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Dramaturgies for Re-imagining Murray-Darling Basin governing

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ABSTRACT

Historically, governing, and thus planning, the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) has been framed in a plethora of ways. Seemingly, ‘the plan’ and planning has to be all things to all people, but the reforms, instituted in the Water Act 2007 (Cwlth), have resulted in greater complexity, uncertainty and controversy. Effective governing of the Basin along an unfolding, viable trajectory within an Anthropocene-world seems more elusive than ever. In this context, we propose a research and praxis agenda for dramaturgy as an initiative that seeks ‘effective’ water governance in the MDB. A dramaturge is someone, group, body or process who writes/adapts a play, brings forth a particular type of performance set in an ever-changing audience/context. Dramaturges engage in praxis. Two exemplar dramaturgies, developed through *ex poste* and *ex ante* analyses, are outlined. Each can be refined or consolidated in an on-going deliberative inquiry-process that generates social learning and effects concerted action for future MDB governance. Our research inquiry is exploratory but is based on a choice to frame governance from a cyber-systemic perspective, a praxis continually enacted through the interactions of actors, their symbols and frames and feedback dynamics between the social and biophysical world. We show how a dramaturgical framework can be used to analyse a policy process to reveal the important symbolic and performative dimensions, which are usually unrecognised.

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Governance performance; systemic failure; imaginaries; dramaturge; planning as dramaturgy

1. Introduction

When the architects of the Federal *Water Act* (2007) (Cwlth) put pen to paper, did they realise that they were writing the script for what would be one of the most controversial performances in Australia’s water story? While we can’t say for sure what was going through their minds, or even who ‘they’ were, it is unlikely that they adopted a performance lens (Ison and Wallis 2011). Performance is an act of staging or presenting a play, concert, or other form of civic engagement. It is the way in which someone or something functions, or how effective something or someone is at doing a good job (Stuart 2021).

In Australia’s primary river basin, the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB), governance performance is the product of a long history of Federal and state government water reform characterised by recurring crisis and conflict (Figure 1). In the face of the emerging global crises of water and climate change and lacklustre performances, in terms of effectiveness, of recent policies and their enactment (e.g. Australian Government Productivity Commission 2017), many arguments have been mounted, and continue to be made, for new approaches to the governance of the MDB (e.g. Donaldson 2015; Colloff and Pittock 2019; Beresford 2021). Key themes keep recurring include (Figure 1): disputes between Basin state governments; the question

of federal powers; the limits of the constitution; nation-building; ecological destruction and restoration and more. The lack of progress in dealing constructively with these issues signals an urgent need for governance that is able to address novel and emerging situations characterised by unfolding uncertainty in an Anthropocene-world. Seeking the means to create and deliver emergent, adaptive governance performances appears justified (Connell 2011; Ison 2016; Ison, Alexandra, and Wallis 2018; Alexandra 2021).

The purpose of this paper is to explore through the lens of dramaturgy, acts of creating an effective water governance performance. We do this by looking at the ways that MDB water governance: has been framed and enacted from 2007 to 2022, and could be framed and enacted into the future. Our research inquiry is exploratory, pursued with a view to creating a set of ‘imaginaries’ (Boulding 1956; Castoriadis 1975; Ison 2016) that might realise different, more systemic, and thus more effective, water governance performances. By revealing some of the framing choices that have or could be used within water governance, we see the potential to open up imaginaries, ‘the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, ... through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life’ (Thompson 1984, 6). Importantly, imaginaries,

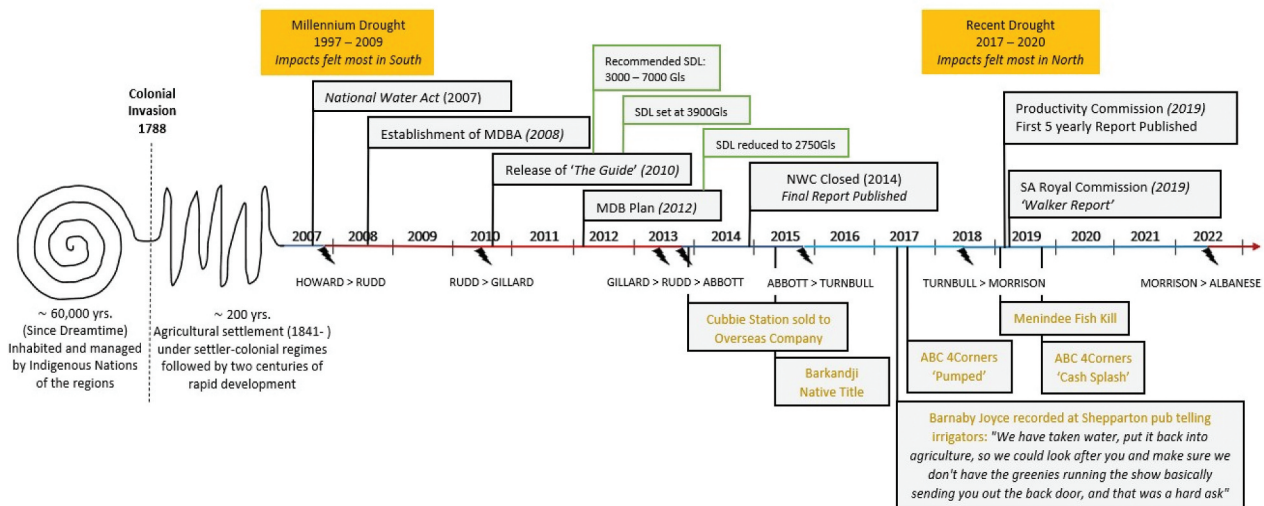


Figure 1. A stylised timeline depicting influences on the governing of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) focussing on the period of 2007–2022. Note: Centre– Ongoing Federal Government and Prime Ministerial changes both between, and within, the major parties (Blue, Coalition; Red, Labour) Above – Policy developments; including associated SDL reductions from the ‘The Guide’ to ‘The Plan’; and key reports published recently. Below – Some notable events or incidents which have featured prominently, or are of significance, in the past decade of the MDB storyline. Abbreviations include: MDBA, Murray Darling Basin Authority; ABC, Australian Broadcasting Commission; SA, South Australia; NWC, National Water Commission; SDL, Sustainable Diversion Limit; GLs, Gigalitres.

are not only symbolic – they have material outcomes, and they ‘influence behaviour, feelings of individual and collective identity, and the development of narratives, policy and institutions’ (Jasanoff and Kim 2009; Sander 2020).

