The Struggles of Passing Down Stories

As far back as our notion of human history goes, there has always been the question of how to store our knowledge and our stories. What do we do to make sure our work outlives us, and can it even truly outlive us? Although evidence of writing dates back to ancient Mesopotamia over five thousand years ago, the practice of passing down stories and traditions orally dates back even further and continues to be used in some cultures and communities. Some traditional stories, such as certain epic poems and religious rituals, were passed down orally for a period of time until they were fixed in writing, that written version being the version we study today. With benefits and drawbacks to each, humanity's oscillation between written and oral tradition reveals our struggle to pass knowledge down to our future generations.

A fun way to think about the different ways to record information is to remove the constraints of humanity and our culture. This thought experiment is exactly what Ken Liu does in his short story "The Bookmaking Habits of Select Species," which goes through a list, encyclopedia-style, of a number of alien species and describes what a book is to them. In each species, their method of bookmaking reveals what their fictional culture values, and each method is complete with its unique advantages and disadvantages. The first species, the Allatians, drag their noses across malleable surfaces and use the soundwaves of speech to create books that work similar to record players, perfectly capturing the tones and inflections of the words of the authors, with their nose acting as the needle to listen back to the book as well. Each time the book is read, due to the malleable material, it is worn somewhat, causing it to lose more and more the integrity of the original production. As a result, most books read/listened to are reproductions that then are already losing the integrity of the original author's words (Liu). The Allatians gain true integrity of a storyteller's intent, recording exactly how an author told a story,

but only at the cost of permanence or accessibility of those same books. Their books are tangible and require physicality- there could be no Kindles in their society. Another species discussed is the Hesperoe, who distrust and dislike writing, for although a text can describe an idea, it cannot engage in debate nor account for its words. As a result, they pivoted to storing the minds of leaders on the brink of death. That way, whenever a person wants to debate a great philosopher of the past, they may simply search the mind-map created to see exactly how they would respond (Liu). This method of bookmaking keeps a true record of the thoughts of an individual, but it also forgoes the ideas of composition, writing novels for the sake of being novels, the spread of information while the "author" is still alive, and the post-mortem development of ideas. Although these species may be fictional and outlandish, the values that they represent and how those values manifest in their preferred bookmaking methods can be found in our own species' preferred bookmaking methods throughout history.

During the medieval period, Europe experienced an academic struggle, having difficulty in the transition to a logically structured, organized, written system of organization, coming from oral structures. The kinds of logical connections that exist in orally-focused ways of learning and thinking do not always lend themselves toward being transcribed. Due to the way that our minds make connections and store informational relationships that do not always need to exist side-by-side, it is difficult to maintain a level of clarity when putting those relationships down onto paper. In an article on indigenous oral history and written word, Linc Kesler writes about the written system of organization as

> by comparison, relatively inefficient for, if not incapable of, representing the kind of logical plenitude the first diagram [attempting to depict oral logic] sought to represent. That system was never intended to be seen, but to be heard. When

> attention was directed to the visible and portable, the flexibility, complexity, and situational integration of the oral system was not only displaced, but depreciated (Kesler 482).

The result of the transition to written logic structures led to a deficiency that is one of the main things the aforementioned Hesperoe were trying to prevent—with written logic structures, one loses the adaptability and completeness of an oral structure. However, as humans cannot map minds as the Hesperoe do, the first attempt to map oral structures was to lay out all of the different, scattered relationships between ideas that one keeps neatly in their brain as a written diagram. Unfortunately, the result is a hard-to-read, near-unusable diagram that can neither show oral structures in their entirety nor be easily read as a logic structure (see Appendix A). Conversely, the written structure, as Kesler notes, is an effective system that makes the information visible and organized (see Appendix B). Those structures, the fact that the logic was written down, is why we can study them now, today. Although the ways of thinking orally may have been recorded, the specific information has been lost unless it was transcribed.

