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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED "Perché i xe bestie?!" Politics, race and exclusion in Vladan Desnica's *The Winter Summer Vacation*

[version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Although Vladan Desnica's novel *Zimsko ljetovanje* (*The Winter Summer Vacation*, 1950) has been criticised for being apolitical due to its emphatically realistic depiction and explicit avoidance of the expected themes of the Second World War, it is a prominent example of a political novel. On several narrative levels, the author draws attention to the expectations of the genre's conventions and reshapes them in an imaginative and politically subversive way. By consistently drawing on officially proclaimed realist procedures and traditional narrative style, Desnica exposes the problematic nature of the 'pragmatic' use of literature and reveals hidden social controversies. He makes his 'civilised' characters into representatives of a Western colonial discourse and a racist vocabulary, turning them into a synecdoche of hegemonic relations and the production of inequality. Their attitude towards the socially and culturally disadvantaged peasants turns out to be a form of subjugation and production of hegemonic relations that correspond to those in a proclaimed egalitarian contemporary society. Although there was no racial question in Yugoslavia of the time, Desnica uses the colonial and racist discourse of his literary characters as an explicit form of hegemonic politics, referring with them both to imperialist Italy and to the contemporary egalitarian Yugoslav state. With his novel, Desnica evokes emancipatory interventions that work beyond the loose framework of the Morlach population. He steers his narrative towards a fundamental humanist framework in the sense of modernist interest in the representation of subjectivity and the mechanisms of community functioning.

Keywords

political novel, Vladan Desnica, Zimsko ljetovanje (The Winter Summer Vacation), colonial discourse, Morlachism, hegemony, Yugoslavia

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

This revised version addresses the reviewers' comments by clarifying and expanding several aspects of the article while preserving its original argument and analytical focus.

Following the reviewers' suggestions to provide additional historical and literary context, the introduction has been revised to offer a fuller account of the debates surrounding Vladan Desnica's work, including a clearer explanation of the criticism directed at his position on politically engaged literature, the significance of the literary developments associated with the *Krugovi* generation, and the broader context of Yugoslav literary debates in the early 1950s. The conclusion has also been revised to establish a stronger connection with the introductory discussion of the novel's reception and Desnica's literary position.

In response to the reviewers' comments concerning theoretical contextualisation, the sections "Politics in the Mis/Uses of Realism" and "White, but not quite: colonial discourse as a sign of inequality" have been revised and expanded. In particular, the discussion of exclusion and hegemonic relations has been supplemented by a brief reference to Frantz Fanon's concept of the Manichean structure of colonial domination as an illustrative framework for understanding the mechanisms analysed in the novel. A footnote has also been added to clarify the interpretation of the Italian expression *Iddio* in response to comments concerning this passage. Finally, minor linguistic and stylistic revisions have been made throughout the article, including the correction of grammatical inconsistencies identified during peer review.

No changes have been made to the title, abstract, author list, figures, tables, or underlying data.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

A definition of the genre of political novel can result in tighter approaches and stricter rules, such as in earlier approaches by Edmund Speare (1924) and Irving Howe (1957) (see 1 and 2). Furthermore, it can result in a looser description where politics in literature is framed as a theme within which notions of representativeness of "common humanity" (3 on page 2) are discussed and elaborated [1]. Following the latter approach, Michael Wilding challenges the supremacy of realism by tracing this broader significance of political fiction in its evolution from the realistic social novel of the nineteenth century to the formally complex forms of modernism. Convinced of the equal political effect of aesthetic form, he emphasises, "[i] n political fictions we would expect not only the political conflicts of social choices, but also the aesthetic conflict of fictional choices" (3 on page 5). In other words, reading political novels requires revealing their formal and thematic treatment of what is in common parlance understood as 'political materials'. To consider the political novel as imaginative prose means to reveal both formal and thematic treatment of 'political materials', and this in relation to the general conception of man and the current problems of the community. In doing so, the novel's narratological conventions change "in proportional allocation of the space and energy to 'story', 'plot', 'documentation', 'romance', and 'ideas'. […] The formal polarities arise from the situation, the politics, the character choices. This is not an abstract formalism. An examination of the formal characteristics of these novels leads directly to the political situations" (3 on page 8).

Politics in the Mis/Uses of realism

Aesthetic choices are part of the text's political nature, they mark political decisions and go beyond the purely formal or decorative purpose of the text. This aspect is also evident in various uses and critiques of realism, such as Bertolt Brecht's confrontation with Georg Lukács [2] or in the Yugoslav Conflict on the Literary Left [3], the effects of which are reflected in the development of individual and group poetics in the twentieth century. In addition to the indispensable role that Miroslav Krleža played in the Conflict on the Literary Left, it is important to emphasise that the very same question pertaining to art and realism was raised by a neo-avant-garde group surrounding the Yugoslav literary and cultural magazine *Krugovi* (Circles, 1952–1958). Among various texts and approaches published therein, notable contributions are "Zapisi o književnosti" (Notes on Art, *Krugovi* 1952, nos. 4–7, see 4) and "Primijenjena književnost" (Applied Literature) by Vladan Desnica (8 on page 20). Here, Desnica ironically criticises the concept of 'applied literature' favoured by the critics supporting socialist realism:

