As Barbara J. Fields rightly notes, the term *race relations* is highly problematic: “Race relations as an analysis of society takes for granted that race is a valid empirical datum and thereby shifts attention from the actions that constitute racism—enslavement, disfranchisement, segregation, lynching, massacres, and pogroms—to the traits that constitute race” (151).

Virginia was the largest of the new United States, in territory, in population, in influence—and in slaveholding. Virginians owned more than 40 percent of all slaves in the new nation. It was Virginia slaves who grew most of the tobacco that helped buy American independence. [...] Virginians drafted not only the Declaration of Independence but also the United States Constitution of 1787 and the first ten amendments to it. And Americans elected Virginians to the presidency of the United States under that constitution for thirty-two out of the first thirty-six years of its existence. They were all slaveholders. (5–6)

We can therefore say, with Morgan, that to a large extent “Americans bought their independence by slave labor” (5), and that Virginia constitutes the key link between the slave economy and national politics. Sutpen’s Virginia origin is thus crucial for the allegorical significance of *Absalom, Absalom!*, pointing as it does to the unsavory paradox that enslavement lies at the very heart of the United States’ freedom as a nation.

*The Specter of Race and Slavery Abroad*

The reason why a re-examination of this genuinely American paradox was particularly urgent at the time when Faulkner wrote *Absalom, Absalom!* is that ’race relations’ in the U.S. were in a deep state of crisis in the first decades of the twentieth century. While the so-called Reconstruction of the post-Civil-War years initially prioritized black freedom and emancipation, the desire for national reconciliation between white Northerners and Southerners eventually “trumped race” (Blight 2). A new phase in race relations thus began in 1877, when federal troops were withdrawn from the Southern states and the North implicitly acquiesced in the South’s demand that the region’s dominant whites were to deal with the ’problem of race’ on their own terms (Blackburn 429–432). As C. Vann Woodward notes, while it was not immediately apparent what precisely the “new status of the Negro” would be, it became clear by the early years
of the twentieth century that African Americans “would be effectively disfranchised throughout the South” through the system generally known as Jim Crow (6). The fact that the various retellings of Sutpen’s story take place between September 1909 and January 1910 in *Absalom, Absalom!* is thus significant, as it situates the novel’s present at a time when race relations in the post-Civil-War South had arguably reached their nadir (e.g. Osterhammel 1210). In addition, we learn that Henry, Sutpen’s son, secretly moves back to Sutpen’s Hundred in 1905 (*Absalom* 140), and it is perhaps no coincident that this allegorical, racist specter from the Civil-War past returns home in the same year that W. E. B. Du Bois founded the Niagara Movement (Grossman 101), which called for racial equality and is generally considered a forerunner of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The latter was founded in the early months of 1909, and the title of the NAACP’s monthly magazine, *The Crisis*, established in November 1910, bears eloquent witness to the social climate of the time (Ovington 16–17; Rampersad 472). The years 1909 and 1910 are thus not merely the temporal setting for the novel’s various retellings (as well as for Quentin’s eventual confrontation with Henry Sutpen; see *Absalom* 298), but also the period when the deepening crisis in race relations in the U.S. led to decisive developments in black self-emancipation. Henry, the long-lost son who killed his half-brother because of the latter’s racial ‘impurity,’ returns – and dies – in Faulkner’s novel precisely when the black emancipation movement began more directly to confront the social and legal consequences of Jim Crow.

Moreover, the fact that the most extended retelling of Thomas Sutpen’s story – Quentin and Shreve’s collaborative narrative – takes place not in the South, but at Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, highlights the extent to which the North was involved in this crisis in race relations. According to Thadious M. Davis, segregationist practices had hardened not only in the South of Jim Crow, but throughout the nation, and they continued to do so after World War I, with the tacit approval of Woodrow Wilson’s presidential administration (411). The Northern setting of the novel’s retellings allegorically acknowledges the North’s involvement in the country’s racial crisis, and the fact that Shreve is Canadian extends the reach of *Absalom, Absalom!* even beyond the nation’s boundaries.

