

Article

A Systems Thinking Approach to Political Polarization and Encounters of Dysrecognition

Gregory A. Thompson *  and Soren Pearce 

Department of Anthropology, College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, USA; sorenpearce@gmail.com

* Correspondence: greg.a.thompson@gmail.com

Abstract

In this article, we employ a Batesonian systems thinking approach to analyze politically polarized and politically polarizing encounters in the contemporary United States. We bring together Bateson's concepts of schismogenesis, double binds, metacommunication, and transcontextualism with recent work on recognition and resonance in order to show how these encounters create moments of transcontextual double binds that produce mutual dysrecognition. We show how these moments of mutual dysrecognition become both animating forces of political polarization in the moment while also becoming constitutive poetic resonances for making sense of future events. When these moments of dysrecognition are considered alongside the removal of mechanisms that restrain schismogenesis, the United States body politic is becoming increasingly schizophrenic—split in two with both parts incommunicado with the other such that the whole system is veering towards collapse. We close by briefly considering the kind of deutero-learning, to use Bateson's term, that might help to stave off such a collapse.

Keywords: political polarization; schismogenesis; recognition; political interaction; poetic resonances; Bateson; Donald Trump



Academic Editor: Sylvie Genest

Received: 18 October 2024

Revised: 15 May 2025

Accepted: 27 June 2025

Published: 17 July 2025

Citation: Thompson, G. A., & Pearce, S. (2025). A Systems Thinking Approach to Political Polarization and Encounters of Dysrecognition. *Humans*, 5(3), 17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/humans5030017>

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

A clip of White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany came to my (Thompson's) attention in a neighbor's Instagram post. In it, a reporter asked McEnany to state "without ambiguity or deflection" that then-President Trump disavows White supremacy. McEnany quoted numerous statements by President Trump disavowing White supremacy. Yet she did not make a definitive statement of this in the present tense, despite the reporter's insistence that she do so. My neighbor's post had a caption to the effect: "Great to see a powerful woman standing up to the bullying media!" I was confused. Where she saw a woman standing up against a powerful and manipulative man, I saw a woman carrying water for a different powerful and manipulative man, her White supremacist boss.

We offer this example to introduce the phenomenon of interest: political polarization in the United States as it is realized by and through mass-mediated encounters. In what follows, we combine a Batesonian systems thinking approach with recent theorizing of constitutive resonances in order to analyze these encounters. We show how people who are differently politically aligned understand these encounters in radically different ways that both presuppose and produce radical political polarization. We show how this is accomplished, in part, through different constitutive poetic resonances that produce a transcontextual interactional double bind that has a Necker cube-like quality in which

each side sees a very different image of the same encounter. Moreover, each of the images entails a moment of dysrecognition of each party by the other party. Finally, in the fashion of Bateson's feedback loops, we show how these moments of dysrecognition become constitutive resonances for future encounters, furthering a relationship of disdain and distrust between political opponents. The end result of all of this is a dysfunctional and schizophrenic body politic.

To illustrate the nature of politically polarized and polarizing encounters, we employ a discourse analysis approach to analyze a handful of examples of such encounters and illustrate their highly creative, semiotically rich, and affectively charged nature. We apply four key concepts from Bateson's systems thinking, namely *schismogenesis*, *double binds*, *metacommunication*, and *transcontextualism* (Bateson, 1972). We add to this the concept of constitutive poetic resonances that constitute the human (political) reals that we inhabit (Thompson & Chase, 2024; Chase & Thompson, 2025; Lepselter, 2016; Sloterdijk, 2011), along with the notion of recognition (Taylor, 1994; Markell, 2009). The result is a dynamic approach for understanding the mechanisms that drive and even constitute political polarization in the United States today. In closing, we briefly consider how Bateson's concept of deutero-learning might help the American body politic to overcome this schismogenic transcontextual syndrome.

2. A Caveat: Doing Anthropology of/with 'Deplorables'

Given reviewers' comments on an earlier draft of this article and in light of the further intensification of the very political polarization that this article seeks to understand, we want to clarify that the analysis below is not a political defense of Trump, of anything he said, or of any of his policy positions. Nor is it a critique of any of those things. Rather, it is our effort to provide insight into the contexts that have produced the political hyperpolarization in the United States today among the American body politic. Those on the political left might find it useful to think of the analysis below as an attempt to understand the context that made it possible for Donald J. Trump to become the democratically elected President of the United States of America—twice.

An important component of our analysis involves presenting the perspectives of both sides of these politically polarized and polarizing encounters. We recognize that, in the current morally and affectively charged climate, it can be especially difficult to take the perspective of one's political opponents. At the same time, the affectively charged nature of one's experience of these encounters is central to the very processes that we describe below—indeed, as we describe below it is one of the engines of political schismogenesis. We thus encourage you, the reader, to closely attend to the affect produced in you as you read about these encounters and our analyses below.

3. A Systems Thinking Approach to Political Polarization in Trumpian Times

Here we should clarify that by "political polarization" we do not simply refer to differences in voting decisions, but also to the dramatically differing interpretations, perceptions, and affective charges of understandings of events in the world, especially as they are construed by the media. As Revers (2023) notes, social scientists have an unfortunate tendency to see political polarization in very static terms, literally as "states" of affairs rather than as processes always in the making. Rather than studying the processes and practices by which political polarization is made, social scientists often fixate on simply characterizing the type and intensity of political polarization. Although this can be informative, it does little to help us understand the mechanisms, processes, and practices by which political polarization is ongoingly being made.

In what follows, we take up this task. In this effort, we draw upon Bateson's systems thinking approach and his notions of schismogenesis, metacommunication, double binds, and transcontextualism. We then add to this the conception of constitutive poetic resonances and dysrecognition to help explain the ongoing constitution of political polarization in the United States today.

3.1. *Schismogenesis*

Political polarization can be understood as a type of what Bateson termed schismogenesis (Bateson, 1935), a process of group differentiation within a given community. In schismogenesis, groups are differentiated from each other by ritual and other practices such that different subgroups can co-exist within a singular community. Yet, if left unchecked, these schismogenic processes could lead to the division of a single group into two distinct and separate groups. Thus, Bateson argues, restraining mechanisms are necessary to hold together different subgroups as a single unified community.

This concept originated in an article that Bateson wrote in response to a 1935 memorandum by the Committee of the Social Sciences Research Council (CCSRC) regarding "cultural contact" or what Bateson refers to as "the problem" of "acculturation" (Bateson, 1972, p. 179). Writing with an eye toward some rather ominous developments in Europe at the time, Bateson's darker concern with schismogenesis (particularly symmetrical schismogenesis) was that, left unrestrained, schismogenic processes can aggravate existing tensions and lead to "hostility and the breakdown of the whole system." (Bateson, 1972, p. 181).

In contrast to the CCSRC's focus on "those cases in which the [cultural] contact occurs between two communities with different cultures," Bateson suggested that we should be investigating "the conditions of differentiation inside a single culture" (Bateson, 1935, p. 179). In other words, Bateson's task is to describe the factors that restrain the schismogenic processes and produce a dynamic equilibrium such that different groups can quiescently co-exist in a single stable community. Without these restraining factors, schismogenesis could lead to pathological developments in which the groups move towards mutual hostility and, eventually, the fissure of the community.

Bateson describes two primary forms of schismogenesis: complementary and symmetrical. Complementary schismogenesis refers to those cases of differentiation in which the behavior and aspirations of the members of the two groups are fundamentally different such that the members of one group treat the members of the other group in fundamentally different ways. For example, the relationship of a squire to his villagers in which the former lords over the latter. In contrast, symmetrical schismogenesis refers to cases of differentiation in which the individuals in two groups have the same aspirations and behavior patterns such that each behaves toward the other in roughly the same manner that the other behaves toward them. Examples include relationships of competition, rivalry, or boasting (Bateson, 1970). Bateson notes the potentially serious consequences of symmetrical schismogenesis: "if boasting is the reply to boasting, then each group will drive the other into excessive emphasis of the pattern, a process which if not restrained can only lead to more and more extreme rivalry and ultimately to hostility and the breakdown of the whole system" (Bateson, 1972, p. 181).

