

Adonis Mirror



7/27/2005

Rusty White Knights

By Richard Leader

The history of rape as a criminal act has ever been defined by the male perspective: throughout time, across a myriad of cultures, it has been a crime not against the woman subjected to sexual violence but against the male relative who held her as his property. Whether the assault impinged upon his respect in the community or his pocketbook, a father being unable to marry a daughter off to another man for the accustomed price, the female perspective on rape has rarely been acknowledged. This is true even today given the popular antifeminist backlash that insists on incorrectly charging women with making more false accusations than real. Such men also work to shift the focus onto male victims of rape, especially those scant few who were assaulted by women, as most are far more interested in perpetuating misogyny than dealing with the unpleasant truth that it is men themselves who are being violent against both sexes. When this is acknowledged, it is to present females as some sort of advantaged party, as if the fact that women can blame (yet often do not) members of a gendered class different from their own somehow takes the edge off of being victimized in the first place.

Men practice the same dehumanization they do towards women, the sort that results in sexual violence, against their fellow brothers in patriarchy: under normal circumstances (outside of prisons) this typically does not result in rape given that the phenomenon of homophobia was designed more to keep peace in the streets (imagine how crippled our society would be economically if men feared sexual

assault in various public spaces the same way women do) than it was to impugn consensual sexual relationships between men, the disparagement of the latter existing a mere side effect. Men are certainly at risk for many forms of violence but they seldom fear it; a socially created difference between men and women that ultimately works to men's advantage as a social class, despite the grievous harm that can occur to individual males as they stumble blindly or even charge headlong into danger. The dehumanization that men wield against each other has powerful effects that do not just impact us, but women as well. This process of male on male domination leads to heightened levels of violence against women, just as how some gay pornography can be misogynistic even without the inclusion of women, given the roles that are portrayed and the abuse of features or attributes historically considered to be feminine.

Rather than simply malignant, many or even most rapists are utterly incognizant of the fact that they are rapists—witness Kobe Bryant's apology of a sort to the woman he largely admitted to raping after his criminal case was dismissed—given that there is no significant experiential difference between consensual and nonconsensual sex from their perspective; both are entered into, negotiated, and practiced the same way. This ignorance is expanded even further given men's ability to "other" sexual predators from the mainstream male population, rendering them exceptional in quality rather than normative. When even rapists themselves can see other rapists as subhuman animals (as mainstream society invites us all to do unilaterally), at least towards those deemed to be "real" rapists, those fabled men skulking in dark alleyways, the possibility that any man could admit to himself that he has committed such crimes is greatly reduced. Hence such crimes will continue.

Radical feminists have no interest in allowing men to "other" rapists and escape personal responsibility for the benefits that males often acquire through their participation in masculinity, the very same process that results in the rape of women. As such, the most successful online attempt at combating sexual predators—at least when it comes to gaining popularity and media coverage—was not created by feminists or their pro-feminist allies but by an anonymous, twenty-something white male. This website is called *Perverted Justice.com*: participants there masquerade as children at various online venues and attempt to engage potential child molesters who are conversing with them inappropriately. The details of these dialogues are then posted on the *Perverted Justice* website along with any photographic or personal information gleaned from the "wannabe-pedophile" (they believe the term to be some sort of legalistic disclaimer protecting the organization from defamation lawsuits). In more recent months, various police agents have relied upon this information to make arrests.

"Xavier Von Erck," the pseudonym taken up by the website's proprietor, tends towards the "South Park Conservative" form of libertarianism that prizes, or at least confuses, selfishness over political goals: Von Erck is a stalwart fan of professional wrestling, so much so that when a wrestling promoter was busted as a wannabe-pedophile Von Erck declined press interviews, refusing to fully exploit the story and the whirlwind of publicity for the promotion of his own website, which was in 2003 mostly a local project working to protect regional chat rooms in the Portland, Oregon area. Nevertheless, *Perverted Justice* has grown significantly in influence since those days, always with some measure of controversy. Fans of the organization still remember a scathing *Salon.com* article, "Mob Justice," with rancor, Katharine

Mieszkowski accusing them of being simple vigilantes out for a good time.

