

Current Trends, Uncommon Paths: Decolonising the Academia through Feminism Workshop

organised by Martina Kopf and Lisa Tackie

University of Vienna, Department of African Studies
13th-14th of January 2022 via Zoom



Decolonisation as a process has long ceased to refer only to the 'official' withdrawal of European colonial powers from various parts of the world. Rather, the concept of decolonisation is increasingly **used and reinterpreted to refer to the inequalities and power mechanisms that guide our world, to challenge them, and thus to open up new debates.** This concept can be stretched and formed and used in new ways, like movements such as 'Rhodes must fall' indicate. In the academic world, the desire for decolonisation has launched a number of initiatives globally in recent years to liberate university education from a one-sided orientation to 'Western' institutions and knowledge traditions and to open it up to knowledge that has been and continues to be marginalised by old and new imperialisms: Decolonise the curriculum! Decolonise education! Decolonise the academia!

This should, of course, include the **dismantling of gender hierarchies** and a **transformation of patriarchal notions of gender.** A number of feminist researchers such as María Lugones (Toward a Decolonial Feminism, 2010), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity, 2003) or Sylvia Tamale (Decolonization and Afro-Feminism, 2020) have laid the foundations for a decolonial feminist approach in the academia. They emphasize that 'gender' and 'coloniality/racality' cannot be treated separately, but must be seen intertwined and interactive. As Tamale argues for the decolonisation of universities in Africa, this **cannot be limited to changing the curriculum, but needs to address research policy, the inclusion of diversity, didactic methods as well as the institutional ethos**, i.e. the fundamental culture of the university. Changes at one level without considering the other layers will remain incomplete. In all these layers, as she further shows, gender is critically involved.

In this workshop we would like to **highlight ideas, approaches and implementations of decolonisation at universities in Africa as well as in Europe from a feminist perspective.** In doing so, we link to an understanding of feminism as holistic, social transformation shaped by African thinkers and women of colour, which challenges 'all forms of domination, in particular as they relate to patriarchy, race, class, sexuality and global imperialism' (Decolonization and Afro-Feminism, 2020, xiii).

Taking this understanding as an inspiration for this workshop, we aspire to make room for current trends and innovative ways of challenging and transforming the academia through decolonial feminist thought and practice. As key question we want to pose:

How do we make the intellectual work of women – in particular Women of Colour – in these different levels of decolonisation visible?

Please register via lisa.tackie@univie.ac.at to participate in the Workshop!

THURSDAY 13.01.2022

10.00 - 10.10: Introduction

10.10 - 11.30: Keynote

Tomi Adeaga *Mapping African Feminisms in Africa and the Diaspora*

11.30 - 13.00: Panel 1 Institutional Strategies

T. Akachi Ezeigbo *Towards a Decolonised and Transformed Academia and Community through Snail-Sense Feminism, an Indigenous Model*

Esther Mbithi *What Is “_She”_ Like? A Reading of Research Articles that Focus on Female Characters in the Fictional Work of Female Authors*

13.00 - 14.00: Break

14.00 - 16.00: Panel 2 Afrofeminist Knowledge in Solidarity and Resistance

Uhuru Phalafala *The Matriarchive as Bedrock of Black Revolutionary Thought*

Faith Mkwesha and Paola Minoia *Unlearning and Relearning Academic Practices through Co-motherhood and Sahwirahood*

Birgit Englert *How Feminist South-South Solidarities challenge Discourses on Decolonization: The Example of Black-Palestinian Solidarities*

16.00 -16.30: Break

16.30 - 18.30: Roundtable

Discussion on Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa

Chair: Gabeba Baderoon and Desiree Lewis

Participants: Danai Mupotsa, Pumla Dineo Gqola and Panashe Chigumadzi

FRIDAY 14.01.2022

11.00 - 12.30: Panel organised by Students of the Seminar "Feminist Africa" at the University of Vienna

12.30 - 13.00: Break

13.00 - 15.00: Panel 3 Transforming Global Canons

Betty Okot *The Perisistent Eclipse of Indigenous African Knowledge Traditions and Feminist Thought in Academia*

