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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Immigration and Libidinal Violence in Gore Vidal's *Duluth*

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Abstract

Though Gore Vidal seldom spoke of immigration in his nonfiction essays, his novel *Duluth* (1983) is centrally concerned with the question. *Duluth* presents a fantasy version of the American city, but one whose concerns are strikingly contemporary: sexual repression, racism, police brutality. In *Duluth*, Vidal suggests that these three elements are in fact linked. He suggests that race-based brutality against undocumented workers is, at the ground level, libidinal in nature. These brutalities are then used by government powers to stoke racial tensions and maintain power; however, even that governmental action is ultimately based in the libidinal drives of individual actors. This article argues that Vidal's linkage of these two forces, the libidinal and the conspiratorial, makes an important intervention in discussions of race and immigration both in the 1980s and today.

Introduction

Throughout his career, Gore Vidal focussed on several ailments of the American experiment – imperialism, homophobia, sex-negativity – but less often did he consider the question of race. Though he was active throughout the 1960s, his attention was seldom on the civil rights movement. Dennis Altman goes so far as to call issues of race Vidal's "greatest blindspot."[1] However, as Altman observes, Vidal was not silent on the issue of racism.[2] He simply did not engage with it as heavily as he did other issues, particularly in his fiction. The *Narratives of Empire* do occasionally feature Black characters as side figures (see, for example, *Burr*). So, too, does *Myra Breckinridge* (1968). However, the experiences of these characters are seldom considered beyond how they affect the protagonist; indeed, in *Myra* the character of Irving Amadeus exists primarily for Myra herself to make a number of racist jokes at his expense. It was not until *Kalki* (1978) that Vidal gave much attention at all to questions of race in his fiction, with a narrative about a group of white Americans

[1]Dennis Altman, *Gore Vidal's America* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 63.
[2]Ibid., 107.

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who, in their zeal for decreasing overpopulation, bring about the destruction of humanity – beginning with everyone who is not white. Thus in *Kalki* the problem is present, but *Duluth* (1983) represents his most concentrated fictional engagement with race. *Duluth* is a novel centrally concerned with American identity at the end of the American Century, an identity that was rapidly changing following the 1963 repeal of race-based immigration quotas and the subsequent increase in immigrants from all corners of the map, Mexico not least among them. In this novel, Vidal chronicles (and anticipates) white backlash to this influx of immigrants and mocks sentimental, if liberal, attitudes toward these same immigrants. Along the way, he identifies a collaboration between police abuse of migrants, on the one hand, and cynical political maneuvering of them, on the other. Indeed, for Vidal these are two sides of the same libidinal coin. Vidal's connection between ground-level libidinal and government-level conspiratorial actions provides an insight into both Vidal's understanding of the racial dynamics of the 1980s and contemporary controversies surrounding immigration.

I have chosen in this essay to use the term "libidinal" to mark the motivations behind racist violence. Derived, obviously, from Freudian language (which Vidal, with his distaste for Freud, would no doubt find objectionable), the term should be understood here as largely, though not exclusively, sexual. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud makes note of the struggle between the demands of an increasingly ordered society and the demands of the libido. Successfully navigating this world depends on displacing libidinal urges into socially approved channels.[3] Though this book complicates his earlier discussions of the same topic, Freud maintains that neurosis largely emerges from the clash between libidinal urges and social demands.[4] Vidal's own antipathy toward Freud is well documented in both his essays and his novels. For example, in "Doc Reuben" Vidal links Freud to his own negative understanding of the Jewish and Christian traditions regarding sex and procreation.[5] However, this Freudian concept of libidinal drives aligns well with Vidal's actual handling of sexuality in his own novels. In *Duluth*, Vidal links racialized violence to libidinal drives. Scholars have pointed out the libidinal dimensions of racist violence before. For example, Jonathan Beller unites whiteness and various modes of observation and control in a kind of "fractal fascism," which he characterizes as libidinal.[6] Anne Anlin Cheng uses Freudian concepts of melancholy to discuss how racialization in America "may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others."[7] Identifying as being part of a particular racial group is thus a libidinal act for the parties in power.[8] While Cheng's assertions are broader

[3]Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 26.

[4]Ibid., 65.

[5]Gore Vidal, "Doc Reuben," in Vidal, *United States: Essays 1952–1992* (New York: Broadway, 1993), 569–82, 577.

[6]Jonathan Beller, *The Message Is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 146.

[7]Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.

[8]Ibid., 156.

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than physical violence, they can give some insight into the dynamics at work in *Duluth*. Indeed, *Duluth* goes beyond these critics by suggesting that libidinal forces are central to racial violence – that beneath seemingly materialist motives lurks the irrational.

Understanding how libidinal drives function in *Duluth* can shed light on Vidal's insights about immigration during the 1980s. Heather Neilson observes that one of Vidal's primary themes in his fiction is power.[9] In Vidal's novels, rape is the ultimate expression of power and domination. Thus is it deployed in *Myra Breckinridge*, *Myron*, and *Live from Golgotha*, all of which feature the protagonist either raping or being raped at one point or another (sometimes, in the case of Myra, both). What is notable about *Duluth* is the way it inverts the conventional relationship between sex and power. In this novel, sex is not an expression of power; rather, power is a supplement or replacement for a frustrated sex drive. Vidal suggests that government repression of minorities is not purely based on rational calculation; rather, it emerges from the libidinal drives and neuroses of the oppressors. In the years since *Duluth* was published, the question of immigration (legal and illegal) has continued to be a dominant one in the American imagination. Vidal's novel provides a lens through which to understand controversies of the past forty years and more; in this book, Vidal suggests that an analysis rooted purely in power, divorced from the libidinal, is incomplete.