Early on, Von Erck and his fellow Perverted Justice staffers answered such critics by arguing that their greatest strength was in deterrence, the public humiliation rained upon would-be predators served to drive them from internet chat rooms (and even create real life consequences through harassing phone calls at home or their place of employment, “unofficially” made by readers-slash-participants at the website). As public appreciation of Perverted Justice grew and their methodologies evolved, and after a Dateline NBC appearance in September of 2004, rather than *them* having to become more willing to work with police departments, the police themselves started flocking to the organization to cash in on its cult of cool. Now, rather than a host of dubious “busts,” Perverted Justice tends to boast about the convictions that their work has resulted in achieving. Although the retooling of the website is admirable, it is in many ways superficial and the significance of their old harassment model seems to have been largely swept under the rug.

This came to a head in 2005 when Von Erck (or someone posing as him to retain his anonymity) was invited to FOX News to debate one of his detractors, Julie Posey, a woman he charges with attempting to become the single authoritative source on combating online predators (as opposed to Perverted Justice which he believes welcomes public participation, at least to an extent, having roughly 30 people on staff), renown he believes Posey has capitalized on to sell copies of her books and to promote a Lifetime TV movie based on her experiences as a “Cyber Crime Fighter.” Von Erck seems to have deemed himself the victor in their public interactions—at one point in their FOX News exchange snorting and muttering

“yeah right” to Posey’s assertion that she has worked to separate herself from vigilantes—primarily because the only statement of Posey’s he saw as a genuine challenge was an accusation that Perverted Justice continues to insufficiently work with the police. To this, the standard response regarding convictions was trotted out, as it was again repeated on their website’s recollection of the event: “The audience of the program, *Dayside with Linda Vester*, saw through Julie’s attacks and applauded Xavier’s retort that with the ratio of arrests, indictments and convictions, we will have a greater number in one year than Julie Posey did in seven whole years.” But that was not the sum of Posey’s contention; in fact, her focus on police involvement was actually a minor point compared to a separate issue, stating:

I strongly disagree with [Perverted Justice]: it leans more towards perverted than it does justice.

It’s more of an entertainment site, actually. You go there, you click on a link of a picture that takes you to that person’s chat-log and that person has a scale—a sliminess scale as he calls it—and you can rate the pervert from, I think it’s, one to five. To me, that kind of gives a sense of entertainment. Anybody that finds entertainment value in exploiting children, I have a problem with it.

Von Erck glibly dismissed this with an outright lie, chuckling “Julie Posey seems to be the only person on the planet who is finding entertainment value from our website.” Yet entertainment value is the one advantage that Perverted Justice has used to surge ahead of competing projects: Von

Erck himself thanks Cruel.com—a site dedicated to publishing hyperlinks to abusive content, almost always of a sexual nature, intended as amusing and sarcastic—for once linking to his site and increasing the number of daily visitors by over twenty times. He credits this publicity with helping the organization get off the ground. The first traditional media coverage the website received also followed in this vein, with Marjorie Skinner of the *Portland Mercury* writing in 2003:

Oddly enough, the website is a funny read—in a dark, wry sense. The PJ members often insert witty asides, mocking spelling errors or penis sizes in the margins of the transcriptions. Sample chat titles include “All he wants is a little romance people can’t you just UNDERSTAND that???” or “Gary wants the sex, but not the ‘trobel.” Part practical joke and part public service, the PJ website is alternately hilarious and hair-raising. And, if so inspired, it gives you instructions on becoming a member and nailing some wanna-bes of your own.

