Spring, as cliché as it sounds, is the season of change, and at PAS, we are embracing that spirit to change and reinvent ourselves to create a more robust center for research into the African Humanities and Social Sciences that will withstand the rigors of the future. As the quote above from an African American pioneering speculative writer demonstrates, change has changed us. First, in choosing a quote from Octavia Butler, we are formally stating that the future for us lies in collaborative, expansive, and lasting dialogue with the entire African diaspora (one can argue that the scope of difference, even on the continent, is suggestive of an internal diaspora, but that is for another conversation) and possibly even to a global Blackness that would include many new partners in the global south including the Dalit intellectual, artistic, and lived communities.

So, change. The pandemic and lockdown have shadowed my directorship from the beginning as I took over the helm of PAS right as the lockdown began. We are barely a year from that experience and are all slowly recalibrating. One of the things that the pandemic revealed to us is that there will never be a return to normal or the prior way of doing things. Whatever operated prior to the shutdown did not translate into the shutdown. Moreover, even a year on, we are only now measuring the complete and lasting impacts that will continue to reveal themselves as we move forward.

We learned that the old model of balkanized research units (centers, programs, and departments alike) would not survive into the future. More than ever, we must develop and implement fundamental interdisciplinary practices. This has led us to clean house and relinquish legacy parts that no longer serve us, retool the ones that do but need adjustment and, in many cases, create innovative approaches. It has taken us three years, but we are finally ready to embark on the next three years with a clear multiyear strategic plan called Reclamation.

We are grateful to all community members, constituents, and stakeholders for adapting with us and staying supportive through it all. We have much to share very soon. Stay tuned.

Named director of the Program of African Studies in 2020, Chris Abani is the Board of Trustees Professor of English at the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences and director of graduate studies for the Litowitz Creative Writing Graduate Program.
Artistic evolution as a female illusionist in a new documentary

By Kathirine Leggette

On March 9, 2023, the Block Museum screened the documentary Being Bebe, followed by a Q&A with the film’s director and star. Directed by Emily Branham, the doc features Cameroonian artist Marshall Kudi Ngwa, widely known as performer Belle Zahara Benet, and his artistic evolution as a female illusionist. Although widely regarded as a drag superstar, Ngwa prefers “female illusionist” to describe his art.

Born in Duala, Cameroon, according to Ngwa, he was not the most masculine boy in school, but became the star of the class, whose name everyone knew. He made friends with many female classmates, and through these friendships he found the space to be his own person without fear of repercussions. When he came to the US to finish schooling, Ngwa found that school was not for him and began performing in the drag circuit, which let him express another side of himself.

Ngwa forged a career in Minneapolis, Minnesota as the female illusionist Bebe Zahara Benet, entertaining at a well-known club called The Gay 90s (the center of gay nightlife in the city), and in pride parades and shows. In 2009, Bebe’s career took off after winning the first season of the U.S. TV show RuPaul’s Drag Race. Since then, he has become a successful television personality, singer, actor, and producer.

When Bebe’s father died, filmmaker Emily Branham, who had been documenting Bebe’s life for fifteen years, decided to go to Cameroon to acquaint herself with the complexity of queer life there. This decision was not taken lightly because Cameroonian society is hostile to the LGBTQ community and the government has criminalized consensual gay sexual relations. Moreover, the overall political climate is undemocratic and often violent. In the film, Bebe and his friends recount a well-known story in which a police officer imprisoned two men for drinking Bailey’s Irish Cream, categorized as a woman’s drink due to the liqueur’s lightness and sweetness. These men were arrested, fined, and sentenced to five years in prison.

Ngwa and Branham’s film documents the vicissitudes of Bebe’s career, as well as explores the experience of many Cameroonians in the LGBTQ community. After watching this documentary, I realized that although it may be hard to live your truth, having the freedom to do so is a privilege. It is important to be humble and kind while not losing who you are. Success is more than money and fame. It is about being proud of where you have come from, where you are going, and having faith in your unknown future.