Imaginaries do not exist like apples waiting to be picked. According to Sander (2020) following Castoriadis (1975) ‘institutions are central to the notion of social imaginary, since they mediate rules – or systems and patterns – by which we live’. In other words, following Ison (2016), imaginaries as institutions can also be understood as social technologies with affordances that mediate human understanding, practices and social relations (Steyaert and Jiggins 2007). Bringing new imaginaries into being and use is a form of praxis involving institutionalisation and enactment, skills similar to that facilitated by a dramaturge. A dramaturge is someone (or group, body or process) who writes or adapts a play, brings forth a particular type of performance set in an ever-changing audience/context. Dramaturges engage in praxis, which Sander (2020) describes as: ‘the act of engaging, applying, exercising, and realising ideas. It implies ways of thinking and ways of imagining. A praxis is a way of taking action in the world’. In the recent history of MDB-governance, the combination of the National Water Initiative (NWI) and the National Water Commission (NWC), as discussed below, could have been seen as script and dramaturge respectively. Using this framing choice makes an exploration of different dramaturgies potentially insightful given that new Prime Minister Albanese posted on twitter in the lead up to the 2022 election:

‘I’m in Adelaide today to announce that a Labor Government will uphold the Murray Darling Basin Plan, deliver South Australia’s share of water and establish a National Water Commission’ (8th April 2022).

The history of MDB governance failings justifies inquiry that seeks new insights through *ex poste* exploration of past policy performances. In this paper, we present a preliminary case for doing future governing through the creation of dramaturgies each with their own internal logic, drawn together by acts of braiding. For Cranston and Jean-Paul (2021) braiding grants autonomy to different knowledges (e.g. indigenous and racialised knowledges with anti-oppressive Westernised knowledges) which when braided together can reorient policy and practice. Building on this form of analysis, we also seek to move towards an *ex ante* mode of praxis that might reveal what future dramaturgies ought to be imagined and invented, accompanied by new ways of conceiving who the dramaturge for Basin-governing-as-performance might be. New praxes are needed more than ever as there are no pre-ordained scripts relevant to the Anthropocene-world we have created (Alexandra 2017); all past institutions and practices are up for reimagining.

In proposing and articulating, our reframing of future MDB governing, we first review the rationale and possibilities within public policy for institutionalising a performance approach for governing the MDB into the future. We then explicate two historical dramaturgies (*ex poste* analysis) followed by a reimagining of each dramaturgy (*ex ante* ‘design’)

that if developed might contribute to MDB governing in an unfolding Anthropocene-world. These are but two of the possible dramaturgies worthy of further imagining. Discussion, including a brief exploration of how a dramaturgical approach might be institutionalised as policy and a research agenda related to institutionalising a performance approach for the MDB, concludes the paper.

2. Performance theory in public policy

Some of the potential strengths of a dramaturgical approach in relation to governance research and practice, and water/river governance in particular, are explored based on recent literature. The use of a dramaturgical framework in the study of governance has not been extensive, however there is some pertinent literature that emerged from the mid-20th Century through writers such as Kenneth Burke (1969), sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) and political scientist Murray Edelman (1964) that developed some theoretical underpinnings, which were then explored in the realm of governance and policy studies by writers such as Hajer (1997, 2005), Freeman and Peck (2007), Fischer (2003), Szerszynski, Heim, and Waterton (2003) and Hilgartner (2000).

2.1. A calling for new dramaturgies – experiences from public policy

Public policy practitioners, including crisis management professionals, have successfully employed dramaturgical perspectives in the past (Ball, McConnell, and Stark 2021). Dramaturgy allows those who choose this framing to recognise the conditions (scenes and settings) that allow certain actors and narratives to ‘take centre stage’ thereby gaining influence and taking control of a performance. Competing, or counter-performances that threaten to emerge and steal the show can also be identified. A dramaturgical perspective can also reveal how ‘audiences’, and their relationship to the performance are created (ibid). Dramaturgical analysis aims “to understand not only ‘what people say’ but connect its influence on ‘how they say it, where they say it, and (especially) to whom’ (Hajer 2009, 65 in Yuana et al. 2020). Whilst the use of a dramaturgical framework in the study of governance has not been extensive, there is growing awareness of its potential role and utility as an Anthropocene-world takes hold, making all past human institutions, and thus practices, worthy of critical scrutiny (Ruiu et al. 2017; Ison and Straw 2020).

We differentiate between dramaturgical analysis, a form of *ex poste* praxis, and dramaturgical design, redesign or co-design, a form of *ex ante*, or ongoing systemic co-inquiry praxis (Ison, Collins, and Iaquinto 2021; Murmaw et al. 2022).

2.2. Dramaturgical analysis

Public policies are always embedded in a particular way of seeing the world or a set of ideas. Policy processes involve an ongoing contest over meaning between different groups. This has been described by Stone (1988 in Fischer 2003, 61) as a ‘constant discursive struggle over the definitions of problems, the boundaries of categories used to describe them, the criteria for their classification and assessment, and the meanings of ideals that guide particular actions’. The use of language, including narrative and symbols, reflect ideologies and values underlying policies. According to Hajer (2005, 42) ‘governance depends on symbols – if we don’t see them it is because we take them for granted . . . paying attention to the symbolic thus helps us understand how authority is created and maintained, how power is exercised, how power differentials are maintained’.