Von Erck has defended against “entertainment” accusations in the past, rather than sliding by them as he did on FOX, by arguing that the interjection of various jokes and comments serves two purposes: first, to make it easier on the Perverted Justice staff who are somehow traumatized by their interactions with wannabe-pedophiles even though the opportunity to dehumanize and bully other men is typically an enjoyable process for most males. And secondly, to facilitate the “readability” of the chat-logs for viewers, who for some reason are expected to bother scanning through all (or presumably some substantial number) of these transcripts for no apparent social benefit, other than to perhaps more reliably vote on how slimy

one perpetrator might come off as being. In the same article posted on Perverted Justice detailing the sins of Julie Posey, one of many apologetics for their “dark humor” summarizes their position:

...we want logs to be readable. These logs are not a joy to read, ever. But if you can make them more readable by giving people something positive, be it a crack at the predator or a sarcastic comment, there is nothing wrong with doing so. People need to be able to get through these logs and the side-comments help them do so by educating them or giving them a bit of dark humor. This dark humor is nothing new to us, such “graveyard” humor is often used by people in stressful situations to cope with what they are being put through. Police use such humor, paramedics do, US soldiers often do. It is a coping mechanism that serves our website well.

This conviction that no one on the Perverted Justice staff—or even among their readership—actually enjoys doing what they do but instead soldiers on stoically for the sake of the children is a vital one, oft repeated, but is ultimately negated by other messages they willingly send—indicating their true intended demographic—such as shirts they sell bearing their logo above an incongruous American flag and the sophomoric slogan “Squeeze No Child’s Behind.” If courting popularity, often in the most misogynistic of circles, is what makes Perverted Justice successful in combating pedophiles (both in recruiting staff and in lending them the ear of police administrators), then it is a case of the ends justifying the means. While feminist efforts are always highly criticized for both their goals and methodology, especially if men as a social class seem to be

losing any ground in the process, Von Erck has been largely free to scrape the bottom of the barrel in order to both advance and celebrate his cause. Whether or not Von Erck was correct about Posey and her alleged profiteering, her accusation of “more perverted than justice” stands; in fact, one of the more honest descriptions of the organization was written by PervScan.com, a website that functions much like Cruel.com in exposing various “perverse” things for their readership’s entertainment:

...the Perverted Justice web site is a pretty entertaining read. You can’t help but enjoy a lurid browse through the transcripts of chats between horny predators and the pseudo-lolitas who entice them. You look at the various photographs of these predators—you see the men preening, posing, showing themselves to advantage in an effort to impress their little girlfriends—and you can’t help but laugh at them. Even if you despise or perhaps even pity one of these men, it’s hard not to laugh at someone who’s had the tables turned on him. What’s more, the PJ site has a certain hipness to it—a lack of religious righteousness, feminist fundamentalism, or indignant victimism—that discourages you from taking any obvious moral stance. After all, let’s be honest: voting for the biggest slimeballs and their “most slimy posts” is simply too much fun to feel like a moral act.

Perverted Justice cannot be that forthright about many aspects of their organization and website: hip masculinity and morality are indeed opposing functions, though Von Erck seems to be attempting to harness both on his own terms. This

involves whitewashing over the fact that violence, sexism, and homophobia are what catapulted Perverted Justice into the limelight, even if the increased scrutiny it now receives makes such content a liability (at least when expressed obviously enough to clash with mainstream notions of “professionalism,” a concept that has more to do with protecting the powerful than the powerless). To accomplish this, the first milestone Von Erck had to rid himself of was actually the cofounder of the website, and his former roommate, one “Frank Fencepost” (after W.P. Kinsella’s *Fencepost Chronicles*) or “Tattooed Indian Guy.”