If you missed Bebe at the Block, find it on Peacock, Vudu, Apple TV or Amazon Prime Video. For more on Bebe, see the website: bebezaharanbenet.net.

Kathirine Leggette is the program assistant at the Program of African Studies.
US-Africa leaders’ summit: A postscript

By Muzifky Muanasali

Background
United States (US) President Joe Biden hosted the second summit between US officials and their African counterparts in Washington, DC, on 15 December 2022. Initiated by President Obama in August 2014, the US-Africa Summit (hereafter the Washington Summit) serves as a cooperation forum to strengthen the US partnership with African leaders under the auspices of the African Union (AU) and expand opportunities around areas of common interest. In announcing the meeting, President Biden underscored the importance of US-Africa relations and increased cooperation on shared global priorities (AU press release, 2 December 2022).

Why Africa matters
In his opening remarks, President Biden stated, “African voices, African leadership, African innovation all are critical to addressing the most pressing global challenges and (to) realizing the vision we all share: a world that is free, a world that is open, prosperous, and secure.” The global challenges President Biden referred to relate to US irritation over the growing footprint of Russia and China on the African continent, also expressed in the Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act (HR 7311, April 2022).

Africa also matters because of its historical links with the United States. Thus, President Biden announced the establishment of the President’s Advisory Council on the African Diaspora Engagement in the United States “to tap the enormous strength of the diaspora communities here in the United States and make sure their insight and experiences are reflected in our work.” However, the US conception of the African Diaspora (people of native African origin living outside the continent) is restrictive and contrary to the general acceptance of the term by people of African descent. For the AU, the African diaspora consists of peoples of African origin, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality, who live outside the continent and are willing to contribute to Africa’s development and the building of the AU.

The US-Africa relationship
The United States still enjoys a reservoir of goodwill and influence in Africa; however, it has also lost much soft power. Relations improved after the Cold War, healing painful memories and allaying suspicions about the US appetite for foment regime change. Nonetheless, the ripple of NATO’s destruction of Libya still rattle many people in West Africa and beyond, not to mention the memory of the US involvement in the Horn of Africa, especially Somalia and the African Great Lakes region (Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

There is also concern about the upsurge of racism in the US, even at the highest level of the federal government, following President Donald Trump’s crude characterization of African countries. At the time, few African leaders went on public record against President Trump; however, they let their feelings loose during the AU summit in Addis Ababa in February 2018. Even the letter of encouragement on US-AU cooperation that President Trump later sent to the AU summit swayed no one. Had it not been for the plea of the AU Commission chairperson to avoid polemicizing on the issue, African leaders would have adopted a decision calling the president of the United States a racist.

Summit takeaways
Overall, there was a convergence of views on joint priorities, notably food security and public health. These two sectors, long neglected by African leaders, are critical to reducing the continent’s vulnerability to exogenous factors.

On food security, the Washington Summit decided to boost the implementation of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), the blueprint for agricultural transformation. Using performance criteria in seven thematic areas, the CAADP evaluates governmental progress on agricultural growth and food security, nutrition, and food safety ( aflatoxin prevention, among other issues). The AU’s second biennial review (2015-2016) of CAADP implementation reported an overall positive trend toward agricultural transformation and growing efforts by governments to address persistent bottlenecks. The report also noted that much remained to achieve the target date of 2025.

While a few African governments appreciated the generosity of some world leaders in sending them free grain or wheat flour, such gestures may ultimately defeat the ambitions of CAADP. They may even increase dependence on food aid, thus profoundly changing the diets of communities that hitherto depend on locally grown staple foods and destroying small farmers’ livelihoods and resilience to climatic variations.

