwork in the fall of 2019, the houses flanking Indian Street, on the south side of the bridge, were boarded up and in the process of being demolished. Locals attempted to stop this extension, citing possible First Nation archaeological remains, but were unsuccessful.

Many entanglements have shaped the urban terrain of the Detroit-Windsor borderland. However, many lament that the post-9/11 security apparatus has increasingly severed social and ecumenical relationships between the two cities. This hardening of the border has shaped the spatial politics of Black, Latinx, and Arab communities, in particular, as has the empowerment of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in the border zone. These agencies surveil migrants but also police protests for racial justice (Hermes 2020).

Although we focus primarily on the Detroit side of the border, the geographic liminality necessitates a framework of borderland analytics, which encompasses ecological, theological, labor, and social entanglements, woven together through shared connections to the Detroit River and Great Lakes. This dynamic proliferates intra-nationally as it opens to borders in the urban terrain, between city and suburbs, documented and undocumented, secular and sacred, progressive and conservative, green spaces and decaying asphalt. The landscape of the Detroit-Windsor corridor thus emerges as a fractal borderland. The proximity of the national border and its securing contributes to the boundaries and divisions that organize the urban terrain. We thus understand this landscape as a corridor, rather than two

<sup>5</sup>Assumption University became the Assumption University of Windsor in 1956 and then part of the University of Windsor in the 1960s. The development was masterminded by the bridge company originally owned by Detroit's Morun family and then bought by Ford Motor Company in 2018.

separate cities in two separate nation-states, only partially integrated through affective, elemental flows. Holy Infrastructures capture these flows to enliven some projects while bypassing others.

To return to the opening site of our borderland inquiry, the transformation of St. Agnes Parish can be seen as an index to the complicity of the Detroit Catholic Church in the racialization and gentrification of the city, yet also as a window into how church actors have challenged these same processes. Furthermore, St. Agnes and the dynamics that expand outward from its history demonstrate how the conferring of Holiness on some infrastructures—and not others—shapes this terrain. Originally constructed in 1921, St. Agnes later merged with Saint Theresa d'Avila Parish. Together they were renamed the Martyrs of Uganda in 2006. Under the leadership of African American parish priest T. Powell, St. Agnes boasted a relatively small but vibrant congregation until its final closure in 2006, due largely to the excessive cost of bringing heat to such an old building during the cold Detroit winters. The building and grounds have gone through multiple permutations, until the most recent sale noted above. The recent history of St. Agnes offers a resounding coda to a wave of parish closures and mergers throughout the last decades of the twentieth century.

The nature of closures varies, as Msgr. Charles Kosanke, the Rector of the Minor Basilica of Ste. Anne in Mexico-town, and at the time also coordinated the Most Holy Trinity Parish in Corktown, explained to us in a January 2020 interview conducted in the then Church of St. Anne. When a church cannot sustain itself alone it can share resources with another church in a cluster arrangement. They remain legally separate but share staff and resources. However, he told us that there often comes a point when they can only maintain one building. Instead of one parish “closing right away, it’s almost like cancer instead of a heart attack. The closure is slower.” In such cases, he said, “usually, what a diocese does is put it up for sale, and there are legal restrictions on that it can’t be sold or used for purposes that would embarrass the church, at least in Detroit. So, we wouldn’t want the church to turn into a bar.” Slow or fast, the closure of Catholic churches and the associated educational premises in Detroit has since the 1970s had a profound impact on the contraction of the Detroit Board of Education, which has primarily affected those who stayed behind: the Afro-American and Latinx populations.

Religious denominations cannot be separated from the physicality and environmental being of denomination churches in space. Denomination, in Christianity, connects to a theological and political dimension of dominion in the power of naming the land, and for that matter, marking the Christianization of the Americas as a confluence of colonial violence and the European legal regime of exception, at the basis then of *Jus Gentium Europaeum*—European public law (Schmitt 2003; McAllister and Napolitano 2020; Oliphant 2021). Terrain, however, emerges through *topology*: the circulation of people and affect through a rhizomatic network, with divergent nexuses forming the nodes that we render legible through place-making. Topology invites us to think about the political ramifications of what constitutes a “Holy Infrastructure,” and how the designation “holy” may be theologically constituted as an inscription of an ongoing and partially failing performative sovereignty of partition: fences, after all, may be permeable to some social and economic interests but not others. This tension of dominion and failed sovereignty of partition puts our discussion of the Detroit-Windsor corridor into dialogue with observations regarding some churches across Europe, where attendance has diminished and a failing performative sovereignty has become



evident, whether from partial ruination, closure, or sale for redevelopment. Moreover, “holy” here signifies a *discursive, imaginative, political, and material field of mediation* that in Christianity has been studied as a phenomenology of rapture (in time and space) and desire for unbrokenness. In this study we use “holy” less in relation to a field of hagiography and human-more-than human mediation along the path of sainthood (Orsi 2011; Hollander 2021), and more as a field of caring and reproduction of potency that requires a calibration of theological and elemental infrastructural management. In other words, it is still less about divine mediation and more about the everyday theologically infused management of the elements, and as such it needs to be understood in relation to local histories of race, migration, and (en)closure.

### Religion and Race in the Auto Industry

Detroit maintains a long history of powerful Black religious thought, elements of which permeate Detroit’s long struggle for workers’ rights and civil rights. Black labor activists, political theorists, and members of the Communist Party worked with Black pastors and their churches to unionize the auto industry, especially Ford Motor Company (Albrecht 2009: 6).

Detroit’s history as a World War I manufacturing center and the rise of the auto industry created the possibility of work for Black people, as Ford hired Black men, though generally for the worst, most dangerous jobs (*ibid.*: 8). To get a job at Ford, a Black man had to secure a letter of recommendation from his minister. In return, Ford donated money to churches, building relationships with pastors. During the struggle to unionize, church leaders who had received funding were caught between their loyalty to Ford and the personal power his support granted and unionizing for the well-being of their constituents. African American ministers, generally Protestant, remained almost uniformly opposed to the union (*ibid.*).

At the same time, J. Frank Norris, the “radio priest” Fr. Charles Coughlin, and former Huey Long protégé Gerald L. K. Smith grew influential in the city. The radio sermons and newspapers promulgated by Coughlin, Smith, and Norris broadcasted a hyperpatriotic, anti-labor message to tens of thousands of Detroit area Catholic and Protestant workers (Pehl 2012: 451). However, many liberal priests and working-class lay people in Detroit rejected such views and sought to align their religious identities with more democratic, pro-union political ideologies. This led to the Detroit cell of the Catholic Worker Movement, a Detroit chapter of the American Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU), and even the formation of the Archdiocesan Labor Institute in 1939 (*ibid.*: 451). These organizations and the associated parishes played a major role in the strike of 1941, as did the NAACP and pro-union Black ministries. Ford, in turn, leveraged support from anti-union churches to depict unionization efforts as a racial conflict. With the ratification of the UAW, Ford largely stopped hiring Black workers. The UAW offered little pushback.

