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Kathy Comfort, *Representations of Marginalized Populations in French WWI Literature*. Lanham and London: Lexington Books, 2023. 183 pp. Bibliography and index. $95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1666916362; $45.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1666916379.

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Throughout the twentieth century, French literary memory of the Great War has been dominated by novels such as *Le Feu* by Henri Barbusse, whose subtitle, *Journal d'une escouade*, grounds the work in the military structure and in the everyday life of the trenches. It is against this literature, which focuses on the combatants and tends to erase singularity and subjectivity in favour of a representation of shared experiences, that Kathy Comfort examines the representations of marginalized populations. The books discussed are Maxence van der Meersch's *Invasion 14*; Colette's *Les Heures longues: 1914-1917* and *La Chambre éclairée*; Bakary Diallo's *Force-Bonté*; Blaise Cendrars's *La Main coupée*; and Roland Dorgelès's *Le Reveil des morts*.

In her analysis of these six texts, the author threads recurring themes. One of them is trauma. While it may seem a truism to claim that trauma is a category that can help understand texts stemming from a world war, Comfort posits that what constitutes her corpus as trauma testimonies is not only the experience of war but also the authors' and characters' belonging to marginalised populations, demonstrating that not all war violence is equal and that vulnerabilities often compound during armed conflict. Another transversal theme in Comfort's analysis is nature, which places this book at the centre of recent debates surrounding the environmental history of the Great War. The third transversal theme is, in my opinion, the strongest of Comfort's original contribution to the field of French Studies but also First World War studies. Kathy Comfort's background as a scholar of nineteenth-century French naturalism gives her the tools to analyse all five authors in terms of their literary influences. By doing so, she joins a limited group of scholars who demonstrate that French literature of the Great War is neither simply a product of the event nor a continuation of the literary practices of the Third Republic, but rather a space where the influences of the event and of literary history meet (an argument previously made by Michèle Touret, Laurence Campa, Dinah Ribard, and, more recently, in my own work [1]). Kathy Comfort's eloquent passages about the influence of Zola in van der Meersch's work, for example, are a compelling illustration of how the literature of the First World War needs to be understood in terms not only of the cultural history of the Great War, but also of French literary history, demanding a closer relationship between historians and literary scholars. Finally, the last transversal theme in Comfort's analysis is, unfortunately, an unfulfilled

promise. In her introduction, the author claims she "see[s] these works as diverse 'fronts' of the war, that include, but are not restricted to, the military one" (p. 1). In the rest of the book, however, Comfort analyses the texts as stemming from or representing the different fronts of the war. While this may introduce some diversity in terms of the spaces and experiences being incorporated into the literary memory of the Great War, the idea of multiple fronts is by now commonplace in the historiography of the First World War which has extensively dealt with the experiences of occupied populations, women, colonial soldiers, and disabled veterans. Comfort's supposed fronts are therefore not as interdisciplinarily original as she claims them to be. The idea of works as fronts (literature as a space for the continuation of war by other means, to paraphrase Clausewitz, especially when written by populations outside of traditional combat roles) could have constituted a significant original contribution and it is unfortunate that it is not explored outside of the introduction.

