

**Black/Jewish imaginaries and children's literature:
reading resistance and intersectionality in *A Pickpocket's Tale***

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Abstract:

In this essay I apply theories of intersectionality to *A Pickpocket's Tale* (2006), a young adult novel which imagines eighteenth-century Britishness, indenture, slavery, and Jewishness. I argue that this is a text which represents feminist resistance and its limits as located within the shared social and physical spaces of Jewishness and blackness. My discussion of the novel's discourse of resistance focuses on scenes, characters and settings where Jewishness and blackness are defined and intersect. By focusing on its black/Jewish coalitional politics I conclude that *A Pickpocket's Tale* presents a politicised intersectional narrative of racial, gender and religious identity that is both subversive and conservative.

Little was culturally fixed or stable in eighteenth-century colonial New York, rather it was a site for the ongoing, haphazard development of national, ethnic and racial identities and, with the American nation not yet constituted, the burgeoning city was a key territory of the British Empire. In a novel aimed at readers who are eleven to thirteen years old, Karen Schwabach's *A Pickpocket's Tale* (2006) offers a representation of eighteenth-century London and New York which conveys diverse contours of Britishness and a nascent Americanness through socially liminal Jewish and black characters.¹

This adventure tale interrogates the ethics of power by showing how the ethnic, religious and national identity of its characters and locations are entangled with crime, punishment, slavery and indenture. Whilst adventure and the ethics of power are familiar subjects for children's and young adult fiction, the juxtaposed themes of *Pickpocket* unusually combine concepts of Britishness, Jewishness, racial servitude and female resistance. In this essay I argue the representation of resistance and the limits of such resistance are firmly located within the text's shared spaces of Jewishness and blackness. My interpretation of the novel's discourse of resistance attends to the scenes, characters and settings where Jewishness and blackness are defined, intersect and collide. In my analysis I subject *Pickpocket* to scrutiny as a text which represents complex social relations between black people and Jewish people as focalised through gender, nationality and economic status. In doing so I use Lori Harrison-Kahan's notion of a black/Jewish imaginary, but I do not suggest that protagonist Molly Abraham conducts an appropriation of blackness.² Rather, in her socialisation as a Jewish girl, Molly develops a critical

consciousness about slavery that is broader than her individual experience of indenture. Specifically, she becomes aware of the vulnerability of enslaved black girls and women to physical abuse by their masters and, ultimately, she confronts the injustice of chattel slavery. Her learned awareness subverts without occluding the distinctions between indenture and slavery and enables her to plan with others to help an enslaved girl seize her own freedom. As such, the text encourages a critical understanding of coalition without denying conflict and tension and suggests a cogent model of black/Jewish imaginaries for the 21st Century. Moreover, by marking different types of whiteness and maleness and differently raced and regulated female bodies, the text offers its target audience a view of the intersection of multiple oppressions without suggesting a commensurability between them. The text also attracts an adult literary critical assessment: it gives attention to how differently marked bodies are subject to definition and regulation through what Althusser has called ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), including religion and legal codes.³ In *Pickpocket*, bodies which are culturally marked and regulated through eighteenth-century colonial frames of race, religion and legal status are simultaneously legible to twenty-first century readers familiar with theories of intersectionality.

In the U.K. and the U.S. representations of ethnic and religious minorities in children's literature is widely understood as limited and limiting, thus a secondary aim of this essay is to contribute to conversations about diversity in children's literature using theories of intersectionality.⁴ *Pickpocket* is framed by postcolonial, feminist, and political economic concerns and thereby breaches certain limiting representations of its female and its non-white characters. It is immediately recognisable as postcolonial through its emphasis on the lives and perspectives of marginalised and oppressed characters and its understanding of the importance of these perspectives to the narrative(s) of British imperialism. *Pickpocket* also depicts 'varying degrees of unease, a sense of being unsettled or de-settled' which, Clare Bradford argues, is characteristic of 'children's texts set in the former settler colonies' such as the United States and which use the presentation of unsettledness to 'reinvoke and rehearse colonialism in a variety of ways' and this is explicitly the case with *Pickpocket* where an understanding of colonial America and therefore also of Imperial Britain is disrupted.⁵ The invocation of unset-

tledness is accompanied in *Pickpocket* by its feminist narrative whereby girls and women work together to protect each other and to undermine patriarchal institutions such as slavery and indenture. A further politicised economic narrative is evident in *Pickpocket* in its interrogation of slavery and indenture: its lead characters are not only conscious of their identity and worth as property, they also conspire to deprive their owners and others of their assets by plotting escape. However, the novel is more typically limiting in other ways, for instance its black characters are all slaves and are not protagonists. Also, despite the radical actions which I focus on in this essay, by the text's conclusion its young female protagonist is incorporated into a domestic role in a heteronormative family and is portrayed as contented and feeling lucky with her circumstances. Thus, the novel accommodates varied interpretations. Curiously, some adult reviewers focus on these more conventional, less resistant aspects of the novel which I believe does it and potential young readers a disservice. Ultimately, *Pickpocket* presents a politicised intersectional narrative of racial, gender and religious identity in British colonial New York that is both subversive and conservative. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which I discuss in the next section, offers an apposite framework for analysing *Pickpocket* given the novel's concern with crime and punishment and how complex, layered identities elicit nuanced perspectives between characters and, potentially, by readers.

