The seventeenth-century Ethiopian book The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Wälättä P̣eţros (Gädlä Wälättä P̣eţros) features a life-long partnership between two women and the depiction of same-sex sexuality among nuns. The earliest known book-length biography about the life of an African woman, written in 1672 in the Gəˁəz language, Gädlä Wälättä P̣eţros is an extraordinary account of early modern African women’s lives—full of vivid dialogue, heartbreak, and triumph. It features revered Ethiopian religious leader Wälättä P̣eţros (1592-1642), who led a nonviolent movement against European proto-colonialism in Ethiopia in a successful fight to retain African Christian beliefs, for which she was elevated to sainthood in the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church. An important part of the text is her friendship with another nun, Ǝxaţä Krəstos, “lived together in mutual love, like soul and body” until death. Interpreting the women’s relationships in this Ethiopian text requires care, but queer theory provides useful warnings, framing, and interpretive tools. The talk emerges out of Prof. Belcher’s work with Michael Kleiner to translate the text, which will be published in 2015 by Princeton University Press as The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Wälättä P̣eţros: A Translation of a Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an African Woman.

Dr. Belcher is graciously hosted by Dr. Nush Powell of the English Department.