

# Visual Irony and Racial Humor in Winslow Homer's *The Watermelon Boys*

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*The Watermelon Boys* (1876) serves as a point of entry into Winslow Homer's Reconstruction-era works, many of which reveal his attention to the plight of freed blacks in the aftermath of the Civil War (Figure 1). The painting's narrative is distilled in a few details: forming a triangle in the immediate foreground, three boys, two black, one white, eat slices of watermelon in an expansive field. The flanking figures remain engrossed in eating, while the central black youth, propped up on his knees, is the arresting focal point of the composition. Alert to potential danger, he gazes penetratingly at something beyond the boundaries of the canvas. In the background, a wooden fence cuts across the landscape and recedes into a meadow in the distance.

Critical reactions to the work were relatively favorable: when it was exhibited at the Brooklyn Art Association in 1876 and at the National Academy of Design in 1878, critics praised Homer's attempt to mine new American subject matter and commented on the painting's humorous potential.<sup>1</sup> A writer for the *New York Sun* referred to Homer's "studies of two young negroes equal in point of humor to anything the artist has ever produced in this line."<sup>2</sup> Although *The*

*Watermelon Boys* appears quite serious to our modern-day sensibilities, the painting plays on the popular stereotype of the African American's love of watermelon. The trope of black boys eating watermelon was already well ingrained in American visual culture, and Homer's painting seems to have fit within the broader array of humorous depictions of African Americans in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Yet, a sustained analysis of the racial significance of this stereotype is absent from the literature on Homer, and the work is seldom discussed in great detail. Moreover, in the context of Reconstruction, *The Watermelon Boys* has been conventionally understood as a racially benign genre scene: the implied scenario is that the boys, engaging in typical mischief, have raided a watermelon patch.<sup>4</sup> While the period interest in such narratives and portrayals of children is well documented, Homer's treatment of childhood subjects as a means to develop and disguise racial symbolism remains unexplored.

This essay seeks to address Homer's engagement with racial humor, focusing specifically on the comic black stereotypes negotiated through the painting.<sup>5</sup> At first glance, *The Watermelon Boys* references obvious stereotypes, but its hu-

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<sup>1</sup> In her analysis of the painting's reception, Margaret Conrads notes that *The Watermelon Boys* had a "humorous veneer that had proven popular with African-American images," and that it served a "public taste that wanted pictures to amuse, thrill, and instruct with a story." Margaret Conrads, *Winslow Homer and the Critics: Forging a National Art in the 1870s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 132-133, 138. Some critics located humor in Homer's representation of fruit pilfering; for instance, the *New York Times* reviewer wrote: "Winslow Homer occasionally hits a responsive chord in human breasts with a picture like that in the corridor called *Watermelon Boys*, in which we are called upon to sympathize with the fun of eating stolen fruit." "The Academy Exhibition: Critics on the Fence," *New York Times*, 10 April 1878, 2. Another commented on Homer's adorable representation of "little darkies eating their watermelon." Quoted in Henry B. Wonham, *Playing the Races: Ethnic Caricature and American Literary Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>2</sup> "The National Academy of Design, II," *New York Sun*, 14 April 1878, 3.

<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint the exact origins of the watermelon stereotype in the visual realm. Guy C. McElroy has argued that Homer's use of the stereotype "predates the explicitly derogatory linking of watermelons with blacks that developed in the 1880s after the collapse of Reconstruction." Guy C. McElroy, Henry Louis Gates, and Christopher C. French, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940*, exhibition catalogue (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, 1990), 81. Yet, the watermelon stereotype found wide currency in print media prior to Homer's making of the painting. Some examples that predate or are contemporaneous with Homer's include "Yankee Notions" (*Harper's Weekly*, January 1853), William Ludwell Sheppard's "A Good Time Coming" (*Every Saturday*, July 1871), Sol Eytinge's "Anticipation—Return from a Melon Scout" (*Harper's Weekly*, August 1877) and "Water-Millions is Ripe" (*Harper's Weekly*, August 1879).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Mary Ann Calo underestimates the importance of the watermelon, noting that Homer "treated the subject as an antic of childhood rather than a familiar racial stereotype" and that the painting, among other rural genre scenes produced during this period, is an "essentially lighthearted, innocent portrayal of country children with very little racial significance." See Calo, "Winslow Homer's Visits to Virginia during Reconstruction," *The American Art Journal* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1980): 21, 10.

