

At the crossroads of race and gender during the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract Salaria Kea, the only African American nurse to serve during the Spanish Civil War, fought against racism and fascism her entire life. Her contributions during the war in Spain, as well as her legacy, have become complicated matters, as the veracity of her testimony found in archival materials is routinely questioned and at times blatantly negated. Kea's experience as an African American woman positions her at the crossroads of racial and gender hierarchies that mark her identity in complex ways. Through the lens of various theories of intersectionality, this article will grapple with the precarious modes of historical discourse found in the archive, and vindicate Kea's testimony, recognising it as making a crucial contribution – from a unique perspective – to the understanding of a more nuanced historical picture.

Keywords Salaria Kea, Spanish Civil War, intersectionality, African Americans in Spain

Salaria Kea's participation in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) as the only African American nurse working with the American Medical Unit of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade stemmed as much from her dedication to the medical profession as it did from her political commitment to anti-fascism. The alliance between the US Communist Party and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade fostered a radical liberal left-wing presence among the more than 3000 volunteers from the United States who left their jobs, families and friends to help defend the Spanish Republic from fascist aggression.¹ Kea's unique position within the

Brigade as the only African American woman helps reveal some of the workings of the intersectional identity markers that place individuals in certain groups, and limit movement between them, as well as denying accessibility for some to certain groups. A brief overview of Kea's life and the circumstances that provoked the war in Spain set the stage for an in-depth analysis of Kea's writings found in the archive, which often clash with 'official' histories of the time. My approach to the archival material is that of a literary scholar, not a historian. I analyse Kea's perspective as expressed in the texts in the archive, as documentation that has been excluded from larger conversations about the Lincoln Brigades. My interest is in how language and documentation include and exclude certain viewpoints regardless of the subject's lived experience, that is, regardless of the 'truth' of lived experience. My interest is not to find the historical truth (if there is one) but rather to look at how the documentation in the archive has been ignored and interpreted in racist and exclusionary ways. Adopting this textual analysis framework towards documents in the archive reveals Salaria Kea's contributions to the anti-fascist movement in the first half of the twentieth century, in the United States and in Spain, and calls attention to the omissions of her voice within the literary discourse produced around the legacy of the Lincoln Brigades.

Biography

Compiling Kea's biography offers insight into how her legacy has been shaped by speculation and misinformation. Some of the contradictions arise in later interviews with Kea, when she herself changes her account of certain events in her life or denies others. For example, it is widely accepted that Kea was born in Milledgeville, Georgia on 13 July 1913, although some sources cite Akron, Ohio as her birthplace.² Kea's family moved to Akron in order to be near relatives, but her mother eventually returned to Georgia, leaving her children in Ohio. Kea's father, who worked at a State Hospital in Ohio, was stabbed to death by a patient when Salaria was 6 years old, leaving the children to be cared for by other family and friends, although in later interviews she claims her

father died during World War I.³ Kea later moved to New York City to attend the Harlem Hospital Training Program when nursing schools in Ohio and across the country denied her access because of her race. She flourished in Harlem, where she soon became employed at Harlem Hospital as a maternity ward nurse, and became politically active as a decisive voice in desegregating the cafeteria there. When Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935, groups of Harlem nurses and physicians gathered medical supplies and sent a 75-bed field hospital to the African nation in support of Emperor Haile Selassie's troops. The defence of Ethiopia from Italian forces bolstered Pan-African sentiment worldwide, and particularly among Black workers in the US. When Mussolini sent aid to the military rebels in Spain at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, the Spanish struggle was seen by Black Americans as a continuation of Italian aggression in Africa. Medical personnel in New York mobilised, and in 1937 Kea sailed with the second American Medical Unit to Republican Spain. She was the only African American among the 12 doctors and nurses who landed in Port-Bou, Spain on 3 April and the only African American woman who served during the war in Spain.

Kea worked at the hospital set up in Villa Paz, the abandoned royal palace near Madrid, until she was wounded at the front and sent home to recover in 1938: 'Returning home late in 1938, she achieved minor celebrity status ... she embarked on a tour to rally support for the American Medical Bureau and the Spanish Republic, speaking to church groups, schools, NAACP chapters, and even the Girl Scouts'.⁴ She had married Irish International Brigader Patrick O'Reilly in Spain, and he later joined her in the US. They lived in New York City and ultimately settled in Akron, Ohio where Kea died in 1990.

