Letters from New York, Lydia Maria Child (September 23, 1841; October 21, 1841; May 1, 1843)

In 1829 William Lloyd Garrison called Lydia Maria Child, then only twenty-seven years old, "the first woman in the Republic." Child was a leading abolitionist and feminist who worked tirelessly for the rights of the underprivileged for all of her seventy-eight years. Her first novel, Hobomok, published when she was only twenty-two, was the story of interracial love between an Indian man and a white woman. Reviewers called it "revolting ... to every feeling of delicacy in man or woman."

Child's most influential work, An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (1833), described the history of slavery in America and advocated racial intermarriage as a means to a multiracial nation, but the popular reaction to it forced her to fold her successful journal Juvenile Miscellany the following year. Child already had a successful career as a children's writer and publisher; among her works was the famous Thanksgiving Day poem "Over the River and Through the Woods." Undaunted, Child edited and helped publish Harriet Jacobs's classic memoir Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), which detailed what Child called the "peculiar phase of slavery [that] has generally been kept veiled."

In May 1841 Child took up a nine-year residence in New York, where she detailed life there for a Boston newspaper and published the columns as Letters from New York (1843, 1845). As she remarked in this work, she realized this in New York, "the loneliness of the soul is deeper, and far more restless, than the solitude of the mighty forest." She died at her home in Wayland, Massachusetts, in 1880.

September 23, 1841

Last week, a new synagogue was consecrated in Attorney-street; making I believe, five Jewish Synagogues in this city, comprising in all about thousand of this ancient people. The congregation of the new synagogues German emigrants, driven from Bavaria, the Duchy of Baden, &c., by oppressive laws. One of these laws forbade Jews to marry; and among the emigrants were many betrothed couples, who married as soon as they landed on our shores; trusting their future support to the God of Jacob. If not as "rich as Jews," they are now most of them doing well in the world; and one of the first proofs they gave of prosperity, was the erection of a place of worship.

The oldest congregation of Jews in New-York, were called Shewith Israel. The Dutch governors would not allow them to build a place of worship; but after the English conquered the colony, they erected a small wooden synagogue, in Mill-street, near which a creek ran up from the East River, where the Jewish women performed their ablutions. In the course of improvement this was sold; and they erected the handsome stone building in Crosby-
street, which I visited. It is not particularly striking or magnificent, either in its exterior or interior; nor would it be in good keeping, for a people gone into captivity to have garments like those of Aaron, "for glory and for beauty;" or an "ark overlaid with pure gold, within and without, and a crown of gold to it round about."

There is something deeply impressive in this remnant of a scattered people, coming down to us in continuous links through the long vista of recorded time; preserving themselves carefully unmixed by intermarriage with people of other nations and other faith, and keeping up the ceremonial forms of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through all the manifold changes of revolving generations. Moreover, our religions are connected, though separated; they are shadow and substance, type and fulfilment. To the Jews only, with all their blindness and waywardness, was given the idea of one God, spiritual and invisible; and, therefore, among them only could such a one as Jesus have appeared. To us they have been the medium of glorious truths; and if the murky shadow of their Old dispensation rests too heavily on the mild beauty of the New, it is because the Present can never quite unmoor itself from the Past; and well for the world's safety that it is so.

Quakers were mixed with the congregation of Jews; thus oddly brought together, were the representatives of the extreme of conservatism, and the extreme of innovation!

I was disappointed to see so large a proportion of this peculiar people fair-skinned and blue-eyed. As no one who marries a Gentile is allowed to remain in their synagogues, one would naturally expect to see a decided predominance of the dark eyes, jetty locks, and olive complexions of Palestine. But the Jews furnish incontrovertible evidence that colour is the effect of climate. In the mountains of Bavaria they are light-haired and fair-skinned: in Italy and Spain they are dark: in Hindostan swarthy. The Slack Jews of Hindostan are said to have been originally African and Hindoo shves, who received their freedom as soon as they became converted to Judaism, and had fulfilled the rites prescribed by the ceremonial law; for the lews, unlike Christians, deem it unlawful to hold any one of their own religious faith in slavery. In another respect they put us to shame; for they had a Jubilee of Freedom once in fifty years, and on that occasion emancipated all, even of their heathen slaves.

