

Ida Pfeiffer, *A Woman's Journey Round the World* (1850)

Abstract

The Austrian explorer and travel writer [Ida Pfeiffer](#), née Reyer (1797–1858), was born and married in Vienna. She enjoyed a better-than-usual education and dreamed of seeing distant lands. In 1846, having already published travel accounts of her journeys to the Near East and Scandinavia, Pfeiffer set out on a demanding voyage to circumnavigate the globe. She returned in 1848 and published *A Woman's Journey Round the World* [*Eine Frauenfahrt um die Welt*] in 1850. The following excerpt relates her impressions of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, and particularly her ambivalent reaction to people of African descent and to the institution of slavery there. Most educated German-speakers in the first half of the nineteenth century in the tradition of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) were opponents of the slave trade; they believed in the general equality of all humans and were relatively open to individuals of other races and ethnicities. Pfeiffer clearly shared many of those beliefs but at the same time she also exhibited strongly racist reactions and sentiments in her direct encounters with African-descended people in Brazil. Untangling and explaining her views on race and her experiences of it is as difficult as it is potentially insightful.

Source

Arrival and Sojourn in Rio Janeiro

I remained in Rio Janeiro above two months, exclusive of the time devoted to my different excursions into the interior of the country. It is very far from my intention, however, to tire the reader with a regular catalogue of every trifling and ordinary occurrence. I shall content myself with describing the most striking features in the town, and likewise in the manners and customs of the inhabitants, according to the opportunities I possessed during my stay to form an opinion of them. I shall then give an account of my various excursions in an Appendix, and afterwards resume the thread of my journal.

[...]

The houses are built in the European fashion, but are small and insignificant; most of them have only a ground-floor or single story – two stories are rarely met with. Neither are there any terraces and verandahs, adorned with elegant trellis-work and flowers, as there are in other warm countries. Ugly little balconies hang from the walls, while clumsy wooden shutters close up the windows, and prevent the smallest sunbeam from penetrating the rooms, where everything is enveloped in almost perfect darkness. This, however, is a matter of the greatest indifference to the Brazilian ladies, who certainly never over-fatigue themselves with reading or working.

The town offers, therefore, very little in the way of squares, streets, and buildings, which, for a stranger, can prove in the least attractive; while the people that he meets are truly shocking – nearly all being negroes and negresses, with flat, ugly noses, thick lips, and short woolly hair. They are, too, generally half naked, with only a few miserable rags on their backs, or else they are thrust into the worn-out European-cut clothes of their masters. To every four or five blacks may be reckoned a mulatto, and it is only here and there that a white man is to be seen.

This horrible picture is rendered still more revolting by the frequent bodily infirmities which everywhere meet the eye: among these, elephantiasis, causing horrible club-feet, is especially conspicuous; there is, too, no scarcity of persons afflicted with blindness and other ills. Even the cats and dogs, that run about the gutters in great numbers, partake of the universal ugliness: most of them are covered with the

mange, or are full of wounds and sores. I should like to be endowed with the magic power of transporting hither every traveler who starts back with affright from the lanes of Constantinople, and asserts that the sight of the interior of this city destroys the effect produced by it when viewed at a distance.

It is true that the interior of Constantinople is exceedingly dirty, and that the number of small houses, the narrow streets, the unevenness of the pavement, the filthy dogs &c., do not strike the beholder as excessively picturesque; but then he soon comes upon some magnificent edifice of the time of the Moors or Romans, some wondrous mosque or majestic palace, and can continue his walk through endless cemeteries and forests of dreamy cypresses. He steps aside before a pasha or priest of high rank, who rides by on his noble steed, surrounded by a brilliant retinue; he encounters Turks in splendid costumes, and Turkish women with eyes that flash through their veils like fire; he beholds Persians with their high caps, Arabs with their nobly-formed features, dervishes in fools'-caps and plaited petticoats like women, and now and then some carriage, beautifully painted and gilt, drawn by superbly-caparisoned oxen. All these different objects fully make up for what amount of dirtiness may occasionally be met with. In Rio Janeiro, however, there is nothing that can in any way amuse, or atone for the horrible and disgusting sights which everywhere meet the eye.

