Friendship as a Political Concept: Kurdish Youth Politics in the 1990s
Delal Aydın
SUNY Binghamton

This presentation is based on my dissertation, “Crafting the Self in the Shadow of the Turkish State: The Formation of Yurtsever Subjecthood in the 1990s,” where I analyze the building of the Kurdish youth movement in the 1990s as a formation of subjecthood in a struggle for recognition. Yurtsever literally means patriot, but it has a larger connotation that blends identification as a supporter of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) with a revolutionary sense of the self. Yurtsever identity crystallized in the 1990s amidst extreme state violence. However, I approach this formation of yurtsever subjecthood as a process of political transformation, not as a clash between fixed identities, i.e. the Turkish state and Kurdish resistance.

For my project I conducted field work in Diyarbakir between January 2015 and January 2016, which combined in depth and semi-structured interviews, archival research, as well as auto-ethnography. I examined the formation of yurtsever subjecthood in Ziya Gökalp High School, a preeminent state school that turned out to be one of the main centers of yurtsever youth mobilization during the 1990s. This presentation specifically deals with the friendship relations between the students of Ziya Gökalp that came to the forefront in my interviews. I discuss how friendship worked as a political ground for the students in a historically specific time that to be a yurtsever meant not only to have a wide web of solidarity against the school administration and pro-Islamic Kurdish Hezbollah groups, but also a common ground of friendship to heal everyday injuries of their class and ethnicity. Kurdish youth of the 1990s refer to themselves as “the lost generation” to highlight the massive loss of lives. In my presentation I also elaborate on how former yurtsever students experience loss of their friends, especially in the shade of current political violence.