Even with the eventual unionization of Ford, civil rights activism, and Roosevelt’s 1941 Executive Order 8802 that prohibited discrimination in the defense industry, Detroit’s Black people still faced repeated white riots in response to their getting jobs and housing. Between 1947 and 1963, the Detroit area lost about half of its manufacturing jobs (134,000) to permanent closures and plant relocation outside of the city. The Department of Defense realized that the war effort had concentrated

all weapons manufacturing into Detroit and pushed to decentralize the industry to protect against enemy air strikes. As a result, the Detroit area lost 82,000 defense-related jobs. White Detroiters were able to follow those jobs into the suburbs, and over half a million did so in the 1950s and 1960s (Albrecht 2009: 5–9). However, color lines in all aspects of the housing market left Black Detroiters unable to move or sell their properties and color lines in employment kept most Black workers in under-skilled, lower-income positions more vulnerable to automation. It was in this context, and that of the civil rights movement, that a Black Catholic Church began to emerge in the Detroit urban core during the 1960's, charting a parallel but divergent path.

### Catholic Racialization in Motown

The iconography of the Sacred Heart introduced above (see figure 1) is reproduced by Father Edward Farrell—a priest beloved by the Catholic constituency of St. Agnes—on the cover of his book *Little Banquets for Ordinary People* (2000), a collection of lay spiritual exercises. In 1968, Father Raymond Ellis, who later became the rector of the Seminary of the Sacred Heart, commissioned a then-controversial yet unique Black Christ to be painted on the vault of St. Cecilia, a Church later renamed St. Charles of Lwanga after it merged with St. Leo Church in 2013. St. Charles of Lwanga, together with the Church of the Sacred Heart, has remained central to Black Catholicism in Detroit since the early 1960s. Renowned artist and activist DeVon Cunningham painted the Black Christ, which quickly became a hotly contested icon for the local community (some black women were upset with the depiction of a Black Christ) and

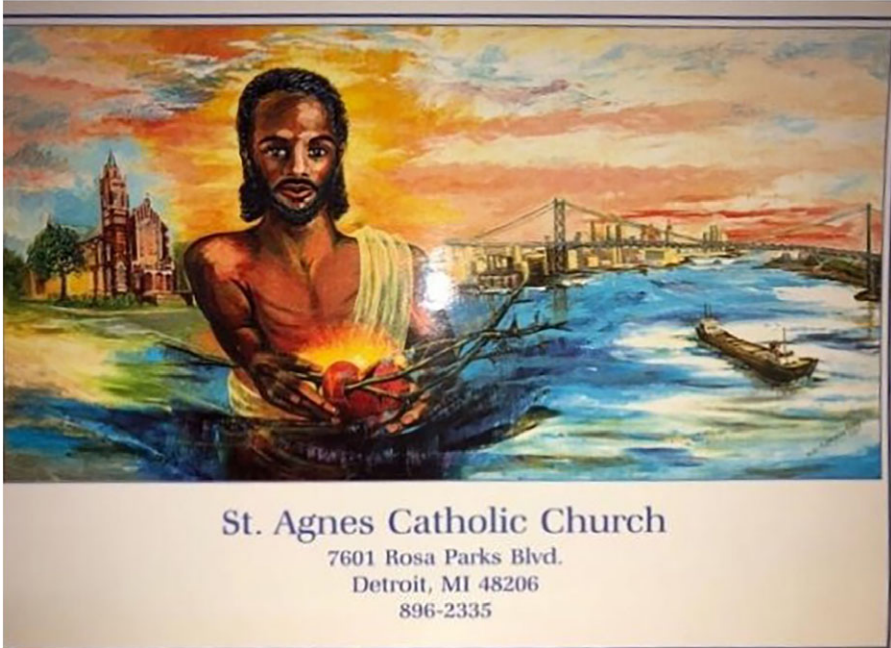


Figure 1. Postcard. Courtesy of the authors (also reproduced on the cover of Edward J. Farrell's *Little Banquets for Ordinary People*, Alba House, 2000).





Figure 2. Black Jesus fresco by DeVon Cunningham, Church of St. Cecilia. Courtesy Alami.

a national index of the “quest for a Black Christ.” In fact, the figure of Christ as a close-up of the painting in the Church (see figure 2) appeared in the front cover of *Ebony Magazine* in March 1969. “The risen Christ rose to all men, so all men should be represented. We should see the risen Christ in each other.... The risen Christ is not the historical Christ. He rose into the soul, mind, humanity, and spirit.”

Up through Father Ellis’ directorship of the Seminary, the Dioceses of Detroit had been known as a laboratory for the Second Vatican Council’s reforms and a base for innovative priests’ and nuns’ church caucuses. Key lay women and activists, such as Dorothy Day and Grace Lee, played an important role in shaping the archdioceses into a key node for engagement with social justice in American Catholicism. Father Gilbert Sunghera, S.J. at the Mercy University of Detroit, suggested to us in an interview that for over four decades the Catholic Church of Detroit could have been described as an “arsenal of democracy.” That said, decisions were taken in the 1930s and 1940s to create missions specifically for African American Catholics in the city which counterproductively compounded the ghettoization of the Afro-Catholic population. Moreover, during the summer riots of 1942, the church allied with the unsuccessful white attempt (mainly by Catholic Poles) to prevent Blacks from residing in the Sojourner Truth housing projects (Davis 2003). Within this conflict, the Catholic Church emerged as a central player in the Detroit Public School District, and later contributed to its own decline by closing Catholic educational institutions that had come to serve primarily Black and Latinx students.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>In more recent years this racialized trend has manifested in the taking over of district schools’ governance by “non-profits” and the funneling of resources into funding already-failing chartered schools (Herrada 2012).

The “flight to the suburbs” that characterized the movement of predominantly white Catholics of Polish and Italian descent to the periphery of Detroit began with the decentralization of the defense industry but intensified with the “revolution” of 1967. The reasons for “white flight” were multiple but included the closing of Catholic schools and the loss of nuns running them, a decline in property values caused by land speculation (Henthorn 2004), and a more marked orientation toward the personal salvation of Protestant sensibilities over communal, collective, and racialized justice sustained in part by the Catholic Worker movement. The religious discourses and liturgies of the New Evangelization under John Paul II directly contributed to this shift (McCallion, Bennett-Carpenter, and Maines 2012). By the early 1990s, over 60 percent of the Detroit’s population was Black and 20 percent lived under a poverty line (Thompson 1999: 163–64). The shift to the suburbs overstretched Detroit’s infrastructure, putting a major burden on those who remained in the city and fostering racial tensions between core and periphery. In the 2020s, politics of Black eviction due to a renewed flight to downtown fostered resistance to this new “racial banishment” in the form of Black stewardship and a politics of place-care (Quizar 2022: 7).