Anke Graneß *Towards a Transformation of the Historiography of Philosophy*

Dobrota Pucherova *African Feminism in the 21st Century: Victories and Disappointments*

15.00 - 15.15: Break

15.15-16.00: Concluding Session

THURSDAY 13.01.2022

10.10 - 11.30: Keynote *Mapping African Feminisms in Africa and the Diaspora*

Tomi Adeaga teaches African literature at the Department of African Studies, at the University of Vienna, Austria. She has published articles such as “Sexuality, Resilience, and Mobility in Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* and Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*,” in *Women Writing Diaspora: Transnational Perspectives in the 21st Century*. Rose Sackeyfio (ed.), (2021), and others. Her areas of interest include African Gender Studies, African literature studies, African Diaspora Studies, translation and transnational studies.

11.30 - 13.00: Panel 1 *Institutional Strategies*

Chair: Miša Krenčeyová

T. Akachi Ezeigbo *Towards a Decolonised and Transformed Academia and Community through Snail-Sense Feminism, an Indigenous Model*

One of the issues trending in scholarship today is “decolonisation of knowledge”. How can knowledge be decolonised in tertiary institutions to make allowances for an integrative and inclusive future that makes for social justice? In the world, whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is being undervalued? I believe this workshop would deal with issues of decolonisation through feminism not only in the academia but also other sites such as the media and the society in general. In 2002, I became Head of English Department at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, and it was my responsibility to manage the affairs of the Department, including ensuring the smooth delivery of lectures and the general welfare of students and staff. Out of twenty teaching staff, only three were females in a Department where most of the students were girls. One year in office, I ensured that three new qualified female lecturers were employed. The aim was to decolonize notions of gender, promote inclusion and increase women’s contribution to knowledge. The works of more female authors were included in the curriculum. Based on my sometimes painful experiences as a woman operating in a patriarchal society, I have devoted significant research effort to the lives of women of my community – past and present – in order to make their experiences known for the purpose of individual and societal reorientation and re-education. In this paper, I intend to highlight my own home-grown feminist theory known as Snail-sense feminism which has been effective in dismantling gender hierarchies and transforming patriarchal attitudes in tertiary institutions and communities in my country – an indigenous model that allows the tenets of inclusion, equity, negotiation and dialogue to thrive in the academia and the society at large. I conclude by asserting that there is much modern society can learn from workable feminist concepts in order to create positive change in society

Akachi Ezeigbo is a Professor of English at Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria. She has been awarded visiting Fellowships in the United Kingdom, South Africa and Germany and has given Keynote Lectures in universities in the USA. She propounded the feminist theory known as Snail-sense Feminism and is an award-winning researcher and writer.

Esther Mbithi *What is “_she”_ like? A reading of research articles that focus on female characters in the fictional work of female authors*

In Kenyan Universities, an effort has been made to include works by female writers on the primary reading lists of literature units at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In this study, we shall examine the primary reading lists of undergraduate and graduate literature units at Kenyatta University, eventually focussing on research articles that deal with creative work produced by female authors: an examination of how the research articles deal with the female characters in creative work such as Yvonne Owuor’s *Dust*; Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash*; Beatrice Culleton’s *April Raintree*; and Rebeka Njau’s *The Sacred Seed*. Our research will be guided by the critical lens of intersectional feminism.

Esther Mbithi is a senior lecturer in the Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Kenyatta University. A non-militant feminist, Dr. Mbithi believes in equal access for all, to available resources and opportunities.

14.00 - 16.00: Panel 2 Afrofeminist Knowledge in Solidarity and Resistance

Chair: Anaïs Angelo

Uhuru Phalafala *The Matriarchive as Bedrock of Black Revolutionary Thought*

In the rural countryside of Southern Africa throughout the twentieth century, grandmothers, mothers, and great aunts – those purportedly trampled by the forward march of modernity's progressive narrative and excised from racialized and gendered capitalist modernity – practiced indispensable traditions and cultures that comprise sacred mythologies, cosmologies, spiritual practices, and genres of being and knowing, that are substantive in the project of re/imagining the western liberal humanist project in the humanities and social sciences. My project mobilizes embodied, performative, and oral knowledges, as well as ecological, economic, and spiritual practices of Black women in the matriarchive – a key decolonial archive that is at the root of southern African radical opposition to colonial apartheid hegemony, which always already rendered it incomplete. Matriarchival knowledges shaped communitarian structures of feeling that were foundational to a black radicalism primarily invested in the “integral totality of the people”, and not simply a dialectical negation of Western civilization (Robinson 73). I argue that this geo-specific ethos is matrilineal.