Each of these types of differentiation contain certain restraining factors that can produce a relatively stable co-existence. Some of the restraining factors that Bateson identifies include the following: patterns of reciprocity that produce mutual dependence; outside individuals, organizations, or circumstances that serve to unite the groups; or the admixture of one form of schismogenesis in a situation that is predominately the other form—e.g., a squire (complementary) plays in an annual game of cricket (symmetrical) with his villagers.

Bateson proposes that by studying the internal arrangements that produce the stable co-existence of different groups within a single community, we might be able to better understand how to produce this state of affairs in disequilibrated cases. In other words, Bateson is studying the sturdy forms of incorporating difference in order to suggest how we might be able to apply these principles to less sturdy forms. Our analysis below takes as its object what has become a less sturdy form—namely political parties in the United States today. Whereas Bateson was primarily interested in studying the processes that hold differentiated groups together, we are interested in studying these processes in groups that appear to be falling apart.

3.2. Metacommunication

Bateson's notion of metacommunication refers to communication about communication. Bateson discusses two key aspects of metacommunication: interactional framing and relationality. An avid naturalist and student of animal behavior, Bateson illustrated the former through an observation of otters at the Fleishhacker Zoo in San Francisco ([Bateson, 1972](#)) and the latter through his own research with octopuses ([Guddemi, 2020](#)).

In "A theory of Play and Fantasy", Bateson described how otters would employ signals such as playful biting that would modify the meaning of subsequent signals such that what might otherwise have been interpreted as "fighting," e.g., biting and wrestling, came to be understood by their fellow otters as "play." He surmised that the otters were able to communicate the message "this is play." More than being a simple communication of some kind of action to other otters, this was a communication about the nature of communication, that is, *metacommunication*.

A related insight into metacommunication came from the study of the behavior of pairs of octopuses placed in an aquarium ([Guddemi, 2020](#)). Using octopuses that he and his family had collected from the ocean, Bateson found that when an octopus was introduced into an aquarium tank that already had an octopus, the two would usually fight to the death. Yet when two octopuses were introduced into the aquarium at the same time, they would usually find a way to peacefully co-exist. As they worked out their relationship, they would display different behaviors indicating different possibilities of relationality until the relationship settled into a sustainable one of what we might call "friendship." Flipping around the "Games Theory" approach that studies how rules determine behavior, Bateson's goal was to understand "how behavior determines rules [for future interaction]" ([Guddemi, 2020](#), p. 141).

3.3. Double Binds, Transcontextual Syndromes, and Deutero-Learning

Given the two levels of communication and metacommunication, double binds occur when the messages being communicated at one level contradict those being communicated on another. Such communicational events are like the optical illusion of the Necker cube since a single image can be seen in two very different ways. In the case of double binds, each image of the encounter contradicts the other, leaving the recipient of the message in a bind as to which one to follow. Here, Bateson offers the example of a parent who insists that a child must both do something or be punished and who is at a metacommunicational level told something contradictory such as "do not see this as punishment" ([Bateson, 1972](#), p. 211).

Bateson further proposes that schizophrenic behavior is one dysfunctional way that people who repeatedly find themselves in double bind situations adapt to those situations. We use the term "schizophrenic behavior" to refer to behavior that is characterized by disorganization and contradiction rather than to refer to the psychiatric diagnosis per se. Bateson thus refers to schizophrenia as a *transcontextual syndrome* since it is produced by multiple contradictory contexts ([Bateson, 1972](#), p. 281). Transcontextual syndromes can

arise when the person caught in the double bind is unable to articulate the nature of the contradiction and, as a result, develops habits that reproduce a negative feedback loop of repeating the same maladaptive patterns of behavior. Such persons are, Bateson notes, “impoverished by transcontextual confusions.” (Bateson, 1972, p. 277). In this case, the confusion resulting from a person being “in the wrong regarding [their] rules for making sense of an important relationship with another [person]” can result in “severe pain and maladjustment” (Bateson, 1972, p. 282).

Yet transcontextual syndromes are not always negative. As Bateson puts it: “if this pathology can be warded off or resisted, the total experience [of transcontextual syndrome] may promote creativity” (Bateson, 1972, p. 282). Similarly, whereas some people, such as schizophrenics, are “impoverished by transcontextual confusions,” there are others, such as clowns, artists, and poets, who are “enriched by transcontextual gifts” (Bateson, 1972, p. 277). Entire fields—such as humor, art, and poetry—are enriched by transcontextualism.

Furthermore, there is an important type of learning that Bateson calls *deutero-learning*, or learning about learning, which can result from transcontextual double binds (Bateson, 1972, p. 166). As an example of this, Bateson tells of a dolphin who learned to produce novel behaviors through the refusal of rewards for existing behaviors. By contradicting the previous communication of providing a reward for a singular behavior and instead withholding that reward, the dolphin’s trainers were able to train the dolphin to produce multiple “novel” behaviors or what Bateson calls *deutero-learning* or learning about learning. In a human example, Bateson describes how a therapist treating an alcoholic is able to create a productive double bind that helps the alcoholic to see the nonsensical nature of their behavior and to thus stop doing it. In these cases, transcontextual syndromes can be productive and creative (Bateson, 1972).

3.4. Constitutive Poetic Resonances

To help further make sense of the Necker cube-like character of the politically polarized encounters that we analyze below, we draw on the concept of constitutive poetic resonances (Thompson & Chase, 2024). Following on the work of many others on poetics and poesis (e.g., Austin, 1975; Fleming & Lempert, 2014; Lepselter, 2016; Mazzarella, 2017), Thompson and Chase (2024) show how different arrays of constitutive poetic resonances enable different observers to see the same image in a Chicago underpass either as the Virgin Mary or as merely a salt stain. Constitutive poetic resonances are historically, culturally, and socially particular forms that function in multiple semiotic modalities and across multiple timescales to make a given seeing possible. Constitutive poetic resonances are the constituents of the seeing of some thing as a particular kind of thing. They are poetically resonant in the sense that, in addition to being constitutive (as in poesis), they also involve a recognizable matching of the qualia of formal features in some semiotic modality or other.

In their work, Thompson and Chase (2024) focused heavily on tracing out the historical resonances that constituted that seeing while giving less attention to the actual encounter of seeing. In contrast, the present project focuses less on documenting the histories of the constitutive poetic resonances that go into making these politically polarized encounters visible as one or another kind of happening and more on the dynamics of the encounters themselves, especially the affects of these encounters.

3.5. (Dys)Recognition

To understand the affectively charged nature of these politically polarized and polarizing encounters, we introduce the term “dysrecognition” based on the concept of recognition elaborated by Taylor (1994). Drawing on G. W. F. Hegel’s notion of recognition, Taylor articulates recognition in the more specified sense of what we might call interpersonal

recognition (perhaps not so different from seeing the Virgin Mary in an underpass salt stain). Taylor describes recognition as a process fundamental to the constitution of modern selves. Recognition is “fundamentally *dialogical*” in character, involving how one is perceived by others (Taylor, 1994, p. 32). Recognition might be understood simply as an answer to the question posed to one’s interactional partner: “Who do you think I am?” Yet in most encounters, this question is not explicitly addressed but is instead answered implicitly by the sayings and doings of the participants in the encounter.

