

Frontier, Ocean, Empire:

Vistas of Expansion in Winslow Homer's United States

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Stephanie L. Herdrich and Sylvia Yount, *Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022), preprint.

In 1836, the year Winslow Homer was born, former president John Quincy Adams rose in the House of Representatives to address the United States' future. The army was fighting a brutal campaign against the Seminoles in Florida, and politicians were spoiling for an expansionist war to the west. Adams saw his country coiled on the starter block, ready to burst into an imperial sprint, and he sought to stop it. "Are you not large and unwieldy enough already?" he asked. "Have you not Indians enough to expel from the land of their fathers' sepulchres, and to exterminate?"¹

Apparently not. Over the course of Winslow Homer's life, the United States shot forward like a rocket. At his birth in 1836, it had 24 states and a western border that stopped at Texas (or, as it was then called, Mexico). By his death in 1910, the country was hardly recognizable. It had 46 states plus colonies in the Caribbean, the Arctic, the Pacific, and Asia. Its population had more than quintupled and its economy—now the world's largest—had grown an astonishing sixteenfold.² Railroads spanned the continent, telegraphic cables reached across the oceans, and airplanes were starting to fill the air.

Where was Winslow Homer in this age of explosive expansion? Nowhere, it might seem. The painter was born in Boston and his ashes were buried five miles to the west in Mount Auburn Cemetery. He spent most of his life in New York and New England. While his compatriots were chasing Native Americans across the plains of South Dakota or outfitting their booming cities with the world's first skyscrapers, Homer was painting bucolic watercolors of dogs, deer, and trout in the Adirondacks. Placed beside his contemporaries Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church, known for lavishly painting the Far West and foreign countries, Homer appears parochial.

He appears so, but he wasn't. The image of Homer as a homebound, inward-looking painter better reflects his reception than his artistic production. A major achievement of this exhibition is to dispel that image by foregrounding

¹ *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st sess., May 25, 1836, 4044.

² Maddison Project Database, version 2020, Groningen Growth and Development Center, www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison.

Homer's wide horizons. Yes, he painted small fishing villages, but he stressed their connections to vast oceanic space. His widely admired Maine seascapes conversed with his maritime paintings of England, Quebec, the Bahamas, and Bermuda. It's easy to see Homer's bright Caribbean scenes—showcased in breadth and depth in this effort—as light-hearted vacation paintings, distractions from his more substantive and darker-hued life's work. Yet by taking all of Homer's ports of call seriously, we can understand him to be concerned with questions of imperial space. At a time when the shape of U.S. power was uncertain, Homer's art probed the geographic possibilities.

To see how, it's important to understand the spatial context in which Homer worked. His career began in the Civil War, a war of violent national integration. Though typically seen as a war between North and South, it can also be understood, in Megan Kate Nelson's words, as a "three-cornered war," with the U.S. Army simultaneously fighting secessionist forces in the South and Indigenous ones in the West.³ It beat both, and by the late nineteenth century a stubbornly fragmented country had become a forcibly integrated one, with railroads, telegraph lines, capital flows, and a strengthened central state binding the peripheral regions to Homer's home, the Northeastern core.⁴ Two years serve as landmarks: 1877, when President Rutherford B. Hayes concluded the federal military occupation of the South, and 1890, when the U.S. Army finally subdued the formidable Lakotas at Wounded Knee and when, according to the U.S. Census superintendent, the Western frontier ceased to exist as a distinct space.

For the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, the end of the frontier marked a crisis. The outward pushing of borders had been hitherto the "distinguishing feature of American life," he wrote, the foundation of its character, economy, and politics.⁵ The question was: What next? Turner's frontier thesis captured the anxieties of his day. Though the country's economy was enormous, it was also unstable, given to crashes and recessions. Many hoped that a spatial solution—expansion in some new form, to compensate for the frontier's loss—could smooth matters.

Two such solutions appeared particularly inviting. First, the United States could reach back across the Atlantic, enriching its commerce and culture by connecting more closely to Europe. The painter John Singer Sargent, a U.S. citizen who nevertheless spent most of his life in Europe, represented this

³ Megan Kate Nelson, *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, the Confederacy, and Native Peoples in the Fight for the West* (New York: Scribner, 2020).

⁴ A process helpfully described by Richard Franklin Bense in *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 1893, in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 2.

