

Cultural Memory and Travel Writing: the case of Ida Pfeiffer

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Abstract

This essay examines the 19th century travelogues of Ida Pfeiffer and argues that travel writing participates in the creation and preservation of history, culture and identity. Focusing on moments of cultural representation of indigenous people, Ida Pfeiffer's accounts of other cultures and subsequently her own are of interest. Even though she is heavily influenced by her European background and dominant theories of racial superiority, by appropriating a space for herself as a woman traveler inside a male dominated field she also gives space to a new voice and creates a new female identity that is passed on to the next generation of women. In that regard, her work participates in the creation of western female 'songlines' that produce as well as preserve cultural memory.

Key Words: 19th century travel writing, song lines, women and identity, aboriginal traditions, indigenous cultures, South America, cultural memory

*The song still remains which names
the land over which it sings.*

Heidegger What Are Poets For?

Europeans refer to the way the Australian Aboriginals trace history as "Songlines" or "Dreaming-tracks" while Aboriginals refer to "the labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia" as the "Footprints of the Ancestors" or the "Way of the Law" (Chatwin 2). This visual/invisible oral history keeps the ancient worlds and memories alive as well as traces the past. For the Aboriginal, the land has to be sung into being and the song cycles describe how the features, the landmarks of the land were created and named during the Dreamtime, the timeless era when the giants, heroes and monsters that serve as totems for the Aboriginal tribes walked the earth. This act of creation stipulates that everything first exists as an idea or image in the mind. It must first be perceived and named before it can exist. The man doing his 'walkabout' is on a ritual journey, tracing the footprints of his ancestors and by singing the stanzas in their original form without changing any word or note he recreates the creation and connects to the past. For the Aboriginal, songlines stretch not only across Australia but also across continents and ages. Wherever men have been a trail of song is left.

This vision of man's place in the world as outlined by the songlines can be found in other cultures also, such as the Nazca-lines of Peru which present a kind of totemic map, the lines of cosmic energy or Ley-lines of Britain, the Dragon-lines or geomancy of Feng-Shui as well as the Singing Stones of the Lapps in Finland. What they all have in common is a recognition of powerful currents and lines of magnetism running invisibly through the landscape over the whole surface of the earth explaining creation and myth.

Western culture's concept of the hero's journey, the hero's cycle of departure, trials, conquest and return, functions in a similar way as the oral tradition of songlines. The myth of the hero is made up by fragments of the soul-life of early man. The hero, a traveler, is on a quest to explore, expand and conquer. The first known hero whose quest has been written in stone and passed down through times is Gilgamesh and ultimately his quest reveals a quest of self-knowledge and identity, which is inadvertently connected to knowing one's past. Even though we identify history with the written word, mental pictures and images play a large role in our understanding of the world and in the production of cultural representation and cultural values.

In this essay I discuss the travelogues of Ida Pfeiffer and argue that travel writing participates in the creation and preservation of history, culture and identity. Travel writing gained a large readership in the 1700s and participated in the creation of European identity in relation to other cultures. In travel accounts of the 18th and 19th century, representation of the colonizing culture as superior to the colonized and indigenous culture is the norm. By the 1800s, few parts of the world remained unexplored. Improved communications and modes of transportation as well as a gradual loosening of cultural and social restrictions made it possible for women to enter the world of explorers, missionaries, and adventurers. Consequently, by the 19th century women were highly proliferate participants in the new genre of travel writing. Accounts of journeys made by women traveling alone subscribed to stereotypical images of the exotic and savage ‘other’ while simultaneously offering new insights and visions of otherness (see Siebert).

Focusing on moments of cultural representation of indigenous people, Ida Pfeiffer’s accounts of other cultures and subsequently her own are of interest. Even though she is heavily influenced by her European background and dominant theories of racial superiority, by appropriating a space for herself as a woman traveler inside a male dominated field she inadvertently also gives space to a new voice and creates a new female identity that is passed on to the next generation of women. In that regard, her work participates in the creation of western female “songlines” that produce as well as preserve cultural memory.