[1]The article was produced as part of the Horizon Europe project, Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe (CAPONEU, grant agreement no. 101094658).
[2]For more, see 5 and 6.
[3]Sukob na ljevici (Conflict on the Left) is a common name for an interwar dispute of left-wing politically oriented intellectuals. In the Yugoslav context, the Conflict is primarily focused on political and literary controversies that arouse while questioning the role of literature in political life. The main figure in the Conflict was Miroslav Krleža with his polemics *Moj obračun s njima* (My Reckoning with Them, 1932), "Predgovor Podravskim motivima Krste Hegedušića" (A Foreword to Krsto Hegedušić's Podravina Motifs, 1933), *Dijalektički antibarbarus* (Dialectical Antibarbarous, 1939) and his novel *Na rubu pameti* (*On the Edge of Reason*, 1938). As demonstrated by Ivana Perica (7 on page 250), the Yugoslav literary sphere gradually strengthened its own position as a "counterpublic sphere" in the interwar decades.

> The analogy with visual arts gives me a salutary idea: just as the branches that have practical applications were separated and given their special place and position there, why should not the same be implemented in the field of literature? Am I joking? What theoretical reasons would stand in the way of this? Frictions and tensions would cease, all practical, pragmatic, utilitarian and similar tendencies would find their satisfaction; applied literature could be given full importance and even precedence over the latter, and the latter would be given its modest but undisputed place under the sun. Why not? I am in favour of applied literature. (8 on page 40)

The proverbial 'critics on duty' react promptly, attacking Vladan Desnica. Jože Horvat protests [4] in his paper "Whom is Vladan Desnica mocking?" (8 on page 40) that Desnica's writing was proof of his reactionary understanding of art theory and social practice. According to Horvat, the path that Desnica suggests to younger writers to whom he addresses his 'Notes' "inevitably leads to a conflict with the progressive forces in society and true literature" (8 on page 41). Another critic using the initials N. St. claims that Desnica stabbed "communising literature" [komunizirajuća književnost] in the back and disqualified it before the eyes of the youth in a year that represented a turning point in the development of Yugoslav literature because it brought great results (8 on page 43). Marin Franičević [5] writes about Desnica's views on freedom; he warns him and reminds him that the fact that Desnica expresses and publishes these views clearly shows that he lives in freedom (see 8 on page 47). Ivan Dončević accuses Desnica of being "a late writer" (8 on page 48) who "thinks in his own way" (8 on page 49), although his literature has "nothing or almost nothing to do with art" (8 on page 49). Dončević claims that the good reputation that Desnica earned from critics made him self-confident. Consequently, he has "become militant" (8 on page 50) and he criticises the socialist lifestyle and "threatens socialism" (8 on page 50). Finally, he even goes so far as to claim that Desnica's prose is boring and his essays are pretentious (8 on page 50). All these attacks on Desnica mentioned here were published in 1952, shortly after Vladan Desnica's articles appeared in *Krugovi* (Zagreb, 1952–1958), a magazine that marked the shift from socialist dogmatism to the neo-avant-garde poetics of a new generation advocating a dynamic cultural and artistic life.

Before his provocative views on literature published in *Krugovi*, Desnica wrote an equally subversive novel, *Zimsko ljetovanje* (1950, *The Winter Summer Vacation*). Although the novel was considered apolitical because of its emphatically realistic portrayal and explicit avoidance of the usual heroic tropes about the Second World War that meanwhile petrified into commonplaces, it is, as we shall see, one of the most important examples of the genre of political novel. Its poetic attitudes, choices and practices show how artistic freedom can make subversive use of traditional and ideologically favoured realist poetics. At the same time, it reveals the problematic nature of the ideological use of literature and reveals hidden social controversies.

Some of these controversies arose from a discrepancy between proclaimed principles and everyday social, cultural and political life. Today, we can recognise that contemporary political slogans that affirm unity/equality in diversity, as in the European Union, explain the foundations of political relations that have been realised in different ways throughout history. After the Second World War, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia proclaimed egalitarian and freedom-loving ideas in the state of 'brotherhood and unity', i. e. a state based on the ideas of self-governing socialism and imagined equality of classes, nations, regions, races, and genders. In the 1950s, after the famous historic 'Tito's No to Stalin' (i. e. Yugoslavia's exclusion from the Comintern), the existing resistance to Western-style imperialism was complemented by an equal resistance to the Soviet-type of imperialism in the East. Respect for diversity and a policy of 'peaceful coexistence' between nationally, regionally, culturally and religiously heterogeneous states thus became a stated principle underlying the idea of integration and equality in the existing society. It is worth noting that this narrative was soon extended and perpetuated to the broader framework of the Non-Aligned Movement, in which the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia participated as a major actor. However, the difference between principles thus declared, which presented some sort of optimal projection of the ideal order, and everyday life of a society burdened by differences and exclusions appears as a more or less explicit topic in a number of literary works: from Desnica's abovementioned novel *Zimsko ljetovanje* (The Winter Summer Vacation, 1950) to Ivo Brešan's play *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja* (A Performance of *Hamlet* in the Village of Mrduša Donja, 1979). Different levels and scopes of policies of identity in these texts are the starting point and framework for raising fundamental questions of the political, which according to Jacques Rancière's (2011) terms are related to the issues of speech, visibility and invisibility in public space. This political element of literature is understood to shake the perceptual order that underlies traditional hierarchies by

[4]Jože Horvat (1915–2018) was a Yugoslav writer, editor and critic who took part in the Conflict on the Literary Left, advocating the position of the dogmatic party line and criticising Miroslav Krleža. Desnica's article was published in 1952 in the *Krugovi* magazine nos. 4–6 and the *Književni Jadran* magazine no. 9. Horvat's reaction was published in the *Naprijed* magazine no. 49 of the same year.