Indeed, one could wonder if the title of the work itself is not another unfulfilled promise. Not all margins are equidistant, and some silences are harder to break, so it is worth considering the extent to which the works examined (and the populations they represent) are marginalised. Marginalised for and by whom? Marginalised in relation to which centre, as it were? Marginalised at what point in time? If Comfort considers that "[t]he best-known French World War I novels tend to be those written by and focusing on male combatants, the majority of whom were white French men from the middle or upper classes, to the near exclusion of divergent perspectives" (p. 3), then yes, focusing on narratives written by or about women and colonial soldiers, for example, is indeed decentring. But the expansion to include these narratives has been a mark of the past thirty years of cultural history of the Great War in France (a paradigm inaugurated by George Mosse's, as well as Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker's works,[2] which are cited by Comfort), to the point where one wonders if this book is not trying to break through an open door. Not being a First World War specialist, it is understandable that Comfort's study is based on a comparison between these works and the historically dominant literary narrative in France, which focused on the *poilus*. This comparison, however, obscures the fact that the populations she is dealing with are no longer at the margins of First World War studies or indeed of First World War literary studies. Nonetheless, the consistent misspelling of Santanu Das's name in the chapter about colonial experiences, as well as the failure to cite Clementine Vidal-Naquet and Antoine Prost in the chapters about women and veterans, respectively, are less easily forgiven.[3] Even in the field of French literary studies, one wonders if the authors are indeed in the margins. Cendrars and Colette are part of the national canon and are taught in schools. Dorgelès and van der Meersch, while not as well known, are part of the First World War sub-canon (for better or for worse, since the latter is usually cited to be criticised). Even Bakary Diallo, arguably the lesser-known among the chosen authors, is an *incontournable* when discussing the *tirailleurs*. Can these famous authors really be considered marginal? Furthermore, in 2024, can we still say that these populations are excluded from the literary memory of 1914-1918, given that the 2013 Prix Goncourt was awarded to a novel about disabled veterans, Pierre Lemaitre's *Au revoir là-haut*, and that David Diop's *Frère d'âme*, about a *tirailleur*, won the International Booker Prize in 2021?[4] Apart from a brief discussion about the *travailleurs chinois* (a severely understudied facet of France's Great War and its literary memory), the corpus is neither as marginal nor as original as the book purports.

On the other hand, the analyses made by Comfort and the specific point of entry she chooses to engage with each text individually are definitely original and oftentimes fascinating. One of the keys used to interpret van der Meersch's *Invasion 14*, for example, is psychosomatology, constituting an interesting and original insight into the work. The same can be said about approaching Colette's war writing though the point of view of non-human relations, especially canine companions in the trenches. Approaching Blaise Cendrar's novel as a collage is, however, hardly innovative, given that he was at the forefront of the development of *simultanéisme* before the war. Furthermore, the false claim that "Cendrars abandoned writing poetry during World War I" (p. 120) deprives the reader of comparisons between the figurative use of language in *La Main coupée* (one of the chapter's axes) and in Cendrars's wartime poems "Shrapnells" (1914) and "La Guerre au Luxembourg" (1916). Having said that, in this chapter readers once again witness one of Comfort's original approaches: she deploys a Balzacian analysis of one of the most modern writers of the *avant-garde*. This not only offers a new point of entry into Cendrars's novel, but it also echoes points made by Judith Lyon-Caen, extending the relationship between history and literature beyond realism.[5]

Indeed, in *Representations of Marginalized Populations in French WWI Literature*, Kathy Comfort demonstrates the full power of her associative reasoning. Not only does she deploy her knowledge of nineteenth-century realism to provide new insights into the literature of the Great War, but she also manages to relate a century-old war to twenty-first century ones, such as Afghanistan and Ukraine. The book's strength can, however, often be its weakness, since the associations and analogies can sometimes be exaggerated. This leads, at best, to anachronism: the countless references to PTSD, which became a concept much later, while an interesting attempt to put WWI and the present in dialogue, may appear quite jarring for First World War specialists, especially because of psychological concepts developed during and due to the war, which would have provided a more accurate framework. At worst, the exaggerated associations lead to generalisations, which can be quite offensive. The author writes: "The narrator of *Invasion 14* explains that the young man and others of his generation had to adjust to a new, dangerous life, starting out as heroes but ending up as pitiful, morally bankrupt individuals. Zidore's situation, then, is a microcosm of that of the traumatized generation that lived through the German occupation during World War I" (p. 28). Given how thoughtfully the author deals with delicate themes elsewhere and her commitment to giving voice to populations she perceives as marginalized, the implication that everyone who endured the occupation was as pitiful and morally bankrupt as a character who sold out his brother to be murdered is awkward. An even more uncomfortable passage appears when Comfort discusses Bakary Diallo's *Force-Bonté*: "He [Diallo] condemns the belief that animals were created for humans to exploit: 'Ces êtres, dits animaux, me font grande peine parce qu'ils ne peuvent pas exprimer aux êtres dits humains ce qu'ils pensent' [These beings, called animals, cause me great sorrow because they cannot express what they think to the beings called humans] (Diallo 1985, 58). The West African troops, most of whom spoke only rudimentary pidgin French, are unable to express themselves adequately and thus are in a position only marginally better than that of the horses exploited by the French army" (p. 87; translation by Comfort). The comparison between the *tirailleurs sénegalais* and animals does not stem directly from Diallo's citation and the suggestion that these combatants could merely speak pidgin French and were therefore unable to express themselves erases the wealth of Wolof, Pulaar, Mandingo, and the plethora of languages spoken by the *tirailleurs.* Regardless of the author's intentions, which I believe were to promote empathy with

