

Syracuse University

## SURFACE at Syracuse University

---

Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics

College of Arts and Sciences

---

Spring 3-30-2022

### Intersectional Silencing in the Archive: Salaria Kea and The Spanish Civil War

Kathryn Everly  
*Syracuse University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/III>



Part of the [African History Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature Commons](#), [Women's History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Everly, Kathryn, "Intersectional Silencing in the Archive: Salaria Kea and The Spanish Civil War" (2022). *Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics*. 29.  
<https://surface.syr.edu/III/29>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE at Syracuse University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics by an authorized administrator of SURFACE at Syracuse University. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

SPANISH LITERATURE

## Intersectional Silencing in the Archive: Salaria Kea and The Spanish Civil War

Kathryn Everly<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Syracuse University

Keywords: Salaria Kea, Spanish Civil War, counterstory

### Hispanic Studies Review

Salaria Kea was the only African American woman to serve with the American Medical Unit during the Spanish Civil War. Her experience has been silenced and edited within the archive by traditionally more authoritative voices. Reconsidering the impact of intersectionality on personal experience can lead to a better understanding of Black U.S. participation in voluntary war efforts as well as to a decentering of the predominant euro-centric versions of the war in Spain and of history in general. The impetus of many African Americans to join the fight against fascism in Spain stemmed directly from the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and the Spanish war in 1936 symbolized racial freedom from fascist oppression for many Black volunteers. For many female nurses, the war in Spain was a chance to actively participate in anti-fascist politics and work side by side with men on the front lines. Through a close textual analysis of papers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives housed at New York University's Tamiment Library, this article examines the intersectional experience of Kea as a Black woman in Spain and uncovers the textual violence that has silenced her story in the archives.

On March 27, 1937 Salaria Kea sailed from New York City with the second American Medical Unit to Republican Spain. She was the only African American woman to serve with the medical unit and it is only through documents scattered throughout the archives that we have a sense of what her experience may have been like. Kea's writings are sparse and unpublished in conventional formats, such as an official memoir by a literary press, but nevertheless, her story is fundamental to understanding how the Spanish Civil War represented an important outlet for anti-racist mobilization in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Among the 35,000 men and women from over 50 countries that volunteered to fight fascism in Spain nearly 3,000 would come from the United States (Carroll 14). Of these U.S. volunteers approximately one hundred were African Americans including Captain Oliver Law who served as the first Black officer in U.S. history to lead an integrated military unit (Lardner 20). Kea was among these volunteers who went to Spain specifically to fight against rising fascism in Europe, but also to combat the Jim Crow-era racism that plagued the U.S. at the time. As David Featherstone explains: "[m]any African American volunteers in Spain linked the conflict to struggles within the United States over white supremacy, reflecting in part their own diverse experiences of gendered and racialised violence" (18). In this article I will explore how the

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to the Syracuse University Humanities Center for a Faculty Fellowship spring 2020, to the helpful and knowledgeable staff at the Tamiment Library Special Collections, and to my research assistant, Lucas Gascón, for his patience and insight.

archive silences Kea's experiences of gendered and racialized violence and will argue that her intersectional history is key to fully understanding U.S. participation in the Spanish Civil War.

Much of the recent research on Salaria Kea focuses on piecing together an archival history of her experiences and legacy. As Anne Donlon and Emily Robins Sharpe have pointed out, the information available about Kea's encounters with racism as well as her commitment to Communism are confusing at best and often contradictory. While this lack of consistency in Kea's story led some of her contemporaries to doubt her testimony, thus thwarting early efforts to recount her experience, the texts we have in the archives and the growing field of research on Black U.S. citizens in Spain offer intriguing insight into the importance and impact that Black women had on the fight against fascism in Spain. Kea's story is informed by multiple aspects of her lived experience including her place in society as a woman, as an African American, as a health care worker, and as a devout Catholic. This intersectionality of social identities is important in demonstrating how "the events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor" (Collins and Bilge 2). Intersectionality, or multiple areas of identity, may influence how an individual experiences and later recalls certain events and Carmen Cañete Quesada argues that the objectivity and veracity of Kea's narratives should not be as important as "the recovery of marginal voices associated with events that took place on Spanish soil" (115). While piecing together Kea's incredibly interesting and provocative biography can serve to better understand her unique experience as a Black woman in the U.S. and Spain, her own autobiographical writing and other narratives about her reveal the importance of storytelling as historical document (Delgado 2412; Martinez xxv).

