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Between Two Worlds: Cultural Bereavement, Intersubjective Memory and the Politics of Identity in the Lebanese American Immigrant Experience

Anastasia Christou 

Middlesex University London, London, UK

Correspondence: Anastasia Christou (a.christou@mdx.ac.uk)

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on oral history interviews conducted in 2025 with Lebanese and Arab American immigrants and their descendants, archived at the Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies (GR0020, NC State University), to develop a cultural-psychological framework for understanding the psychic dimensions of migration without recourse to pathologising categories. Engaging theoretically with concepts of cultural bereavement, cultural humility, generational and intragenerational trauma, identity, intersubjective experience and the non-medicalisation of human suffering, the paper argues that the meaning-making processes of Lebanese and Arab American individuals navigating diaspora constitute a distinctive psychological terrain: one characterised by layered loss, recursive belonging and emotionally dense negotiations of selfhood across time and place. Theoretical engagement with the sociology of diasporic return and nostalgia, Arab American political subjectivity as well as the critique of trauma medicalisation, and the cultural politics of emotion informs the empirical analysis. Through thematic analysis of narrated life histories, the paper identifies three interlocking phenomenological structures: the mourning of a homeland that continues to change in the narrator's absence; the transmission of memory and political consciousness across and within generations; and the formation of hyphenated, palimpsestic identities under conditions of racialisation, cultural erasure and geopolitical anxiety. The paper concludes by proposing an integrative concept: 'diasporic intersubjectivity' as an original contribution to the fields of cultural psychology, interdisciplinary migration studies and the cultural psychology of Arab American experience.

1 | Introduction: Migrant Oral History as Psychological Artefact

Migration is one of the most psychologically demanding transitions a human being can undertake. It involves not merely a change of geographic location but a rupture in the structures of meaning through which a person knows oneself, situates oneself in relation to others and narrates the arc of their life.

For Lebanese and Arab American immigrants in the United States, a community whose presence in North America predates the twentieth century and whose waves of arrival have been shaped by civil war, economic collapse, political violence and geopolitical instability, this rupture carries a particular intensity. The homeland they leave behind is not static; Lebanon continues to undergo convulsions of crisis, meaning that the immigrant's grief for a lost home is compounded by

Note on Terminology: The participants in this study are exclusively of Lebanese origin. While Lebanese Americans form part of the broader Arab American community, this paper employs 'Lebanese American' as the primary designation throughout, reflecting the specific national and cultural heritage of the research participants. The term 'Arab American' appears where the analysis deliberately engages with scholarship or political formations that address the wider pan-ethnic community of which Lebanese Americans are a part. This distinction is maintained in the interest of conceptual precision and fidelity to the sample composition.

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the continuing, witnessed suffering of those who remain. Understanding such experience demands not a clinical vocabulary of disorder and adjustment but a cultural-psychological vocabulary of meaning, mourning and intersubjective selfhood, one assembled, of necessity, from multiple disciplinary traditions.

The empirical foundation of this paper is 13 oral history interviews conducted between June and November 2025 under the auspices of the Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies at North Carolina State University, archived as Collection GR0020. The narrators represent a remarkable diversity of generation, religious affiliation, class, gender, political consciousness and geographical pathway. They include Fred Abraham, a Lebanese American who grew up in Clarksdale, Mississippi, working in his family's grocery store and navigating the racial geography of the Jim Crow South; Susan Assaf, who spent her early infancy, with later sojourns as a child and graduate student, in Lebanon before returning to the United States and making deliberate, reflective choices about which cultural practices to transmit to her own children; Rania Masri, an activist and academic who moved to North Carolina at 14, spent 18 years living in Lebanon, experienced the 2006 war at first hand, and subsequently returned to the United States to care for her ageing parents; Salma Hassanieh, a therapist from a Druze family who immigrated at 18 and built a professional practice dedicated to serving Middle Eastern and North African communities; Mireille Sleiman, a novelist who grew up during the Lebanese Civil War and lived successively in Belgium, the United States, England and China before returning to Lebanon; Melissa Simms, a third-generation Lebanese American reconnecting with her heritage in adulthood; Paul Schervish, a Jesuit priest rooted in the Lebanese-American Maronite Catholic tradition and community life in Detroit; Alaa Jaza, a Beirut-born military veteran and police officer in North Carolina; and others whose accounts contribute to a qualitatively rich archive of human meaning-making across difference.

The paper is situated within the tradition of cultural psychology as defined by Valsiner (2007), Shweder (1990) and Bruner (1990): a discipline committed to the proposition that mind, self and emotion are not universal biological constants but are constituted in and through cultural participation. Within this framework, migration is not simply a stressor to be managed but a profound reorganisation of the cultural scaffolding through which meaning is made. The paper draws on and synthesises theoretical resources from cultural bereavement theory (Eisenbruch 1991), cultural humility scholarship (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998; Hook et al. 2013), intergenerational and intragenerational trauma research (Hirsch 2012; Kellermann 2001; Yehuda and Lehrner 2018), phenomenological accounts of intersubjective selfhood (Merleau-Ponty 1945; Benjamin 1988; Husserl 1931), the diaspora sociology (Christou 2006, 2011; Christou and King 2010, 2015), Arab American studies (Naber 2012; Alsultany 2012; Jamal and Naber 2008), Lebanese diaspora history (Khater 2001), Palestinian refugee ethnography (Allan 2014), critical trauma theory (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Das 2007), and the cultural politics of emotion (Ahmed 2004; Cvetkovich 2012). These theoretical resources are mobilised throughout the empirical analysis rather than presented as a self-contained preliminary

literature review, in keeping with a commitment to letting the oral history material drive the conceptual work.

The paper proceeds in six substantive sections. The initial four sections analyse the three major thematic structures identified in the data: the phenomenology of mourning and cultural bereavement; the intergenerational and intragenerational transmission of memory, trauma and political consciousness; and the formation of hyphenated, palimpsestic identities under conditions of racialisation and geopolitical anxiety. Section 5 develops the integrative concept of 'diasporic intersubjectivity' and Section 6 articulates the paper's original theoretical contributions to the journal's interdisciplinary mission.