A classic macho story-teller, Frank Fencepost’s profile at the site spun a tale of how he once, while posing as a minor, convinced a pedophile to bring him Taco Bell (or McDonald’s, as *Wired* reported, the story constantly evolving) carryout to his own home, something he gleefully accepted before chasing the creep away by shouting sadistic threats. Such theatrics ensured that it was Fencepost and not Von Erck who was approached by media contacts and he fulfilled that duty with flair, receiving little censure by mainstream reporters who were more than willing to give him a pass and play along. And while the current incarnation of the website is proud of its gay contributors, something that Perverted Justice claims to occasionally draw flack from conservative letter writers who refuse to acknowledge any difference between gay men and pedophiles, Fencepost was routinely homophobic—not to mention sexist and simply scatological—in his writings. These included reversal-stunts that he pulled at the end of his busts (“could i just ram my big hard indian dick down your pathetic child molesting throat?”) which were often followed by self congratulatory annotations in the site’s documentation (“GOD, HOW I LOVE TO THREATEN PEDOPHILES WITH A

GOOD OL' PRISON-SEX HOMMA-SECSHUAL RAPE. REALLY THROWS EM FOR A LOOP SOMETIMES. HOPE YOU LIKED IT."), to jokes in his profile about donating predator's phone numbers to gay-sex lines.

In May of 2004, Fencepost's profile and the totality of his prior "busts" were deleted from the Perverted Justice database, though many postings from other contributors were also removed as they did not comply with new legalistic standards (principally regarding entrapment and phone documentation, it would seem). Some theorized that this was due to a particular incident where he accused a former-friend and rival tattoo artist of being a wannabe-pedophile (who Fencepost himself unorthodoxly approached in a chat session) rather than his aggregate behavior at the organization. When this happened a sundry of conjectures were widely shared across the underbelly of the internet at websites such as *Corrupted-Justice.com*, a page devoted to combating Perverted Justice and what they see as a spate of false accusations conducted by them. In turn, fans of Perverted Justice, who view their detractors as a group of actual pedophiles and their supporters (perhaps like a more defensive version of Nambla; incidentally, Von Erck has also accused Julie Posey of collaborating with these groups of "pedophiles"), registered *Corrupted-Justice.net* for their own counterattack. This war of the dueling domain-name suffixes is a classic case of masculine agonistic behavior and, despite their differences, members of both camps form a single larger community where even the energy of the "good guys" involved is wasted jockeying for social position through various abuse and banter. It was exactly this dynamic that made Fencepost both an asset and a liability.

While the harassment model of Perverted Justice has fallen by the wayside, at least in the public face it attempts to

present to Dateline NBC and FOX News viewers (if not necessarily in the deep recesses of various online forums), the nominal erasure of Fencepost belies how important that model was to the group's early and continued success: his shock-jock techniques made the chat transcripts performances of a sort (as he said, "Hope you liked it") and his participation at the site for over two years is proof enough that the lion's share of his audience did enjoy it, helping to grow the organization's public profile to the size that such behavior was no longer tenable—effectively making himself obsolete.

Despite the gleaming new image the organization has worked to cultivate and the revisions they have made to the face of their website (yet they have deliberately chosen to keep vestigial organs such as their trademark "sliminess" scale, betraying their roots, and has even added a "wankers" section devoted to images of wannabe's genitalia), male on male domination is still the name of the game. Visitors to the site are instructed to "other" the wannabe-pedophiles (made even more explicit through the process of voting), even though patriarchal society rewards men for turning humans with less power than themselves into fetish objects; patriarchy is inherently pedophilic. In that regard, it stands to reason that many men finger pointing at "wannabes" have similar proclivities themselves, though they find some measure of sanction in that they abide by the rules of some arbitrary age limit that renders their attractions both just and sensible. While male conversations about the "age of consent" are problematic on any number of levels, that Perverted Justice has no discernable interest in cutting to the root of domination—but instead wants merely to help parents protect their children, a framing that itself might promote systems of hierarchy—allows patriarchs to endlessly chase their own tails in the pursuit of justice.

The mudslinging between the Corrupted-Justice.com and Corrupted-Justice.net fanatics is emblematic of this problem; even if some men are being taken into police custody and are remanded to prisons, perhaps sparing children from potential assaults, the net effect is still a triumph for masculinity. One could liken it to the “War on Terror,” where the collateral damage involved in taking down one terrorist breeds enough anti-American sentiment to create a dozen more. In the same way, patriarchy creates pedophiles: using patriarchy to combat pedophiles can only result in even more of them existing.