[5]Marin Franičević (1911–1990) was a poet, literary historian and critic, editor of the journal *Republika* and of publications of the Lexicographic Institute, as well as professor at the Pedagogical Academy in Zagreb. In 1947, he took part in a conference of Soviet writers in Moscow, which focused on questions of social literature and New Realism.

"intervening in the parcelling of space and time, place and identity, language and sound, the visible and the invisible, which is the arena of the political" (9 on page 4).

White, but not quite: colonial discourse as a sign of inequality

At first glance, one could expect that Vladan Desnica's novel *Zimsko ljetovanje* intervenes in public space and its order of the visible and sensible by positioning its narration in a concrete historical framework: the Second World War, from the surrender of fascist Italy and the bombing of Zadar by the Allies in the autumn of 1943 to the spring of 1944. However, this frame, as well as successive inroads of Italian fascists, Chetniks and partisans, respectively, is less important for the central drama that revolves around a conflict of mentalities and the dynamics and consequences of inequality between two groups. This drama, as I will demonstrate more closely herein, made critics aware of the novel because it demonstrated a conflict of mentalities in a veristic and brutal clash between two groups. One, a group of refugees, residents of the 'civilised' city of Zadar that has been destroyed by Allied bombs, and the other, a group of their hosts, peasants from the neighbouring Ravni kotari region, who offer them a roof over their heads and food.

The arrival in the countryside reveals many stereotypes that these 'civilised' city dwellers, who represent themselves as 'white', bring with them. Their dislike of the peasants, who constitute a different class, a different religion and a different ethnic group, is expressed using racist vocabulary:

> The refugees immersed themselves in the village and gradually became familiar with it. Their previous impressions of the peasants' misery, their craftiness, and their willingness to exploit the misery of others were confirmed. Even more, it turned out that the peasants were in fact very limited and grinned like blacks to everything (10 on page 62).

The seemingly detached and objective narrator uses the characters of city dwellers as focalisers to show, with subtle irony, the grotesque extent of their perceptions. At the very beginning, focalisation is foregrounded through the perspective of Lizeta and Ernesto Doner, a married couple who will experience a personal tragedy in the village at the end of the novel. Their view of the village is gradually caricatured, despite the narrator's verism and aloofness. In the first pages of the novel, the narrative voice emphasises that the village is *terra incognita* for the city dwellers, a place without meaning, from which they are separated "as by the Great Wall of China or a belt of wasteland" (10 on page 41) that is not fifteen, but one thousand kilometres wide. The exoticisation of the place and its inhabitants is also evident in Lizeta's naïve perception: To her, the village is an inexhaustible source of "chickens, turkeys, hams, and wine, where before Easter the sheep work to raise enough lambs, and the chickens to lay enough eggs" (10 on page 41). In this abundance of food, depicted as a mosaic of a green meadow with poppies and a stream in the middle, quite fitting for a perception based on clichés, everything is copious – "but above all, milk! In their perception, milk gushed inexhaustibly, bubbling and squeezing as in the bosom of a new mother, flowing in streams and rivers, unmeasured and unstoppable, pouring into milking pails, bowls, buckets, and its flow could neither be dammed nor regulated" (10 on page 62).

Following this orientalist phantasmagory that is evidently associated with racist stereotypes, the villagers are portrayed as "perfidious and cunning, and they always have dirty hands […] [and are] rather stupid; they blow their noses with their fingers and have to be shouted at loudly because they are somewhat deaf from the dirt in their ears. They live miserably, but that is their own fault, for they are completely clumsy and shiftless" (10 on page 62), but still "they go out of their way to cheat the city dwellers at every opportunity". The worst thing in the village are snakes, "perfidious as their masters, the peasants" (10 on page 62), but one should also beware of mosquitoes, which appear in huge swarms in the summer and from which one can catch malaria, just as one can "get one's feet wet" (10 on page 62).

The narrator complements the discrete humour of these sentences with a remark that Ernesto's perception of the village, unlike Lizeta's, "was more realistic and complete" (10 on page 62). This actually only means that the horizon of his stereotypes goes beyond everyday perceptions and includes economic relations in the village, so that their apparent reality and completeness additionally emphasise the bizarreness of their joint prejudices. Ernesto distinguishes between common peasants and "tribe chieftains" (10 on page 62), equally convinced that the peasants are masters of feigning and haggling, that the former are "ignorant and backward", the latter "too cunning and sly", but all of them, both the primitive and the corrupt, conceal good and authentic things "from the eyes of the white man" (10 on page 43), such as "a small barrel of genuine, unadulterated domestic wine" (10 on page 43). Later, when the city dwellers begin their life as refugees, or their "winter summer vacation" in the village, the perspective will not essentially change.

The identification of the village with primitivism or aboriginal cultures is repeated several times: For example, at the moment when the Chetniks, with their leader Dule, force the population to gather and swear an oath, "[i]t seemed to them as if they were attending a ritual ceremony of redskins" (10 on page 132). Just as they had previously participated in fascist marches in the streets of their city, the inhabitants of Zadar also participate in the oath swearing with the Chetniks. They do

this out of inertia, fear and ignorance, but also out of indignation at "these things" (10 on page 133), which they see here as emanating from the village.

