Though the specific timeline of the multicultural history of Los Angeles might be debated, Los Angeles’s role as a center for people of varying races and ethnicities is rarely called into question. Aside from contributing to traditional cultural products like food, music, and fashion, a variety of ethnic and racial groups—including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Jewish Americans—have had an active role in the producing such popular cultural products as television and film in Los Angeles, sometimes to the delight, but sometimes to the dismay of people from their very communities. For more recent immigrant communities, like the Armenian Americans in Los Angeles, their anxiety regarding cultural representation may manifest itself through ethnic self-policing. Armenian Americans have lived in Los Angeles in significant numbers since the 1960s and have had a more obscured ethnic representation by way of literature, television, and film than other ethnic groups. Recently, however, with the rise in popularity of the television reality show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, one example of Armenian American life has become very visible. In this paper, I will examine the ways in which *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* has become the new cultural text that is produced, distributed, and consumed by an American public who view the Kardashians as representatives of Armenian Americans from Los Angeles and how such a representation has become a source of friction for Armenian Los Angelenos.

It’s estimated that over eight million Armenian people live in diaspora, with one million of those people living in Los Angeles, making Los Angeles home to the largest Armenian community in America. Much has been written about the Armenian Genocide of 1915. However, a detailed explication of a visual text that is not based strictly on memoirs is much more infrequent. Different ethnic groups such as African Americans,
Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans of Los Angeles have produced contemporary literature that is reflective of the specific experience a minority ethnic group has in a multicultural city. A majority of the literary cultural production that comes from the Armenian diaspora comes in the form of memoirs and oral histories that stemmed from the displacement of Armenians from Armenia. Some Armenian Americans have asked, “Where are our contemporary tales that represent the Armenian experience in America?” Recently, Armenian Americans like author William Saroyan, former California governor George Deukmejian, former all-time winningest college basketball coach Jerry Tarkanian, or even the infamous physician Jack Kevorkian have been eclipsed by reality television’s Kardashians. Armenians who live in Los Angeles (particularly the Armenian population that has grown dramatically over the past three decades in the San Fernando Valley) are concerned about the pervasive cultural representatives they find in visual texts and on television, specifically in Keeping Up with the Kardashians, because of what the community sees as negative ethnic stereotyping.

When writing about texts regarding the Armenian American experience and how it’s represented to a consumer culture, it’s important to expand upon what Armenian American literature looks like today. Many books written about Armenians in America are memoirs, with a few earning critical acclaim for their superb level of writing. Peter Balakian published Black Dog of Fate, which became a New York Times bestseller, and more recently, The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America’s Response. In 2012, Chris Bohjalian’s The Sandcastle Girls, a fictional account of a young aid worker who helps Armenians in Syria at the time of the Genocide, was also a New York Times bestseller. All of these texts utilized archival documents or eyewitness accounts as part of their central source material, as do a myriad of other Armenian American authors. And while The Sandcastle Girls is told from a present-day American narrator’s perspective, the narrative tone for most of the other works about the Genocide is intentionally meant to preserve a historically accurate voice. The Armenian Genocide has been central to the community’s cultural memory and identity, and the fear of forgetting this history is woven through Armenian American non-fiction and fiction alike.
With this threat constantly on the horizon, the focus in these narratives has remained the Genocide.

The fear of forgetting the Armenian Genocide is engrained in the minds of the Armenian diasporic community from a very young age. Turkey’s denial of the events of 1915 has withstood the recognition of several European countries, including France, which acknowledge the events as genocide. In his 2012 book *The Holocaust and the Armenian Case in Comparative Perspective*, Turkish historian Yucel Guclu contends that Armenians have long associated the Genocide, or “case” as he refers to it, with the Holocaust as a vilifying rhetorical strategy unfounded in fact and devised to demonize the Ottoman Turks.

The term “genocide” was coined in the 20th century, and has a special meaning. It is defined not only by the characteristic of mass death, but by the characteristic of mass death caused intentionally by the policies and actions of a state, with the expressed purpose of wiping out a national, ethnographic, religious or other group. There are only a small handful of mass deaths in all of history that have been deemed, by consensus, a genocide. The tragedy of the Armenians is not one of those events.