While written word is lasting, one of its main disadvantages when compared to oral tradition is context. Over time, as civilizations rise and fall, context that may have once been incredibly obvious is obscured and lost. An entertaining example to examine is one of the earliest jokes, scrawled in Sumerian on a tablet thousands of years ago. It is, roughly translated, as follows: “A dog walks into a bar and doesn’t see anything, and so he says ‘Shall I open this door?’” (Gordon 56). This saying, perhaps once a hilarious joke or a deep, philosophical proverb, is completely nonsensical to the modern reader. There are others, such as Derrida, who will argue that context does not matter, as context can never be complete and is always reduced, generalized (Derrida 3). With this viewpoint, regardless of its deficiencies, a written work should always

stand alone. However, with, albeit extreme, examples such as the joke above, I find it difficult to agree.

The most prominent current defender of context and oral tradition would be indigenous communities. A number of these communities have highly codified and preserved oral histories and stories, passed down generation to generation and told in a way contextual to their lives. In fact, the context of the lives of the natives is so important to understanding that, without that context, the traditions may not even be able to be explained. For example, "Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank recounts having entered an Indigenous community with lists of questions, only to be gently told that, to understand the things she was asking about, she would need to know the stories" (Kesler 484). In keeping the stories oral, they are always able to be told in a way that is relevant and understandable to the modern day. The form of oral storytelling maintains all of the body language and vocal emphasis of the storytelling, the main aspect that the earlier described fictional Allatians sought to preserve—although, even with their unique books, their stories too would remain unchanged and unadaptable to modern sensibilities.

Much of the oldest literature that we have access to consists of stories that were once told and passed down orally, but are now permanently in the form they were in when they were written down. There are objections to this finalization of oral stories as far back as Socrates, who "objected to the epics' depiction of the gods as capricious and inconsistent, and to the power that compelling oral narrative had to encourage an identification with characters that drew people out of their 'real selves' and thus undermined the integrity and consistency of their own characters" (Havelock, as cited in Kesler 483). Socrates argued that the written versions of gods lost all of the nuance gained from a powerful storyteller, one who told the story in a way best suited for their audience and time. Presumably, the text that Socrates read was once a powerful oral