2 | Mourning Lebanon: Cultural Bereavement, Embodied Loss and the Homeland That Keeps Changing

2.1 | The Structure of Diasporic Grief

The concept of cultural bereavement, introduced by Eisenbruch (1991) to describe the mourning of uprooted people not for a single lost person but for an entire world of meaning, finds precise empirical instantiation in the oral history data this paper draws on. Unlike clinical grief, which is bounded by social rituals of condolence and recovery, cultural bereavement has no formally recognised object, no sanctioned duration and no institutionalised form of communal witness. Eisenbruch was explicit that cultural bereavement is not a disorder; a point that carries methodological weight for this paper. What Rose (1996) calls the 'psy-complex,' the tendency of modern psychology to translate ordinary human suffering into diagnostic categories, risks rendering politically produced grief into personal pathology, thereby obscuring both its social dimensions and the collective forms of recognition it demands. When Salma Hassanieh speaks of how, even amid pride in her heritage, 'it's not pride, it's just feeling grief because I can't be in Lebanon as much as I want' (Hassanieh, oral history interview, Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, North Carolina State University, 2025, section 'Pride in Lebanese Identity') the compulsive monitoring of news, the helpless grief of watching the country deteriorate, the guilt of safety from a distance, she is not exhibiting symptoms of a disordered attachment style. She is giving an accurate phenomenological account of what it is like to love a country that is being destroyed, from a position of geographic remove that cannot be closed.

What distinguishes Lebanese American cultural bereavement from other diasporic mournings is that the object of grief is not a fixed, stable referent but a place in continuous, often catastrophic transformation. A recurring feature of the GR0020 oral history material is what might be called 'anticipatory-retrospective mourning': the immigrant mourns not only what she has left but what Lebanon is continuing to become in her absence. Christou (2006) analysis of second-generation Greek Americans who return to Greece only to find a country transformed beyond recognition provides a structural parallel that illuminates the Lebanese case. In both instances, the homeland of memory and the homeland of the present are disjoined in ways that produce a grief mainstream psychology has no adequate vocabulary for: the mourning

of a place one has never truly left because one has never stopped imagining it, and that one can never truly return to because it no longer exists as imagined. Drawing on Boym's (2001) distinction between restorative nostalgia which seeks to reconstruct the lost past as if it had never been interrupted, and reflective nostalgia which dwells in the longing itself, accepting its irresolvability we argue that diaspora subjects develop sophisticated emotional relationships to the past that resist simple categorisation (Christou and King 2015). The Lebanese American narrators in GR0020 are, in the majority of cases represented in this sample, practitioners of reflective nostalgia in Boym's sense; though these 13 accounts do not exhaust the diversity of the broader Lebanese American community. While the structural parallel with the Greek diaspora is instructive, the Lebanese case carries a distinctive configuration: the compounding of recurrent catastrophe such as civil war, multiple Israeli incursions, the 2020 port explosion, chronic economic collapse with Lebanon's hyper-confessional political system means that the object of Lebanese diasporic mourning is not simply 'a homeland that has changed' but a homeland whose transformations are perpetually produced by sectarian and geopolitical forces in which diaspora members themselves are implicated. This specificity distinguishes the Lebanese case within the wider comparative field of diasporic nostalgia.

Rania Masri's account offers the most elaborate instance of this structure in the archive. Having spent 18 years living in Lebanon (years during which she taught, engaged in local politics, and experienced the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war) she describes a perpetual negotiation between the Lebanon she had imagined and the Lebanon she inhabited, between the politically active self she had become and the structural constraints that hemmed her in. Her eventual return to the United States was not an abandonment of Lebanon but a further displacement, adding a new layer to what was already a multiply fractured sense of home. Speaking of her relationship to place, she notes the feeling of being 'uprooted' (Masri, oral history interview, Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, North Carolina State University, 2025, section 'Childhood in Bahrain') not once but repeatedly. A formulation that captures the intragenerational dimension of a life punctuated by successive political-traumatic ruptures rather than a single developmental crisis. Fassin and Rechtman's (2009) argument that the medicalisation of war-related suffering systematically depoliticises what are fundamentally political situations is acutely relevant here: Masri's account resists medicalisation at every turn, insisting that her experience of displacement is inseparable from the geopolitical forces of Lebanese sectarianism, American foreign policy, Israeli military action that produced it. Her life is not a case study in adjustment difficulties; it is a biography of political engagement under conditions of ongoing collective trauma, which Das (2007) would recognise as the formation of personhood within and through what she calls 'critical events': historical ruptures that do not merely wound but fundamentally reconfigure the terms in which selfhood and action are possible.

2.2 | The Embodied Archive: Food, Language and Habit-Memory

Cultural bereavement is not only narrated; it is embodied. The oral histories in GR0020 are saturated with sensory particularity: food, language, music, the weight of objects, the smell

of places that functions as what Connerton (1989) calls 'habit-memory': cultural knowledge stored in the body and reproduced through repeated practice. Ahmed's (2004) argument that emotions are not merely inner states but bodily orientations towards the world, directional relationships between the body and its objects that shape what can be perceived, desired and acted upon gives this embodied dimension of cultural bereavement its full psychological weight. The Lebanese American body oriented towards the scent of za'atar, towards the sound of Arabic, towards the specific labour of making kibbeh or sfeeha, is a body that carries Lebanon within its very disposition towards the world. It is a body that knows, in its orientation, what has been lost.

Paul Schervish's account of growing up within the Lebanese American Maronite Catholic community in Detroit is particularly rich in this embodied register. He describes the rhythms of communal food preparation and shared eating as foundational to his sense of cultural identity not supplementary to it. The kitchen, in his account, is simultaneously a site of cultural continuity and of cultural bereavement: it is where Lebanon is preserved in practice, and where its geographic distance is most acutely felt in the very act of preservation. The Maronite liturgy itself, conducted in Syriac and Arabic, functions as what Hirsch (2012) would call a 'site of postmemory': a ritual form that carries within it the traces of experiences and histories that the individual participant may not have personally lived but that constitute the affective horizon of her cultural world. To participate in the Maronite Mass is to be inserted into a historical continuity that extends back, through the Lebanese church, to a Middle Eastern Christianity predating the Arab conquest a form of temporal depth that, as Khater (2001) shows in his history of Lebanese emigration from 1870 to 1920, has been mobilised in diasporic contexts as a resource for both communal cohesion and claims to cultural distinctiveness.