With the appointment of Edmund Szoka as archbishop of Detroit (1981–1990; he became Cardinal in 1988) the archdioceses and the Seminary adopted a more emphatically conservative bent, inspired by the long arm of John Paul II’s policy and the end of the communist era in Western Europe. Szoka privileged forms of evangelization that compounded the movement of white Catholics to the suburbs by emphasizing the role of church hierarchy in decisions to merge parishes and close churches that served as centers of community life. This alienated many parishioners, fragmented congregations, and produced a plethora of empty church buildings. The question of how to maintain, repurpose, or offload these structures and the real estate on which they sat fostered its own set of conflicts as land speculation persisted. Szoka and Cardinal Adam Maida were key players in the unfortunate adventure of the archdiocese of Detroit’s large subsidy for the establishment of the St John Paul II Center in Washington, D.C., inaugurated in 2001 but later sold at a loss to the Knights of Columbus (Feuerherd 2006). Nowadays, the Seminary of the Sacred Heart is known predominantly for its online vocality regarding Pope Francis’ allegedly ambiguous magisterium.<sup>7</sup> As the landscape of the U.S. Catholic Church fractures from within, powerful lobbies have supported concerted efforts to destabilize Pope Francis’ reforms of the Vatican and its curia, particularly with respect to divorce and LGBTQIA2S+ rights.

Nonetheless, a tradition of powerful Black Catholicism persists in the city. In 2019, we met with Father Norman Thomas, the pastor of Sacred Heart Parish from 1968 until his death on 28 February 2023. Entering Fr. Thomas’s office, we were greeted with artwork depicting biblical scenes with Black characters, alongside statues and art from various African cultures. In response to the Archdiocese threatening to close parishes, Fr. Thomas helped form the Detroit Catholic Pastoral Alliance, which protested the closing of churches and schools in the city and trained lay-ministers. They added women at the altar and Black ministers so that Black parishioners could see themselves represented in their leadership. Empowering parishioners forged new connections: the Sacred Heart Parish supports Haitians in Detroit and sponsors annual humanitarian visits to Haiti.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of these critiques, see Feuerherd 2019.

Forty different organizations out of Sacred Heart support recycling, cancer research, and other progressive concerns.

New flows of people and resources have begun to reanimate Catholic Detroit. The current archbishop of Detroit, Allen Vigneron, has led media and fundraising campaigns making the Solanus Casey Center—dedicated to a beatified Capuchin friar—one of the strongest forces for Catholic evangelization and one of the country’s most important pilgrimage centers.<sup>8</sup> The naming of the historic Ste. Anne as a minor basilica has drawn further attention. Even as the influx of pilgrims generates new revenue, a growing population of Latinx parishioners has begun to revive Catholicism in the Motor City. However, the threat of parish closure and shifting demographics have also bolstered reactionary tendencies in some (predominantly white) congregations, drawing interest and support from militant conservative networks. The material, affective forces thus generated have started to transform the city in new ways that require a turn toward infrastructural thinking.

In the specific terrain of Catholicism, a focus on Holy Infrastructures develops from a robust tradition of the study of *lived* Catholicism and its attention to material religion, and embodied, sensorially mediated hermeneutics between people, God, phenomenological materiality, and saintly figures (Orsi 2013; Vázquez 2011). Yet, a concentration on Holy Infrastructure also requires attention to *living Catholicism*, foregrounding study and participation in a Catholic “eschatological imminence”<sup>9</sup> acting in and on time (Roberts 2015). That is to say, from a Christian theological perspective, relinquishing hope of a solidity of institutions and infrastructures opens up a different perspective on the relation between infrastructures and time. It brings divine and multispecies temporalities into the same picture. It is to consider living Catholicism as a participatory, but also sometimes racially exclusionary process in a transformative era both in this world and in a penultimate (Christian) eschatological horizon. Ethnographically speaking, Catholic infrastructures emerge as a terrain of multiple and conflicting sovereignties, of both rooting and eradicating life, and as a participatory and transformative temporality that is both immanent and eschatological. Here, we dwell on the flow of the elements to grapple with this infrastructural intersection between terrain and transformative time. We do so because, we argue, they are both intrinsically connected to justice, and the undoing as well as the compounding of injustice. The play of infrastructure enlivens some spaces while neglecting others. The social and theological promise of various lived forms of Catholicism may alternatively charge such spaces with transformative potency or withdraw such potential entirely. These infrastructures form and unravel, they constitute and promise access or hindrances, and as Larkin (2013) reminds us, this is a foundational aspect of infrastructural justice.

<sup>8</sup>In the words of Vigneron, Father Casey leads to the “renewed commitment of being evangelists” and being an exemplar “in the field hospital of mercy”; <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2017/11/detroit-archbishop-says-solanus-casey-exemplifies-worker-field-hospital-mercy>.

<sup>9</sup>The use of the term “eschatology” here refers to a concept and a strand of Christian theology concerned with the “end of things” such as judgement and the fulfillment of the world, the destiny of humankind and the soul, and the study of the end of time as a return to salvation. We use “immanence” to refer to a theological principle of the participation and presence of God in the creation of the world; “imminence” is of the pressing times. Eschatological imminence is used to signal a crucial immanent temporality of God’s justice.



Figure 3. Map showing churches discussed in the text in relation to predominant race reported for 2010 census tracts. Courtesy of the authors. Census data downloaded from [datadrivendetroit.org](http://datadrivendetroit.org).

## Soil

Originally constructed in the 1830s and expanded in the 1920s, the Church of the Assumption Grotto stands fenced off in Detroit's northeast, abutting Gratiot Avenue (see figure 3). For decades, it has served as a point of reference for Tridentine and Latin Masses as well as for a Catholic constituency made up of strong pro-life groups with connections to the conservative Catholic media group Church Militant (<https://www.churchmilitant.com>). Originally named the “church of the woods” in German, Assumption Grotto was registered as a National Historic Place in 1991. For over twenty-five years it has been led by Father Edward Perrone, who was investigated and acquitted (2019–2021) over allegations that he sexually abused altar boys.<sup>10</sup> Just a few blocks away is the Rise Bakery (recently relocated to the Solanus Casey Center), which employs recently released Black male inmates.

Every year, in concomitance with the Feast of Assumption, the church becomes a pilgrimage site for parishioners and believers who travel from across the county to celebrate the annual Feast of the Virgin of the Grotto. The grotto in question sits in a primarily African American neighborhood but has very few African American parishioners. Built in the nineteenth century, this open, semi-circular structure features memorial plaques for popes and prominent Catholics of Irish, German,

<sup>10</sup>For an explanation of the allegations and findings on Perrone's case, see <https://www.detroitcatholic.com/news/fr-perrone>.





Figure 4. Grave of the unborn fetus (1973), Church of the Assumption Grotto. Courtesy of the authors.

and French origins. Interestingly, the grotto and the church grounds sit on a World War I and World War II German military cemetery.