When Heidegger says, “the song still remains which names the land over which it sings” he voices Hadamard’s rejection of “the view that thinking is possible only with the use of language” (Hadamard xi). Albert Einstein when describing his thinking process, did not give words a dominant role. He instead relied on “certain signs and more or less clear images” (Hadamard 142) before connecting logical concepts and word constructions. The science of songlines, feng shui, or singing stones recognizes invisible powerful currents and lines connecting a people to their past and land. In that regard, memory is a mix of logical verbal concepts and non-verbal images and signs. The Greeks made memory a goddess, Mnemosyne. Not surprisingly, she is the mother of the nine muses whom she conceived in the course of nine nights spent with Zeus. Her role is to remind mankind of its heroes and their high deeds as well as preside over lyric poetry. It is the poet who possesses or is possessed by memory. She is the seer of the past, a witness of ancient times and the age of origins. She uses imagery, symbols and metaphors to draw a map and lines to the past and to man’s soul. The mere act of being could not be comprehended without the memory to a past. In order to be, woman has to remember that she is, lest her identity vanishes behind a cloud of incomprehensible confusion. And like the historian, the poet as keeper of memory preserves the collective, external memory as well as the individual, internal memory. It is the poet, the writer, who helps man to recognize himself and others, which in turn serves in recognizing causes and effects. The interconnectedness of everything is understood through memory as well as the concept of time, the distinction between a ‘before’ and ‘after’.

For the Aboriginal culture, the connection to the land lies in the visible and invisible paths and signs that are passed on and are vital to its identity. They are more than geographical lines, more than paths to memorial grounds, more than a navigation system. They are the Aboriginal’s spiritual paths connecting him to his past and to his future. Traditionally, an Aboriginal at the age of thirteen goes on a ‘walkabout’, a rite of passage that leads the young man back to his roots and gives him a navigation system for his life. There he learns to walk the songlines and add his own identity to the lines. Rites of passage are a vital part of many cultures and rely on images and signs as much as the spoken word. They present a way to connect the new generation to the past as well as provide a platform to create a future. One might argue they are also a way to reinforce a patriarchal system since women’s rites of passage in most cultures are less defined or less known due to their limited public role in the community. Nevertheless, there are many rites-of-passage for girls as they begin and complete puberty. Well known are the bat mitzvah, the quinceañera, the Sweet 16 and a beautiful Apache ceremony called Na’ii’ees, which usually takes place the summer after a girl has her first period and commemorates the story of Esdzanadehe, the first woman. It originally lasted a few days, during which a girl, covered with a golden mixture of cornmeal and clay, became imbued with the power of the first woman and received the ability to heal and bring blessings to her community.

The songlines like travelogues lie at the intersection of collective and individual memories and aid in preserving the memory of places, things and people. Like a painter who paints what he sees within, the travel writer has to invite the reader to participate in the landscape of the travelogue and not simply portrait the outwardly visible world. The writing participates in connecting to the past, future and a cultural identity.

As the songlines trace the past and bring it to life in the present, travel writing of the 19th century participated in appropriating the new world for its purposes and in creating new paths that connected diverse cultures. Typically, the Westerner was interested in expanding his known world, adding new possessions as well as defining himself against a foreign culture and inadvertently creating a bridge between the cultures. For the travel writer, male or female, the impossibility of an objective view creates problems of authenticity since travelogues played and still play a major role in the cultural representation of other nations, peoples and continents. Back home their printed accounts were taken as facts, which have lost their relevance in the 21st century but their influence still fuels European view of superiority. Many travelogues from the 19th century present images of unknown lands, plants and people pitting them against a European standard of superiority.