I situate the rural context of Southern Africa in selected cultural production as foundational to a particular tenor of cultural and spiritual sensibilities, to which resistance politics were tethered. The attunement and investment by its proponents reveal the potentiating value of rurality as sites of black cultural, political, and spiritual paradigm-shattering epistemes. This redresses the balance between the so-called advanced urban metropolises and the backwards rural countryside, where in the case of South Africa these geographies were racialized and gendered. I recast rural intellectual and imaginative traditions in the making progressive urban and revolutionary politics, with the matriarchive as nucleic. In following some of these cultural workers' projects into the black diaspora where they were exiled by the apartheid regime, I map the trajectory of matrilineal knowledges in the making of black international politics in pan-Africanist circuits.

Uhuru Phalafala (PhD, University of Cape Town) is a lecturer in the English department at Stellenbosch University. She is the 2020-2021 alumni of the Future Professors Program. Her research interests are material and expressive cultures, apartheid- & Cold War-era cultural circuitries, black internationalism, translation, decoloniality, and world literatures. She heads a Mellon-funded research project 'Recovering Subterranean Archives', which investigates South African culture in exile, to repatriate and republish it. She is the co-editor of *Safundi* Special Issue on “Cultural Solidarities: Apartheid and itineraries of expressive culture”, and is completing her book project on *Black Radical Traditions From The South*.

Faith Mkwesha and Paola Minoia *Unlearning and Relearning Academic Practices through Co-motherhood and Sahwira*

With this paper, we intend to reflect on a story of institutionalized racism and the solidarity that has connected one another as feminists. The story is personal and, at the same time, political. The area in focus is that of the academy as a location of white-centered social relations (Keskinen et al. 2021), following events that occurred in the public space. The events concern the profiling of black lives (in this specific case: violence against an adolescent child) and daily insecurity, and fear of expressing, within the academy, the effects of violence and lack of institutional protection. We discovered that intersectional inequality, affecting the positioning of diverse scholars in the academic career and networking, also exists in anti-racist academic groups. Scholars who do not concentrate on publishing in highly ranked academic venues but also engage in political activism and criticism towards institutions, encounter more difficulties, isolation, and work precariousness. Pseudo-activism is normalised, disciplined, and well supported when expressed in abstract terms, or scrutinizing foreign institutions. On the contrary, discrimination is not addressed, if it questions local academy or other national institutions. Against this backdrop, our quest for academic solidarity for the case of racial violence received poor reactions or paternalistic and silencing responses. Based on that, the authors decided to act through decolonial strategies of co-motherhood (Takševa 2018) and sahwirahood (Mkwesha and Huber 2021). Co-motherhood involves collective care of children and beloved ones; it is a community caring practice, based on both original cultures of the two authors: rooted in their cultural traditions and feminist at the same time (Chilisa and Ntseane 2010). Sahwira is instead an ubuntu-centred practice in use in Zimbabwe (one of the authors' country of origin) involving solidarity, voicing, and healing, both reflective and transformative, which can humanise relations in the academy. We propose Sahwira as inspiring relations of trust that create new feminist mediation spaces. In our specific case, Sahwira has allowed a "scale jumping" (Minoia and Mølkanen, 2021) of the conflict mediation through the mobilization of other actors and their spaces. Thus, with the involvement of an international decolonial network, we crossed the limits of the legal mediation space forged by national(ist) institutions. We will discuss in particular the process that lead to a statement that produced a positive impact nationally: <https://decolonise.eu/racial-violence-will-not-be-tolerated/>.

Paola Minoia, Universities of Helsinki and Turin, is the PI of a participatory research on Ecocultural pluralism in the Ecuadorian Amazonia and a member of the EU/COST Network Decolonising Development.