Symbols stand for things, but also for plans and patterns of activity involving complex interactions among people over extended periods of time. Symbols are created through language and communicative interaction; they signify meanings and suggest judgements (Hewitt 2003). Examples of symbols in policy are freedom, free markets, decentralised government, equality, justice and civil rights (Fischer 2003). Dramaturgical analysis draws out the way in which scenes are scripted and staged as well as how the multifold players then subsequently act within and upon those scripts and stagings (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

However, as Hilgartner (2000, 8) points out in his dramaturgical analysis of the creation of credibility in scientific advice, not all performances turn out as planned. Like a stage show, political performances (be they events, texts, interpersonal interactions) try very hard to prevent audiences from seeing what is going on ‘backstage’. But all performances are vulnerable to unexpected developments; issues, events and narratives that performances are designed to hide can leak out and compromise the show. This seems the case with the MDB; Figure 2 presents metaphors arising from MDBA staff based on their experience of developing the Basin Plan, research denied formal publication by the MDBA even though already in the public domain (Ison, Russell, and Wallis 2009). We draw attention to these metaphors as they reveal the emotional as well as conceptual struggle then going on inside the MDBA. Collectively, they offer insights into the mechanisms of dysfunctionality which broke out of the MDBA organisation into the broader MDB governance performance (see Donaldson 2015), and they also point to how, methodologically, metaphor analysis could be combined with dramaturgical analysis and design (see Ison, Allan, and Collins 2015).

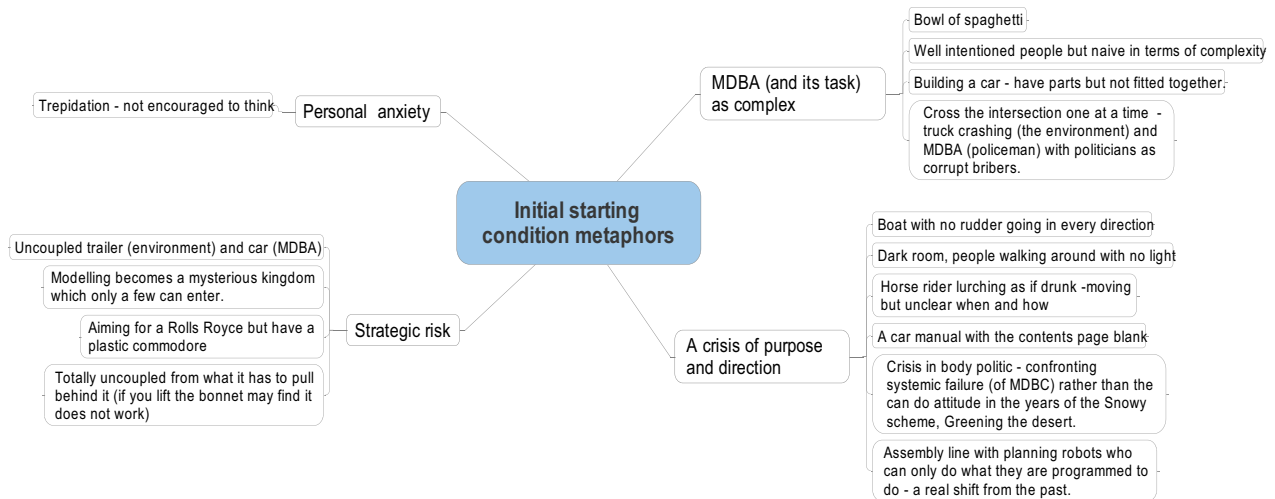


Figure 2. A set of metaphors generated by 25 Murray-Darling Basin Authority staff describing how they characterised the task of developing the basin plan (Source: Ison, Russell, and Wallis 2009).

Governance effectiveness can be understood as an emergent property of processes by which contestation and control over meaning in the MDB has taken place, and has led to the dominance of certain frames over others at key moments in its political history (Figure 1). We seek to explore how dramaturgical analysis and dramaturgical creation might be used to mitigate governance performances in ways that treat all policies as experiments which in their continued use demand feedback and learning (Ison and Straw 2020) and also establish the autonomy of different performance lineages that, like the braiding of a rope, maintain their own integrity but can be braided to enhance robustness and effectiveness as part of a governance performance.

As ours is only a preliminary inquiry, there is a need for more detailed and systematic analysis to illuminate the ways meaning has been enacted on the MDB political ‘stage’ over time. As we will show, dramaturgical analysis can be used to look differently at how the enactment of meaning takes place and to better understand how it leads to opening or closing the possibility of different trajectories. A dramaturgical analysis can also illustrate how the script, setting, actors and their roles might be re-imagined. Drawing on the work of Hilgartner (2000), and particularly Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) and Freeman and Peck (2007) as well as Stuart (2021), we identify five elements of a dramaturgical analysis (Table 1).

The MDB examples given in Table 1 are by no means definitive, and are open to contestation, but that is in fact the point. Interpretation in governance reform is best conducted as an on-going deliberative process; in that sense effective governance is a never-ending-story. *Ex poste* dramaturgical analysis can be revealing, and is a necessary first step because it allows the surfacing and critical scrutiny of framing choices

held, knowingly or not, by stakeholders (actors) in a governance performance. But dramaturgy construction itself would need part of a public policy performance as part of on-going governing of the MDB. We call this shift a move towards dramaturgy as systemic design, or co-design (which might also be framed as systemic inquiry or co-inquiry within a community of public policy design practice – *sensu* Wenger 1989; Allan et al. 2020).

We now turn to Michael Frayn’s play ‘Copenhagen’ (Frayn 1998) as an experiential and conceptual trigger for shifting this inquiry into dramaturgy from an *ex poste* to an *ex ante* form of praxis.¹

2.3. Producing new dramaturgies

The play ‘Copenhagen’ is more than it appears i.e. the historical content and timing of particular explanations realised through the conversations of physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg together with Bohr’s wife, Margrethe, based on their meeting in Copenhagen in 1942. It is claimed that the play is an ‘embodiment of the principles that August Strindberg outlines in the preface to A Dream Play: ‘everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. Working with... real events as a background, the imagination spins out its threads of thoughts and weaves them into new patterns’.² In ‘Copenhagen’, Frayn employs the device of ‘calling for another draft’ whenever his characters contest an interpretation of the past. This play opens up to the audience questions regarding their own epistemological commitments and the nature of policy knowledge. Each draft creates the possibility of new dramaturgical lineages, able to be adapted and refined as circumstances unfold.

Table 1. Elements of a dramaturgical analysis that could be applied to the MDB.