<sup>5</sup> This essay takes its cues from recent scholarship on humor studies, such as Jennifer Greenhill's 2012 book, *Playing It Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age*, and especially her chapter on "Winslow Homer's Visual Deadpan," as well as Marc Simpson's 1988 essay on racial humor in *The Bright Side* (1865).

morous veneer is undermined in several ways. The narrative is complicated by the inclusion of the white youth. Homer also inverts the social hierarchy such that the black protagonist is situated at the apex of the pyramid, a compositional choice that places primary emphasis on the black figure. It is a dignified and sensitively rendered portrayal that lacks the caricatural exaggeration typically ascribed to the black body. In addition, Homer made key changes to the composition in two different states of the painting—and in an 1878 wood engraving published in the *Art Journal*—changes that inflect racial significance and raise crucial questions about how he approached painting and illustration.

Homer, then, presents a complex view of race relations with a confluence of perplexing factors: he introduces stereotypes that work to codify racial difference and then complicates them, holding multiple narratives in suspension. This interpretation of Homer's painting demonstrates that the artist's humor is twofold: first, he employed stereotypical humor honed by his exposure to the popular press; second, he enacted racial critique through irony. Visual irony, in this instance, indicates a kind of incongruity between the artist's literal and implied meanings.<sup>6</sup> Homer painted with symbolic complexity, and close formal analysis of *The Watermelon Boys* reveals layers of encoded meanings, each intended to disrupt and in some cases contradict the racial stereotypes initially brought to bear on the work.

If we are to read the painting in terms of racial humor, the black children provide the first visual cue. The mere representation of black figures in the arts served to generate a comic effect for contemporary viewers who perceived racial difference as a sign of physical and mental inferiority.<sup>7</sup> Viewers steeped in the imagery of black minstrelsy would have also recognized the humor and range of significations inherent in the watermelons themselves. The lazy, carefree, and watermelon-loving black emerged as a character on the minstrel stage beginning in the early nineteenth century. The actor J.W. McAndrews performed a popular skit called "The

Watermelon Man" between 1856 and 1899, and the racist association between blacks and watermelons persisted as a comic trope in the illustrated press.<sup>8</sup> In Homer's scene, the watermelons activate the racial stereotype and serve as a virtual stand-in for the black body.<sup>9</sup> Situated in the immediate foreground, their vibrant red color punctuates the composition, enlivening the muted palette. Given their prominence in the work, they might also be understood as a visual punch line, articulating an easy joke for viewers already well-versed in its meaning.

Homer's engagement with stereotypical humor raises numerous questions about his upbringing and attitude toward race. Born in Boston in 1836 to a middle-class family, Homer came of age during a time when anti-slavery arguments were intensifying throughout the country. His awareness of racial issues was brought to full consciousness through his work for the popular press, and his first, real contact with African Americans came with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Hired by *Harper's Weekly* to document the activities of the Union Army, Homer typically depicted the quiet or humorous aspects of camp life as opposed to heroic, monumental scenes of battle. Even more unusually, African Americans often took center stage in his works. In prints such as *A Bivouac Fire on the Potomac* and *Our Jolly Cook*, African Americans are cast as comic performers who entertain a white audience (Figures 2 and 3). Despite their grotesque appearances, both figures occupy the center of the scene, an uncommon compositional arrangement at the time.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in his painting, *Defiance: Inviting a Shot before Petersburg*, a crudely-painted, banjo-strumming black man can be seen in the middle ground just beneath the central figure.<sup>11</sup> His wild hair, exaggerated lips, and bulging white eyes evoke the visual repertoire of minstrelsy.

Homer's 1865 painting *The Bright Side* is more closely aligned with the stereotypical humor seen in *The Watermelon Boys* (Figure 4). It depicts four black teamsters in the Union Army resting beneath a tent. As Marc Simpson has noted,

<sup>6</sup> My analysis of the painting's humor derives from Joan Halperin's definition of irony in her essay on Georges Seurat and Jules Laforgue. She argues that modern irony "speaks with a double voice, presenting and concealing an implicit message under a separate explicit message." Joan U. Halperin, "The Ironic Eye/I in Jules Laforgue and Georges Seurat," in *Seurat Re-Viewed*, ed. Paul Smith (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 113-114.