Language is perhaps the most emotionally charged dimension of embodied cultural bereavement in the oral history archive. Arabic, the language of the ancestral homeland, of prayer, of endearment, of argument, occupies a position of profound ambivalence in the lives of Lebanese Americans across generations. For narrators like Alaa Jaza, who arrived in the United States as a young man from Beirut in the early 2010s, Arabic remains the primary language of interiority and intimate relationship; English is a necessary professional acquisition that has not displaced Arabic as the language through which experience is most fully felt. For Melissa Simms, whose grandfather was among the first in her family to emigrate, Arabic was present in the household during her childhood; she recalls hearing it spoken between adults, sensing its emotional register without comprehending its content but was not transmitted to her as a functional language. Its absence is experienced now as a form of disconnection that is at once linguistic, relational and political: to lose a language is not only to lose a medium of communication but to lose access to a dimension of one's own inheritance that cannot be fully recovered through translation. The incompleteness of Arabic transmission across the generations (neither fully retained nor fully relinquished) is one of the most structurally significant expressions of intergenerational cultural bereavement in the participant oral histories, and one that resists any therapeutic or educational intervention that does not attend to its cultural depth.

Fred Abraham's account of growing up in a Lebanese American family in Clarksdale, Mississippi introduces a further complication: the social context in which embodied cultural practices must be performed shapes what those practices can mean and accomplish. Khater's (2001) historical analysis of early Lebanese emigrants' strategies of self-presentation in North American host societies illuminates the Abraham family's situation: Lebanese cultural identity was not simply a private heritage to be maintained within the family but a resource to be deployed, selectively and strategically, in navigating a host culture whose racial hierarchies were both rigid and violent. In the Jim Crow South, the Abraham family's position as Arab Christian merchants occupied a structurally anomalous and dangerous middle ground: they were not Black and therefore not subject to legal segregation, but they were not straightforwardly white in the sense that the local racial hierarchy demanded. Their Lebanesehood was simultaneously a source of cultural pride and a complex racial positioning that required continuous management. The psychological labour this required (the careful calibration of cultural self-presentation across racially charged social encounters) is a form of what Ahmed (2004) calls the 'stickiness' of racial affect: the way in which race attaches to bodies as an affective charge that precedes and outlasts any individual encounter.

3 | Memory, Trauma and Political Consciousness Across and Within Generations

3.1 | Postmemory and the Family as Transmission Site

The family extended, often transnational, organised around religious affiliations and the village of origin rather than the nuclear household is the primary institution through which memory, cultural identity and the affective traces of historical suffering are transmitted in the Lebanese diaspora. Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory: the intense, often overwhelming relationship that the children of traumatised survivors have with experiences they did not personally live through, but which they have grown up with as if they were their own is essential here, though it requires expansion for the Lebanese American context. In Hirsch's account, postmemory is mediated primarily through image and narrative, through the photographs and stories that survivors transmit to their children. In the Lebanese diaspora, postmemory is also mediated through food, music, religious practice, the Arabic language and the persistent affective monitoring of news from Lebanon that structures the emotional rhythms of diaspora households. These practices are not merely supplementary vehicles for memory transmission; they constitute a form of embodied postmemory in which Lebanon is reproduced not only in what is said or shown but in how one moves, what one eats, what one fears and what one considers beautiful.

Melissa Simms's oral history illuminates what postmemory looks and feels like in the third generation. Growing up in Seattle in a large, tight-knit Lebanese American family, she describes gatherings organised around Lebanese food, music and storytelling as the primary environment of her cultural formation: not a set of lessons about Lebanon but an immersive participation in a culture that carried Lebanon within its everyday rhythms. She recalls her grandfather as a figure whose

experience of emigration was present in the household not as explicit narrative but as emotional atmosphere, a quality of attachment to origins that she absorbed before she had any conceptual framework for it. Her adult decision to reconnect more deliberately with her Lebanese heritage (joining an Arab social group, becoming more publicly vocal about her identity, educating American friends about the complexity of Lebanese history and culture) is not a simple recovery of something that was lost but a reflexive reconstitution of a heritage that was always already mediated. This is what I (Christou 2011) identify as 'narrative bricolage': the creative assembling of identity fragments into a provisional but coherent self-understanding, a process that is simultaneously personal and collective, individual and historically embedded.

Susan Assaf's account adds the reflexive and volitional dimension that Simms's retrospective account gestures towards but cannot fully articulate: Assaf describes the deliberate choices she made about which Lebanese cultural practices to transmit to her own children and which to let go; choices that required her to acknowledge that the Lebanon her children would inherit was necessarily a translated, mediated version of the Lebanon she had grown up in, and that something was always lost in translation. This is a form of cultural labour that is both creative and grief-laden, involving not only the active reproduction of cultural practices but the mourning of the dimensions of cultural experience that cannot be reproduced: the specific textures of social life in the ancestral village, the tacit knowledge embedded in a particular community's way of doing things, the embodied feel of a place that no photograph or recipe can fully convey. Connerton's (1989) insight that social memory is transmitted not only through cognitive representations but through bodily practices and performative habits is borne out in Assaf's account: what she is trying to transmit to her children is not merely information about Lebanon but a disposition towards Lebanese culture, an orientation that is partly embodied, partly affective and only partly available for deliberate, reflective choice. (Assaf, oral history interview, Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, North Carolina State University, 2025, section 'Career and Motherhood').

