

## AUDIBLE POSTCARDS | Albie Smith

### Artist statement

The concept behind this video stems from the diversity of archival material I accessed through NYU's online Tamiment archive. I decided to combine Spanish Civil War postcards with oral histories from veterans of the war. By synthesizing different media, I hoped to make a statement about the Spanish Civil War that couldn't have been made if I had considered documents in isolation.

The first oral history I listened to was told by Steve Nelson, a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. While it was a coincidence that I listened to his history first, he served as the perfect introduction to the through line of my project. Nelson began his oral history with an anecdote about himself at the age of twelve, around the time of the first World War; he recalls asking himself a very simple question: "What the hell is war?"

So I set out to gather other oral histories with that question firmly rooted in the back of my mind—just what the hell is war?

After completing the oral history research portion of the project, I moved on to arranging the audio clips. As I began trimming the clips, I began to notice how I was editing some speakers' words. To cut off a stammer, hesitation, or a misspoken word was to change the story being told. Most of the time, I chose to keep these "mistakes" because they added to the experience of listening to the story. To splice their words and delete their imperfections would be to make them sound less like real people.

In arranging the audio clips, the order became important. Certain combinations evoked strong contradictions. For example, Steve Nelson discussed a metaphorical "fire"—Yugoslav slang for "war." Leopold Alfred Amery, another Abraham Lincoln Brigade veteran, discussed an actual fire he witnessed, which raged and consumed many of his comrades. Placing these clips one after the other elicits certain questions. What is fire in the context of war? How many different kinds of fire does war bring?

I found that Spanish Civil War postcards formed a worthy visual juxtaposition with the audio. These brightly colored, cartoonish depictions of terribly tragic events were an apt visual aid to the stories of people who witnessed the events. When I laid the audio with the postcards, I immediately knew it worked. It was like the postcards were a comic book and the veterans' words were the missing captions.

I did not want to choose postcards that were a literal depiction of the audio clips, a pairing that might trigger an altogether new emotion or thought. One veteran recalls a time when he thought it was raining, only to realize the "rain" he felt was actually bullets hailing from the sky. I chose to pair this audio with a postcard of men drowning in water with planes careening around them. This audio/visual pairing suggests that the planes rained down so many bullets that the men felt they were drowning in them.

The result of my work is a short film (6:36). I call the work "Audible Postcards: What the Hell Is War?" Click [here](#) to view.

All materials below courtesy of Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Special Collections  
Elmer Holmes Bobst Library  
70 Washington Square South  
New York, NY 10012, New York University Libraries.

Abe Smorordin, 4/29/20; Media Entertainment, Inc. Oral History  
Collection; ALBA 047; box 3, folder 7

Bill Van Felix, 4/29/20; Media Entertainment, Inc. Oral History  
Collection; ALBA 047; box 3, folder 10

Evelyn Hutchins, 4/29/20; John Gerassi Oral History Collection;  
ALBA.AUDIO.018; box 1

Joe Brandt, 4/29/20; Manny Harriman Video Oral History  
Collection; ALBA VIDEO 048; box 1

Karl Cannon, 4/29/20; Manny Harriman Video Oral History  
Collection; ALBA VIDEO 048; box 1

Len Levenson, 4/29/20; Media Entertainment, Inc. Oral History  
Collection; ALBA 047; box 3, folder 6

Leopold Alfred Amery, 4/29/20; Manny Harriman Video Oral  
History Collection; ALBA VIDEO 048; box 1

Moe Fishman, 4/29/20; Media Entertainment, Inc. Oral History  
Collection; ALBA 047; box 3, folder 5

Pierre Duvalle, 4/29/20; Manny Harriman Video Oral History  
Collection; ALBA VIDEO 048; box 4

Steve Nelson, 4/29/20; John Gerassi Oral History Collection;  
ALBA.AUDIO.018; box 1

[Spanish Civil War Films 2], 4/29/20; Harry Randall: Fifteenth  
International Brigade Films and Photographs; ALBA PHOTO 011; box 7

[Spanish Civil War Postcards \(ALBA.242\)](#)

Spanish Civil War Postcard 003  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 008  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 014  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 021  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 027  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 033

Spanish Civil War Postcard 037  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 038  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 039  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 040  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 042  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 045

Spanish Civil War Postcard 047  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 049  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 054  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 056  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 061  
Spanish Civil War Postcard 063