Atlantic orientation.⁶ Second, the United States might make more frontier by descending on the tropics and seizing colonies. Theodore Roosevelt, who personally invaded Cuba and orchestrated a war in the Philippines, represented this colonizing orientation.⁷ The two visions weren't mutually exclusive, but they implied different directions. The Atlanticists looked east, the imperialists looked south.

And where did Winslow Homer look? For a curious and prolific nineteenth-century U.S. painter, it's striking how uninterested he was in the West. Neither the physical place, which he never visited, nor its visual tropes—log cabins, tipis, Plains Indians, railways, bison herds—caught his eye. The land frontier did not concern him.

But the oceanic frontier did. Or oceanic *frontiers*—plural. At a time when his compatriots were debating how the United States might stretch its influence across water, Homer was painting maritime vistas to the east and south. Sometimes, these were enticing. Often, they were forbidding. By placing Homer within the geographical imaginaries of his day, we can understand his work as reflecting on his country's spatial trajectory. Even when painting small fishing towns, Winslow Homer was looking outward.



The first direction Homer gazed was east, across the Atlantic to Europe. He wasn't the only to do so. The Civil War's end inaugurated a period of Atlantic-facing globalization for the United States. In the late nineteenth century, it received more investment and immigration than any other country in the world, and the bulk of those flows originated from Europe.⁸ Two institutions represented the transatlantic connections: the ocean-spanning telegraphic cable and the gold standard.

The first transatlantic cable connecting the United States and Britain, laid in 1858 before quickly breaking, was a thin wire down which only a trickle of information intermittently flowed. Yet it represented something far greater. Celebrations of the 1858 linkage “bordered on hysteria,” Tom Standage has written.⁹ In New York City, thousands marched, couples danced to the “Telegraph Polka,” and a torch parade grew so boisterous that it set fire to City Hall.¹⁰ “The Atlantic is dried up,” wrote the *London Times*, “and we become in

⁶ An important account remains Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁷ On this tendency, see Stephen Kinzer, *The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2017).

⁸ Eric Rauchway, *Blessed Among Nations: How the World Made America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 19.

⁹ Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-line Pioneers* (1998; New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 80.

¹⁰ Simone M. Müller, *Wiring the World: The Social and Cultural Creation of Global Telegraph Networks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1.

reality as well as in wish one country.”¹¹ A new cable in 1866 replaced the broken 1858 line and, over the next half century, telegraphic connections grew thicker and more reliable, allowing the easy transmission of news and financial correspondence across ever-larger spaces.

A submerged cable thousands of miles long is not an object with inherent visual appeal. Yet artists found ways to make it work. Personifications of Britain and the United States shook hands or gazed at each other across the Atlantic, or cableships stretched a thick wire over the placid ocean. Such images were prominent—the muralist Constantino Brumidi painted one in 1862 in the U.S. Capitol. Winslow Homer, a young illustrator when the first cable was laid, could not possibly have missed these.



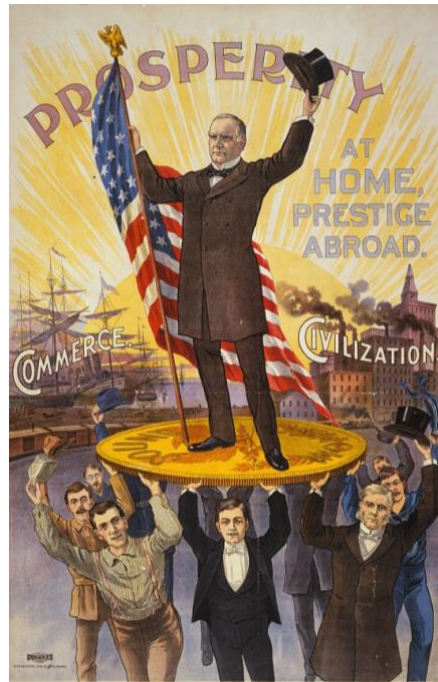
A typical visual celebration of the Atlantic cable, from 1866, the year of its successful reinstallation after breaking in 1858. The English lion and the U.S. eagle hold the cable’s opposite ends as ships pass over calm waters between: *The Eighth Wonder of the World, The Atlantic Cable* (1866), [Library of Congress](#)

Nor could he have missed talk of the gold standard, a core political issue in the post-Civil War era. The war’s expense had forced the U.S. government to stop paying its debts in gold-backed notes, instead issuing “greenbacks,” a fiat currency with no metallic basis. Whether the country should return to the gold standard provoked a raging debate on which presidential elections hung, one that tended to pit farmers in the South and West (debtors, thus preferring the easier money of the greenbacks) against the Northeastern financial elite (creditors, thus hoping to contract the currency and resume gold). The gold standard was also a question of globalization. Returning to it would put the United States on the same stable currency basis as Britain, allowing capital to