Colonial black/Jewish imaginaries

The novel tells the story of young, nominally Jewish Londoner, Molly Abraham, who is sold as an indentured servant to the 'Virginia' colony, as the American colonies were collectively called, as a punishment for her small-scale criminal activities as a pickpocket. Bought by the Bell family who live in New York, Molly arrives after a transatlantic journey in the hold of a convict labourer ship similar to the ships used to transport enslaved Africans to the very same 'New World'. The year is 1730. An uneasy alliance develops between Molly and the Bell's African slave, Arabella, as they toil side by side in the Bell's observant Jewish household. Molly's narrative arc can be summarised as one where she struggles with the group identities which are imposed upon her, Jewishness and indenture, even as she attempts to comprehend those identities in relation to slavery, blackness, and the social and cultural limitations placed upon girls and women. Whilst a good portion of the text concerns

Molly's determination to escape from her indenture and return to London, I focus on the circumstances and ideologies which lead to Arabella and Molly collaborating to help another slave, Christy, to escape *her* bondage. Given that this text highlights parallels between blackness and Jewishness as regulated by British law, readers are presented with a British 'black/Jewish imaginary.' Harrison-Kahan defines the black/Jewish imaginary as 'a realm of literary and cultural production in which Jews and African Americans imagined themselves and each other in relation to the white mainstream.'⁶ I shift the concept so that it might encompass British Jewish and British black subjects in the colony of New York. Molly's eventual understanding and acceptance of Jewishness, gives shape to this black/Jewish imaginary and is focalised through the mitzvah.⁷ Her understanding and ability to participate in a mitzvah is achieved only once she understands not just brutality of slavery but also how it differs from her own position as an indentured Jewish servant.

Despite the prominence of the black/Jewish imaginary in *Pickpocket* in reviews and descriptions of the text for teachers, librarians and the general public it has been interpreted as a Jewish book which foregrounds Jewish life and culture. There is little hint of the intersections between slavery and indenture or Jewishness and blackness, or even feminist thinking, as can be observed in the following commentary:

Karen Schwabach uses richly detailed descriptions and authentic period language to bring history to life. She skillfully explores the subjects of Jewish culture in Colonial America and London street culture in this gritty yet heart-warming debut novel.⁸

In a review with a similar angle, Schwabach's research is praised:

This is an engaging novel for young readers, with historically accurate information about life in London and New York that is presented with all its complexity. It is particularly useful as an excellent introduction to the life of the Jews in New York at that time.⁹

This review goes on to acknowledge how 'Molly grudgingly learns about compassion, family, and the real meaning of freedom through her contact with an abused African slave' but underplays how the depictions of black enslaved life is central to *Pickpocket*. In a comparable vein, the review for *Booklist* mentions that Molly 'meets an abused African American slave' which 'sharpens her perspective' and brings with it 'ethical dilemmas' but this interaction is placed on par with Molly learning to read and learning about Judaism.¹⁰ Collectively, these book reviews demonstrate a difficulty in articulating

Pickpocket's colonial black/Jewish imaginary. Their consistent focus on Molly and her relationship to Jewish identity fail to alert potential readers and buyers to what I consider the novel's key selling points: the feminist imperative of the text and how Molly and Arabella must negotiate their antagonisms of caste and racial difference towards each other *and* imagine themselves as powerful despite their class positions as coerced female labourers. These commentaries, in their omission of the complexity and politics of the text, inevitably narrow its potential target audience to readers who may be perceived as automatically being interested in a narrative focused on Jewish girls. The unusual presentation of a black/Jewish colonial, feminist alliance makes an important contribution to how young readers might critically engage with these topics and therefore deserves as wide an audience as possible. These reviews are also disappointing because they ignore how *Pickpocket* boldly presents the tensions between blackness and Jewishness, community and individualism, resistance and acquiescence. The text surfaces what Harrison-Kahan calls 'interminority identifications' and delivers a useful paradigm for its 21st-century readers to explore black/Jewish imaginaries.¹¹