Taylor points out how one of the important consequences of the modern preoccupation with recognition is that there are moments in which one is recognized as something other than who one *really* is. Instances such as racism and sexism provide examples of this kind of recognition that Taylor terms *misrecognition*. In this connection, Taylor notes that since recognition is formative of the modern subject, “misrecognition has now graduated to the rank of a harm that can be hardheadedly enumerated along with [inequality, exploitation, and injustice]” (Taylor, 1994, p. 64). To be seen as something less than who one is has come to be understood as a grave injustice.

Yet, as Markell (2003) has pointed out, this way of characterizing misrecognition begs the question: prior to any moment of recognition, who is one *really*? This presumes an ontologically prior “always already there” subject that exists prior to and outside of recognition—a conception that, in his other work, Taylor had been trying to avoid. As Markell further notes, this way of thinking of misrecognition misses a critical aspect of recognition, namely its creative and constitutive force (Markell, 2003). Similar to Bateson’s octopuses, whose relational being is constituted by their behavior in encounters with one another, so too are human subjects constituted by and through recognition.

To avoid this problem of a presupposed always-already-there-subject and to instead enable us to see subjects *in the making*, we introduce the term *dysrecognition*. Instead of referring to a pre-existing metaphysical subject, dysrecognition occurs when a subject is recognized in a manner that is undesirable, displeasing, or discomfiting to them. This affective conception of dysrecognition allows us to focus on the processes by which persons are constituted as particular kinds of persons who are understood to be doing particular kinds of things in encounters that have particular kinds of consequences (esp. affects). Additionally, dysrecognition itself can become a particularly powerful constitutive poetic resonance for making sense of what transpired in the event and for how one will understand subsequent encounters and one’s relationship to others.

4. Schismogenesis, Double Binds, Transcontextualism, and the Constitutive Poetic Resonances of Dysrecognition in Politically Polarized and Polarizing Encounters

4.1. Schismogenesis in U.S. Politics

Bringing these theoretical tools to the study of political polarization in the United States, first, schismogenesis offers a way of conceptualizing political polarization processually (Bateson, 1935). More importantly, it helps us see the nature of this relationship as well as the restraining factors that keep the schismogenic processes of political polarization in check.

U.S. political parties are, firstly, a symmetrical schismogenic system in which each party competes against the other, roughly as equals. The symmetrical nature of this relationship can be seen in the competitive ritual of the “debate” between competing candidates, in which numerous measures are taken to ensure that the candidates are on an equal playing field, down to the number of seconds that each candidate is allowed to speak. Yet, the result of this competition is that the winning party is politically empowered over the other—a complementary schismogenic relationship. As Bateson noted, this kind

of periodic admixture of complementary schismogenesis into a symmetrical schismogenic relationship is itself a restraining mechanism on symmetrical schismogenesis that can help to stabilize the system.

A further restraining mechanism on the two party schismogenic system in the United States is a third entity that functions to mediate this relationship, namely, the media (note that we use “media” and “press” interchangeably to reflect widespread attitudes toward information channels regardless of medium). The media is supposed to have an antagonistic relationship to whichever party is in power and thus is expected to serve as a check on the party in power through critical engagement ([Karadimitriou et al., 2022](#)). Ideally, this relationship is supposed to be symmetrical in as much as the press and the president are presumed to be on equal footing in their encounters with each other. However, this relationship between the press and the president is often complementary since the press asks the questions and the White House answers them. The White House’s ability to determine the format of the conversation further contributes to the complementarity of this relationship.

One restraint on the complementary schismogenesis of the relationship between the press and the president is the annual ritual known as the White House Correspondents’ Association’s Dinner (WHCAD). This ritual is one of ritual insulting, typically with the press insulting the president. As with Bateson’s squire playing competitive games with the townspeople, this ritual effectively, even if only temporarily, lowers the position of the party in power—thus releasing some of the schismogenic tension by temporarily inverting the hierarchy.

U.S. politics can thus be characterized by a schismogenic triangle with the political left, the political right, and the press occupying the three points of the triangle. Schismogenesis can operate along all three sides of the triangle, depending on which party is in power. This schismogenic triangle is a further restraining mechanism on the schismogenic processes between any two points of the triangle since the third entity, the press, is supposed to restrain whichever party is in power. You might say that, historically in U.S. politics, the press mediates the schismogenesis between the two dominant political parties.

Yet, all of these restraining mechanisms have been undermined in various ways in recent years. Conservative critics have pointed to an imbalance in this schismogenic triangle, suggesting that the press is no longer a check on the political left ([Goodwin, 2025](#); [Mitchell, 2017](#)). U.S. politics has long had critiques of the political biases of the press, particularly by conservatives (e.g., during the McCarthy era of the 1940’s and 1950’s ([Hemmer, 2014](#); [Lane, 2021](#))). By undermining an important restraining device of schismogenesis, the perception and/or reality of the liberal bias of the press furthers political polarization in America today. As we will see below, this perception of liberal bias in the press is a frequent constitutive poetic resonance of these encounters.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the Trump administration has refused or undermined two of the restraining mechanisms mentioned above. By refusing to acknowledge then-President Biden’s electoral victory, current-President Trump undermined the stabilizing work of the admixture of complementary and schismogenic relations. Notably, one of the most common aspects of the “stop the steal” movement was a concern that the biased coverage of the press had influenced the election in favor of Biden (most notably in what has been called “the Hunter Biden laptop scandal” ([Flood & Cuebas-Fantauzzi, 2024](#)). Regarding the WHCAD, Trump refused to participate in this event of ritual insulting during his first term in office, arguing that these events had become too politically biased, not to mention that Trump himself had been roasted by then President Barack Obama in the 2011 WHCAD ([Taddonio, 2016](#)). Trump’s failure to participate in this event similarly

removed an important restraining mechanism that historically had helped to maintain the stability of the American political system.

4.2. *Double Binds and Transcontextualism in U.S. Politics*

Bateson's theory of double binds and transcontextualism can help us understand politically polarized and polarizing encounters themselves. Only whereas Bateson used these concepts to characterize individual behavior, we apply these concepts to encounters between people. For example, we describe how, through differences in constitutive poetic resonances, the encounters themselves can be characterized as "schizophrenic" in as much as they produce a double bind of mutual dysrecognition in which participants on both sides feel as if they have been seen in a manner that is undesirable, displeasing, or discomfiting.

The concepts of constitutive poetic resonances help us to understand how these politically polarized double images of the encounter are produced in the first place and how these encounters themselves further produce political polarization. Just as the salt stain in the underpass is for some an image of the Virgin Mary and for others a mere salt stain, so too can the very same politically polarized encounter be seen by some as evidence of the monstrous behavior of the one side and at the same time seen by others as evidence of the monstrous behavior of the other side. These radically different political seeings depend on the constitutive poetic resonances that make either seeing possible. This is because, similar to illusions such as the Necker cube that involve inferring a three-dimensional object from a two-dimensional image, so too in social life we must, from the two-dimensional image of the sayings and doings of the persons involved, infer a three-dimensional image of who the participants are and what was being done in the encounter. This inference-dependent activity that Bateson called informational "transforms" (what linguistic anthropologists call metapragmatics) means that human encounters are multistable regarding the images that can emerge out of our encounters with others. These inferences are made based upon constitutive poetic resonances. Thus, depending on one's background and exposure to various arguments and histories, including the various "bubbles" (Cf. [Sloterdijk, 2011](#)) in which one resides, one will bring with them constitutive resonances that will reveal a particular image of the encounter.

To illustrate this, we conduct a close analysis of an example of a politically polarized and polarizing encounter regarding the size of Trump's inauguration crowd, along with a few other encounters, in order to map out an interactional structure that we believe has been and continues to be reproduced—to great effect (and affect). Our argument is that this oft-repeated interactional structure produces a transcontextual double bind due to differences in constitutive poetic resonances that results in at least two countervailing understandings of what happened. The outcome of these countervailing images is a moment of mutual dysrecognition and a schizophrenic body politic.