Element	Description	MDB/water governance exemplars
Scripting	Constructs participants by establishing roles and relationships, i.e. 'who are the characters in the play?' Determines who is involved and who is excluded. Can construct various actors as collaborators or antagonists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Water Initiative (NWI); • The <i>Cwlth Water Act</i> (2007) • The MDB Plan • Abandonment by environmental NGOs of community-based water management (under the MDBC) in favour of obtaining more water through new institutions i.e. environmental flows and buybacks
Setting	Physical environment, in which interaction takes place, includes artefacts that participants bring to the physical environment (e.g. reports, presentations, minutes).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public meetings used in release of the MDB plan • Modellers 'isolated' on the upper floor of the MDBA offices
Stage Management	This is the 'mise-en-scene' – or setting the stage and it is at the heart of dramaturgy. It involves deliberate attempts to pull together elements of a performance by drawing on narrative and symbols or creating new ones. We can explore how the scenes are staged, what elements have been deliberately displayed to create and strengthen a performance, and what is concealed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolic burning by irrigators of the MDB plan at public meetings • Decision by NSW Minister not to sign-off community-derived catchment plan for the Murrumbidgee River (prior to the formation of the MDBA)
Performance	The dramaturgical impact that is created, through new knowledge and understandings or the way that future interactions are shaped. A performance can have strong dramaturgical cooperation which creates a compelling and authoritative display. Alternatively, there can also be a breakdown in stage management which sees unauthorised performances (e.g. leaks), strong competing performances and counter-narratives (Hilgartner 2000). Alternative performances can, however, take a political process in new and interesting directions, which allow an entry point to a range of different audiences (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial starting conditions - framing failure by key MDBA personnel (i.e. not wicked, not a human activity system etc) • The 'Cwlth is in charge' reframing that followed the (2007) Act • Resignation of the Chair of the MDBA Board in (2010) • The institutionalisation of 'cultural flows'
Performativity	Stuart (2021) asks 'when is a performance considered performative? Is performance different from performativity?' For Stuart (ibid) 'performativity is more of an expression that creates or pushes forward a transaction or an exchange between the performer and the spectator. You don't just enact, you have to be able to create and build something out of it. It isn't merely an action or a text being performed and witnessed by an audience. It asks the questions "what do we say/do?" and "why we say/do it?" And so, performance becomes performative when intentions deepen. So, everyday life performances, interviews, theatrical plays, and even ordering food can be considered as performative performances'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal National Party actions and public statements (of which there are many examples) once water came under their ministerial responsibility • The functioning of preferential lobbying in relation to fracking, gas exploitation, groundwater protection across the MDB

Frayn's play also provides a means to explore methodologically and conceptually how a systemic form of expressionism might reinterpret and challenge the dominant narratives of contemporary water governance where the means are required to abandon the high ground of espoused 'technical rationality', to use Donald Schön's (1995) metaphor. In doing so, a move towards the meaningful exploration of moral and contextual uncertainties, of the type found within attempts at governing the MDB, can be enabled (as the play *Copenhagen* exemplifies).

The 'Copenhagen' context is the rise of totalitarianism, a world war and a race to create an atom bomb. The context now is our human-created Anthropocene-world (Ison and Shelley 2016). Frayn's play points to sources of practice innovation for future water governance because it:

- acknowledges, and gives voice to, multiple perspectives or interpretations. *Copenhagen* is performed in three 'drafts' (or alternative scenarios) – all characters are ghosts looking back to the meeting in 1941 (a form of reflexivity)
- is essentially about epistemology – our ways of knowing and particularly our manners of

claiming knowing – just as different MDB actors claim to know the river, the nature and role of water in the Australian landscape and how it should be managed and governed

- triggers a growing awareness that 'language speaks the characters and not vice versa' (Barnett 2005, 144) and that 'it is language structuring memory and not memory structuring language' (ibid:145) - see Ison (2018)
- recognises features of 'self-organising' and thus, potentially, of ways of subverting command and control (hierarchy) approaches that dominate governance (Ison, Röling, and Watson 2007);
- stimulates an awareness that as beings living in language, we humans have choices of how to frame situations and that all choices have consequences
- highlights how technological solutions 'rarely challenge the assumptions on which our institutions, and thus our problems are built' (Hentschel 2002; Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021, 142).

Frayn's device in calling for 'another draft' explains how performance and dramaturgy can be understood and used especially if undertaken as part of

a deliberative process, or in acts of governing that have well-staged deliberative elements (Ison 2013).

3. Reframing basin governing as braided dramaturgies

3.1. Possible dramaturgies

What the MDBA-led plan has shown is that a single dramaturgy for the future is not enough especially as between 2007 and 2022 both the script and the dramaturge changed, and thus so did the overall performance and performativity. The NWI and NWC were abandoned, Federal ministerial control for water shifted from the Liberal to the National Party and thus, a new dramaturge emerged. During this period, there were too many competing narratives not in conversation (where a conversation can be understood as a form of braiding – a turning together – in which differences are understood and accommodations reached, as must happen for any performance to be effective). New ‘drafts’ are thus needed in the sense employed by Frayn (1998) given the complexity, uncertainty and lack of overall effectiveness of the MDB planning process, and thus MDB governance (Figure 1).

Our perspective is that each draft can be considered as a dramaturgy with its own logic, narrative and internal coherence and, if circumstances demand, its own dramaturge. In practice each dramaturgy would ideally be built deliberatively and as part of an ongoing MDB governance performance in perpetuity. Building on Rubenstein, Wallis and Ison (2013); Ison and Wallis (2011), Ison (2013) and Godden and Ison (2019) we present an *ex poste* and *ex ante* inquiry into two possible dramaturgies each with its own autonomy but capable of future braiding, as part of a meta-framing, in a deliberative, adaptive governing performance for the MDB.

- **Governance as enacting competing rationalities and worldviews – technical, economic, ecological** – dramaturgically framed by the Minister at the start of the MDB planning process in 2007 i.e. Malcolm Turnbull, enamoured with economic rationality and not from the National Party
- **Governance as citizen-driven, self-organising, emergent** – derived from the history of ICM (Integrated Catchment Management), the formation and institutionalisation of CMAs (Catchment Management Authorities), the shift from participatory processes to co-design and, sporadically, social learning as a form of governing.