Previous critics have pointed out the importance of the politics of identity in Desnica's novel, which operate with a range of different collective identities: "(1) ethnic (Italian/Serbian/Croatian), (2) religious (Roman Catholic/Orthodox), (3) linguistic (Italian/Slavic), (4) political (fascist/Chetnik/partisan) and (5) sociocultural (urban/rural)" (11 on page 149). However, the differences between the two groups, the city dwellers and the villagers, whether linguistic, religious, ethnic or social, reveal the mechanisms of creating inequalities and hegemony based on the evaluation of these differences. Among these mechanisms, Desnica particularly highlights the practice of naming as a symbolic process of marking space, people and animals. Two examples are indicative of this process.

Geopolitical appropriation – naming the village

The village in which the city dwellers arrive functions as a heterotopia,[12] a parallel space with its own laws that unrealistically mirrors the focaliser's original, actual world. In the novel, both the city dwellers and the members of the Italian fascist authorities see the village and the villagers as an empty denotation, whiteness without history, which should be written using proper names. Thus, the village of Smiljevci first becomes Borgo Mirtillo, which turns out to be a mistranslation, since bilberry (the Italian word *mirtillo* means 'bilberry') is not immortelle (the Croatian word *smilje* means 'immortelle'); then again it mistakenly becomes *timeto* (thyme) and finally *gnafalio* (10 on page 86–87). This ignorant and persistent (re) naming is part of the appropriation of space used by the new fascist authorities as a testing ground for maintaining public order and disciplining their subjects. It also supports the deeply rooted stereotypes on which they will build their own imperialistic colonial claims. This becomes clearer when a fascist *federale* comes to the village to search for its hidden history and oriental traces. Professor Bogdani, a local intellectual being a part of his entourage, explains that in these regions the Turks left behind "a multitude of Turkish words, expressions and customs", as well as the custom of planting poplars, "reminiscent of Turkish minarets", so that during their campaigns, "in the absence of minarets, the Turks called to prayer from a platform made in the branches of poplars" (10 on page 94). This information which, as Bogdani says, has not yet been recorded in science, aroused the *federale*'s "great interest" because he loved "living history, that is, clear and tangible, and not misty and hazy, as the history of this region seemed to him" (10 on page 94). Before this history, and among "this yellow population with swollen spleens, still eating with wooden spoons and staring indifferently at a passing car" (10 on page 95), among the women "with their Samoyedic low foreheads, sitting in front of their houses and scratching lice off each other" (10 on page 95), his enlightened, colonising mission under the guise of military domination is juxtaposed with the nonsense of his own imperialistic aspirations: "I do not understand at all what we are doing here! Why are we going around the world trying to make people and nations happy against their will instead of sitting at home healing our own wounds and hardships? It is we who are building good roads through the wilderness for others in Europe and on the edge of Africa, as if we were becoming an asphalting company!" (10 on page 95).

Referring to the mechanisms of colonisation of space, Desnica uses the name Morlach as a metonymy for the tradition of negative stereotyping and exclusion of the area and inhabitants of continental Dalmatia throughout history. The name 'Morlach' was popularised by the famous Abbe Alberto Fortis eighteenth century travelogue *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (*Travels Into Dalmatia*, 1774; see 13). Fortis's experiences, impressions, and views of the noble and savage Morlachs contain a number of Western stereotypes about the Slavic population living in the mountainous regions of the eastern Adriatic. Fortis depicts them as *noble savages* and writes down the Morlach ballad *Asanaginica*, also known as *The Mourning Song of the Noble Woman of Hasan Aga*, which was soon translated from Italian into other languages, e.g. by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe into German. Johann Gottfried Herder, for instance, takes from Fortis the distinction between the Morlachs, the modern barbarians and their Ottoman neighbours, a dangerous and savage people from the even deeper depths of the Balkans.

Re/naming children and animals: individuals and groups

To further illustrate the processes of exclusion and hegemonic power relations, Desnica confronts the figures of children and animals: the girl Mafalda, a few months old, brought from Zadar by her parents, the pig Migud, a local mascot, a privileged member of the village community, and finally a mentally disabled boy, the "feeble-minded" Bepica (10 on page 173).

When she was brought to the country, Mafalda, the Doner family's daughter, was given a new prosaic name: "Since they have been here in the countryside, they have called her by a nickname her father gave her out of affection when they lived in Zadar: Špižmica. They saved the name Mafalda for better times – it was not appropriate for such a name to drag its purple skirt over the dust of the village" (10 on page 63). With a telling semantic shift, Desnica describes this renaming, namely losing one's name and receiving a nickname, as a demotion or at least a lowering of the code. Then, in the ninth

chapter, as I have shown elsewhere (14 on page 168), he applies a reverse procedure to the figure of her killer – the pig Migud, "the main figure in Ićan's household" (10 on page 75). As we can already read in the chapter's first sentence, the process of naming an animal here suggests a process of personalisation – of receiving a face [6]:

