Kara-Keui Galata bridge, Constantinople, Turkey. Turkey Eminön Istanbul, ca. 1890. [Between and Ca. 1900] Photograph.

HOW WESTERN ARMENIAN CAME TO BE: A STORY OF PEOPLE, PURISM AND GLOBAL IDEAS

This presentation explores the emergence of the standard language known today as Western Armenian. In particular, it examines the intellectual labor that led to the acceptance of this language as the dominant written medium among Ottoman Armenians by 1915. This study turns away from conventional philological treatments of Armenian language history and focuses instead on the social aspects of language use. In this way, it takes a socio-historical approach to the study of language, examines the people and ideologies that shaped its use and advocates for the broader application of historical sociolinguistic methods to the study of Armenian and other languages in the Ottoman Empire. Drawing on insights from the fields of historical sociolinguistics, global intellectual history and nationalism studies as well as untapped Armenian-language primary sources, the presentation uncovers the fundamental role that beliefs about purity played in the formation of the standard language. While this focus on purity remained a constant among the intelligentsia throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the presentation shows how ideas about what was considered "pure" were shaped and reshaped by various actors and interactions with ideas that originated far beyond the Ottoman Empire. This interaction came in the form of four global intellectual movements—humanism, cultural nationalism, comparative philology and folkloristics—which created new and conflicting attitudes about how Armenian ought to be used. The presentation also highlights how these movements fundamentally shaped norms about "proper" Western Armenian usage that continue to predominate in post-Ottoman Armenian diaspora communities around the world today.

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The Promise Armenian Institute UCLA

UCLA Narekatsi Chair in Armenian Studies

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National Association for Armenian Studies and Research

ARARAT-ESKIJIAN MUSEUM

Jennifer Manoukian, Ph.D.
University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellow, University of California, Irvine