Metafictional *Duluth*

Duluth is one of Gore Vidal's experiments. While Vidal's best-known fictional works are the *Narratives of Empire*, which (with the exception of a metafictional coda at the end of *The Golden Age*) avoid postmodern elements, his inventions sit easily alongside contemporary postmodern novels. In these experiments, Vidal is interested in the form of the novel and in the ways in which he can manipulate narrative, space, and time. His most daring inventions – which is not to say his most successful ones – are almost universally science fiction of one kind or another and almost all involve television: television as a time machine in *Myron*, as a reality-altering mechanism in *Live from Golgotha*, and in *Duluth* as a kind of mediator between fictional realities. Indeed, as Marcie Frank observes, "the print-screen circuit becomes a vehicle through which Vidal conveys his sexual politics."[10] Frank reads the novel as in part a commentary on American literary taste, since "each of the characters populating the archetypal American city either is a romance writer or derives from the imagination of one."[11] Thus, when a woman introduced in the first chapter dies in a car accident, she reawakens in a television show that somehow allows her to converse with people from her original life. Meanwhile, all of this action takes place within or alongside the novels of a female writer named Rosemary Klein Kantor, a plagiarist who writes using a computer drawing on a database of all the world's fiction.[12] This narrative complexity makes it difficult to summarize the novel. In a way, the surest summary

[9]Heather Neilson, *Political Animal: Gore Vidal on Power* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash, 2014), 32.

[10]Marcie Frank, *How to Be an Intellectual in the Age of TV: The Lessons of Gore Vidal* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 97.

[11]Ibid., 73.

[12]Gore Vidal, *Duluth* (New York: Ballantine, 1983), 12.

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is that "things happen and then alien insects invade and take over" (in a final scene that anticipates Vidal's own more successful satiric conclusion to *Live from Golgotha*). The cast of characters is not enormous, but it is constantly shifting; they die, they are reincarnated in a new story, they move on … and, thematically, as with most of his experiments, the novel is interested in whatever Vidal was interested in at the time – all of it, all at once.

Duluth takes on middlebrow women's fiction, television, racism, police brutality, and a host of other topics. This jumble of themes perhaps pushes critics to consider the book a fairly standard metafiction. Most critical responses to *Duluth*, both laudatory and not, focus on the novel's satire in the abstract or refer to its implementation of various metafictional tricks. At the time, reviewers hardly knew what to do with it. Fred Kaplan says, "The response from many [reviewers] was uncomprehending bewilderment. They preferred Vidal's more traditional straight narratives, preferably about American history. Some expressed angry rejection, particularly on political grounds."[13] A glance at contemporary reviews confirms Kaplan's assertion. *Kirkus Reviews* called the novel "in-crowd parody … better done in those New Yorker one-or-two-page humor pieces."[14] Writing in the *New York Times*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt spoke highly of the novel, calling it a "savagely inhuman comedy."[15] However, in the same publication George Stade disparaged it, saying that the novel satirizes "Middle America's political and sexual practices, its cultural pretensions and its literary preferences, which do not seem to include novels by Mr. Vidal," and insisting that Vidal is "not at his best here."[16] R. Z. Sheppard, in *Time*, ruled that the novel is "clever throughout but only sporadically funny."[17] Other readers were more kind. Italo Calvino – with whom Vidal shared a mutual admiration – praised the novel highly, calling Vidal the master of the "hyper-novel or the novel elevated to the square or to the cube."[18] Among more recent critics, Susan Baker and Curtis Gibson devote considerable space to reading the novel as a deconstruction of the idea of authorship itself, suggesting that the novel "severs the connection between author and text."[19] Meanwhile, Vidal's primary biographers both praise the book, with Kaplan claiming that "*Duluth* raises cleverness to high art" and asserting that the novel represents "a disappointed lover's bitterly elegiac, wittily imaginative lament for what once was (at least in expectation) and now is no longer."[20] Meanwhile, Jay Parini claims that the novel was misread at the time, since reviewers

[13]Fred Kaplan, *Gore Vidal: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 724.

[14]"Duluth," *Kirkus Reviews*, 1 May 1983, at www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/a/gore-vidal-22/duluth (accessed 23 Sept. 2025).

[15]Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Books of the Times: Duluth," *New York Times*, 20 May 1983, at https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/01/07/01/specials/vidal-duluth.html (accessed 23 Sept. 2025).

[16]George Stade, "The Duluth We Deserve?", *New York Times*, 5 June 1983, at https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/01/home/vidal-duluth.html.

[17]R. Z. Sheppard, "Shotgun Satire," *Time*, 13 June 1983, at https://time.com/archive/6697720/books-shotgun-satire (accessed 23 Sept. 2025).

[18]Italo Calvino, "Imagining Vidal," in Jay Parini, ed., *Gore Vidal: Writer against the Grain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 31–36, 36.

[19]Susan Baker and Curtis S. Gibson, *Gore Vidal: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997), 179.

[20]Kaplan, 723.

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"missed the anarchic energy of *Duluth*, which has many virtues, though its lack of narrative coherence makes them less visible."[21]

The overwhelming critical focus on the metafictional aspects of *Duluth* is understandable. This is a novel centrally concerned with boundaries and borders – boundaries of taste, such as Vidal pushed often in his novels, and boundaries of fiction. The boundaries of Duluth are not only fluid in a geographical sense, as will be discussed below; they are also malleable in the *fictional* sense. Beryl, a character introduced in the opening pages of the novel, dies mere chapters later. Her consciousness is transferred to a book by fictional writer Rosemary Klein Kantor, while her companion, Edna, is moved to a soap opera called *Duluth*, written by *another* Rosemary Klein Kantor. From this soap opera (and from the novel) these women are able to reach out and converse with people within the no less (or more!) fictional world of Duluth. Here Vidal introduces "the fictive law of absolute uniqueness," according to which "each character in any fiction ... is absolutely unique," and accordingly "can appear, simultaneously, in as many fictions as the random may require."[22] Edna is able to speak to townsperson Chloris from inside the television set, much to the confusion of her costars.[23] The characters in *Duluth* are aware of this sort of transposition; Rosemary Klein Kantor tells the son of Beryl Hoover about his mother's transmission into her novel:

> I was midway through Chapter Three of Countess Mara which is set in the Swiss Alps at the clinic of a famed cosmetic surgeon, when Beryl suddenly entered the book, as a patient. Beryl made herself right at home. She claims to have been a friend of my heroine, Countess Mara, which I doubt ...[24]

The characters realize that Beryl wants to communicate, but she is obliged to wait until later in the narrative.[25] In a sense, thus, she becomes an immigrant within the fictional world of *Duluth*.