5. **Methods and Analysis of Schismogenic Encounters**

The methods employed in our analysis below are discourse analysis in the tradition of interactional sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology ([Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2008](#); [Silverstein, 1998](#)). This approach involves the analysis of talk in particular interactions with the goal being to document the interactional-text(s)-in-context(s) that emerges by considering what happens in, before, and after the interaction itself ([Silverstein, 2011](#)).

The empirical data that we will use to explore these processes are publicly available recordings of encounters between Donald Trump or members of his administration and the media. Through these examples, we point to the patterned structure of these encounters and show how this structure produces political polarization through an affectively charged moment of dysrecognition. Because these data are publicly available on the Internet, we

would encourage readers to access these data on their own to check our analysis. As noted above, we encourage the readers to actively consider their own reactions, affective and otherwise, to our descriptions and analyses of these encounters.

As both of us are on the left side of the political spectrum, we are familiar with the perspectives and contexts of liberals. When the politically polarizing events described below happened, we were immediately able to see them as a liberal would see them (and our social media feeds reinscribed those understandings). In contrast, making sense of the right and conservative constitutive poetic resonances took quite a bit more work. One aid in this regard is the fact that both of us have lived in strongly conservative places for the past fifteen or so years. In interacting with neighbors, co-workers, friends, and even family members, we have developed a basic understanding of both the understandings of these events as well as some of the constitutive poetic resonances circulating among conservatives. Of further assistance for understanding right and conservative positions was the fact that, for the past five years, we have been conducting research on political polarization with both liberal and conservative students and their extended families while also actively engaging with conservative media.

We should also mention here that in these conversations we have been active participants, often seeing only one perspective and arguing, sometimes heatedly, for that perspective. These first-hand experiences have provided us with insight into the animating power of the interactional structure that we describe here. Put slightly differently, as with Favret-Saada's suggestion that you must be bewitched in order to understand witchcraft (Favret-Saada, 1980), the experience of having participated in these kinds of encounters and having felt their animating power has been important for understanding how these encounters accomplish the (bewitching) work that they do (Clifford, 1983; Geertz, 1989). Of course, as noted above, the reader will be engaged in their own seeing of the encounters described below, and surely these will be accompanied by their own (bewitched) affects.

6. Analyses of Politically Polarized and Polarizing Encounters

Here we analyze an encounter and show how it actively produces political polarization. We attend closely to this encounter and the events following it in order to show the transcontextual nature of these encounters and how they produce a double image of the encounter itself that results in a double bind of dysrecognition due to the different constitutive poetic resonances of the encounter's participants and observers. But first, before considering our focal case, we briefly consider a different encounter to illustrate the general structure of these politically polarized and polarizing encounters.

6.1. *The Politically Polarizing Nature of These Encounters: Megyn Kelly and Donald Trump (6 August 2015)*

This event happened during one of the Republican primary debates in the lead up to the 2016 election in which then-FoxNews reporter Megyn Kelly asks then-candidate Donald Trump the following question:

"Mr. Trump, one of the things people love about you is you speak your mind and you don't use a politician's filter. However, that is not without its downsides; in particular, when it comes to women. You've called women you don't like, fat pigs, dogs, slob, and disgusting animals. Your Twitter account—"

Audible laughter can be heard from the audience as Kelly says "pigs, dogs," and "disgusting animals." Before Kelly can continue, Trump interrupts, holding one finger in the air as if to be precise and says, "Only Rosie O'Donnell." The audience erupts in raucous laughter—accompanied by cheering, clapping, and whistling—that lasts for a full six seconds.

Kelly presses ahead, stating that this issue was “well beyond Rosie O’Donnell,” to which Trump concedes, “Yes, I’m sure it was” (CBS News, 2015). Kelly continues:

“Your Twitter account has several disparaging comments about women’s looks. You once told a contestant on *Celebrity Apprentice* it would be a pretty picture to see her on her knees. Does that sound to you like the temperament of a man we should elect as president? And how will you answer the charge from Hillary Clinton who is likely to be the democratic nominee, that you are part of the war on women?”

Trump responds:

“I’ve been challenged by so many people and I don’t frankly have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you this country doesn’t have time either. This country is in big trouble; we don’t win anymore. We lose to China, we lose to Mexico—both in trade and at the border—we lose to everybody. And frankly what I say, and oftentimes it’s fun, it’s kidding, we have a good time. And honestly, Megyn, if you don’t like it, I’m sorry. I’ve been very nice to you although I could probably not be based on the way you have treated me but I wouldn’t do that. But you know what? We need strength, we need energy, we need quickness, and we need brain in this country to turn it around. That I can tell you right now”. (CBS News, 2015)

This clip came to the attention of one of us (Thompson) when a linguistic anthropologist had presented it as an example of what they were referring to as Trump’s “metapragmatic gaslighting” of the American public. The idea being proposed was that whenever someone would call Trump out for saying something that was inappropriate, he would respond by basically saying “I never said that,” or more to the metapragmatic point, “I never *meant* that.”.

Yet one thing that did not quite make sense was the reaction of the audience to Kelly’s question. The loud laughter and guffaws that members of the audience made as soon as Kelly got to the point of her question seemed to us to be, at best, despicable and indecent and, at worst, monstrous—evidence of out-and-out misogyny. Since I (Thompson) was teaching a linguistic anthropology class at the time, in the interest of trying to make sense of this laughter I played this example for the class and described the argument about metapragmatic gaslighting. In response to this query, a female student offered that the laughter could be equally understood as a response to *the media gaslighting Trump* by insisting that he is a sexist misogynist. For those who do not believe Trump is a sexist/misogynist and/or who feel that it is not an important issue for a presidential debate, Kelly’s question was further evidence of a mainstream media that was not able to treat Trump fairly and without bias. From this perspective, Kelly’s question was laughable.

Although people on either side will likely find it difficult to see the perspective of the other side, here we simply point to the fact of two directly contradictory images, what we are calling an interactional double bind. For those who already knew Trump to be a sexist misogynist, the image of despicable and monstrous Trump supporters was apparent in that encounter. For those who knew the “mainstream media” to have been unfair and biased against Trump and overly concerned with “political correctness,” Kelly’s question was evidence of a despicable and monstrous mainstream media.

In addition to illustrating the double image nature of these encounters, this example also shows the structure of mutual dysrecognition in such encounters. Each side sees the other as morally reprehensible. Furthermore, this moment of dysrecognition became a poetic resonance for observers. This can be seen in comments on a YouTube video of the Kelly-Trump encounter showing that many people (especially Trump supporters) revisited

it with increasing frequency leading up to the 2024 election ([KTVU FOX 2, 2015](#)). In other words, these encounters of mutual dysrecognition can become part of a schismogenic feedback loop in which the contradictory constitutive poetic resonances that are presupposable for each side are reinforced by the same singular encounter such that this encounter becomes a constitutive poetic resonance for making sense of future political encounters.

6.2. *The Size of Trump's... Inauguration Crowd (21 January 2017)*

We next jump ahead a year and a few months to right after Trump's inauguration in January of 2017 to a consideration of our main example. On the day after his inauguration, a press conference was called to address concerns about the inaugural coverage by the media. White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer expressed frustration with the media regarding how they had presented images and numbers that made Trump's crowd appear smaller than it actually was, calling this "misrepresentation" "shameful and wrong." Although both of us had initially seen images comparing Trump's 2017 inauguration with Obama's 2009 inauguration and showing the latter's much larger audience, as we investigated this issue further, we were surprised to discover that, when taken as originally stated, Spicer's claim is not a demonstrable lie.