Gulcu goes on to say that the Armenian case, though not genocide, was a tragedy suffered not only by Armenians, but also by Greeks and Assyrians in his attempt to assuage the reader and gloss over the institutional, systematic deaths of Christian peoples that was well-documented and photographed by human rights ambassadors. When colonizers attempt to distract and defend their actions as legitimate wartime casualties, the colonized are left to suffer the losses of life and land, and are tasked with passing down their traumatic narrative to future generations in order to preserve what remains of their ethnic identity. The Armenian population has been continually marginalized by sustained Turkish colonial practices. Bedrosian, in her introduction to her collection of critical articles about Armenian American writers titled *The Magical Pine Ring: Armenian American Literature*, notes,

To this day, the Turk casts a dense shadow over the Armenian psyche and the collective memory. Coming to terms with how and why is beyond
the scope of this study, but as a figure in the story Armenians tell about themselves, the Turk might fill every circle in their *Inferno*, and some not yet charted. (17)

The shadow that Bedrosian acknowledges is one that invades the identity of most Armenian Americans. There are still living survivors of the Genocide, and many Armenians who immigrated to America are either directly related to a survivor or are caring for a survivor presently.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth details the connection between trauma and history.

The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life. . . . The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives—as I show concretely in my readings of Freud, Duras, and Lacan—often emerges, indeed, as an urgent question; Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. . . . it is the inextricability of the story of one’s life from the story of a death, an impossible and necessary double telling, that constitutes their historical witness. (16)

The crisis of death and life following the Armenian Genocide shapes the Armenian American identity and deals with the trauma by preserving what remains of cultural organizations. This shared trauma guarantees, to some extent, unity in the community and prevents the loss of cultural identity. The community cannot bear the death of their identity, and the resulting homogenous identity of the hard-working, burdened immigrant often does not allow heterogeneity in cultural representation.

Much like the descendants of Holocaust survivors, Armenian Americans not only lost their political and intellectual leaders, friends, and family, they also lost their money,
property, and—most significantly for the diasporic community—their homeland. The shadow cast on the Armenian American psyche is not insignificant. Turkey absorbed Western Armenia, and unlike Germany, has made no reparations. Levon Abrahamian, in *Armenian Identity in a Changing World,* contrasts the Jewish and Armenian diasporas.

The Jews lost their homeland after losing statehood, while the Armenians only lost statehood, and even this was in a sense substituted by the institute of religion. Only the Armenians of Western Armenia lost their homeland like the Jews, but here too there is a considerable difference between the two types of diaspora. All this brings us back to the problem of the homeland, which seems to be the crucial characteristic of the Armenian diaspora. (326)

Indeed, the loss of homeland for Armenians, regardless of whether they descended from either the East or West, was catastrophic. Fractured families relied on the church and schools to preserve the sense of homeland when they settled in countries like Lebanon, Syria, Greece, and France. And so the personal stories that detail how Turkey subjected them to such trauma are told often and are filled with familial pathos, as the shadow looms over Armenian American psyches, homes and schools.

There are close to a dozen Armenian private schools scattered in and around Los Angeles (concentrated in the San Fernando Valley) that serve the cultural and sometimes religious needs of the Armenian American community. In addition to learning the Armenian language, children from 1st through 12th grade take Armenian History, and for some parish schools, religion courses. The mission statement for A.G.B.U. MDS, one of the larger Armenian schools in the Los Angeles area with a potential capacity of 950 students, reflects this desire to maintain a coherent ethnic identity. The school expects students to

Become individuals aware of their Armenian cultural heritage who: have acquired a basic knowledge of Armenian language, literature, and history; have developed an appreciation for Armenian culture and their identity;
are prepared to contribute to Armenian community life and their historic homeland. (A.G.B.U.)

Children from ages three to eighteen are taught Armenian history and the importance of remembering the horrifying, traumatic experiences of their grandparents and great-grandparents in an effort to shape their social conscience. A vast majority of Armenian American children from Los Angeles attend one of these schools at some point in their lives, either as full-time students or as students who attend these private schools on weekends for cultural edification. Kindergarteners are taught songs chronicling the pain and suffering of their ancestors. Middle schoolers are assigned books like Adam Bagdassarian’s *Forgotten Fire* by and David Kheridian’s *The Road From Home: A True Story of Courage, Survival and Hope* that discuss first-hand accounts of the human rights violations that occurred at the turn of the twentieth century such as torture, rape, and murder. High schoolers watch films like the 1982 full length feature *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, which tells the story of an Armenian village that fought against Turkish insurgents. Nearly all read at least one work from William Saroyan, most likely *My Name is Aram*. Saroyan’s seminal collection of short stories follows a young Armenian American boy growing up in Central California’s San Joaquin Valley. To put it in perspective, Saroyan’s *My Name is Aram* is as much a cultural touchstone to Armenian Americans as Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is to Americans from multiple backgrounds.