The Washington Summit also focused on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic but noted enough on the prevalence of other, more devastating infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, measles, and the Ebola virus, on which the AU has sometimes adopted a leading eradication approach. Such was the case of the AU Support to the Ebola- outbreak in West Africa (ASEOWA). At its peak in September 2014, ASEOWA deployed 855 African health workers and volunteers in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone in response to the Ebola outbreak. ASEOWA withdrew in September 2015 after the three countries had been declared free of Ebola transmission without losing a single volunteer.

Before ASEOWA deployment, the chairperson of the AU Commission, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, invited leading African businesspeople to Addis Ababa to solicit their contributions to Africa Against Ebola Solidarity Trust Fund. At the end of the two-hour meeting, the AU Commission raised $30 million that, among other things, served to finance ASEOWA.

Going forward
Intentions to move forward with this cooperation seem genuine on both the US and African sides (the AU appointed former Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn as its point person.) Implementation of the summit’s outcomes should be smooth if the parties maintain the spirit of cooperation in which they conceived their partnership. However, there are lingering doubts about how far the US would go in the current global context.

To be sure, the parties’ strategic priorities are not necessarily compatible. For the US, it is to out-compete China and constrain Russia militarily (US National Security Strategy, October 2022). Africa only matters if it serves US national security interests (US Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa, August 2022); otherwise, the US House of Representatives has vowed to punish recalcitrant African leaders (H.R. 7311, 2021-22). For their part, African leaders want to work with China, Russia, Turkey, India, and any other foreign partner willing to help the AU to implement its Agenda 2063.

China, for one, has entrenched its partnership. Africa-China trade will soon exceed $360 billion. China imports more from Africa than it exports. Meanwhile, Chinese companies are building essential infrastructure projects like the just inaugurated Africa CDC headquarters in Addis Ababa or the ECOWAS seat now under construction in Abuja. Fifty-two African countries and the AU Commission have signed Belt and Road agreements. The new Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang continued the tradition set by his predecessor in traveling to Africa on their first overseas trip, delivering debt relief and duty-free facilities for African exports to China.

Russia, too, is expanding bilateral military cooperation. Mali received new fighter jets and combat helicopters. Algeria is finalizing a multimillion-dollar arms purchase and, like Sudan and some countries in Africa’s southern region, mulls the possibility of hosting a Russian military base on its soil. To further strengthen ties, Russia will host a summit with African leaders in St. Pietersburg and join the BRICS summit in South Africa later this year.

At the Washington Summit, AU chairperson and Senegal’s President Macky Sall asked his host about the fairness of the US intent to punish Africans for cooperating with China and Russia. In January 2023, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) renewed its criticism of US threats against African cooperation with Russia and China. Eventually, the US will have to find a way out of this dilemma and ponder President Macky Sall’s warning that continued threats against Africans could seriously jeopardize the future of US-Africa cooperation.

Muzifky Muanasali holds a PhD in political science from Northwestern University (1994). A former academic in Africa and the United States, Dr. Muanasali spent over two decades working for the African Union and the United Nations. He is presently a Pius Okigbo Fellow at Northwestern’s Program of African Studies, focusing on the challenges and opportunities of Africa’s transformation amidst current global uncertainties.
ISITA was the cosponsor of the January 27 symposium “Translation Practices across Institutional Borders: from the Scholar to the Public.” Organized by Xena Amro, PhD student in Comparative Literary Studies and ISITA’s graduate assistant, the primary sponsors were Comparative Literary Studies, the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, and the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities. The day-long symposium brought together Northwestern faculty and graduate students, as well as scholars, translators, and editors/publishers from outside Northwestern for a day of discussion.

Translation was inclusively defined to consider the interdisciplinary methodologies of translation beyond linguistic transformations. Participants thought together about the scholarly, ethical, practical, and emotional imperatives of translating within academic institutions to reach the broader public. Lively panels involving Northwestern faculty and graduate students engaged the audience with their own experiences with translation. The symposium brought forth topics including the ethical implications of translating South Asian Dalit literature; the acts of translation involved when musical and visual artists collaborate; the metaphysics of translating Sufi texts; exploration of how long-term personal relationships between authors and translators impact the act of translation; the development of a translators “Adda,” or meeting place, to encourage community involvement in translation, and others.