Kea's life after Spain was marked not only by her devotion to the anti-fascist cause but also by the overt racism she faced living in Ohio – including from hostility to her interracial marriage – and the fear that the McCarthy hearings struck in the hearts of all communist party members in the US. In 1947 she watched as her Lincoln Brigade comrades were called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC); Alvah Bessie, a former Lincoln Brigade member and a successful screenwriter at the time, became known as one of the 'Hollywood Ten' and was sentenced to a year in prison in Texarkana,

Texas. At the end of an interview he conducted in 1980 at Kea's home in Akron, John Gerassi added his own observations, as a kind of epilogue to the interview, and commented on the overt racism faced by Kea and her husband:

... recently they feel this rise in the Ku Klux Klan that's now beginning to make itself felt in Akron. There were things like her saying that whenever they go to the supermarket, she goes out one way, he goes out the other. And they arrive in the supermarket, where they shop and then they do ... the whole thing again, because they're very afraid ... she had gone to church with her husband and had got – he had got – their threats. For her. Saying, that if they still went to church together, this white Catholic church in Akron, that, to quote, 'they were going to kill her that goddamn, f----, n---- bitch.' This really, really scares her.⁵

Threats of violence and racism were nothing new to Kea, but to read about the fear she lived with on a daily basis at the end of her life complicates in devastating ways her truly heroic legacy of early anti-fascist activism in the US and in Spain.

It was during her later years living in Akron that Kea downplayed her political commitment to the Communist Party, specifically in an interview in the film *The Good Fight*. Voice-over narration immediately before her remarks explains that while the US Communist Party organised the volunteers going to Spain, many were not communists. Kea then explains: 'I said I'm not just going to sit down and let this happen. I'm going out to help, even if it is my life ... And I was doing Christ's duty'.⁶ Her emphasis on serving as a religious calling would seem to separate her from strict Marxist party doctrine. In *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, edited by Danny Collum, a short biography appears about Kea (spelled Kee), in which she denies any links to the CPUSA, declaring she didn't 'know what a Communist was'. 'I thought it was for white people only, like the Mafia'.⁷ Nevertheless, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archive web page about Kea states that while working for Harlem Hospital, 'Ke[a] associated with left-wing groups and joined the Communist Party in 1935'.⁸ This contradiction in accounts of Kea's political affiliation does not come

as a surprise: it may very well be the case that she wanted to distance herself from the party later in life to avoid government retaliations as well as racist attacks. In a letter to her husband written from Harlem Hospital when she had returned from Spain, she discusses the unrest in Europe on the eve of World War II and her devotion to O'Reilly, signing the letter 'Your devoted wife and comrade, Salaria'.⁹ In signing the letter 'comrade', Kea acknowledges the importance of the party and of its particular ideology of equality among workers, and in this case between men and women. Whether or not she ever did join the party or consider herself a communist remains superfluous to the double marginality she faced as an anti-fascist woman of colour.

Her life was full of contradictions, as we will see, but, rather than focus on what is factual versus what may have been invented, an analysis of the source and reasons for the contradictions reveals the intersectional institutional racism embedded in the archive. Archives often reflect the point of view of a dominant social order. The individuals with power and access who were responsible for gathering, sorting and documenting artifacts tended not to consider marginal or minority perspectives. Alternative histories, such as those from feminist or postcolonial perspectives, give voice to previously silenced populations; and they encourage us to think about not only what is included in the archive, but also what is excluded.

Another interesting fact about Kea's presence in the archive is the multiple ways her name appears in documents. In a number of instances she is referred to as Salaria Kee, which may suggest that the writer did not have direct contact with her, and therefore had never checked the correct spelling of her name. The Kee spelling occurs mostly in documents from war-time Spain and in testimonies of other Lincoln Brigade volunteers; however, in her own writing and in the later legacy articles about her, the name routinely appears as Kea.

Spain and civil war

The Spanish Civil War gave US liberal thinkers a chance to exercise their dedication to a global anti-fascist labour movement that had galva-

nised the labour unions and the communist party at home. The war had begun in 1936, when General Sanjuro and his second in command, Francisco Franco, had planned a swift military coup to take down the democratically elected government of the Spanish Republic, which the armed forces and Catholic church considered too left-leaning and anti-clerical. The coup failed, but was followed by a military rebellion against the legally elected Republic government, which found itself facing a civil war, and struggling to halt the rapid spread of Nationalist military forces. Sanjuro then died in a plane accident, leaving Franco in command, and the latter embraced both military and economic help from fascist Germany and Italy in the form of munitions, including tanks and bomber jets. The Republic found it difficult to arm itself sufficiently because of the non-intervention pact, an oral agreement between 24 European governments not to sell or send arms to either side of the conflict, which had sought to curtail German and Italian intervention. In response to the non-intervention pact (ignored by Germany and Italy) – which has been called a ‘dishonest farce’ – the USSR sent arms to the Republic, and the newly formed International Brigades sent between 32,000 and 35,000 troops to fight voluntarily.¹⁰