Ida Pfeiffer (1797-1858) was born in Austria and did not travel until her children were grown up and she was separated from her husband, Her books were translated into seven languages and she is most famous for her travels to Iceland, the Holy Land, Madagascar and her journey around the world. As a European and a woman traveling alone in the 19th century, Ida Pfeiffer identified with the colonizer and displayed eurocentric sentiments found in the discourse of the empire. In Madagascar, for example, she describes the ugliness of a princess who is wearing western clothes.

[...] our fashion seems downright baroque and ridiculous when natural beauty and grace are lacking – the more so with those crude figures and their dark ape-like faces.
(*Verschwörung* 191)ⁱ

Yet, she is also ambiguous in ‘reading’ her surroundings, in her position within the imperial discourse as well as in her marginal position as a woman. Ida Pfeiffer exhibits attitudes and enforces stereotypes by seeing with a European mind but her written “song” often reveals an unknown world open to new perspectives on different cultures as well as gender roles. Her travelogues function like a map, spinning and weaving invisible lines over the land she (dis)-covers as well as over the culturally defined image of woman. Even so she follows in the footsteps of her male predecessors she also explores unknown territory. While escaping the cultural confines of her native Austria she is very careful not to appear too daring and goes to great length to refute any doubts on her honorable reputation as a middle-aged widow. In *Eine Frau fährt um die Welt*. (A Woman’s Journey Round the World) in 1846, she informs the reader that she is neither knowledgeable nor witty enough to infer judgments on her experiences.

The only gift to which I can lay claim is that of narrating in a simple manner the different scenes in which I have played a part, and the different objects I have beheld; if I ever pronounce an opinion, I do so merely on my own personal experience. (*Eine Frau* 5)ⁱⁱ

At the same time she compares herself to the painter and poet who are compelled by an inner force to paint and to write as she is compelled to travel and impart her experiences. This slyly and inadvertently gives her an authority, a *raison d’être*, for her work and argues for its value.

One of Ida Pfeiffer’s greatest concerns was to find a balance between relaying what she experienced with knowing that it was merely a subjective and not a universal truth. Fellow male travelers like Alexander von Humboldt used their scientific research as a point of departure and only occasionally referred to human settlements and customs in their accounts (see Fisch). Ida Pfeiffer felt compelled to repeatedly point out her lack of an education and background for scientific accounts due to being a woman. This repeated defense sheds light on the gender gap and prevalent gender inequality. On the other hand it is also a publicity stunt by appealing to the conservative reader who might not approve of her wish to get away from the societal conventions that imprisoned a woman in her times. She sees objectivity as a tool of science and education to which she as a woman has no access and therefore she is not in a position to claim any authority. Yet this act of disclaiming any authority gave her the ‘authority’ or freedom to take a critical stance towards her own society and its treatment of women as well as its treatment of foreigners. Traveling was her ‘walkabout’, her rite of passage and allowed her to be in charge of her life in a way that was not possible at home. It also allowed her to see her culture with a different and critical eye and to imagine a different life. She expressed regret and made references to an imprisoned life, “ein Joch” (a yoke) (*Eine Frau* 62) ruled by conventions upon returning home. However, even so she longed to travel she never considered emigrating and felt sorry for the Europeans who did (Jehle 63). Living a different life while traveling was all she needed.

The root of her independent self-assured stance lies in her belief that she as a civilized European was superior to any of the less civilized and colonized people she met. She repeats the European claim of superiority while at the same time she is aware of her socially inferior status as a woman and the inherent hypocrisy which she questions. This ambiguity is a central element in her writing and informs the reader of prevalent patriarchal and colonial structures. What appears peculiar about Ida Pfeiffer's writing is her strange detachment to people – host and native alike – as a means to convey objectivity. She relies heavily on other Europeans, the colonizers, to provide shelter and guidance. It is her status as a lone female traveler that incites curiosity and helps her gain entrance to higher places. This detached voice can be heard for example when she describes her experience of being attacked in Brazil. Here she offers an interpretation by connecting the attacker's motive with his master's cruelty and consequent oppression.