Other symposium participants were publishers and editors. For instance, Susan Harris discussed her editorial role in Words without Borders, a magazine dedicated to international exchange through translation practices. She discussed how they select translations, assess their linguistic and aesthetic quality, and promote their circulations. Yojie Prins, professor of comparative literature at the University of Michigan, shared her initiative on “Translating Michigan,” a multidisciplinary research project that works against cliches of the midwest as a monolingual, racially homogenous, rural heartland.

The Maktaba project, a joint initiative between ISITA and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, was featured on the panel titled “Bridging the Divide between Academia and the Public.” Mauro Nobili, project lead at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, highlighted the battle for sources in African history and how historians’ focus on the colonial library has obscured the “Islamic library,” produced by Africans in Arabic and A’jami. The Maktaba project endeavors to open that Islamic library to nonprofessional audiences by creating an online collection displaying images of selected manuscripts from the UIUC and Northwestern University libraries alongside English translations and contextual essays. Paul Naylor (cataloger of West African manuscripts at Hill Museum and Manuscript Library), one of a group of international scholars producing translations for Maktaba, discussed (continued)
Chris Abau (English and PAS direc-
tor) was a finalist for the 2023 PEN/ 
Voelcker Award for Poetry Collection.

Chad J. Achenbach (Fuisberg School of Medicine) coauthored “Accelerated Epigenetic Age among Women with 
Invasive Cervical Cancer and HIB 
Infection in Nigeria.” Frontiers in 
Public Health 10. April 29, 2022. 834800; 
and “Analyses of Kaposis Sarcoma 
Trends among Adults Establishing 
Initial Outpatient HIV Care in Nigeria: 
2006-2017.” Infectious Agents and 
Cancer 17(1): 10.

History alumni Marcos Leitio 
de Almeida (2020) and Andrea 
Rosengarten (2022) received Chabraja 
History Department Postdoctoral 
Teaching Fellowships for 2022/23. 
In the fall quarter, Almeida taught the 
seminar “Black Atlantic: Slavery 
and Diaspora in the Modern World,” 
and in the spring will teach a course 
called “The Global History of Slavery.” 
Rosengarten will engage comparatively 
with work on land management trans-
formation under capitalism across 
world regions while paying particular 
attention to dryland areas.

Bimbola Akinbola (performance 
studies) published “African Aunties: 
Performing Diasporic Digital 
Disbelongings on Tik Tok,” Text and 
Performance Quarterly 42(3), 2022: 284-
297.

Karen J. Alter (political sci-
ence) published four articles: “The 
Contested Authority and Legitimacy 
of International Law: The State 
Strikes Back,” an SSRN Scholarly 
Paper (Rochester, NY), April 1, 2022. doi. 
10.2139/ssrn.4089382; “How to 
Change the Operating System of 
Global Capitalism: A Rejunee” 
International Journal of Constitutional 
and Perils of Theorizing International 
Regime Complexity in an Evolving 
World,” Review of International 
Organizations 17, 2022: 375-396; “The 
Future of Embedded International 
Law: Democratic and Authoritarian 
Trajectories,” SSRN Scholarly Paper, 
org/10.2139/ssrn.4086806.

Cheno Bahl (history graduate 
student) coauthored “Sierra Leone: 
Opposition MPs Supported Judiciary’s 
Hatchet Man against Democracy.” 
Africanist Press, March 21, 2023. He 
was recently interviewed about the 
debate on the origin of the Ebola out-
break in West Africa by Ryan Grim on 
the Counterpoint Show, which can be 
viewed at youtube/fajUJMqAGGAA.

Dil Singh Basanti (anthropology 
graduate student) was awarded an 
NSF Doctoral Dissertation Research 
Improvement Grant in 2022.