> A pig does not usually have a proper name. And that is a good thing. For the name establishes a certain closeness between animal and human being; by means of a name, an animal is lifted out of the rank of a nameless animal being, it strives to achieve equal footing with a human being, receives its special face, its personal history; we know its inclinations, its nature, its habits, remember its experiences; it becomes our company, we are connected by the hours we have passed together – in short, it becomes a person; nothing yet, to be sure, an irrational, unconscious person – but a person! (10 on page 75)

As a kind of refrain of the first sentence of this quotation, he later repeats: "And it is good that the pig has no name! […] Yes, it is good that the pig is nameless. But at that time, Ićan's pig had a name" (10 on page 75). This naming reveals everything that namelessness seeks to overcome: first and foremost, an emotional relationship that develops over time; a human being "easily becomes attached" (10 on page 75) to a pig, like any other animal, and "a spark of genuine human sorrow smoulders at the bottom of its pupils" (10 on page 75). Furthermore, long before vegetarianism was widespread, the narrator shows that gastronomic attitudes can also be influenced by proximity to animals. So that this knowledge, which recognises "a mere human eyelash" (10 on page 75) in the "jelly-like mass of brawn we consume with relish", is able to "loosen a fork in the hand" (10 on page 75). In other words: When one recognises in one's meal the resemblance between human and animal physiognomy, one ceases to eat the meal eagerly. By getting a name, the pig enters the space where the human being establishes his emotional and cognitive connections, thus influencing judgement and behaviour. Migud, as the "main character" in Ićan's household, "a monument to the porcine genus" (10 on page 75), is given a privileged position not only in his own yard, but also in the village community, which is now extended to include the city dwellers.

The naming of animals and the renaming of children in the heterotopic space of a relocated village – whose Italian name also phonetically reflects the Italian version of the girl's name, Gnafallo/Mafalda – indicates problematic social practices. The bestialisation of the Other is part of the strategies underlying hegemonic relations in different societies. All hierarchies are based on the "domination of perfection over imperfection, of force over weakness, of eminent virtue over vice", as Couze Venn shows. "Thus, the body must be subject to the soul, slaves to their masters, women to their men" (16 on page 115). As a variant of this kind of bestialisation Orientalism is, according to Edward Said, based on the conception of a "primitive man" (17 on page 206). It also includes "the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability; this is why every writer on the Orient, from Renan to Marx (ideologically speaking), or from the most rigorous scholars (Lane and Sacy) to the most powerful imaginations (Flaubert and Nerval), saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption" (17 on page 206). Finally, the narrator cedes such dehumanising logic to the dialogue between the embittered city dwellers and the disabled Bepica, who tries to understand their attitudes. After hearing the adults describing peasants as mere animals, he has to ask a question:

> "Perché i xe bestie?" [7] – asks feeble-minded Bepica in a childishly interested manner, tugging at his father's sleeve. […] "*Papà, ma perché i xe bestie*?" Mr. Karlo, otherwise reasonable and balanced, responds in scholarly fashion, again in Italian: "Perché cosi Iddio li ga creà!" – Mr. Karlo replies in an even tone of his deep voice. (10 on page 173)

The steadiness of Mr. Karlo's deep voice is presented here as the last link in the ignorant, senseless and actually idiotic relationship between the city dwellers and the peasants, who function as their own otherness. It is significant that in his response to feeble-minded Bepica, Mr. Karlo pronounces 'Dio' (God in Italian) as 'idio/t', which defines the whole situation in terms of the author's ironic response [8] to any possibility of universalising differences and legitimising the hierarchies underlying those differences. Ernesto, the killed girl's father and the character who focalises a whole array of the city dwellers' colonising points of view at the beginning of the novel, speaks up in revolt and provides an additional response and a kind of final judgement on the circumstances that caused the tragedy. His words indicate both his criticism

[6]Etymology of person, from Latin persōna ("mask; character") could arise from Etruscan (φersu, "mask; masked individual; actor"), which could be a loan from Ancient Greek πρόσωπον (prósōpon, "face; appearance; mask used in ancient theatre to denote a character or, more generally, a social role"). This meaning, as we will see further, connects the animal and child character in opposite situations and a final tragic ending. See 15.

[7]In Venetian dialect: Why are they animals? Because God created them so.

[8]Although the expression "Iddio" in the Italian language of that period was an accepted alternative to the now common word "Dio", it first appears to the reader of Desnica's novel, written in Croatian, with its semantic ambivalence regarding the criticism of the "idiotism of exclusion".

and his personally tragic turnabout. With them, he also emphasises the main point of the final chapter and the overall ending of *The Winter Summer Vacation.* He responds to Karlo and others with a bitter sigh: "Ah, 'sto vostro Dio, 'sto vostro Dio!" (Ah, this God of yours, this God of yours!)

He thus links all previous images of personal and collective ignorance in the flight from one's own responsibility and participation in the suffering of others. Moreover, he also reflects on the social production of these circumstances in a protest that emphasises that one's own responsibility for tragedy (someone else's and one's own) is passed over with silence. By transforming this character – whose superficial and stereotypical attitudes marked the novel's beginning and through whom personal tragedy emerged – Desnica highlights the potential to distort or subvert hegemonic patterns of separation in any given historical period (14 on page 172–173). His seemingly detached and objective narrator, who exposes the grotesque perceptions of the citizens, actually maps what Fanon (18 on page 41) describes as the Manichean world of the colonisers, while remaining silent on the repulsiveness of oppressive structures. The narrative shows that the proclaimed equality of the new order suffers from the same pathologies of power that Fanon criticised in the post-colonial bourgeoisie: formal liberation without genuine decolonisation of social relations.