William Saroyan captured the feeling of being without a homeland in his writing. He was born in Fresno, California in 1908 as Armenians were being displaced from their home country by the Ottoman Turks. Fresno at the time was an immigrant town, home to Chinese, Irish, Jewish, Japanese and Mexican peoples, in addition to an influx of Armenians who moved before the worst days of the Genocide began. Saroyan describes the dichotomy of Armenian-ness and American-ness in his work *Antranik of Armenian*. His narrator says,

> The nation is lost. The strong nations of the world are jumping with new problems. To hell with the whole God damn mess, I said. I'm no Armenian. I'm an American. Well the truth is I am both and neither. I love Armenia
and I love America and I belong to both, but I am only this: an inhabitant of the earth, and so are you, whoever you are. I tried to forget Armenia but I couldn’t do it. My birthplace was California, but I couldn’t forget Armenia, so what is one’s country? . . . Well, I do not know for sure, but I know it is all these things as remembrance in the blood. (38-39)

It is ironic that although many Armenian Americans have embraced such literary cultural representations as found in Saroyan’s novels, the representation that is most well-known is the television representation of the Kardashian family. Indeed, the power of popular culture has helped Jewish Americans cope with the trauma that colonized peoples struggle with generations after the initial trauma takes place. But of the two competing Armenian American narratives, the story of the privileged Kardashians has eclipsed Saroyan’s community-approved narrative.

Like many immigrant communities, Armenians found refuge in America out of necessity. For decades after 1915, members of the Armenian intelligentsia and community leaders held fast to the idea that the diaspora would one day return to Armenia. Armenia was under Soviet Russian rule for a large part of the twentieth century, and the living conditions in former Soviet-ruled Armenia were undesirable. The diaspora became more assimilated. “Once diasporas are established,” Denise Aghanian writes in *The Armenian Diaspora: Cohesion and Fracture*, “they become intimately shaped by the host country’s dominant ideology, political system, socio-economic structure, cultural traditions and domestic foreign policies” (5). Even now, as Syrian-Armenians have returned to Armenia because of conflict in Syria, these Syrian-Armenians vow to return to Syria when the political climate is more stable. Though the Armenian government is eager to welcome these Armenians back to the homeland, stories of organized-crime syndicates threatening the livelihoods of entrepreneurs have forced those re-entering Armenia to find yet another country to call home. The Armenian diaspora boasts millions of Armenians, more than reside in the country of Armenia, and has engaged a number of strategies to ensure the community’s preservation, even a form of communal self-policing.

Outlining diasporic identities in her work, Aghanian states,
Diaspora identities are those that are constantly reproducing themselves through difference. As such each Diaspora community has modified its way of life, blending elements from its heritage with elements of the mainstream. The use of English in the Armenian Apostolic Church is a clear example. Even so, within their travels and hyphenated identities there are more complex markers of identity. This means keeping any values and customs from other groups. By the use of transnational strategies, which exposes them to many cultures, Diasporas are in an advantageous position to pick and choose characteristics. (177)

Because of the unique hybridity of diasporic identities, the tendency to select and control cultural characteristics is a practical inevitability for Armenian Americans. Political, cultural, and religious leaders in the Armenian American diaspora have a heightened awareness when it comes to the threat of assimilation and the fear of forgetting, and thus they have consciously positioned the Genocide as a shared cultural memory in order to keep the community intact. These leaders desire to preserve homogeneity and to maintain cultural values in the diasporic community, and any representations of Armenian American-ness that is not approved becomes a threat of its own kind.

Much of the discourse that surrounds the Armenian diaspora, which is estimated to be anywhere from five to ten million strong, is informed by the Armenian Genocide. During and after the Genocide of 1915, Armenians scattered to countries like Lebanon, Iran, Greece, and Iraq to find a safe place to raise their families. Around the mid-twentieth century, when conflicts arose in the countries where they sought refuge, Armenians came in droves to America. So many Armenian Americans have had the distinct experience of being doubly-displaced, bringing with them their Armenian heritage as well as the customs and traditions of their adopted, temporary homelands. No doubt the multitude of Armenian diasporas have contributed to the difficulty of finding a single, codifying ethnic representation of Armenian American-ness, as it is impossible to say that a Lebanese Armenian American’s experience is similar to an Iranian Armenian American’s experience. The double displacement proves how successful the
Ottoman Turks were in making conversations about ethnic representation by the colonized increasingly difficult.