The metafiction of *Duluth* works in service of Vidal's social concern with national boundaries, and particularly in this novel with the question of illegal immigration. The two work in parallel; in some sense *all* of these characters are illicitly crossing borders. *Duluth* allows Vidal to approach a controversial topic of the time that he did not address in his essays: the problem – or "problem" – of illegal immigration from Mexico. Vidal's collected essays contain little about immigration beyond this passage in "Monotheism and its Discontents":

> Professor Pendulum is having a nervous breakdown because so many different tribes are now being drawn to this sweet land of liberty and, thus far, there is no indication that any of the new arrivals intends ever to read *The Age of Jackson*. I think the taking in of everyone can probably be overdone. There may not be

[21] Jay Parini, *Empire of Self: A Life of Gore Vidal*, Kindle edn (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2015), 272.
[22] Vidal, *Duluth*, 16.
[23] Ibid., 24.
[24] Ibid., 39.
[25] Ibid., 40.

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> enough jobs for very many more immigrants, though what prosperity we have ever enjoyed in the past was usually based on slave or near-slave labor.[26]

Vidal's perspective here is strikingly moderate; he mocks people who worry about the destruction of "American culture" via the influx of foreign voices, but he acknowledges that the United States may struggle in providing jobs for these new residents. Beyond this, he has little to say in his work as an essayist. As *Duluth* shows, however, Vidal was interested in the way in which immigrants, whatever their legal status, might be exploited by a combination of libidinal assault by the police and political maneuvering by the powerful.

Duluth is, thus, Vidal's most sustained examination of the question of racism and immigration at the dawn of the Reagan era. Of critics who have discussed this novel, both Heather Neilson and Dennis Altman have made this connection. Neilson comments, "A serious subtext throughout the novel is the unresolved – the novel implicitly suggests unresolvable – issue of interracial conflict."[27] Meanwhile, Altman gestures toward the difficult satiric tone Vidal takes toward race.[28] In the novel, while the white residents cross borders of fiction, the Mexican characters cross national borders and live unregistered in the barrios off Kennedy Boulevard. Vidal maintained that all of his novels were in fact about America and American politics, from the historical fiction to the inventions like *Myra* or *Duluth*.[29] In the historical novels, this topicality is fairly easy to see; in the inventions, it appears in more abstract ways. In the case of *Duluth*, the setting functions symbolically. The novel came to Vidal with the first sentence.[30] Vidal locates the action of the novel in "present-day Duluth."[31] However, "present-day Duluth" is not the actually existing Duluth of Vidal's era or any other. It is, rather, a symbolic manifestation of the vices and errors of the American Century. The city of Duluth is coextensive with the nation it occupies. Just as the small town stands in for America in the work of Sherwood Anderson or Sinclair Lewis, so too Duluth – not a small town, but in this novel a city of indeterminate size – is America itself. As Vidal says, "If, as it has been so often said, every society gets the Duluth that it deserves, the United States of America in the last but one decade of the twentieth century has come up with a knockout."[32] Here Vidal sets readers up to understand his Duluth symbolically or mythically.

Duluth is not a peaceful city. Rather, it is a savagely racist and violent metropolis. Vidal introduces the theme of racism early:

> Beryl's mind is indeed elsewhere. She has just observed through the frosted glass of the car window – the month is chill February and though it is only noon, the lights of the aurora borealis fill the entire southern sky like the long cold fingers of some great metaphor – a number of white men slowly hoist

[26]Gore Vidal, "Monotheism and Its Discontents," in Vidal, *United States*, 1048–54, 1053.
[27]Neilson, *Political Animal*, 218.
[28]Altman, *Gore Vidal's America*, 106, 117,
[29]Robert J. Stanton and Gore Vidal, eds., *Views from a Window* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1980), 32.
[30]Kaplan, *Gore Vidal*, 736.
[31]Vidal, *Duluth*, 1.
[32]Ibid., 1.

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> from the frozen ground a black man with a rope that has been slung over the branch of a tree. As the white men all pull together, the black man slowly leaves the ground for whatever afterlife the Supreme Author may be writing for him.
>
> "I believe, Edna, that a Negro is being lynched."
>
> "You'll love Duluth. I can tell."[33]

Obviously, Vidal is upending American geography – the aurora borealis appearing in the south – indicating that everything in this world is upside down, a reflection of our own world though not an exact replication of it. At the same time, the murder Beryl witnesses – the lynching of a Black man – was common in much of the twentieth century. Her casual observation – "I believe, Edna, that a Negro is being lynched" – suggests the commonplace nature of this sort of thing; Edna's own blasé response – ignoring the content of Beryl's words and insisting that she'll "love Duluth" – serves a similar purpose. This opening section sets up the world of the narrative and also suggests something about the narrative voice in the way hyperbolic satire will readily give place to graphic descriptions of real-world atrocities.

The physical borders of this Duluth are as ill-defined as its fictional boundaries. To the south sits Mexico, the source of its undocumented immigrants. Immediately to the north is Canada. There are other cities in *Duluth*'s America – most notably Hollywood and New Orleans, "just across the causeway."[34] But for Vidal's purposes there may as well not be any city other than Duluth. Duluth *is* America; its streets and major landmarks are named after American Presidents, its demographics are roughly those of the United States, and its central problems are also those of the United States in the 1980s:

> All appetites are catered for in Duluth. From casual lake-front sex to warm meaningful relationships in the ethnic barrios at the glittering desert's edge, there is something – if not someone – for everyone. There is also gambling at The Dude Ranch at the end of brothel-lined Gilder Road as well as social climbing and contract bridge at any number of private clubs of which the most exclusive is The Eucalyptus, set on a high hill overlooking the Duluth Woods, at whose verdant heart there is a swamp known to insect-lovers the world over as a unique macrocosm of insect life, vermiform and otherwise. Duluth's proud claim to be the bug capital of the world is no idle boast.[35]

This description encompasses most of the themes and the locations that will recur throughout the novel. Particularly notable is the contrast that Vidal's narrator sets up between "casual lake-front sex" and "warm meaningful relationships" – the latter of which take place in "the ethnic barrios," implying that the former is largely the domain of the white majority of the city. Sexual anarchy is satirized extensively in *Duluth*, though generally in a lighthearted manner. However, the prevalence of sex in the white community of the city has implications for its treatment of minorities. It is, in some sense, the source of the libidinal violence visited upon the immigrants

[33]Ibid., 2.
[34]Ibid., 29.
[35]Ibid., 1.

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in the novel. Meanwhile, in this passage the residents of the barrios are portrayed as a seemingly healthy alternative to the sexual mores of the dominant caste. Vidal will eventually puncture this sentimental view of racial minorities later in the novel, showing them to be as sexually insecure as their white oppressors. For Vidal, as he claims in the title of one of his essays, "Sex Is Politics."[36] Meanwhile, the last sentence of this description anticipates the novel's conclusion, when insectoid aliens invade the city, ironically literalizing the fears of the white rulers of Duluth, who spend much of the novel thinking about the increasing number of ethnic minorities in their city.

