

More Than a One-Horse Race – Indian Relay Racing between Indigenous Tradition and Settler Spectacle

Four people, three horses, two exchanges, one display of Indigenous culture in North America. Whether they dub it North America's 'first', 'original', or 'most extreme sport', news outlets and magazines such as The New York Times, Vogue, or National Geographic increasingly report on Indian relay racing (IRR). The attention-demanding designations stem from the high-risk character of the practice: In IRR, a rider competes in a two-to-three-round race, changing horses twice by jumping off their horse in full stride and on to the next without the help of a saddle or stirrups. Two team members keep the waiting horse ready for the exchange, and a so-called mugger jumps in front of the running horse after the rider has leaped off to bring it to a stand.

Indian relay races are a longstanding tradition within North American Indigenous communities. They recently gained mainstream popularity as the extensive media coverage of Indian relay racing, the reintegration of races into the Calgary Stampede, and the overall growing number of IRR events in Canada and the United States indicate, for example. This research project examines IRR as a sociocultural phenomenon located at the intersection between Native tradition and Western spectacle culture in historic and contemporary perspective.

The analysis of IRR as cultural practice together with its medial-literary representations at the heart of this project examine the renegotiation of the West through IRR amidst a rodeo context that largely affirms the White settler colonial narrative. Through archival research, personal interviews, participant observation, as well as literature and media analysis, this project will provide a comprehensive, intersectional understanding of how Indian relay races help individuals and communities navigate the interchange between Indigenous identity and mainstream settler colonial Western culture.

Research on Indian relay races is notably sparse, which provides both an opportunity and a challenge, underscoring the necessity of this study. This project aims to make substantial contributions to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Indian relay races by highlighting their importance within Indigenous communities and their evolving role in mainstream cultural contexts. The study situates IRR transnationally within a broader cultural, social and historical framework of Indigenous/First Nation communities in the Northern Great Plains of the United States and Canada, such as the Blackfeet Nation, Piikani Nation or Enoch Cree Nation.

Research Objectives

Focusing on Indian relay races, this project addresses an important but underexplored expression of Indigenous cultural practices and traditions, contrasted and contextualized by White settler-colonial rodeo culture and mainstream media representation. The project provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Indian relay races, highlighting their cultural and social significance in the past, present, and possibly future.

Tracing the development of IRR as organized sporting event and cultural practice within and outside the Indigenous community is a crucial objective of this project. One case study that offers bountiful source material is the Calgary Stampede. Digitized programs demonstrate that IRR was included in the Stampede program in 1912 and 1916 but was then dropped from the program until 2017. The reintroduction of IRR raises questions about cultural appropriation, authenticity, and the commodification of Indigenous traditions. The lack of knowledge regarding IRR as part of the well-documented Stampede parallels the insufficient comprehension of IRR as a Native American sport

and tradition. The Horse Nations Indian Relay Council (HNIRC) or the Elite Indian Relay Association (EIRA) are examples of associations that have made efforts to promote and standardize the sport. The investigation of their events sheds light on the sociocultural significance of IRR for Indigenous communities detached from the White mainstream.

This research will moreover critically examine how Indian relay races were and are presented in popular news, media and advertisements, then and now. Indian relay races are deeply rooted in Indigenous traditions, symbolizing the spiritual bond between humans and horses in addition to intra-personal human relationships. This research will explore how IRR serves as a means of preserving cultural heritage and fostering community identity, especially as they gain popularity outside Indigenous environments. Taking the cultural and spiritual importance of Indian relay races within the Indigenous communities into consideration, the project, therefore, examines how these meanings interact with and evolve within mainstream contexts, offering new insights into processes of cultural exchange and resistance.

The study furthermore asks the question of how the meaning of IRR for Indigenous people is juxtaposed with non-Native perceptions of the sport in mainstream culture. The research analyzes whether the spiritual and cultural significance of the races is transported into new, possibly commercial, contexts or whether IRR primarily serves as a source of excitement, entertainment, and exoticism for non-Indigenous audiences. The research will additionally explore open questions regarding the involvement of women in Indian relay races, providing a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics. The findings will shed light on the ways Indigenous women and non-binary people navigate and challenge traditional gender norms in competitive sports. The project thus highlights the construction and contestation of gender roles and identities in the cultural pluralism that emerges in IRR, marked by the intersection of Indigenous and settler-colonial-rodeo culture.

Preliminary Work

In my peer-reviewed paper „'Go West, young duck' – Renegotiating the Myth of the American Frontier in a Scrooge McDuck Comic Book" I researched the nuanced representations of identity-forming myths such as the Wild West, the frontier, or the cowboy (forthcoming, *American Studies*, Vol. 1 2025). The paper includes an analysis of Indigenous characters in a transatlantic perspective and establishes my expertise and interest in the cultural narratives and social realities of the West, which will facilitate my access to and understanding of IRR.

To gain a first impression of the discourse on IRR, I researched select primary sources, particularly source material related to the advertisement and media coverage of Indian relay races. In the digital archive of the University of Calgary's "Calgary Stampede Collection", I found historical evidence of the integration of IRR into the event and valuable additional information such as the varying price money allocations and advertisement strategies. My preliminary examination will support my further research of historic documents and establish a trajectory in the representation of IRR. At the same time, it is essential to expand the research to include Indigenous perspectives and knowledge throughout the project.

I will submit a proposal to the DFG for a Walter-Benjamin-Programm position in December 2024 to support the realization of the planned research project. Prof. Dr. Stefanie Schäfer has agreed to host me with the project at the University of Mannheim and her extensive expertise will benefit the research profoundly. Additionally, I have contacted international scholars, librarians and registrars to initiate an inter- and transdisciplinary conversation about IRR. I plan to expand this network to include IRR participants and Indigenous community members to highlight the Indigenous perspective on the cultural practice.