



CEDEJ Tuesday Seminar

March 17, 2026, at 1 pm

By Amy Fallas

Making Ancients Modern:

Coptic Experts, Pharaonism, and the Search for Egyptian Origins

In the inaugural issue of the journal for the Association of Coptic Art in 1935, Coptic doctor Georgy Sobhy endeavored to answer a burning question: did Muslims and Christians in Egypt share physiological characteristics with ancient Egyptians? Or, more pointedly, which religious community had more in common with the ancient Egyptian phenotype and could, perhaps, claim closer descent to the pharaohs? Sobhy drew from his contemporary medical practice to compare Muslim and Christian skull measurements, facial features, height averages, and more with examples from ancient Egyptian mummies. In the interwar period when public discourse raged over the parameters of what constituted Egyptianness, this kind of racial knowledge production acquired immediate relevance to answering questions about origins, who could claim authenticity, and whether Muslims and Christians were both equally Egyptian. This talk considers the work of Sobhy and other early twentieth century Coptic professionals and explores how their scholarly contributions informed sectarian notions of pharaonism and shaped circuits of knowledge production on Egyptian origins.

Amy Fallas is a Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of History at UC Davis and an incoming Assistant Professor of History at North Carolina State University. She is a scholar of the modern and transnational Middle East and her research focuses on histories of sectarianism and social welfare in Egypt, ethnic and religious minorities in the eastern Mediterranean, and transhemispheric mobilities between the Middle East and Latin America. Her book manuscript "Charitable Citizens: Philanthropy and Religious Difference in Modern Egypt" offers a new approach to the social history of sectarianism in Egypt through local and global nodes of philanthropy from the late 19th to mid 20th century. "Charitable Citizens" examines how a network of over a hundred sect-based charitable societies mediated inter-religious tensions in modern Egypt through social service, medical infrastructure, scientific knowledge production, and urban interventions. Her academic scholarship is published in peer reviewed journals such as *History Compass*, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, and the *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Her public-facing work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Jadaliyya*, the *Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, *Mada Masr*, the *New Arab*, and more.