The Brigades’ presence in Spain ended in 1938, as the weakening Republic made a good-faith effort to de-escalate the violence, hoping that Franco would do the same, to at least limit the devastating effects of warfare on the population. However, the violence continued, and, when Madrid and Barcelona fell in 1939 the war was declared over, and Franco was installed as military dictator, a position he held until his death in 1975. The non-intervention stance in the US was hotly contested by activists, writers and artists, many of whom went to Spain to witness first-hand the people’s valiant defence of the Republic. Martha Gellhorn, through a lengthy correspondence during the course of the war, pleaded with first lady Eleanor Roosevelt to convince her husband to help Spain. In 1938, on a return transatlantic voyage to Spain, Gellhorn wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt: ‘It makes me helpless and crazy with anger to watch the next Great War hurtling towards us ... Why don’t we lift our embargo to Spain[?]’.¹¹ An appeal from the Teachers of Spain to CPUSA secretary general Earl Browder stated that ‘the war was no longer the result of factions fighting within the country ... foreign

intervention had become such that the Government was fighting a war of national liberation for the entire nation'.¹² The implication is that no longer was the war an internal conflict, but rather a testing ground for how far fascist powers could reach. Many considered the fall of Spain a precursor to the fall of Europe to fascist ideologies. For Kea and other African American volunteers, who were focused on the resistance in Ethiopia and refused to just watch the next conflict develop, the Spanish Civil War became a unique opportunity to combine their dedication to racial equality and to workers' rights, in a display of intersectional anti-fascism.

Intersectionality and representation

Robert Reid-Pharr explains the unique and often overlooked role of African American volunteers in Spain, who 'were quick to narrate the war as an extension of the generations of struggle against slavery and white supremacy of which they were intimately familiar'.¹³ The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 cannot be underestimated as a driving force of Pan African solidarity and a motivating factor for Black Americans to join the Brigades. Many volunteers were members of the CPUSA, which recognised the importance of powerful Black organisations such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded in 1916 by Marcus Garvey. The UNIA's position that emigration to a Black-controlled Africa was the key to emancipation for Black Americans bolstered active support within the US for the defence of the people of Ethiopia. Robin D.G. Kelley describes the commitment to support the Ethiopian troops as a race as well as a class issue for African Americans. In Ethiopia the proletariat were subject to a pro-monarchist and very anti-communist government, where a few individuals held most of the wealth.¹⁴ The joint concerns of supporters of Garveyism and Black communists in Harlem led to the formation of the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia (PCDE), which solidified the Black left and organised international reactions to the crisis in Ethiopia – a crisis of Italian intervention that would soon repeat itself in Spain. The Civil War in Spain became a key concern for Black

volunteers not only because of the connection to the Italian invasion in Ethiopia that was now playing out on Spanish soil, but also because in Spain (unlike in Ethiopia), people were 'experimenting with a radical democracy in which peasants, workers, and women held the right to vote and in which Socialists and Communists held positions of power in government'.¹⁵ Black volunteers found the draw to Spain as much an issue of racial justice in defence of Ethiopia as a class issue in defence of the proletariat.¹⁶

Kea writes explicitly about the importance of Ethiopia in the fight against fascism, but nowhere in the accounts of white nurses or white brigaders is there any mention of the East African conflict. At the onset of that conflict, racial tensions had grown, as Black workers in Harlem rallied to support the Ethiopian people and government and thus pulled focus away from US labour concerns. The cultural divide then grew, as Imaobong Umoren observes: '[in] Harlem, riots broke out, with skirmishes between blacks and Italian Americans, worsening long-standing tensions'.¹⁷ Thus, Kea's account as a Black woman becomes doubly marginalised, as her political commitment to Ethiopia is not shared by her fellow nurses; while her concerns as a woman are not shared by most of her Black comrades. Reid-Pharr notes that:

[H]er anomalous position as a black woman struggling against fascist aggression in Republican Spain triggered the deployment of a set of reactionary disciplinary practices designed to corral the serious disruptions to hegemonic notions of race and gender that her presence provoked.¹⁸