Duluth and Mexican immigration in the 1980s

Duluth engages with important controversies of the time surrounding immigration. Contemporary commentary on Mexican immigration was mixed. In 1979, John Erlichman published a piece entitled "Mexican Aliens Aren't a Problem ... They're a Solution." This article chronicles Erlichman's time at the Safford Federal Prison Camp, a holding place for illegal immigrants awaiting deportation. He recounts his journey from fear of the "swarthy men with long dark mustachios" to an understanding of their plight.[37] He discusses the ignorance and indifference of the federal government toward Mexican immigrants and ends by arguing that America "should welcome these Mexicans enthusiastically."[38] In response, Gary Imhoff of the Federation for American Immigration Reform wrote in a letter to *Esquire* that Erlichman was ignoring the role that illegal immigration played in unemployment.[39] This exchange in the pages of *Esquire* demonstrates the state of the discourse in the final years of the Carter administration, shortly before Reagan took office. It is into this milieu that Vidal launched *Duluth*, and it is against such a backdrop that the novel ought to be read. This is not to say that Vidal's metafictional meditations are irrelevant, but that they operate in support of a political reflection. The social–political situation allows readers to more fully understand the novel's fundamental project, in which the metafictional services the political.

Immigration in America has been a constant source of anxiety throughout the twentieth century. Though Aristide Zolberg argues that immigration was not a free-for-all in the early years of the American experiment, it remains true that it was not a matter of federal policy until much later.[40] The 1980s were in the middle of a reevaluation of the role of immigration in America, and particularly Mexican immigration. In the 1960s and 1970s the laws about immigration were revised to eliminate racial quotas and introduce new ways of controlling immigration. During this same period, increasing numbers of Mexicans entered the United States, driven by both domestic issues and general neglect of the matter stateside.[41] Under President Jimmy Carter,

[36]Gore Vidal, "Sex Is Politics," in Vidal, *United States*, 538–53.

[37]John Ehrlichman, "Mexican Aliens Aren't a Problem ... They're a Solution," *Esquire*, Aug. 1979, 54–64, 54.

[38]Ibid., 55, 64.

[39]Gary Imhoff, "Illegal Aliens," letter in *Esquire*, Nov. 1979, 9.

[40]Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 2, 3.

[41]Ibid., 340, 341.

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a study was undertaken to recommend changes in the racial quotas that had previously ruled American immigration policy.[42] The intent here was to revise the United States' outdated immigration policies:

> By the time SCIRP [Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy] submitted its report in February 1981, Ronald Reagan had been elected to the presidency; but despite the change of administration, hailed as the dawn of a new era in American politics, the commissioners set the legislative agenda for an entire decade, leading to the enactment of major legislation in 1986 and 1990.[43]

SCIRP recommended legalizing many of the undocumented workers then in the United States, partly because much American agriculture depended upon these workers.[44] Zolberg points out that advocates of immigration reform during this period were motivated by many competing ideas, including protectionism, capitalism, and Malthusianism.[45] Reagan, the incoming President in 1980, continued this work by initiating a process that would finally produce legislation in 1986.[46] Zolberg observes that, during the 1960s and following, Mexico was a central locus of concern regarding immigration, since, "As the leading source of both legal and unauthorized immigration, Mexico assumed singular significance, evoking that of Ireland a century and a half earlier, except that American fears now crystallized around language rather than religion."[47] Contemporary writing on the subject bears this out. In a 1983 piece, Thomas Morgan grapples with his status as "not only a liberal but an Anglo who did not want to pay for the maintenance of *their* language, did not want to have to learn Spanish in order to get around in his own country."[48] In his article, Morgan confronts his own anxieties about an alien culture refusing to assimilate with the mainstream of America before concluding that "the latinization of America will, in time, lead to Hispanic integration" – thus comfortably returning to his original liberal ideas about America as a melting pot.[49]

As a result of this cultural churn, immigrants were sometimes seen as a threat.[50] Vidal depicts this attitude early in the novel, when Beryl and Edna – the two characters who will shortly suffocate in a snowbank and be reborn in other parts of the narrative – discuss a spaceship that landed in Duluth at some point before the narrative begins. Since arriving, the vessel has remained closed, with no visible sign of its occupants:

[42]Timothy J. Henderson, *Beyond Borders: A History of Mexican Migration to the United States* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 106.
[43]Zolberg, 354.
[44]Ibid., 355.
[45]Ibid., 359; Vidal was no stranger to Malthusian thinking himself, as seen in *Myra Breckinridge* and *Kalki*.
[46]Henderson, 114.
[47]Zolberg, 340.
[48]Thomas B. Morgan, "The Latinization of America," *Esquire*, May 1983, 47–56, 48, original emphasis.
[49]Ibid., 56.
[50]Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants & the Seeds of Resistance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 121.

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> "What's in it?" [Beryl asks]
> "Aliens, I suppose."
> "Mexicans?"
> "Haitians. Boat people. Shriners. We're being destroyed from within, Beryl."[51]

This exchange reflects the concerns discussed above: a fear that the flood of immigration that followed the repeal of racial quotas would cause the destruction of (white) American culture. The first three groups – Mexicans, Haitians, and "boat people" – are groups that were very much part of the discourse surrounding immigration in the period. Indeed, "boat people" were a focus of much anxiety during the 1980 "Marial boatlift," when a wave of immigrants fleeing Cuba arrived in Florida. Subsequently, Haitians were also called "boat people," and both groups "stoked public and media anxieties over race, crime, and a perceived immigration emergency – all serving to justify the use of detention."[52] Vidal is here nodding toward these anxieties. Meanwhile, the fourth group, the Shriners, are a fraternal organization akin to the Masons and not one of the groups typically made the target of immigration hysteria. Vidal punctures the grim alarmism surrounding immigration by ending the list with a milquetoast category.