On the day of the Feast in 2019, we sat on flimsy folding plastic chairs during a ceremony as part of the annual August celebration, literally atop graves. The soil of the church grounds holds a military past, mobilized that day in reference to then-President Trump's sentiment of reclaiming America from liberal discourses of diversity. Entering the grounds of the church gardens, we were met with pro-life banners and a "tomb" for an unborn fetus (figure 4). Positioned at the south entrance, the cenotaph welcomes believers in their procession to the grotto. Given the epochal shift that followed only a few years later in the effective overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the tomb more than ever marks the "ensoilment" and monumentalization of the tensions running through U.S. society. The tombstone of "life" reads as uncannily contemporary. It pronounces: "In loving memory of the unborn babies murdered in the holocaust of abortion. Lord keeps them in our loving arms. Abortion legalized Jan 22, 1973. 18,763,680 deaths as of 11 AM June 8, 1985. 32,000,000 as of July 1995." For the Father in charge of the celebration at the church, "abortion is the sacrament of Satan" because the devil does not want humans to be born as Catholics who would—through participation in the Eucharistic sacraments—facilitate the incarnation of Christ on earth. Abortion serves as a way to desacralize and conquer space. By "preventing" Catholic souls from incarnating, abortion is thought to remove Christ's gift of life. This, in turn, diminishes divine presence in the world. The space—the very

soil/earth—becomes less Christ-like. Abortion then, from this perspective, emerges as a problem of scale, soil, and rooting in space. And whiteness, a positionality—as the theologian Willie James Jennings noted—“rooted in place,”<sup>11</sup> but also an eschatological promise and a devotion to making the earth productive.

L.R., a Detroit woman of German origin in her early sixties, and the main caretaker of the Assumption Church, worried over the many abortion clinics on 8 Mile Road, positioning Assumption Grotto as one brave warrior in a landscape of darkness. L.R. analogizes her role to the Virgin of Guadalupe, who, in her version of the story, was a pro-life hero who stopped Aztec human sacrifices and converted the entire Aztec nation to Catholicism. Gratiot Avenue, where the grotto is located, holds significant historical importance as an urban artery that has seen the establishment and transformation of Protestant and Catholic settlements. L.R. and other parishioners embody a settler colonial desire, which is manifest in asserting possession over land by marking the soil and the urban terrain as a sacred space for Christ-presence, while simultaneously perceiving the neighborhood’s Afro-American presence as encroaching upon it. As Bain (2023) writes, soil itself plays into racialized discourses of material composition under capitalism, where Blackness is metaphorically and literally identified with raw material, malignancy, and abjection.

L.R., who had offered us a tour of the cemetery on our first visit, conveyed a clear sense of pride and ownership of the space. She carefully pointed out the individual graves of former parishioners and noted their contributions to war efforts or to church construction. Moreover, L.R. sees a particular and important relation between holiness, mud, soil, and water. She tells us that as Bernadette encountered the Virgin of Fatima, she had to bury her face in the mud—in the soil—in order to find the holy water. One must dig through the mud and the soil, because of the inherited “sinfulness” of humanity, L.R. argues. Burying one’s face in mud, she insists, is a necessary sacrifice to constantly renew the church, a powerful act that a powerless individual can easily undertake.

Here, earth/soil as element gives life to Catholic infrastructure in multiple ways. A mobilization of bodies and affective prayers takes place through the force of memorializing a “holy” European war-past on which devotees stand. However, the soil also holds the vulnerability and suffering of the pastoral crowd—predominantly non-local, since none of the approximately nine hundred families that support this parish live nearby. The Feast marks a moment of return, as suburbanites rearticulate their familial and cultural attachments to the grotto—and to its charismatic leaders—on a yearly pilgrimage into a “landscape of darkness” that they hope to reclaim for a brief time. On this celebratory day, groups of believers will pray to the stations of the Holy Cross well ahead of the main mass that takes place in the late afternoon. Fourteen standing stones carved in the 1960s with figurations of Christ’s journey mark the stations of the cross throughout the cemetery. We share the events of the day with the dead. Children play amidst graves and celebrants take food back to their folding chairs. The dead sit beneath and between us through each mass and musical number. The Stations of the Cross take on the feel of a walk with old friends as parishioners pass through the monuments. We slowly circulate through each one of the stations with a group of around forty parishioners praying the rosary. It is a slow

<sup>11</sup>See <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/whiteness-rooted-place>.



rhythm of stopping and starting. The group includes different ages, but the majority are older, and some are rather frail, using canes and walkers, making it difficult to kneel at each of the Stations of the Cross. The performance of a militant and militaristic pro-life discourse thus acquires a different affective force of vulnerability while kneeling on the soil and “dragging” the body through the procession. The body that folds onto the soil (as it kneels in honor), is also a body in pain that folds over itself, in some cases overweight, panting, and unsteady.

At sunset, a candle-lit walk circles the perimeter of the cemetery before emerging at the front of the parish. Police cars light the dark night as they stand guard in the street, though the walk does not go beyond the property or into the neighborhood, concluding just outside of the fence and onto the sidewalk. This serves as a stark visual reminder of the fear of the encroaching city: even to go just beyond the fence requires a police presence.

Parishioners feel “under siege” in multiple ways. The waves of church closures under Szoka have elicited a permanent anxiety about the continuing coherence of their dispersed community. L.R. describes the church’s historic status as a form of leverage. Assumption Grotto received this status in 1992, and relocation of the cemetery would require extensive resources. Nevertheless, L.R. fears merging or closure by the Archdiocese, given its lack of financial income and a perception that it is persecuted for its conservative stances. A recent stormwater tax levied on impermeable surfaces will hit the church hard, and L.R. regards it as another moral encroachment by the city. Stabilization of the church grounds through parking lots and pavement has offloaded the vulnerability of soil onto the city sewer system.

It is through the earth/soil that both the strengths and vulnerabilities of this Church become a Holy Infrastructure. The folding of bodies—and affective attachments—into the soil thus anchors the circulation of living bodies between the white suburbs and the racialized urban core, echoing ancient patterns of fluid territoriality emplaced through veneration of the dead (Sawchuk et al. 2018). Maintaining the biographical continuity of this Church—oriented toward Tridentine, Latin-mass rites—and its dispersed congregation encourages specific alliances and investments. The “tomb” for the unborn “ensoils” a materiality of life’s sacrifice, rendering abortion legible as the “sacrament of the devil” and conferring a nearly crusade-like anti-choice position on the crowd of predominately white parishioners affectively connected to the soldiers whose bodies root painful memories and loss. The earth/soil enfolds this affect and transforms the cenotaph into a reliquary. The very ground on which Assumption Grotto sits highlights many different forms of human frailty imbued by death, life, and sacrificial penitence.

An analytic of the elements here expands our understanding of how anti-abortion politics positions life, its defense, and its vulnerability beyond socio-centric religious/political explanations. By comprehending a pressing dynamics of contemporary civil life through the grammar of soil, as well as the implications of losing soil to “evil” forces, we can achieve a more granular and affective understanding of a political configuration that extends well beyond this moment, into the larger relations between the Catholic Church and the state. The ensoilment of “life” and its vulnerabilities through peripatetic practice animates and defines a dangerous relation of blood and soil under threat from encroaching evil. An analytic of soil then adds an interstitial value beyond “politics as usual.”



Figure 5. Holy Trinity Church. Courtesy of the authors.

## Water

In the lateral nave of the Most Holy Trinity Church in Corktown, a high relief of a shipwreck from the mid-nineteenth century is prominently displayed between the stained-glass windows. Up to the early twentieth century, the body of water between Detroit and Windsor was referred to as the “seas” separating two countries. Priests used to regularly visit and liturgically bless the fishing fleets that worked these waters and lakes Michigan and Erie. The artwork in figure 5 shows a corpse lying on a boat, whose sails—sealed by a Celtic Cross—are stirred by an angel. This memorialization of deaths at sea from a nineteenth century shipwreck points to an infrastructure of blessing that by-passed boundaries of nation/state confinement.

