

Comfort, Kathy. *Representations of Marginalized Populations in French WWI Literature: Muted Voices*. Lexington Books, 2023. 196 pp. ISBN: 978-1-66691-636-2 (Hardback); 978-1-66691-637-9 (eBook).

Review by Thérèse Migraine-George
University of Cincinnati

Kathy Comfort's *Representations of Marginalized Populations in French WWI Literature: Muted Voices* examines the multifaceted ways in which a diverse group of five authors—Maxence Van der Meersch, Colette, Bakary Diallo, Blaise Cendrars, and Roland Dorgelès—depict World War I in their works. As a pivotal and traumatic moment in world history, the Great War has inspired a wide range of representations in literature and film. However, Comfort argues that the best-known literary depictions of World War I are predominantly shaped by the Eurocentric perspectives of white male writers, who focus primarily on combat experiences while often neglecting the experiences of marginalized groups. As Comfort notes, “Women’s voices in general, along with those of children, colonial troops, disabled veterans, and former combatants returning to civilian society are not often a part of the conventional World War I novel” (5).

Conversely, Comfort aims to provide a more nuanced, complex, and equitable view of this historical event, which has shaped—and continues to shape—the social, political, and cultural aspects of our contemporary world and our global experiences with ongoing conflicts in different regions. The meticulous and insightful analyses in each chapter offer a broad and inclusive perspective that foregrounds the “peripheral” fronts of the war, challenging the dominant narratives of male valor and sacrifice typically associated with the conflict. As Comfort puts it: “In a modest way, the present project contributes to the goal of reconnecting the fragments of World War I survivors by bringing together the narratives that shed light on what those on the periphery endured, in effect, re-centering war narratives to include the muted voices” (6). Comfort’s discussion of women’s experiences during the war is particularly noteworthy. By underscoring their multiple roles on the home front and their often selfless contributions to the war effort, Comfort portrays them as overlooked yet central agents during this period. Similarly, her analysis of the representation of colonial subjects and disabled soldiers constitutes a significant contribution to both historical and fictional accounts of the Great War.

One of the book's most significant threads is its focus on the material and psychological impacts of the Great War on these authors, all of whom experienced it firsthand. Comfort demonstrates that, from the violence and destruction wrought by the war, these authors crafted diverse literary accounts that can be read as trauma narratives stemming from the marginalized conditions of their authors or protagonists. These narratives also invite readers to reflect on a range of issues, including the roles of nature, the body, silence, and memory, as well as the potentially therapeutic functions of literature. If, as Comfort illustrates, our representations of the Great War have been largely shaped by fictional narratives (literature and film), these alternative narratives allow us to reimagine and understand the Great War differently. Another significant aspect of the book is its interdisciplinary approach. Comfort combines literary analysis, historical context, and cultural studies, enabling readers to grasp how the Great War and various wartime experiences have been critically shaped by discourses on gender, race, and disability. Moreover, Comfort deconstructs the traditional separation between the "military front" and the "home front," again foregrounding the roles played by "muted," marginalized agents in the war effort.

Each chapter, focusing on a specific author, provides a distinct account of the Great War. Chapter one examines Van der Meersch's *Invasion 14*, a contender for the Prix Goncourt in 1935, which presents an epic, Zolaesque realist narrative and is one of the few novels to depict the lives and suffering of civilians in the occupied North. While considered an important chronicle by historians, it is less recognized by literary scholars; Comfort convincingly argues that this novel offers a "psychosomatic" approach to the war experience. Chapter two focuses on Colette's war reporting, highlighting the specific sufferings and abuses faced by women, including sexual assaults and unwanted pregnancies. Colette's essays, Comfort writes, "are especially timely" because they "find their twenty-first-century equivalent in war-torn Ukraine" (2). In chapter three, Comfort examines one of the few accounts of the Great War from the perspective of a *tirailleur sénégalais* in Bakary Diallo's memoir *Forve-Bonté*. A significant dimension of this work is its grounding in the native Peuhl value system of its author, providing a rare non-Western perspective on the war. In chapter four, Comfort analyzes Blaise Cendrars's opposition to the glorification of the war and his focus on the French Foreign Legion, often overlooked in narratives of the Great War, in his "prose collage" *La Main coupée*. Chapter five looks at Roland Dorgelès's novel *Le réveil des morts*, where Comfort analyzes the author's portrayal of returning veterans grappling with the challenges of reintegration.

Comfort's scholarship not only enriches our understanding of WWI literature but also highlights complex stories that remain largely unheard, untold, or ignored. It is a welcome contribution to both literary studies and historical discourses surrounding World War I. Moreover, the book opens new perspectives on the complexities of war literature and experiences, emphasizing the critical importance of inclusive representations in both historical and fictional texts.