His master had castigated him shortly before due to a misdemeanor and when he met us in the woods he might have thought he could take this opportunity to satisfy his hatred against the whites and go unpunished. (*Eine Frau* 40) ⁱⁱⁱ

This explanation exposes her ambiguity towards the colonizer. On the one hand she supports the rightful establishment of the imperial order, on the other hand she shows an understanding of the black man's fate as a slave.

Space is fundamental in any exercise of power. The creation of space for Ida Pfeiffer is a self-empowering exercise. Her position shows the divisiveness between being aware of her own marginalization as a woman and her claim to be positioned at the 'center of civilization'. The worldview she brings to the reader is ambiguous as her female voice asserts its own kind of mastery by resisting the ideology of female subordination and passivity and criticizing the European male discourse of domination and intervention yet nevertheless relying on the comfortable reassurance of white superiority. This ambiguity allows for a space or subtext that foreshadows an understanding of other cultures and people. In that space she creates a sense of freedom as well as records traces of a history of cultures subjugated to foreign rule. Even though those accounts are heavily shaded in Eurocentric colors, a close reading provides a glimpse of life in the colonies and of indigenous cultures at the time.

The following quote by a well-known literary hero points at a fundamental issue in any textual reading. "This that appears to you as a barber's basin is for me Mambrino's helmet, and something else again to another person" (Cervantes 233). It is the great anti-hero Don Quixote who defends his view by pointing at the illusory nature of objectivity; a reality associated with many travelogues that claim authentic views. Ida Pfeiffer voices the philosophical nature of Don Quixote's claim in her introduction in 1850 to *Eine Frau fährt um die Welt* (5). Her sense of space is inscribed in language and employs her view of foreign cultures as a means to reflect on her own position. She often warns that the European is no better than the primitive other and that only a lack of education and thus consciousness has kept the suppressed majority from uprising and overthrowing the intruder, the ruling minority. The space she writes in reflects the problem of an imported language and an 'alien' native landscape and culture. The discrepancy between what is seen and said often distorts the picture. This distortion creates a double vision and what we see in Pfeiffer's text is on the one hand an ugly, chaotic, physical presence as well as a warm, lively, colorful culture with a carelessness that is foreign yet desirable and irresistible for the European outsider. "I stayed the night with these half-savages, who bestowed on me the highest respect and showered me with attention" (*Eine Frau* 52). ^{iv} An intense fascination with foreign cultures underlies Pfeiffer's halting comparisons of the inferior nature of the colonized to European civilized manners. As she says herself, it was not only her childhood dream to see the world but also a wish to get away from the societal conventions that imprisoned a woman in her times. She repeatedly finds it necessary to defend herself and often stresses her innocence, humility and age before she continues her travelogue. She wants her readers to know that she has fulfilled her role as a wife and mother before going out into the world, which allows her now to claim a different life and space.

Even though Ida Pfeiffer traveled in circles that were an extension of European culture, she actively sought and found native cultures. It was not always pleasant and she often felt repulsed and scared but her descriptions at times reveal a view that differs from her eurocentric sentiments. The gulf between imported lies and myth about the natives and the reality she found is vast. When she is at a loss and comes to the limits of understanding and interpreting, we can see the other culture in a different light. A more immediate and authentic view of the colonized emerges in those moments when she is caught without a point of reference from her own cultural heritage.

Her trip into the interior of Brazil is such a moment. She travels into the jungle on horseback with a local guide. What she encounters is a world that renders itself difficult to describe and “von der sich ein Europäer kaum einen Begriff machen kann” (of which a European can hardly form an idea) (*Eine Frau* 44). At the last settlement of whites – newly immigrated Europeans as well as the Portuguese who had settled a few centuries earlier – she encounters the usual social hierarchy of white masters and black slaves. Yet only the sleeping quarters seem to reflect that order. In daily life it is the struggle to survive that demands that everyone help each other. It is nature that demands equality. Ida Pfeiffer’s choice of words reflect her curiosity as well as disgust at the chaos she perceives.