<sup>7</sup> Claire Perry has shown how images of African Americans, and African-American children, in particular, often served as the visual punch line in nineteenth-century parodies. Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in Nineteenth-Century Art and Culture*, exhibition catalogue (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 82. Beginning in the early 1860s, *Harper's Weekly* presented an average of sixteen "comic" images of African Americans each year, and in 1874, the magazine began publishing Sol Eytinge's *Blackville* sketches. Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Frederick Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1930), 225. On the relationship between watermelons, racism, and minstrelsy in

photography, see Tanya Sheehan, "Looking Pleasant, Feeling White: The Social Politics of the Photographic Smile," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 127-157.

<sup>9</sup> Due to the widespread currency of social Darwinism in the late nineteenth century, watermelons eventually became equated with black physiognomy, as in a cartoon published in *Judge* on September 17, 1892, and mass-circulated postcards that illustrated the evolution of watermelons into "coons."

<sup>10</sup> Peter H. Wood and Karen C. Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks: The Civil War and Reconstruction Years*, exhibition catalogue (Austin, TX: Menil Collection, 1988), 31.

<sup>11</sup> There is a longstanding visual tradition of blacks as comic performers in nineteenth-century American art. For more information see Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, *Images: Iconography of Music in African-American Culture (1770s-1920s)* (New York: Garland Pub., 2000); and Christopher J. Smith, *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sidney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

contemporary critics made repeated mention of the painting's humor: Homer invoked a common racial stereotype that equated the lazy mules in the background with the blacks resting in the foreground.<sup>12</sup> Another critic described the "comic old darkey with the pipe" emerging from the tent at the center of the composition.<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Greenhill has shown how this alert and confrontational figure complicates the easy equation of blacks with laziness, turning the joke on its head.<sup>14</sup> This individual provides a compelling figural analogue to the black protagonist in *The Watermelon Boys*. Although the former challenges the viewer directly, his gaze being far more aggressive and defiant, both figures are central to the overall narrative. They invite deeper consideration and appear to reverse the initial stereotypes, pointing to alternate meanings.

These Civil War-era paintings and prints are important visual precedents that complicate our understanding of Homer, and they are indicative of his attention to the racial beliefs of the audience to whom he hoped to market his work. Homer's visual vocabulary was shaped by his experience with the popular press, where denigrating racial stereotypes proliferated in mass-circulated magazines and periodicals like *Harper's Weekly*, *Every Saturday*, and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. Trained as an illustrator, he became well-versed in anecdote, slapstick, and racial humor that appealed to popular sentiment.<sup>15</sup> Homer's perception of African Americans, however, shifted during Reconstruction, as he moved away from stereotypes to the representation of more humanized and individualized black figures.<sup>16</sup> The Reconstruction period, between 1865 and 1877, saw a dramatic increase in racial violence as whites attempted to reinstate the status quo. Furthermore, the process of

integrating newly emancipated blacks into society proved difficult, especially in the South. Despite federal efforts to secure educational access and voting and landholding rights, African Americans remained threatened and disenfranchised.

Homer's visits in the mid-1870s to Petersburg, Virginia, seemed to lay bare these problems for him. While there, he created a series of oil sketches, watercolors and drawings of African-American subjects he observed in the colored sections of the city.<sup>17</sup> Among these works, Homer's 1876 painting *The Cotton Pickers* was made precisely when the gains of blacks under Reconstruction were being undermined (Figure 5). This somber scene recalls antebellum-era slavery: despite the two female figures' monumental and heroic stature, the painting shows that working conditions akin to enslavement continued to persist well after the war.<sup>18</sup> Homer's presence in Petersburg eventually aroused anger: at one point, he was confronted by several white men who called him a "damned nigger-painter" and attempted to drive him out of town.<sup>19</sup> Although Homer, who affectionately referred to these as his "darkey pictures," probably never saw African Americans as equals, he empathized with them, giving them agency and humanity in his imagery.<sup>20</sup>

Armed with new subject matter, Homer began to represent white and black children together by the mid-1870s, disguising his commentary on race relations through the veneer of childhood, showing how the two races could co-exist.<sup>21</sup> According to Jean Gould, Homer had encountered four children eating watermelon when he decided to paint the scene.<sup>22</sup> A pentimento shows that he reduced the number of figures from four to three, perhaps to create a more focused composition, with the main black figure singled out for attention.<sup>23</sup> His body is highlighted with greater contours

<sup>12</sup> Marc Simpson, *Winslow Homer: Paintings of the Civil War*, exhibition catalogue (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1988), 51. For example, the critic for *Watson's Weekly Art Journal* wrote: "The lazy sunlight, the lazy, nodding donkeys, the lazy, lolling negroes make a humorously conceived and truthfully executed picture." *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Greenhill, *Playing It Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 29.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Adams, "Black Images in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature: An Iconological Study of Mount, Melville, Homer, and Mark Twain" (PhD diss., Emory University, 1977), 114.