3.2 | Intragenerational Trauma and the Politically Narrated Life

Less theorised than intergenerational transmission, but no less significant for the GR0020 corpus, is what this paper terms 'intragenerational trauma': the repetitive re-wounding of a single generation through successive political-historical crises that interrupt any possibility of recovery, consolidation, or psychic integration. The concept differs from intergenerational trauma in that it concerns not the transmission of suffering across generations but the accumulation of multiple formative ruptures within a single biographical arc. Rania Masri's narrated life is the most fully developed instance in the corpus. Born in Lebanon, raised in Bahrain within a politically conscious and analytically engaged family, transplanted to North Carolina as a teenager, she arrived in the United States already formed by a political consciousness that was then 'radicalised' (her own term) by her encounter with racism in the American South. She describes arriving at 14 to a place where being Lebanese 'is

looked down upon... if you're Arab,' and recalls finding notes in her locker reading 'Foreigner, go home' after she challenged a teacher's framing of Pearl Harbor in class (Masri, oral history interview, Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, North Carolina State University, 2025, section 'Moving to North Carolina'): not merely the ordinary disorientation of cultural difference but active hostility directed at her Arab identity in a context saturated by the political anxieties of the early 1990s and the First Gulf War. Her response was not adaptation in the assimilationist sense but deepening: the racism she encountered confirmed and sharpened her existing understanding of how imperial power operates across racial and national boundaries, producing what Naber (2012) calls 'imperial feelings': the acutely embodied experience of living in a country whose foreign policy is prosecuted against one's homeland and community of origin.

Masri's subsequent development as an anti-war organiser in the United States, her decision to move to Lebanon for 18 years to engage in teaching and local political work, her experience of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war while resident in Lebanon, and her eventual return to the United States to care for her ageing parents constitute what might be called a 'politically narrated life': a biographical account in which personal events are consistently situated within broader geopolitical contexts, and in which the self is understood as inherently political. A sense of self formed by and in response to historical forces rather than as a pre-social individual who subsequently encounters the political world. This form of selfhood is not a pathological fusion of the personal and the political; it is a culturally specific and politically coherent mode of being, common in communities whose collective fate has been shaped by forces beyond their individual control. Kellermann's (2001) work on the transmission of Holocaust trauma across generations, and Yehuda and Lehrner's (2018) research on the epigenetic dimensions of that transmission, provide one theoretical context for understanding how historical violence shapes the subjectivities of subsequent generations. Masri's case requires a framework that can also account for the ways in which individuals actively engage with, rather than merely bearing, the historical forces that have formed them. Das's (2007) conception of how critical events reconfigure the conditions of action and personhood, rather than simply wounding the persons who live through them, is more adequate to Masri's account than any model of trauma transmission that figures the survivor as primarily passive.

Alaa Jaza's oral history offers a strikingly different articulation of intragenerational experience. Born in Beirut in 1991 (the year after the formal end of the Lebanese Civil War), he grew up in a Lebanon defined by postwar reconstruction, residual militia influence, and persistent political instability. He recalls photographs of himself as a child wearing a miniature Lebanese army uniform, images that simultaneously evoke the innocence of play and the normalisation of militarised national identity in the postwar landscape. His emigration to the United States in the early 2010s, followed by service in the US Army and deployment to Iraq and Jordan, traces a trajectory shaped at every point by the intersection of Lebanese and American geopolitical histories: he who grew up under the shadow of one military conflict found himself, as a young immigrant seeking belonging in a new country, recruited into

another. The moment of diasporic loneliness he articulates is among the most telling in the corpus: returning from his military deployment, he recalls, 'everybody's hugging, and guess what? There was nobody there for me'. This observation captures, in a single image, the particular social isolation of the immigrant soldier: the person for whom military service is simultaneously an act of belonging and a reminder of outsiderhood, whose sacrifice is publicly honoured in general but who is personally unclaimed by the communities of recognition that military service is supposed to provide. Our (Christou and King 2015) analysis of how return migrants experience the doubleness of belonging (at home nowhere fully, at home partially in multiple places) finds a specific and painful instantiation in Jaza's account.

3.3 | Diasporic Witnessing and the Affective Labour of Distance

A structural feature of the GR0020 corpus that cuts across individual biographical differences is what this contribution calls 'diasporic witnessing': the experience of being geographically distant from events that feel existentially and affectively close. For Lebanese Americans, this takes a particularly acute form in relation to Lebanon's recurrent catastrophes. The 2020 Beirut port explosion which killed more than two hundred people, injured thousands, and destroyed large parts of the city functions across multiple narratives in the corpus as what Erikson (1976) called a 'collective trauma': an event that damages the social fabric of a community in ways that exceed the sum of individual injuries, and that is experienced as traumatic not only by those directly affected but by those who are connected to the affected community through ties of kinship, cultural identification and shared history. For the Lebanese American narrators of GR0020, watching the explosion footage on screens thousands of miles from Beirut, unable to reach family members by telephone in the hours after the blast, the experience was one of helpless witness: the grief of proximity without the possibility of presence.

Cvetkovich's (2012) concept of 'public feelings', the affective dimensions of political life that are experienced privately but are collectively produced and collectively significant, provides a useful frame for understanding the emotional labour of diasporic witnessing. The compulsive monitoring of news from Lebanon, the WhatsApp groups in which diaspora members share and discuss developments in real time, the fundraising drives and solidarity marches that diaspora communities organise in response to Lebanese crises: these are not merely private emotional responses but collective affective practices through which diasporic communities maintain their relationship to the homeland and to each other across geographical separation. Salma Hassanieh, who describes her evolving relationship with her Lebanese Druze identity and the pain of witnessing from afar, models this double movement: she is simultaneously managing her own grief and professional distress and serving as a point of affective connection for the MENA community members she works with as a therapist. Holding space for their grief about Lebanon while managing their own and bringing to this work the kind of cultural humility that Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) identify as the irreducible ethical foundation of cross-cultural clinical practice.

Mireille Sleiman's engagement with diasporic witnessing takes an aesthetic and literary form. Her novel, *The Blue Mountain*, which she discusses in her oral history as an exploration of her family's experiences of war, migration and identity across multiple countries and generations, is an act of the kind of 'reflective nostalgia' that we (Christou and King 2015) distinguish from 'restorative nostalgia': it does not seek to recover or reconstruct the Lebanon that was, but to transmute the experience of loss and displacement into a form that can be shared, examined and inhabited by others. Sleiman describes the experience of growing up during the Lebanese Civil War as one of simultaneous normalisation and terror; a childhood in which violence was ordinary background rather than exceptional foreground, and in which the imagination developed specific strategies for living alongside catastrophe. Her subsequent residences in Belgium, the United States, England and China have produced what she describes, in a formulation of remarkable precision, as a 'sand bottle' identity: layers of different-coloured sand, each representing a country of residence, that have been poured on top of one another and cannot be separated without destroying the whole. This image is philosophically a figure for what this contribution theorises as the 'palimpsestic self': a self that carries within it the traces of multiple inscriptions, each of which modifies but does not erase the others, and whose integrity consists not in the priority of any single layer but in the particular configuration that all the layers together produce.