Conclusion: The political novel as emancipatory intervention

Vladan Desnica's auctorial interest in this book can be seen as an endeavour to expose various forms of subjection and the production of hegemonic relations. In his view, colonial and race discourse are obviously the most pronounced form of such policies. He uses them as a synecdoche for the production of inequalities in his own community. Accordingly, the emancipatory interventions he invokes in this novel are broad and inclusive. For this reason, this novel functions beyond the boundaries that focus on the loose borders of the Morlach population. The concepts to which he directs his interest are quite basic, human and anthropological, in the sense of a modernist interest in the mechanisms of community functioning – its disputes, injustices, and illogicalities. After the 1950s, in parallel, the question of geopolitical division and race becomes a theme of daily politics and art. For the neo-avant-garde generation of artists that rallied around the literary magazine *Krugovi* [*Circles*] (1952–1958)], this opens up the possibility of finding new forms of expression, language, and emancipation that are at once revolutionary and integrative.

After this rather thematic insight, I must briefly discuss the formal aspect of Desnica's novel. If we speak of political fiction as innovation, or at least as a self-conscious use of standard narrative conventions in dealing with political material (3 on page 8), I must mention that this was also an important aspect of the novel's reception. Public critics ideologically rejected the novel not only for its handling of political and social content, but also for its abuse of the publicly proclaimed realistic form favoured in the poetics of social realism. Desnica's objective narrative style, his seemingly detached and objective narrator focusing on the city dwellers to show with subtle irony the grotesque extent of their perceptions, was understood as a brutal and cynical attack on the optimistic perception of the new order [9].

Political and aesthetic subversion thus operate simultaneously here through the misuse of proclaimed aesthetic codes and the deliberate evasion of the almost inevitable theme of the era, the People's Liberation Struggle (Narodnooslobodilačka borba, NOB), and the completely detached portrayal of the protagonists and their processes of ideological exclusion and production of the Other. In the period of proclaimed equality, a novel about the policy of hegemony was perceived as a political attack on the official communist Yugoslav politics, which resulted in the author being banned from participating in public life for four years. Thus, the novel, whose formal poetic choices and theme explicitly refuses to engage in predictable aesthetic solutions, became one of the most outspoken political provocations. Together with the author's novellas and his "Notes on Art" (4 on page 11), this novel sparked an important public discussion about art and freedom, truth, sincerity, literariness and life, justice and law – all of which are fundamentally related in political thought. Given its profound intervention in the aesthetic and social spheres, and its allegorical potential to profoundly shake the public sphere in the 1950s, I believe it is still more than relevant today.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

[9]Among other critics, Đuro Šnajder claims that Desnica's novel *The Winter Summer Vacation* is a "gloomy and inhuman book" (19 on page 99); Marin Franičević acknowledges his talent, but warns that this book is a prime example of a "naturalistic view of life" (20 on page 113). "The peasant characters", he complains, "have no perspective" and, worse still, "[b] elieve it or not, the partisans are only mentioned once in 198 pages of the text, and the war scenes are not even discussed" (20 on page 115). "There is no popular revolution for the village of Smiljevci", he states disappointedly (20 on page 115).

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Version 2

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✔ **Matteo Nicolini**
Verona University, Verona, Italy

It is well written, the research question is clearly deployed, as are the arguments. The author has addressed all the issues I raised in my previous evaluation.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: law and literature, minority rights, settler colonialism, geographies of power and law.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 24 July 2025

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? **Alan Ali Saeed**
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Marina Protrka Štimec's article, "'Perché i xe bestie?!' Politics, race and exclusion in Vladan

Desnica's The Winter Summer Vacation," explores themes of ethnic exclusion, political ambiguity, and racialised discourse within the context of Vladan Desnica's 1950 novel *Zimsko ljetovanje* (Translated into English; *The Winter Summer Vacation*). The article provides a complex reading of a lesser-known Yugoslav novel by situating it within broader European racial and political discourses, particularly those relating to the treatment of Italians in Dalmatian territory during World War II.

One of the article's most commendable fortes is its developed political contextualisation. Štimec does not merely focus on Yugoslav history or literary aesthetics; instead, she threads these through the complex tapestry of postwar European racial thinking and transitional justice. By highlighting the contradictions between anti-fascist Yugoslav ideology and its own practices of ethnic exclusion, the author makes a compelling case for reading Desnica's novel as a critique of all hegemonic powers, regardless of their political leanings.

Štimec's ability to engage with theoretical frameworks, particularly postcolonial and racial theory, is noteworthy. She positions the novel's treatment of Italians as a racialised other within a broader discussion of how nations define themselves in opposition to internal enemies or unwanted foreigners. The article draws from several continental theorists and local historical accounts to build its argument, making it interdisciplinary in nature. This helps connect literary study with broader sociopolitical dynamics, particularly in Southeastern Europe.

The article reads Desnica's novel with thoughtfulness to the author's stylistic restraint. It rightly notes that Desnica avoids explicit ideological positioning and that his narrative often gestures toward ambiguity. Štimec interprets this ambiguity not as apolitical but rather as a deliberate aesthetic strategy that critiques both Italian fascist violence and Yugoslav nationalist retribution. Likewise, the article convincingly interprets how characters in the novel navigate the tension between inherited cultural identity and imposed ideological categories. The detailed analysis of ethno-linguistic politics, such as the use of dialect, name-calling, and bureaucratic identification, offers insight into how linguistic keys operate as markers of exclusion and belonging.