¹¹ Quoted in Standage, *Victorian Internet*, 83.

flow more easily across the Atlantic. William Jennings Bryan, the gold standard's greatest critic, moaned how it would enrich the "Atlantic coast" but gouge the "hardy pioneers" of the West.¹²

Standing against Bryan and for gold was William McKinley, the president who eventually returned the United States to the gold standard in 1900. A monetary standard was even harder to depict than a transatlantic cable, but this campaign poster captures the atmosphere: the candidate doffing his top hat while standing on a gold coin representing "sound money" in front of a bustling port, where factories belch smoke and ships fill the calm sea. The rising sun's position confirms that the port is an Eastern one and that those ships are plying the wavelessly smooth Atlantic. *Prosperity, prestige, commerce, and civilization* are McKinley's bywords.



William McKinley campaign poster, c. 1896, capturing the Atlantic orientation of gold standard promotion [Library of Congress](#)

Winslow Homer participated actively in the discussion over the Atlantic's place within the United States. He painted the ocean constantly, and traveled it, too, spending a year in Paris in 1866–67 and a year and a half in England in 1881–82, mostly in the small fishing village of Cullercoats. If Homer's paintings from Cullercoats resemble his subsequent ones from Prouts Neck, Maine, there's a reason. Cullercoats and Prouts Neck share a marine ecosystem, the rich North Atlantic boreal region that gives a similarity to fishing cultures from

¹² William Jennings Bryan, speech in 1896 *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention* (Logansport, IN: Wilson, Humphreys, and Company, 1896), 229.

Cape Cod to the North Sea.¹³ Nor was it only ecology that connected Homer's New England to the wider Atlantic world. A branch of the transatlantic cable ran through the Grand Banks of Newfoundland and terminated in Portland, a few miles from his home in Prouts Neck.

Yet if Homer engaged with the Atlantic, he did so on different terms than the champions of commerce and civilization. His earlier depictions—works such as *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)* (1873–76)—show a calm and inviting ocean. But after Cullercoats and for the rest of his career, Homer's Atlantic was a choppy, dark, and dangerous space, one that bedeviled sailors and caught even beachgoers in its treacherous undertow. This was not purely a visual interest in turbulence. Painting water inland, such as the rivers and lakes of the Adirondacks or the St. Johns River in Florida, Homer emphasized the serenity of aquatic scenes. It was when he looked east toward Europe that the skies grew dark and the waves tall.

Rarely did the waves rise so high as in *Life Line* (1884), acknowledged in its day as a masterpiece. The titular line is a cable strung between a wrecked ship and shore, on which a coast guardsman bears a woman to safety—Homer based his painting on real-life scenes from Atlantic City, New Jersey. Though all cables look similar, there's a world of difference between *Life Line's* cable and the telegraphic ones that filled Atlanticist visual culture. Clear communication, bustling commerce, and international unity are nowhere in Homer's painting. Here, the Atlantic coast is connected not to Europe but to a foundering ship.

The next year, Homer offered another Atlantic epic, *The Fog Warning* (1885), showing a lone fisherman encountering rough waters and approaching fog on Newfoundland's Grand Banks. As the historian W. Jeffrey Bolster has explained, the details are meaningful. Homer's fisherman is tub-trawling for halibut from a dory. Doing so was just as dangerous as Homer's painting makes it look, as it required fishermen to navigate deep waters in small craft. Why take the risk? The fishermen Homer met in Prouts Neck pursued halibut (formerly spurned as a “trash fish”) far from the coast because they were running out of bottom fish closer by. And they would soon exhaust the halibut, too.¹⁴ Homer's subject is not a brave soul facing down the timeless perils of the unforgiving sea, in other words. He's a hard-pressed worker risking his life to wring diminishing returns from a collapsing ecosystem.

Seen from the Grand Banks, the Atlantic isn't a source of stability and abundance, as the gold standard's promoters promised. It's foreboding and fished out.

¹³ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), chap. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7. See also Franklin Kelly, “A Process of Change,” in *Winslow Homer*, ed. Nicolai Cikovsky Jr. and Franklin Kelly (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 227–228.