Harrison-Kahan's 'interminority identifications' manifest in how the characters acknowledge the power they wield as well as that which is wielded against them and recognise their different experiences of power. The reader is presented with the compounded, intersecting identities of race, class, gender and religion which position characters in asymmetrical relations to one another and to antisemitism, slavery and patriarchy. This is not a matter of simple addition or 'layers of identity' for, as Crenshaw has written regarding black U.S. women and anti-discrimination doctrine, '[b]ecause the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which the black woman is subjugated.'¹² I extend this formulation to include Schwabach's multicultural cast of characters, because, despite the reviews, *Pickpocket* allows readers to see how complex, intersectional experiences of enslaved black girls and women are both similar and distinct from the intersectional experiences of indentured Jewish and non-Jewish women and girls. Intersectionality is 'the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of

power.’¹³ *Pickpocket* is fundamentally concerned with difference which it represents through Jewishness, blackness, indenture, enslavement, and the social position of women and girls. Each of these identities overlap, intersect with and/or stand in contrast to the normative identities of whiteness, maleness, European-ness, wealth, freedom and slave-ownership. *Pickpocket* organically enables a study of children’s literature using Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality and Harrison-Kahan’s black/Jewish imaginary which in turn advances how we interpret diversity in children’s literature.¹⁴ In the next section I examine how the black/Jewish imaginary of *Pickpocket* is presented discursively in its settings and characterisations and in the freeing of Christy.

Intersectional spaces

Upon her arrival, Mr Bell describes New York to ten-year-old Molly as being ‘more free’ for Jews than London.¹⁵ This statement asserts a familiar American ideal of freedom, but it depends entirely on an individual’s, or a group’s, status and perspective, as *Pickpocket* explores.¹⁶ Indeed, what Mr Bell experiences as a place that is freer for him as a Jewish man is simultaneously and obviously a place that is less free for Molly as a young girl even though he recognises her as Jewish. The third-person narration conveys Molly’s clear understanding of her new status:

She had just been bought...She had been swept into the slavery that the other prisoners had talked about on the ship, the seven years of starvation and servitude that were either better or worse than the gallows, depending on whom you asked. She had no control over what was happening to her. She felt a sharp stab of longing for London, where there was always somewhere to run, always a new hiding place.¹⁷

The loss of Molly’s autonomy, no matter how precarious it was in London, is a key feature of the larger narrative and of her self-definition. Bell’s words to Molly confirm to her the accuracy of her perceptions. In this same passage Bell inducts Molly as his servant, initially by renaming her Miriam because, he explains, it is ‘more’ Jewish. Then he asks if she can cook and clean and, finally, instructs her that she must always use ‘Sir’ when she responds to him. The explicit difference in status demonstrated in Bell’s speech underscores the textual tension between freedom and bondage, power and powerlessness, which is consistently presented in the narrative. In New York, Molly is viewed as uneducated and un-socialised: she does not yet know how to be a good servant, she does not know anything about Judaism and she is not a ‘good’ child because she does not automatically respect the

adult world. Although she steadfastly refuses to answer to 'Miriam' and remains Molly, the patriarchal forces of the world she finds herself in are nevertheless directed towards correcting her faults and making her into an efficient servant, a good Jew and a proper girl. However, her 'English' faults, such as having the quick wit and nimble fingers of a thief and lacking a respect for authority, are presented in the text as the strengths which allow her to analyse her new world and its contradictions. Molly, as the passage above demonstrates, also does not initially understand the difference between racial slavery and indenture, as she uses the terms interchangeably. As Molly's familiarity with New York and her understanding of herself as privileged through both whiteness and indenture each increase, it becomes possible for her to work with Arabella and others to aid in Christy's escape. Thus, whilst Crenshaw developed the idea of intersectionality to voice the way in which black women's oppression is related to but distinct from black male oppression *and* white female oppression, intersectionality is also useful to this evaluation of *Pickpocket* because it brings visibility to the overlapping contexts of Molly's privilege which enable her to discern what political coalition might look like with those who are differently oppressed from her. Bell's power and privilege as Molly's and Arabella's owner is also nuanced though his Jewish subjectivity.

If, as Maria Nikolajeva states, children's literature, like all literature, is concerned in one way or another with power, then *Pickpocket* is additionally noteworthy for the ways in which patriarchal power and chattel slavery are eventually contested by Molly, Arabella, and a free indigenous woman, Betty Moccasin.¹⁸ This contestation, notwithstanding the book reviews cited earlier, is the principal action of the text. It also stresses a key difference in Molly's experience of power in England and the New York colony: in England, as a child orphaned at age seven and accustomed to seeing others only as potential antagonists and enemies, Molly is powerless in response to the ruling of the court which sends her abroad to be indentured. Whilst wealth and poverty are the main distinctions Molly makes amongst people in London and on the transport ship, in the colony she learns a new vocabulary of difference: whilst wealth is still a good indicator of power, the most significant barometer of difference between people is gender and enslavement. As Molly develops her understanding of gendered difference and the difference between being enslaved, indentured, or free, Arabella becomes her most important tutor, providing information as they work and sleep side by side in the Bell's

kitchen. The black/Jewish imaginary in *Pickpocket* is centred within this relationship and focalised through collective action by women and girls that implicitly critiques individualism, actively reveals intersectionality, and yet does not obscure conflict.¹⁹ As the protagonist, however, Molly's desire to return to England drives much of the plot and Schwabach deftly uses physical spaces as a counterpoint to Molly's self-interest: the narrative value of the collective interest is communicated through the focus on female-only spaces as incubators for feminist alliances. The most prominent of these spaces is the Bell's kitchen.