Armenian Americans have often produced literature that reflects this inheritance of anxieties and fears, and Armenian American scholars have tended to focus their analysis on this powerful historical memory. Although there is increasing work done of such authors as Saroyan, Armenian American scholars have all but ignored the emerging cultural narrative of the Kardashians. Over two decades ago, research about Armenian American cultural products in Los Angeles would yield results about food, dance, and music, mostly from parochial private communities, schools, and churches. Certainly, Armenian Americans from Los Angeles have published works of fiction and non-fiction. The city’s educational institutions reflect the population’s concerns with preserving Armenian culture. UCLA and USC, in addition to CSU Northridge and CSU Fresno, house extensive Armenian Studies programs. USC’s Shoah Foundation, which says it “is dedicated to making audio-visual interviews with survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides a compelling voice for education and action,” frequently works with scholars and survivors of the Armenian Genocide. Though the Kardashians have sold millions of copies of print periodical publications, Armenian American scholarly publications, such as the *Journal of Armenian Studies*, have yet to address their growing cultural significance as a kind of Armenian American text. With the emergence of third and fourth generation Armenian Americans, scholars should consider not only the lingering trauma of the Genocide as a shaper of community identity, but also more heterogeneous notions of the Armenian American identity—including the Kardashians.

When discussing colonialism in academia, scholars often cite European colonial powers that at one time dominated places like the Americas, India, and beyond. But as Ania Loomba states in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, colonialism is not exclusive to the Europeans. In fact, “it has been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history” (8). Loomba points out “the Ottoman Empire, which began as a minor Islamic principality in what is now Western Turkey, extended itself over most of Asia Minor and the Balkans.” If the Ottoman Turks are the colonizers and the Armenians the colonized,
the struggle to find Armenian ethnic representation for the colonized might sound more familiar. Gayatri Spivak has delved into what British colonization and eventual withdrawal have done to India and Hong Kong, but for the Armenian diaspora, the colonization is ongoing. Where England has seceded from colonies and relinquished subsequent reign, and Germany has made reparations to the Jewish people, Turkey remains resolute in rejecting the label of “Armenian Genocide,” and still controls much of the land that the Ottomans claimed from Armenia starting in the late nineteenth century. Turkey declares that any Turk “who explicitly insults being a Turk, the Republic or the Turkish Grand National Assembly, shall be imposed to a penalty of imprisonment for a term of six months to three years” (Miles). The government did so in the case of Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk. Pamuk’s crime was detailed in a Swiss newspaper in February 2005. “Thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody but me dares to talk about it,” Pamuk said. The public outcry in his homeland of Turkey was extreme; copies of Pamuk’s books were burned at rallies. Clearly, in attempting to control and punish Pamuk, the Turks are attempting to police, and, even, colonize one of their own. However, I must ask, in what ways has the Armenian American leadership engaged in its form of self-policing when they perceive that a threat is being generated not from the outside, but from within the community?

*Keeping Up with the Kardashians* follows the blended Kardashian-Jenner family as they run their clothing stores, travel the world for paid appearances and vacations, get married and divorced, and raise children and grandchildren in the affluent Los Angeles suburb of Calabasas. Among the producers of the show is Kris Jenner, the matriarch of the Kardashian family and architect of their widespread fame and fortune. As such, each episode of the show depicts the family as an all-American family struggling with personal flaws and family conflicts, but all through a lens of privilege. Scenes in a given hour-long episode jump from images of Los Angeles traffic and the Downtown Los Angeles cityscape at night, to footage of the Pacific Ocean from Malibu and private airplanes as they take off. Though the show is technically a reality show, there is no doubt that through the practice of lighting, makeup, and editing, the show is crafted to present to the viewer a specifically benign glimpse into the world of Kourtney,
Kim and Khloe Kardashian, as they are the fulcrum upon which the show is balanced. Cameramen, along with lighting crews and makeup artists, are portrayed as being omnipresent as the sisters attend press conferences, go to restaurants, and lounge around their respective homes.

In addition to its representation of a blended family (Kris Jenner was married to and divorced from prominent Armenian lawyer Robert Kardashian before the show was created), the show attempts to and has succeeded in capitalizing off of the exotic-sounding last name Kardashian. The title of the show seeks to normalize the family’s Armenian last name as it is mixed into the idiom “keeping up with the Joneses,” a phrase which speaks to the preoccupation middle and upper class Americans have with maintaining the same level of financial and social standing as their neighbors. Before 2007, the Kardashians were known to be Los Angeles area socialites that came from an affluent family, but they had not yet attained the level of celebrity and wealth that they have today. Despite their elite social standing, the Kardashians have often been criticized precisely because of their privilege. For Armenian Americans, the Kardashians’ narrative of financial privilege is clearly distinguished from the suffering immigrant narrative found in Saroyan’s works.