Duluth and libidinal racism

The plot of *Duluth*, insofar as it can be summarized, revolves around an attempted race war fomented in order to steal an election. Racial animosity is created in order to maintain systems of power. A central locus of the novel is the ethnic barrios in which the Mexican immigrants live:

> Just off ethnic Kennedy Avenue the barrios begin. Mile after mile of paper and plywood shacks give shelter – if that's the word – to almost one million illegal and legal Mexican aliens. Every night the barrios are alive with mariachi music and joyous laughter because illegal aliens are essentially life-enhancing, since their deepest feelings are all on the surface while their shallowest feelings are hidden deep down – unlike the cold Anglos of Garfield Heights who cannot relate to one another without using as an intermediary a wise psychiatrist who will break the ice for them so that Dad can finally kiss Junior. Should there ever be really real people, really warm loving people anywhere on earth, it is those one million or so Chicanos who live in the barrios off ethnic Kennedy Avenue in East Duluth.[53]

The most obvious layer here is the joke about where the barrios begin: off "ethnic Kennedy Avenue." Though the Kennedys were Irish, and so reflective of a previous wave of immigration, the association of the name of the messianic JFK with an ethnic enclave seems deliberate. The Kennedys were by this time, as Vidal dubs them in one

[51]Vidal, *Duluth*, 9.
[52]Shull, 137.
[53]Vidal, *Duluth*, 13–14.

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essay, "the holy family" – an almost mythical symbol of a lost (or never-to-be) Golden Age.[54] By juxtaposing the ethnic barrios with a symbol of America at mid-century, Vidal both draws a connection between successive waves of immigration and punctures the idea of whiteness as central to American identity. The second element to notice here is that Vidal is parodying certain ways in which white authors write about minorities. Richard Reeves, in *Esquire*, argued that "Chicanos want respect. They don't want to be called, as the *Los Angeles Times* used to call them, 'the little people who have big hearts.'"[55] *Duluth* satirizes this sort of infantalization. Indeed, Vidal's narrator sounds very like Norman Mailer in "The White Negro." Mailer suggests that an existence on the fringes of society gives Black culture a greater vitality than that possessed by white culture.[56] Mailer's comments about Black people are close to the attitude displayed by the narrator of *Duluth* towards Mexican immigrants. Vidal's narrator sets up a binary between the Mexican American immigrants (legal and illegal) and the "cold Anglos." The Mexicans are warm, life-affirming, and cheerful, while the Anglos are cold and unloving. This sort of bifurcation is common in discussions of ethnic minorities, where the ethnic groups are imagined as having the virtues lacking in the majority population – particularly (as in Mailer's discussion of Black people) those virtues that are marked as more "primitive": love of life, unembarrassed sexuality, and so on. Far from being antiracist, such a perspective represents a sentimental or Romantic collapse between oppression and being close to the sources of life. The oppressed minority supplies the libidinal charge lacking in the oppressing majority. While Altman argues that "Vidal appears torn between satirizing white racism and making fun of symbolic attempts to rectify it," it may be more accurate to say that Vidal sees libidinal racism baked into fetishistic regard for the Other.[57] Vampire-like, the white majority feeds on the life-giving ecstasy of the oppressed minority in order to rejuvenate itself. This very infantilization is, thus, libidinal.

In *Duluth*, oppressors derive libidinal (sexual, but more than sexual) pleasure from their acts of oppression. In this, Vidal seems to agree with the insights offered by James Baldwin in his story "Going to Meet the Man."[58] Paul Griffith argues that the Baldwin story shows a link between racial violence and the repression arising from "an American sexual mythology derived from a tradition of negative beliefs about the human body."[59] That is to say, repressed sexual or libidinal urges work themselves out in racial violence. The oppressor thus gets a sexual thrill from *being* the oppressor. Much the same could be said of *Duluth*; though it is a sexually libertine city in some ways, at its core is a deep sexual insecurity, parodically exposed in the novel's

[54]Gore Vidal, "The Holy Family," in Vidal, *United States*, 809–25.

[55]Richard Reeves, "Mexican American," *Esquire*, 2 Jan. 1979, 8–10, 10.

[56]Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," in Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1959), 337–58, 348.

[57]Altman, *Gore Vidal's America*, 106.

[58]James Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man," in Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man: Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 186–204.

[59]Paul Griffith, "James Baldwin's Confrontation with Racist Terror in the American South: Sexual Mythology and Psychoneurosis in 'Going to Meet the Man'," *Journal of Black Studies*, 32, 5 (2002), 506–27, 513.

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obsession with noses (a Shandyean touch on Vidal's part).[60] Vidal is interested in the ways in which undocumented persons are victimized by the establishment, particularly in this libidinal or sexual way; indeed, he suggests that sexual aggression is at the core of racial oppression.

Duluth features multiple sexual assaults on Mexican immigrants by a female police officer named Darlene Ecks. Darlene's sexual assault on undocumented Mexicans – and her own subsequent rape by these same Mexicans – is a clear portrait of Vidal's dynamics of libidinal power. It is important to note that Darlene is not a sympathetic figure; she is not even, as Vidal's heroine–rapist Myra Breckinridge is, a potential mouthpiece for the author's own views. Rather, she is an arm of state power. Violence, particularly sexual violence, has long been deployed against minority groups by the powerful. In his book *Other People's Blood: U.S. Immigration Prisons in the Reagan Decade*, Robert S. Kahn documents a pattern of cruelty against immigrants. This pattern includes cases of sexual assault.[61] Kahn suggests that immigration detention presented "an enormous prison system that systematically terrorized refugees and violated U.S. laws throughout the 1980s."[62] While the cases Kahn discusses postdate Vidal's novel, they are still useful to bring into contact with Darlene's molestation of Mexican immigrants. Vidal is suggesting that there is something psychosexual in the hatred of racial minorities, and particularly, in this novel, of Mexicans.

Darlene's abuse of racial minorities is not limited to undocumented immigrants. It extends to her coworker "Chico" – tellingly, a Black man with a Spanish nickname meaning "boy," making for a kind of doubly racist joke. "Chico" and Darlene have an odd friends-with-benefits arrangement:

> At least once a week, Darlene handcuffs "Chico" to the steering wheel of their police car and abuses him verbally. He likes this. He also likes it when she pounces on illegal Mexican workers in the kitchens of the better Duluth restaurants and strip searches them, all the while thundering out her own version of "Gimme a pig's foot and a bottle of gin," which is "Gimme a piece of okra and a pair of prunes!"[63]

There is a network here of libidinal violence running from the white policewoman, through her Black coworker, to the undocumented immigrants of Duluth. The indication here is that Darlene assaults Mexican immigrants out of a repressed sexual urge. Her racist violence is libidinal in nature. In this account, Vidal is echoing explicitly a point he made around twenty years previously, in an essay titled "Police Brutality." In this essay, Vidal recounts an experience he had in Washington, DC. According to Vidal, he was in a taxi at a red light when he saw four men in trench coats beating two other men on the street. When Vidal confronted these men, he was rebuffed. The language Vidal uses to describe the policemen is important here:

[60]Vidal, *Duluth*, 29.