Indeed, it took a violent, sexist, homophobe—Frank Fencepost—to even get the effort up and running, all at a time when feminist attempts at making the world a safer place for women and children have run aground, finding opposition at every turn. As Perverted Justice offers no concrete platform on more complex issues of consent and exploitation, not daring an opinion on more mainstream pornography (or even Hollywood), the denizens featured in its busts effectively become pornography for other men, supposedly decent men, who can then revel in the degradation of their inferiors. If society is using pedophiles—or more accurately, a man not being a pedophile—as some sort of benchmark for decentness, then as a society we are in fairly deep trouble.

Yet the line between the deviant predator and the heroic Boy Scout is a rather thin one and not nearly as wide as most would like to believe. Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped from her Salt Lake City home on June 4, 2002; she was 14 years old at the time. She was taken by Brian “Emmanuel” Mitchell who held her for nine months before she was rescued by police intervention. Mitchell certainly looked the part of a pedophile, a haggard drifter and handyman, something that was ham-

pered home by those in the media covering his arrest. One such article was penned by Gwen Florio of the *Denver Post*, writing at length on March 13, 2003: in opposition to the image she painted of Mitchell, she also included as a foil a number of men who also saw Smart as a fetish object, but in a way that was somehow presented as socially acceptable, positive even, given their squeaky-clean image:

When photographs of Mitchell, accompanied by two veiled women, appeared on Salt Lake television stations Wednesday, Josh Cranning gasped. Cranning, 21, of Salt Lake, said he had frequently seen Mitchell, who he knew as “Jesus,” with the same veiled women in Liberty Park in downtown Salt Lake shortly after Elizabeth vanished.

Mitchell and the women came to Sunday “drum circles” in the park, Cranning said, and the women wore veils over their hair and hospital-type masks covering their faces. “They almost looked Muslim,” he said.

Wednesday night, Cranning and three friends drove to the Smarts’ Federal Heights neighborhood high above Salt Lake with a special treat to leave on her doorstep: a bag of “the best licorice in the world.” The Australian-brand licorice was strawberry flavored.

“Just taste it and tell me Elizabeth isn’t gonna love it,” Cranning said. He and his friends called themselves “The Elizabeth Smart Stole My Heart Club.”

Although none of them knew her personally, photographs of the lovely young girl with the striking long blond hair made them follow her case, the group said. “We imagined the worst,” said Joseph Cover, 20, of Salt Lake, “and then this great thing happened.”

Whereas Mitchell was a psychopathic monster, these All-American Good Old Boys saw Smart in an eerily similar way, not as a person, but as a thing that existed only to reflect their own identities; her vulnerability, symbolized by that striking blonde hair (one might ponder theories on the writer’s use of the gender neutral “blond,” when sexy-sexism was the subject at hand), serving to remind them of their own goodness and virility, even as they were inappropriately acting out as groupies for a teenage girl. (Mitchell himself existed as an object in their minds, also to remind them of their own goodness and virility by way of comparison.) That they could even presume to intrude—like so many television cameras—into her life, as if receiving fancy licorice from strange men topped her list of desires on the eve of being returned to family after a year of abduction and rape, is almost too bizarre to fathom.

Yet that is what happened and it was reported with a positive spin: Smart was “damaged goods,” who had every reason in the world to fear men, strange or not, and male society cannot abide such fear unless it exists and functions on men’s terms; the Elizabeth Smart Stole My Heart Club wanted to “fix” Smart and make her viable, compliant, to male sexuality once again, hoping that if their intrusion into her life went un-rebuffed, it would prove that it was some disturbed hippie-freak and his sickness and not patriarchy and its framework of sexuality that was to blame for the harm that was visited upon her. Being that they cannot truly know what happened to the

strawberry candy (a fruit that has deliberate sexual connotations in our culture) they left at her stoop, it is likely that they assumed themselves successful in their mission, believing in the “healing power” of patriarchal sexuality. Their interest in testing her limits was then promoted as a positive enterprise and not the work of creeps who ought to have been minding their own business, especially when it came to 15 year old girls.