Kea's story is in essence a counterstory, understood as a narrative that goes against dominant (white male) experience and documentation. The inconsistencies in her narrative that give rise to suspicions of invention and fabrication in her testimony form part of her unique voice and go against the grain of rigid historical accuracy. Aja Martinez describes counterstory as both a verb that counters official History and a noun that describes the narrative testimony of difference. She explains "[t]his methodology rejects notions of "neutral" research or "objective" research and exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color" (3). Kea's experience is silenced by this very rhetoric that reveals the racist tendencies of the archive to prioritize and legitimize white versions of history. Kea's writings and presence in the archive challenge these structures that assume legitimacy and pose the question: how can alternative forms of writing and testimony, or counterstory, enrich and inform a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of history?

In order to pursue these lines of questioning, I will first give a short overview of Kea's life and then discuss the implications of intersectionality as a tool to analyze her experience in Spain. Then I will analyze two documents about Kea, both from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives housed at New York University. The first is an article published in the spring 1987 issue of *Health and Medicine: Journal of the Health and Medicine Policy Research Group* and the second is a pamphlet titled "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain" published by The Negro Committee to Aid Spain in 1938 and republished in the *Bay Area Post* in 1977 with an added introduction by Marion Merriman Wachtel. Instead of focusing on the facts as either erroneous, invented, or "true," I will consider these texts as a testament to the perspective of a young, Black woman working within overtly racist constructs that were, and still are, the medical industry, the U.S. military, and Spanish society. There are some important visual sources in the archive such as well-known photographs of Kea with the American Unit, footage of Kea attending wounded soldiers at Villa Paz in Henri Cartier Besson's *Victoire de la vie* from 1937, and an interview in the 1984 documentary *The Good Fight* that also appears in Julie Newman's documentary *Into the Fire* (2002). While these materials are widely available and have been studied previously, the written material in the archive reveals certain attitudes toward Kea's testimony that do not come across in the visual. In compiling material for books about nurses in Spain, the researchers' notes in the archives question the veracity of her testimony and a more detailed analysis of the written texts reveals a different perspective of the silenced and forgotten Black experience in the U.S. and in Spain during the 1930s.

## Biography<sup>2</sup>

Salaria Kea was born in Milledgeville, Georgia on July 13, 1913, although some sources cite Akron, Ohio as her birthplace. Kea's father worked at a State Hospital in Ohio and was stabbed to death by a patient when Salaria was 6 years old, although in later interviews she claims her father died during World War I. In any case, her mother moved the children to Akron in order to be near family and eventually returned to Georgia leaving her children in Ohio. Kea talks about her siblings' love and support and how they nurtured her interest in school, fostered her independent spirit, and encouraged her to join the medical profession.<sup>3</sup> She 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 fully employed at Harlem Hospital as a maternity ward nurse and became politically active as a decisive voice in desegregating the

---

2 The biographical information is compiled from various sources (Robins Sharpe, Donlon, "A Negro Nurse") including Kea's Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archive page credited to Chris Brooks and from the website [Blackpast.org](http://Blackpast.org).

3 She fondly remembers her brother Andrew who supported her throughout her life. She tells a story (printed in "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain") of how she was prohibited from playing basketball in high school on the all-white team. 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 realization that one does not have to accept and submit to unfair practices—one resists and fights" ("Every Knock" 1).

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 defense of Ethiopia from European forces bolstered Pan-African sentiment worldwide and particularly among Black workers in the U.S. 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 mobilized 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 April 3 and the only African American woman who served during the Spanish Civil War.

Kea worked at the hospital set up in Villa Paz, the abandoned royal palace, until she was wounded at the front and sent home to recover in 1938. Yet even back in the United States she continued the fight against fascism as she travelled to various cities seeking support for the rapidly waning Spanish Republic and was active throughout her life fighting for civil rights. She had married Irish International Brigadier Patrick O'Reilly in Spain and he later joined her in the U.S. They lived in New York City and ultimately settled in Akron, Ohio where Kea died in 1990.

Robins Sharpe explains how the subtle details about her life, such as her birthplace and accounts of her father's death, vary from archive to archive (1), suggesting that Kea chose to emphasize different aspects of her early life and also nodding to the constructedness of autobiography, biography, and history in general. Every account of the past involves a decision about what to include and what to suppress with the modification of places, dates, and details pointing to the nature of invention embedded in historical and autobiographical narrative. These narrative contradictions push against the grain of rigid, chronological facts that are often considered as assumptions of "truth." The truth about Kea's life is perhaps less important than Kea's life story (counterstory): how she presented herself in her writings and interviews and how she was represented reveal much that has been overlooked about attitudes toward race and the Spanish Civil War, such as how the war in Ethiopia and racism in the U.S. motivated and molded Kea's experience in Spain.