Whether the Black Jews, now a pretty large class in Hindostan, intermarry with other Jews we are not informed. Moses, their great lawgiver, married an Ethiopian. Miriam and Aaron were shocked at it, as they would have been at any intermarriage with the heathen tribes, of whatever colour. Whether the Ethiopian woman had adopted the faith of Israel is not mentioned but we are told that the anger of the Lord was kindled against Aaron and his sister for their conduct on this occasion.

The anniversary meetings of the New-York Hebrew Benevolent Society present a singular combination. There
meet together pilgrims from the Holy Land, merchants from the Pacific Ocean and the East Indies, exiles from the banks of the Vistula, the Danube, and the Dneiper, bankers from Vienna and Paris, and dwellers on the shores of the Hudson and the Susquehannah. Suspended in their dining hall, between the American and English flags, may be seen the Banner of Judah, with Hebrew inscriptions in golden letters. How this stirs the sea of memory! That national banner has not been unfurled for eighteen hundred years. The last time it floated to the breeze was over the walls of Jerusalem, besieged by Titus Vespasianus. Then, our stars and stripes were not foreseen, even in dim shadow, by the vision of a prophet; and here they are intertwined together over this congress of nations!

In New-York, as elsewhere, the vending of "old clo'" is a prominent occupation among the Jews; a fact in which those who look for spiritual correspondences can perceive significance; though singularly enough Sartor Resartus makes no allusion to it in his "Philosophy of Clothes." When I hear Christian ministers apologizing for slavery by the example of Abraham, defending war, because the Lord commanded Samuel to hew Agag in pieces, and sustaining capital punishment by the retaliatory code of Moses, it seems to me it would be most appropriate to have Jewish criers at the doors of our theological schools, proclaiming at the top of their lungs, "Old Clothes! old Clothes! Old Clothes all the way from Judea!"

October 21,1841

In a great metropolis like this, nothing is more observable than the infinite varieties of character. Almost without effort, one may happen to find himself, in the course of a few days, beside the Catholic kneeling before the Cross, the Mohammedan bowing to the East, the Jew veiled before the ark of the testimony, the Baptist walking into the water, the Quaker keeping his head covered in the presence of dignitaries and solemnities of all sorts, and the Mormon quoting from the Golden Book which he has never seen.

More, perhaps, than any other city, except Paris or New Orleans, this is a place of rapid fluctuation, and never-ceasing change. A large portion of the population are like mute actors, who tramp across the stage in pantomime or pageant, and are seen no more. The enterprising, the curious, the reckless, and the criminal, flock hither from all quarters of the world, as to a common centre, whence they can diverge at pleasure. Where men are little known, they are imperfectly restrained; therefore, great numbers here live with somewhat of that wild license which prevails in times of pestilence. Life is a reckless game, and death is a business transaction. Warehouses of ready-made coffins, stand beside warehouses of ready-made clothing, and the shroud is sold with spangled opera-dresses. Nay, you may chance to see exposed at sheriffs' sales, in public squares, piles of coffins, like nests of boxes, one within another, with a hole bored in the topmost lid to sustain the red flag of the auctioneer, who stands by, describing their conveniences and merits, with all the exaggerating eloquence of his tricky trade.
There is something impressive, even to painfulness, in this dense crowding of human existence, this mercantile familiarity with death. It has sometimes forced upon me, for a few moments, an appalling night-mare sensation of vanishing identity; as if I were but an unknown, unnoticed, and unseparated drop in the great ocean of human existence; as if the uncomfortable old theory were true, and we were but portions of a Great Mundane Soul, to which we ultimately return, to be swallowed up in its infinity. But such ideas I expel at once, like phantasms of evil, which indeed they are. Unprofitable to all, they have a peculiarly bewildering and oppressive power over a mind constituted like my own; so prone to eager questioning of the infinite, and curious search into the invisible. I find it wiser to forbear inflating this balloon of thought, lest it roll me away through unlimited space, until I become like the absent man, who put his clothes in bed, and hung himself over the chair; or like his twin-brother, who laid his candle on the pillow and blew himself out.