4 | Identity Formation in the Diaspora: Hyphenation, Racialisation and the Palimpsestic Self

4.1 | The Hyphen as Psychological Space

To be Lebanese American is to inhabit a hyphen. The hyphen—that small typographical mark between two national-cultural identifiers—is a figure for an entire psychological space: the space of in-betweenness, of double belonging, of the negotiation between identities that are both genuinely one's own and in potential tension with each other. Cultural psychology has developed a substantial literature on the dynamics of bicultural identity (Berry 1997; LaFromboise et al. 1993), but the oral histories in GR0020 suggest that the hyphenated experience of Lebanese Americans resists any linear model of assimilation, integration, separation or marginalisation. These narrators are not in fixed positions on a continuum between Lebanese and American; they are in continuous, dynamic movement across a complex psychological landscape shaped by generation, class, region of origin, religious community, gender and political commitment, a landscape whose topology changes in response to events both personal and historical.

Valsiner's (2007) account of identity as a dynamic, dialogical process of positioning within and against cultural discourses is more adequate to this complexity than any static model of bicultural balance. For Lebanese American narrators, identity formation is inseparable from the politics of naming: to be Arab in the United States after September 11, 2001, is to be positioned by a dominant cultural discourse as suspect, threatening or in need of explanation; to be Lebanese is sometimes to claim a specifically Christian or Druze heritage that refuses

the homogenising category of 'Arab'; to be Lebanese American is to negotiate the hyphen in ways that vary dramatically by generation, class, region of origin and political commitment. Alsultany's (2012) concept of 'simplified complex representations', the dominant culture's tendency to acknowledge minority complexity while still fundamentally misreading it captures the affective structure of many encounters between Lebanese American narrators and their American interlocutors: the experience of being seen, partially, but not really known, and of carrying the burden of that partial recognition in every public encounter.

Melissa Simms's account of her adult decision to reconnect with her Lebanese heritage offers one of the more reflexively articulate examples of identity work as an ongoing project rather than a fixed achievement. Growing up in Seattle as a third-generation Lebanese American, she had internalised her Lebanese heritage through immersive family participation (food, music, storytelling, the texture of family gatherings) without explicitly or politically claiming it. As an adult, in the wake of the 2020 Beirut explosion and the broader political moment shaped by the Black Lives Matter movement's reshaping of American conversations about structural violence and racial identity, she describes making a deliberate decision to claim her Lebanese American identity more assertively: joining an Arab social group, speaking publicly about her background, educating friends about the complexity of Lebanese history and the suffering of the Lebanese American community. This is identity work in the fullest sense: simultaneously personal and political, individual and collective, backward-looking towards inherited history and forward-looking towards the kind of recognition and solidarity she wishes to cultivate. My (Christou 2011) category of 'narrative bricolage' captures the creative, constructive dimension of this process; what Simms is doing is not simply recovering a pre-existing heritage but actively assembling, from available materials, a Lebanese American selfhood adequate to her present situation and her political commitments.

4.2 | Racialisation, Imperial Feelings and the Politics of Visibility

It is important to note that Lebanese American identity is not only shaped by homeland politics but is constitutively formed through American social and political transformations. The post-9/11 securitisation of Arab and Muslim identities, the Black Lives Matter movement's reshaping of conversations about structural racism, and the 2020 Beirut explosion's galvanising effect on diaspora political consciousness have all inflected the ways participants in this study understand and articulate their identities. Masri's account of her 'radicalisation' in response to racism in North Carolina is inseparable from the specific historical moment of the First Gulf War and the political culture of the American South in the early 1990s. Simms's decision to claim her Lebanese American identity more assertively was precipitated partly by the political opening created by Black Lives Matter. These are not incidental biographical details; they demonstrate that the United States is not merely a receiving context but an active co-constitutive force in the formation of Lebanese American subjectivity.

Arab Americans occupy a peculiar and often painful position within the racial politics of the United States. Classified by the US Census Bureau as White, they are regularly subjected to forms of discrimination, surveillance and cultural stereotyping that are inconsistent with the privileges legally and socially associated with whiteness. Jamal and Naber (2008) document the systematic ways in which Arab Americans have been rendered simultaneously invisible within a racial framework that recognises primarily Black-white dynamics, and hypervisible as objects of post-9/11 surveillance, hate crime and political vilification. Tehranian (2009) extends this analysis to show how Arab Americans exist as what he calls an 'invisible minority': a community large enough and culturally distinctive enough to constitute a genuine minority group, but whose formal racial classification as white renders their minority experiences structurally incoherent within the dominant frameworks of American race politics.

Naber's (2012) concept of 'imperial feelings' gives the psychological dimension of this structural invisibility its most precise theoretical formulation. To be Arab American is to feel, in one's own body and daily social experience, the consequences of a US foreign policy that is simultaneously one's own government's policy and a policy directed against one's homeland, community of origin and cultural identification. This is not merely an abstract political contradiction but a psychologically specific form of what might be called 'diasporic doubleness': a mode of being in which one's American and Arab identities are not merely hyphenated but placed in structural antagonism by the foreign policy choices of the state whose citizenship one holds. Rania Masri's political trajectory from teenage immigrant encountering racism in North Carolina to anti-war organiser to Lebanon-based political actor to returning caregiver, is a fully elaborated instance of how a Lebanese American subject might navigate this antagonism. That is, by refusing the separation of the personal from the political, and by making the antagonism itself the subject of political action.

Fred Abraham's account of growing up in the Jim Crow South provides a historically earlier and geographically specific version of the same structural dynamic in a context where its racial stakes were not merely affective but legally enforced. The Abraham family's position as Arab Christian merchants in a deeply segregated Mississippi town placed them in a racial middle ground that required continuous, sophisticated negotiation: too Arab to be straightforwardly white in the cultural sense, not Black in the legal sense that would have subjected them to formal segregation, they navigated their interactions with non-Lebanese Mississippians through a combination of economic pragmatism, communal solidarity and cultural self-presentation that drew on their Lebanese heritage as both a resource and a complication. (Abraham, oral history interview, Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, North Carolina State University, 2025, section 'Growing up in the South') Khater's (2001) analysis of how early Lebanese emigrants negotiated racial and class positioning in North American host societies helps contextualise Abraham's account: the Lebanon these emigrants left was itself a society deeply marked by class, sectarian and regional divisions and the strategies they developed for navigating American racial politics drew on, and were constrained by, the cultural resources they brought with them.