### **Intersectionality**

When considering Salaria Kea's impact on Spanish Civil War studies it quickly becomes impossible to separate her gender from her race because both identity markers carry with them a substantial influence on her formation as a person and her reasons to volunteer with the medical unit. Intersectionality helps to orient the various positionalities experienced by an individual in a given social context, for example, Kea's race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and political stance are a few of the factors that shaped her experience and her ability, or

lack thereof, to move within certain socialized spaces. Intersectionality also can reveal the underpinnings of how social structures and institutions, such as the military and hospitals, are constructed as a hierarchy that systematically alienates certain groups and intersections of groups of people. “When it comes to the organization of power, different people find themselves encountering different treatment regarding which rules apply to them and how those rules will be implemented” (Collins and Bilge 9). Kea’s situation of being identified as a female compounded with being racially grouped as African American problematizes her interaction with either group. As the only Black woman serving with the medical unit, she herself forms a “group” of one and is often held up as an object of fascination, especially within the archive, where she is the lone representative of the gender and racial equality, relative to overt segregation in the U.S., that Black volunteers and women briefly experienced in Spain.<sup>4</sup>

Her papers are scattered throughout the archive in various files, but she is mostly absent in the volumes of academic research dedicated to women’s writing and participation in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>5</sup> Patrice Douglass explains the systematic erasure of race in women’s history that categorizes all women as pertaining to one group thus ignoring 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” (Douglass cited in Nash 21). One mode of violence suffered by Black female subjects comes in the form of silence and erasure from social, historical, and political discourses as well as a compounded marginalization within the subaltern discourse of historical reparation. In Kea’s case, the interplay between her race and gender force a fluid negotiation that constantly changes according to where she is and who is there with her.

For example, 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” (129). This same incident is recorded in *A Negro Nurse in Spain* and points to the importance of solidarity among Black Americans in Spain, however, it also highlights how Kea was appropriated by

---

<sup>4</sup> In Joe Brandt’s collection of testimonies *Black Americans in the Spanish People’s War Against Fascism, 1936-39*, Thomas Page idealizes his experience: “Spain was the first place I felt like a *free* man (italics in original, 56), and Bert Jackson recalls: “it was only in Spain the American Negro received anything like a fair treatment as a member of the Armed Forces” (21). While it is certain the integrated battalion in Spain was unique, Black soldiers experienced immediate segregation upon return to the U.S. Page remembers: “Leaving Spain was one of the saddest days of my life. Just the thought of going back to Jim Crow, America made me sick” (56).

<sup>5</sup> One exception is *Women’s Voices from the Spanish Civil War* edited by Jim Fyrth and Sally Alexander. The selection is a short statement about her moral obligation to help the cause titled “Doing Christ’s Duty” (151).

both groups, women and African Americans, in order to further a specific political agenda. She was one of the few women with medical expertise who traveled to Spain alone and formed part of a feminist-centered transnational movement that privileged single, working women. She also is embraced by the Black volunteers as one of the political activists protesting the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, as her own writings confirm, yet her fellow nurses never mention in their writings the importance of Ethiopian freedom for Black U.S. volunteers. Intersectionality perhaps explains how Kea's voice is divided: either represented as one of the nurses or as one of the few Black Americans who fought against fascism in Spain. This remains true in her personal experiences as well as in the archive that often fails to highlight different aspects of her astounding contributions to the war effort, to women's rights, to civil rights, and to a leftist political agenda. However, a wholistic approach to uncovering her experience begins with questioning the subtle negations of her testimony found in the archive and giving voice to the silenced experience of a Black woman in Spain.

### **Structural Racism and Problems in the Archive**

Conducting archival research can be a tricky process. One encounters many leads brimming with possibility only to run into a brick wall of contradictions or just plain silence. Nevertheless, the archive is also full of opportunities to explore and uncover silenced stories that are there waiting to be found. Long gone are the days of thinking about the archive as an "immutable, neutral, and ahistorical place in which historical records are preserved" (Chaudhuri et al. xiii). Many scholars looking particularly for information about marginalized populations or historically underrepresented groups approach the archive as a living, breathing space that in effect is a "site for the production of knowledge" (xiii). In searching the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives housed at the Tamiment Library and Wagner Archives at New York University, one quickly comes to understand the complex nature of archival organization. For example, Salaria Kea's papers are dispersed throughout many different personal archives that focus on independent projects, such as Professor Francis Patai's extensive research on women, the papers and publications about Black volunteer soldiers in the Brigade, and other papers focusing on relief efforts for Republican Spain immediately following the war. Kea's family did not organize her materials nor did she keep her letters and writings filed and designated to donate to any particular foundation or library, therefore, it becomes the work of others to catalog her experience. It becomes apparent that "the act of collection is a subjective matter involving a series of decisions regarding what to keep, what to discard, how to organize what is kept, and for what purpose" (xiv). With each new researcher that comes along with a specific agenda, the archive shifts and reforms into a body of perhaps previously untapped knowledge.