As we will see, her accounts of racism are questioned and dismissed by her fellow nurses, while male volunteers seem only interested in meeting her because she is female. Kimberlé Crenshaw explains: 'ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups, another problem of identity politics which bears on efforts to politicise violence against women'.¹⁹ The violence against Kea that ensues includes a silencing of her story and a failure to recognise her contributions to breaking racial and gender barriers in the 1930s.²⁰

An intersectional approach reveals the ways in which hierarchies are embedded in, and underpin, social structures and institutions – including the military and hospitals – and how they systematically alienate certain groups of people. ‘When it comes to the organisation of power, different people find themselves encountering different treatment regarding which rules apply to them and how those rules will be implemented’.²¹ As Kea navigates various social structures and institutions, at a very young age she becomes aware of the need for political action to achieve what is taken for granted by others. For example, she tells of how she was prohibited from playing basketball in high school on the all-white team. Her older brother Andrew went to the school board to complain and managed to get her transferred to a school where she could play. She writes: ‘This was my first realisation that one does not have to accept and submit to unfair practices – one resists and fights’.²²

It was during her time of political and transnational activism in Harlem that Kea aligned herself with left-wing political groups and joined the US Communist Party.²³ Even though, as we have seen, later in life she denies ever joining the party, it is very likely that her connections to activism and workers’ rights led her to become a member. Whatever the case, the CPUSA was instrumental in recruiting New Yorkers to volunteer in Spain: in November 1936, ‘three Communist Party functionaries met in a small office in lower Manhattan to discuss the formation of a US. International Brigade’.²⁴ Kea was more than likely aware of the communist party affiliation of most of the volunteers; however we can again see a division of allegiance, as the majority of African American volunteers denounced the racism inherent in fascism, while the CPUSA focused on workers’ rights. Nevertheless, the impact of the CPUSA, and specifically the Popular Front in the 1930s, on Black women leftist politics created a space of solidarity for Black feminist thought, specifically in terms of anti-fascism in Spain. Kea, along with other leading women figures in Harlem, including Louise Thompson and Thrya Edwards, built widespread support for Spain both during and after the war.²⁵ Eslanda Robeson spent time in Spain, and documented her experience in *We Go to Spain*, providing an insider’s view of the chaos of war but also of her heightened anti-fascist critique.²⁶ Interest in Spain for these women stemmed from what they considered

were the racist politics and aggression in Ethiopia and Jim-Crow era segregation in the US. In Spain, however, three sectors of identity came together that Black left feminists held as primary concerns: the 'triple oppression' of class, race and gender.²⁷ As Denise Lynn points out, the conflict in Spain represented serious threats to the advancement of women's rights as well as class and labour oppression.²⁸ During the Second Republic women had been granted the right to vote, and several women had served as diplomats in the government. Franco threatened to nullify this legislation and 'liberate' women from factory work – which is exactly what happened after the Nationalist victory in 1939.²⁹ While the general party line was to reject white, bourgeois, first-wave feminism, Black women in the CPUSA focused on 'fascism's particular threat to women and minorities';³⁰ and Spain took centre stage as a battlefield to combat gender and class oppression.

Kea became an important spokesperson for the support of Republican Spain, and in 1938 The Negro Committee to Aid Spain published an account of her story in the pamphlet *A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain* (republished in the *Bay Area Post* in 1977). In August that year she embarked on an extensive national speaking tour, with Edwards by her side.³¹

Trouble in the archives

Kea's voyage to Spain in 1937 serves as the backdrop to one of the events she repeatedly reports on in her writings but which is contested by others. In the 1987 issue of *Health and Medicine: Journal of the Health and Medicine Policy Research Group*, a short article titled 'While Passing Through' recounts her experience travelling to Spain in 1937: 'I sailed from New York to Spain on the *S.S. Paris* with the second American Medical Unit ... The doctor in charge of the group refused to sit at the same table with me in the dining room and demanded to see the Captain. The Captain moved me to his table where I remained throughout the voyage'.³² In the interview with Gerassi from 1980, Kea describes the same incident, naming the doctor in question as Dr Pitts, the 'top doctor' in charge of the unit, who had said: 'I have

never sat at the table with a n---- wench and I'm not going to start now'.³³ Despite Kea's insistence on the negative impact of this exchange in two separate sources, her account has been routinely negated in the archive. In February 2020, I spent several days at the New York University Tamiment Library special collections reviewing the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives and found examples of what I consider to be unfounded editorialising and textual manipulation. For example, in the collected papers of Fredericka Martin (1905-1992), who worked in Spain as chief nurse and administrator of the American Hospital division and oversaw the work of fifty-four nurses, the word 'False' appears in large, pencilled script next to this story in a print copy of the article. Martin's archive contains the notes and correspondence from the time she spent during the latter years of her life, when she was compiling information, conducting research, and sending out questionnaires to former Medical Bureau staff in order to write a history of the non-military presence in Spain during the war. Her project was never published but, fortunately, all her research and correspondence are housed at the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives in New York.