After her introduction to New York as a gateway to bondage and servitude rather than to freedom and opportunity, Molly is handed over by Mr Bell to Mrs Bell and Arabella in the kitchen where she is immediately linked to other women and girls in the text, both enslaved and free. The kitchen is where Arabella and Mrs Bell teach Molly about being a servant and elements of being Jewish (for instance, Arabella teaches Molly about keeping the kitchen kosher). The kitchen is where other Jewish women come to speak to Mrs Bell, sometimes in Yiddish, and share news from England. Women and girls, including Molly and the Bell's toddler, Rachel, fill and dominate the kitchen space. In figuring the kitchen space in this manner, Schwabach uses a familiar feminist trope: the kitchen as a female space from which men are mostly absent and can, potentially, be ignored and even undermined. In turn, following, Doreen Massey's concept of gendered space and the construction of gender, Molly's perception of herself as a girl and as a serving girl is reinforced by this space where she spends much of her time. Massey states,

Space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (and such related things as our degrees of mobility) are gendered through and through. Moreover they are gendered in a myriad of different ways, which vary between cultures and over time. And this gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live.²⁰

The Bell's kitchen as a locus of female-centred activity and communion can be contrasted with the synagogue which also relies on gendered spaces: it actively excludes and restricts women and girls, both in terms of what they can do in its sacred space and where they can do it. Men and boys enter the synagogue through its main door, are allowed to say the prayers, and read from the Torah scrolls whilst women and girls attend the synagogue on Saturdays only and enter through a side door and go

up to the 'women's gallery,' a balcony from which the actions of the men are audible but only partially visible because of a lattice-work screen that rises from the balcony railing up to the ceiling and which Molly describes as 'a bit like being in a cage'.²¹ The architecture and customs of the synagogue reflect and, as Massey says, also effects the social status of women and girls, a status which Molly experiences as less than that of men and boys. By using 'cage' as a descriptor, the narrative evokes Molly's time in Newgate prison in London, whilst the gendered spaces of the colony's Jewish community further complicates Bell's idea of New York as a place which is freer for all Jewish people. The kitchen, on the other hand, is where Mrs Bell and Arabella have some sovereignty. Their kitchen is where Christy, an 'African' slave girl, comes for help and their kitchen is where Molly, Arabella and Betty plot to provide that help. Whilst the synagogue is presided over by white Jewish men, the domestic space of the kitchen is female and feminist, black and Jewish, and perhaps even sacred because of its accommodation of such differences.

By writing about slavery in the burgeoning eighteenth-century city scape of British New York, the text refuses its twenty-first-century reader the familiar iconography of sprawling rural slave plantations and underscores the ubiquity of chattel slavery across the colonial territories. *Pickpocket* depicts slavery in an urban and domestic setting, where it operates on a small scale and alongside the independent and indentured labour of white people.²² The kitchen is a setting for labouring women and girls to develop specific forms of resistance across social, cultural, and ethnic divisions. Although there is a hierarchy amongst the women, with Mrs Bell at its apex, the kitchen is an intriguing, complicated crossroads of free and coerced labour, blackness, Jewishness, and femaleness. Hierarchy notwithstanding, all the women are less free in one sense or another than Mr Bell and other white men and boys in the colony, of any faith. The complexity of this kitchen as a space which both contains women through work and provides opportunities in which to plot freedom and subvert hierarchies of power is highlighted when Christy arrives there one night, pounding on the kitchen door, bloodied and beaten. Similarly, Molly also transforms the synagogue into a space which, rather than restricting women's movements, features as an essential component of Christy's eventual escape to unfettered freedom.

Radical mitzvahs

Christy's escape and the black/Jewish imaginary of the text are animated through a formulation I call the radical mitzvah. As Molly contemplates and plots her return to London she experiences ambivalence about this plan for three key reasons: The Bells are kind to her, she has no one to return to, and because she is taught by the Bells about the notion of doing good deeds, or mitzvahs. As her acculturation within Judaism develops alongside her understanding of racial slavery and indenture, incorporating mitzvahs into her behaviour facilitates Molly's maturation. Furthermore, she recognises the transactional nature of some mitzvahs given the specific context of slavery and indenture. When it becomes apparent, for instance, that the Bells could ill afford to buy Molly but did so anyway, as a mitzvah, Molly is thankful but shrewdly observes to herself that they nevertheless benefit every day from the hard work she performs for them. The radical mitzvah that she eventually does on behalf of Christy has a similar moral complication: Molly plans to steal the silver breastplates and rimonim which decorate the Torah scrolls in the synagogue to finance a return journey to London but eventually abandons this plan to assist in Christy's escape. Witnessing Christy's bloody wounds reminds Molly of the violence she experienced and learned to avoid on London's streets, and the fact that such violence is absent from her life with the Bells, a life facilitated by their mitzvah. So, like the Bells, in helping Christy, Molly helps herself by choosing the safer, more accommodating life as the Bell's servant. And yet, the mitzvah of helping Christy is simultaneously a form of theft – Molly helps Christy to steal her freedom – which relies on Molly's ability and willingness to defy the institutions she was being ideologically conditioned to respect, and it is in this sense that I categorise her mitzvah, the central action of the novel, as radical.