Women have especially been underrepresented in the archive yet "their voices are sometimes found in abundance" (xiv) as they emerge in unexpected places, giving new meaning to what was once considered insignificant. Kea's writings

found in others' archives have been censored, editorialized, and discarded as false, yet these very acts of silencing and violence create a dialog between those with power and those without. The silencing of her voice forces us to recognize the institutionalized sexism and racism that exists within the archive and demands a more critical approach to how we deal with historical material. The act of interpretation, much like the literary methods of reader response theory that insists the text exists only when read and interpreted by a reader, places the researcher in the role of producer and organizer of historical knowledge. As Chaudhuri, Katz, and Perry explain, this approach that seeks to give voice to silenced subjects within the archive demonstrates a "methodological self-consciousness regarding historians as history makers and raise[s] questions about the relationship between ourselves and our subjects" (xv). It is not a question of inventing connections or drawing parallels where before there were none, but rather of being aware of what has been silenced, marginalized, or editorialized in the archive and how it has been categorized to supposedly represent a historical "truth." It is up to the researcher to piece together the value of the counterstory and make a claim for the value of alternative historical perspectives.

Several key samples of Kea's papers are in the Fredericka Martin archive. Martin (1905-1992) worked in Spain as chief nurse and administrator of the American Hospital division and was in charge of overseeing the work of fifty-four nurses. Martin's archive reflects the time she spent during the latter years of her life compiling notes, 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 of her research and correspondence is housed at the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives in New York.

Much of Kea's writings that are questioned, edited, and silenced are 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. For example, Kea published a short article titled "While Passing Through" in the spring 1987 issue of *Health and Medicine: Journal of the Health and Medicine Policy Research Group*. The piece written entirely in the first person presents much of the same information from the pamphlet "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain," but the first-person narration gives this piece a distinctly personal register that heightens the testimonial value. In this article Kea writes about 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” (“While Passing Through” n.p.).<sup>6</sup> Directly next to this paragraph in the outer margin the word “False” is written in large penciled script. Directly opposite this first handwritten note is another, smaller version of the word “false,” this time next to a description of the conditions in the hospital set up at Villa Paz near Madrid.<sup>7</sup> Kea describes the quarters as overrun with cattle and explains how the peasants who had recently 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” (“While Passing Through” n.p.). The editorializing intervention of the penciled in “false” in both instances sends a very firm and absolute message. It is not a question mark, for example, that would indicate a point needing clarification but a word, “false,” that immediately and categorically labels the text as erroneous. The single word in the margins has a double effect: first it delegitimizes Kea’s voice as a reliable narrator in a gesture that neither questions the information nor specifies exactly what information provided is not true. Secondly, it jars our concept of the archive as a repository of historically valid material and forces the reader to take sides. Who is telling the truth? The racist content of the experience on the ship becomes lost in the distracting conundrum of who is “right” and who is “wrong,” who is inventing a story or who is trying to cover up overt racism to protect an idealized voyage to free Spain.

The textual violence of the editorial accusations leads to a profound, negative impact on Kea’s credibility as a witness; her authority as a witness and writer of first-person testimony is silenced. Her account of personal humiliation, isolation, and racism is a counterstory to what, for many white nurses, was most likely a triumphant, patriotic voyage to fight fascism in Europe. What remains in the archive is not her own account but rather the negation and refusal to accept her voice as true. This is not a questioning of her memory or a suggestion that perhaps she is not remembering the events as they actually happened; this is an accusation directed at her version of historical reality. And this is what remains in the archive; forcing readers to first and foremost defend Kea’s voice as perhaps truthful and then make a case for its authenticity even before we can begin to think critically about the content.

The third instance in the document negating part of Kea’s story is yet another penciled note reading “false” next to a description of a Canadian ambulance driver-technician found by the medical team with “his head blown away” (“While Passing Through” n.p.) after an aerial attack. The gruesome description of the Aragon Front details the exhausting work of the medical staff, the “screams coming from every direction” (“While Passing Through” n.p.), people digging in mounds of dirt looking for bodies, and the shock of

---

<sup>6</sup> In the typescript of an interview with John Gerassi from 1980 Kea describes the incident in this way: Dr. Pitts was the “top doctor” in charge of the unit and said: “I have never sat at the table with a n---- wench and I’m not going to start now” (8). The interview, unfortunately, was not published in Gerassi’s book on North American volunteers in Spain.