<sup>16</sup> Randall C. Griffin, *Winslow Homer: An American Vision* (London: Phaidon, 2006), 86.

<sup>17</sup> Very little information is known about Homer's decision to return to Virginia, although we know he was on assignment there in the 1860s, and he chose to visit again in 1873, 1875, 1876, and possibly 1877. For commentary on the geographical site of this painting, see Lloyd Goodrich and Abigail Booth Gerds, *Record of Works by Winslow Homer* (New York: Spanierman Gallery, Goodrich-Homer Art Education Project, 2005-2014), 2:394-396.

<sup>18</sup> When the painting was exhibited at the Century Club in March of

1877, a writer for the *Post* also commented that the female figures appeared to be slaves. Conrads, *Winslow Homer and the Critics*, 116. See also S.W. Gold, "A Measured Freedom: National Unity and Racial Containment in Winslow Homer's *The Cotton Pickers*, 1876," *Mississippi Quarterly* 55 (2002): 163-184; and Anna Arabindan-Kesson, "Threads of Empire: The Visual Economy of the Cotton Trade in the Atlantic Ocean World, 1840-1900" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Gordon Hendricks, *The Life and Work of Winslow Homer* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979), 104-105; William H. Downes, *The Life and Works of Winslow Homer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1911), 85-86.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Wood and Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> During Reconstruction, children became ubiquitous subjects in the nation's art and popular literature, reflecting a nostalgic call for the simplicity of antebellum rural life. Images of black and white children together could more readily circulate during this time period since they did not upset existing hierarchies of power. Jo-Ann Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 154; and Perry, *Young America*, 95.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Gould, *Winslow Homer, A Portrait* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1962), 161.

<sup>23</sup> Conrads, *Winslow Homer and the Critics*, 232n120.

and definition, as opposed to the rest of the work, which is thinly painted.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the black protagonist appears poised and vigilant: his raised eyebrows and crisply painted, almond-shaped eyes signal his alertness to some kind of danger beyond the fence.<sup>25</sup> A palpable anxiety suffuses the scene: as in his late painting, *The Gulf Stream* (1899), Homer's rendering of the black figure's vulnerability conjures the threatened status of blacks during Reconstruction, when lynchings and racial violence were pervasive features of everyday life.

The black youth's commanding presence in the center of the image might also be interpreted as an ironic commentary on race relations at this time. In most American artists' depictions of interracial scenes, blacks are almost always outnumbered or relegated to the margins of the image. If they are depicted as a focal point, it is usually to reaffirm existing racial stereotypes.<sup>26</sup> Here, however, the white youth is outnumbered and situated in a position below the central black figure. In a striking inversion, Homer seems to have displaced the negative physical characteristics associated with the black body onto the white boy. His eyes appear as mere slits, his dirty, bare feet protrude out towards the viewer, and his gaping mouth verges on the grotesque.<sup>27</sup> With these pointed visual contrasts, Homer draws on the satirical potential of incongruity: his sympathetic treatment of the black boy in turn conflicts with and eschews prevailing caricatures of blacks during this time.

The figures' close proximity to one another is also ironic in that it belies any indication of a racial divide. Although the boys do not interact, they appear to be friends, united by their actions and their tight triangular configuration.<sup>28</sup> Consider, as a point of comparison, Homer's 1875 painting *Weaning the Calf*, which reveals a racially marked distinction between the figures (Figure 6). In this scene, distinct pairings are formed between the trees, haystacks, chickens, white children, and the black youth and calf. As in *The Bright Side*, blacks and animals are conflated, although here the black

youth is working. He wears tattered clothing and struggles to rope in the calf in the foreground, in contrast to the passive, neatly-dressed white children standing beside him.<sup>29</sup> On a formal level, even the sunlight and shadow serve to demarcate their systemic racial separation in post-war America. As Rachel Carren has noted, the black boy continues to work hard, like a slave, while the white youths oversee his labor.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Homer self-consciously relied on framing devices in different ways: in *Weaning the Calf*, he offers up pairings as a means to articulate difference, while in *The Watermelon Boys*, he unites the black and white children in order to upend difference. In the former, the title slyly refers to the weaning of black citizens' dependency from the federal government, while the latter title affirms the easy companionship between the boys, its language posed in stark contrast with the racist dialect that often accompanied paintings and prints devoted to the watermelon stereotype in the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

