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Micro-movement and the memory of slavery

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The [obituary](#) of Julian Bond – the activist who became well-known during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement – elicited a [strong response](#) from many readers upon its publication in the *New York Times* last week for identifying his great-grandmother as “a slave mistress of a Kentucky farmer”.

What is so offensive about this phrase is the word “mistress”, which obfuscates the brutal coercion and sexual abuse that served as a cornerstone of the atrocity of slavery. Instead it casts the experience of slavery as one of consent and independence, reconciling it with the ideology on which the United States was founded. The word undermines one of the substantive hopes of reflecting on slavery: the recognition of the injustices that reigned during the New World’s most formative years, as well as their deep-seated consequences in the present. It represents the power of articulating injustice – or failing to do so.

The language of the *New York Times* obituary is an example of a [micro-aggression](#), a category of speech or action which has become increasingly identified in mainstream discourses. What makes it “micro” is that it is common, every-day and assaults the sensibilities and social standing of those affected by broad axes of oppression, like racism and sexism. Inasmuch as a micro-aggression is the manifestation of the power of a privileged group transmitted through an individual, it points to the fact that any individual, even the most oppressed person, even an enslaved person centuries ago and today, may speak and act in order to signify meaning. It points to the agency that can be derived from living and surviving.

This conception of the “micro” also complicates the assertion that being enslaved in America meant being socially dead, a passive object – an assertion whose derivatives, today, suggest that the legacies of slavery are part of a forward development out of bondage, and that it is the responsibility of disparaged black Americans to fulfil the liberal promise and free themselves from the margins.

This reflection on representing the past coincides with the [International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition](#) (August 23), a day designated by UNESCO to commemorate the memory of enslaved people and to promote international solidarity towards the amelioration of its legacy. It also links to another meditation on memory, representation, and solidarity.

I recently flew from New York to London on a jumbo jet operated by Air France. I understood very little of the French in-flight instructions, but one word I recognised repeatedly: *décalage*, which means a gap or a lapse. In the context of the flight I think it must have referred to the time lag between the continents or the tearing of the plane from the ground.

For me, it harkened back to a quote I had read of Léopold Senghor’s, the cultural theorist and first President of Senegal, speaking on the differences between black Americans and Africans: “a simple *décalage* – in time and in space.” Senghor seems to be using *décalage* as a way of identifying the simplified *modus operandi* of the African diaspora and to locate a basis for black internationalism. The literary theorist Brent Edwards [proposes](#) that we read *décalage* not to suggest a prior cohesion, but to represent the removal of something already superimposed. This ‘something’ is the racial construct, which asks black peoples to translate across their differences. As a model for understanding race, Edwards writes, *décalage* accounts for the inarticulate differences that would allow black internationalist movement.

If we think of these differences as constituted of the most local experiences that render us unique agents capable of individual sovereignty, then they account for the flexibility necessary in any social movement, as well as the idiosyncrasies that render the movement’s meaning at the community and individual level. The overlapping and diverging paths of people is what engenders the possibility of cohesion and advancement. It also destabilises the notion that the practice of slavery could ever make a slave out of an enslaved person. While we recognise the near-absolute oppression of slavery in order to change the meaning it has in our contemporary lives, let us also be careful to recognise that it was never absolute – that kinship persisted, narratives were written, and on [23 August, 1791](#), a group of enslaved people resisted their oppressors in Saint-Domingue and invigorated the abolitionist movement.



Julian Bond speaking at a Black History Month event in 1984 (image: State Archives of Florida)

I submit this piece for publication a day “late” – 24 August – as a kind of micro-resistance to the notion that we can remember and commemorate slavery only at designated moments and only in response to the acts of defiance that made headlines. Sensitivity to the agency as well as the oppression of enslaved people even at the most personal level is key to our collective memory because, finally, our past constrains the meaning of our present.

For more information about International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, visit the portal on the [UNESCO website](#).

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