In making our choice, we are governed by time and space and our own traditions of understanding out of which we think and act. At this historical moment, it would make sense to have, at minimum, a third dramaturgy which might be called ‘Governance as enacting cultural flows and river sentience’ (see ACHM 2014; O’donnell and Macpherson 2019; Muir, Rose, and Sullivan 2010). But equally this is not a dramaturgy which is ours for the telling; others need to be involved (Yunkaporta 2019; Marshall 2017).

We begin with an *ex poste* analysis using the elements of Table 1 as a framework to highlight some key differences between these two dramaturgies of MDB governance (Table 2).

3.2. Ex poste analysis based on two dramaturgies

Dramaturgy 1, ‘competing rationalities’ (Table 1), situates policy and planning as rational (with competing claims among different rationalities) and science as an independent source of evidence. There are many aspects of this dramaturgy draft which we cannot address here because of space limitations – clearly the practices associated with modelling are very important as is the dominant framings of the catchment as a ‘biophysical’, ecological system, or irrigated agriculture (food-bowl) system. The dominant framing is of a technical water resources problem, where water resources are over-allocated and it is a hydrological and economic numbers game to reallocate water ‘optimally’ between competing uses. Another powerful and linked framing is the MDB as a food bowl that is not only the agricultural heartland of Australia but also a beacon of viable production, export to Asia and sustainability of rural livelihoods. An arguably weaker framing in historical terms, but one on which the Water Act 2007 is essentially based, is an ecological framing, where Basin ecosystems are in terminal decline and require life-bringing water to survive.

This dramaturgy can be appreciated in terms of Schön’s (1995) distinctions between the ‘high ground’ of technical rationality and the ‘swamp of real-life issues’, choices that for him plagued the persistent failure of much public policy. Important to this dramaturgy is the institutional innovations that make up the Basin Plan e.g. water markets, the institution of environmental water, environmental water holder etc., as well as the stories as to why this trajectory had so much appeal to environmentalists in 2007 (see O’donnell et al. 2019). Governance within this dramaturgy is often characterised by overwhelming institutional complexity, exacerbated by non-systemic institutional innovation (Wallis and Ison 2011) and also by loss of organisational memory over time, particularly the

Table 2. An *ex post* analysis: Some key differences between three dramaturgies of MDB governance.

Elements	Dramaturgy 1: Competing rationalities	Dramaturgy 2: Citizen driven, self-organising, emergent
Scripting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expert-dominated planning Competing rationalities at play: ecological, economic, agri-cultural - food and fibre production MDBA staff Politicians Scientists, modellers Authors of the Water Act (2007) (Cwth) Exclusionary Top-down Other stakeholders, general public as recipients (the audience) Constructed as antagonistic Water framed as commodity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Began with Integrated Catchment Management (ICM; e.g. Anon 1991) Evolved into CMAs (variously named in the different states); subjected to waves of decentralisation and centralisation Concurrent development of Landcare, a localised, contextual model later appropriated by the state (Allan et al. 2020) Slowly evolving participatory catchment managing taking root under the MDBC (never purposefully mainstreamed) but undermined by shift of script to markets and market mechanisms CMA's framed as Basin-Plan-deliverers, rather than plan co-designers-over-time
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determined by high institutional complexity, multi-level governance regimes The release of the guide through televised media, internet, followed by community meetings in rural towns The guide itself is a key artefact and a performance in itself; Good science claimed to be a necessary precursor (rather than needed but never sufficient) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focused on biophysical improvements, often at the expense of building and sustaining the social Perhaps too often a plaything of state-based ministries or agencies, poorly able to give away power in a Westminster governance model
Stage Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presented as a polished performance, scientific, rational and independent The guide constructs water 'problems' as static, knowable, diversions as 'optimisable' The 'Sustainable Diversion Limit' (SDL) becomes a key symbol of the debate Following release of the SDL there is a breakdown of dramaturgical control by MDBA Strongly emotive (aggressive?) 'unauthorised' performance by interest groups steal the show - symbolic theatre by irrigation interests (e.g. nooses around farmers necks, public displays of burning of the guide) The strong likelihood that there is a backroom performance being orchestrated through late night phone calls among Australia's 'water mafia', those officials retired and current who feel they know 'how things should be' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unquestioned background of globalised, capitalist agriculture (Lawrence and Vanclay 1991) Predominantly forced to operate within a delivery model of first-order R&D (Russell and Ison 2000), rarely participatory theatre (Boal 1996) Absence in both state and federal government of a ministry or agency genuinely concerned with rural development (thus community impacts out of scope of the first iteration MDB plan)
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The guide attempts to deliver a new performance where environment is privileged Interest expands beyond initial stakeholder groups through strong media. Larger audience (for a few news cycles anyway?) Entrenches antagonism and ongoing polarisation of the debate - strong rhetoric by politicians, interest groups, citizens Series of symbolic performances, most notably resignation of the Chief Executive of the MDBA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CMA's lack public presence within the MDBA governance reforms (but may have roles in the 'shadow side')? Cultural flows appear as a legitimised narrative but with unclear purpose, trajectory and funding Cultural-flows narrative demands participation by First-Nations people but purpose, possibilities and capacity are at issue
Performativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performativity followed the seasons and political parties - from 2007 to 2014 'environmental recovery' via water buy backs, retrieving over allocated water and water use efficiency via technical means The establishment and orchestration of environmental flows was the dominant pursuit in a context that was no longer a 'natural system' but best considered a 'socio-technical system' Performativity shifted markedly from 2014 onwards; a nation-building and nature-taming discourses, run by rural interests (espoused) was reasserted in various forms The Basin Plan remains the espoused means to achieve better governance, even though behind the scenes there is little confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jazz-like improvisations that are localised, emergent and engaging appear non-existent or subjugated polycentricity (Ostrom 2010) and its enactment not obvious Too many set pieces; the imposition of the systematic state i.e. set goals, achieve goals, gain reward

performative elements of effective governing (Wallis, Ison, and Samson 2013).

This dramaturgy forms the corpus of the 'official story', the public narrative - the one that the media portrays and is portrayed for the media and the 'outward-facing' politics of the day. Many of the main features are included in Figure 1. There has been, however, a 'shadow setting', a behind the scenes performance which arises from awareness of how much the world of Australian water politics has a certain

'cronyism'. The rules and members of a 'water mafia' become apparent from stories told in bars, over dinners, or coffees and engineered by networks of airport meetings, late night phone calls etc, which combine to 'govern' what is or is not done. Of course, there are (or were) multiple clubs. In one framing, the data presented in Figure 2 could be appreciated as the club largely comprising personnel in the then new MDBA who had come across from its predecessor organisation the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC).