With its racially integrated cast of characters, *The Watermelon Boys* recalls the work of William Sidney Mount. Reviving a tradition of genre painting from the 1830s, Homer knew of Mount's work and copied one of his paintings in 1855.<sup>32</sup> Mount created numerous images of African Americans in the company of white citizens, as in his popular 1836 painting *Farmers Noonning* (Figure 7). This rural vignette shows three farmers in a hay field taking a noon break from harvesting. At center, a reclining African-American man sleeps against a haystack while a young white boy tickles his ear with a piece of straw. Martin Berger has shown how a contemporary critic interpreted this painting in terms of racial binaries, noting the differences between the black and white men, who are either asleep or awake, and lazy or industrious.<sup>33</sup> Yet, despite these stereotypes, the black figure is also a focal point of the work: as Deborah Johnson points out, he shares in the noon respite with his white co-workers, and he is not the only reclining figure.<sup>34</sup> Laden with visual clues, the painting also corresponds to larger debates about slavery in

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>25</sup> According to Peter Wood, this direction of looking is a pictorial strategy Homer learned while at *Harper's Weekly* in order to guide the viewer's eyes to focus on what is most important within the image; it is a device used often in Homer's images of blacks and children from this period. Peter Wood, *Near Andersonville: Winslow Homer's Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 72; Wood and Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks*, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 103-106.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Haltman has made a similar observation with respect to the white youth's facial expression, describing him as "brutish and insensate, a mouth without a brain." Kenneth Haltman, "Antipastoralism in Early Winslow Homer," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 1 (March 1998): 107.

<sup>28</sup> For an extended discussion of the importance of this configuration, see Albert Boime, "Blacks in Shark-Infested Waters: Visual Encodings of Racism in Copley and Homer," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 19-47.

<sup>29</sup> Haltman, "Antipastoralism in Early Winslow Homer," 94.

<sup>30</sup> Rachel Carren, "From Reality to Symbol: Images of Children in the Art of Winslow Homer" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1990), 167.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Thomas Hovendon's *Ain't That Ripe?* (1885), William Aiken Walker's *Little Negro Girl Eating Watermelon* (c. 1885), Sigmund Krausz's *Oh Golly, But I'se So Happy!* (1891), the 1896 Edison Manufacturing Company film "Watermelon-Eating Contest," and an 1882 Currier & Ives lithograph entitled *O Dat Watermillion!* For related "racial puns" in Homer's titles, see Wood and Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks*, 49-52.

<sup>32</sup> Griffin, *Winslow Homer: An American Vision*, 74.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>34</sup> Deborah J. Johnson and Elizabeth Johns, *William Sidney Mount: Painter of American Life* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1998), 43. A contemporary critic also acknowledged that the black figure was the "masterpiece of the composition." Quoted in Adams, "Black Images

the North. According to Elizabeth Johns, the tam-o'-shanter worn by the white boy was a common abolitionist symbol, while ear-tickling meant filling a naïve listener's mind with promises.<sup>35</sup> The suggestion here is that the black man is being misled about the benefits of emancipation in light of the comfortable realities of his present existence. Although Mount was strongly anti-abolitionist, this ambiguous work puts forth conflicting meanings, inviting white viewers to imagine the role and place of emancipated African Americans in their world.

*The Watermelon Boys* draws on the compositional structure and multivalent humor of *Farmers Nooning*.<sup>36</sup> Like Mount, Homer prompts the viewer to decode his visual language, reading past the work's immediate stereotypes to probe its deeper symbolism. Fences recur frequently in Homer's Reconstruction-era works, signifying an iconography of enclosure.<sup>37</sup> As an example, the fence located in the right-hand portion of *The Watermelon Boys* is redolent with meaning and could be indicative of a racial divide. A section of it appears broken, indicating that the enclosure has been breached, an interpretation supported by the interaction between the white and black children in the foreground. Moreover, the tightly packed bundle of books situated next to the white youth in the lower-right foreground alludes to the status of black education, an increasingly contentious issue in Reconstruction America.<sup>38</sup> Literacy was perceived as a major threat by the white community, so much so that laws had long prohibited any formal schooling for blacks; as a result, their post-war access to education represented social upheaval. Homer called attention to this problem in *Sunday Morning in Virginia* (1877) and *Taking a Sunflower to Teacher* (1875), works that sympathetically portray black children attempting to learn and suggest Homer's support of education for the rising black generation.<sup>39</sup>

Despite recalling the deeply embedded prejudices of

in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature," 26-27.