[61]Robert S. Kahn, *Other People's Blood: U.S. Immigration Prisons in the Reagan Decade* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 85.

[62]Ibid., 14.

[63]Vidal, *Duluth*, 6.

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one is "plump, flushed, with popping eyes; the face of a young pig gone berserk," who looks with "longing" at his victim.[64] The implication here is clearly that these policemen get a sexual thrill out of their violence, a thrill literalized in Darlene's assaults on Mexican immigrants. For Vidal, police violence is driven by sexual insecurity and a desire for power.

When Darlene assaults Mexican immigrants, she is performing in a parodic way the assaults seriously committed both in Vidal's story of police brutality and in Robert S. Kahn's accounts of anti-immigrant violence. Darlene acts out because she is sexually unfulfilled in her sadomasochistic affair with Chico. The true libidinal roots of this abuse are exposed when her sadomasochistic relationship is reversed. Darlene meets and assaults a Black man named Big John.[65] Unlike her assaultive encounters with the Mexicans or sadomasochistic race play with "Chico," this encounter results in Darlene falling in love and losing all interest in assaulting undocumented workers.[66] Susan Baker and Curtis Gibson read this shift in Darlene's character as a parody of *faux* complexity in contemporary fiction.[67] However, another perspective is that Vidal is here parodying (and exposing) the core truth of racist violence: that it is always essentially libidinal, always driven by repressed or unacknowledged sexual urges. When Darlene finds a (to her) satisfying outlet for her sadomasochistic urges, her desire to act out against immigrants vanishes.

In Vidal's view, the violence of the police is part of a circuit that includes retaliation by the victimized. Darlene's violence against Mexican immigrants is not without consequences. One of her victims is a man named Pablo Gonzales. Pablo is the leader of a group called the Aztec Terrorist Society.[68] Subsequently, he will lead an attack on the elite of Duluth. He is largely motivated by the assault committed by Darlene. Indeed, all of the antigovernment violence is motivated by the sexual predation of the police on the immigrant community. Vidal introduces the Aztec Terrorist Society by way of a meeting between ten victims of police assault. They are discussing the ways in which Darlene Ecks has sexually humiliated them all by shaving their pubic hair and mocking the size of their genitals. Here, Vidal focusses on one of his favorite satirical targets: heterosexual male egoism. Vidal is not engaging unproblematically; his depiction of these Mexican men plays up stereotypes of Latin machismo, employing a mode of satire that Altman admits could easily be "misunderstood as racist."[69] Within this anxiety, however, is found another anxiety: one surrounding legality and identity. These terrorists have had their very identities assaulted, even more than their bodies. In her book *Impossible Subjects*, Mae M. Ngai documents the treatment of illegal immigrants in the years between 1924 and 1965. She points out that, though there were preexisting anti-Chinese laws, the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act (1924) "was the nation's first comprehensive restriction law."[70] Ngai says that "illegal alienage is not a natural or fixed condition but the product of positive law; it is contingent

[64]Gore Vidal, "Police Brutality," in Vidal, *United States*, 554–57, 556.
[65]Vidal, *Duluth*, 60.
[66]Ibid., 86.
[67]Baker and Gibson, *Gore Vidal*, 175.
[68]Vidal, *Duluth*, 73.
[69]Altman, *Gore Vidal's America*, 117.
[70]Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 3.

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and at times it is unstable."[71] Natalia Molina, in *How Race Is Made in America*, similarly focusses on the years from 1924 to 1965. Molina makes use of "the term *racial scripts* to highlight the ways in which the lives of racialized groups are linked across time and space and thereby affect one another, even when they do not directly cross paths."[72] She suggests that immigration laws structure American thinking about race.[73] Though Mexicans in America were for a long time legally white, they were "culturally nonwhite."[74] During the 1920s, "a new racial order was being codified."[75] Molina observes that "in the absence of clearly defined institutional guidelines regarding where Mexicans belonged in the racial order, the fight to reposition them lower in the racial hierarchy intensified."[76] Alongside this was a newfound sense of Mexican identity being encouraged south of the border. This was "a positive national identity centered on Mexico's mestizo past. The mestizo was a product of Indian and Spanish blood, which together produced a stronger race, *la raza cosmica*, according to [minister of education] Vasconcelos."[77] In the United States, reaction to Mexican immigration became heavily racialized. "Operation Wetback" was a program begun in 1954; the racist phrase "wetback" "served to reactivate the notion of the Mexican as immigrant every time it was uttered and to criminalize Mexicans, since its genesis was associated with the characterization of active and intentional undocumented immigration."[78] Thus, in Molina's estimation, the category "illegal immigrant" was one that was debated and negotiated and remained – and remains – fluid. It is precisely this fluid identity that Vidal's Aztec Terrorist Society is responding to. They are embarrassed by Darlene's treatment of them; since "[m]ucho macho is now at stake," each member seeks revenge for Darlene's attack on his "plumed serpent" in language that seems to echo the calls for Mexican pride south of the border.[79] They determine to capture and rape her.

Racial tension is not confined in *Duluth* to a simple binary. Vidal tells readers, "Hostility between black and brown is constant in Duluth" because the mayor stokes racial hatred to keep the ethnic groups divided.[80] This fact is graphically illustrated midway through the novel, when the Mexican terrorists invade a gathering of Duluth's richest citizens. While there, they encounter a Black worker named Rastus. Pablo greets him with a mixture of fraternity and racial hatred, saying, "Although you are a nigger and carry a transistor and live only for the pleasures of sexual congress, you are still oppressed and our brother."[81] His words here are echoes of Mailer's comments on Black sociopathy. Rastus's response, to himself, is to think of

[71]Ibid., 6.
[72]Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 6.
[73]Ibid., 11.
[74]Ibid., 23.
[75]Ibid., 49.
[76]Ibid., 53.
[77]Ibid., 62.
[78]Ibid., 114.
[79]Vidal, *Duluth*, 52.
[80]Ibid., 74.
[81]Ibid., 156.