4.3 | Religious Community and the Infrastructure of Diasporic Belonging

For many narrators in GR0020, a religious community provides the most durable institutional infrastructure of diasporic belonging. Paul Schervish's account of the Maronite Catholic church as a site of cultural continuity, identity formation and intergenerational connection illustrates how religious practice functions in the diaspora not merely as spiritual sustenance but as cultural anchoring: the church is the place where Arabic is spoken, where Lebanese food is shared, where the village and family networks of origin are reproduced in new geographic conditions. The Maronite liturgy, conducted in Syriac and Arabic, is a linguistic and musical archive of a Middle Eastern Christianity that predates both the Arab conquest and the modern nation-state; to participate in it is to be inserted into a historical continuity that extends far beyond the individual or the family, and that provides a form of temporal depth unavailable in most American religious contexts.

Salma Hassanieh's account of her Druze heritage and its influence on her professional and personal identity introduces a further dimension of religious complexity. The Druze, a religious community practising a form of esoteric monotheism, concentrated historically in Lebanon, Syria, and what is now Israel, occupy a distinctive and often precarious position within Lebanon's confessional system and within the Lebanese American diaspora, which is predominantly Christian. Hassanieh describes her Druze background not as a fixed, determining essence but as a formative dimension of herself that continues to inflect her professional practice in ways she is actively and reflexively engaged in understanding. Her dual vocation as a therapist working with MENA communities and as a member of a religious minority navigating American culture exemplifies a form of cultural humility that is not merely methodological but existential: the willingness, born of one's own experience of double marginalisation, to hold open the question of how different communities experience the world rather than assimilating their experience to one's own. This is precisely the orientation that Hook et al. (2013) identify as the practical correlate of cultural humility in clinical settings, and that Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) first articulated as an alternative to the cultural competence model's pretension to stable, transferable knowledge about cultural groups.

5 | Diasporic Intersubjectivity: Towards an Integrative Framework

5.1 | Beyond the Bounded Individual: Relational Selfhood in the Diaspora

Cultural psychology has long resisted the individualism of mainstream Western psychology. The tendency to locate psychological phenomena within the bounded, autonomous individual rather than in the relational, cultural field in which individuals are always already embedded (Valsiner 2007; Markus and Kitayama 1991). The oral histories in GR0020 push this critique further by revealing the extent to which immigrant selfhood is constituted not only in relation to the immediate cultural environment but in relation to a homeland that is geographically

absent but psychologically present; to ancestors who are dead but affectively alive; to a community dispersed across multiple continents but experienced as intimate and close; and to a geopolitical history that continues to unfold, generating new ruptures and new demands for affective and political response. The self of the Lebanese American narrator is, in a precise sense, intersubjective: constituted through ongoing, dynamic relations with others who are living and dead, present and absent, familiar and strange.

The concept of intersubjectivity, as developed in phenomenological philosophy by Husserl (1931) and Merleau-Ponty (1945) for whom it names the constitutively relational character of consciousness, the fact that experience is never purely private but always already oriented towards and shaped by other consciousnesses; and in psychoanalytic theory by Benjamin (1988) and Winnicott (1971) for whom it names the relational matrix within and through which the self first emerges and continues to be constituted, provides the foundational philosophical resources for the concept developed here. Allan's (2014) ethnographic work on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon's Shatila camp offers a powerful empirical complement: her demonstration that Palestinian refugees maintain vivid, emotionally dense relationships to a homeland they have never seen; a homeland constituted not through direct experience but through the accumulated stories, photographs, land keys and ritual practices of a community in exile shows that intersubjective selfhood is not limited to relationships with others one has personally encountered but extends to relations with places, histories and communities that are known through cultural mediation. The absent homeland is not merely a memory; it is an intersubjective relationship, constituted and maintained through social practice.

The concept of 'diasporic intersubjectivity', as proposed here, refers to the specific form of relational selfhood that characterises the experience of people who are simultaneously embedded in a host culture and oriented towards an origin culture; for whom the self is constituted through ongoing, dynamic, emotionally dense relations with multiple cultural others across multiple temporal and spatial registers; and for whom this relational constitution is shaped by structures of geopolitical power that position the host culture and the origin culture in relations of potential or actual antagonism. Diasporic intersubjectivity is not simply biculturalism or hybridity in the standard theoretical sense, not merely the coexistence of two cultural identities within a single person. The claim is more radical: that the very structure of the diasporic self is intersubjective; that it cannot be understood, and cannot understand itself, except in and through its relations with others who are positioned differently within the fields of culture, history and power.

5.2 | Four Dimensions of Diasporic Intersubjectivity

Four dimensions of diasporic intersubjectivity emerge with particular clarity from the GR0020 corpus. The first is *temporal extension*. The diasporic self carries within itself relations with others across time: with ancestors whose choices determined the conditions of one's own existence; with a homeland whose present situation is shaped by historical forces one has

lived through in part and inherited in part; with descendants to whom one hopes to transmit something worth keeping. Melissa Simms's relationship to her grandfather's immigration story, Paul Schervish's relationship to the Maronite tradition's historical depth, Mireille Sleiman's relationship to her family's Civil War experience. These are all forms of temporally extended intersubjectivity in which the past is not simply remembered but actively constitutes the present self. Hirsch's (2012) postmemory is one name for this temporal extension; diasporic intersubjectivity proposes that postmemory is not merely a relationship to inherited images and narratives but a constitutive dimension of the diasporic self's structure.