If Shreve allegorically internationalizes the novel, then Sutpen’s period of residence in Haiti from the early 1820s to about 1833 serves more concretely to highlight both historical and present dimensions of U.S. imperial policies. Haiti is described in *Absalom, Absalom!* as “halfway between the dark inscrutable

25 See Norman (4) on the complex history of the term *Jim Crow.*
continent from which the black blood [...] was ravished by violence, and the cold known land” from which Sutpen came (202). We never find out how exactly young Sutpen reaches Haiti, but we do learn that he ultimately worked as an “ overseer or foreman or something to a French sugar planter,” and that as such he helped quell a violent uprising (199). Commenting on this episode, Richard Godden insists that Sutpen’s account of a slave revolt on Haiti in 1827 is anachronistic because “there were neither slavers nor French plantations” in the post-revolutionary ‘black republic’ (251). By contrast, Leigh Anne Duck contends that, though formal slavery no longer existed in Haiti, the working conditions on the plantations were in fact virtually indistinguishable from those on the slave plantations of the U. S. South (34–35). John T. Matthews concurs with Duck’s account:

The Haitian Constitution of 1804 had abolished slavery, outlawed white landownership, and confiscated the property of French colonists [...]. Almost immediately mulatto offspring of former white landowners began to reclaim their land, violating the spirit of the measures and angering Emperor Dessalines. When Dessalines attempted to reinforce policies favoring Negroes, the mulatto class rebelled and Dessalines was assassinated. Meanwhile, agricultural failures stemming from the breakup of large plantations and the creation of small black-owned farms, especially in Haiti’s southern region, led to reforms designed by President Jean Pierre Boyer to return peasants to laborer status on large farms. These measures constituted the notorious Rural Code [...]. (253)

Under the Rural Code, the rights of black laborers were so severely restricted that the historian Eric Williams describes the effects of the bill as “the restoration of slavery, minus the whip” (334). And indeed, if we look at the text of Absalom, Absalom!, we find that the black Haitian laborers – de iure freedmen – are depicted in such equivocal terms that their de facto status as quasi-slaves becomes apparent. Accordingly, as Matthews points out, even Sutpen himself “may not register that the black plantation workers he oversees are not technically slaves; he cares only that they may be treated that way” (253). Moreover, even if the novel’s depiction of conditions in Haiti were incorrect (Blackburn 218), it would nevertheless have resonated strongly in the segregated United States of the early twentieth century, where African Americans were de iure equal but de facto increasingly discriminated against: “In sum, Thomas Supten travels to a locale shaped by economic and legal structures that prefigured post-Civil War

26 The military struggle in Haiti for independence from France ended in 1804 (Popkin 140), and the constitution established in 1805 proclaimed: “slavery is abolished forever” (qtd. in Popkin 2).
sharecropping in the U.S. South – the form of labor still experienced in Faulkner’s era, by up to 80 percent of farmworkers in some regions” (Duck 35). The ‘exotic’ space of nineteenth-century Haiti thus suddenly appears as very close to home.

Moreover, Faulkner wrote Absalom, Absalom! at a time when the recent military occupation of Haiti by the U.S. was still frequently, and controversially, discussed in the national media.27 The occupation of Haiti in 1915, which ended in 1934, had been justified by the island republic’s economic instability, the causes of which reached back to the 1820s (i.e. precisely the time when Sutpen resided there):

As part of the negotiations to achieve international recognition, in 1825 Haiti agreed to pay reparations to France to the tune of 150 million francs in gold. France had demanded these costs to compensate it for the costs of the war and also to pay the former plantation and slave-owners for losses. This move by France was supported by the United States […]. (Street 4; see also Bryan 43)

The 1825 arrangement, which constitutes the root cause of Haiti’s long-term financial instability, was thus supported by the slave-holding United States, whose government also withheld diplomatic recognition of the new black republic until 1862 (i.e. after the outbreak of the Civil War; see Herring 239; Gordon S. Wood 537). So crippling was Haiti’s historical burden of reparation that it remained one of the island’s major policy concerns even in the early decades of the twentieth century, despite the fact that Haitian governments had shown exemplary diligence in meeting debt payments (Hans R. Schmidt 32, 113, and 168; see also Popkin 152). In the meantime, and especially since work on the Panama Canal had begun in 1904, the U.S. showed itself more aggressively determined to maintain political stability in the Caribbean “as a means of preventing foreign encroachment that might threaten the developing American military, political, and economic hegemony in the area” (Hans R. Schmidt 43). If the Haitian republic’s economic instability ultimately provided a rationale for U.S. intervention, this instability can in turn be traced back to the reparation

27 According to Ineke Bockting, it was in early 1934 that Faulkner began to combine four short stories which he had written between the late 1920s and the early 1930s into “a manuscript that he initially entitled Dark House”; by August 1934, Faulkner had decided on the title Absalom, Absalom! (1). When Faulkner began work on the novel, the U.S. troops were thus only just about to withdraw from Haiti.