The manner of living in this settlement was of such a description that I was almost tempted to believe that I was already among savages. [...] The inhabitants were cowering upon the floor, playing with the children, or assisting one another to get rid of their vermin. The kitchen was full of people: whites, Puris, and negroes, children whose parents were whites and Puris, or Puris and negroes—in a word, the place was like a book of specimens containing the most varied ramifications of the three principal races of the country. (*Eine Frau* 50-51) ^v

Here at the edge of civilization, Ida Pfeiffer retreats into seemingly objective recounting of what she sees. Her choice of words – “elende Hütten, wimmeln, unappetitlich” (miserable huts, seething, gross) – expose her subjectivity, her disgust and alienation from the settlement. The natives treat her with respect, asking for medical advice and offering food she actually relishes while she continues to refer to her hosts as “Halbwilde” (half savages) (*Eine Frau* 52). She needs their assistance and accepts their help in finding and visiting the native Indians, the Puris, the true savages, where she falls back on subjective descriptions of ugliness and regurgitates the prevalent European equation of appearance with the intellect where ugliness, a subjective concept, and dirt denotes stupidity and justifies the idea of racial and intellectual inferiority. However, her description of the natives’ reception, their friendliness, their orderly daily lives and rituals belie her judgments and show a different world. It is the Indian who takes advantage of the white missionary by partaking in the act of baptism in exchange of goods and only working for him when he wants to. She experiences native Indians as good people, gentle and hospitable but when introducing the reader to their language she reverts again back to being the uneducated woman who accepts the theories of European scholars that refer to the indigenous language as endemic and plain.

They are said, for example, only to be able to count one and two, and are therefore obliged, when they desire to express a larger number, to repeat these two figures continually. (*Eine Frau* 54) ^{vi}

Again she does not question this assumption of inferiority nor asks her guides, a black woman and a Puri who speak that language for more detailed information.

What is of interest here is her criticism of the colonizers in juxtaposition to her Eurocentric judgments because they offer a different reading and give us a different view of the colonized natives. Her description of a burial in Benares, India is fairly concise and still contemporary. Yet a curious detachment becomes again evident when she describes that

His relatives and friends remain by the dying man till sunset, then they go home and leave him to his fate. He generally falls prey to a crocodile. (*Eine Frau* 162) ^{vii}

In India she tells us that the European is a “geduldete Eindringling (tolerated intruder) (*Eine Frau* 163), which of course is incorrect in light of the historical situation. The colonial center gives no choice and tolerance is not an option. In China she is an intruder who is not tolerated and is advised to not go further into the country since the Chinese population has been known to stone foreigners to death, especially women. The colonial protective power is missing and Ida Pfeiffer retreats.

Another example of double messaging is her experience in Ceylon where she presents the European as superior but the source of the natives’ skills nevertheless reveals the cleverness of the natives who exploit the Europeans with the colonizers’ own tricks. When she arrives in Ceylon she says “The natives already learned from the shrewd Europeans the art to turn something to their advantage when the opportunity arises. (*Eine Frau* 130).^{viii} Even though she classifies Europeans as clever and the source of the natives’ skills she nevertheless recognizes and points to the cleverness of the natives. The indigenous and heterogeneous society she comes across is well organized and structured and refutes the myth of the primitive uncivilized stranger. It is easy for the traveler to move around and she admires and is surprised by the well-organized ways of travel as well as the ‘civilized’ way the people conduct their business. The efficient water stops fascinate her and she is full of admiration.