Martin's work is admirable, and she spent her life helping and defending others, so it is perhaps hard to believe that she purposely contradicted Kea's testimony. Nevertheless, the evidence in the archive at NYU shows a systematic erasure of a racist exchange, even if not necessarily Martin's own overt racism. Martin's editing of Kea's account in the article and the written word 'false' in the margins not only negates Kea's point of view but also introduces conflict and doubt into the very idea of an historical archive. The racist content of Kea's experience becomes somewhat lost, as we try to discern who is telling the truth, who is inventing a story, or who is trying to cover up overt racism to protect an idealised voyage to free Spain. David Featherstone has written about the inherent racism in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and affirms that Salaria Kea, an 'African American nurse who served with the Second American Medical Unit', recalled in vivid terms 'the entrenched prejudice she encountered from senior medical staff from the United States South while in Spain.'³⁴ Featherstone presents this racist episode as important not only to Kea's testimony but also because it 'problematises some of the practices through which solidarities were constructed

in Spain'.³⁵ Yet volunteer Bert Jackson claimed in 1947 that 'it was only in Spain the American Negro received anything like a fair treatment as a member of the Armed Forces', defining the Spanish experience as egalitarian and anti-racist.³⁶ The legacy of African American volunteers in Spain is a complicated mixture of political liberation for Black leftists, as they actively protested and fought against fascism as well as exposing institutional racism, in Spain but also, even more so, when they returned to the US.

Much of the questioning, editing and silencing of Kea's writings is found within the Martin archive. In several instances the contents of the articles and manuscripts are violently rebuked in marginal handwritten notes and the testimony rendered false. It occurs again, for example, in the same copy of the article from *Health and Medicine* cited above, in which Kea describes the conditions in the hospital at Villa Paz. She describes the quarters as overrun with cattle and explains how the peasants who had occupied the space were so accustomed to living in misery and squalor that 'even with the king gone, they did not feel free to live in his beautiful palace'.³⁷ Directly next to this description appears the pencilled-in 'false', echoing the first instance of Martin's editorialising. The blunt negation of Kea's observations as false sends a direct and absolute message: it does not question or even doubt the information, but systematically denies Kea's version of events. This violent intervention once more calls into question the very concept of the archive as a repository of historically valid material, and forces us to take sides.

Contradictory information exists everywhere in the archives, and part of the scholar's job is to decode and discern the relevance of various perspectives. In some cases multiple sides of people's stories have been published, revealing that there can often be many versions of events that happened in Spain during the war. One of the most contested events is the death of Black battalion leader Oliver Law. The claims and counterclaims that he was shot by a sniper or shot by one of his own disgruntled, and probably racist, Lincoln Brigade comrades have been published and republished in various venues over the years. The various versions of the events surrounding Law's death, such as those published in books by veterans Cecil B. Eby and William Herrick, did not include the extreme editorialising or negation featured in Kea's accounts of her

experiences.³⁸ Law is represented in the archive as a hero, but also at times as an irresponsible battalion leader. But, most importantly, his complicated experience and contributions are documented, and the accounts have been circulated as an intrinsic part of Lincoln Brigade history. Kea's version of her own life story – not even something she claims to have witnessed, but her own experiences – has been denied an audience until now.

Reid-Pharr explores this issue further in correspondence between Francis Patai and Martin Balter found in the archives. Patai was an academic working on a book about the women volunteers in Spain, and Balter had been a member of the Lincoln Brigade. Reid-Pharr describes the incident on the ship, and Kea in general, as a problematic topic 'dripping from the ends of their pens'.³⁹ Patai's letter discounting the racist incident on the ship and rejecting Kea's experience states: 'the whole incident will not appear in my book ... none of us want such an untrue lie to dim the glory of the U.S. volunteers'.⁴⁰ The omission of Black experience from 'official' versions of history radically changes who has access to the past and who is considered an active participant in the construction and dissemination of historical information. The erasure of Kea's story and perspective leave her marginalised and often forgotten as an active and important contributor to the construction of US history. Patrice Douglass explains the systematic erasure of race in women's history that ignores the radical differences embedded in female experience:

The archive of gender is structurally anti-black. Its assumptive logic, whether explicit in its presentation or not, maintains that all women have the same gender. This orientation of thought does more than render Black gender invisible or silent. It makes it conceptually impossible to think of gender violence as orienting more than the realm of gender.⁴¹