Christian theology commonly associates water with crossing or passage, allegorically over the Jordan River. Water also carries connotations of purification and satiation, as L.R. recounts in her retelling of Bernadette’s encounter and her description of Assumption Grotto as an “oasis” in the desert of Gratiot Avenue. However, in a broad sense, Christian theology expresses little concern with the destructive properties of water. The flood will not come again, according to the story of Noah, which some Evangelicals take as a rationale for denying sea level rise (Webster 2013).

While Detroit lies far from the ocean, climate forecasts predict that much of the Great Lakes Region will receive significantly increased precipitation due to climate change. This shift has already begun to impact cities, since stormwater drainage, stress on hydraulic infrastructures, and flooding are becoming more pressing issues. These problems are especially evident in Detroit, with standing water pooling on its streets and flash floods swamping its freeways during rush hour. The Detroit Water and Sewerage System simply cannot accommodate the additional stressors already posed by climate change. This lack of capacity did not inevitably follow from the financial problems the city has faced in recent decades. Rather, the city’s hydraulic infrastructure has long been a key site for the negotiation and contestation of sovereignty across national, racial, community, and religious borders. The management of stormwater in Detroit reveals how the Catholic Church has

emerged as a node in the circulation, interruption, and governance of flows of water. At the same time, these physical, elemental flows aggregate clusters of interests, resources, attention and (in)attention, which generate unexpected alliances and fragmentations.

The Detroit Water and Sewerage System serves both the more affluent (primarily white) suburbs and a racialized urban core. Prior to 1974, white city leadership expanded the municipal system to the suburbs, taking on significant debt to do so. This created an exceptionally large and complex water system. The election of an African American mayor in 1974 and increasing “white flight” to the suburbs exacerbated conflict over water rates and governance structures. As the urban core at the center of the water system shrank, the physical strain on the overbuilt and aging water system grew. Decreasing urban density effectively increased the cost per individual to access water utilities.<sup>12</sup> Coalitions of suburban leaders deployed racially coded language of corruption, criminality, and incompetence in attempts to gain control over the system in the state legislature. Detroit residents were caricatured as “deadbeats” and blamed for high rates (Kornberg 2016).

To address these concerns, planners proposed a fee on impervious surfaces, both as a source of revenue and as a disciplinary mechanism. Impervious surfaces create excessive stormwater runoff which the sewer system must accommodate, generating additional stress. In contrast to water meters, which function to produce rational, calculating subjects, Detroit planners intended the fee on impervious surface to discipline *collective* subjects—corporations and organizations—into implementing greening initiatives. Of twenty-two thousand eligible properties identified by the city, approximately two thousand corresponded to “religious properties.” By 2017, these measures had begun to significantly increase the water bills of many churches, putting religious leaders at odds with the mayor’s office (Derringer 2017). Fears of further closures spurred the formation of the Detroit Regional Interfaith Voice for Equity (DRIVE).

By late 2022, only a handful of Catholic organizations, such as Sacred Heart parish and the Solanus Casey Center, had begun to implement green infrastructure initiatives. Other churches had incorporated stormwater mitigation into more general renovation projects. The Holy Redeemer Church in Mexico-town emphasized the necessity of such efforts in stabilizing the foundations of its historic edifice, but they noted that their property, like that of many churches, drew no water from the municipal system and so was not required to pay the fee. Still, such renovations had proven costly. Holy Redeemer had only managed to fund their renovations through a congregation swelled by recent immigrants from Latin America. A massive influx of pilgrims pending the beatification of Solanus Casey had likewise facilitated greening projects at the Solanus Casey Center.

Other parishes have sought outside help. The late Fr. Norman Thomas told us in 2019 that the Nature Conservancy had played a key role in implementing “green” solutions at Sacred Heart. More recently, Gesu Catholic Church and School has obtained funding from the National Wildlife Foundation to construct greenspaces and rain gardens. These latter efforts, along with those at the Solanus Center, explicitly coalesced as aspects of larger environmental justice projects intended to

<sup>12</sup>These processes culminated in the city of Flint transitioning away from the Detroit municipal system, leading to the devastating water crisis of the 2010s (Badalucco 2016; Parkinson 2017).

benefit parishioners and communities. Much recent headway by DRIVE in stormwater mitigation planning likewise falls under this banner. Holy Infrastructure here promises both justice and greening of the community through theology: taking care of “our common home,” as called for by Pope Francis (Francis I 2015).

However, the ecclesiastical governance of water suffers from a broad lack of interconnection and communion across the parishes of Catholic Detroit. To address the stormwater crisis, individual parishes have primarily turned to affinal allies outside of the Catholic community, oriented by desires for financial stability, environmental care and stewardship, or the preservation of heritage. Other denominations or secular environmental organizations offer funding and support where the church hierarchy and Catholic organizations have not. Whether this inability to provide support results from incapacity or disinterest remains unclear to us. Certainly, we noted no effort to render the stormwater legible through theological discourse. The language of flowing water instead applies primarily to flows of *people*, particularly in relation to “Mass Mobs”: a movement to organize mass attendance at specific churches on specific days. Such mobs “stormed” into St. Josaphat and St. Albertus, “plunging” into the parish and departing, constituting a specific time-space configuration of hosting and being hosted by the divine.

In mobilizing the language of rushing water, the Mass Mobs offer insight into how (white) Detroit Catholicism channels its energy. The Mass Mobs had primarily supported historic churches such as St. Joseph, or old Tridentine Rites’ liturgical spaces such as that of St. Joseph Shrine. And they largely function to preserve the ecclesiastical aesthetics of specific structures and properties, without trying to develop a sustained interconnectivity that might facilitate a greater degree of overall resilience. A similar but also different dynamic unfolds at Ste. Anne’s, founded by early eighteenth-century French settlers and the second-oldest continuously operating Roman Catholic parish in the United States. Ste. Anne, which recently became a Minor Basilica, undertook a fundraising campaign to raise \$26 million, partly by selling a section of its land to the company that owns the Ambassador Bridge. This sale has been opposed by some people who live in this part of Mexico-town. The parish-endorsed expansion of the Ambassador Bridge on the Detroit side has included erection of a long, new wall alongside it that cuts off traffic flow in the neighborhood and access to different sections of the community. A battle between local residents and the Detroit International Bridge Company is ongoing.<sup>13</sup> Ste. Anne’s fundraising goals may have played into the logic of this expansion. This expansion has also proven contentious across the river in Windsor, where the Church of the Assumption and the University of Windsor sit exactly aligned with Ste. Anne at the foot of the bridge. During our multiple visits to Indian Road in 2018 and 2019, at the foot of the bridge on the Windsor side we witnessed first a boarding up and then bulldozing of a row of houses to make way for the bridge’s expansion. Here, an expansion of hosting and being hosted by the divine is brought into being by enhancing but also interrupting the flow of habitation—a certain form of dwelling—for different constituencies.