The Kardashian family has succeeded in parlaying the American public’s fascination with cultural representations of immigrants and the generations that stem from them, partly because of their Othered last name, and partly because of their physical attributes. Though the sisters are only half Armenian, they embody many physical traits that are identified with the Armenian community: Armenian women are perceived to be full-figured with long dark hair, large dark eyes, and tan skin. Public opinion would attribute the success of the show, spanning over ten seasons, to the notorious sex tape that featured Kim Kardashian. When the video continued to circulate (despite the lack of Kim’s consent in publicizing the video) due to the advent of the internet, Kris Jenner secured a distribution deal for the video with an adult film production company. To some in the Armenian community, the Kardashians’ meteoric rise to stardom as a result of the video is problematic, and they, as well as other Americans, have criticized the family and their resultant fame.
In a traditionally patriarchal Armenian society, Armenian women are expected to lead private and sexually modest lives, and the various Armenian churches, which are scattered throughout Los Angeles County, enforce these social norms. It is not uncommon for Armenian parents to avoid discussions of sexuality in public spaces, though when those conversations do arise, more often than not, the conversation is in private and serves to warn and enforce, not to encourage and inform. The American military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on sexuality is not dissimilar to the stance the Armenian community takes on human sexuality. So the Kardashian situation is particularly interesting, because the family, namely the matriarch Kris, not only acknowledged Kim’s video, which after all was already leaked to the populace, but also gained agency by controlling a portion of the video’s distribution and profiting from it. The brilliance of the Kardashian brand of public relations and marketing lies in the classically American narrative of redemption—the idea that everyone deserves a second chance. With their matching exotic looks and moniker, the Kardashian family has positioned themselves in American pop culture as a dysfunctional family, rising from the ashes of the sex tape to move past the sexual taboo of public displays of fornication and onto commodification of their ethnic identity with business ventures that include clothing stores, magazine covers, club appearances, books, perfumes, and a combined social media following that totals somewhere in the hundreds of millions.

From the outset, the Kardashian sisters have made their late father Robert and his emphasis on maintaining the girls’ Armenian American identity part of their narrative. In season one of Keeping up with the Kardashians, the sisters watch home videos their father filmed. The first words the viewer hears from Robert as he watches his very young daughters play together are, “Let’s see, can you girls speak Armenian?” (IMDb). Clearly, the Kardashian patriarch was wanted his daughters to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage identity. These issues related to cultural identity continued long after he passed away in 2004. On a 2012 episode of Khloe and Lamar, one of several spin-offs of Keeping Up, Khloe Kardashian struggles with the idea of her professional basketball player husband playing for a Turkish basketball league. “The Armenian Genocide is such a controversial and very sensitive issue because the Turkish and
Armenian people disagree about the facts of what actually happened”, Khloe says. “I know how strongly the Armenians feel about the Genocide, and how it’s never been recognized. At the same time, I do not hold today’s generation of people accountable.” (Khloe and Lamar) Khloe is echoing the same concerns that most Armenian Americans have in obtaining Turkey’s recognition of the Genocide. Much of the episode is devoted to Khloe’s anxiety about approaching her husband about the Armenian Genocide and her family history. She discusses living in Turkey with her younger brother Rob, and he seems doubtful. “Imagine what it’s going to be like,” he says. Kim, her older sister, also urges Khloe to weigh her options. “Just be careful. I don’t think you understand. . . . When I did the cover of Cosmo International, Turkey picked it up and I got a lot of backlash for it.” Kim is warning Khloe about the cultural strictures that are in place when Armenians are affiliated with Turks. Khloe and Lamar have raised questions of ethnic identity on a familial and national level, and Kim recognizes the significance of this moment—they have inherited not only an Armenian name, but a whole system of significations associated with their Armenian American identity.

Kim is also referring specifically to a magazine cover of her published in Turkey during the month of April. In response to the criticism she received, Kim took to her blog to express her frustrations.

Cosmopolitan magazine has a number of international editions all around the world that run in various territories, and when I did this shoot for the international covers I had no idea that Turkey was planning to run my story on their cover THIS month, considering Genocide Remembrance Day is this month. My Armenian heritage means a lot to me and I’ve been brought up to be incredibly proud of my family’s background and culture so as an Armenian American woman it is a huge honor for me to be on the first ever Armenian Cosmopolitan.

