

Tropical Botany in Exile. Mona Lisa Steiner (1914-2000): Scientific Continuities, Transfers and Practices in Austria and the Philippines

In 1938, the Austrian botanist Mona Lisa Steiner (1915-2000) fled to the Philippines to escape National Socialist persecution, where she managed to build up a new existence and to establish herself within a few years as an expert on the tropical flora of the Philippines. After her re-migration to Austria in 1965, Steiner described her escape to the Pacific island-nation as a botanical expedition, which resulted in the set-up of a research location with corresponding institutional, personal and material resources. During the second third of the 20th century, research on the physiology and biodiversity of plants of tropical and subtropical climatic or geographical regions in the metropolises of science depended mainly on sources attained from botanic expeditions, while some research institutions at the periphery, such as botanical gardens, allowed intrinsic research on endemic plants in their natural habitats. In both cases, tropical botany functioned as a framework for the global transfer of scientific and cultural knowledge and practices, which also had a key impact in many other spheres of society. The image of the profitable scientific, political, cultural and economic exploitation of nature was marked by the arrangement of plants in so-called taxonomic families that were also characterized by standardised knowledge of their medical, nutritional and economical utility. Tropical botany, within the international and interdisciplinary network of research and in the context of a cross-cultural transfer of knowledge beyond the boundaries of disciplines and countries in the era of World War II (WWII), post-war and decolonisation, thus followed different research agendas and activities in the centers and at the periphery of science. This can be followed and found reflected in the scientific work of Mona Lisa Steiner. But, as her scientific working style in theory and practice may also owe much to the specific historical, social, gender related and political context of her education and professional development in the era of the Second World War and the exile of science, her activities should also be looked at in a wider perspective. Thus, the planned research project focuses on an epistemological analysis of tropical botanical research and the polyvalent phenomena of global knowledge and plant transfer in the second third of the 20th century, and does so against the background of specific perspectives of gender in science, science in exile as well as the history of women in exile. The key questions of the proposed project are: *How did the global transfer of knowledge and practice influence the agendas and foci of tropical botanical research of an Austrian botanist in the Philippines? How were these developments dynamically linked with the epistemic, political, social and cultural shifts in 20th century history of science?*