

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

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Four people, three horses, two exchanges, one display of Indigenous culture in North America.

What is Indian Relay Racing (IRR)?

- A rider competes in a 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 horses ready for the exchange, and a so-called mugger jumps in front of the running horse to stop it, after the rider has leaped off.



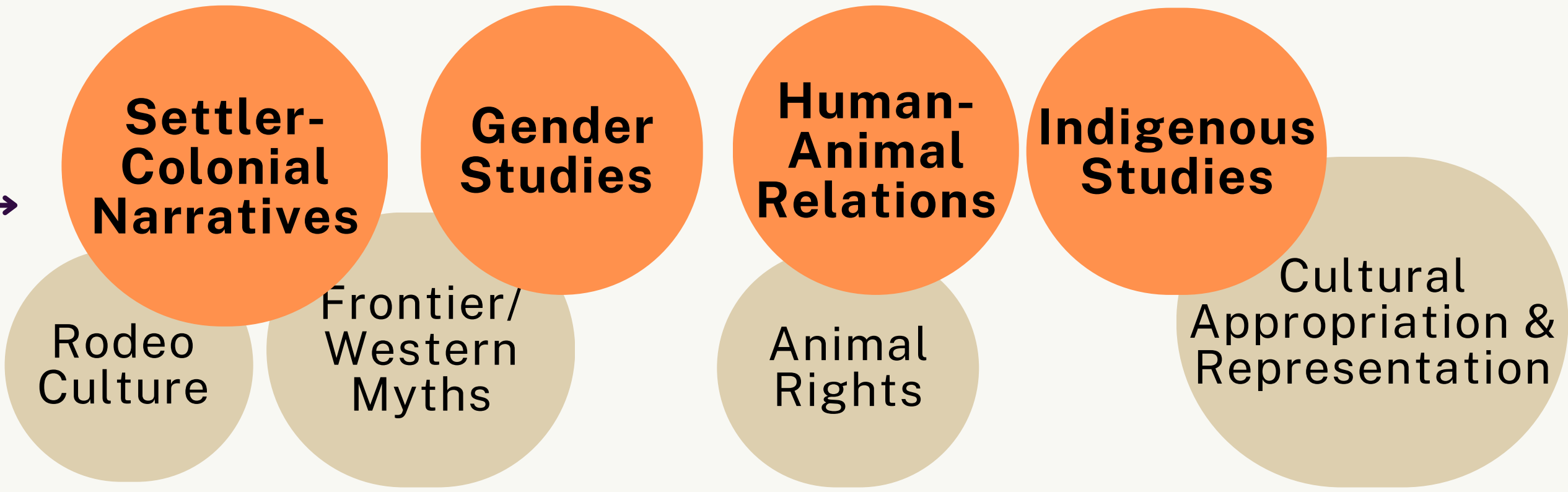
OVERVIEW

Focusing on Indian relay races, this project addresses an important but underexplored expression of Indigenous cultural practice and tradition, contrasted and contextualized by White settler-colonial rodeo culture and mainstream media representation.

RESEARCH GAP

Research on Indian relay races is notably sparse, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The project draws on scholarship from interconnected fields such as:

By analyzing IRR through an intersectional, transdisciplinary lens, the project highlights the (continuous) importance of Indian relay races within Indigenous communities and its evolving role in mainstream cultural contexts.



HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

Tracing the development of Indian relay as organized sporting events and sociocultural practice highlights their cultural persistence amidst shifting contexts. The Calgary Stampede, where IRR featured briefly in 1912 and 1916, before reappearing in 2017, offers a compelling case study and abundant historical records. Oral history interviews with Indigenous organizations and IRR participants provide insight into Indigenous’ efforts to preserve and promote IRR. The analysis of medial representations of IRR in White mainstream media at the same time sheds light on instances of commodification and appropriation of IRR.