Clearly, there are public relations concerns with celebrity personalities of the Kardashians’ caliber, but aside from the awareness of her audience, Kim is a testament to the dominant issues that are important to Armenian Americans. Even though the Kardashians, and other Los Angeleno Armenians, are several generations removed
from the Genocide, the latest generation is still tasked with carrying on the tragic stories and trauma until the country of Turkey acknowledges that the Genocide took place. Even though Kim had no precise way of knowing when and where a publishing conglomerate like *Cosmopolitan* would run her cover story, she is held accountable for her cover of *Cosmopolitan* in Turkey; clearly, she feels her actions are being policed by Armenian American expectations. In a nod to traditional Armenian values and her communal responsibility, Khloe turns for advice to her closest Armenian relative, her father’s brother, who says he was upset when he heard about their possible move to Turkey and reminds Khloe of the massacre that has yet to be recognized by the Turkish government. Here, her uncle fulfills not only the role of her dead father, but also the role of the community’s patriarchs. Finally, Khloe brings up her discomfort with the situation to her husband, and they decide to no longer entertain the option of moving to Turkey. Khloe clearly privileges the communal choice over her immediate familial issues, thus proving the power of the trauma narrative that has been sustained even for Armenian American generations far removed from the Genocide.

The popularity of the Kardashian Armenian American narrative has coincided with the popularity of Armenian television broadcast in America. *USA*Armenia boasts a constant line-up of Armenian news programming, Armenian soap operas, and Armenian game shows. Recently, the network aired a reality television show about Armenian Americans called *Glendale Life*. *Glendale Life* differs from *Keeping Up* and its spinoffs because the show is produced by Armenian producers for Armenian audiences. Sharing many of the voyeuristic qualities of reality television programs like MTV’s *Jersey Shore*, the show chronicles the lives of a handful of young Armenian Americans residing in Glendale, California as they date, party, and quarrel with one another. Over the past decade, shows like *Jersey Shore* have been attracting key demographics and garnering high television ratings. The Instagram account for *Glendale Life* purports that the show “presents the luxurious lifestyles of beautiful Armenian women and handsome Armenian men” (Instagram). Indeed, a typical episode of *Glendale Life* depicts young men and women of Glendale as they get plastic surgery, buy luxury cars and goods, and drink in excess as the cameras roll. The fundamental difference between the two shows,
however, lies in its intended audience. *Keeping up with the Kardashians* is broadcast nationally in the United States on cable television, while *Glendale Life*, whose characters code switch between the Armenian and English languages, is broadcast on the Armenian television station *USArmenia*. For a vocal portion of the diaspora, it was one thing for American television to produce and promote an Armenian American representation that they might object to, but for Armenian television to perpetuate a similar objectionable representation was too much for some to bear.

When filming for *Glendale Life* began in early 2014, a group of Armenian Americans was outraged and started a Facebook page and petitioned *USArmenia* to cease production of the show. Even the local news station NBC4 had picked up the story, titling it “Critics Slam ‘Glendale Life’ Reality Show for Perpetuating Armenian Stereotypes” (NBC4). Members of the Armenian community were the primary critics of the show, and they felt so passionately about the show as being detrimental to the Armenian cultural image that they launched a change.org campaign. Using multiple social media platforms, organizers of the campaign sent letters to the Armenian television station *USArmenia*, stating,

> [We] implore you on behalf of all Armenians who wish to uphold our heritage, maintain our cultural beliefs and standards and pay homage to our rich history, help us STOP this show from airing. We have fought too long and too hard to be seen as more than what the media has portrayed us being to allow for the bottom to completely fall out with such a disgraceful depiction of Armenians.

The campaign proved unsuccessful, the show aired, and the show has over 34,000 followers on Instagram. The campaign was successful, however, in demonstrating the significant numbers of concerned Armenian American diaspora willing to participate in ethnic self-policing, as well as the numbers who continued to enjoy the voyeuristic gaze into the lives of other representative Armenian American cultural images.

Before the former Soviet Union allowed exit visas to America, and before the Lebanese-Israeli conflict pushed the diaspora further West, Jack Antreassian described a similar sentiment to that of many Armenians leaving comments on *YouTube* videos for
In “The Armenian in America,” Antreassian writes,

Three things leap out of a jumble of virtues we customarily flaunt, I suppose, as principal features of our image as we would like others to see it: Armenians are the first Christian nation; Armenians were massacred by the Turks; and Armenians are always self-reliant and law-abiding, rarely recorded on welfare rolls and police blotters. . . . We are inordinately sensitive about our community life, owing perhaps to our subconscious sense of its inadequacy. We are unable to bring ourselves to criticize the church, any of our organizations, any of our political parties, any of our leading community figures. The inevitable result is a sort of creeping stagnation, in which major energies of the community are dissipated, denied as they are the drive and concern of an involved citizenry. (253)

Because their church, political parties, and community leaders are the last remaining semblances of their ethnic identity, to criticize them would leave the Armenian American alone, robbed of a unifying identity twice. Armenian Americans are aware of the power of marketing and brand-awareness, and many desire that the image that is marketed to American audiences be pristine and idealized rather than flawed. Ethnic dissention must be sacrificed for community cohesion.