The second dimension is *spatial distribution*. The diasporic self maintains affective and relational ties to places it may visit only rarely or never: ancestral villages in the Chouf mountains or the Bekaa Valley; the neighbourhoods of Beirut that exist in family stories and photographs; the landscapes of a Lebanon that is simultaneously real and imagined, present through its effects and absent through its geographic remove. Hassanieh's account of how 'my connection when I land in Lebanon is so strong' (Hassanieh, oral history interview, Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, North Carolina State University, 2025, section 'Pride in Lebanese Identity'), even as she describes grief at being unable to visit as often as she would like, describes precisely this: a self that is relationally embedded in a place it can reach only through screens and telephone calls and the reports of those who have recently been there. Our (Christou and King 2015) concept of 'diasporic longing' captures the affective dimension of this spatial distribution: the sustained orientation towards an absent homeland that is neither simple nostalgia nor uncomplicated grief, but a more complex affective structure in which longing, pride, guilt and political engagement are interwoven.

The third dimension is *political charge*. Diasporic intersubjectivity is constituted within and against structures of power, for example, racialisation, immigration law, geopolitical violence, colonial and imperial history that shape the conditions of possibility for diasporic selfhood in ways that are neither chosen nor easily escaped. Masri's political consciousness, Jaza's double military service, Abraham's navigation of the Jim Crow South, these are not merely biographical facts but psychological structures: ways in which the self has been formed by and in response to political power. Naber's (2012) insistence that Arab American subjectivity is constituted at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalisation (racial, religious and geopolitical) grounds this dimension empirically; diasporic intersubjectivity as a theoretical concept is designed to hold political power within the frame of psychological analysis rather than relegating it to the context within which psychological life merely unfolds.

The fourth dimension is *emotional density*. Diasporic intersubjectivity involves the sustained maintenance of a complex emotional landscape: grief for the homeland, pride in heritage, guilt about safety, anger about injustice, joy in cultural practice, anxiety about belonging, love for those left behind that does not resolve into stable equilibrium but is continually renegotiated in response to new events, new encounters and new life transitions. This emotional complexity is not a symptom of failed adjustment. It is the affective signature of a life that is genuinely

multiple, genuinely historical and genuinely engaged with a world that is itself multiple and historical. Ahmed's (2004) argument that emotions are collective and political, that they do not merely accompany but actively constitute social relations supports the insistence that the emotional density of diasporic intersubjectivity is not a private psychological phenomenon but a mode of engagement with shared political realities.

5.3 | Non-Medicalisation and the Ethics of Cultural-Psychological Understanding

The framework of diasporic intersubjectivity carries with it a firm commitment to the non-medicalisation of immigrant experience. This is not a naive denial of the reality of psychological suffering: the narrators in GR0020 describe experiences of disorientation, grief, loneliness, anger and anxiety that are entirely real and that sometimes require professional support. But it is an insistence, grounded in Eisenbruch's (1991) original formulation of cultural bereavement and in Fassin and Rechtman's (2009) critical genealogy of the trauma concept, that such suffering is not primarily a function of individual psychopathology but of the conditions under which diasporic life is lived. A person who grieves her homeland is not disordered; she is responding appropriately to a genuine loss. A person who carries within herself the weight of her community's historical suffering is not exhibiting the sequelae of a psychological disorder; she is living in a historically specific way that demands not therapeutic intervention but political recognition and cultural understanding.

Hassanieh's professional trajectory from Lebanese Druze immigrant to therapist specialising in working with MENA communities exemplifies the form of culturally grounded practice that the framework of diasporic intersubjectivity calls for. Her work, as she describes it, is not the application of a culturally neutral therapeutic technique to a culturally specific population but the development of a form of practice that is genuinely responsive to the cultural particularity of the people she works with that understands, for instance, that what looks like resistance to therapeutic disclosure may be a culturally appropriate orientation towards privacy and communal problem-solving rather than a psychological defence mechanism; that understands the political dimensions of the distress her clients bring to sessions; and that brings to this work a form of reflexive self-awareness about her own cultural positioning that Hook et al. (2013) identify as the practical correlate of cultural humility. Her dual positionality as both a member of the MENA community and a trained clinical professional is not a conflict to be managed but a resource to be cultivated, an instance of the kind of lived intersubjectivity that the present framework proposes as a theoretical category.

6 | Original Theoretical Contributions: Cultural Psychology, Interdisciplinarity and the Study of Diasporic Life

This paper's concluding section is devoted not to a summary of findings but to an explicit articulation of the original theoretical contributions the paper makes to interdisciplinary scholarship on migration, identity and belonging, and to the mission of the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*. These

contributions are organised under four headings: the concept of diasporic intersubjectivity as a theoretical innovation; the methodological case for oral history in cultural-psychological inquiry; the interdisciplinary synthesis that the paper enacts; and the specific contributions it makes to the cultural psychology of Arab American communities.

6.1 | Diasporic Intersubjectivity: A Theoretical Innovation

The concept of 'diasporic intersubjectivity' is the paper's primary theoretical contribution. While intersubjectivity has a distinguished pedigree in phenomenological philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, its application to the specific situation of diasporic subjects (people who are simultaneously embedded in multiple cultural fields, across multiple temporal and spatial registers, within and against structures of geopolitical power) is original. Previous accounts of diasporic identity in cultural psychology have tended to oscillate between two poles: the cultural competence model, which focuses on the acquisition of skills for navigating between cultures and the hybridity model, which celebrates the creative productivity of cultural mixing without adequately accounting for the conditions of loss, mourning and political constraint under which that mixing occurs. Diasporic intersubjectivity goes beyond both by insisting that the diasporic self is neither a skill-bearer nor a hybrid organism but a relational subject whose very constitution is intersubjective. In this sense, identities are formed through and as a network of relations with others who are positioned differently within the fields of culture, memory and power.

This theoretical move has immediate implications for how cultural psychology conceptualises the self. If the self is constitutively intersubjective, not merely influenced by others but constituted through them, then the appropriate unit of analysis is not the individual but the relational field. The oral histories in the GR0020 archive demonstrate this with clarity: what it means to be Rania Masri, Mireille Sleiman or Alaa Jaza cannot be understood by examining any of these persons in isolation from the communities, histories and geopolitical forces through which they have been formed. Crucially, this is not a claim that individuals are reducible to their social determinants: the creative, resistant, sometimes transformative agency visible in each of these narratives is also part of what the framework must account for. Diasporic intersubjectivity proposes that agency and structure are not opposed but are co-constituted in the relational field of diasporic life.