Adia Benton (anthropology) 
coauthored “Intersectionality and 
Syndemics: A Commentary.” Social 
Science and Medicine 299, February 
2022: 113783.

Alumna Krista Johnson (political sci-
ence 2002) published a blog post, “It 
matters How We Define the African 
Diaspora,” Council on Foreign Relations, 
5 April 2023.

Richard Joseph (professor emer-
itus, political science), published an 
opinion piece, “Nigeria’s Electoral 
Democracy Seeks to Find Its Footing 
after Contentious Election,” Chicago 

Robert Launay (anthropology) will 
be a fellow at the Leibniz Zentrum 
Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin for 
the months of May and June. He will 
give talks in Geneva and Bayreuth. 
He has published “50 Years After: 
Reflections on the Manding Conference 
of 1972” in Mansu Khirui, no.74, 2002. 
Mansu Khirui is the newsletter of the 
Mande Studies Association. He also 
published “The Qur’an School and 
Trajectories of Islamic Education” in 
the Routledge Handbook on Islam in 
Africa, edited by Terje Ytrestøy. 92-103. 

In February, Peter Mwangi (Swahili) 
team up with his colleague from 
the University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign to present the final project 
of their Mellon-funded elementary 
Swahili listening and writing curri-
cula online at the Mellon Curriculum 
Design Forum organized by the 
University of Chicago’s Language 
Center on February 9. That same 
month he presented a paper, “Thriving 
Linguistically in the Face of the 
COVID-19 Pandemic: Foreign language 
Apps,” at the 2023 Contemporary and 
International Education Society (CIES) 
annual conference in Washington, DC.

Alumna Vanessa Watters Opalo 
published “Credible Risk: Private 
Credit Bureaus and the Work of Loan 
Officers in West Africa,” in Africa 
S0001972022000353.

Zekeria Ahmed Salem (ISITA and 
political science) presented a seminar 
on the “Mauritanian Scholars on the 
World Stage: from ‘Desert Archive’ to 
Global Islamic Authority at Humanities 
Research Fellowships for the Study of 
the Arab World.” New York University/
Abu Dhabi in February.

Alumna Rhiannon Stephens 
(2007) participated in a conversa-
tion on “Seasons of Honor and 
Decent: Language, Climate, and Social 
Differences in East African History” at 
the University of Chicago, in February.

David Schoenbrun (history) and 
coauthor Rebecca Grollemund fea-
tured in the February 17 episode of 
the Journal of African History podcast 
to discuss the interpretation of Bantu 
language expansions. Their article 
“Their Moving Histories: Bantu Language 
Expansions, Eclectic Economies, and 
Mobilities,” coauthored with the late 
Jin Vansina, was published online by 
Cambridge University Press in January 
2023 and will appear in the first issue 
of the 2023 volume of the Journal of 
African History.

Craig Stevens (anthropology gradu-
ate student) has joined Northwestern’s Information Science as Innovator in 
Residence.

Economists Chris Udry, Dean 
Karan, and others have coauthored 
several articles, including “Cognitive 
Behavioral Therapy among Ghana’s 
Rural Poor is Effective Regardless of 
Baseline Mental Distress.” American 
Economic Review: Insights 4(4), 
December 2022: 527-545; “Tackling 
Psychosocial and Capital Constraints 
Opens Pathways Out of Poverty,” 
Nature 603/7903, 2022: 291-297; 
and “Machine Learning and Phone 
Data Can Improve Targeting of 
Humanitarian Aid,” Nature 603/7903, 
2022: 864-870. In addition, Udry has 
countered “Agricultural Technology in 
Africa,” Journal of Economic Pers-
pectives 36(1), 2022: 33-56.