During this press conference, Spicer made the following statement about the size of Trump's inauguration crowd:

"This is the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe". ([CBS News, 2017](#))

This statement became the basis for a media narrative asserting that Spicer lied. To this point, some media outlets only reported the quote up to Spicer's "period," leaving off the statement that further specifies the remit of the claim "in person and around the globe" and stating unequivocally that this was a falsehood based on the obvious deficiency of Trump's in-person crowd (e.g., [Swaine, 2018](#)). Here we should mention that some of Spicer's initial numbers about the in-person crowd were factually incorrect, but he corrected these in a follow-up briefing a few days later (more on this below). Importantly, these wrongly reported numbers received less media attention than Spicer's claim that this was the largest audience ever, a claim that in liberal media feeds was widely circulated as a claim about the in-person audience. This could be seen in Facebook posts at the time (that appeared in Thompson's Facebook feed) that showed images from the top of the Washington Monument of Trump's 2017 inauguration alongside the same image of Obama's 2009 inauguration. These images demonstrably showed that there were many more people on the Washington Mall for Obama's election than for Trump's. This same presumption of falsity has been circulated by journalism scholars who have written on the subject and unequivocally refer to Spicer's claim as a "lie" ([Carpini, 2018](#); [Murguía, 2019](#)).

In a follow-up meeting a few days later, after a mea culpe for presenting numbers that were wrong, Spicer doubled down on his initial statement:

"I have a right to say if you add up the network streaming numbers, Facebook, YouTube, all of the various live streaming that we have information on so far, I don't think there's any question it was the largest watched inauguration, ever". ([CBS News, 2017](#))

Among the few media outlets that evaluated Spicer's original argument that this was the largest inauguration crowd "both in person and around the globe," FactCheck.org concluded that "On that point, Spicer *may* be correct" ([Robertson & Farley, 2017](#)). They further noted that livestreaming had become much easier in the years between 2009 and 2017 (thus enabling many more people to watch) and at that time it was difficult to get good estimates of how many people livestreamed the inauguration. Politico drew a similar conclusion, noting that the claim was "plausible," while stating that "it is essentially

impossible to know whether enough people watched Trump's inauguration online to overtake Obama's in 2009" (Weprin, 2017). Nonetheless, Spicer's statement had been widely circulated in liberal circles as a bald-faced lie about the in-person audience.

Here again we have two radically different images of the encounter itself. On the one (shall we say left?) hand are those who believe that Spicer's repeated insistence that Trump's inauguration crowd (typically understood as the "in-person audience") was larger than Obama's was a lie. From this perspective, Spicer's statements were evidence of the Trump administration's willingness to ignore the facts, particularly when President Trump's ego was involved. On the other hand, there are those who believe that this was an example of a media hell-bent on destroying President Trump—also regardless of the facts. Each side's perspective on the encounter creates a moment of dysrecognition for those on the other side: Trump's supporters are seen as megalomaniacal liars, and the mainstream media are seen as liars who disregard the facts.

Further evidence of the nature and consequences of the double image of this encounter can be seen in two subsequent encounters. The first is between Kellyann Conway and NBC's Chuck Todd and the second is between Trump himself and ABC's John Muir. Both point to the robustness of these double images that result in mutual dysrecognition. The two following examples also help to illustrate how it is that these mass-mediated encounters can become consequential for others who are not directly participating in these encounters. Two points are salient here, one about metacommunication and the nature of the relationship between the media and the Trump administration and the other helps to explain Trump's supporters' strong affective identification with him.

Regarding the first, in each of these examples, Trump and the Trump administration engaged in a metacommunicative strategy that, like Bateson's octopuses, thematizes the nature of the relationship. In these cases, Trump and his administration suggest that the media are not trustworthy conversational partners. Recall that with Kelly, Trump noted "I've been very nice to you although I could probably not be based on the way you have treated me, but I wouldn't do that," or recall Spicer's calling the media's coverage "shameful and wrong." This metacommunicational thematization of the antagonistic nature of the press' relationship to the Trump Administration was an ongoing motif of the Trump administration's encounters with the press.

This can be seen in an interview the day after Spicer's initial press briefing between NBC's Chuck Todd and Kellyanne Conway, then Trump's Senior Counselor to the President. This is a fascinating and highly polarizing encounter in its own right since it is the baptismal moment of the now infamous phrase "alternative facts." For our purposes, though, what is important about this encounter is that Conway repeatedly points to the media's bias against the Trump Administration (NBC News, 2017). Moreover, this encounter results in Todd producing audible evidence of that very bias.

Regarding this thematizing of the antagonistic nature of their relationship, when Todd asks Conway why the press secretary was sent out for his very first briefing to "utter a provable falsehood," Conway responds, "Chuck, I mean if we're going to keep referring to our press secretary in those types of terms I think that *we're going to have to rethink our relationship here*" (emphasis added). She then mentions a "falsehood" that the press had reported the day prior that suggested that President Trump had removed the bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. from the Oval Office (which turned out to be untrue), itself another constitutive poetic resonance for many Trump supporters for whom this demonstrated the media's antagonism to Trump (Gibbs, 2017; Miller, 2017).

A few minutes later in the interview, Todd can be heard audibly laughing at Conway when she, somewhat hesitantly, suggests that Spicer simply was using "alternative facts." Then a few minutes later when she notes that "there is no way to really quantify crowds,"

Todd can again be again heard audibly laughing at Conway. This time Conway calls attention to Todd's laughter saying "you can laugh at me all you want but... the way that you just laughed at me is actually symbolic of the way, very representative of the way we're treated by the press. I'll just ignore it, I'm bigger than that, I'm a kind and gracious person." Here Conway thematizes the biased nature of their relationship.

For those who have previously seen the constitutive poetic resonances of a press that has a liberal anti-Trump bias (a fact which is a common theme in most conservative media outlets), it is easy to see this encounter as yet another example of liberal media bias against Trump and, by extension, conservatives themselves. On the other hand, those who are convinced that the Trump administration is full of egomaniacs and liars would find it easy to see this as an example of the Trump administration's obfuscation and duplicity in the interests of "bigly" self-aggrandizement.

Taken together, these contradictory images illustrate the mutual dysrecognition produced in this encounter. Whereas Spicer, Conway, and the Trump administration are portrayed by Todd and the media as laughably ignorant and inattentive to the facts (as noted by Todd's comment "alternative facts are not facts"), those who accept the anti-Trump bias of the media would note that Todd is engaged in his own (laughable) biases and ignorance and inattention to the "facts." In other words, the doubled image of the encounter produces a moment of mutual dysrecognition in which each side sees and is seen by the other as highly problematic, perhaps even monstrous, in near-mirror image of each other.

A similarly structured encounter occurred a few days later in an interview of President Trump by ABC News reporter David Muir that was held at the White House. This example further illustrates the double image nature and the ongoing thematization of the relationship between the media and the Trump administration. This example also suggests a second way that these encounters are consequential for non-participants to the encounter, namely as a means of creating a strong affective identification between Trump and his followers. As we will see, the double-imaged nature of these encounters and the resulting mutual dysrecognition are necessary ingredients to this identification.

After asking the president about his decision to go to the CIA a few days earlier to talk about the size of his crowd—implying that Trump was being prideful and selfish by doing so—Muir then asks President Trump a very similar question to the one that Chuck Todd asked of Kellyanne Conway, "Does that [sending Spicer out in the first White House press briefing to talk about inaugural crowd size] send a message that that's more important than some of the very pressing issues...?"