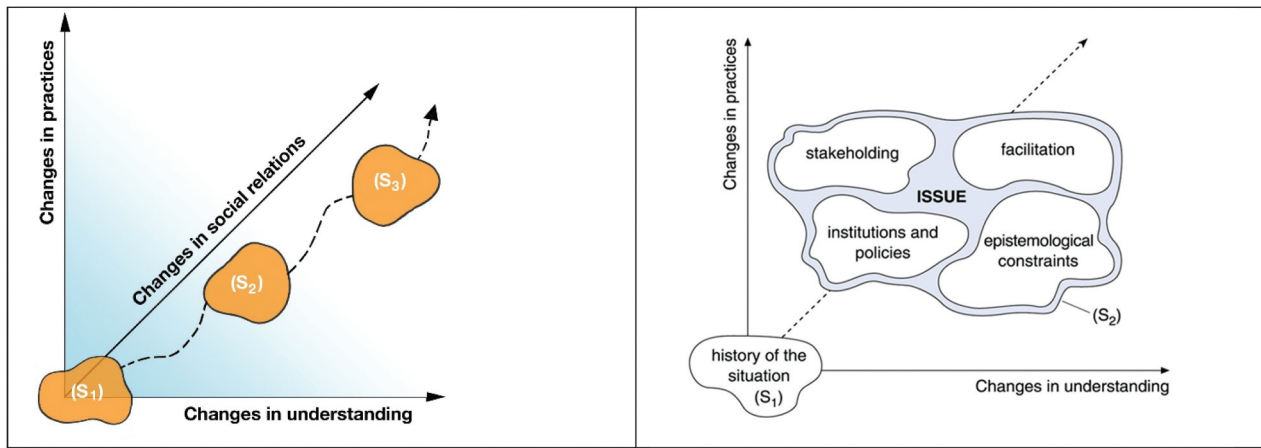


Figure 3. The SLIM heuristic showing (a) three key elements of trajectory change (understandings, practices and social relations) with (b) a set of five variables that enhance or constrain the emergence of social learning performances as concerted action (as a result of the interaction of changes in understanding, practices and social relations of those involved – key performativity elements). (Source: Adapted from Ison et al. 2004).

They carried with them the ethos of the MDBC, but at the time were very disaffected and were not experiencing themselves as members of the new ‘MDBA-Plan Club’.

Dramaturgy 2, ‘citizen driven, self-organising, emergent’, can be understood as having, since inception with ICM in the 1980s (Mitchell and Hollick 1993), concerns with relational, or systemic dynamics whether limited to the biophysical realm or expanded to include the social. Waves of concern can be understood in terms of shifts from ‘integration’ to ‘participation’ in its many forms (Collins and Ison 2009) then ‘social learning’ (Ison, Röling, and Watson 2007) and now a plethora of framings: e.g. co-design, water-food-energy nexus and social hydrology. A constant tension has been between hierarchical, command-and-control governance (see Ison, Röling, and Watson 2007; Allan et al. 2020) and what Rhodes (1996) argued for, governance as the functioning of ‘self-organising, inter-organisational networks’. All too often missing from both sides of this argument has been the neglect of a practice, or praxis, focus as well as the institutional innovation needed to generate the unfolding of knowing-through-action that drives emergent, self-organisation (Lather 1986; Cook and Wagenaar 2012; Ison 2017; Alexandra 2019). Ananda, McFarlane, and Loh (2020) contend that water governance reforms should facilitate institutional configurations that enhance social learning opportunities. This field of innovation can be understood in terms of systemic (or cyber-systemic) governance (Ison, Collins, and Wallis 2014).

3.3. Ex ante analysis as a basis for future co-design based on two dramaturgies

In building a dramaturgy, the challenge is to be able to examine each of the elements of past performances through a deliberative process. This

involves participants holding multiple, partial perspectives who, over time, are able to stand outside their own circumstances and experiences so as to act reflexively by bringing into conversation understandings that may offer news of difference and that can lead towards concerted action (Figure 3) – i.e. producing a co-owned performance. Such a process requires the offering of explanations that do not descend into, or reify, particular orthodoxies. It is undone when participants come as representatives of others and feel the pressure to ‘hold the party line’ or where consensus, a lowest common-denominator position, is sought rather than seeking an accommodation of differences (Ison 2017). As Donella Meadows said in her now oft-cited paper ‘places to intervene in a system’, meaningful change only comes by addressing the higher-level concerns, i.e. the mindset out of which conception of a system arises, thus demanding a power to transcend paradigms (Meadows 1997). Table 3 uses our dramaturgical framework (Table 1) to provide some dramaturgical considerations for possible *ex ante* designs, or ideally, co-designs, as departures from historical dramaturgies (Table 2).

We suggest that the realisation of the emerging dramaturgies proffered in Table 3 would be aided by understanding the dynamics of social learning as a process and governance mechanism (Figure 3) as well as by choosing to reframe a river and its governance in terms of a co-evolutionary dynamic between a social and a biophysical system (Ison, Alexandra, and Wallis 2018). To be viable and useful, a dramaturgical approach would require concomitant investment in a conducive ‘governance system’ as offered through social learning approaches (Ison, Grant, and Bawden 2014).

Table 3. Dramaturgical considerations for possible *ex ante* designs as departures from historical dramaturgies: Some key elements to contribute to an MDB governance meta-dramaturgy.