Just as the two Corrupted-Justice websites are feuding, another battle is being waged between ChildSeekNetwork.com and TeamAmberAlert.net (which Perverted Justice views as a group of hucksters), each taking time away from their purported goal of finding abducted children. Even Progressive-minded Liberals are growing weary of the mainstream media’s incessant reporting on cases of missing females, from Elizabeth Smart to Laci Peterson, all to the exclusion of other issues. Instead of tackling this head on, “dark humor,” is again seen as the answer, or at least a palliative of some sort. On June 24, 2005, NPR ran a segment intended as satire of this phenomenon, proposing a news network devoted entirely to “Where the White Women At.” While even many feminists found this amusing, the attempt at racial sensitivity (the supposition being that abducted minority girls and women are less likely to receive media attention) was a false one, being that male Liberal media has itself shown little interest in violence against women—including the hundreds who have been murdered in the region of Juarez, Mexico—and even partners with the pornography (*Counter-Punch*) and sex tourism industries (*The Nation*) on occasion. Men of all colors will use any excuse to bond with each other as men over the corpses of women; those women being white in this case only makes it easier for them to rationalize it, even to feminists.

The way in which men have responded and continue to respond to the systematic male violence that is perpetrated against women is inherently problematic, tainted by ego and defensiveness even at its very best. In most cases such work is patently opportunistic. This includes seeking to make women ever more fearful of men's violence, only not against the intimate partners who perpetrate most rapes and assaults, but those "other" men who exist in the shadows. Men also frequently present themselves as the sole-possessors of the knowledge and tools that women need to defend themselves, especially in the area of martial arts instruction (a surprising number of male instructors seem to be into sadomasochistic sex), where women must swear fealty—and money—to one man in order to protect themselves from others. Even pro-feminist organizations find themselves taking advantage of men's violence: the masculinity loving Men's Resources International.org, a newcomer to the corporate pro-feminism shell game, availed themselves of this phenomenon by creating a widely circulated petition in defense of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA); the petition conveniently doubled as a way to compile a valuable mailing list while blatantly soliciting for financial assistance, not to mention the free advertising their website received as feminist channels were willing to distribute it.

Perverved Justice, in taking advantage of the sexiness our culture bestows upon acts of domination in order to popularize (and thus legitimize) their organization, still caters to that world view even as it has achieved victories in defense of children. While their assertion (in defense of "dark humor")

that compares themselves to "soldiers" is a significant stretch by any reasoning, just as a critique of the Iraq War does not necessarily have to make a moral indictment on the personalities of American service men and women as individuals, neither am I accusing Perverved Justice staff, or its founders, of being closeted-pedophiles. It would, however, be equally specious to think of Frank Fencepost as a singular aberration, one that was easily dealt with by simple disposal.

What Perverved Justice does do, however, is collaborate willingly with patriarchy to accomplish its goals: if it takes a misogynistic homophobe to lead the crusade against pedophiles, then it is a war that cannot be won. Men, as rusty white knights, cannot be counted on as reinforcements in combating their own violence against those with less social, economic, and institutional power than themselves. Indeed, the man behind much of the Arthurian mythos, Sir Thomas Mallory, is rumored to have been jailed on a charge of rape (of one Joan Smith) as he penned the story of the Knights of the Round. Even more rumors speculate that the charge of rape was brought by the woman's husband under a statute making cases of "elopement" a crime, even when the woman happily consented. While historians debate who loved her more, Sir Mallory or Mr. Smith, it is men's perspective and not Joan's that is made relevant: something that is happening once again to feminist efforts in the fight against sexual violence as they are either colonized—as in the case of Take Back the Night rallies—or utterly ignored when men's entertaining alternatives are allowed to steal the show.