<sup>13</sup>For more on this conflict, see <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2023/02/20/southwest-detroit-residents-battle-ambassador-bridge-owners-over-possible-expansion/69916788007>.

Walls are hardening, but water is flowing and not always life-enhancing. Water that escapes through improper management eludes the theological frame. Parishioners and priests construct flooding as a technical problem addressed through municipal politics. An increasingly common refrain proclaims that water is life: a universal need and a potentially unifying interest. But water can also drown and disrupt. Disinterest in its governance divides the Catholic Church into those with the resources to stay the flooding and those who must scramble to mitigate its effects. In other words, the Catholic Church, with its patchwork presence/absence across multiple parishes and educational venues, is not a homogenous, unitary entity. “Bluening infrastructures” connect the urban political, financial, and ecclesiastical forces “to biophysical forces that restructure urban space through new hydraulic accumulations and dispossessions” (Gaber 2021: 1805). And this manifests through a church that is caring, against these dynamics of accumulations and dispossession, but which is also constituted by the flow of a (white) “mob” (parishioners from a suburban parish) that compounds it.

## Air

As we drive along I-75, steam billows up from cement monoliths. River Rouge, and southwestern Detroit more generally, typically have the worst average Air Quality Index in Michigan. High cancer rates affect a predominantly racialized population. Air quality has improved in recent years and the Sierra Club won major settlements for residents in 2020, which led to the closure of three coal-fired plants and substantial funding for electric buses and other measures to improve air quality (Rushing and Ali 2021). The Trump Department of Justice filed an objection to the latter, which constituted a separate settlement between the Sierra Club and DTE Energy, arguing that Clean Air Act settlements could not extend beyond the terms approved by the Department of Justice. River Rouge thus acted as a laboratory for the consolidation of executive power in an experiment that ultimately failed. The court ruled against the Department and the incoming Biden administration declined to appeal.

We turn off of the highway and proceed to St Frances Xavier Parish, only to find it shuttered. Serendipitously, we encounter the caretaker in the yard, chatting with an unhouseed friend. He explains that the Parish recently completed its merger initiated in 2012 with Our Lady of Lourdes Church to form Ste. Andre Bisette parish in Ecorse, directly south of Detroit. After informing us of the current state of affairs, he invites us into the desacralized church, where we find a stripped-down space with nearly empty walls, remnants of old banners featuring John Paul II, and, in one corner, scattered statues. Affixed to one of the lateral glass doors is a copy of the letter of the canonical act of desacralization, signed from Rome.

Moving past the antechamber, we appreciate the beautiful late nineteenth-century architecture, its ceiling adorned with sparse yet elegant art deco details. Descending into the basement, the caretaker guides us to what was originally a school gym and an assembly hall used by the affiliated Catholic school next door. Old plastic chairs are piled in one corner and a glass cabinet holds a collection of basketball trophies. A rack of outdated clothes stands in the center, perhaps left over from a fundraising fair. Life has paused here in an ordinary moment, not entirely emptied out yet. The caretaker reiterates that the historic building, like St. Agnes, will be sold.

The nearby Ford River Rouge plant in Dearborn marks the site of the 1941 strike. The area stood at the heart of Catholic labor, industrial dehumanization, and racial

tension, as captured in the Diego Rivera murals housed at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The factory that once employed over 120,000 workers closed in 2004. The site remains the largest industrial complex associated with Ford Motor Company. The Dearborn Truck plant, the primary facility, boasts a vegetation-covered roof and rainwater reclamation system but employs only six thousand workers, on a two-tier wage system.<sup>14</sup> Racial division remains, and industrial dehumanization has given way to post-industrial demobilization and depopulation. A future with clean air relies on flows of aid, but urban greening spaces and breathing space are emerging through other means.

Air constitutes the most amorphous and ethereal element in our discussion. Here, we consider air as movement, analogous to the movement of the flock passing through a space, flowing like air (and water). The Capuchin Solanus Casey Center in the southwest of Detroit poignantly illustrates such movement. Since Detroit includes more Catholic churches than most urban centers in the country, the Catholic Church has contributed to an urban economy in movement and also serves as an index of expansion and re-imagination in a contracting and expanding economy. Architectural firms have helped to enact such imaginaries, with a Capuchin and Hamilton Anderson collaboration seeking to draw local neighbors into the process of expansion rather than pushing them out and cheaply expropriating their land for the Center's enlargement.<sup>15</sup> The promise of infrastructure here extends outward.

Solanus Casey, a Friar Minor Capuchin, may become the fourth ever U.S. born canonized saint in the history of the Catholic Church. Born in 1870, he was beatified on the 18 November 2017, in Detroit's Ford Field football arena before seventy-one thousand people, an event live-streamed to approximately 240 million viewers. He is already an impactful saint, but is considered a humble one in the Catholic pantheon, having originally been given the role of porter at the Saint Bonaventure Capuchin monastery in Detroit, which he held for over two decades. He was well-aware of the trauma of the Great Depression and fed and tended to the needs of all who came to the church's door. Construction on the Solanus Casey Center began in 2002, near the well-known Capuchin Food Kitchen and gardens, which have provided food for many in downtown Detroit. The original layout of the Center—now the fastest growing pilgrimage center in the United States—manifests elements of Franciscan inspiration. It is designed as a place of pilgrimage, flow, and circulation with a centrifugal rather than centripetal vector (Foley 2018). As Father David Preuss, the then-Head of the Center, conveyed to us, it is a living model that indexes a church that is agile in its way of hosting and being hosted by the divine, rather than a static parish.

The Creation Garden at the entrance of the Center receives the pilgrims by inviting them into an experiential ground where one can contemplate "Sister Moon," a cast stone sculpture by Nancy Frankel; "Brother Fire," made by Rob Fisher from powder-coated stainless steel strips; "Sister Water," a composition of Arabic-glazed tiles crafted by Hashim Al-Tawil and reminiscent of an Islamic non-figurative

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<sup>14</sup>The UAW successfully negotiated a gradual end to this two-tier system in the 2023 strike (White and Shepardson 2023).

<sup>15</sup>Visit the company website for an overview of this donation and collaboration: <https://www.hamilton-anderson.com/project/solanus-casey-center-master-plan/>.



tradition; and “Brother Wind,” large engraved metal chimes with a figuration of different water animals, by Woodrow Nash (McNichols 2009).<sup>16</sup>

The contemplative aspect is one of many that animates this Holy Infrastructure that, as it grows, not only belongs to the Friar Capuchins, the Archdioceses of Detroit, but also more and more to the long arm of the Vatican’s governing apparatus. This is always the case when a new saint is anointed. The actual canonization of Saint Solanus brought into view a *complexio oppositorum*. As though miraculously, Saint Solanus created coalitions among antithetical forces still at work within the Catholic Church (Schmitt 1996; Muehlebach 2009). The Capuchin order which—together with the archdiocese of Detroit and the Vatican Pontifical Council for the causes of Saints—were in charge of the organization of the beatification. At the same time, they aimed to de-clericalize the space by minimizing the number of clerics on the altar, enhancing the altar’s open space, and enacting the reliquary’s aesthetic in wood rather than in metal or gold (Foley 2018). On the other hand, the Sacred Heart Seminary and the Archdioceses of Detroit also managed the event because there was much at stake in *capturing future flows* of pilgrims to the Solanus Center, seen as an important hinge in the Pastoral plan for the new evangelization of the city, entitled “Unleash the Gospel.”<sup>17</sup>

For Father David, the Solanus Centre is a testimony of what was of Jesus on earth, then of Saint Francis, and now of Saint Solanus: a capacity of giving life to a contemporary societal form in which God is at work. In this way, the Bible is not just a historical document but a living one; a continuous, creative, divine inspiration for the living. The Center is animated by Solanus’s power of presence and the Capuchin mantra of prayer and service. The movement of an increasingly larger flock of believers further enlivens the space. The air in this Holy Infrastructure is a living *medio* of flow. The flow of the infrastructure directs not only bodies moving in space, but also the saintly air/ambience that envelops and traverses the pilgrims as a collective “body.”