Research Objectives

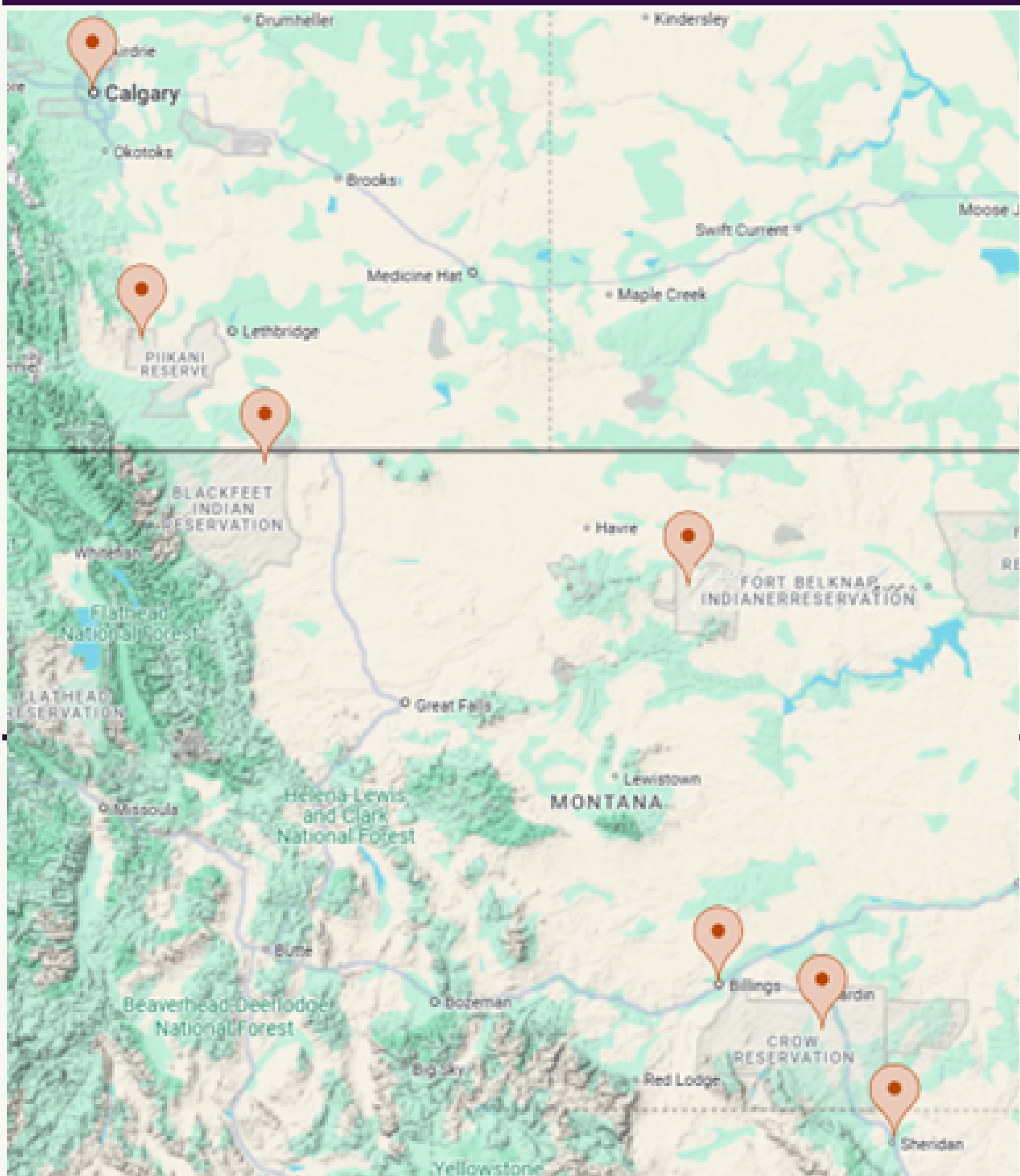
GENDER DYNAMICS

The Indigenous practice of IRR intersects closely with settler-rodeo culture and thus poses an ideal environment to examine gender roles and performances in a cultural pluralism. The research explores the ways Indigenous women navigate and challenge traditional (White) gender norms in competitive sports. The project extends the focus on gender identities to include two-spirited/non-binary Indigenous community members, and asks how their, often spiritual, gender identities interact - and possibly conflict - with IRR and mainstream rodeo.

CONTEMPORARY INTEGRATION

The project investigates how IRR serves as a means of spiritual expression, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering community identity, especially as it gains popularity outside Indigenous events. (How) Do these meanings translate into the mainstream context? Or does IRR serve primarily as a source of excitement, entertainment, and exoticism for non-Indigenous audiences? By investigating such dynamics in the wider context of White rodeo, the project additionally provides insight into the impact of settler-colonial events and narratives on IRR, and vice versa, as the races experience growing popularity in rodeo and cultural festivals.

Expanding the scope of the PI’s project, an additional Ph.D. project examines depictions of IRR, rodeo, and horses in Native American literature and visual media. These representations reveal nuanced perspectives on cultural resilience, community, and human-animal relationships. Potential focuses include narratives of empowerment, critiques of commodification, and intersections with gender and identity politics.



Important sites for in-person research: Southern Alberta & the Northern Great Plains of the US

NEXT STEPS: DATA COLLECTION ON-SITE

The project makes use of a variety of different source types to ensure a holistic and comprehensive insight from multiple perspectives and demographics. The following sources are central to the research:

- Oral History Interviews, e.g. with Indigenous members of IRR teams such as Mountain River Indnrly Team (MT) or the Piikani Nation (AB), as well as organizers of the Crow Native Days (MT)
- Participant Observation: Calgary Stampede & World Championship Indian Relay Races in Sheridan (WY)
- Archival Material: The Calgary Stampede Archives, Glenbow Western Research Center (both at the University of Calgary), Glenbow Museum (AB)

Research Goal

The analysis of IRR as sociocultural practice along with its representations in literature and visual media highlights, how IRR offers Indigenous individuals and communities a stage to reclaim agency and renegotiate the myth of the Wild West in a rodeo context that largely affirms the settler colonial narrative.

THANKS

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