<sup>7</sup> The hospital was set up in the summer palace abandoned in 1931 with the abdication of King Alfonso XIII.

the surrounding chaos and death. The idealized heroics of the U.S. volunteers crumble in the face of Kea's visceral, disturbing accounts of wartime Spain culminating in the decapitation of the innocent driver. This particular detail, also labeled "false" in 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, but it also sanitizes 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 Robert 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" (63). 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 penciled-in notes in the margins of this document relegate her narrative to a marginalized position within the war-time archive.

The published autobiographies of Black male volunteers such as James Yates's *Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (1989) and the collection of testimonies edited by Danny Collum, *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do"* (1992) also describe the atrocities of the war and perhaps were embellished as well for narrative effect, but nevertheless were published as important, authentic historical information. Collum's book is a collection of field reports from volunteers, poetry, and press releases from the likes of Langston Hughes and Richard Wright as well as a section titled "Testimonies." Kea's first-hand account from the journal *Health and Medicine* is absent in this collection, but the report from 1937 written *about* her in pamphlet form titled "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain" does appear. Her voice in the pamphlet is mediated by a third-person narrator that fails to mention her encounter with racism on the ship or anywhere else in Spain. Kea's first-person testimony slips through the cracks of history as neither represented adequately by African American historical accounts (Collum's book) nor by the women compiling histories of nursing aid in Spain. The women writing a feminist history of gender equality reject Kea's suggestion of racism among the ranks while in the male-dominated accounts she is a footnote at best. This limbo of pertaining to various identity groups is what Kimberlé Crenshaw cites as detrimental to the Black woman's subjectivity and social positioning. Identity as a term becomes

blurred by the constantly changing power dynamics of the individual as seen or placed within a certain social or cultural group. Through an intersectional lens we begin to understand Kea's unique position within the civil war archive: she belongs to the African American cohort in Spain but is underrepresented in that history; and she belongs to the feminist vindication of women's work as intrinsic to military operations in Spain yet certain aspects of her story are negated and discarded. The unique positioning of Kea as the only Black female serving in Spain ironically disempowers her voice within both of these groups. As Crenshaw points out, "ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups" (357) and only by unearthing the lost voice and affirming that difference counts as an alternative experience and necessary part of a comprehensive understanding of history can we begin to formulate a broader, more accurate version of U.S. participation in the Spanish Civil War.

### **A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain**

The pamphlet "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain" was written in 1938 to garner financial support for the Republic as it fought to hold its ground against Franco's quickly advancing forces. The piece was issued by the Negro Committee to Aid Spain and cites the help of the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. The publication rallies for Republican economic support by using Kea's persona as a brave young woman who left a steady nursing job at Harlem Hospital to risk her life for Spanish democracy and to fight against rising fascism in Europe. The 14-page pamphlet is divided into seven sections: a short introduction, "Childhood", "Training and Work at Harlem Hospital," "Republican Spain," "The American Base Hospital at Villa Paz," "Negro Soldiers in Spain," and "At the Front." The authorship of the pamphlet is vague, but it does include several direct quotes from Kea as well as word-for-word excerpts from her type-written manuscript. The mix of first and third-person narration allows for multiple viewpoints and commentary on Kea's activities while at the same time providing eye-witness testimony. Anne Donlon suggests that Thyra Edwards wrote this pamphlet as a way to rally support for Republican Spain and champion civil rights in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> Edwards, a tireless activist, grew up in Texas, joined the Houston NAACP when it was formed in 1918, and traveled throughout Europe in the 1930s including a stop in Spain to help child war refugees. Her experience with Kea is documented in a personal scrapbook about her time in Spain and in the U.S. touring major cities seeking economic support for the Spanish Republic. She does not sign her name to the pamphlet but prefers to leave the narrative voice to Kea who is the main character and often directly quoted. The ambiguity of authorship can be frustrating when trying to authenticate the stories and sentiment behind the words, but if we consider the value of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Donlon writes: "archival evidence strongly suggests that Edwards was the primary author" of *A Negro Nurse in Rep. Spain* (114). Edwards and Kea travelled extensively together in 1938 throughout the Northeast, South, and Midwestern United States raising money and supplies to send to Spain (Donlon 106).

multiple-voiced narrative that emerges in the document and the compelling, direct attack on racism, the text becomes an invaluable testimony of Black feminist solidarity and a metaphorical call to arms.

Much of the information in the pamphlet comments on the poor conditions at the field hospital in Villa Paz that fostered Kea's ingenuity in finding ways around the lack of resources, such as filling hot water bottles with soup or boiling eggs in wine when water ran out. There are several copies of the pamphlet in various archives, but one copy in the Fredericka Martin papers is marked with hand written notes in the margins declaring information such as the bombings and operating room conditions as "false" and "exaggerated," similar to the editorializing seen in the article in *Health and Medicine*. The handwriting is the same in the pamphlet as in the article, thus confirming Martin's ongoing doubts about Kea's story and continuing the overwhelming negativity of textual violence that exacerbates the search to piece together Kea's experience.<sup>9</sup> However, the most striking feature of the pamphlet is the introduction that frames her experience in Spain as a revolutionary act of transnational Black solidarity in the face of rising fascism in Africa and Europe that is directly equated to racism in the U.S.

The angle of racism intersects with fascism and oppression in such a way that African American presence and participation in the war effort in Spain gain a much more transnational purpose, focusing on the liberation of oppressed Black people all over the world. The first words of the pamphlet directly tie events in Spain to the crisis in Ethiopia: "What have Negroes to do with Spain? What has Spain for us? What about Ethiopia? Why should Negro men be fighting in Spain? What do they expect out of it?" (3). The rhetorical questions draw the reader in and define the marginalization of one group with the use of the word "us" that implies a "them." This technique establishes a solidarity between the narrative voice and the reader who relates to the interrogation and suspicion experienced by Black volunteers. The duality of "us" and "them" in the opening paragraphs of the pamphlet suggests the racist discrimination faced by Black volunteers. The questions also address white suspicion that there is no place for Black Americans in the Spanish war effort, which in turn evidences the racism traditionally faced by African Americans in the U.S. military. As these opening questions suggest, Black volunteers had to defend their right to go abroad by providing a rationale that presented Spain as a key link in the ever-growing global chain of racist sites of oppression. The "us" and "them" opposition established in the opening paragraphs of the pamphlet smartly poses the question that reflects in all probability what white people

---

<sup>9</sup> The pamphlet also includes marginal hand-written notes by nurse Ann Taft, also stationed at Villa Paz, who agrees with Martin's negative editorializing saying: "all your comments are correct."

repeatedly were asking, demanding to know what Spain had to do with the Black population. The answer given in the pamphlet is very clear and directly links the fight against fascism in Spain to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

The importance of the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia cannot be underestimated as a springboard for Black political and social consciousness in Spain and the U.S. in the 1930s. Ethiopia was one of the only countries in Africa at the time that had maintained independence and avoided direct European colonial rule (Kelley 16).<sup>10</sup> This unique position within the African continent elevated Ethiopia to symbolic stature of Black global independence. Robin D.G. Kelley states in the chapter “This Ain’t Ethiopia, But It’ll Do” from *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*: “Ethiopia had become known as the cradle of civilization; it was among the first countries in the world to adopt Christianity. In the black Christian world, Ethiopia has remained a principal icon and is in some ways perceived as an African Jerusalem” (16). As a center of transnational Black identity, Ethiopia served as a global imaginary for Black freedom and self-rule, regardless of the actual government and populace. The outcry against the Italian invasion served a greater purpose than to defend Ethiopia’s self-rule; it became a global movement that brought together many sectors of Pan-Africanism and fostered a real solidarity among Black New Yorkers who bonded together first to defend Ethiopia and, when the conflict moved to Spain, to fight Mussolini’s support of Franco on Spanish soil. “The defense of Ethiopia did more than any other event in the 1930s to internationalize the struggles of black people in the United States” (Kelley 16) and Kea was very much a part of this movement that went beyond just sending medical aid to Spain.<sup>11</sup>

Ethiopia was a point of inclusion for Kea and many of the African American volunteers as the struggle became synonymous with racism in the U.S. and offered the Black population a multiple rationale for heading to war in Europe. As the pamphlet describes:

The lynching of Negroes in America, discrimination in education and in jobs, lack of hospital facilities for Negroes in most cities and very poor ones in others, all this appeared to them as part of the picture of fascism: of a dominant group impoverishing and degrading a less powerful group. The open pronouncements of Germany and Italy against all non-Aryans is convincing evidence. (“A Negro Nurse” 3)

<sup>10</sup> Kelley explains “The only other African nation not under direct European colonial rule was Liberia...Despite the appearance of independence and the symbolic meaning Liberia held for African nationalists, it remained essentially a protectorate of the United States, which pressured the Liberian government to offer Firestone Rubber Company a concession of one million acres-nearly all of its arable land mass- for the cultivation of rubber” (note 29, 48).

<sup>11</sup> The best-known international “manifestation of Ethiopianism in the United States was perhaps Harlem’s own Abyssinian Baptist Church, founded in 1809” (Kelley 16). The church building on West 138<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan was built in 1922-23 and designated a New York City landmark in 1993.

Political activism, which all volunteers shared in one form or another, intersects with racial oppression motivating African Americans to seize the opportunity the war in Spain presented as a way to help combat colonialism in Africa, fight fascism in Europe, and bring attention to the rising anti-racist movement in to the U.S. Through geocritical juxtaposition, the epicenter of the political impetus of the Spanish Civil War for Black volunteers shifts from Europe to Africa, no longer privileging a Eurocentric history of the civil war, but rather a counterstory or counter history. Combatting fascist troops in Spain is historically and intrinsically linked to the invasion of Ethiopia yet this aspect is absent from the majority of accounts of white soldiers and nurses in the archive.<sup>12</sup>

Kea's work as a nurse exemplifying the intersection of race and gender is another key element of the pamphlet. The majority of the narrative of "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain" revolves around tending to wounded soldiers while surviving behind the battle lines with limited resources, such as the lack of water to properly clean and make meals, the insufficient amount of electricity, and inadequate food. As mentioned previously, Kea comes across at times as a spectacle for the Black soldiers, an anomaly that drew men to her just to see if it was true that a Black nurse had made her way to Spain. Kea is sexualized in a particular way that did not pertain to white nurses who didn't have this particular racial connection with a select group of soldiers. Even though many nurses report some level of sexual based discrimination and unwanted attention, the atmosphere seems to have been one of mutual respect with a focus on the pressing humanitarian effort. As a way to conclude, I return to the story that best exemplifies Kea's duality as a Black nurse in Spain and complicates her position within historical discourse.

In *A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain*, as in Yates's account, we meet Oliver Law, a fallen war hero and the first African American to lead a U.S. Army battalion. His enthusiasm to meet Kea is evident as the pamphlet describes: "[h]e 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" (10). Since he did not have the appropriate clothes to wear, he summons his friends to determine who will get to go 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" (11).<sup>13</sup> This anecdote emphasizes the fact that Law and the other men were only interested in meeting Kea because she was a single (available) woman, thus projecting her

---

<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Spain's war in Rif during the 1920s and Franco's military preparation in North Africa all shift the center of the production of political and cultural knowledge from Europe to Africa and are worthy areas of study if we are committed to fully understanding the local and global implications of the Spanish Civil War.

<sup>13</sup> A notable inconsistency is that in the pamphlet the soldiers draw straws while Yates remembers them flipping a coin.

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.

This incident in the pamphlet sets up another dichotomy similar to the “us” and “them” racial discourse used at the beginning of the piece. Here gender is distinctly separated into a hierarchy of numbers, there are more men vying for the chance to meet one woman. Also issues of power and mobility come into focus, namely the ability to move around in military and medical circles freely. It would be much more difficult, for example, for Kea to venture out on her own and visit the group of soldiers in their barracks, thus the men are forced to draw straws and send a lone envoy. The story of white volunteers, either male or female, excited to meet the only Black nurse in Spain simply does not exist; and therefore, even though there is a heightened awareness in the pamphlet of the importance of Black leadership in Spain, the opposition of Black and white, male and female, subject and other maintains the ideological gulf between cultural experience. It becomes a radical reorganization of historical assumptions about the war in Spain when the locus of political and social motivation shifts from a white, European model to Black, female, African, and African American solidarity. Kea is caught somewhere in the middle as a Black woman working to fit into the white medical establishment and a Black woman whose position within the patriarchal hierarchy of African American volunteers separates her out, placing her in the subordinate position of objectified other.

It is a notable omission in the pamphlet that there is no mention of Kea’s relationship with white Irish brigadier John Patrick O’Reilly, whom she met in the hospital at Villa Paz. She and O’Reilly married in Spain and lived first in New York and then in Ohio after the war. There are many possible reasons that Kea did not include her relationship with O’Reilly in the pamphlet (nor does he appear in her typewritten memoir) starting with that perhaps she wanted to focus on her nursing experience and the revolutionary spirit of those working in Spain. Perhaps her relationship and marriage to a white man would detract from the strong identification with the Ethiopian crisis and Pan-African sentiment of Black unity and solidarity in the face of global fascism and racism. Perhaps she wanted to protect O’Reilly from these kinds of assumptions or protect herself from racist attitudes of co-workers. Nevertheless, what emerges from the pages of the pamphlet is an idealistic imagination of the revolutionary and egalitarian social microcosm that existed among the volunteers in Spain. Whatever kind of racism and sexism Kea experienced in Spain was either denied, as we have seen in the Martin archive, or smoothed over with a political discourse of mass liberation for the oppressed races once fascism is defeated in Spain.

Kea's presence in Spain and the methods of collecting and presenting her writings and experiences in the archive reveal the importance of unearthing her counterstory. 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" (71). Structural racism in the archive silences the Black, female version of history and so it is up to the researcher to approach the material with an eye toward restitution and justice. Salaria Kea is an important figure in Black feminist transnational history and her story, as powerful counterstory, is just beginning to receive the attention it deserves.



## REFERENCES

- “A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain.” 1938. *Issued by The Negro Committee to Aid Spain with the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. Reissued with Intro by Marion Merriman Watchel*, 1977. Tamiment Special Collections, New York University, Fredericka Martin Papers, ALBA. 001.
- Bessie, Alvah, and Albert Prago, editors. “Our Fight. Writings by Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.” *Monthly Review Press*, 1987.
- Brandt, Joe. *Black Americans in the Spanish People’s War Against Fascism, 1936-39*. Self Published, 1979.
- Brooks, Chris. “Volunteers Salaria Kea.” *Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives*, <http://www.alba-valb.org/volunteers/salaria-kea/?searchterm=SalariaKea>. Accessed 26 Sept. 2019.
- Cañete Quesada, Carmen. “Salaria Kea and the Spanish Civil War. Memoirs of A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain.” *Black USA and Spain. Shared Memories in the 20th Century*, edited by Rosalía Cornejo-Parriego, Routledge, 2020, pp. 113–33, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429060427-6>.
- Carroll, Peter N. “Introduction.” *Facing Fascism. New York and The Spanish Civil War*, edited by Peter N. Carroll and James D. Fernández, Museum of the City of New York and New York UP, 2007, pp. 7–17.
- Chaudhuri, Nupur, et al., editors. *Contesting Archives. Finding Women in the Sources*. U of Illinois P, 2010.
- Collins, Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality*. Polity, 2016.
- Collum, Danny Duncan, editor. *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War. “This Ain’t Ethiopia, But It’ll Do”*. G.K. Hall and Co, 1992.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Critical Race Theory*, edited by Kinberlé Crenshaw et al., The New Press, 1995, pp. 357–83.
- Delgado, Richard. “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative.” *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 87, no. 8, Aug. 1989, pp. 2411–41, [doi:10.2307/1289308](https://doi.org/10.2307/1289308).
- Donlon, Anne. “Thyra Edward’s Spanish Civil War Scrapbook. Black Women’s Internationalist Writing.” *The Whole World Over. Black Women and Internationalism*, edited by Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany M. Gill, U of Illinois P, 2019, pp. 101–22, <https://doi.org/10.5622/illinois/9780252042317.003.0006>.
- Featherstone, David. “Black Internationalism, International Communism and Anti-Fascist Political Trajectories: African American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War.” *Twentieth Century Communism*, no. Issue 7, 2014, pp. 9–40, [doi:10.3898/175864314813903980](https://doi.org/10.3898/175864314813903980).
- Fyrth, Jim, and Sally Alexander, editors. *Women’s Voices from the Spanish Civil War*. Lawrence and Wishart, 1991.
- Into the Fire: American Women in the Spanish Civil War. 2002*. Directed by Julie Newman, FirstRun Features, 2007.
- Kea, Salaria. “May Every Knock Be A Boost.” *Francis Patai Papers, ALBA 131, Box 2, Folder 12*. ---. *Typescript Memoir of Salaria Kea*. Tamiment Special Collections, New York University, Fredericka Martin Papers, ALBA 001, Box 9, folder 33.
- . “While Passing Through.” *Health and Medicine. Journal of the Health and Medicine Policy Research Group*, vol. 4, no. 1, Spring 1987. Tamiment Special Collections, New York University, Fredericka Martin Papers, ALBA 001, Box 9, folder 33.

- . Interview by John Gerassi. Tamiment Special Collections, New York University, Francis Patai Papers, ALBA 131, Box 2, folder 12.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do." *Collum*, pp. 5–57.
- Lardner, Ring, Jr. "Introduction." *Bessie and Prago*, p. 15.
- Martinez, Aja. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. *CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series*. 2020.
- Nash, Jennifer C. *Black Feminism Reimagined After Intersectionality*. Duke University Press, 2019. *Crossref*, [doi:10.1215/9781478002253](https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478002253).
- Reid-Pharr, Robert F. *Archives of Flesh. African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique*. New York UP, 2019.
- Robins Sharpe, Emily. "Salaria Kea's Spanish Memoirs." *The Volunteer*, vol. 4, Dec. 2011.
- "Salaria Kee O'Reilly (1913-1991)." *Blackpast*, Jan. 2007.
- The Good Fight. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War*. Directed by Noel Buckner, Mary Dore and Sam Sills, The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Film Project, 1983.
- Victoire de la vie*. Directed by Henri Cartier Bresson with Herbert Kline, Frontier Films for the Centrale Sanitaire Internationale, 1937.
- Yates, James. *Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. Open Hand Publishing, 1989.