Elements	Dramaturgy 1: Competing rationalities	Dramaturgy 2: Citizen driven, self-organising, emergent
Scripting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each rationality is considered necessary but not sufficient and cast in terms of 'drafts' as per Frayn in his play Copenhagen Implications of commitments to systematic, linear-cause-and-effect framings and explanations revealed Implications of different framing choices revealed e.g. 'wickedness', complexity, emergence and surprise; Commitments to practice, particularly modelling practices, explored and limitations of those based on stationarity (Milly et al. 2008) are revealed Understandings of what it is to be human are not uncritically based on the increasingly discredited <i>Homo economicus</i> framing (Aldred 2019) Practices do not conserve positivistic framings of what it is to do science, an understanding that was critiqued in (1970) by Hasan Özbekhan in his report to the Club of Rome, entitled 'The Global Problematique' (Özbekhan 1970) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Citizens, rather than scientists or scientists as citizen-artists Participatory implications (democratic), i.e. who are the audiences? How do performances serve to 'create' audiences and included or exclude certain actors and actor groups? What roles do people use and how do these change? Foster scripts imbued with terroir, in the French understanding of wines
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The setting shifts from closed-door offices to field-based co-design Policy is pursued within a clear statement of purpose which is revisited regularly The NWI/NWC is recast as MDB governance scripts and dramaturge, respectively New institutions invented with systemic affordances, including ameliorating loss of livelihood by basin residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Importance of the development of the setting and the contexture, not just the acts What devices have been used? Polycentrise (after Ostrom 2010) the settings and the actors
Stage Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not left to bureaucrats and scientists; staffing and research support to come from across the Arts The systemic (e.g. audience participation or co-design) is combined with the systematic (e.g. reports and evaluations of the efficacy of performances) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opening up the back stage Surfacing assumptions and mental models and framing Unpacking the devices used to represent and conceal information (front-stage and back-stage) Manage to obtain and respond to audience feedback
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New focus is given to orchestrating flows and releases across the basin in ways that simulate patterns of historical variation Cooperative Federalism is made real through transforming, for example, the MDBA to a National MDB Cooperative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring competing narratives adapted to context Work with improvised performances aligned through common, but distributed purpose The politics of invitation – who participates – comes into play
Performativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The performativity of the river system in relation to human and non-human inhabitants is given priority (perhaps through granting river sentence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary purpose is to build and maintain a quality relationship between citizen-stakeholders in a river basin through creation of catchment based-dramaturgies that develop a responsible and response-able governing performance and a deepening citizen eco-literacy

The key message to be taken from the heuristics in Figure 3 is that social learning involves moving from one particular situation to an improved situation through changes in practices, changes in understanding and, through experiential emergence, changes in social relations of those participating. The six variables that enhance or constrain situational transformation include: the history of the situation, the institutions that structure the situation, the epistemological constraints of those involved, their stakeholding, whether facilitation occurs, and the sixth (hidden) variable, learning processes. This heuristic, deployed within an overall deliberative approach could be used to orchestrate situated, unfolding, dramaturgies building on the social learning approach designed and delivered by Ison, Collins, and Iaquinto (2021) for transitioning towards water-sensitive cities. When done well, social learning, derived from the SLIM (Social Learning for the Integrated Management and sustainable use of water) Project tradition (Steyaert and Jiggins 2007), attends to the five elements of dramaturgy outlined in Table 1.

To make the heuristics of Figure 3 operational requires the reframing of rivers as structurally

coupled, social-biophysical systems in an unfolding co-evolutionary, mutually shaping, dynamic (Ison, Alexandra, and Wallis 2018). Such a reframing breaks out of the unhelpful dualism at the heart of many practice and policy performances, i.e. the natural, ecological, biophysical or hydrological conceived as separate from the social. A move towards a framing as a duality (the structural coupling of a social and a biophysical system), a pair that together make a whole (as in predator and prey) allows the essence of Anthropocene concerns to be appropriately addressed, i.e. the on-going relationship of *Homo sapiens* with the biosphere and other species.

The social learning process dynamics that can emerge from operationalising the SLIM heuristics could be exploited to produce particular dramaturgies as well as operating at a meta-level to braid different dramaturgies. The shift to meta-level braiding is to produce novel governance performances that respect and value different knowledges, different ways of knowing. This is a field for further research and praxis innovation.

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1. The MDB as a theatre for governance performances

The MDB has a long history of controversy and conflict that seemingly warrants a ‘wicked’ framing for the situation (Rittel and Webber 1973; Head 2022), one that failed to be applied when the MDBA began operations despite the contemporaneous work of the APSC (2007) and involvement by APSC-paper authors with staff of the MDBA in joint workshops (Ison, Russell, and Wallis 2009). This lack of a wicked framing led the MDBA to develop a Basin Plan and a guide (MDBA 2010) that followed a linear logic of:

Calculate hydrologic characteristics > determine environmental water requirements > consider social and economic aspects > set diversion limits

The release of this guide resulted in substantial backlash from a public concerned that they had not been appropriately consulted, felt fatigued from water reform, could not understand the complex and inaccessible document the MDBA had produced and saw it as an attack on their livelihoods (House Standing Committee on Regional Australia 2011). Later, in response to these and other concerns, the MDBA reframed the Basin Plan in terms of ‘delivering a healthy working Basin’, adopting the language of the well-regarded ‘The Living Murray’ program (MDBA 2011). The Basin Plan was eventually passed through Parliament in November 2012 and was initially intended to be fully implemented from 2019, but now extended until 2024 with a 5-yearly report on the effectiveness of the Basin Plan published in 2025 (MDBA 2022). The dramaturgical approach outlined here if pursued would be a means to break out of the trap of consistently, and prematurely, taming a wicked problem, a persistent failure highlighted by Rittel and Webber (1973).

Common across the history of conflict is a dominant policy framing in which water is a technical resources problem with economic value determined in a market. In this framing, water resources are over-allocated and it is a hydrological and economic numbers game where the goal is to reallocate water ‘optimally’ between competing uses. Another powerful, and linked framing is the Murray-Darling Basin as a food bowl that is not only the agricultural heartland of Australia, but also a beacon of viable production, export to Asia and sustainability of rural livelihoods. An arguably weaker framing, but one on which the *Water Act* (2007) is essentially based on an ecological framing, where Basin ecosystems are in terminal decline and require life-bringing water to survive. Often missing from these framing choices is the growing realisation that it is variability itself that drives Australian ecological processes (Colloff and Pittock 2022) and that attempts to stabilise these, by

means ranging from dams with planned releases through to institutions like water allocations, abstraction rights and environmental flows, can undermine the stochastic functioning of river systems such as the MDB.