Faith Mkwesha, Helsinki University, Swedish School of Social Sciences. Also, Founder and Director of a feminist organisation SahWira Africa International NGO. Managing Committee member of a project Feminist and Queer Solidarities Beyond Borders Supported by Nordic Ministers and hosted at Gothenburg University. Also member of the EU/COST Network Decolonising Development.

Birgit Englert *How Feminist South-South Solidarities challenge Discourses on Decolonization: The Example of Black-Palestinian Solidarities*

In my contribution, I would like to discuss solidarity by Women of Colour with Palestinians and explore how and why these are pushed to the margins even within discourses on decolonization.

Feminist scholars and writers such as Angela Davis, Chandra Mohanty or Alice Walker have for many years been in the forefront of articulating solidarity with Palestinians who resist the ongoing occupation of their land by the state of Israel. Since 2005, Palestinians have organised themselves in a Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS) – a non-violent transnational movement which draws directly on the Anti-Apartheid movement which helped end racial domination in South Africa.

Especially in Germany and Austria, but also in other European countries, BDS has been condemned as an allegedly antisemitic movement by national assemblies and this perspective is also widely perpetuated by most media and even in academic contexts. As the Black US-American journalist and human rights scholar Michelle Alexander wrote in an article for the New York Times in 2019, Palestine remains a topic which even people who consider themselves as “progressive” prefer to remain silent about. In the German speaking context, Alexander’s point has been underscored since spring 2020 in the debate which was sparked off by accusations of antisemitism against Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe.

My paper will offer an analysis of various texts by Black feminist scholars from scholarly, artistic, and activist contexts who expressed solidarity with Palestinians, often in reaction to experiences they made while travelling in Palestine. I aim to give these texts more visibility and ask why this form of South-South solidarity is rarely acknowledged even in scholarly contexts where other texts by the very same scholars are discussed. I argue that this is an expression of incomplete decolonization in academic and activist circles and thus needs to be addressed in debates on this very issue.

Birgit Englert is an Associate Professor in African History and Society at the Department of African Studies, University of Vienna, Austria. Her research focuses on land rights, popular culture, translocality and mobility as well as research methodologies. Currently, she is working on a project which aims at writing a history of entangled solidarities between actors in African countries and Palestine.

16.30 - 18.30: Roundtable Discussion on Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa

Chair: Gabeba Baderoon and Desiree Lewis

Participants: Danai Mupotsa, Pumla Dineo Gqola and Panashe Chigumadzi

Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa (2021) is the first collection dedicated to contemporary Black South African feminist perspectives. Leading feminist theorist, Desiree Lewis, and poet and feminist scholar, Gabeba Baderoon, have curated contributions by some of the finest writers and thought leaders into an essential resource. Radical polemic sits side by side with personal essays, and critical theory coexists with rich and stirring life histories. The collection demonstrates a dazzling range of feminist voices from established scholars and authors to emerging thinkers, activists and creative practitioners.

The writers within these pages use creative expression, photography and poetry in eclectic, interdisciplinary ways to unearth and interrogate representations of blackness, sexuality, girlhood, history, divinity, and other themes. *Surfacing* asks: what do the African feminist traditions that exist outside the canon look and feel like? What complex cultural logics are at work outside the centers of power? How do spirituality and feminism influence each other? What are the histories and experiences of queer Africans? What imaginative forms can feminist activism take?

Surfacing is indispensable to anyone interested in feminism from Africa, which its contributors show in vivid and challenging conversation with the rest of the world. It will appeal to a diverse audience of students, activists, critical thinkers, academics and artists.

Gabeba Baderoon is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *The History of Intimacy*, and the monograph *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. She co-directs the African Feminist Initiative at Penn State University, where she is an Associate Professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and African Studies.

Desiree Lewis teaches in the Women's and Gender Studies Department at the University of the Western Cape. As an interdisciplinary feminist scholar and intellectual activist, she has also taught at several other South African universities and held visiting professorships and chairs. She has published widely on feminism in Africa, literary and cultural studies, as well as sexualities, gender and embodied identities.