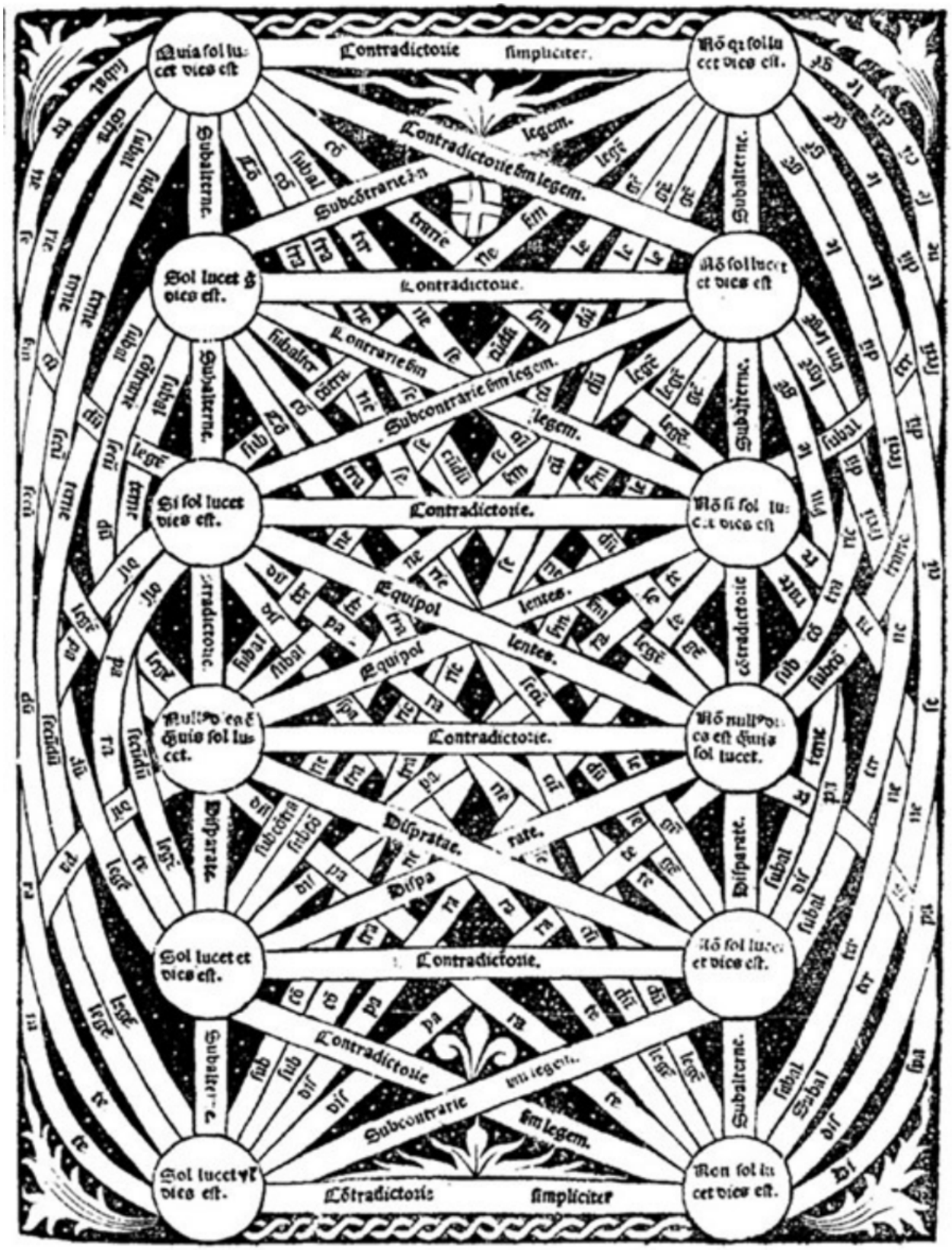
rendition, but reduced to written word, lost its power. Recently, to remedy this, there has been a trend of new adaptations of old myths, told in a way contextually understandable to the modern reader, or even with a political bend. Some notable examples include Madeleine Miller's *Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018), Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), and a 2017 Shakespeare in the Park production of *Julius Caesar* with a line inserted referencing Trump's infamous "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters" (Wilkinson). None of these examples purport themselves to be fully accurate translations or reproductions of the stories they retell, but instead they set out to make these old stories once more accessible and relevant. Another practice is that of translating ancient texts with the intention to create a fully accurate translation or retelling of the text, but to do so with modern values and readers in mind. Major examples include Stephen Mitchell's translation of the Gilgamesh, *Gilgamesh: A New English Version* (2018), a retelling of the poem as a poem in modern English and poetic license, and Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* (2017), in which she pays extra attention to female characters historically misrepresented in translations by men. These examples could continue, going on to include creative film retellings of classics and satirical novels borrowing characters from antiquity, but the important point is that, despite the fact that many oral stories are now literally etched in stone, they continue to be revitalized and recontextualized as they once were orally.

As time goes on, newer and newer ways to store information are created. With the advent of modern technology, although we may not have the nose record player tablets of the Allatians, we do have audiobooks, sometimes narrated by the author themselves. Some native communities have decided to record their traditions—not in writing, but in digital video form (Kesler 485). It is even possible that, with the perpetual advancement of artificial intelligence, the mind-mapping

of the Hesperoe is not so far away. Technology aside however, perfect factual accuracy is not always the point of the storytelling, as is illustrated by the values of the indigenous communities discussed previously. If history is any indication, the struggle of recording and communicating in a true way will be a challenge for the foreseeable future.

