Though no African American poetry was published before 1773, the racial tensions that it often addresses began much earlier, during the early years of Anglo settlement on this continent. The first British colonies in North America were established as trading posts and operational bases for corporations engaged in the business of trading and selling both raw materials and finished goods (Ancel, *Slavery*). Initially, labor for the colonies was provided by poor, white indentured servants (Murolo 7). Being contracted, bought, or sold into indentured servitude was essentially the same as being a slave, except that the servants were eventually freed, usually after three to six years depending on their contract (Murolo 7-9, *Slavery*). The first Africans brought to the colonies were treated more like indentured servants than slaves (*Slavery*). As events in Colonial America progressed, slavery replaced indentured servitude for black people and many Americans were inspired to use poetry to bring attention to the injustice of racial slavery, as well as the continued oppression of black people after slavery ended (Murolo 9-12, Ubriaco).

The various poetic approaches to the issue of racial tension explored in this paper include a request for solidarity and inclusion of black people in white society based on appeals to a shared religion (Christianity), an appeal to black people to rebel and run away (also based on Christianity), a shocking description of the horrific results of racism, and finally, a radical appeal to revolt against all the traditional bonds of society in order to achieve true solidarity among all members of the lower class. Because our understanding of these poems can be greatly enhanced by first exploring how racism arose and evolved in the United States, the discussion of specific examples of poetry will follow.
an examination of why racism exists among the working class in the United States.

Bonding over their shared lifestyles, black and white servants lived, worked, and socialized together, but things started to change in 1640 when three servants, John Punch (black), James Gregory (white), and a man named Victor (white), ran away from their master in Virginia (Slavery, Ubriaco). All three men were whipped, “the two white men were sentenced to an additional four years of servitude, . . . and the black man, a man named John Punch, was ordered to 'serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere’” (Virginia). The judges and law makers of the day represented wealthy, white planters and corporations (Ancel). Giving John Punch a harsher sentence than his mates was an intentional act, designed to assist elite planters by fostering resentment and division among the workers (Ubriaco). Without solidarity, the working class is less likely to cooperate, organize, and revolt (Ubriaco). The case of John Punch is the first recorded incident of someone being condemned to servitude for life and is the first notable step toward the institutionalization of slavery in the United States (Slavery, Virginia). By establishing this precedent of lifelong servitude for a black person, the judge employed, on a very small scale, standard European divide-and-conquer tactics against three members of the lower class.¹

Thirty-six years later, in 1676, following a gradual reduction in the quality of life for black people after the case of John Punch, the divide-and-conquer approach solidified as a result of Bacon's Rebellion (Ubriaco). Nathaniel Bacon united a group of roughly 1000 black and white farmers, slaves, and indentured servants (Murolo 18-19). Many of the rebels had served the terms of their indenture and had been set free but had few viable means of securing income and very limited access to farmable land because so much of it was owned by wealthy planters (Ancel). After turning their attention away from attacking the mostly friendly Native Americans nearby, Bacon's group of underclass citizens pillaged the plantations of wealthy planters and attacked the capitol in Jamestown (Murolo 18-19). Prior to Bacon's Rebellion, race slavery was not an official institution regulated by laws, but after the
rebellion, laws defining and regulating the practice of slavery were passed in Maryland and Virginia, and soon, “as other British colonies institutionalized slavery, they, too, passed laws designed to eliminate common ground between servants and slaves. Labor revolts that united black and white were soon a thing of the past” (Murolo 18-19, Slavery).

The exploitation of race and ethnicity in order to set the lower class at odds with itself was a standard European imperial tactic in its colonies around the world. Just as the Germans set up the Tutsis to rule over the Hutus in Rwanda, and the British exploited the caste system in India to serve their own ends, the elite law makers in North America gradually set up a social system wherein whites, no matter their station in life, ranked above blacks (Ancel, Keen 3, Meredith 157-161). As black people became more oppressed, poor white people were granted more privileges (Ancel). Whites were sufficiently deceived by the token privileges bestowed on them and began thinking that they were “better” than blacks (Ubriaco). Blacks, of course, resented the unequal treatment because the poor whites were their peers; equal in every way except for skin color. Thus divide-and-conquer tactics proved to be successful in North America just as they had been in Africa and India (Keen 3, Meredith 157-161).²