Danai Mupotsa is a Senior Lecturer in African Literature in the School of Literature, Language and Media at Wits. Her research interests are race, sex, gender and intimacies. In 2020, she published the Portuguese translation of her debut poetry collection, *feeling and ugly*, and recently co-edited 'Time Out of Joint: The Queer and the Customary' in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Mupotsa is a 2020 Atlantic Fellows for Racial Equity

FRIDAY 14.01.2022

11.00 - 12.30: Panel organised by Students of the Seminar "Feminist Africa"

Chair: Lisa Tackie

We from the seminar Feminist Africa of the Department of African Studies in cooperation with Gender Studies at the University of Vienna and as part of the workshop "Current Trends, Uncommon Paths: Decolonizing the Academia through Feminism" wondered how the visualization of inclusion and exclusion practices of Flinta* (women, lesbians, inter-, non-binary, trans- and a-gender persons) and BIPOC persons in the education sector can look like.

On the one hand, we wanted to gather (collective) insights in the course of a group discussion to visualize the experiences of affected people in the higher education sector, to highlight the problems that inhibit decolonization and to reveal subversive practices in an inherently racist institution. On the other hand, we also want to call for a dialogue in the wake of a panel in which we identify possible approaches that can help decolonize Austrian universities. We are convinced that decolonization cannot be discussed in absence of intersectional feminist discourses.

Viola Innerhuber, Master student of African Studies

Marielle Lath, activist and Master student of African Studies

Dorith Nopper, Master student of Gender Studies

Nora Winter, Master student of Gender Studies

13.00 - 14.30: Panel 3 Transforming Global Canons

Chair: Martina Kopf

Betty Okot *The Perisistent Eclipse of Indigenous African Knowledge Traditions and Feminist Thought in Academia*

Women have always been influencing across socio-political spaces in Africa despite predominant narratives suggesting otherwise. They have over the years been portrayed as silent, weak, oppressed and subjugated in society. However, a legal, feminist, sociological and political reading of African precolonial history show women in different light. There was a silent hegemony displayed in political, family, religious and cultural domains as mistresses of social events, advocates, 'chiefs of war,' matrimonial agents, protagonists of own destinies, and above all agents of good will in controlling male excesses. Drawing on feminist imaginaries from the Acholi and other cultures in Uganda, I reflect on the eclipse of the African woman's hegemony in post-colonial contexts. I explore, how this obscurity affected her contributions in the socio-political space and limited this to state politics, save for the few who ventured into the area. Drawing my PhD work on the Acholi of Uganda, I reach beyond the widely accepted concept of decolonization and re-interpretation of inequalities and power mechanisms considered to be guiding the African feminist world, to illustrate from contextual and oral historical accounts, that the pre-colonial African woman had more visibility and voice compared to her so-called contemporary emancipated counterparts. I depict her as a stakeholder in indigenous knowledge production and intergenerational learning, who challenged male dominance, and was a repository of knowledge in medicine, spirituality and social security. Hence, it is vital to make women of color more visible in the decolonization debate, by recognizing their cultural-historical wealth of knowledge and support their contributions in modern scholarship.

Betty J. Okot recently published on gender, war and peace (2018) and patriarchy and women's land rights (2021). Her current research explores past and contemporary understanding of customary laws in Acholiland. She is at the Child Health and Development Centre, Makerere University. She was Co-Investigator on the Refugee Responses to Covid-19 study, Makerere University.

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Anke Graneß *Towards a Transformation of the Historiography of Philosophy*

In this paper, I would like to present a research project which aims to contribute to the transformation of research and teaching in philosophy (in the sense of revealing and overcoming racist and sexist structures) and, thus, to a decolonisation of our discipline: Reinhart Koselleck Project "Histories of Philosophy in Global Perspective".