Trump responds:

"Part of my whole victory was that the men and women of this country who have been forgotten *will never be forgotten again*. Part of that is when they try and *demean me unfairly*, because we had a massive crowd of people. We had a crowd—I looked over that sea of people and I said to myself, 'Wow.' And I've seen crowds before. Big, big crowds. That was some crowd. When I looked at the numbers that happened to come in *from all of the various sources*, we had the biggest audience in the history of inaugural speeches. I said the men and women that I was talking to who came out and voted *will never be forgotten again*. Therefore I won't allow you or other people like you *to demean that crowd and to demean the people* that came to Washington D.C. from faraway places because they like me. But more importantly they like what I'm saying". (ABC News, 2017, emphasis added)

There are a few items of note in Trump's response. First, to the earlier point, when describing his inaugural crowd size as the largest, he is clear that it is "from all of the

various sources.” Later in this same interview when Trump and Muir walk in front of a picture of the inauguration, Trump again notes how big the audience was while again qualifying his statement, “including television and everything else”.

Second, and more importantly, President Trump deftly shifts from “demean me unfairly” to “demean that crowd and demean the people” as if to suggest that this is the same action. This implies a metonymic relation between Trump himself and his supporters, “the people” (Cf. [Mazzarella, 2019](#)). Instead of this being about Trump’s outsized ego, as Muir seems to be suggesting, seemingly unbeknownst to Muir, Trump turns Muir’s criticism of Trump into a criticism, even erasure, of Trump’s supporters. As with Spicer and Conway, Trump reminds the audience that these attempts to diminish the size of his crowd are actually attempts to diminish the people in that crowd.

Anecdotal evidence of this metonymic relationship can be found in the words of an early Trump supporter from Colorado, interviewed by Peter Hessler of *The New Yorker*, who said “I’ve never been this emotionally invested in a political leader in my life. . . . The more they hate him, the more I want him to succeed. Because what they hate about him is what they hate about me” ([Hessler, 2017](#)). This suggests that when Trump supporters see Trump being wrongly (to them) dysrecognized by the media, they can relate since they have often had the same experience themselves in their conversations with neighbors, friends, and acquaintances.

Summing up, on the one hand those on the political left who saw the images comparing Trump’s and Obama’s first inaugurations or who had determined that Trump is an egomaniac might have, as was hinted at by Todd’s and Muir’s lines of questioning, seen this as a situation of a self-interested and self-aggrandizing President who can’t see past the size of his inauguration crowd. On the other hand, those who were supporters of Trump and who believed the media to have an anti-conservative bias would have likely seen this as an instance of the press once again belittling and demeaning both Trump and Trump supporters like themselves. Here, the moment of mutual dysrecognition takes on another dimension since, as was hinted at by the quote from the Colorado man, it is not merely that Trump is being demeaned, it is his supporters who are being demeaned by members of the media diminishing the size of his crowds.

We next consider a further example that illustrates how this act of demeaning functioned as an important engine of the Trump movement.

6.3. *Les Deplorables* (9 & 16 September 2016)

In the heat of the 2016 election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, while addressing a group of donors known as LGBT for Hillary, Clinton said the following:

“I know there are only 60 days left to make our case—and don’t get complacent, don’t see the latest outrageous, offensive, inappropriate comment and think well he’s done this time. We are living in a volatile political environment. *You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right?* The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it. And unfortunately there are people like that. And he has lifted them up. He has given voice to their websites that used to only have 11,000 people—now 11 million. He tweets and retweets their offensive hateful mean-spirited rhetoric. Now, some of those folks—they are irredeemable, but thankfully they are not America”. ([Reilly, 2016](#), emphasis added)

Here Clinton engages in a characterization of Trump’s supporters as “deplorables” and as “irredeemable,” an obvious moment of *dysrecognition* as we have defined it. In this utterance, Clinton put to words what many conservatives and Trump supporters felt the mainstream media and the political left felt about them, namely, that they were deplorable.

The animating force of this moment of dysrecognition can be seen in a Trump rally that was held just one week after Clinton's deplorables comment. There, after a number of preliminary speakers and with much anticipation from the audience, the song "Do You Hear the People Sing?" from the musical *Les Misérables* played in the background as then candidate Trump took the stage. The screen displayed an image after the fashion of a *Les Misérables* poster of a barricade only with a Trump flag and an American flag mounted on top. Above the barricade was the phrase "*Les Deplorables*" (notably without the accent on the first é in "deplorables" as would be standard in French).

As candidate Trump slowly walked onto the stage, the crowd burst into exuberant chants and cheers. Trump smiled and clapped in apparent appreciation, briefly standing back and stage left as their cheers and chants continue to build. The audience spontaneously erupted in synchronized chants of "U - S - A!" and "Trump, Trump, Trump." Once the audience's cheers began to subside, Trump walked up to the microphone center stage, briefly hesitated to ensure the crowd was quiet, and said, slowly and deliberately: "Welcome. . . to all. . . of you. . . DEPLORABLES." As he said this, he gestured with hands outstretched in front of him and then spreads them to either side as if christening the audience with the term "deplorables." The crowd went wild ([Bloomberg Television, 2016](#)).

In this moment, Trump seizes on this critical and, for our purposes, exemplary moment of dysrecognition, turning this experience of recognition as "deplorable" and "irredeemable" into an experience for "all" of his supporters to ironically enjoy. And enjoy it they did. "Deplorables" merchandise began popping up in online and in-person sites with t-shirts and mugs saying things like "Proud Member of the Basket of Deplorables" and "Deplorables Unite for Trump"—items can still be found for sale online to this day. Additionally, a sold out "DeploraBall" inaugural event was held at the National Press Club to celebrate the first inauguration of President Trump.

These examples illustrate how this moment of dysrecognition unleashed affectively charged infra-political energies. This must have been especially true for anyone who had the experience of themselves being seen as deplorable. Despite Clinton's clarification that she was only referring to a small subset of Trump supporters, Trump, in his christening gesture, extended this moment of dysrecognition to all of his supporters.

Whereas in the Muir interview, Trump implicitly makes the case that Trump's supporters stand for Trump such that to demean him is to demean them, in this case the reverse is true: Trump stands (up) for his supporters such that to demean them is to demean him. Trump's grand entrance playfully keeps the powerful affective identification of these infra-political energies alive. These same infra-political energies are reanimated each time he is demeaned or belittled or recognized as deplorable, that is, racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.

6.4. Further Examples of "Deplorable" Politics

Beyond the aforementioned examples, there have been many more moments where Trump engaged in talk that was taken by others to be deplorable in precisely these ways. To mention just a few such events, consider the following (incomplete) list: describing immigrants as criminals, drug dealers, and rapists ([Lee, 2015](#)); the Access Hollywood recordings ([NBC News, 2016](#)); Trump's claims that Obama was not born in the United States ([CNN, 2011](#)); Trump stating that undocumented immigrants are "poisoning the blood of our country" ([Tapper, 2023](#)); Trump's proposed "Muslim ban" ([Wang, 2017](#)); Trump's statement following the killing of Heather Hyer in Charlottesville at a protest of a White supremacist rally saying there were "very fine people" on both sides ([CNBC, 2017](#)); Trump calling Haiti and African nations "shit-hole countries" ([Fram & Lemire, 2018](#)); Trump referring to the coronavirus as "Kung flu" or "the Chinese virus" ([LA Times, 2020](#)); Trump's White House Press Secretary refusing to disavow White supremacy, insisting that

he had already done so many times ([The White House, 2020](#)); Trump questioning whether Vice President Kamala Harris is Black ([PBS NewsHour, 2024](#)); Trump stating (without any evidence) that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio are eating peoples' pets ([Thomas & Wendling, 2024](#)); or Trump stating that the crash between a plane and a helicopter over the Potomac happened because of the FAA's 'woke DEI' policies ([Licon, 2025](#)).

From the very beginning, those on the political left (and some on the right) were convinced each time candidate Trump said something shocking or offensive, "deplorable" in Clinton's terms, that it would be the end of Trump's political career (recall Clinton's injunction to her supporters not to be complacent and think, "well he's done this time"). And yet, as Clinton warned, none of these "deplorable" moments ended his political career. Instead, each time he made such statements, his supporters seemed to rally behind him.