Other instances in the Fredericka Martin archive reveal further silencing of Kea's first-person accounts of her time working at Villa Paz. Next to Kea's description of a Canadian ambulance driver-technician found by the medical team with 'his head blown away' after an aerial attack

(which is also recounted in *Health and Medicine*), there is another pencilled note reading 'false'.⁴² The gruesome description of the Aragon Front details the exhausting work of the medical staff, the 'screams coming from every direction', people digging in mounds of dirt looking for bodies, and the shock of the surrounding chaos and death.⁴³ This image is also labelled 'false' in the document, an editorial act that discounts the validity of Kea's observations and perspective while asserting an authoritative voice that maintains order in the idealised heroics of the US volunteers. The pencilled word 'false' that appears several times in the margins of the document suggests that Kea's account is hyperbolic at best or otherwise completely invented. By disregarding the dramatic events of the bombing, the 'falsity' of Kea's testimony not only discredits her experience as a nurse serving with the medical unit; it also sanitises the reality of war by claiming that some of the violence was invented. Certainly, at some point in the bombings along the Aragon Front a soldier or driver or peasant was blown apart in such a way as Kea describes; the details of the specific place and time of such an event are much less important than the overall impact on the young nurse of having to witness and deal professionally with such atrocities. As Reid-Pharr convincingly argues: 'the reality [of] ... this story, *her* story, gains its potency from the ways it is viscerally connected to the whole of the spectacular complexity established beneath the sign of the Spanish Civil War'.⁴⁴ Even if Kea's account is exaggerated, it remains her impression, her experience, and her story to tell. Furthermore, if the reader is convinced by the numerous times 'false' appears in the margins, her narrative crumbles and is questioned as pure invention. If Kea's narrative of the bombings is 'false' then we have even more reason to believe that her encounter with a racist doctor during the transatlantic voyage is also 'false'. By systematically denying her voice and the agency of witness-born testimony, the pencilled-in notes in the margins of this document relegate her narrative to a marginalised position within the war-time archive.⁴⁵

The violence inflicted on Kea's version of her own experience by her white contemporaries and archivists lays bare the ways in which institutional racism marginalises Black voices: it is clear that this violence stems from a place of race and gender discrimination, once

more revealing the importance of intersectionality in allowing multiple readings, and a better comprehension of lived experience. On the one hand, Kea's experiences are silenced by white authoritarian perspectives, while, on the other, she is automatically separated by her gender from male African Americans serving in Spain. Her position at the crossroads of intersectional discourse as a Black female leaves her estranged from both identity markers, Black and female, and in this way her voice becomes a unique representation of a particular event, that is the Spanish Civil War.

At the intersection

Kea's presence in Spain as part of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade positioned her in two distinct groups: nurses and African Americans. Her ability to move between these two groups becomes problematic in that she was the lone representative of her gender in the group of African Americans and the only Black nurse. However, intersectionality is not only a study of individual identity. As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge note, identity politics is 'a vital tool of resistance against oppression and relies unambiguously on an understanding of identity as a political location, not an essence'.⁴⁶ Kea's identity is fluid and constantly changing depending on her positionality within certain groups, which in turn defines her subjectivity within each group. Collins and Bilge also note that '[S]ocial context matters in how people use identity to create space for personal freedom'; and that this implies a malleable subjectivity rather than a steady, unchanging identity.⁴⁷ When male troops discovered there was an African American nurse in the unit, they showed great interest in going to the medical unit to meet her.

In his autobiography, James Yates describes the excitement among Black soldiers when they heard about her arrival: 'The story has it that the news spread among the men in the deep trenches near Teruel that a Black nurse was about to arrive. A Spanish coin was flipped to decide who was going to meet her, and Oliver Law won'.⁴⁸ Law was the first African American soldier to command troops in battle (also see above), and later died 'a hero's death', leading a charge against Francoist forces

on Mosquito Hill at the Battle of Brunete on 9 July 1937.⁴⁹ The story of the war hero winning the contest to go meet the nurse bolsters a romantic vision of the volunteers' time in Spain, but at the same time plays out as a story of segregation as the only soldiers interested in meeting Kea were African American.