A historiography of philosophy that wants to do justice to both the global and intercultural entanglements of philosophical traditions and current calls for decolonisation of research and teaching cannot continue narratives of the history of philosophy of the last two hundred years and merely add a few examples from other regions of the world to them. Rather, the mechanisms that first led to the exclusion of non-European philosophical traditions as well as of women philosophers from the prevailing narratives must be critically examined, and methodological problems that arise anew in connection with the systematization of non-European traditions of philosophy must be thoroughly considered. This includes a critical reflection on the impact of historical events with global effects such as European expansion, colonialism and slavery on philosophical theories within and outside Europe, the question of the status of orally transmitted philosophical traditions and concepts in the historiography of philosophy, as well as the reconstruction of philosophical knowledge of women in the different regions of the world. Equally urgent is the examination of traditions of the historiography of philosophy in non-European languages. Taking seriously the call of the German philosopher Reinhart Koselleck to realize that each present was once an imagined future, our project aims to show not only the plurality of philosophical traditions in all regions of the world but also traditions of the historiography of philosophy in non-European languages, in order to broaden the theoretical background for insights into the history of philosophy. We have collected extensive bibliographic collections of all books and manuscripts on the history of philosophy published to date, from the beginnings of the writing of the history of philosophy up to the 21st century, in selected European and non-European languages: <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/en/histories-of-philosophy/histories-of-philosophy/>. In my lecture, I will give an overview and review of the data collected so far and the new challenges for the historiography of philosophy.

Anke Graness is managing director of the Reinhart Koselleck Project "Histories of Philosophy in a Global Perspective" (University of Hildesheim) and Visiting Professor at the Department of Philosophy (University of Wuppertal). Her research interests include the historiography of philosophy with a particular focus on philosophy in Africa and of women philosophers.

Dobrota Pucherova *African Feminism in the 21st Century: Victories and Dissapointments*

I am arguing that African feminism has become a global phenomenon in the 21st century. It is more visible than ever in international feminist forums and is actively shaping the global feminist debate through influential texts that have been appropriated worldwide. Contrary to postcolonial feminism of late 20th century, which focused on the differences between women's experiences, African women writers and feminists of the new millennium see feminism as a transcontinental movement that reacts to a global backlash against women's emancipatory victories. This epistemic shift in African feminism has been enabled by the Africans' increased mobility, digitalisation, and participation in transnational women's movements, as well as by the transformations within Western feminism, which has become more inclusive of diversity. For these women, the "African vs. Western feminism" is no longer the analytical frame of inquiry. On the other hand, African feminist thought continues to be neglected within African/general philosophy discussions. Male scholars continue to ignore women's contributions to topics such as modernity, postmodernity, identity, or Africa's position in the world. This shows that the knowledge created by African women continues to be marginalized in the traditionally male-dominated field of philosophy, where more gender awareness is needed.

Dobrota Pucherova is Senior Researcher at the Institute of World Literature (Slovak Academy of Sciences) in Bratislava and a Lecturer in the Department of African Studies and the Department of European and Comparative Literature at the University of Vienna.

Organisation

Martina Kopf is a Senior Lecturer in African literatures at the Department of African Studies, University of Vienna, and Elise Richter Fellow with a research project on 'Concepts of development in postcolonial Kenyan literature' (Austrian Science Fund, FWF). With Anke Graneß and Magdalena Kraus, she wrote *Feministische Theorie aus Afrika, Asien und Lateinamerika* (2019). Furthermore, she has published on development theory and critique in African writing (Kenya) and issues of literary witnessing and trauma.

Lisa Tackie is studying African Studies in the MA programme at the University of Vienna. Since 2019, she has held the position of one of three elected study representatives of African Studies. Furthermore, she is student assistant for the racism-critical Working Group at the Department of African Studies as well as in a research project on "Concepts of Development in Postcolonial Kenyan Literature" (Austrian Science Funds FWF). The focus of her studies and her work is research on diaspora and racism with an intersectional approach.

Moderation

Anaïs Angelo is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of African Studies, University of Vienna. She is currently writing on women's parliamentary politics in post-colonial Kenya. Her research interest include African presidential powers, African women's postcolonial history, archives and sources and biography writing.

Miša Krenčeyová is interested in the intersectional dynamics of power relations and the politics of empowerment in various historical and regional contexts. Based in Vienna/Austria, she has a background in Development Studies and African Studies and works as a lecturer, trainer, facilitator, and consultant on issues related to social justice.

Research project "Concepts of development in postcolonial Kenyan literature" (Austrian Science Funds, FWF)

FWF Der Wissenschaftsfonds.