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the Mexicans as "these crazed spicks."[82] The exchange of highly charged racial slurs serves two purposes. First, Vidal's brand of satire depends on shocking the reader; he is attempting to elicit the exact same objection that many readers of this article will no doubt feel seeing them set out in print. Leaving to the side whether that is a worthwhile endeavor, there is a second, and perhaps more salient, purpose at work, which is to highlight the fact that Rastus and Pablo hold *each other* in contempt. In Vidal's narrative, racial animosity does not exist simply on an oppressor–oppressed binary; rather, members of different oppressed groups can be turned against each other to the benefit of the ruling class. This is a phenomenon Vidal observed in another context when discussing the lives of queer people.[83]

Following this event, the Mexican terrorists escape to Germany and then return with a plan to buy property in Duluth. When asked if the mayor will recognize him, Pablo responds that he won't because "I have a thick moustache now. My hair is combed different."[84] White racists, in this narrative, simply cannot tell Mexicans apart. In the event, Pablo is correct.[85] However, the mayor's assistant, Bill Toomey, hypnotizes Pablo to coerce him into assisting the mayor under the illusion that he is helping his people.[86] The point of this hypnosis is ultimately to cause Pablo to assassinate the mayor's political rival, the Duluth police chief. Under hypnosis, Pablo is forced to create evidence implicating himself in the murder, including "a photograph of the youthful actress Jodie Foster."[87] This is possible because, as one character observes, "Bill Toomey is CIA. And you can always tell if the CIA is involved in a political murder if the police are able to find a diary that shows just how lone and crazed the patsy of choice is."[88] The power in Duluth is not simply local, any more than Duluth is simply local: it is national and it is part of the state apparatus of control. Pablo's lawyer – "the best in the business" – plans to use the infamous "Twinkie defense" to get Pablo free.[89] This linking of the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan and the accomplished murder of Harvey Milk has been observed by Heather Neilson, who notes a theme of assassination running through the novel, down to the street names (Kennedy, Lincoln, McKinley).[90] Pablo is, however, not freed; instead, his story ends with him being sodomized for a second time by a nurse. Vidal's narrator dryly notes, "Thus, the dream ends for Pablo. Duluth has prevailed – yet again."[91] This final humiliation done to Pablo underlines Vidal's argument that the oppression of immigrant minorities is, in the end, a matter of sexualized power. The libidinal aspect of anti-immigrant racism extends all the way up to the city government and its treatment of immigrants.

[82]Ibid., 157.
[83]Gore Vidal, "Pink Triangle and Yellow Star," in Vidal, *United States*, 595–611, 598.
[84]Vidal, *Duluth*, 197.
[85]Ibid., *Duluth*, 198.
[86]Ibid., 200.
[87]Ibid., 242.
[88]Ibid., 249.
[89]Ibid., 242.
[90]Neilson, *Political Animal*, 221.
[91]Vidal, *Duluth*, 257.

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Libido and "The Dude"

Behind all of Duluth's racial strife is a single figure – a white man. And he is driven not by purely rational concerns, but by his own libidinal urges. One of the mysteries of the novel is the identity of the shadowy figure called The Dude, a crime lord who is, Edna says, "numero uno behind the scenes here in Duluth."[92] Much of Darlene's activity – when she is not harassing Mexicans or, later, having sex with Big John – is attempting to track down the identity of this mysterious figure. It turns out that The Dude is the mayor himself.[93] The twist here is that there was never truly a question of overturning the government; the criminal mastermind secretly running things and the political head of the town are one and the same. Everything in the novel – as it relates to humans – is under the control of this shadowy figure. Unknown to both Darlene and her immigrant victims, their actions are part of a larger government effort to stir up dissatisfaction in the barrios:

> Suddenly a young would-be rapist comes up behind her, puts a wiry arm about her neck and drags her into a deserted hovel on whose walls "Viva Castro" has been painted over and over again by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in order to make it seem as if Castro is behind all the disorder in the barrios when, actually, it is the FBI itself that instigates most of the riots.[94]

This government manipulation is a major theme later in the novel, when the incumbent mayor attempts to instigate a race riot in order to maintain control. Vidal is acutely aware of the ways in which systems of power exploit minority groups in order to maintain power. Again, scholarship on immigration in the 1980s supports this reading of the novel. Though Nicholas Laham observes that "Reagan was disinterested [*sic*] in immigration,"[95] other scholars disagree. Kristina Shull's *Detention Empire* documents the ways in which the detention of undocumented workers fed into the increasingly carceral state:

> In practice, detention looks and feels like prison, functioning within a larger context of mass incarceration in the United States. The increasing criminalization of migration itself since the 1980s, a phenomenon scholars label crimmigration, has melded the two systems together in ways that have made them nearly indistinguishable – from local law enforcement's cooperation with ICE to the building of "mixed-use" facilities.[96]

Shull identifies the Reagan administration's tactics against immigrants as a form of "state-sponsored terror."[97] Shull argues that Reagan and his administration, far

[92]Ibid., 4; note the use of Spanish.
[93]Ibid., 248.
[94]Ibid., 22.
[95]Nicholas Laham, *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Immigration Reform* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), vii.
[96]Shull, *Detention Empire*, 28.
[97]Ibid., 33.

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from neglecting immigration, weaponized it in the interest of furthering US interests abroad and white racial dominance at home.[98] Shull thus considers the anti-immigration actions of this period to be a kind of "counter-insurgency."[99] In *Duluth*, police brutality is in service to a similar system. Darlene's predations on Mexican immigrants are well known to the authorities – both to the mayor, who plans to use the information in his campaign against the police department's Captain Eddie, and to the captain himself, who tacitly endorses them because "the only way you can get an illegal alien to cross the Rio Grande and go back home is to hassle him."[100] Government agents have even suggested that the mayor remove Darlene. However, he refuses, since "he wants a bloodbath."[101] The mayor knows about the corruption in the police force and their brutality toward Mexicans, which he calls "[c]alculated, *depraved* brutality. Worse than Houston."[102] His plan involves weaponizing Darlene's well-known assaults on Mexican immigrants in order to prompt a race riot. Bill Toomey describes it thus:

> The second you give the word, Operation Chile-con-Carne will be operational. The men will strip search the women. The women the men. By nightfall, Duluth will be in flames. Then we send in the national guard. Nuke the barrios. And you will win the election as the Law-and-Order candidate.[103]

Again, Vidal is echoing here a point made in his essay on police brutality. In that piece, he alleges that the FBI are willing accomplices with such far-right organizations as the John Birch Society.[104] In order to maintain power, *Duluth*'s mayor uses Darlene's assaults to raise discontent within a minority population. By raising this discontent, he hopes to create a riot that will allow him to clamp down and assert the (white) status quo. Vidal here critiques both the hypocrisy of concerns for "law and order" and how cynically lawmakers exploit minority groups in order to maintain power.