the non-human victims of the war, comparisons between black men and animals should have no place in twenty-first century scholarship.

In spite of its sometimes-careless prose, Comfort's book remains interesting. While specialists of the Great War may find the claims of marginalisation and originality of the corpus overstated and those in French studies may find more value in reading the book as independent essays, each with a very innovative way of examining texts, I believe there is a lot of value in how Comfort chose to approach each work. Potentially precisely due to her lack of specialist knowledge of 1914-1918, Comfort demonstrates that the literature of the Great War is in fact a much more complex phenomenon. *Representations of Marginalized Populations* shows that what is known as war literature is indeed a product of the war, but also of literary models. In that sense, they cannot be understood as testimonials or transparent documents nor simply in terms of aesthetic continuation or rupture. Understanding the literature of the war requires historiographical knowledge, but also a profound sensibility towards the ebbs and flows of French culture and literature. Ensuring this literature remains relevant is yet another challenge, one that Comfort meets at every turn. The book's conclusion hints at a development. As a specialist of the literature of the Shoah, Comfort proposes a comparison between the novels of both world wars, focusing on how the emergence of the *résistant* as the national hero relegated the *poilu* to the role of the victim. As the French Studies community navigates the transition between the centenary of the First World War to that of the Second, we can all hope that Kathy Comfort will indeed use her unique way of entering texts to produce this comparative study.

NOTES

[1] Michèle Touret, "La Guerre 1914-1918 est-elle une période littéraire ou un facteur de périodisation ?" in Francine Dugast-Portes and Michèle Touret, eds., *Le temps des lettres* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2001), pp. 211-221 ; Laurence Campa, *Poètes de La Grande Guerre. Expérience combattante et activité poétique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010) ; Dinah Ribard, "Ce que fait la littérature. Poésie et histoire des mondes ouvriers," *Cahiers d'histoire* 138 (2018): 159-173; and Julia Ribeiro Thomaz, "'Knowing You Will Understand': The Usage of Poetry as a Historical Source about the Experience of the First World War," *Alicante Journal of English Studies / Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 31 (2018):109-124 and my forthcoming book *Poésie sous le feu. Fonctions et usages poétiques dans la Grande Guerre*.

[2] George L. Mosse, *De la Grande Guerre au totalitarisme. La brutalisation des sociétés européennes* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 1999) ; and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18 Retrouver la Guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

[3] Clémentine Vidal-Naquet, *Couples dans la Grande Guerre. Le tragique et l'ordinaire du lien conjugal* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014) and Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française: 1914–1939*, 3 vols (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977).

[4] Pierre Lemaitre, *Au revoir là-haut* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2013); David Diop, *Frère d'âme* (Paris: Seuil, 2023).

[5] Judith Lyon-Caen, *La griffe du temps.Ce que l'histoire peut dire de la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2019).

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