Antreassian’s argument helps explain why the Armenian community reacts so quickly when the most famous Armenian American is no longer a political leader or community figure, but celebrities like Kim Kardashian and her family. The prevalence of the Kardashian narrative, as well as the absence of critical discussion that surrounds this half-Armenian, half-American family, may indicate that Armenians might need to consider multiple narratives of representations. Because of the Kardashians, Armenians and Armenian causes have gained a larger place in the American social conscience, though not necessarily in the way that garners the community’s support. Though many Armenian Americans may be uncomfortable with the spectacle of the Kardashians as emblematic of excess and wealth, the Kardashians offer a facet of what it is to be Armenian American, even if it may not be a complete cultural image that gains approval.
from the community leaders. Armenian Americans of Los Angeles should realize that the idea of controlling the Armenian cultural representation to the point of fabrication and obfuscation is in fact detrimental to that representation, not beneficial. This desire to monitor a community’s cultural representation, however, is not an exclusively Armenian problem.

For instance, ABC has drawn ire from its television audience with the advent of their show *Fresh off the Boat*, about Eddie Huang’s Taiwanese-Chinese-American family moving to Florida. Some viewers have asked if the show is simply perpetuating offensive stereotypes of Asian Americans as characters “fresh off the boat.” *The New York Times*’ Dwight Garner writes Huang’s book is “a surprisingly sophisticated memoir about race and assimilation in America.” Huang is a member of an ethnic group presenting his life as he is often comically sandwiched between immigrant parents and American society and expressing frustration at the caricaturing of Chinese immigrants, precisely as he is attempting to portray his family as fully developed characters. Constance Wu, one of the stars of *Fresh off the Boat*, reaffirms Huang’s beliefs about ethnic groups portrayed on television in an interview with *Time* magazine.

We shouldn’t be a voice for all Asians. We are such a varied group that there’s no one show that can be like, “This is what Asian America looks like!” But we’re given that burden because we’re so rarely represented. If you see Tina Fey on television, you’re not like, “All white women are like Tina Fey.” Yet people are like, “Oh Jessica Huang’s not like my mother, but this show is supposed to be about Asians, so shouldn’t she be like my mother?” I understand the burden, because the history of our representation on TV is very sparse. (Feeney)

Similar to other immigrant populations in the United States, the Armenian American population hails from countries all around the world. In addition to their Armenian heritage, the diaspora has absorbed the languages and traditions of their adopted countries (Iran, Lebanon, Syria) their families fled to after the Genocide. Like other underrepresented groups in the media, Armenian Americans are especially sensitive to the images that are portrayed in social media and on television. Because there are so
few representatives, the community feels a greater need to craft those representative images for public consumption.

The Kardashians have been criticized not only by the Armenian American community, but also by the wider American public because of the very things that have made them such a pervasive cultural presence: fame and fortune. The Kardashians are notorious for being “famous for being famous,” and, thus, some have argued they have no particular skill set or vocation deemed valuable by communities that respect more traditional labor. For a people that, historically, have prided themselves on the highly specialized work of various craftsmen and agrarians (farmers, jewelers, entrepreneurs), this is a significant point of contention. In fact, the name Kardashian implies that somewhere in their ancestry, the family occupation was stone carving (“kar dash” means “stone carver”). They also exist outside of the trifecta of untouchable subjects that Antreassian pointed out: the Kardashians, until very recently, were not directly affiliated with any Armenian churches, political parties, or community figures. Perhaps, the Kardashians have become a symbolic target for a frustrated, colonized diaspora. But the famous family makes public statements often in an attempt to quell any backlash they receive from Armenian Americans. While Saroyan depicts the trauma-based narrative of the Armenian American, the Kardashians’ narrative is founded on popular, capitalist-based success. When comparing the two dominant Armenian American representations and narratives, I argue that both narratives have a place in the larger social narrative of the community, and the Kardashians have even found a way to intersect the two cultural stories.