Despite its valuable insights, the article leaves some key areas underdeveloped. One notable omission is the deeper literary analysis of narrative voice and character interiority. While Štimec discusses how characters are 'read' by state institutions and other characters, less attention is given to their own psychological development. More close reading of specific passages, especially those in which characters express doubt, fear, or ethical conflict, would have enriched the argument.

Another point of critique is the concern over structure and repetition. At times, the article reiterates its central view about the racialisation of Italians without offering new supporting evidence. While this emphasis is understandable, the argument might have gained more momentum by including comparative examples from other Yugoslav literary texts or contrasting voices from contemporaneous authors.

There is also minimal discussion of Desnica's broader literary career. Although the article briefly mentions his ambivalent position as a "Serb-Croat intellectual", it does not sufficiently contextualise how his multilingualism and cross-cultural identity might have influenced the novel's themes of ambiguity and exclusion.

Štimec engages with a variety of theoretical frameworks, racialisation, memory politics, and legal theory among them, but the article occasionally assumes familiarity with these without defining them for the reader. For instance, the discussion of racial discourse would benefit from clearer definitions and a more explicit engagement with key thinkers like Fanon, Said, or Gilroy, who could lend further depth to the transhistorical reading of 'enemy construction.'

Despite the above limitations, Štimec's article makes a significant contribution to the study of

postwar Yugoslav literature and the racialised dimensions of political discourse. It highlights a critical and often overlooked moment in Southeastern European history and shows how literature can be used to interrogate official narratives of liberation and victimhood. The article also opens opportunities for future research. Scholars working on transitional justice, memory studies, and political violence in literature may find Štimec's methodology a useful model for integrating literary close reading with historical analysis and ideological critique.
All things considered, Marina Protrka Štimec's article offers a compelling, though at times uneven, examination of Vladan Desnica's *The Winter Summer Vacation*. It shines in its interdisciplinary engagement and political sensitivity, but could benefit from more sustained close readings and expanded literary context. Nonetheless, the article represents a valuable scholarly effort that deepens our understanding of how literature serves as a lens for examining the complexities of race, nationalism, and exclusion in postwar Europe. Štimec's careful attention to the politics of naming, identification, and exclusion within the novel enhances our appreciation of Desnica's subtle literary strategies, affirming the novel's place in the canon of politically engaged literature.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Yes

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Yes

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Partly

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Dr. Alan Ali Saeed's research focuses on British modernist women writers, particularly their use of stream-of-consciousness and philosophical narrative techniques. He also explores feminist autobiography as a form of resistance and identity formation. His work bridges literature with philosophy and psychology through interdisciplinary narrative analysis. He is increasingly interested in representations of Kurdish identity in fiction, as well as visual storytelling in graphic novels and film. Across all areas, his scholarship emphasises marginalised voices and gendered narrative strategies.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of

expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 03 Jun 2026

Ivana Perica

Dear Dr Ali,
Thank you for your careful reading of my article and for your generous and insightful review. I appreciate your encouraging assessment of the manuscript, especially your remarks on its interdisciplinary approach, political contextualization, and engagement with questions of race, exclusion, and identity in postwar Yugoslav literature. In response to your valuable observations, I have clarified several contextual and conceptual aspects of the argument, expanded sections where further background was needed, and addressed a number of issues you highlighted. Among the broader theoretical perspectives you suggested, Fanon's reflections on the Manichean structures of exclusion proved particularly fruitful for further developing aspects of the novel's representation of hierarchy, separation, and racialized perception. I have therefore included a brief reference to this framework in the revised version of the article. I am also grateful for your suggestions regarding literary contextualization, close reading, and broader theoretical perspectives. These observations have been helpful not only in preparing the revised version of the article but also in identifying promising directions for future research.
Thank you again for your evaluation and for the constructive spirit in which your comments were offered. A revised version of the article incorporating these changes has been prepared and is expected to be published in the coming days.
With sincere appreciation,
Marina Protrka Štimec

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 12 June 2025

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Matteo Nicolini
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Enrico Andreoli
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The text explores the aesthetic consequences and choices of what we may term as the 'political