<sup>35</sup> Johns, *American Genre Painting*, 34-36.

<sup>36</sup> I am very grateful to Randall C. Griffin for sharing his thoughts with me on this matter. To my knowledge, no one has analyzed these two works together or identified irony as an underlying point of comparison.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Berger refers to this iconography in nineteenth-century genre painting in *Sight Unseen*, 36. Other examples include Homer's *Near Andersonville* (1865-66), *Children Sitting on a Fence* (1874), *Milking Time* (1875), and *Dressing for the Carnival* (1877). In the latter work, the closed gate is thought to signify a kind of barrier between white and black worlds. Wood, *Near Andersonville*, 73; and Griffin, *Winslow Homer*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> Wood and Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks*, 60.

<sup>39</sup> Alternatively, Richard Powell has argued that Homer's depiction of black students made allusions to the "remedial training that newly emancipated blacks were perceived as needing." He also notes that these "youthful representations, attached to an equally elusive image of the black, figured into the already conflated notion that blacks possessed "naïve" and "child-like qualities." Wood and Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks*, 11.

his day, *The Watermelon Boys* points to Homer's investment in sustaining a kind of ambiguity in meanings: the painting's unique synthesis of visual irony and stereotypical humor conveys the paradoxical realities of race relations in America, projecting mixed messages about an uncertain future. By way of conclusion, it is important to note that Homer employed and modified comic black stereotypes depending on the medium in which he was working. Although he was reportedly "annoyed and embarrassed" about the popularity of *The Watermelon Boys*, he made a companion engraving to the painting that was published in August of 1878 (Figure 8).<sup>40</sup> Specifics about the work and change in title are unknown, but *Watermelon-Eaters* was used as one of two illustrations in George W. Sheldon's August 1878 article on Homer and Frederick Arthur Bridgman in the *Art Journal*.<sup>41</sup> The unique dialogue between the painting and wood engraving merits further consideration. In the latter, Homer included an angry farmer menacing the boys beyond the fence, creating a humorous scene much in the same vein as William Sidney Mount's 1848 painting *Boys Caught Napping*. *Watermelon-Eaters* similarly shows young children caught in irresponsible acts, facing punishment from adult figures. Stealing watermelon was a typical boyish prank that would have been looked upon with amusement. As a result, the engraving more conspicuously plays on a theme of fruit pilfering popular among American artists in the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup>

Yet there are also key changes to the painting and print that exploit the racist attitudes of the day. When the painting was initially shown at the Brooklyn Art Association in December of 1876, critics reported the inclusion of the farmer, which was removed by the time it was exhibited in 1878.<sup>43</sup> Infrared reflectography reveals a section of the canvas scraped down, possibly even sanded, at the place where the farmer stands in the illustration.<sup>44</sup> With the ad-

<sup>40</sup> Gould writes about this reaction, although there is no citation. Gould, *Winslow Homer*, 161.

<sup>41</sup> The other engraving is titled *In the Fields*, after Homer's 1876 painting *Song of the Lark*. Sheldon's article suggests that the two prints were commissioned and engraved by the *Art Journal*. See George W. Sheldon, "American Painters: Winslow Homer and F.A. Bridgman," *Art Journal* 4 (1878): 225-227. An article in the *New York Evening Post* also refers to Homer drawing on wood sketches of his paintings titled "The Song of the Lark" and "Hooking Melons" for *Appleton's Art Journal* in February 1878. "Art Notes," *New York Evening Post*, 14 February 1878, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Perry, *Young America*, 94.

<sup>43</sup> The early state of the painting exhibited at the Brooklyn Art Association was referred to as "The Farmer's Seed Melon." See "Paintings, Thirty-Third Reception of the Art Association," *Brooklyn Union*, 5 December 1876, 3; and "Art...The Thirty-third Semi Annual Reception of the Brooklyn Art Association," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 5 December 1876.