It was not until I had been here several weeks that I became somewhat accustomed to the appearance of the negroes and mulattoes. I then discovered a few very pretty figures among the young negresses, and handsome, expressive countenances, among the somewhat dark-complexioned Brazilian and Portuguese women; the men seem, as regards beauty, to be less favored.

The bustle in the streets is far less than what I had been led to expect from the many descriptions I had heard, and is certainly not to be compared to that at Naples or Messina. The greatest amount of noise is made by those negroes who carry burdens, and especially by such as convey the sacks full of coffee on board the different vessels; they strike up a monotonous sort of song, to the tune of which they keep step, but which sounds very disagreeable. It possesses, however, one advantage; it warns the foot passenger, and affords him time to get out of the way.

In the Brazils, every kind of dirty or hard work, whether in doors or out, is performed by the blacks, who here, in fact, replace the lower classes. Many, however, learn trades, and frequently are to be compared to the most skillful Europeans. I have seen blacks in the most elegant workshops, making wearing apparel, shoes, tapestry, gold or silver articles, and met many a nattily-dressed negro maiden working at the finest ladies' dresses, or the most delicate embroidery. I often thought I must be dreaming, when I beheld these poor creatures, whom I had pictured to myself as roaming free through their native forests, exercising such occupations in shops and rooms! Yet they do not appear to feel it as much as might be supposed; they were always merry, and joking over their work.

Among the so-called educated class of the place, there are many who. In spite of all the proofs of mechanical skill, as well as general intelligence, which the blacks often display, persist in asserting that they are so far inferior to the whites in mental power, that they can only be looked upon as a link between the monkey tribe and the human race. I allow that they are somewhat behind the whites in intellectual culture; but I believe that this is not because they are deficient in understanding, but because their education is totally neglected. No schools are erected for them, no instruction given them – in a word, not the least thing is done to develop [sic] the capabilities of their minds. As was the case in old despotic countries, their minds are purposely kept enchained; for, were they once to awake from their present condition, the consequences to the whites might be fearful. They are four times as numerous as the latter; and if they ever become conscious of this superiority, the whites may probably be placed in the position that the unhappy blacks have hitherto occupied.

But I am losing myself in conjectures and reasonings, which may, perhaps, become the pen of a learned man, but certainly not mine, since I assuredly do not possess the necessary amount of education to

decide upon such questions; my object is merely to give a plain description of what I have seen.

[...]

After all, slaves are far from being as badly off as many Europeans imagine. In the Brazils they are generally pretty well treated; they are not overworked, their food is good and nutritious, and the punishments are neither particularly frequent nor heavy. The crime of running away is the only one which is visited with great rigour. Besides a severe beating, they have fetters placed round their neck and feet; these they have to wear for a considerable period. Another manner of punishment consists in making them wear a tin mask, which is fastened with a lock behind. This is the mode of punishment adopted for those who drink, or are in the habit of eating earth or lime. During my long stay in the Brazils, I only saw one negro who had on a mask of this description. I very much doubt whether, on the whole, the lot of these slaves is not less wretched than that of the peasants of Russia, Poland, or Egypt, who are *not* called slaves.

I was one day very much amused at being asked to stand godmother to a negro, which I did, although I was not present at either baptism or confirmation. There is a certain custom here, that when a slave has done anything for which he expects to be punished, he endeavors to fly to some friend of his owner, and obtain a note, asking for the remission of his punishment. The writer of such a letter has the title of godfather bestowed on him, and it would be accounted an act of the greatest impoliteness not to grant the godfather's request. In this way, I myself was fortunate enough to save a slave from punishment.

[...]

Source: Ida Pfeiffer, *A Woman's Journey Round the World, from Vienna to Brazil, Chili, Tahiti, China, Hindostan, Persia, and Asia Minor*. An unabridged translation from the German of Ida Pfeiffer. Second Edition. London: Strand, 1852, pp. 15–19.

Source of original German text: Ida Pfeiffer, *Eine Frauenfahrt um die Welt. Reise von Wien nach Brasilien, Chili, Otahaiti, China, Ost-Indien, Persien und Kleinasien*. Erster Band. Wien: Verlag von Carl Gerold, 1850, pp. 29, 32–37. Available online at:

https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/pfeiffer_frauenfahrt01_1850

Recommended Citation: Ida Pfeiffer, *A Woman's Journey Round the World* (1850), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-5018>> [July 20, 2024].