One of the desired results of divide-and-conquer techniques is confusion among the conquered. The attentions of the conquered are directed toward each other rather than toward the powerful entities that are exploiting them. Therefore, understanding the intentional implantation of racism yields a much richer reading of African American, abolitionist, and sympathizer poetry; these poems reflect many different directions toward which the attention of the underclass may be more appropriately focused because we are able to keep in mind who the real enemy is while reading them. Nearly 100 years after Bacon's Rebellion, wealthy white people who had established many laws restricting the behavior of black people to prevent agitation and organization and who also owned all the means of mass production, deemed Phillis Wheatley to be the first black writer worthy of publication. The first book
published by an African American was Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773 (Gilyard 129). Prior to the 1700's, “The primary concern for the [poet] of the period is self-definition. America has no distinct personality, at the time. So while certain themes are prevalent—slavery, Puritanism, Native Americans—most poets . . . were more concerned with self-definition within these contexts,” but by the time Wheatley was published, racism had become a part of the working class culture (Exam 1). *On Being Brought from Africa to America* is one of the poems included in her book:

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Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too;
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our fable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.³
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(Wheatley 129-30)

Even though this poem boldly claimed that black Christians were worthy of God, it was allowed to circulate in white society because the majority of the poem reinforced racist stereotypes of African people as Godless, heathen savages, and also depicted the transporting of Africans to America, against their will, as having been beneficial to the Africans because it resulted in their salvation. In this meek poem, Wheatley accepts the racial divide but attempts to bridge the religious divide in the hopes that religion trumps race. Perhaps Wheatley realized that the corporate interests of her day cared about neither race nor religion and hoped that if she could appeal to the good will of white Christians, they may stand together against the oppressors. Perhaps she thought that the upper class would blush at its hypocrisy and begin to treat black people humanely. No matter the results for which she hoped, hers is a voice humbly begging for solidarity among the races and some semblance of acceptance into white culture.
As relations among members of the lower class continued to deteriorate, some poets gave up on meekly asking for decency and began to think about escaping their oppressors. One theme that was widely embraced by African Americans was the use of the story of Moses from the Christian Bible as a way to define the slave experience as well as provide hope for escaping the misery they endured (Gilyard 117-118). The slave owners were compared to Pharaoh and the slaves were compared to the Israelites waiting to be led to freedom by Harriet Tubman or any one of a number of other activists performing the Moses-like activity of helping the oppressed (Gilyard 118). In 1869, Frances E. W. Harper wrote *Moses: A Story of the Nile*. In this lengthy poem, Harper addresses many labor issues, including divide-and-conquer tactics. In one passage, Pharaoh responds to Moses' plea to free the oppressed by punishing the slaves and giving them additional work:

'Twas a sad day in Goshen;  
And the king's decree hung like a gloomy pall  
Around their homes. The people fainted 'neath  
Their added tasks, then cried unto the king,  
That he would ease their burdens; but he hissed  
A taunt into their ears and said, “Ye are  
Idle, and your minds are filled with vain  
And foolish thoughts; get you unto your tasks,  
And ye shall not 'minish of your tale of bricks.”  
And they turned their eyes  
Reproachfully to Moses and his brother,  
And laid the cruel blame upon their shoulders.  
(Harper 136-158)

There are several other passages in *Moses* that provide lessons about solidarity and how the upper class may divide the lower class. However, Harper's message of solidarity, unlike Wheatley's which appeals to white Christians, applies only to the slaves. The ultimate goal of the poem is to free all the black people, not to try and get along with white people or make the existing system of slavery more tolerable.

In the late 1930s, Abel Meeropol wrote “Strange Fruit”, a song later made popular by Billlie Holiday. Meeropol was a union activist and in another song, “Hand in Hand With Labor”, Meeropol
writes, “we're one big Union, 'cross the nation” (Baker 30). The concept of “One Big Union” was adopted by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) (Ancel). The IWW is notable among labor unions not only because it promotes anti-capitalist ideals, but also because it has never discriminated based on race, ethnicity, gender, or creed (Ancel). Because Meeropol used the phrase “One Big Union”, we can tell that he was sensitive to all members of the underclass and that he recognized racism as a tool employed by elite interests. In “Strange Fruit” Meeropol lets us know that words like “horrific” are entirely too weak to describe the practice of lynching:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!
Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop
(“Strange” 1)