As with the laughter at the Megyn Kelly question mentioned earlier, the joy of Trump supporters in each of these moments, as well as in the "Les Deplorables" moment, is difficult for those on the left to understand. The most common explanation by the political left has been the approach that Clinton took, namely, to suggest that Trump's supporters are racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. Although this certainly may be part of the problem in a country where racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. are still built into the fabric of social life, this hardly seems a sufficient explanation for the surprisingly widespread tolerance and support of Trump's statements by Trump voters which included a not-insignificant number of African American and Latino voters. Importantly, here again is a feedback loop that only makes the problem worse by enacting the very moment of dysrecognition that produces political polarization. What is needed is some way to break out of this feedback loop of mutual dysrecognition.

Those on the political right would point to something quite different as the reason for the joyfulness in the Trump rally. It is the same reason given by the student regarding the laughter at Megyn Kelly's question to Trump. The problem, from this perspective, is the liberal bias of the mainstream media. As one woman, also interviewed in the article by Hessler, noted: "For those of us who believe that the media has been corrupt for a lot of years, it's [supporting Trump is] a way of poking at the jellyfish. ... Just to make them mad" ([Hessler, 2017](#)). This offers a much different explanation for the uptake of Trump's comments by his supporters while also explaining the jouissance of the audience when they were christened by Trump as "deplorables"—a deeply ironic inhabitation that highlights the hypocrisy of those who wield the term.

This further helps to explain a statement that many on the political have left found baffling. In a "not-officially-off-record" interview with Robert Kuttner, Steve Bannon, then Trump's Chief Strategist and Senior Counsel, said, "[t]he Democrats. . . the longer they talk about identity politics, I got them. I want them to talk about racism every day" ([Henderson, 2017](#)). Considering the inflammatory statements that Trump makes around race and ethnicity, this might seem to most liberals to be a bad idea. And yet if one considers the outcomes of these schismogenic encounters of dysrecognition that we have described above, one can begin to see how this strategy makes sense. These encounters in which Trump is being called racist, sexist, or homophobic animate his supporters' opposition to the liberal bias of the media and to liberal's dysrecognition of Trump supporters. These moments furnish the infra-political energies needed to help sustain a powerful political movement such as the one that has fueled Trump's rise to power. Every time Trump makes a statement that is interpreted by the mainstream media as, for example, racist, sexist, or homophobic, Trump reminds his supporters that he is a "deplorable," just like them.

7. Conclusions: Schismogenic Encounters of Mutual Dysrecognition

With these various examples at hand, we can see the overarching and commonly repeating structure of encounters that produce and reproduce political polarization in the United States today. These encounters typically start with an ambiguous communication (e.g., Spicer's "period" in the middle of his sentence or McEnany's simultaneous assertion/refusal of Trump's non-supremacist views). Then, depending on the context of participants, different constitutive poetic resonances contribute to the realization of two, typically contradictory, images of what just happened. These differing images of what just happened produce a moment of mutual dysrecognition in which each side feels as if they have been recognized in a belittling or demeaning manner, with these dysrecognitions often appearing as near mirror images of each other. These different images of what just happened can also contain very different metacommunicative messages about the nature of the relationship between the participants. Both the dysrecognitions and the messages about the nature of the relationship can then serve as constitutive poetic resonances for future encounters in a "remember when X did Y" kind of way, furthering the feedback loop of polarization. As they accumulate over time, these encounters produce a schizophrenic body politic in which each side can observe the very same encounter and see something entirely different from the other.

One of our hopes in writing this article has been to help readers better understand the structure of these transcontextual schismogenic encounters so that they might be able to move beyond the "pain and maladjustment" that has typified these encounters. As mentioned at the outset, what is particularly troubling in U.S. politics today is that many of the *restraining* factors that would have helped create a stable system are no longer functioning. As we have shown through a number of examples, at the small-scale level of interactions, political encounters themselves frequently devolve into moments of misunderstanding and mutual dysrecognition that actively produce further political schismogenesis. Thus, in addition to the fact that the restraining mechanisms are no longer functioning, the proliferation of encounters like the ones we have documented here suggests that schismogenesis is also accelerating. To put it in Bateson's terms, the steam engine of political polarization is barreling forward with increasing speed and with no governor to control it—a runaway train.

This Batesonian framing of the problem of political polarization in the United States today raises a few simple questions. Will political encounters continue to be characterized by transcontextual double binds and mutual dysrecognition thus leaving Americans unable to communicate across political lines? Or, will Americans be able to deuterio-learn to, like Bateson's dolphin mentioned above, thus creating new and novel responses to encounters of mutual dysrecognition in ways that can produce a different outcome? It is worth noting here that the current state of transcontextual double binds and schismogenesis seems to be (financially) beneficial to both of the existing political parties and to the media even though they are antithetical to a healthy democracy.

The Batesonian hope of deuterio-learning, like Bateson's aforementioned alcoholic, would require an understanding of the transcontextual nature of these encounters so that we can avoid continuing to engage in interactional habits that constantly (re)constitute the negative feedback loops of the double bind. This deuterio-learning requires stepping back from these everyday encounters and understanding how the structure of these encounters produces misunderstanding, mutual dysrecognition, and demonization.

The task here is to come up with ways of responding to the transcontextual double binds of mutual dysrecognition in a manner that once again stably incorporates into the U.S. body politic the very contradictions that are supposed to be foundational to our democracy. As Bateson noted of schismogenic processes, failure to engage in this kind of

deutero-learning will likely lead to further hostility and, eventually, the total breakdown of the system.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.A.T.; data curation, G.A.T. and S.P.; writing—original draft preparation, G.A.T. and S.P.; writing—review and editing, G.A.T. and S.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was supported by a grant from the Rust–Shallit Fund that is administered by the Anthropology Department at Brigham Young University.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data used in this article are readily accessible on the Internet.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Zach Chase, Robert Gelles, Daniel Groll, Jordan Haug, Judith Irvine, Charles Nuckolls, and Clayton Van Woerkom for feedback on previous iterations of this article. Greg Wurm and Sylvie Genest were particularly helpful in pointing to Bateson’s double bind and feedback loops, respectively. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a festschrift panel for Charles Nuckolls at the Society for Psychological Anthropology’s Biennial Meeting, a seminar funded by Ethical Inquiry at Carleton College, and in the online “Talking Politics” series sponsored by the University of Chicago, University of Colorado Boulder, and Brown University.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- ABC News. (2017, January 25). Transcript: ABC News anchor David Muir interviews president trump. *ABC News*. Available online: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/transcript-abc-news-anchor-david-muir-interviews-president/story?id=45047602> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- Bateson, G. (1935). Culture contact and schismogenesis. *Man*, 35, 178–183.
- Bateson, G. (1970). Bali: The value system of a steady state. In J. Belo (Ed.), *Traditional Balinese culture* (pp. 384–402). Columbia University Press.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. Chandler Publishing Company.
- Bloomberg Television. (2016, September 16). *Deplorable entrance: Trump takes stage to ‘Les Mis’ song* [Video]. YouTube. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEiTKloMgBg> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Carpini, M. X. D. (2018). Alternative facts: Donald Trump and the emergence of a new U.S. media regime. In P. D. Dahlgren, & Z. Papacharissi (Eds.), *Trump and the media* (pp. 17–24). MIT Press.
- CBS News. (2015, August 7). Transcript of the 2015 GOP debate (9 p.m.). *CBS News*.
- CBS News. (2017, January 24). White House briefing by Sean Spicer—Full transcript, January 23, 2017. *CBS News*.
- Chase, Z. J., & Thompson, G. A. (2025). Thick perception. *Ethos*, 53(1), e70000. [CrossRef]
- Clifford, J. (1983). On ethnographic authority. *Representations*, 2(1), 118–146. [CrossRef]
- CNBC. (2017, August 15). *President Donald Trump on Charlottesville: You had very fine people, on both sides* [Video]. YouTube. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmaZR8E12bs> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- CNN. (2011, April 8). *Donald Trump on Obama: “It’s not a birth certificate”* [Video]. YouTube. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBT78Q0rbSo> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Favret-Saada, J. (1980). *Deadly words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fleming, L., & Lempert, M. (2014). Poetics and performativity. In N. J. Enfield, P. Kockelman, & J. Sidnell (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of linguistic anthropology* (pp. 485–515). Cambridge University Press.
- Flood, B., & Cuebas-Fantauzzi, A. (2024, October 14). Hunter Biden ‘laptop from hell’ scandal turns 4: How media, intelligence community misled Americans. *Fox News*. Available online: <https://www.foxnews.com/media/hunter-biden-laptop-from-hell-scandal-turns-4-how-media-intelligence-community-mislead-americans> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Fram, A., & Lemire, J. (2018, January 11). *Trump: Why allow immigrants from ‘shithole countries’?* The Associated Press.
- Geertz, C. (1989). *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Stanford University Press.