<sup>44</sup> This information is contained in a footnote in Conrads, *Winslow Homer and the Critics*, 232n120. Quentin Rankin, a conservator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, conducted the analysis of this painting.

dition of the farmer, the engraving reintroduces some of the negative behavioral traits usually attributed to blacks in American visual culture, as the mischievous element conforms to popular stereotypes that blacks were susceptible to every kind of vice.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, one critic remarked on the painting as a “sketch of rural predatory life,” while another explicated this idea further, writing about the “negro-lad, stealing melons in fulfillment of a predatory law of nature, without sin and without conviction of sin....”<sup>46</sup>

Now, moreover, the white boy appears more alert in the engraving, while the likeness of the black protagonist has been distorted accordingly: his nose, lips, and skull are visibly exaggerated, physiognomic stereotypes that contemporary viewers would have been primed to recognize. Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which Homer’s engraving was affected by editorial interference, or even by the engraver’s intermediary involvement, Homer was certainly attuned to the racial dichotomies between these two figures as they were translated from painting to print.<sup>47</sup> A similar modification occurs in the engraved version of *The Bright*

*Side*, where Homer removed the confrontational main figure emerging from the tent, bringing sole focus to the lazy and humorous black men below.<sup>48</sup>

As many scholars have noted, Homer tended to simplify and create open-ended narratives in his paintings while retaining more detail and anecdote in related illustrations.<sup>49</sup> Yet, by eliminating the farmer and leaving the painting open to interpretation, Homer also supplanted one form of humor for another: the painting, which is nearly stripped of its racially charged humor, points to Homer’s exploration of visual irony, while the engraving reverts to comic black stereotypes in order to appeal to a mass audience. Reading the engraving and painting together not only reveals the reciprocal relationship between the two, but it also shows how Homer’s artistic project is ultimately one of ambiguity. By teasing out these works’ problematic symbolism and grappling with the artist’s approach to humor, we can gain insight into Homer’s views on race, and indeed the nation’s own complex attitudes towards its black citizens.

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<sup>45</sup> Perry, *Young America*, 78. This idea also plays on the racial stereotype that their inherent laziness must be subsidized by pilfering.

<sup>46</sup> “The National Academy of Design, II,” *New York Sun*, 14 April 1878, 3; Earl Shinn, *Nation*, 30 May 1878, 363.

<sup>47</sup> For more information about the artist’s engraving process, see Barbara Gelman Jackson, *The Wood Engravings of Winslow Homer* (New York: Bounty Books, 1969); David Tatham, *Winslow Homer and the Pictorial Press* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003); and Marilyn S. Kushner, Barbara Dayer Gallati, and Linda S. Ferber, *Winslow Homer:*

*Illustrating America* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> Simpson, *Winslow Homer’s Paintings of the Civil War*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> See John Wilmerding, *Winslow Homer* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 88; and Wood and Dalton, *Winslow Homer’s Images of Blacks*, 42. Peter Wood has also suggested that such transpositions often “had the effect of simplifying the interpretation of a work by eliminating all but one explanation,” especially when he engraved paintings for the broader market of the illustrated press. *Ibid.*, 83-84.





Figure 2. Winslow Homer (American, 1836-1910), *A Bivouac Fire on the Potomac*, 1861, wood engraving on wove paper, 16 x 21 ¾ inches. Portland Museum of Art, Maine. Gift of Peggy and Harold Osher, 1991.70.33.

◀ Figure 1. [facing page] Winslow Homer (American, 1836-1910), *The Watermelon Boys*, 1876, brush and oil paint on canvas, 24 1/8 x 38 1/8 inches (61.3 x 96.8 cm). Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York, NY, USA. Gift of Charles Savage Homer, Jr., 1917-14-6. Photo Credit: Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum / Art Resource, NY.