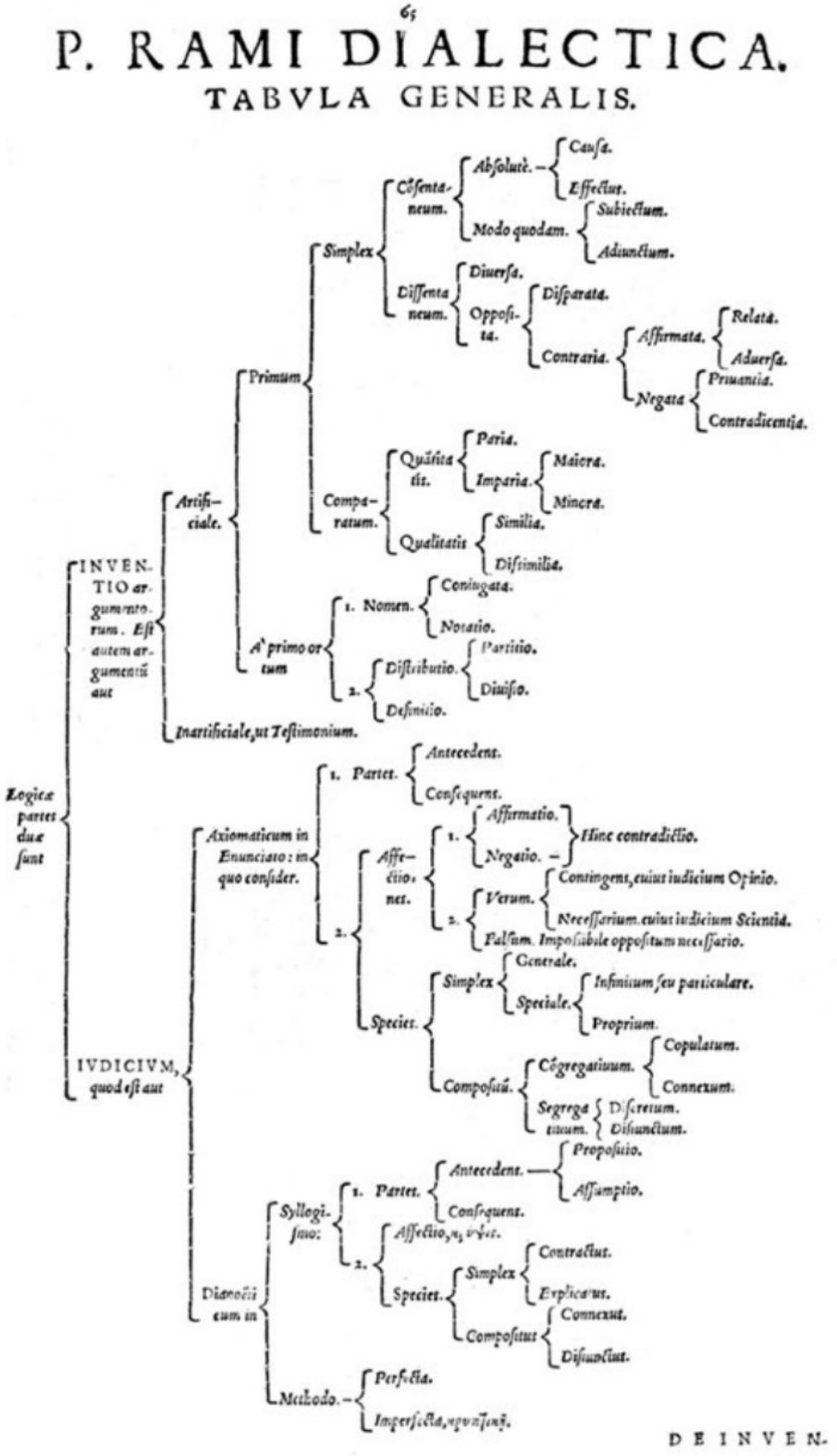
Appendix A

Celaya's Diagram (as cited in Kesler)



Appendix B

Ramus's Diagram (as cited in Kesler)



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