One of the reasons that Christy's master, Grant, beats her brutally and regularly is because Christy's father was part of the 1712 slave uprising in the New York colony, and Grant is terrified that Christy will one day kill him too because, he says, 'blood will tell'.²³ Arabella reveals this information to the whole household on the night Christy seeks refuge there:

Her name's Christy. She belongs to Mr Grant, the cordwainer," said Arabella tensely. "He often beats her for no reason. He takes against her because her father was one of them burned in 1712... Mr Grant thinks she's bound to turn out a rebel and burn down white people's houses.²⁴

Christy's plight is the occasion for an even deeper understanding of not just racial slavery but black self-determination and female self-determination. Cleverly, this explanation of Grant's violence and twisted rationale doubles as a means to insert an actual piece of New York's history of black resistance to slavery, and one that is far bigger than the single, small-scale resistant act of the novel's plot. The 1712 uprising in New York was a freedom struggle by enslaved workers, who:

...desiring their freedom, set fire to a building and attacked those summoned to put out the blaze. They managed to kill nine persons and wound seven others, but they failed to spark a larger revolt. Half a dozen accused conspirators committed suicide after their capture, and more than twenty were put to death, some by being burned alive.²⁵

Schwabach includes historically accurate details throughout the novel and Grant's attitudes and Christy's injuries – 'puffs and gashes had closed both her eyes and obscured her features' – contribute to Molly's burgeoning understanding of mitzvahs as well as her growing sense of solidarity with Christy as an innocent victim of horrific violence.²⁶ These developments propel the narrative to the moment where Molly makes a rapid decision to abandon her own quest to return to London in order to help Christy achieve her freedom. To Schwabach's credit, Molly is not figured as Christy's white Jewish saviour, but rather as a junior co-conspirator as Arabella and Betty Moccasin are responsible for the detailed planning and plotting. Betty negotiates with the 'Mohawks' to provide sanctuary for Christy and Arabella secretly gathers necessary supplies, such as food and blankets, for Christy's journey to Mohawk territory. Once Molly decides to help Christy rather than herself, she corrals her skills at deception and lures a rival thief called Hester, now indentured too, to the synagogue, with a hint of the silver treasure. Once they break in, the two girls fight noisily and destroy parts of the men's section which in turn attracts local attention and gives Christy enough time to be spirited down to the harbour by Arabella and Betty, and safely away. These girls and women openly defy the patriarchal structures which confine them in bondage and servitude and they do so at great risk to themselves. This collective, coordinated feminist action is the prime example of how the black/Jewish imaginary of the text is positioned to oppose patriarchy and is simultaneously a radical, collective implementation of a mitzvah. Betty Moccasin, a minor and under-developed character who

exists outside the context of a community, patriarchal or otherwise, is nevertheless the embodiment of independent womanhood and the critical envoy for Christy's quest for freedom. The radical mitzvah of *Pickpocket* is fuelled by the conviction held by these girls and women that the abuses and life sentence of British slavery are unjust. It is achieved through Arabella and Christy's willingness to trust Molly, the British Jewish thief, to help them create a different life for Christy. Their collective, small act, like the larger act of the 1712 uprising, is a formidable challenge to 'the arbitrary rule' of racial slavery.²⁷

Understanding and performing mitzvahs are a significant aspect of the black/Jewish imaginary of the novel: a key step in Molly's inhabitation of Jewishness by means of understanding and performing mitzvahs is realised through her decision to put aside her own desires and instead be of help to Christy. Furthermore, the mitzvah for Christy is an outcome of Molly's newly acquired knowledge of how slavery is similar in some respects but also far worse than indenture because the latter has an end date. Arabella tells Molly they are unlike because she, Arabella is not Jewish and although they are both owned by the Bells, Arabella, a slave, is 'owned 'for life'.²⁸ Molly's ability to think about enslaved Africans in relation to herself as a Jewish person and in relation to the white mainstream, as per Harrison-Kahan, comes to the fore in the enactment of the radical mitzvah. The kitchen and the synagogue, the spaces where these mitzvahs are performed, are strategically used as conduits for deliberate acts of trespass. Molly ignores and resists the sacredness of the temple as well as its gender segregation when, during her strategic fight with Hester, she trespasses on the main area of the synagogue and evades the men attracted by the commotion.²⁹ The kitchen, in between its use by women to prepare meals and coordinate household chores, becomes the staging ground for feminist resistance against slavery. Freeing Christy and invading the synagogue show women and girls actively shaping black girlhood and Jewish girlhood on their own terms and in defiance of the ideologies and spaces which otherwise confine them. For those left behind, however, the same ideologies and spaces continue to encourage and enforce assimilation into prescribed roles for women and girls, enslaved and indentured, black and Jewish.