- Gibbs, N. (2017, January 24). A note to our readers. *Time*.
- Goodwin, M. (2025, May 3). The press hates Trump more than it loves the truth—And the hyperbolic fear-mongering we’ve seen is proof. *New York Post*. Available online: <https://nypost.com/2025/05/03/opinion/michael-goodwin-the-left-wing-media-creates-false-allegations-with-trump-back-in-the-oval-office/> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Guddemi, P. (2020). *Gregory Bateson on relational communication: From octopuses to nations*. Springer International Publishing.
- Gumperz, J. J., & Cook-Gumperz, J. (2008). Studying language, culture, and society: Sociolinguistics or linguistic anthropology? *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(4), 532–545. [CrossRef]
- Hemmer, N. (2014, January 17). The conservative war on liberal media has a long history. *The Atlantic*.
- Henderson, N. (2017, August 18). What Trump understands about white identity politics. CNN. Available online: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/17/politics/trump-white-identity-politics/index.html> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Hessler, P. (2017, July 24). Follow the leader. *The New Yorker*.
- Karadimitriou, A., von Krogh, T., Ruggiero, C., Biancalana, C., & Bomba, M. (2022). Investigative journalism and the watchdog role of news media: Between acute challenges and exceptional counterbalances. In J. Trappel, & T. Tomaz (Eds.), *Success and failure in news media performance: Comparative analysis in the media for Democracy Monitor 2021* (pp. 101–125). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
- KTVU FOX 2 San Francisco. (2015, August 6). *Donald Trump: Women* [Video]. YouTube. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f83CrDM0K4> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Lane, J. B. (2021). Getting the story right: Reader critiques of ‘The last days of Joe McCarthy’. *American Journalism*, 38(4), 471–492. [CrossRef]
- Lee, M. Y. H. (2015, July 8). Donald Trump’s false comments connecting Mexican immigrants and crime. *The Washington Post*.
- Lepselter, S. (2016). *The resonance of unseen things: Poetics, power, captivity, and UFOs in the American uncanny*. University of Michigan Press.
- Licon, A. G. (2025, January 30). *Trump was challenged after blaming DEI for the DC plane crash. Here’s what he said*. The Associated Press.
- Los Angeles Times. (2020, June 20). *Trump calls the coronavirus the ‘kung flu’* [Video]. YouTube. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN2tgtcKGck> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Markell, P. (2003). Tragic recognition: Action and identity in *Antigone* and Aristotle. *Political Theory*, 31(1), 6–38. [CrossRef]
- Markell, P. (2009). *Bound by recognition*. Princeton University Press.
- Mazzarella, W. (2017). *The mana of mass society*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mazzarella, W. (2019). Brand(ish)ing the name, or, why is Trump so enjoyable. In W. Mazzarella, E. Martin, & S. Santner (Eds.), *Sovereignty, Inc.: Three inquiries in politics and enjoyment* (pp. 113–160). University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, Z. (2017, January 20). Donald Trump signed order to prepare for repeal of Obamacare. *Time*.
- Mitchell, A. (2017, May 10). *Democrats, Republicans now split on support for watchdog role*. Pew Research Center. Available online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2017/05/10/democrats-republicans-now-split-on-support-for-watchdog-role/> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Murguía, S. J. (Ed.). (2019). *Trumping truth: Essays on the destructive power of “alternative facts”*. McFarland.
- NBC News. (2016, October 7). *Donald Trump makes lewd remarks about women on video* [Video]. YouTube. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYqKx1GuZGg> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- NBC News. (2017, January 17). *Kellyanne Conway: “Press Secretary Sean Spicer gave ‘alternative facts’”* [Video]. YouTube. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSrEEDQgFc8> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- PBS NewsHour. (2024, July 31). *WATCH: Trump questions Kamala Harris’ identity, saying ‘is she Black or Indian?’* [Video]. YouTube. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BURiu_OvWdU (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Reilly, K. (2016, September 10). Hillary Clinton transcript: ‘Basket of deplorables’ comment. *Time*. Available online: <https://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Revers, M. (2023). Performative polarization: The interactional and cultural drivers of political antagonism. *Cultural Sociology*, 19(1), 207–228. [CrossRef]
- Robertson, L., & Farley, R. (2017, January 24). The facts on crowd size. *FactCheck.org*. Available online: <https://www.factcheck.org/2017/01/the-facts-on-crowd-size/> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Silverstein, M. (1998). The improvisational performance of culture in real-time discursive practice. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Creativity in performance* (pp. 265–312). Ablex.
- Silverstein, M. (2011). The indeterminacy of contextualization: When is enough enough? In A. Auer, & S. Pfänder (Eds.), *The contextualization of language* (pp. 55–76). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Sloterdijk, P. (2011). *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology* (W. Hoban, Trans.). Semiotext(e).
- Swaine, J. (2018, September 6). Trump inauguration crowd photos were edited after he intervened. *The Guardian*. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/06/donald-trump-inauguration-crowd-size-photos-edited> (accessed on 7 July 2025).

- Taddonio, P. (2016, September 22). WATCH: Inside the night President Obama took on Donald Trump. *PBS Frontline*. Available online: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/watch-inside-the-night-president-obama-took-on-donald-trump/> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Tapper, J. (2023, December 18). Trump: Immigrants are ‘poisoning the blood of our country’. *CNN Politics*. Available online: <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2023/12/18/lead-trump-immigration-language.cnn> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Taylor, C. (1994). The politics of recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism: Expanded paperback edition* (pp. 25–74). Princeton University Press. [CrossRef]
- The White House. (2020). *Press briefings archives*. Available online: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/press-briefing-press-secretary-kayleigh-mcenany-100120/> (accessed on 7 July 2025).
- Thomas, M., & Wendling, M. (2024, September 15). Trump repeats baseless claim about Haitian immigrants eating pets. *BBC News*.
- Thompson, G. A., & Chase, Z. J. (2024). The resonance of seen things: Seeing the Virgin Mary in the concrete. *Ethos*, 53(1), e12446. [CrossRef]
- Wang, A. B. (2017, January 29). Trump asked for a ‘Muslim ban,’ Giuliani says—And ordered a commission to do it ‘legally’. *The Washington Post*.
- Weprin, A. (2017, January 23). Was Trump’s inauguration the most-streamed of all time? *Politico*. Available online: <https://www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2017/01/trump-inauguration-streaming-audience-234056> (accessed on 7 July 2025).

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.