Dramaturgy 1 is the most constraining for future governing as in its enactment it conserves praxis, language, concepts, metaphors and understanding that obfuscate, distort, or are past their use-by-date, i.e. a future dramaturgy needs to transform by deframing the dominant discourses drawn from hydrology and water engineering as well as ecological and economic ‘science’ (Ison and Straw 2020). Repeating dramaturgy 1 (Table 2) with constantly changing competition between competing rationalities seems irresponsible at this historical moment.

4.2. The systemic implications of reframing water governance in terms of dramaturgies

To be effective, governing of the MDB, like any social innovation, requires a conducive setting within which institutions, comprising norms, rules, codified arrangements and procedures, operate so as to enable rather than constrain practices with a focus on learning (and acting) from feedback, i.e. practices that are adaptive to changing circumstances (Steyaert and Jiggins 2007; Norgaard and Kallis 2011; Ison and Straw 2020). From a ‘systems’ theoretical perspective (Ison 2018), governance can be thought of as a process of steering an ongoing, viable course in response to feedback. A ‘viable course’ is charted in relation to a purpose that is negotiated collectively (deliberatively) in a co-evolutionary and unfolding context. Governance that is ‘systemic’, and ‘adaptive’, incorporates learning and change in response to unfolding circumstances, and therefore demands understanding of, and managing, feedback processes. Because concepts and language involved in governance discourse opens up the assumptions and ‘cognitive commitments’ in thinking about decision-making then future governance requires consideration of the worldviews, framing choices and assumptions of those governing (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). Participating in deliberative dramaturgy construction is a potential means to achieve these ends.

For multiple dramaturgies to be envisaged as a purposeful plan of action for future MDB governance then attention has to be given to who is, or could be, the dramaturge. At the moment, it is a complex, competing field of praxis, with individuals and groups pulling in different directions. i.e. state and Federal politicians (of varying political persuasion), state and federal ‘water bureaucrats’, industry and mining lobbyists ... the list goes on. Post NWC, attempts have sought to make the Productivity Commission (a product of neo-liberalism) the principal dramaturge. As

outlined earlier, the new Labor Government is reported to be planning to reintroduce the NWC within a renewed NWI (Jasper and Long 2022). It is to be hoped that the opportunity for a fresh start will lead to a refreshed NWC/NWI able to operate as an effective dramaturgist, equipped practically and intellectually with an enthusiasm and capability to explore and enact multiple, braided performances. An NWI reframed in this way, as a systemic action research approach (Ison, 2008) with requirements for investment in social learning would represent a first serious attempt to govern the MDB as a wicked problem (ASPC 2007), and a novel institutional form much needed for effective Anthropocene governance (Ison and Straw 2020).

Institutional innovation is needed which fixes attention on the future and future generations. Richard Lazarus (2009, 1153) summarised this dilemma as it applies to climate change legislation: 'To be successful over the long term, climate change legislation will need to include institutional design features that insulate programmatic implementation . . . from powerful political and economic interests propelled by short-term concerns'. Inherent in this warning is an undue focus on short-term projects to achieve long-term change and the necessity to design and enact policies and processes that can be sustained (institutionalised) and adapted by future human generations. Institutions are required that endure in form and enactment beyond changes in governments. Innovation in an expanded justice system, possible constitutional reform and purposeful action to address entrenched coalitions of power are also needed (see Thiel 2015).

It needs to be asked whether there is a will to create multiple dramaturgies, or drafts that would matter to enough people to trigger a shift in the nation's sensibility about water and its governance? How would we know this – probably when citizens started talking about water and rivers differently – an emergent water literacy. Could we begin to speak of the performativity of the river (possibly as a feature of granting sentience), understanding that we are the river and the river is us? Could a pilot, or pilots, be devised as part of the 'implementation' of the MDB plan? To this must be added an emerging dramaturgy associated with cultural flows and possible treaty arrangements with first-nation peoples. As implementation of the MDB plan will involve a 'group performance' at multiple levels and scales (Table 3) dramaturgical understandings may also assist in the more effective operation of CMAs, Boards, Committees, Implementations or Working Groups etc (e.g. Freeman and Peck 2007) or, potentially examine their efficacy as institutions designed to create performances.

There is a national mood swing for reform and a desire to move away from on-going MDB-

governance failure (Grafton et al. 2020). In the 2022 Federal election, 68% of Australian citizens did not cast their primary vote for a major party; there is a growing demand for alternative modes of governing (Hollo 2022). Investment in, and pursuit of, multiple partial dramaturgies which might be braided to produce and reproduce a co-evolutionary MDB-governing performance constitutes an imaginary fitted to the variability that has produced the Australian continent and its indigenous life forms, variability that is likely to be even greater under human-induced climate change. Sander (2020) explains what it means when we try to push our imagination. What we mostly do, she says, 'is to mix and re-combine already known concepts, questions, and circumstances to arrive at new relationships and figures: We ask well-known questions in new contexts, or we insert logics from other disciplines into a specific framework We repeat, re-make and re-model. We use what is around us and what we already know, to find ways towards imagining something else'.

The motivation for this work grew out of attempts to develop a collaborative research program between systemic governance and performance studies scholars. Now, a decade later, the rationale for this research and scholarship is more pressing but demands new 'actors' and a new 'dramaturge' (e.g. a reimagined NWC) collaborating to transform MDB governing as an 'Anthropocene-performance'. Our arguments constitute 'a draft' for investment in the ongoing evolution of policies, practices, and governance arrangements based on the braiding of different knowledge systems. Other means of 'drafting' can be found to assist; methodologically, imaginaries, dramaturgies and discourse coalitions (Donaldson 2015) are related but also different; each tradition offers potential ways of analysing past policy-practice as well as designing, or co-designing, future governance trajectories. Each has potential to offer ex-post insights that can be gleaned through their elucidation and then used as a basis for co-design (e.g. Bischoff-Mattson and Lynch 2016). Our preliminary study provides backing to Essig's (2016) claims for pursuing a 'dramaturgy of public policy' approach based on the work of Roberto Bedoya (2013). She says: 'of course! . . . you understand policy the way you analyse a script dramaturgically: the characters, the setting, the given conditions, the motivations, the inciting action'.

Notes

1. see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copenhagen_%28play%29 (Accessed 15 January 2023).
2. *ibid.*

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