The concept also makes an original contribution to the theorisation of nostalgia in cultural psychology. By locating nostalgia within a framework of intersubjective selfhood by showing, following my earlier work (Christou and King 2015) and Boym (2001), that reflective nostalgia is not merely an affective orientation towards the past but a mode of being in the present that is constitutively relational, the paper shifts the psychological analysis of nostalgia from an intrapsychic to an intersubjective register. One is nostalgic not for a place in isolation but for a self that existed in relation to that place, in relation to others who shared it, in relation to a world of meaning and practice that is now lost or transformed. This relational account of

nostalgia opens new avenues for cultural-psychological research into the emotional dimensions of diaspora that go beyond the standard dichotomies of adjustment versus maladjustment, assimilation versus separation.

6.2 | Oral History as Cultural-Psychological Method

The paper's methodological contribution is its sustained demonstration of the distinctive value of oral history as a method for cultural-psychological inquiry. The 13 interviews in GR0020 constitute a corpus of unusual richness not because they are representative in a statistical sense, but because they are revelatory in a phenomenological sense: they show, with a depth and complexity that survey or experimental methods cannot achieve, what it is actually like to live as a Lebanese American, to carry within oneself the weight of Lebanon's historical suffering while building a life in a country that is simultaneously one's home and a source of the geopolitical forces that have devastated the homeland. The distinctive epistemic value of such material lies not in its generalisability but in its phenomenological depth: these 13 accounts do not represent Lebanese Americans as a statistical population, and no such claim is made here. What they provide is a set of richly narrated windows into structures of diasporic experience attested across the diaspora studies literature, even as the specific configurations are particular to each narrator. Future research with larger or more demographically diverse samples will be needed to assess the distribution of these patterns more broadly.

The paper advocates for a form of qualitative cultural psychology that takes narrative seriously as both data and method that attends to the way people organise their accounts of their lives, to the metaphors and images they choose, to the silences and hesitations in their narration, to the way they position themselves in relation to the communities and histories they invoke. Sleiman's 'sand bottle,' Masri's sense of being 'uprooted' repeatedly across a single lifetime, Jaza's poignant account of returning from deployment to find 'nobody there for me' these are not mere illustrations of pre-formed theoretical points; they are the primary evidence for a psychology concerned with meaning rather than measurement. This methodological commitment, informed by Bruner's (1990) narrative psychology and by Eastmond's (2007) argument for narrative methods in forced migration research, represents a contribution to the methodological self-understanding of cultural psychology that is consonant with the journal's longstanding commitment to interpretive and qualitative approaches.

6.3 | Interdisciplinary Synthesis

A distinctive feature of this paper is its systematic integration of frameworks from cultural psychology, phenomenological philosophy, qualitative migration sociology (my own work), Arab American studies (Naber, Alsultany), Lebanese diaspora history (Khater), Palestinian refugee ethnography (Allan), critical trauma theory (Fassin & Rechtman, Das), the cultural politics of emotion (Ahmed, Cvetkovich) and the study of postmemory and intergenerational transmission (Hirsch). This interdisciplinary

synthesis is not merely additive; not a gathering of additional citations from adjacent fields but transformative: each framework is modified by its encounter with the others. Cultural psychology's account of the self is enriched and complicated by diaspora sociology's attention to the structural conditions of migration and by Arab American studies' insistence on the political dimensions of identity. My sociological account of diasporic return and nostalgia is deepened by cultural psychology's attention to the phenomenological and intersubjective dimensions of experience that sociological frameworks often bracket. Critical trauma theory's insistence on the political intelligibility of war-related suffering is made psychologically specific through cultural psychology's attention to the meaning-making processes through which individuals and communities respond to historical violence. The analytical result of the concept of 'diasporic intersubjectivity' is genuinely greater than the sum of its disciplinary parts.

6.4 | Contributions to the Cultural Psychology of Arab American Experience

The paper makes a specific contribution to the cultural psychology of Arab American communities, a population that has received considerable scholarly attention in American Studies, sociology and political science but remains relatively underrepresented in the mainstream cultural psychology literature. By bringing the oral history archive of the Khayrallah Center into dialogue with the theoretical resources of cultural psychology, the paper demonstrates both the richness of the Arab American experience as a site of cultural-psychological inquiry and the need for culturally specific frameworks that can account for the particular forms of racialisation, political consciousness, religious diversity and transnational connection that characterise Lebanese and Arab American life.

The paper's insistence on the non-medicalisation of Lebanese and Arab American suffering is itself a political intervention in the cultural psychology of immigration, and one of its most distinctive ethical commitments. Against a tendency to pathologise the responses of communities subject to racism, geopolitical violence and cultural invisibility, the paper insists on the cultural intelligibility and political significance of those responses. The grief, anger, pride and political consciousness narrated in GR0020 are not symptoms to be managed but forms of sense-making to be understood. A cultural psychology that begins from this stance of recognition and respect is not only more theoretically accurate, but also more adequate to the complexity of the phenomena it studies and more ethically adequate to the persons who have shared their stories.

7 | Conclusion

Every oral history carries within it not only what was said but what was not said: the silences, the hesitations, the topics approached and then retreated from, the experiences that resist narration because they are too painful, too private or too politically risky to give voice to. The oral histories in GR0020 are no exception. They are rich and generous accounts, but they are also selective; they are narrated performances of a self that is

always more than what can be spoken. This remainder, the unspeakable and the unsaid, is itself a psychological fact of the first importance. It points to the existence of dimensions of diasporic experience that have not yet found their forms of expression, that may require new forms of cultural practice, new modes of communal gathering, new aesthetic and political languages before they can be articulated. Cultural psychology, at its best, attends to these silences with the same seriousness with which it attends to speech, recognising that what cannot yet be said is often what most urgently needs to be understood.

The concept of 'diasporic intersubjectivity' proposed here is offered as a framework adequate to the generosity of the GR0020 narrators, one that insists on the relational, temporal, political and emotional complexity of their lives; that refuses the reduction of that complexity to diagnostic categories or assimilationist narratives; that takes seriously the interdisciplinary resources required to understand experience that exceeds any single disciplinary framework; and that attends to the particular challenge of lives lived, with intelligence and feeling and political commitment, between two worlds.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies (2025) at <https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/findingsaids/gr0020>, reference number (Collection GR0020).

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