

Open Letter to the Oregonian Editor

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“The Theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” (PTSS)

To the Editor:

Holly Danks, in her article “Judge Rejects Slave Trauma as Defense For Killing” (May 31) has written a grave misrepresentation of the theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) and its applications, especially as it relates to this case. While I am not at liberty to discuss the case specifically, I feel it is important that I clarify the nature of the theory and its utility.

The theory takes into account the development of survival adaptations necessary for enduring a hostile slave environment, and examines how these adaptations, both positive and negative, continue to be reflected in the behaviors of African Americans today. In no way was PTSS presented as an explanation for the death of a child. Those who would misconstrue Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome as a form of justification for criminal behavior, or rationalization for beating, abusing or harming children in any regard, fail to take into account my commitment to the fundamental values and ethical standards of the profession of Social Work which is to promote health and well being and to “do no harm.”

After fifteen years of often pain-staking research, my work on Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome has made me acutely aware of a need for further dialogue regarding the relationship between historical traumas and the issue of race in this county. A more thorough examination of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome will be offered in my soon to be released book, “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing.

Upon hearing the term Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), some might think to themselves, how could African Americans today possibly be affected by events that occurred so long ago? After all, African Americans are free now! In fact, they have been free for a long time. The dismantling of 243 years of slavery with the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation, suggested that African Americans were legally free,” yet what followed was a virtual re-enslavement through legislation reflected in Peonage, (1865 – 1945), Black Codes (1866 –1867), Convict lease (1880 – 1928) and Jim Crow (1896 – 1954).

This legislation perpetuated the continual oppression and subjugation of African Americans, and contributed to lasting physical, emotional and psychological injuries. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which attempted to address the injustices, ended the legalized separation and isolation imposed upon African Americans. It should be noted however, that this Act occurred only 40 years ago.

Recurring racist incidents like, the 1955 brutal killing of Emmitt Till, the 1989 beating death of Mulugeta Seraw here in Portland, the 1991 police assault of Rodney King, and the recent

dragging death of James Byrd, in Jasper Texas in 1999, serve as fresh reminders that the trauma continues.

In the meantime, the discussions about the validity of my theory persists which is consistent with the emergence of any new theory. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as noted in Ms. Danks article, took “fifty years for society and the courts to accept.” I am not alone in recognizing the need for greater understanding and research with regard to historical multi-generational trauma, scholars like Alvin F. Poussaint, James P. Comer, Yael Danieli, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Mikihiro Tatara to name a few, continue to explore the consequences of extreme suffering on generations of diverse people. I will continue to pursue my research on PTSS despite those who would misrepresent its purpose and deny its validity. Ultimately, my work is about healing.”

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