“Strange Fruit” stands out not only because it so deeply sickening, but also because it was written by a white man writing specifically from the point of view that all laborers need solidarity. Following the creed of the IWW, Meeropol tells us that it does not matter who you are, what you do, or where you came from, lynching is bad. It is so bad, there are no words to describe how bad it is. It is so unreasonable it becomes incomprehensible, strange. Hanging a worker from a tree and leaving him there to rot because he tried to quit his job is something that we, as workers ourselves, can all agree is not acceptable by any stretch of the imagination. Where Wheatley asks for acceptance, and Harper suggests running away, Meeropol lets people know why they should be vigilant in their demands for equal and humane rights for all workers.

Huey Newton, one of the founders of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, also understood
the need for vigilance and solidarity, and, like Meeropol, Newton was able to clearly identify the source of the racial and labor problems in the United States. He laid the blame at the feet of corporations and a political system that created, fostered, and exploited the racial divide in order to glean higher profits from the labor of the underclass (“Ten” 1). The Panthers “saw black America as a colony—their goal was self-determination, their first concern survival. The Panthers also identified with African and Asian anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles” (Murolo 253).

Portrayed as black nationalists because of their demands that black people be given fair recompense for their labor, the Panthers actually worked side by side with other ethnic grassroots organizations including The Brown Berets (Chicano group), the Young Lords (Puerto Rican group), and the Young Patriots (poor white Appalachians who wore Confederate flag patches and denounced racism) (Murolo 257-258). Before their untimely demise, the Panthers organized several workers' unions, actively engaged in community services, and “by 1969, [the Panthers’] Free Breakfast program . . . served 23,000 children in nineteen cities” (Murolo 253). Newton beautifully expresses the depth of his commitment to solidarity and rejection of divisions based on race, gender, ethnicity, and even family bonds in his poem, Revolutionary Suicide, published in 1975:

By having no family  
I inherited the family of humanity.  
By having no possessions  
I have possessed all.  
By rejecting the love of one  
I received the love of all.  
By surrendering my life to the revolution  
I found eternal life.  
Revolutionary Suicide.  
(Newton)

With an Eastern tone, Newton is expressing that he cares as deeply for every human as he cares for his own family, and even his own self. Make no mistake, this sentiment of self-sacrifice is entirely un-American. Because capitalism, oppression, repression, and racism thrive on the pioneering spirit of
the individualist in the United States, Newton's communal spirit is a direct threat to these institutions. He wanted deep and lasting change in the United States from top to bottom. He wanted all workers around the world to be treated humanely, to be compensated fairly, and to be allowed the liberty of self-determination in their lives (“Ten” 3). These are radical ideas that go against everything capitalism stands for, and, as the Panthers' free breakfast program was thriving, “Chicago police shot [Panthers] Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in their beds on December 4, 1969. By 1970, the police had killed twenty-seven Party members” (Murolo 253, Slavery).

I always thought that racism in the United States was just a result of ignorance, but racism is not an accident of history. Our understanding of the intentional implantation of racism not only helps us to understand why our culture is the way it is and thereby enriches our reading of African American poetry, it can also serve as a model for understanding class divisions along many other lines: gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, occupation, and political affiliation. The poems discussed here reflect several different approaches to race relations in the United States. From Wheatley's gentle plea for acceptance to Newton's radical militant approach, we need all these voices asking in many different ways for solidarity because one never knows which voice will inspire the next W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells- Barnett, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Abel Meeropol, Phillis Wheatley, Dick Gregory, Martin Luther King Jr., Huey Newton, Cornel West, Sojourner Truth, Frances E. W. Harper, Barack Obama, or Moses.
Notes

1 "Divide and Conquer: Also, divide and govern or rule. Win by getting one's opponents to fight among themselves. For example, Divide and conquer was once a very successful policy in sub-Saharan Africa. This expression is a translation of the Latin maxim, Divide et impera ("divide and rule"), and began to appear in English about 1600" ("Divide" 1).

2 As a side note, one of the most dramatic examples of the long term results of divide and conquer tactics is that of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis by the Hutus in Rwanda.

3 Italics and spelling are copied directly from source text.
Works Cited