Zachary Wright (Northwestern-
Qatar) published “Islam, Blackness, 
and African Cultural Distinction: The 
Islamic Negritude of Shaykh Ibrahim 
Masse.” Journal of African Religions 
10(2), 2022: 237-265; and “Spiritual 
Training across the Sahara: Debating 
the Need for the Living Sufi Master in 
the Tijaniyya.” Journal of Islamic 

African studies PhDs awarded in 2022


New acquisitions to the Herskovits Library

By Esmeralda Kale, the George & Mary LeCron Foster Curator of the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies

Herskovits Library


This new publication on hair is the work of NU alum Ayinoluwa Abegunde and compliments her recent exhibit in the Herskovits Library. Full of current and yet familiar hairstyles, this guide provides practical advice on how to look after koily hair. QR codes point to online videos created by the author that provide additional support. This guide allows the reader to identify their hair goals and document and track their individual hair journey.


In memory of an animal that no longer walks the earth, this book is beautiful from cover to cover. The black-and-white engravings of the western black rhinoceros capture the reader’s attention.

The Homily of the Archangel Michael. 1880.

Place of production not identified.

This Ethiopian manuscript, written in Geez, tells the story of St Michael’s fight against Satan. St Michael’s role as Prince of the heavenly army was to fight against Satan, rescue God’s people, and defend souls. The vibrant illustrations depict these battles and bring this manuscript to life. “Bound in Ethiopia; square-cut wooden boards covered in goat leather (as well as spine), stained deep red; 6 nested panels tooled in blind on each cover with a blind Coptic design at center. Floral-pattern cotton fabric doublures visible at center of inside covers. Sewn on 4 sewing stations in the Ethiopian manner; knotted leather thong sewn on as end-bands.” It is a beautiful addition to the Herskovits Library.
Why Swahili?

By Declan Shaughnessy

When I tell people I am taking Swahili, they often ask first: Why? I wonder if they are unaware of the importance of the language, do not see the practicality in learning Swahili, or are genuinely interested in my motivations. Either way, I enjoy telling people about my experiences in Swahili and my connection with the language that pushed me to take it in the first place.

Ninatoka mji wa Syracuse. I was born and raised in Syracuse, New York, a sanctuary city in upstate New York. Spread across the city are immigrants from various countries ranging from Nepal to Burundi to Honduras. My mom is an ENL teacher for the Syracuse City School District, so I have interacted with many of these kids in and out of school and gotten to know them personally. I also played soccer for an organization called Tillie’s Touch, which focuses on helping kids, primarily immigrants from underprivileged backgrounds, both athletically and academically. Many kids I went to school with and played soccer with were from places like Kenya, Tanzania, the DRC, and South Sudan and spoke Swahili.

Before coming to Northwestern, I had never considered learning Swahili, perhaps out of lack of opportunity or just genuine laziness. However, when given the opportunity, I wanted to seize it to gain a unique skill that could be very helpful in both my life and those within my community. I know firsthand the issues that can arise from communication barriers, especially with children who arrive here speaking little to no English. My mom says once a week how she wishes she knew how to speak Swahili to speak to her students. I am privileged to have this opportunity and hope to discover new ways to use this skill to benefit the community around me.

Declan Shaughnessy is an undergraduate at Northwestern University.

Congratulations to Swahili students who won prestigious study abroad scholarships

Three Swahili students have won prestigious language scholarships to study Swahili this summer. **Shelby Mohrs** (anthropology PhD candidate) has won the Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) Program for study in Arusha, Tanzania, awarded by the US Department of State’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs; **Chelsea Angwenyi** (social policy), a third-year student, and **Nicholas Bucciarelle**, a first-year student, have been awarded Fulbright-Hays Swahili Group Project Abroad scholarships to study in Kenya. In addition, **Barak Tucker**, a first-year student, has been accepted into the Howard University Swahili Study Abroad (HUSSA). **Beckett Sands** (sophomore psychology major and elementary Swahili student) and **Gideon Pardo** (sophomore studying journalism) were awarded scholarships by the Undergraduate Research Office to travel to Rwanda this summer to explore the impact of the new mathematics curriculum on Rwandan high school learners.