As we have seen, the pamphlet *A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain* was used as propaganda to garner support for the Republican cause. An account of Kea's childhood and experiences in Spain, the pamphlet details her dedication to the defence of Ethiopia, and her commitment to justice and anti-fascism. As in Yates's account, Law's enthusiasm to meet Kea is evident:

[h]e [Law] was delighted at the thought of a Negro nurse coming and prepared to welcome her. But, the story goes, from months in the trenches his clothes were in rags. He had no shoes and his underwear showed through his trousers.⁵⁰

Since he did not have the appropriate clothes to wear, he summons his friends to determine who will get to meet Kea:

He was in excellent spirits. He called the Negro chaps together and suggested that they draw straws, the one drawing the shortest would go in his stead. Douglas Roach drew that one. The others watched him eagerly as he dressed himself for the occasion'.⁵¹

A notable inconsistency is that in this account the soldiers draw straws, while Yates remembers them flipping a coin, but in either case this anecdote emphasises the fact that Law and the other men were only interested in meeting Kea because she was a single (available) woman, thus projecting her gender as the most salient aspect of her person, above her job as a nurse yet intertwined with her race. It is only the Black volunteers who gather together and draw straws for the chance to go meet Kea; it seems soldiers of other races were not interested in meeting the only African American nurse at the front.

Given these various instances in the archive that locate Kea either as African American or as a woman, and define her according to

these categories, it would seem that her version of the story would be fundamental to understanding the relationships forged between the volunteers. However, as we have seen, her accounts are often disregarded as inventions or exaggerations. How does this attitude in turn affect her legacy? It is clear from various sources that African American presence among the Lincoln Brigade was an important part of US involvement. A mobilised group of politically active and successful resistance fighters, African Americans brought a global perspective to fighting fascism in Spain through their concerted efforts to combat both the Italian presence in Ethiopia and Jim Crow segregation at home. In the Browder archive, a document titled 'Communist Appeal to Socialists for Unity-in New York' states: '[u]nity of action between Socialists and Communists is called for everywhere ... among the youth, Negroes and women';⁵² this reveals the party's attempt not only to reconcile communist and socialist party differences but also to include marginalised populations that would perhaps feel alienated by party politics and membership. Kea openly declared her political commitment to anti-fascism, most notably in the documentary *The Good Fight*, where she explains that she didn't think about being Black in Spain but back in the US she was once again 'at the bottom' – a reference to her social standing as an African American woman.⁵³ She never expresses regret about her time in Spain, and at the end of the documentary affirms that she was very proud to have gone to Spain and that she did 'what she is here to do, help others'.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, what remains in the archives is a story of service and dedication that is routinely questioned, often negated, and relegated to a marginalised story of minimal importance.

However, we see an effort to restore respect and recognition for Kea's legacy, as well as that of many African Americans living in Akron, in the series published in *The Beacon Journal* during the 1990s. Author Cristal Williams Walker paints a much more positive picture of Kea's wartime experiences in her four-page profile published in the newspaper's magazine on 3 February 1991, one year after Kea's death. The article cites Kea's memoir directly, recounting how she was separated from her American unit and held at gunpoint by German troops. There is no intent to editorialise or rectify the story, but rather Kea is portrayed as a hero 'on the front lines of history'.⁵⁵

The story of Kea's capture by the enemy has been routinely denied by other sources, which claim that this certainly did not happen in the way Kea insisted. We find a similar attitude yet again in a letter to Francis Patai dated 1989, from Walter Lear, the president of the History Center of the Institute of Social Medicine and Community Health. In the letter he states that he has Kea's 'memoirs' in his possession.⁵⁶ Every mention of her 'memoirs' and the 'facts' of her account is in quotation marks, and he comments that 'Salaria's writings should be very carefully reviewed and "facts" checked before their publication as historical documents'.⁵⁷ Of course it is routine and good scholarship to check the 'facts', but in this case stating the need for 'facts' is a means of silencing once again a voice that appears throughout the archive but is never taken seriously. Kea's testimony is important, not particularly because it may claim to be 'true' or not, but certainly because it is a voice that has fallen under such intense scrutiny.

In the *Beacon* article Kea is given the benefit of the doubt and her experience takes centre stage. On the cover of the magazine we see an image of a young Kea and the headline 'A Heroine', while the byline reads 'When Salaria Kea O'Reilly Wasn't Fighting the Nazis Her Enemy Was Racism'.⁵⁸ The article includes a short biography that focuses on the racism young Kea faced, ranging from her experiences in high school days, to rejections from nursing schools in Ohio because she was Black, and to the denial of service in World War II because of her race. The larger parts of the article recount Kea's story of being captured and held prisoner, which appears in her memoirs and is not printed elsewhere to my knowledge. She describes being held at gunpoint by a soldier who calls her a 'savage' and tells her to get up, and continues:

My body quivered as I said, 'Shoot, you coward'. He pushed the butt of his gun under my body and flipped me over as if I was a coin with the gun pointing at my stomach, he asked, 'Who are you?' I licked my dry lips, 'I am an American nurse,' I said.⁵⁹

Whether or not this story is 'true', it deserves to be heard. Perhaps Kea is embellishing or even inventing this scenario, but it certainly is true that the volunteers and Republican sympathisers were treated in

this way by Nationalist troops. It is certainly probable that Kea experienced this herself and in this light her account of being captured and held prisoner becomes less of a personal story to scrutinise, and more of an account of what wartime was like for many serving in Spain. Her presence in wartime Spain as an active anti-fascist fighter is the centrepiece of her story and while perhaps it is legitimate to question the veracity of some aspects of her accounts, such scepticism should not be seen as an opportunity to silence, deny, and reject her voice from being heard.

A legacy restored

A concerted effort is being made on the part of scholars and archivists to vindicate Kea's legacy, through a closer look at her personal materials and the scrutiny that has plagued her story. Her testimony as a Black woman is complicated yet worthy of analysis, as Reid-Pharr explains: 'We see among the chroniclers of Kea's remarkable journey a self-conscious will to resist the messiness unleashed by her own version of events'.⁶⁰ But, as the details of the war in Spain reveal, history is a messy business, and the validation of all perspectives can only provide a larger, more complete view of how things 'really' were. In Kea's case, the courage she showed as a young, single Black woman travelling halfway across the world to fight fascism, in a country where she did not speak the language, and where she did not have any previous social connections with colleagues, is astounding. Throughout her life Kea maintained that unique sense of courage and justice that defines her character and legacy. In her memoir she describes herself as '[o]ne of those who understand that Fascism and slavery and persecution and Jim Crow are just one and the same thing'.⁶¹ The notion of intersectionality provides an understanding of the inter-connections between her dedication to anti-fascist work in the form of resistance against racism and the defence of women's rights to serve in the Brigade – and allows an avoidance of the mistake of confining her experience to either one group or the other. Kea claims many positions within the social structure, including but not limited to her race, gender, class, religion and sexual orientation.

In *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, Kea asserts that her decision to travel to Spain and help the civilian population was motivated by a humanitarian calling as much as a political one. She states: 'I'm not just going to sit down and let this happen. I'm going out to help, even if it is my life! But I'm helping. This is my world too!'.⁶² Her affirmation that individual commitment to the anti-fascist cause can make a difference links North American segregation to Spanish oppression of the common people: she sees herself as part of the whole world, not just part of the US fight against racism but also part of the struggles of the common people in Ethiopia and in Spain. These words, translated into Spanish, form an important part of her legacy as they are also found on a public mural commemorating Kea's work in Tarancón, Spain, a small town that lies about an hour outside of Madrid in the region of Cuenca.⁶³ The mural depicts Kea in her medical unit uniform looking out toward the viewer with her words, in Spanish, displayed on her right: tenía que ir a ayudar, aquel era mi mundo también. The image and words ensure that her presence in Spain is not forgotten, and spread her message to future generations of Spaniards. It is also noteworthy that the image of the mural appears on the Facebook page of the Dublin District of the Communist Party of Ireland, where Kea was made an honorary member by O'Reilly.

It seems fitting to end with Kea's own words about her philosophy of life. Among the Francis Patai papers in the ALBA archives there is a page-long typed affirmation by Kea called 'While Passing Through'. She eloquently states what she can do to live a just and prosperous life starting with:

I will try to live through this day only, not to tackle my whole life's problem at once. I will be happy. This assumes the truth of Abraham Lincoln's statement that 'Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be'.⁶⁴

In the face of the blatant and dangerous racism she faced living in Akron, her optimism and positivity are impressive and give us insight into the young nurse who embarked on that ship in 1937. She continues in the affirmation to assert her position defending justice, helping others, and living a full life, concluding with:

Some call it Christianity, Some call it adventure, Others call it humanitarianism, But I call it passing through this world of ours.⁶⁵

These final words are fundamental to understanding who Kea was: she questions social institutions that label people and attitudes, thus rejecting one particular term but accepting them all. Her positionality within the system is not only reflected by Christianity, but also by adventure and humanitarianism. This is her legacy and the way she should be remembered. Kea's contributions as a nurse helping wounded soldiers on the front line in Spain, paired with her courageous fight against racism during her life, make her not only an important figure in the war against fascism but also a fundamental representative of intersectional humanitarian efforts during the first half of the twentieth century.

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