You will, at least, my dear friend, give these letters the credit of being utterly unpremeditated; for Flibbertigibbet himself never moved with more unexpected and incoherent variety. I have wandered almost as far from my starting point, as Saturn's ring is from Mercury; but I will return to the varieties in New-York. Among them I often meet a tall Scotsman, with sandy hair and high cheek-bones—a regular Sawney, with tartan plaid and bagpipe. And where do you guess he most frequently plies his poetic trade? Why, in the slaughter-houses! of which a hundred or more send forth their polluted breath into the atmosphere of this swarming city hive! There, if you are curious to witness incongruities, you may almost any day see grunting pigs or bleating lambs, with throats cut to the tune of Highland May, or Bonny Doon, or Lochaber No More.

May 1, 1843

May-day in New-York is the saddest thing, to one who has been used to hunting mosses by the brook, and paddling in its waters. Brick walls, instead of budding trees, and rattling wheels in lieu of singing birds, are bad enough; but to make the matter worse, all New-York moves on the first of May; not only moves about, as usual, in the everlasting hurry-scurry of business, but one house empties itself into another, all over the city. The streets are full of loaded drays, on which tables are dancing, and carpets rolling to and fro. Small chairs, which bring up such pretty, cozy images of rolly-polly mannikens and maidens, eating supper from tilted porringer, and spilling the milk on their night-gowns—these go ricketting along on the tops of beds and bureaus, and not unfrequently pitch into the street, and so fall asunder. Children are driving hither and yon, one with a flower-pot in his hand, another with work-box, band-box, or oil-canakin; each so intent upon his important mission, that all the world seems to him (as it does to many a theologian), safely locked up within the little walls he carries. Luckily, both boy and bigot are mistaken, or mankind would be in a bad box, sure enough. The dogs seem bewildered with this universal transmigration of bodies; and as for the cats, they sit on the door-steps, mewing piteously, that they were not born in the middle ages, or at least, in the quiet old portion of the world. And I, who have almost as strong a love of
localities as poor puss, turn away from the windows, with a suppressed anathema on the nineteenth century, with its perpetual changes. Do you want an appropriate emblem of this country, and this age? Then stand on the side-walks of New-York, and rich the universal transit on the first of May. The facility and speed with which our people change politics, and move from sect to sect, and from theory to theory, is comparatively slow and moss-grown; unless, indeed, one excepts the Rev. O. A. Brownson, who seems to stay in any spiritual habitation a much shorter time than the New-Yorkers do in their houses. It is the custom here, for those who move out to leave the accumulated dust and dirt of the year, for them who enter to clear up. I apprehend it is somewhat so with all the ecclesiastical and civil establishments, which have so long been let out to tenants in rotation. Those who enter them, must make a great sweeping and scrubbing, if they would have a clean residence.

That people should move so often in this city, is generally a matter of their own volition. Aspirations after the infinite, lead them to perpetual change, in the restless hope of finding something better and better still. But they would not raise the price of drays, and subject themselves to great inconvenience, by moving all on one day, were it not that the law compels everybody who intends to move at all, to quit his premises before twelve o'clock, on May morning. Failing to do this, the police will put him and his goods into the street, where they will fare much like a boy beside an upset hornet's nest. The object of this regulation is to have the Directory for the year arranged with accuracy. For, as theologians, and some reformers, can perceive no higher mission for human souls than to arrange themselves rank and file in sectarian platoons, so the civil authorities do not apprehend that a citizen has any more important object for living, just at this season, than to have his name set in a well-ordered Directory.

However, human beings are such creatures of habit and imitation, that what is necessity soon becomes fashion, and each one wishes to do what everybody else is doing. A lady in the neighbourhood closed all her blinds and shutters, on May-day; being asked by her acquaintance whether she had been in the country, she answered, "I was ashamed not to be moving on the first of May; and so I shut up the house that the neighbours might not know it." One could not well imagine a fact more characteristic of the despotic sway of custom and public opinion, in the United States, and the nineteenth century. Elias Hicks' remark, that it takes "live fish to swim up stream," is emphatically true of this age and country, in which liberty-caps abound, but no one is allowed to wear them.