Sherman Alexie's Indian Killer as Indigenous Gothic

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Abstract
In Sherman Alexie's controversial 1996 novel Indian Killer, a six-year-old boy named Mark Jones, "the first-born son of a white family" (192), is kidnapped from his bedroom by someone identified only as "the killer." The killer, who possesses a knife inlaid with turquoise stones that has already been used to stab and scalp a white, male victim, leaves after the crime a calling-card of blood-stained white owl feathers. Intent on completing "a powerful ceremony that would change the world" (192), the killer remains not only menacingly anonymous and indecipherable, even to the very conclusion of Alexie’s book, but is described as a "shadow" (71) that shifts between human and bird or spirit form, able to glide into and out of trees, and to enter and exit inhabited homes undetected. More than anything, perhaps, the killer seems to be the darkness itself, as the following passage suggests: "Mark Jones woke up in a very dark place but knew instantly that somebody was sitting near him. The frightened little boy tried to talk and to move, but found he was gagged and his arms were tied behind his back. He struggled against the ropes. The killer reached out and touched him. Mark couldn't see the killer, but felt something familiar, and almost comforting, in the touch" (191). Inside a terrifying darkness, a gagged, bound, and blinded white American boy comes into contact with a touch that is uncanny in its strange familiarity. That haunting brush with faceless otherness is, I argue, absolutely central to the anti-liberal literary and cultural politics of Indian Killer, a book that compels its readers into an experience of contact surprisingly similar to that of Mark Jones. In place of access to Indian experience or identity that many readers might seek, the book Indian Killer offers its readers a disorienting encounter with nothingness and unknowability.

Chapter of
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