Solanus is remembered for his soft and quiet voice. For Catholic charismatic cosmology, voice, breath, and electronic audiovisual technology are strongly interrelated in the bodybuilding of sainthood (de Abreu 2015; 2021). Additionally, the Holy Infrastructure of the Solanus Center relies on circulating air, opening doors, and its open-air creation garden and covered walkway. Solanus’s sanctity was less invested in being a Petrine rock and, more accurately, in being a door keeper, letting people in, listening to them, and letting them move through. Nowadays, his saintly corporeal presence envelops believers through the movement of his relics’ distribution. As Father David remarks, the Capuchin no longer have much control over the saint’s body, which was exhumed just before canonization and flown back to Rome. A Vatican commission is now in charge of distributing his bodily relics to where they may be needed for new churches dedicated to his blessings. The Solanus Center retains a relic of a small right-hand bone, since sanctity requires a new movement of the potency of the body in space. Paradoxically, the Holy Infrastructure of the Solanus Centre shows how air and movement become central

<sup>16</sup>For a visual reference to these sculptures, see <https://maryloudriedger2.wordpress.com/tag/solanus-casey-center-creation-garden/>.

<sup>17</sup>To view the official document related to this archdioceses’ plan, see <https://www.unleashthegospel.org/the-letter/>.

to its force and potency, as it relinquishes its own ability to retain the saintly body. Absence here creates ambience.

As the charisma of his sanctity grew, so did the center's modular possibilities. Father David recalls that the physical expansion of the center required buying out a set of nearby properties in a spirit of "urban renewal not urban removal." In 2017, through a \$20 million donation given by Art Van Furniture founder Art Van Elslander, a major renovation began, focused particularly on redesigning the balance of light and dark in the Center's existing, somehow-too-formal pre-Vatican II architecture (Welch 2017). The renovation was to improve the flow and movement of the pilgrims, orient the garden, and construct a new and better shop along with a pilgrims' cafeteria. The architectural company Hamilton Anderson, which is leading the expansion, was slightly surprised when they realized that the renovation included a large shop near the Chapel of Blessed Solanus to ensure gathering, but also to make the shop central to the pilgrims' experience as they passed by it, at least in the donor's view.<sup>18</sup> Circulation, movement, ambience, and now increased retail clients and capital enhancement all characterize this Holy Infrastructure in its gaseous capacity to expand and "continuously" grow. Flows of desire—for an "American saint," for earthly miracles, and for the well-being of the community and the earth—fall into alliance to produce the Solanus Center as a node in a network inscribed by the bodies of pilgrims and priests.

### Holy Infrastructures: An Open-Ended and Transformative Practice

Infrastructure is a particular kind of assemblage: a spatial one that contracts dynamic flows of force into a network, harnessing and regulating their affects. In contrast to the open-ended, non-totalizing concept of the assemblage, infrastructure channels and shapes but also breaks down, requires repair, and defines the limits and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. An infrastructure can have profound political implications because it organizes and negotiates access and emerges and reseeds through phases of planning and improvisation.

The existing literature on religious infrastructure can be typologized as three-fold. One is a study of material religion as a form of infrastructure, insofar as it is a study of the struggles and tensions around the potentials and failures of materiality to channel divine force (Handman and Opas 2019: 1010). This approach questions how infrastructures have largely been studied via Latour's continuum of human and non-human, which has somehow sidelined religious socialities. This approach advocates instead for a study of religious infrastructures as flow and distribution of resources mobilized by the institutional space where the religious subject operates. This approach takes religious denominations as its central focus and shows how infrastructures manifest the life of institutions. This seems more marked for Catholicism than for evangelical Christianity.

A second literature focuses on the study of religious infrastructure as an infrastructure of the mind; that is, on the mind and the distribution and enactment of the relation to/dialogue with/imagination of God across different cultural milieus. Taking for granted the dialogical nature of "talking to God" and

<sup>18</sup>For the relocation of the Bakery in the Solanus Casey Center, see <https://www.detroitcatholic.com/news/on-the-rise-bakery-moves-to-newly-opened-solanus-casey-center-expansion>.

God's reply, this body of literature emphasizes the nature of infrastructure as the production of different forms of personhood produced by this speaking relation. The way in which "the supernatural" is invited into the self as an act of imaginative speech becomes the architecture of a comparative religious infrastructure of the mind (Luhrmann and Fortier 2017). However, not only is the basis of this analytic (on the phenomenology of speaking to God) skewed to a cataphatic Christian understanding (in which God is identified with attributes), but the whole notion of an infrastructure of the mind is problematically underpinned by a particular theology of Christianity (such as *imago dei*, a shape of the human gaze in relation to the divine gaze) and it takes for granted a notion of a "supernatural" God. It also underplays the importance of Christian kenosis and imitation through carnality and a theology of incarnation.

We agree here that the problem God poses in anthropology and ethnography is akin to the problem posed by earth beings and other cosmopolitical entities in terms that engage with ethnographically divergent worlds (de la Cadena 2015). This "problem" should not diminish or detract from the embodied call for ontological parity over alterity from fieldwork interlocutors, as fleshed out in the anthropology of evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity (Chua 2022). Yet our discussion also aims to move beyond long-existing secular distinctions between church and state sovereignty as separate political spheres. Instead, we think of them as intertwined and processual, as an ongoing management of life rather than as independently necessitating mediation and the mediatization of God and spiritual presence. For us, the boundaries of church and state—as *projects* rather than agents—are both co-constitutive and permeable, both generative and ridden with tensions.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, and for us more productively, some approaches to religious infrastructure build upon Henri Lefebvre's notion of corporeal rhythm as a form of inscription into spatial reality that offers the possibility of profoundly transformative changes (2013). Other studies invite us to consider the complex making-visible and the making-invisible of infrastructures that stand at the interlocking of differing knowledges of the land and soil at contested borderlands (Muehlmann 2020). From such perspectives, borderland churches can be studied as spaces of condensation and elongation of devotional rhythms and via the interconnection and mapping of flows of material religion, devotional and liturgical labor, and resources and orientations linking up different nodes of worshipping across borderlands (Peña 2017). Such is the case with the ongoing connections between the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption in Windsor and Ste. Anne Minor Basilica in Detroit.