Certainly, the mayor talks about his plans in terms of rationality; however, the mayor is not a rational actor either. He is also motivated by a desire for power that is ultimately libidinal, a fact that makes him susceptible to the manipulations of others. The alien space ship settled in the city is initially positioned in the desert, from which can be seen Duluth, the Great Lakes, and New Orleans.[105] From within can be heard the sound of music – which the novel associates with the ethnic barrios.[106] Later, however, by moving a thumb tack on a map, Captain Eddie is able to move the ship itself, first from the desert to the Duluth woods and then into "that corner of Lake Erie which joins the Colorado River at the edge of the Fifth Ward where the

[98]Ibid., 39.
[99]Ibid., 61.
[100]Vidal, *Duluth*, 72–73.
[101]Ibid., 73.
[102]Ibid., 66, original emphasis.
[103]Vidal, *Duluth*, 89.
[104]Vidal, "Police Brutality," 556.
[105]Vidal, *Duluth*, 32.
[106]Ibid., 33.

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black folks live."[107] Later, the mayor visits the spaceship only to be greeted by a visitor taking the form of Hubert Humphrey.[108] The aliens inside offer to buy land in Duluth and the mayor offers them the barrios.[109] As with Darlene, the mayor's motivations are not simply materialist, though he presents them as such. In the process of the negotiation, the aliens play on the mayor's own libidinal urges – primarily for power, but also for sex. The mayor is introduced in the novel as a paradoxically upstanding father.[110] His position as a family man is ironically contrasted to his political corruption.[111] The disguises the aliens assume play to his desire both for power (the evocation of Hubert Humphrey) and for sex. Late in the novel, he is shown a new version of the alien visitors, including the leader, who takes the form of "a magnificent raven-haired beauty, with plunging cleavage," named Tricia ("My favorite girl's name!" exclaims the mayor).[112] All of this runs parallel to and mirrors the illegal-immigrant plot. Just as Darlene's rapes derive from her own frustrated libido, so the mayor's power plays seem to emerge from a libidinal drive for power, and it is on this that the aliens work. As the novel continues, the theme of "alien" humans and that of the very real aliens inside the ship begin to merge. Late in the novel, the mayor is deposed by other human actors: the hypersexualized Big John and the nose-obsessed Clive.[113] The cycle of libidinal power struggle seems set to continue. However, at the end of the novel – without warning – the insects inside the spacecraft literally take over the narrative as "[s]ecretly egged on by the bankrupt centipedes from outer space, the bugs have taken over Duluth through a mere shift in tense, replacing those temporary interlopers, the human race."[114] The novel concludes with insect leader Tricia taking her place at Rosemary Klein Kantor's typewriter and rewriting the opening of the novel in an insect mode.[115]

Vidal ends *Duluth* on a science-fictional note, one that derives from the mayor's own desperate struggle for power. Abrupt endings are typical of Vidal's inventions; years later, he will repeat this particular trick in *Live from Golgotha*. Within the context of *Duluth*, this anti-conclusion stands as a rebuke to the mayor's pretense of total control. The mayor has spent the novel stirring up race hatred among marginalized groups in order to maintain his own power. He has, for most of the novel, been successful: Pablo's revolution was neutered and humiliated; the police chief was murdered; the mayor's reelection was secured (at least, until Big John and Clive intervened). But now, through an act of overreach, the mayor has caused precisely the crisis he claimed to work against: the American way of life – indeed, the *human* way of life – has been ended and replaced by another one altogether alien to the earth. If Vidal's primary interests are power and political maneuvering, then the point of this twist would seem to be that there is a limit to these things. The ironic invocation of James Baldwin's grim warning of "fire next time" as "fire *this* time"

[107]Ibid., 74, 81.
[108]Ibid., 160.
[109]Ibid., 214.
[110]Ibid., 65.
[111]Ibid., 73.
[112]Ibid., 213–14.
[113]Ibid., 244.
[114]Ibid., 261.
[115]Ibid., 262.

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becomes prophetic:[116] the powerful have created their own doom, and that of the human race.

Conclusion

In *Duluth*, Vidal engages with topics that rarely concern him in his more polemical writings. During the 1970s and 1980s, the question of immigration was increasingly relevant, thanks in part to the removal of racial quotas in the 1960s. Though Vidal in his own voice rarely spoke on this issue, in *Duluth* he considers the ways in which the problem of immigration is yet another manifestation of libidinal power struggles. At the local level, on the ground, Vidal portrays racial dynamics as fundamentally libidinal in nature. Meanwhile, the powerful mayor uses racial hatred and unrest, caused by the ways in which the corrupt police force preys upon undocumented immigrants, to maintain his own power. In this, he is not working from rational self-interest; his motivations are ultimately as unreasoned as those of Darlene Ecks. These connections suggest that Vidal sees a libidinal element in the immigration debates of the period. In *Duluth*, purely material analysis is insufficient to explain racial dynamics; even the most powerful people in the city are ultimately motivated by their own libidinal frustrations. Vidal here engages with problems of his time, but his insight seems to be prophetic; in the years since 1983 and the Reagan administration, the backlash against immigration has only grown. Under subsequent Presidents, including Obama, Biden, and both Trump administrations, the question of immigration has grown increasingly fraught, and with that anxiety has risen the violence visited on undocumented persons. *Duluth* would suggest that this violence is not simply a matter of policy; it has to do with a deep libidinal distortion. Introducing this element to discussions of American immigration policy (or, perhaps, reintroducing it) would offer considerable texture to the debate. Such a move would enable observers to see that these problems are not solved simply by policy changes; rather, they are motivated by libidinal forces that resist simple solutions. In this way, *Duluth* offers at the same time both complication and clarification: complication in that the libidinal issues it highlights are not easily addressed, and clarification in that the novel perceptively diagnosis a core issue in an ongoing debate.

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[116]Ibid., 27, emphasis added.

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