The street was busy and lively which I had not seen even in Europe. [...] Along the road large earthen containers stood under small palm thatched roofs with coconut halves to use for drinking. (*Eine Frau* 131-2)^{ix}

She describes the heterogeneous group of people with her Eurocentric judgment of beauty but gives the reader a close description what they look like and thus in the reader's mind arises an image that is not necessarily ugly.

The popular travelogues of the 19th century had a profound influence on the image of the native, and women travelers by presenting a less science and more culture oriented view participated in solidifying the prevalent understanding of others. Since travel writers played a part in constructing an identity of European racial and cultural superiority, the colonized consequently got to 'know' themselves as subordinates to Europe and saw themselves through the eyes of the colonizer. The dislocation from their cultural roots created hybrid cultures that have been struggling to find a voice in the wake of independence and in the political and economic shadow of the western powers and former imperial powers.

While the male writers at the time concentrated on scientific research, women writers took a closer look at culture and social norms. The cross-cultural elements in the work of women travelers point at a larger picture and at the writer's ability to create links to the past, present and future. Ida Pfeiffer is ambiguous in 'reading' her surroundings, in her position within the imperial discourse as well as in her marginal position as a woman. She exhibits attitudes and enforces stereotypes by seeing only a "barber's basin", her language and images, however, often betray her by revealing also a "knight's helmet" if one cares to look.

Ultimately, the memory preserved in the texts and images of the travel writer becomes in the case of Ida Pfeiffer a part of the collective memory that continues to develop through the social and political evolution of a culture. Her travelogues are documents of the past that reverberate in the present and serve as a European songline intertwined with songlines from abroad that challenge traditional cultural beliefs.

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ⁱ [...] wo aber natürliche Schönheit und Grazie fehlen, da wirken unsere Moden geradezu barock und lächerlich – um so mehr an diesen plumpen Gestalten mit den dunklen Affengesichtern." (*Verschwörung* 191) All translations are my own.

ⁱⁱ Ich vermag nur schmucklos das zu erzählen, was mir begegnet, was ich gesehen, und will ich etwas beurteilen, so kann ich es bloss von dem Standpunkt einfacher Anschauung aus.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sein Herr hatte ihn kurz zuvor eines Vergehens wegen gezüchtigt, und als er darauf uns in dem Walde traf, mochte er denken, nun Gelegenheit zu haben, seinen Haß gegen die Weißen ungestraft befriedigen zu können.

^{iv} Ich blieb also über Nacht bei diesen Halbwilden, dir mir fortwährend die größte Achtung erwiesen und mich mit Aufmerksamkeit überhäuften.

^v Die Wirtschaft in dieser Ansiedlung war der Art, daß ich schon hier wähnte, mich unter Wilden zu befinden. [...] Die Inwohner kauerten auf dem Boden und spielten mit den Kindern oder halfen sich gegenseitig vom Ungeziefer befreien. Die Küche war voll Menschen; da gab es Weiße, Puris und Neger, Kinder von Weißen und Puris oder von Puris und Neger – kurz, eine wahre Musterkarte von den verschiedensten Verzweigungen dieser drei Hauptassen.

^{vi} So sollen sie z.B. nur 1 und 2 zählen können und müssen daher diese beiden Zahlen immer wiederholen, wenn sie eine größere Zahl ausdrücken wollen.

^{vii} Verwandte und Freunde bleiben nur bis Sonnenuntergang bei dem Verscheidenden; dann gehen sie heim und überlassen ihn seinem Schicksal. Gewöhnlich wird er die Beute eines Krokodils.

^{viii} die Eingeborenen [haben] den schlaun Europäern die Kunst, bei günstigen Gelegenheiten grossen Nutzen zu ziehen, bereits abgelernt.

^{ix} Die Strasse war so belebt und bewohnt, wie mir selbst in Europa nichts Ähnliches vorgekommen ist. [...] Längs der Strasse standen unter kleinen Palmdächern grosse irdene Gefässe mit Wasser gefüllt; Kokoschalen lagen daneben, als Trinkgefässe dienend.