Perhaps richer catches could be found elsewhere. The other prominent spatial solution to the United States' economic instability was empire. Here, the idea was to seize tropical lands as raw material sources, captive markets, investment sites, or proving grounds for white manhood. Such land-grabs reached their peak in the late nineteenth century. Between 1880 and 1913, the proportion of the world's land under colonial control rose from a quarter to more than a half, and the number of individuals held in colonial bondage jumped from 312 million to 554 million.¹⁵

Overseas empire had been largely a European undertaking up to the end of the nineteenth century. The United States had laid claim to nearly a hundred uninhabited islands in the Caribbean and Pacific, and it had bought the vast territory of Alaska from Russia in 1867. Yet these imperial holdings were minor compared with British, French, Dutch, Spanish, German, and Belgian ones. Washington had expended its imperial energies conquering the West and integrating the South, not scrambling for Africa or carving up Asia.

That changed quickly in 1898. In that year, the United States entered a war Spain was fighting against its independence-seeking subjects in Cuba and the Philippines. The United States joined the war on the rebels' side but ended it by seizing some of Spain's colonies. It annexed the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam, occupied Cuba, and—in a fit of imperial enthusiasm—annexed the non-Spanish lands of Hawai'i and American Samoa. Suddenly, the Stars and Stripes was flying from flagpoles across the Pacific and the Caribbean.

The newly raised flags fluttered in unfamiliar tropical breezes. Whereas westward expansion had involved moving along climate-stable latitudinal belts, entering the tropics meant encountering novel environments. For some, such spaces were romantic and exciting. Art historian Krista Thompson describes a growing booster literature emanating from the Caribbean colonies, meant to entice whites to these "picturesque, 'tropical' paradises."¹⁶ Homer himself sold illustrations to *Century Magazine* for a touristic article ("A Midwinter Resort") about the Bahamas. As Thompson notes, he seemed entirely comfortable with colonialist stereotypes of Caribbean islands as exotic idylls.¹⁷

Such images of the island colonies as paradises were necessary to overcome a countervailing sense of them as degenerate and disease-ridden. More than one traveler came to the islands with ambition and left with diarrhea. The

¹⁵ Bouda Etemad, *Possessing the World: Taking the Measurements of Colonisation from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century*, trans. Andrene Everson (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 123.

¹⁶ Krista Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4. The Bahamas crosses the Tropic of Cancer, so technically it's part tropical and part subtropical. Yet, as Thompson explains, it was fully part of tropical discourse at the time.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 106–110, 136.

famed Rough Riders who invaded Cuba in 1898 succumbed quickly to yellow fever and malaria—they were “ripe for dying like rotten sheep,” Theodore Roosevelt wrote.¹⁸ William Howard Taft, the Philippines’ first U.S. colonial governor, was laid low by amoebic dysentery and a (probably related) rectal fistula that nearly killed him.¹⁹ Benjamin Kidd’s influential *The Control of the Tropics* (1898) concluded that, in tropical regions, whites could be no better than underwater divers: they’d never adjust, and they’d always have to come up for air.²⁰

Questions about the nature of colonial space ricocheted through the U.S. mainland starting in 1898. But to Winslow Homer, they were old hat—he’d been visiting the Caribbean since 1884. Although he was by no means the sole U.S. chronicler of the region, he was nevertheless in rare company. When he first arrived at the aspiring tourist mecca of the Bahamas, a British colony, there were only some 150 visitors at the height of the season.²¹ Spain’s colony of Cuba, which Homer visited in 1885, also struck him as fresh ground. “I expect some fine things,” he wrote to his brother. “It is certainly the richest field for an artist that I have seen.”²² Over the next years, Homer would return to the region, painting Florida (including its island Key West) and the British colony of Bermuda, as well as more Bahamian scenes. He produced a burst of Caribbean pieces right after the 1898 war, even revisiting sketches from his 1885 Cuba trip.

Homer can be seen as an advance scout for a country that would soon turn its gaze south. After the war with Spain climaxed with a dramatic naval battle at Spain’s old colonial capital, Santiago de Cuba, Homer produced a substantial and significant painting of the scene, *Searchlight on Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba* (1901). Homer didn’t sail with the navy to Cuba, but he didn’t have to. He could paint Spain’s defenses because he’d already been to the island and knew what they looked like.