The ethics of power

Christy's regular victimisation and its contrast to Molly's circumstances presents an opportunity in the text to consider both the ethics of power and the types of injustice ratified by British slave law. The extreme abuse which Christy suffers is familiar to Arabella and reminds Molly of similar abuse witnessed in London and, moreover, unleashes in Molly an understanding of her own power and her ethical responsibility to do something. Her realisation of the immutable yet arbitrary differences between her position as an indentured labourer who will be freed at age twenty-one and Arabella's and Christy's life sentence in slavery, also galvanises Molly into action. While *Pickpocket* avoids showing their experiences of slavery and indenture as commensurate, it is also deliberate in its endorsement of coalition and collective action in the face of injustice. I have argued that in the shared physical space of the kitchen and in the shared ontological space of a black/Jewish imaginary, Molly and Arabella's (and Christy and Betty's) alliance is not just forged but flourishes. Furthermore, their collective refusal to return Christy to Grant for further inevitable abuse is subtly contrasted with the action taken by the Bells. Whilst the Bells provide Christy with a temporary haven, help nurse her horrible wounds, and decry Grant's violence, as law-abiding slave owners they do not question that she should be sent back to her master, anything else would be unlawful. But Arabella, Christy, and eventually Molly, see the situation quite differently because of their status as enslaved and indentured women and girls, with no recourse to the law. The radical mitzvah of aiding/stealing Christy exists on morally firmer ground in the world of the text. Molly, Arabella and Betty successfully pick the pocket of Christy's owner and flout commandments in both Christianity and Judaism which forbid stealing. This undercutting of established patriarchal structures of control makes the text's position on the ethics of power quite plain. The text offers a stinging critique of the Judaism practiced by the slave-owning but otherwise good-hearted Bells.

Pickpocket demonstrates a key convention of children's literature whereby the protagonist gradually accepts the contours of the adult world as normative.³⁰ Indeed although the narrative does not follow Molly into adulthood, and does not suggest that Molly 'becomes ready to exercise the same oppression that (s)he has been subjected to', she does, eventually, become a part of the Bell family and benefits from the comfort and security it provides; this is despite her continued status as an indentured servant and Arabella's continued status as a slave.³¹ Molly's full assimilation into the Bell

household ultimately mutes the politicised intersectional narrative. The text's resistant feminist black/Jewish imaginary allow Molly, Arabella and Christy to understand, question and decisively object to the normativity of the world around them, most notably slavery, deprivation, and physical abuse, but the spaces and systems of that world remain intact and fully operational.³² I argue, however that the containment of Molly and Arabella in their positions of servitude does not negate their subversive actions but it does bring to the fore the idea of intellectual and physical freedom, and underscores again varying degrees of being unfree. The parallel narrative of slavery and indenture offered in *Pickpocket* insists on an understanding of bondage that moves beyond a simplistic concept of freedom and slavery: freedom for Christy, Molly and Arabella, as girls and as women, as Africans and as Jews, and as British subjects in the colonies has different definitions and different consequences.

In its representation of a colonial black/Jewish imaginary, *Pickpocket* is a novel that, as Clare Bradford asserts in a larger discussion about children's fiction and ethnicity, 'takes a critical approach to concepts of multiculturalism, exposing the fault lines which threaten national mythologies of tolerance and equality.'³³ The text historicises Jewish indenture and black slavery within Britishness and thereby historicises a black/Jewish imaginary for the contemporary reader. Schwabach engages with cultural difference rather than just presenting characters of different ethnicities and gives explicit attention to how whiteness is a privileged position for Molly to occupy even though she is an indentured servant far from her home country. By setting the narrative first in London and then in colonial New York, Schwabach highlights both as key sites of the British slave and indenture systems in the 18th Century. These discursive strategies of the text are at least as significant as the physical acts of resistance enacted by Molly, Arabella, Christy and Betty. Schwabach's presentation of British slavery and indenture in the context of British Jewish settlers foregrounds for readers the complexity of identity and colonial culture by displaying the various ways that race, class, gender and religion intersect and inform structures of oppression, resistance and alternatives to such structures. By contrasting Molly's subversive acts and political awareness with her assimilation and acculturation, the narrative voices a doubled meaning of belonging: the idea of belonging to community and the idea of belonging to someone else as their property. This amplified meaning reiterates the incommensurability of the

types of oppression presented in the text. When Molly fully comprehends how her circumstances are inexorably different from Arabella's, it is a suitably uncomfortable narrative moment:

With a funny twist in her stomach, Molly suddenly saw her situation through Arabella's eyes. Molly had no reason to run away. The Bells were kind to her. Kind to her and Arabella both, really. But the Bells owned Molly until she was twenty-one. They owned Arabella for the rest of her life. What was it Arabella had said? *Until the grave set her free*. . . Molly felt for the key in her pocket again. She wasn't going to steal the silver from the synagogue. She was going to help Christy, to help Arabella set her free before the grave. She wasn't going to steal any silver, and she wasn't going to go to London. She was going to stay with the Bells, here in this little brick house on Mill Street near the synagogue. Until she reached the age of twenty-one, as her indenture said. She tried to feel disappointed, but instead she felt as if a great weight had lifted from her shoulders. . .³⁴

Molly learns to grasp this difference, as she develops empathy for Arabella's caste position in the household and in the world of colonial New York. As this passage reveals, the narrative of freedom and self-determination that culminates in Christy's successful escape is tempered by the lack of change in Arabella's circumstances and Molly's contrasting good fortune. Moreover, the passage exposes the limits of resistance presented in the text: slavery is an obstacle to be overcome, or not, rather than a system that needs to be destroyed. Indeed, despite the interior monologue and mature perspective of the above passage, Molly is outwardly legible to others through her acceptance of Judaism and her place within the Jewish slave-owning colonial community. Such narrative choices inevitably diminish the solidarity of the women's collective action because they re-centre individualism and, even though productive feminist alliances have been made and executed, the occasion for such alliances, the structures of oppression, remain robustly in place.

Conclusion

Various scholars assert the specific value of children's literature and its role in shaping perspectives about both the world we inhabit and the world as we imagine it once was and in my analysis of *Pickpocket* I explicitly agree with this viewpoint.³⁵ *Pickpocket* suggests an understanding of how complex identities and intersectional structures of oppression are not merely a modern phenomenon. Indeed The question 'ain't I a woman?', attributed to the nineteenth-century ex-slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth, identified how she was excluded from womanhood because of her race and other

privileges, such as larger portions of food, because she was not a black man.³⁶ In asking similar questions about the ethics of power, key characters in *Pickpocket* question the ideology of the systems which ensnare them in servitude and they attempt to refuse the singular identities they have been accorded as black and Jewish girls and women. Peter Bramwell goes so far as to contend that, 'children's historical fiction is more about the time it was written than the era in which it is set', but I would argue the point differently.³⁷ The feminist alliance forged amongst Schwabach's characters does bear the distinct attributes of third wave feminism and cotemporary discourses of diversity in children's fiction.³⁸ However, *Pickpocket* foregrounds the intersectional identities of its main characters which offers readers access to more complex ideas about both British black and Jewish identities in the 18th Century.³⁹ Indeed, whilst reviews overlook the black/ Jewish imaginary in *Pickpocket* and seem oblivious to the text's discourses of intersectionality, this does not mean that either is opaque or irrelevant to the text's specific historic context and once attention is given to the feminist alliance between girls and women this intricate field of relation becomes plain.

Ultimately, I locate the novel's discourse of resistance as noteworthy yet limited. It is noteworthy because the work to achieve Christy's escape requires a defiance of the British colonial patriarchal society which enslaves and subjugates most girls and women. On the other hand, the central act of resistance is limited because it paradoxically re-enforces the very same patriarchal system: by helping Christy, Molly is emptied of her own desire to return to London, becomes more firmly acculturated within Judaism and is, eventually, pleased to be wanted by the Bells, despite the disproportionate response by the British legal system to her act of petty theft in London. Furthermore, the Bell's expanded family will inevitably become more dependent on Arabella's slave labour once Molly completes her indenture; within the colony the pressure which women and girls, enslaved and free, bring to bear on the systems which oppress them stay intact for all but Christy. And yet, the Bell household remains notable as a space shared by British Jewish and British black people and as a space animated by cross-cultural radical mitzvahs. *Pickpocket* makes it difficult for readers to consider eighteenth-century Britishness, indenture, slavery, and Judaism as discrete social formations. The alliance

forged among the characters, which exceed shared faith communities and racial identity, therefore simultaneously seem to speak to a desire for a resistant black/Jewish imaginary for the 21st Century.

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NOTES

¹ Karen Schwabach, *A Pickpocket's Tale* (New York: Yearling, 2006). Hereafter abbreviated as *Pickpocket*. *Pickpocket* is an American text written and published in America, yet it tells a British story.

² Lori Harrison Kahan, *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black-Jewish Imaginary* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 2.

³ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy, and other essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

⁴ Some of the key recent pieces of research regarding the limited representation of diversity in children's literature include the report by British organisation, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 'Reflecting Realities: A Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature 2017.' This report found that in 2017 only 4% of books published in the UK featured black and minority ethnic characters and only 1% had a black or minority ethnic main character (<https://clpe.org.uk/library-and-resources/research/reflecting-realities-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-children>). See also, the U.S.-based grassroots organisation, We Need Diverse Books (<https://diversebooks.org/>) and the annual report by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin which publishes statistics about children's and young adult fiction by and about people of colour in the U.S. Their figures for 2017, for instance, showed that of 3700 books received, 340 featured African American characters and 122 were written by African American authors (<http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>).

⁵ Clare Bradford *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial readings of children's literature*. (Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008), 3.

⁶ Harrison-Kahan, 2.

⁷ A basic definition of a mitzvah is a good deed.

⁸ PenguinRandomHouse.com (www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/162805/a-pickpockets-tale-by-karen-schwabach/9780375849213).

⁹ Barbara Silverman, 'A Pickpocket's Tale.' *The Jewish Book Council* (2006). (<https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-pickpockets-tale>)

¹⁰ Shelle Rosenfeld, "A Pickpocket's Tale." *The Booklist* 103.6 (2006), 62. Web.

¹¹ Harrison-Kahan, 145.

¹² Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' in *The Black Feminist Reader* edited by Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Blackwell: Malden and Oxford, 2000), 209.

¹³ Kathy Davis, "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful." *Feminist Theory* 9 (1) 2008, 68.

¹⁴ 'Intersectionality' is not widely used as a concept within the study of children's literature. Whilst children's literature regularly gives attention to issues of race, gender, class and disability, keyword searches using 'intersectionality' and 'children's literature' produced negligible results.

¹⁵ *Pickpocket*, 56.

¹⁶ The American ideal of freedom is captured in the famous lyric, 'land of the free, home of the brave' from 'The Star-Spangled Banner' written by Francis Scott Key in the 19th Century and ratified as the American national anthem in the 20th Century (see Heyman, Richard. "Star-Spangled Banner, The." *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, edited by Simon Bronner, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1st edition, 2018. *Credo Reference*, <https://search-credoreference>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2018).

¹⁷ Schwabach, 50.

¹⁸ Maria Nikolajeva, *Power Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 7.

¹⁹ Schwabach, in fact, emphasises how political alliance is not synonymous with friendship and therefore Molly and Arabella are not shown becoming best friends. Female solidarity is also nuanced: Mrs Bell as mistress of the house is not party to the collective action, perhaps because, although she is depicted as kind-hearted, her allegiance is with other slave owners and not with slaves.

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- ²⁰ Doreen Massey *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 186.
- ²¹ *Pickpocket*, 92.
- ²² Slavery was a part of the colonial landscape in New Amsterdam under the Dutch but when the British took over and New Netherland became New York, in the mid-17th Century, Kelley and Lewis write, '[I]t would be the English who expanded their hold on the Atlantic coast of North America and steadily increased the number of blacks living there. As more black newcomers appeared in the English mainland colonies, racial designations gradually took on new significance. Eventually, legal codes would impose hereditary enslavement, and profit-conscious traders would undertake the importation of slaves direct from Africa.' Robin D.G. Kelley and Earl Lewis (Editors) *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 62. See also Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of The Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870* (London: Picador, 1997), 203, 261.
- ²³ *Pickpocket*, 156.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Kelley and Lewis, 92.
- ²⁶ *Pickpocket*, 154.
- ²⁷ Kelley and Lewis, 90.
- ²⁸ *Pickpocket*, 85.
- ²⁹ *Pickpocket*, 209.
- ³⁰ Nikolajeva, 7.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Nikolajeva, 9.
- ³³ Clare Bradford, 'Race, Ethnicity and Colonialism' in David Rudd (editor) *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 48.
- ³⁴ *Pickpocket*, 198.
- ³⁵ For example, see Brigitte Fielder, 'Black Girls, White Girls, American Girls: Slavery and Racialized Perspectives in Abolitionist and Neoabolitionist Children's Literature' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* Volume 36, Number 2, Fall 2017, 323-352; Kimberly Reynolds, *Children's Literature A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 4; Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1984).
- ³⁶ Quoted in Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix 'Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5(3) (2004), 75-86.
- ³⁷ Peter Bramwell, 'Past Settings, Contemporary Concerns: Feminist Historical Fiction in the Late Twentieth Century' in Butler, Catherine and Kimberly Reynolds (editors) *Modern Children's Literature: An Introduction*, 2ⁿ Edition (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 154.
- ³⁸ See for instance, Pat Pinsent 'Postmodernism, New Historicism and Postcolonialism: Some Recent Historical Novels in 169 in Butler and Reynolds, p. 168; and see also, Roderick McGillis, "Self, Other, and Other Self: Recognizing the Other in Children's Literature." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 21 no. 2, 1997, 215-229.
- ³⁹ For instance, the prevalence of 'white slavery' is often obscured in histories of Imperial Britain. See Don Jordan and Michael Walsh, *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).