Abstract:

When asked about his most disquieting painting, *The Gulf Stream*, of a black sailor adrift in shark-infested seas, Winslow Homer explained, “The subject of this picture is comprised in its *title* & I will refer these inquisitive schoolmam’ms to Lieut. Maury.” While scholars have written off Homer’s directive as an example of the artist’s lack of sentimentality and dry wit, I propose to take Homer for his word—to use the actual Gulf Stream, a warm current connecting the Caribbean to northern Europe and its then maritime authority Matthew Maury, as the framework for reinterpreting this canonical artwork.

Maury is celebrated today as the father of modern oceanography, but his motivations for reinventing the field in the Civil War era were hardly neutral. By mapping the seas, Maury hoped to establish a Confederate global empire to our south with the expansion of slavery—an illegal enterprise dependent on maritime efficiency. By connecting this fraught history of oceanography to Homer’s *Gulf Stream* and his other 1890s Caribbean paintings, I argue that the artist’s central concern in these artworks was the history of American imperialism in the tropics—a pursuit unsuccessfully launched by Maury and others in the 1850s but realized in the 1898 naval conquests of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

This paper is part of a broader project that rethinks the global dimensions of nineteenth-century American painting through the lens of empire building—an understudied issue in our field. We can better understand art and imperialism by connecting artworks like Homer’s to the infrastructures and technologies of colonization.