So, what did Homer see, reconnoitering the island colonies of the Caribbean? Though his depictions exhibit considerable variation and nuance, one is nevertheless struck by how enticing they are, as compared to his scenes of the North Atlantic. Hurricanes whip through his Caribbean seascapes just as nor’easters battered his New England coastal scenes. But these storm paintings are balanced in his Caribbean corpus by cheery depictions of placid waters that capture the islands “at their most brilliant moments,” as the *New*

¹⁸ *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. 11 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926), 143. More generally, see J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Andrew J. Rotter, *Empires of the Senses: Bodily Encounters in Imperial India and the Philippines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 206–207.

²⁰ Benjamin Kidd, *The Control of the Tropics* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1898), 54.

²¹ Kelly, “Process of Change,” in Cikovsky and Kelly, *Homer*, 186.

²² Cikovsky and Kelly, *Homer*, 397.

York Times put it.²³ In Homer's Caribbean, the skies overhead are often bright, the sea appears abundant, and everyone looks in good health. Strapping young men diving in shallow waters or combing the beaches grab turtles, shells, and sponges with their bare hands. If the harsh economics of colonialism impel them to collect those sponges, the viewer sees no hint of it.

It's hard not to read such luminous works—especially those painted in 1898 and after, while the country was loudly debating the virtues of colonies—as an invitation to empire. Homer's sole imperial war painting, *Searchlight* (1901), would seem to confirm this. In it, a beam of electric light from a U.S. naval ship pierces the darkness around Spain's seventeenth-century fortress in Cuba. That image comports perfectly with the argument made by imperialists at the time: that the United States needed to fight in the Caribbean to protect Spain's territories from a backward and cruel colonizer.²⁴ Yet freeing them from Spanish rule did not mean granting them independence. By the time Homer painted *Searchlight*, the United States, in the name of "liberating" Spain's colonies, had seized an empire containing (counting occupied Cuba) some ten million people.



Winslow Homer, *Searchlight on Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba*, 1902

²³ April 19, 1885, quoted in Dana E. Byrd, "Trouble in Paradise?: Winslow Homer in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Florida, 1884-1886," in *Winslow Homer and the Camera: Photography and the Art of Painting*, ed. Dana E. Byrd and Frank H. Goodyear III (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 134.

²⁴ An excellent analysis of imperialist discourse is Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Along Hoganson's lines, one could, if inclined, attempt a sexual interpretation of *Searchlight* by comparing the upward-pointing shaft of light from the U.S. ship to the antiquated, horizontally positioned artillery of the Spanish Empire. Though they don't touch on the political implications, Cikovsky and Kelly discuss the "self-evident phallic symbol" of the cannon (as well as the "breast-like and vulvular forms" of the Spanish fort's architecture) in *Homer*, 379.

Dana E. Byrd has argued that Homer's Cuban paintings can be read as critical of Spanish rule.²⁵ But it's hard to find anything in Homer's work amounting to an indictment of the U.S. colonialism that followed. In February 1899, the United States embarked on a bloody war of pacification against the Philippine independence movement. That war killed hundreds of thousands of Filipinos—taking more lives than the Civil War, it now appears.²⁶ Images of colonial violence circulated widely, to the point where *Life* magazine featured an illustration of U.S. soldiers gleefully torturing a Filipino on its cover.²⁷ Yet Homer didn't engage with scenes of that sort. Instead, he spent the Philippine War years making and exhibiting radiant vistas of life in tropical and subtropical colonies.



Homer's oceanic themes reached a confluence with *The Gulf Stream* (1899), one of his post-1898 Caribbean scenes, and, as a critic at the time wrote, "one of the most powerful pictures Homer ever painted."²⁸ It shows an "unfortunate negro," in Homer's words, who has been "blown out to sea by a hurricane."²⁹ His boat, the *Annie*, is marked as being from Key West, so presumably he was driven into open waters from Florida. The *Annie's* mast has snapped off, the sea is choppy, hungry sharks circle, and a storm looms on the horizon, where a distant ship can also be seen. Peter H. Wood has suggested that the storm might refer to the previous year's fighting in Cuba.³⁰ Yet Homer was reticent to ascribe any such meaning. "The subject of this picture is comprised in its title," Homer explained in a scolding letter to his dealer. Any "inquisitive schoolma'ams" asking further should be referred "to Lieut. Maury."³¹ That would be Matthew Fontaine Maury, the noted oceanographer (and later commander of the Confederate navy) whose book, *The Physical Geography of the Sea* (1855), opened with an evocative description of the Gulf Stream.

²⁵ Byrd, "Trouble in Paradise?" 117–126.

²⁶ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 103, 421n.

²⁷ *Life*, May 22, 1902.

²⁸ Kenyon Cox, "Three Pictures by Winslow Homer in the Metropolitan Museum," *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 12 (1907): 124.

²⁹ Quoted in Peter H. Wood, *Weathering the Storm: Inside Winslow Homer's Gulf Stream* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41.



Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream*, 1899, reworked 1906

“There is a river in the ocean,” is how Maury began. “Its banks and its bottom are of cold water, while its current is of warm.”³² The Gulf Stream, he explained, originated in the Caribbean and flowed northeast toward Europe, extinguishing itself finally in the Arctic. It’s why Western Europe is temperate even at high latitudes, and it’s why it’s faster to cross the Atlantic going east than west. So important was the Gulf Stream to North America in the age of sail that Benjamin Franklin decided to pierce the customary mariners’ secrecy about such navigational matters and publish the first map of it.³³

The Gulf Stream is thus an Atlantic canvas and, like so many of Homer’s Atlantic works, it features rough waters. The broken sloop, the *Annie*, recalls the small, imperiled dory of *The Fog Warning*. But in this case Homer has anchored the American end of the transatlantic connection not in the North Atlantic boreal region—the chilly ecological belt that united England and New England, through which the telegraph cable ran. He’s anchored it instead in the Gulf Stream, insisting on the relevance of places like Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Florida to the Atlantic world. It’s notable, too, that the Gulf Stream is not a bidirectional corridor, admitting traffic both ways like a telegraph cable. It flows one way, from the Americas to Europe.

As ships traveled up the East Coast of the United States and across the Atlantic following the Gulf Stream, they carried sugar, the archetypal Caribbean commodity. Homer depicts this in the form of cut sugarcane reaching out from the *Annie*’s hatch. It’s a striking inclusion. Though Homer had previously painted Black people at work in the Caribbean, he’d shown

³² M. F. Maury, *The Physical Geography of the Sea* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1855), 25.

³³ Lewis Hyde, *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 128–130.

them working for themselves, fishing or selling fruit. He hadn't shown them laboring on plantations or serving whites (who barely appear in his Caribbean images). Those sugarcane stalks offer a glimpse, rare within Homer's oeuvre, of the extractive economy at the root of empire.

The Gulf Stream connects the two oceanic frontiers, linking Caribbean colonies to Atlantic crossings. To what end, however, is far from clear. When he'd painted the North Atlantic boreal region from both sides, Homer had engaged with a prevalent Atlanticist discourse about cultural, informational, and financial flows. When he'd depicted the clear skies of Caribbean colonies, Homer had entered a conversation about the tropics and empire. *The Gulf Stream*, however, scrambles the two spaces and offers an unexpected vantage, one that points in a different direction than the dominant geographical imaginaries of his day.

Nearly a century later, the Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott would latch onto the geographic peculiarity of Homer's painting in his celebrated epic, *Omeros* (1990). In it, Walcott's narrator gazes excitedly at *The Gulf Stream* and places the painting's central figure as suspended between "our island and the coast of Guinea," with his head turned "towards Africa." Such an orientation would put the ominous storm to the *Annie's* north, coming from Europe or the United States. The ship on the northern horizon, Walcott dismisses—the *Annie* "needs no redemptive white sail."³⁴

Walcott's reading of *The Gulf Stream* speaks to the surprising possibilities of the painting's vantage and its subject. Homer described the "unfortunate negro" in the *Annie* as having been "blown out to sea." His position was thus accidental: he did not mean to be there, caught between sharks and a storm. It's hard not to connect him to the African American soldiers sent forth to fight for the U.S. Empire in Cuba, or perhaps more broadly, as Walcott did, to the larger history of Africans captured and brought unwillingly to the Caribbean.³⁵ Through this enigmatic figure, Homer emphasizes the unpredictability of the Atlantic's currents. The ocean carried trade, ideas, and imperial ambitions, but its eddies caught people, too. And sometimes those whirling flows brought storms.

³⁴ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), chap. 36.

³⁵ Albert Boime, "Blacks in Shark-Infested Waters: Visual Encodings of Racism in Copley and Hunter," *Smithsonian Studies in Art* 3 (1989): 38–39; Wood, *Weathering the Storm*, 44–47. Walcott juxtaposes *The Gulf Stream* with Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Robert Gould Shaw and Massachusetts 54th Memorial, commemorating Black soldiers in the Civil War.