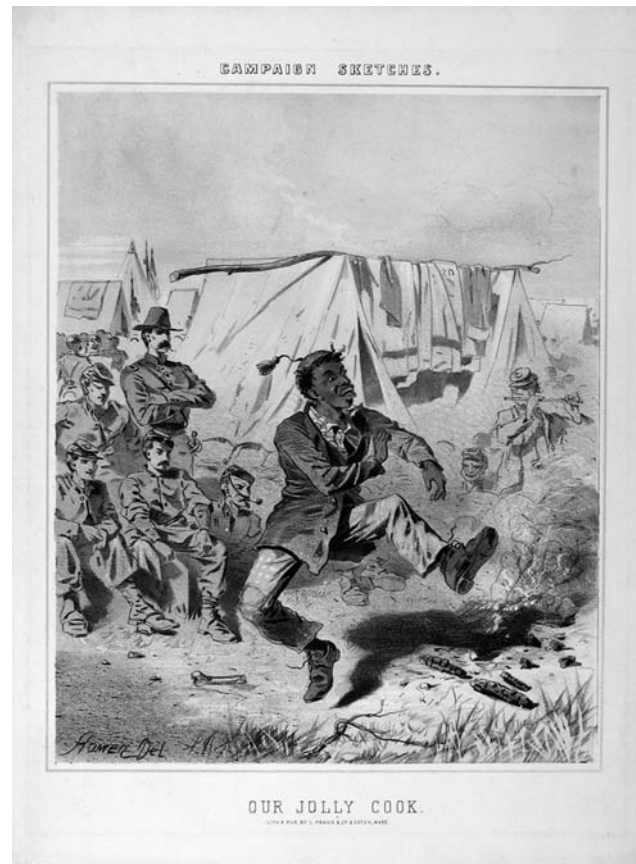


Figure 3. Winslow Homer (American, 1836-1910), *Our Jolly Cook*, from *Campaign Sketches*, 1863, lithograph in black and gray. Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Gift of W. P. Jacobs.

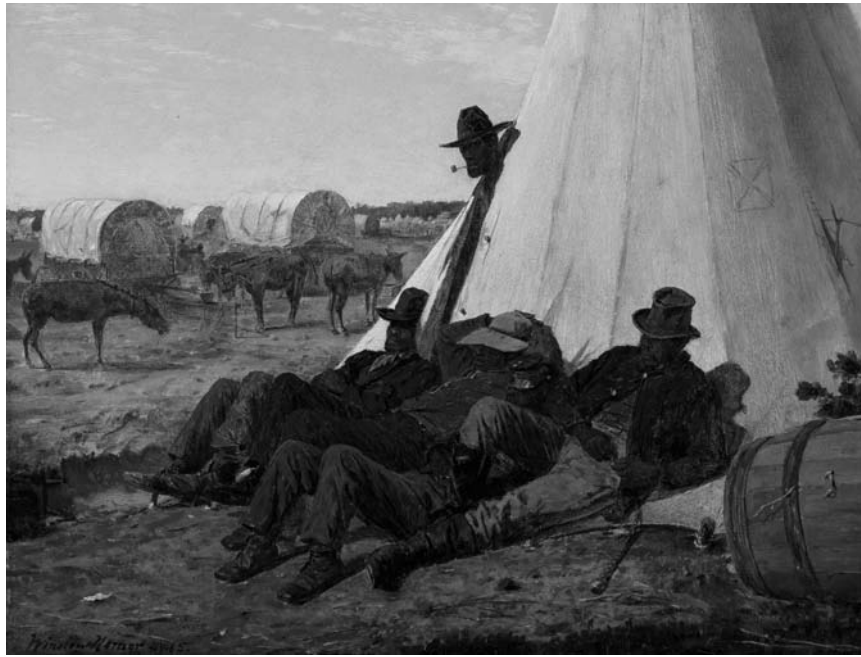


Figure 4. Winslow Homer (American, 1836-1910), *The Bright Side*, 1865, oil on canvas, 12 3/4 x 17 inches (32.4 x 43.2 cm). De Young, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 1979.7.56.

Figure 5. Winslow Homer (American, 1836-1910), *The Cotton Pickers*, 1876, oil on canvas, 24 1/16 x 38 1/8 inches (61.12 x 96.84 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art; acquisition made possible through Museum Trustees: Robert O. Anderson, R. Stanton Avery, B. Gerald Cantor, Edward W. Carter, Justin Dart, Charles E. Ducommun, Camilla Chandler Frost, Julian Ganz, Jr., Dr. Armand Hammer, Harry Lenart, Dr. Franklin D. Murphy, Mrs. Joan Palevsky, Richard E. Sherwood, Maynard J. Toll, and Hall B. Wallis (M.77.68). Digital Image © 2014 Museum Associates / LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY.



Figure 6. Winslow Homer (American, 1836-1910), *Weaning the Calf*, 1875, oil on canvas, 24 x 38 inches (61.0 x 96.5 cm). North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina exchange.





Figure 7. William Sidney Mount, *Farmers Nooning*, 1836, oil on canvas, 20 ¼ x 24 ½ inches. The Long Island Museum of American Art, History & Carriages. Gift of Frederick Sturges, Jr., 1954.



Figure 8. After Winslow Homer, *Watermelon-Eaters*, 1889, wood engraving on wove paper, 5 1/8 x 7 inches. Portland Museum of Art, Maine. Gift of Peggy and Harold Osher, 1991.70.168.