This understanding of infrastructure allows us to foreground a religious image that does not merely condense holiness but is enacted in flows through the infrastructure (de Abreu 2015). Hence, we understand material infrastructures as "holy" when they are embedded in practices of affective devotions, orientations and desires that transform not only the practice of devotions (how different churches inspire different devotions), but also in how the poetics and poesis of devotional

<sup>19</sup>It is beyond our scope here to situate this focus on Holy Infrastructures and the management of elements and forms of life in close relation to rich debates in anthropology on the adequacy of mediation in conveying and affording the presence and the semiotic truthfulness of God (Keane 2008), the problem of God's presence and the creativity that this may entail (Engelke 2007), and the force of spectacular mediatization as a neo-baroque aesthetics—especially strong in and through the Catholic Church in the Americas (Norget 2021). Yet we want to signal their productive interface for other work to come.

experience are always theistically open-ended and unfold as a political force for colonialist inclusionary and exclusionary formations (Largier 2017; Craig and Yountae 2021). Therefore, Holy Infrastructures operate as open-ended and transformative encounters of affective attachments, desires, and human and other-than-human copresence (Beliso-De Jesús 2015). They also mark the rhythms of the polis.

Infrastructures have also been read as the promise, and particularly, as mediating the promise of the modern (Larkin 2013). Productive debates on infrastructures and borders as method hinge on a connective and disjunctive promise of modernity which is also, from one perspective, itself a secularization of a theological language and an alleged interiorization of the spiritual, or the discursive division of the transcendent supernatural from the evidentiary natural (Mezzadra and Nelson 2013; Taylor 2007; Latour 2013).<sup>20</sup> The promise of infrastructure operates both at the connective and disjunctive levels of imagination as distributive processes, creating relations between that which it distributes and to where it is distributed.

Thus, central to Catholic infrastructures in the Detroit-Windsor borderland is the articulation of infrastructures, labor, capitalist reproduction, and the emergence and multiplication of performative acts of its refusal—a spacious temporal zone of friction (Tsing 2011). The symbiotic relation between the two regions in the economic ecology of this borderland was dramatically rearticulated with 9/11, creating a knock-down effect, particularly on the stagnating urban ecology of labor in Windsor. It is only now, with the completion of renovation at the Church of the Assumption, across the river from Ste. Anne, that a common language of heritage Church infrastructure has been openly mobilized once again.<sup>21</sup>

Hence a promise of Catholic modernity, entrenched since *Rerum Novarum* and then through the Vatican II Council, is always in tension with the proliferation and heterogenization of borders. This invites us to think more broadly on the waxing and waning of church infrastructures at the borderlands: how being populated by different groups, religious materialities, saints' potencies, and rhythms and mobility inform a social contract (or lack thereof), an "obligation" between church and people (Peña 2017). A promise is central to a Holy Infrastructure that this waxing and waning orients, a mediation of interconnected theological, urban, and racial scales, constantly re-oriented through and with the elements.

## Holy Infrastructures and the Elements

Churches, whether thriving, failing, or abandoned, act as nodes through which various circulations pass. Although the buildings and their affiliation with the Catholic hierarchy act as a constant, the nature and intensity of flows vary. The buildings themselves obviously do not produce these functions which arise from the confluence of forces and the histories that unfold and converge in each church. These forces are not abstract, but physical, social, and theological and thus in movement

<sup>20</sup>This is the case of the Mariner's Church on the waterfront of Detroit, to which Gordon Lightfoot's song of "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" refers, and which is part of an anglophone heritage across United States and Canada.

<sup>21</sup>For a similar drive seeking the status of minor Basilica on the Canadian side of the border, see <https://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/assumption-church-continues-renovation-parish-applies-for-national-heritage-designation>.

through city. Each church stands as a constellation rather than as a building, connected to a web of different spaces through the movement of parishioners, resources, and materialities.

Social forces crosscut the urban fabric and the Catholic Church, operating as its own constellation, or stratum, with considerable resources, works to recruit or enlist and organize these forces, but it cannot control or determine them. The church thus emerges as a horizontal phenomenon, constructed through asymmetrical alliances rather than as a vertical phenomenon, a model of a Church hierarchy. Or, better, an understanding and mobilization of a vertical and sovereign Church have, more than ever, to embrace and reckon with elemental encounters and flows. In the present moment, this tension is captured theologically very well by the impasse (and active resistance) within the church to Pope Francis and his mantra of the encounter and the mercy of embrace (Cavadini and Wallenfang 2018; Napolitano 2020). However, the church, and churches, can shape and reinforce certain tendencies through the creation of infrastructures that channel flows of people, relics, and sacred materialities in a more vertical way. In a charismatic Catholic setting, as in Brazil, air can be an elastic rhythm of “body building” which moves leaders and the masses who follow them, although without any agenda for emancipatory renewal of a social and labor contract (de Abreu 2021), an interest that would have been instead at the center of Dorothy Day’s Catholic activism in Detroit.

Since the early eighteenth century in the Detroit region, the Catholic Church operated among many other stakeholders, including as part of the Native fur trade. It was Father Gabriel Richard (1767–1832), originally based in the Church of Ste. Anne who took the lead in counteracting the “immoral” behavior of Indians, Protestants, and atheists by promoting a “good order” that only the Catholic Church could provide (Wenger 2022: 46). That order also implied the foundation of Catholic education infrastructures including the trusteeship of the new University of Michigan. Yet, the elements and their management also point to a potential failure of a vertical power of sovereignty and its unleashing of violence. Historically, for the Catholic Church, the alleged management of elements in “unnatural” or “miraculous” ways, (for example, the movement of fire going downward, water flowing up etc.) has been the index of witchcraft, and so expunged through deadly public expiations.

However, it is not only through the construction and the maintenance of physical infrastructure but by sacralizing certain circuits or otherwise rendering them (il)legible from more mundane perspectives that “Holy Infrastructure” coalesce. The cases of “Mass Mobs” (re)sacralize spaces, in some cases via support for the Tridentine Mass (see St. Josephat and Grotto) and flows increase and decrease in intensity. However, when these flows disappear, the coherence of a given node collapses. The soil of the grotto is a sacred battleground of memorialization, but also of a feared “conquering” by demonic, pro-choice forces and Black neighbors’ encroachment. Elements remain theologically latent and immanent, though socially potent; yet without the cooperation of these forces in space, an architecture cannot remain habitable as Holy Infrastructure. Yet, this does not necessarily result in the abandonment of the church itself if the Catholic hierarchy can successfully recruit and integrate other flows. This is a central way in which the Catholic Church has compounded and eased the racialization processes (and white flight) in Detroit via the hardening and softening of those flows. Hence, a study of a religious denomination such as Catholicism through a focus on the elements, their life-enhancing and life-taking qualities, asks us to engage religious formations beyond

a paradigm of denominations and dominion. This broader lens allows us to focus on how inscriptions of holiness within certain infrastructures cultivate the flow or interruption of people, affects, elements and resources, which, in turn, informs the urban terrain of Detroit as a racialized borderland.

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