In Arthur Scarritt’s new book, a con man, an advocate for native rights, and an Andean mountain village symbolize a larger picture of the persistence of racist colonial systems that keep indigenous Peruvians in poverty.

Between 1999 and 2003, Scarritt, an associate professor in the Department of Sociology, was living in the village of Huaytabamba (all names are pseudonyms), researching his dissertation on how impoverished residents were confronting globalization. He’d seen a tractor in the village and hadn’t been able to figure out why the villagers scorned the piece of farm equipment. It turned out that a villager named Damian had sold them a free tractor donated by Japan, then pocketed the money. This anecdote was the spark for Scarritt’s book.

Damian, son of a village patriarch, had the benefit of a formal education. His knowledge of Spanish, along with his native Quechua, allowed him to move easily between the village and the city, straddling indigenous and mixed, or Mestizo cultures. He earned peoples’ trust, built relationships with officials and was able to gain power over the distribution of resources in his village.

In one scheme, Damian convinced villagers to sell their cattle and give him the money to subsidize a project that would, he said, lift them out of poverty. He fled with the money, leaving the village in financial and psychological ruin. The advent of Evangelical religion helped villagers trust one another again and operate in ways that benefited the community. It also made them vulnerable to Damian when he returned. Religion also kept them from lynching him.

True to character, Damian had a bigger scheme in the works. A 1995 law had provided for the division of land into private tracts as well as the retention of older native communal land systems. The law gave villagers the option of a vote to choose.

The village’s elite families, including Damian’s, favored privatization. They wanted to use the land to generate cash. The majority of families in the village, fearful of losing their land, wanted to keep the traditional communal system. Scarritt met a villager named Pedro — a Damian foil — and watched as he led the charge against privatization. Damian led his own pro-privatization intimidation campaign. When the issue came to a vote, a majority of villagers voted against putting lands in private hands. The vote was for naught. Village elites ignored the defeat and imposed privatization upon the resisting villagers.

“My book asks about the racial divisions between Mestizos and rural, indigenous people, and about how those divisions provide certain people, like Damian, with outsized power,” said Scarritt.

Progress for native people can only come, he added, when various sectors of society no longer depend on the continued disenfranchisement of native people in order to prosper.
Outdoor writer and Idahoan Ted Trueblood gave Owyhee County its nickname, the “Big Quiet,” said John Bieter, a professor of history. The county is the largest landmass in the lower 48 states with the fewest number of people—a massive place that can be mysterious and unknown, even to a native Idahoan.

While researching another book, Bieter happened upon the story of Omaechevarria v. State of Idaho, a case pitting Basque shepherders against cattle ranchers in a question over land use. When the case went before the U.S. Supreme Court, the court sided with the cattlemen.

Bieter continued his Owyhee inquiry and produced “Showdown,” a look at Owyhee County through six stories that resonate with characters and controversy. Three are stories of the “Old West,” pre-1918, including Omaechevarria, as well as what’s been called the “last Indian massacre” in 1911, and a mining claim dispute from the 1860s.

Bieter’s stories from later decades include that of murderer Claude Dallas, of the Saylor Creek mining claim dispute from the 1860s. Bieter’s stories from later decades include that of murderer Claude Dallas, of the Saylor Creek mining claim dispute from the 1860s.

A middle chapter serves as “connective tissue,” said Bieter. It explores the meaning and persistence of Old West mythology across the country and the world, and the ongoing dialogue between those ideas and the character of the West today.

“Showdown in the Big Quiet: Land, Myth and Government in the American West”  
By Dr. John Bieter

Gautam Basu Thakur’s book is part of the series “Film Theory in Practice,” which looks at popular film through literary theories. The editors matched Basu Thakur, assistant professor of English, with postcolonial theory based on his expertise in critical theory, previous publications on filmmakers Michael Haneke and Satyajit Ray, and research on globalization and neoliberalism. Basu Thakur chose the James Cameron blockbuster “Avatar” as his focus.

The first part of Basu Thakur’s book is an overview of postcolonial theory—what happens to indigenous peoples, to language, to culture, to civic systems, during colonization? What happens in its aftermath when a colonizer has departed?

The second part of the book concerns Basu Thakur’s postcolonial “read” of the popular film. On its surface, “Avatar” criticizes the colonization of the alien world Pandora and the exploitation of its natural resources. It even provides a heroic figure in the form of Jake Sully, a man from Earth who shifts his loyalties from the colonizers to align himself with Pandora’s native Na’vi. But in effect, with all of its romantic visions, the film’s anti-colonization resolution becomes kind of a balm, said Basu Thakur, that “makes us lose focus on the real thing.”

“Avatar” creates an illusion for viewers that all is well in the world outside the cinema, even as very real colonizers continue to exploit very real people.

“Postcolonial Theory and Avatar”  
By Dr. Gautam Basu Thakur

Claudia Peralta’s book details a documentary class that took place at Boise State during the summers of 2012-2014. Peralta, a professor in the Department of Literacy, Language and Culture, has taught a class that focuses on globalization and neoliberalism. Peralta and her colleagues sought to expand the student’s understanding of film and documentary as it relates to neoliberalism, and to show the connection between film and social issues.

Her book explores how the partnership between the professors, Caramaschi and the students came into being and about how it developed. Caramaschi, whose film and written work has focused on ethnological subjects including the nomadic Tuaregs of North Africa, encouraged students to conduct interviews at the university, but also to venture into the larger community, said Peralta.

The book, she added, will be a guide for educators who want to create a similar project using film to look at social issues and help students understand their communities.

“Film and Education: Capturing the Bilingual Communities”  
By Dr. Claudia Peralta

Environmental Research Continues to Improve and Inform Our Lives

This issue of EXPLORE magazine highlights some of the depth and breadth of the research in ecology, evolution and behavior being conducted here at Boise State University.

The stories featured on these pages represent only a fraction of the many issues affecting the natural world that we tackle every day in our labs and in the field. You’ll find similar areas of emphasis in geological sciences, chemistry, physics and other disciplines where faculty and student researchers strive to understand and improve the physical world.

While many colleges and universities have environmentally based programs, at Boise State we are looking at issues that few others address. For instance, we do bird research like no one else, particularly the study of the raptors, songbirds and threatened species that call Idaho home. And even though much of what we do is uniquely situated to our Intermountain region, the lessons learned are applicable around the globe.

Based on their expertise and experience, our researchers often are consulted as international experts and are included in grants and projects far beyond our borders.

In the end, we want to inform the dialog about the diversity of life on Earth and how we can ensure a healthier ecosystem for generations to come.

— DR. MARK RUDIN, VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH and ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT