How do we know when we are hearing the truth in an interview? What do we do with conflicting versions of events, conflicts that are bigger than differing points of view or the discrepancies that come from forgetting details after many years? What are we to think when the story we recorded disagrees with the written historical record? When we have more than one version, how are we to choose which one we will present to the world?

There is not one easy explanation for the inconsistencies we record. As oral historian Alessandro Portelli found, it is even possible for stories to be consistent with each other and still be inaccurate. When Portelli interviewed the people of Terni, in central Italy, about the death of Luigi Trastulli, he found that many of his informants, eyewitnesses among them, agreed: Trastulli died in 1953 in street fighting following the layoff of two thousand steel workers. But the historical record shows Trastulli was killed in a clash four and a half years earlier at an anti-NATO rally.¹ Portelli thinks the “mistake” he heard tells us the interests of the tellers, what is beneath the story. This discrepancy, he says, “enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents. It is not caused by faulty recollections, . . . but actively and creatively generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events.”²

I have found it useful to keep Portelli’s theories in mind as I compare interviews that cannot both be “true.” I agree with Portelli; often the discrepancies tell us more than facts. They can be windows into values, dreams, self-image, and changes in attitude over time. They can assist us in interpreting our interviews and understanding our narrators’ characters more fully.

Oral historian Saul Benison found this to be the case in his work with Tom Rivers, a virologist and director of the Rockefeller Institute. Rivers told Benison...
that the former director of the Rockefeller Institute, Simon Flexner, and William H. Park, Director of Laboratories at the New York City Board of Health, hated each other. Rivers's explanation was that Flexner had taken credit for a discovery of Park's, but it turned out their conflict was over an antiserum Flexner discovered that Park thought was dangerous. Benison concludes, “The myth that Rivers retailed to me told me more about Rivers. It told me what the hell Rivers would get excited about, if someone took his work.”

However, not every case of conflicting accounts falls into this category. Sometimes narrators have secrets they want to keep from us; sometimes they deliberately lie. They can also be simply mistaken, that is, misremembering. They could have been misinformed themselves. We all know how stories change passing from teller to teller, the proverbial telephone game. When we come upon these inconsistencies, therefore, it is incumbent on us, as the person most expert on our own work, to decide what is the closest we can come to the truth and what these conflicts of “fact” mean. We are forced into the position of judge and jury. This paper will focus on the problems of fact and truth I have come across in working with my interviews for an oral history of Julia Ruuttila.

Julia was an activist in Oregon for fifty-three years. She had helped organize the timberworkers’ union in the 1930s in Oregon and spent many years working for the longshoremen’s union. She was the person who, in 1936, instigated the defense committee to win the release of Ray Becker, the last Wobbly in prison from the Centralia tragedy of 1919. She was the president of the woodworkers’ ladies auxiliary during a long lockout following the union’s desertion of the AFL for the CIO. She had fought for peace and human rights and was a left-wing and union journalist until her eightieth birthday.

Most feminists have approached oral history as an opportunity to make unheard voices heard, to document private lives: farm women, war workers, pioneers, homeless women—the list goes on. Julia was not one of these women. Her name regularly appeared in newspapers both as author and actor. She was on a first name basis with senators and union presidents. I was inspired by Julia’s accomplishments, by her devotion, courage, and stamina. I wanted to interview her because I wanted to share her story in order to encourage other women to aspire to a greater impact in the public world.

In the course of the interviews, I discovered the more universal female themes of her life that other oral histories with women have documented: abuse, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, drug addiction, loneliness, the pain and loss of loved ones, and the struggle to retain the roof over her head. Julia sometimes objected when I wanted to talk about her “personal” life. She had agreed to the
interviews because she wanted future generations to know the history of the unions; she wanted them to understand what life had been like when workers were at the mercy of the boss and foreman. “This is about the unions,” she would repeat. I tried to help her understand the necessity of telling the whole story, of putting her life in context, of inspiring other women to identify with her by revealing her life’s ordinariness as well.

Julia accepted my argument that including her personal story would make the work more accessible, that people would be more likely to read and therefore learn the union history she wanted to impart. Did she understand the concept of the personal being political, of the connections between the more emotional aspects of her private life and her public life? I doubt it. Even the stories she told of her early childhood focused on politics, on her parents’ activism, the lectures her father gave her, and her rebellions in the outside world. The stories she told of her private life came through her screen of politics first, minimizing personal motivations. Feminism for Julia was primarily about equality in the public world, though she did think husbands should share the work at home. She said it was her experience of male chauvinists running a union where the rank and file were mostly women that turned her into a “women’s libber.”

In 1990, with Julia’s permission, I began interviewing some of her friends and associates and to search out newspaper snippets to augment her accounts of events in the interviews. I was persuaded to follow this course by the book Dorothy Healey Remembers. I saw how much richer Maurice Isserman had made this oral history through the use of other voices, of those who had known and worked with Healey, and newspapers accounts of events discussed in the interviews.

Then, in 1991, Julia died. With her gone, I could no longer consult with her when I found inconsistencies between her stories and those I was hearing in interviews and reading on microfilm. Most of the differences were minor, the sort I could attribute to “the eye of the beholder” or to details defused, eroded smooth over the years, and I plunged ahead.

For instance, Julia told me, “The yearbooks of high schools then had what’s known as a literary section. After I was expelled from Eugene High School, I had the entire section. I was furious when I saw that because I didn’t think they had any right to it. So I went to the principal’s office and accused them of stealing my poetry and my story. We had quite a hassle.” I found the yearbook. Indeed her work appears there, two pages, a poem and a story, but several other students’ works are printed there as well. Was Julia lying or even consciously exaggerating? Perhaps the latter, but it was a very long time ago. I concluded that her fury made her remember the school’s crime as even more heinous than it was, that is, not only “stealing” her work but using it to the exclusion of all others.
But major inconsistencies I couldn’t dismiss so quickly or comfortably. For example, when did she meet her third and final husband, Oscar Ruuttila, and what precipitated her suicide attempt shortly before the marriage? I can still feel my chagrin the day her old friend Helmi Kortes-Erkkila said:

Has anyone told you about how she met Ruuttila? Well, I hope it isn’t different.

I read in the *Oregonian* that Julia had tried to commit suicide and was in the hospital. So I went and I saw her. She said she didn’t think life was worth living because she had fallen in love. Afterwards she laughed about it, “Imagine, on account of a man, by being spurned by a man, I should try to commit suicide.”

I said, “Life can be beautiful if you get the right man and I know just the guy for you. I want you to meet him because I think he’d make a wonderful husband.” So she did.

The story Julia told me differed dramatically in two respects. She claimed to have known Oscar long before the botched suicide attempt, and she had never admitted that she shot herself over a man. Her explanation of why she had attempted suicide in 1950 was unusually hazy, a clue that the narrator may be being less than forthright. It was slightly different each time she spoke of it: She got fed up with the world; she was heavily in debt and bored with life, and it seemed she wasn’t getting anything accomplished; it was a telephone bill that she didn’t see any possible way of paying, and if she couldn’t pay the bill, she couldn’t continue to write for the papers she worked for.

If Helmi was right, I could understand Julia withholding the “real” reason from me. Helmi’s story didn’t fit the image of the strong, independent woman I think Julia wanted the oral history to project of her life, a woman above such mundane emotions. Liberated. Besides, politics, fighting the system, was where one’s energy should be spent. Julia had said, “One thing I remember my father telling me—when I got interested in some young man once that he greatly disapproved of—that the whole institution of romance and romantic novels was something that was cooked up by the capitalist class so that people would waste their time and energy and they wouldn’t think about how to overturn the bosses.”

Yet, Julia did spend time and energy on romance, and she definitely romanticized her own life. For instance, when Julia was in her thirties, she met Betty Wollam, a fellow political activist, and told her a story of a passionate love affair resulting in a pregnancy, the knowledge of which she kept from the father. The man was an artist she supposedly met in Chicago before she returned to Portland and met her first husband, Maurice “Butch” Bertram. Betty told me:
I was twenty-one or twenty-two. We talked mostly about managing our own lives and being our own helmsmen. I think she was very conscious of the fact that she was the older woman teaching the young woman how to go. It was such a romantic story that, y’know, I remember it quite well.

My mother was a radical, but she was a very traditional woman. Julia was something else. A whole new outlook on life that you didn’t have to put chains on yourself. Other people would try to, but you didn’t have to accept them. I thought she was such a glamorous older woman.9

The trouble with Betty’s story of Julia’s pregnancy is that Julia was already married to Butch when she arrived in Chicago, already pregnant.10 Julia had told the tall tale to Betty, not to me.

I came to see this incident as Julia, the frustrated novelist, recreating her life story into what she thought would serve the young Betty Wollam best. I told Betty what I believed the truth to be, and she mused, “I think she had a lovely imagination and suited her story to the audience, which is not that bad.” Neither is it so unusual. Don’t we all have different versions of our lives for different occasions and audiences, different images of ourselves at different times and for differing needs?

Perhaps Julia had suited the story she told me of her suicide attempt to another image she had of herself, the image she wanted the world to see in the oral history: a woman above the weakness of such extreme despair over spurned love. Or, perhaps Julia now believed what she told me, as Portelli’s workers believed the chronology they reported. Was this how Julia made sense of her suicide attempt? Did she need this explanation, as Portelli asserts the workers of Terni needed their myth, “to heal the[ir] feeling of humiliation and the loss of self-esteem.”11 Should I interpret Julia’s account not as fact, but as further evidence of Julia’s self-image as a woman ruled by rationality rather than emotion?

I was more troubled by Helmi’s story of how Julia met Oscar Ruuttila. I loved the story Julia told:

Oscar came to the hospital from Astoria to see me [when I was recovering from my suicide attempt]. I think that was when he decided he was going to marry me. When they told him I couldn’t have visitors, he simply sat down in the hospital office and wrote me a letter. I remember he had a postscript on it that said, “Do not despair, I mean to be your friend.”

I’d known Oscar for a long time. I used to see him at meetings. He was usually a delegate from his local and I was always at those meetings to write them up for the union newspaper. How we began to get really on more intimate terms, he wrote me a letter and bitterly criticized an article I had written. I was simply furious and I wrote him a letter in reply. He wrote to apologize and we began to write to each other.12
I told this story to Helmi, and she said:

I would swear that he did not go to the hospital to see her because he didn’t know her. I’m positive of that. Anyway, she did tell me years afterwards that “Helmi, it was the most wonderful thing you ever did to me to introduce me to Oscar because I know now what love is.”

It’s not unusual for different participants in an event to report it quite differently, and forty-one years had elapsed between Julia and Oscar’s marriage and my conversation with Helmi. Perhaps Helmi did tell Julia that Oscar was the man for her. Maybe Julia didn’t tell Helmi she already knew him. Still, there was that flashing warning sign of Helmi’s preface: “Well, I hope it isn’t different.” Looking at it through Portelli’s eyes one would have to say this was more about Helmi than Julia. Who can blame Helmi for wanting to believe she had a part in making Julia and Oscar’s fine marriage?

No one else I asked knew how Julia and Oscar had met or when, but in Julia’s file for her unfinished autobiography, *The Bridges of Ce*, written only half a dozen years after she married Oscar, in every draft of the contents two chapter titles appear, “I Cannot Pay my Telephone Bill,” and the next, “I Mean to be Your Friend.” If Julia’s story was not factually correct, it was one she had created a long time ago and embraced as the truth by the time we spoke. Furthermore, Julia’s suicide attempt was on November 5, 1950, and she married Oscar on January 3, 1951. These dates added to another recollection from Betty Wollam weighted the evidence in favor of Julia’s version. Wollom had recalled:

[I] first realiz[ed] that they were going to be a couple at a picnic out along one of the lakes. He was sculling a scow or rowboat, and she was sitting facing him and she had put her arm up around the back of her head and was looking at him very roguishly and coquettishly. Within six months they were married, and she had moved to Astoria.

This was probably at a labor picnic of some kind, even Labor Day, but certainly not in November or December; it would have been too cold. Besides, Julia’s left shoulder and arm were smashed in her suicide attempt. Any lolling in a rowboat with her arm behind her head had to be before her injury, as she was still not fully recovered when she and Oscar were married.

Julia had spent years telling stories, creating the myth of her life, a vision in which class solidarity was primary and her personal life secondary. For example, her official story was that she left her second husband, Ben Eaton, because he turned out to be a racist hypocrite. She seemed to adore telling an anecdote set in a restaurant with a “white trade only” sign. When she noticed the sign she asked
Ben to leave with her, but he refused to do so before finishing his meal. Julia’s account ends with:

J: So I just scrambled out over the top of the booth and left. And that was the end of that.
S: The end of the meal or the end of the marriage?
J: Both.
S: You left him then?
J: Sure!\textsuperscript{13}

Three years later, she admitted to me that the final straw was really a beating she suffered at his hand.\textsuperscript{14} In this case, Julia knew what really happened, could remember it and recount it, but she clearly preferred the idea of leaving her husband over politics rather than abuse. She was a writer, a storyteller, and knew how to create drama, what the elements of a good story are. The first story was political, the second “merely” female, common, and perhaps humiliating.

I learned that eventually some of her myths, like this “white trade only” one, would evaporate, but I could not trust they all would. Like everyone, Julia had her secrets, her boundaries. Even as we became closer and Julia admitted earlier withholdings and untruths, some things remained not for my ears. I couldn’t coax them forth.\textsuperscript{15} For example, when she was telling me why she finally divorced Butch, her first husband, one secret peeked out:

J: Well I had become quite interested in another man that I’d met in the union world, but it was mostly over the drinking.
S: You didn’t tell me about this other man. [I thought I’d heard about all of the important men in her life.]
J: And I don’t intend to. I knew it was a dead end when I embarked on it. But I did learn a lot from him about how unions function that weren’t mass production unions.
S: This other man wasn’t in a mass production union?
J: No.
S: What kind of union was he in?
J: Well now, that’s enough. Subject’s off limits.\textsuperscript{16}

There were other times when Julia changed her story, told me she’d previously lied or omitted important facts, for whatever reason. The most dramatic illustration is the story of her serious illness in California in the twenties. It was not until the second round of interviews in 1987, when Julia knew me better and, I think, trusted me more fully, that she told me her illness was caused by a
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botched abortion. She did it again with regard to where and when she married her first husband, Butch:

December 1, 1983:
J: I almost starved to death in Chicago. And then I became involved with a man I later married, my first husband.

December 8, 1983:
S: When did you marry him?
S: You met in Chicago?
J: No, I had known him before that.
S: Oh, really. Where'd you meet him?
J: Well, I rather not go into that.

March 19, 1987:
J: So he went on to California and later he wrote me a letter and I began to write to him. And later on I married him.
S: You got together with him in Chicago, is that right?
J: Well, I don't remember what I told you about that part of it, but it was mostly not so. Later when he was in Chicago I married him. I don't know what I told you.
S: You didn't tell me a lot. That you were together in Chicago. Mike was born in Chicago? Is that why you married him? Because of Mike?
J: No, I married him in Fresno, California.

As I worked on the transcripts, inconsistencies showed up. Usually they were indications that something was "funny" in her story. After she moved to Alaska in 1987, I would write her for clarification. Once she responded, "Some of my errors were intentional. I was embarrassed by your questions. And I did not, and still do not, like to dwell on that painful period in my life." And yet Julia freely talked about the painful periods in her life. I never felt I was coercing her; I never felt Julia could be coerced.

So what's an oral historian to do? Julia's story is too important to throw away. The places where the questions arise are in the personal details; neither interviews with others nor any of the documents have raised any doubts about the political content, the events involving the unions and other organizations and movements she was involved in. Some of the difficulties were resolved by Julia herself when she admitted telling less than the truth and corrected the story. Other times I have had to be a detective, puzzling through the chronology and
putting clues together, as when I saw that Betty Wollam’s rowboat story tipped
the balance to Julia’s version of meeting Oscar. But there remain the unresolved
contradictions. Then I think of Portelli and realize I don’t need to look at all the
inconsistencies as problems but can see them as windows into Julia’s mind and
psyche.

Ultimately, I have reminded myself this is oral history, Julia’s version of her
life. So it is Julia’s explanation of her suicide attempt, Julia’s evaluation of her
successes and failures that will appear in my text. When Julia has given me more
than one version, I have used my judgment, my knowledge of Julia, and have
chosen the story, usually the final version, that rings most true, that presents the
least problems of conflict with the rest of the story and the documents.

Interviewing for and editing an oral history of one person’s life is only subtly
different from aiding and abetting the writing of an autobiography. Indeed, Alex
Haley called the result of his endeavor with Malcolm X an autobiography, and
when the author of an autobiography tells less than the truth, that is what stands.18

So in my work, Julia shall speak for herself, both because she deserved to
and because she trusted me to let her. I think my obligation is to portray her life
as she saw it, to be true to the spirit of Julia’s memories and to maintain her
unique voice.

Notes

1. Alessandro Portelli, The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning
in Oral History, SUNY Series in Oral and Public History (Albany, N.Y.: State Uni-
4. Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, Dorothy Healey Remembers: A Life in the
American Communist Party (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Later pub-
lished in 1993 by the University of Illinois Press, under the title California Red: A
Life in the American Communist Party.
5. Interview with Julia Ruuttila, December 2, 1983. This interview and all others cited
in this paper were conducted by the author.
Swaggart (Eugene, Ore.:1924), vol. 23. Housed at the Lane County History Mu-
seum, Eugene.
7. Interview with Helmi Kortes-Erkkila, March 3, 1992. All quoted material in this
paper with Kortes-Erkkila is from this interview.
9. Interview with Betty Wollam, May 21, 1991. All quoted material in this paper with Wollam is from this interview.


15. Because she revealed more on so many occasions, I continued to try even though I knew I was on questionable territory. On the one hand, Julia had a right to define the limits. But, on the other hand, her limits were not firm; there were many occasions, some of them detailed in this paper, when she corrected her story, stayed with the newer version, and even shared it then with others.