In January of 2015, the Kardashians issued a statement revealing their intentions to visit Armenia for the first time in the year that marks the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide.

The Kardashian sisters have taken over half the globe to date. Next stop: Armenia . . . The sisters have always culturally identified with their Armenian roots, annually paying tribute to victims of the Armenian Genocide, which occurred in what is now modern-day Turkey, and otherwise proudly recognizing their heritage. Kim has also spoken out
Seeking the Next Saroyan

about the plight of Syrian Armenians caught up in the ongoing civil war in Syria. (E!News)

2015 marks the centennial of the Armenian Genocide. Many Armenians across the world have launched campaigns to gather, march, and educate the world about the Turkish denial. 2015 marks a paradigmatic shift, for Armenian Americans—through figures such as the Kardashians—have gained a highly visible platform that allows them to give voice to their cultural narratives of shared suffering. In April 2015, Kim and Khloe Kardashian, along with Kim’s husband, rapper Kanye West and her young daughter North, visited Armenia. They were greeted throughout their visit by throngs of people. Kim and Khloe took to Instagram (and to the millions who follow them) to announce their visit to Armenia and raise awareness about the Genocide.

Armenia we are here!!!!! We are so grateful to be here and start this journey of a lifetime! Thank you to everyone who greeted us! I can’t wait to explore our country and have some yummy food! #MyDadAndGrandParentsWouldBeSoProud. . . . My husband and daughter came to Armenia as well to see my heritage and learn about my ancestors! (Instagram)

The question of returning to Armenia is one that is often posed to members of the diaspora. The Armenian community expects that its members will visit the homeland at least once in their lifetime, and the Kardashians are no exception. In this moment, the Kardashians are merging the traditional narratives of shared trauma with their contemporary narratives. Acknowledging her heritage, Kim paid homage to her Armenian American father and grandparents, and then toured the various historical and cultural sites that are symbolic markers for the diasporic community. In their journey to Armenia, Kim and Khloe became representations of Armenian American-ness, even though they operate outside of the big three organizations that Antreassian highlighted (political parties, church, and cultural clubs). Their visit to the homeland came at a pivotal moment: the Armenian Genocide Centennial. For the Armenian American community this historical commemoration served a political purpose: to demand that Turkey admit its role in the Genocide, a word the country even refuses to acknowledge.
In this way, the Kardashians are using their fame as a means of bringing a repressed narrative onto the world stage.

Upon their return from Armenia, and on April 24 2015, the day of remembrance for the Armenian Genocide centennial, Kim authored an article for *Time* magazine about the legacy she inherited from her father.

We were told that when a lot of Armenians moved, they took the -ian off their names in fear that they would be killed. “Whatever your girls do, never change your last name—it’s Kardashian,” he would say. . . . So many people have come to me and said, “I had no idea there was a genocide.” . . . We have this spotlight to bring attention to it, so why would we just sit back? . . . I would like President Obama to use the word *genocide*. It’s very disappointing he hasn’t used it as President. . . .

There’s a purple centennial pin that everyone wears to commemorate the genocide. Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan gave me his when I met him. Purple is my daughter’s favorite color, so she wants to wear it every single day. When she gets older, I will explain to her the real meaning behind it. I’m half Armenian, but I grew up with a [sic] such a strong sense of my Armenian identity, and I want my daughter to have the same. (Kardashian)

In her article, Kim is engaging in writing a counter narrative—challenging not only ongoing political narratives, but also her own popularly perceived image as a spectacle of privilege. Although her meeting with the Armenian Prime Minister could be seen as a result of her fame, she highlights the trauma that haunts the lives of all Armenian Americans, as well as her commitment to preserve that shared story for her daughter. Here, Kim effectively merges the narrative of the past with a narrative of the present and future.

Although Kim Kardashian does not conform to traditional patriarchal expectations of the Armenian community, I argue that she is part of the rich cultural repository that represents an increasingly heterogeneous community, and more scholars need to turn their attention to the ways that multiple representations are enacted in the community. As we have seen, in a shifting globalized society, the Kardashians demonstrate the
ways that narratives of trauma may merge with narratives of cultural visibility, that narratives of the past may merge with narratives of the present and future. In *Armenian-North American Literature*, Lorne Shirinian writes, “Armenian diaspora culture is alive and vital and only needs recognition of the possibilities of innovation, innovation that embraces tradition and change, the past and the present, the old and the new” (51). In embracing new cultural representations, the Armenian American diaspora may finally be able to embrace a more complex understanding of what it could mean to be Armenian American.
Works Cited