implicatures' within the political-novel genre, especially in Vladan Desnica's literary thought. The analysis also considers Yugoslav literature in the 'Tito's No to Stalin' era in the 1950s.
Its first section is devoted to setting the scenario and outlining the debate that sorrounds Desnica's literary production, as well as his posture as regards applied literature and the trends that percolated Yugoslav literary milieu during the Socialist regime.
This part is well arranged and written in a pretty good shape; it is also functional to the analysis carried on later in the essay. Yet, this part only sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature. What the author should do is merely to supply a clearer background as regards the aforementioned literary debate on political novel and critiques to Desnica, as well as to explain the following statement: Desnica 'stabbed 'communising literature' ... in the back and disqualified it before the eyes of the youth in a year that represented a turning point in the development of Yugoslav literature because it brought great results'. We have replied to the above question that the work is original in terms of argument. As we are unfamiliar with the main features of Yugoslav literature, we suggest the author be clearer as regards the material. She should indicate to which year she makes reference and what constituted the 'turning point' within the broader context she summarises here.
The author then moves on and concentrates her analysis on the relationship between space and authority in Desnica's subversive approach to it. We find compelling that author's view that, in Desnica, speech, visibility, and invisibility make up a 'political element of literature' that 'is understood to shake the perceptual order that underlies traditional hierarchies' (few lines above, please correct the following:
'Different levels and scopes of policies of identity in these texts ARE [not is] the starting point ...).
Particularly, the issue of authority is at stake here; this issue is deployed by making reference to the ‘colonial’ narrative on the subject of occupation of other territories, which is carried out in the 1950 novel *Zimsko Ijetovanje* (*The Winter Summer Vacation*).
The text’s narrative is set in the (now Croatian) Dalmatian territory and in a precise historical moment, namely the years between 1943 and 1944. At that time, this territory was conditioned by the conflict between Fascist Italy – on the area in the previous years – and the Allied forces, which had intervened in opposition to it. It is in this context that the novel emphasises the relationship between the citizens displaced from the bombed city of Zadar and the villagers in the countryside where the former found refuge; it is a relationship that emphasises the mistrust, if not racism, of the former towards the latter, who were considered perfidious and intellectually inferior.
Firstly, the author analyses this relationship from the perspective of a narrative on cultural hegemony, where the city dwellers are seen as the bearers of a colonial reference that can characterise the discourse of Western (legal and non-legal) tradition. In this sense, the mistrust of city dwellers towards country dwellers is examined also through a crafty narrative technique (the refugees' 'view of the village is gradually caricatured, despite the narrator’s verism and aloofnes') and by making reference to further literature on the subject, as capable of creating a kind of egalitarian dystopia. This analysis focuses well on the problems posed by the hegemonic narrative of the Western tradition and its ability to create ‘inequalities in equality’.
Secondly, the contribution focuses on the examination of the relationship between space, law and politics through the critique of the renaming of places. If we understand well the stream of the argumentes presented in the essay, 'the practice of naming as a symbolic process of marking space' paves the way to a series of speech acts with a truly perlocutory function. Indeed, they produce effects on the adressees (the villagers) and also have some bearing on the real world, which is thus recreated by, again, assuming that the act of renaming changes the view of us readers and also of the 'civilised'.
The process of renamig is clearly exaplain by Štimec: it is operated by the ‘colonial’ actor through

the Italian language of the city's own inhabitants. Štimec is operating an investigation on what is defined as colonisation of space. The argument is persuasive and supported by evidence: the engaging discussion on how the term 'Morlach' evolved over time thanks to Fortis is intriguing. It is interesting to note how the author carries out this examination not only with reference to space understood as territory, but also to lived space generally understood: the extension of the investigation to human and animal redenomination appears fitting. What we suggest here is to have a look at the geographical literature on power (see e.g. the 'Handbook on the Geographies of Power' edited by Mat Coleman and John Agnew; see also Anderson's Imagined communities and, if the author might wish so to do, to Nicolini's Legal Geography, Chapter 6).
The renaming is also perlocutory in terms of bestialisation. Here, we find again the hierachies of domination and dispossesion. It is as the Italian displaced were deproving the villagers not of their land, but of their ability to establish their own connection between community and territory. This is due, as the author of the essay correctly states, 'this novel functions beyond the boundaries that focus on the loose borders of the Morlach population'. Drawing boundaries is indeed a way of shifting from the aeral conception of territory to a geometrical one. It is a form, we add, of settler colonialism (on which we recommend Štimec read some papers by Sandy Kedar).
In this latter respect, however, a passage that appears somewhat forced is the reference to the not coincidental similarity between the term "Iddio" – used by a displaced city dweller in a descriptive passage about the human dimension of the countryside – and the term "idiot": "Iddio", in fact, is a word that in the Italian language of the time is not at all uncommon to find as an alternative to the one – "Dio" – that has become more common over time.
Last but not least, the author comes back to how Desnica's novel was critised in the conclusion – a bit of coordination with the critiques deployed at the very beginning of the article is needed.
The text is engaging, interesting, and opens up new avenues for those of use that do not know Yugoslav literature. That is way we suggest a minor revision by taking into account the suggestions we made above.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?

Yes

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?

Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?

Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?

Yes

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Yes

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: law and literature, minority rights, settler colonialism, geographies of power and law.

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however we have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 03 Jun 2026

Ivana Perica

Dear colleagues Nicolini and Andreoli,
Thank you very much for your careful reading of my article and for your thoughtful and constructive review. I am especially grateful for your positive assessment of the originality of the argument, the analysis, and the article's contribution to the understanding of Yugoslav literature and Vladan Desnica's work. Your comments and suggestions have been valuable in improving my manuscript. Following your recommendations, I have revised the text in several areas. In particular, I have expanded the discussion of the literary and historical context surrounding the debates, clarified the references to the turning point in the generation of the krugovaši, added the point concerning the use of the term Id/Dio, and corrected the language issue you identified. I am also grateful for your suggestions regarding additional literature and methodological perspectives. They have been helpful in further reflecting on the broader implications of the article and in situating its arguments within a wider scholarly conversation. A revised version of the article incorporating these changes has been prepared and is expected to be published in the coming days. Thank you again for your generous engagement with my work and for your constructive recommendations, which have significantly contributed to improving the article.
Marina Protrka Štimec

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.