

# Rice studies the reality behind the Machu Picchu myth

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I actually like to think I am the most New York person around, because I grew up around Buffalo, I went to college in Ithaca, I went to grad school on Long Island as part of the SUNY system and now I live in New York City and work in the CUNY system.” That is how Dr. Mark Rice describes himself, yet this native of Ridgway, Pennsylvania went to study history in faraway places.

After obtaining his bachelor’s degree in history from Cornell University and his doctorate, also in history, from Stony Brook University, he became an assistant professor in the Department of History of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College.

But why history? “Something appealed about history, and although this sounds a bit altruistic, I think when you’re twenty years old you can be a bit altruistic about the notion of history, as its ultimate goal is to seek to uncover narratives, to uncover truth. It was just something really appealing to me, to unearth narratives and people that have passed away or passed into obscurity—this ability to bring people and communities out of the past and explain why their stories matter,” says Rice.

“History,” he adds, “is kind of like an ocean. It’s this massive thing that is there and is solid, but it also has currents and it shifts. What happens today also forces us to revisit what happened in the past, so it’s a living subject.”

He chose to go to South America initially because he wanted to perfect the Spanish he had learned in school, and to immerse himself fully, he decided to go to Chile, where there were very few Americans studying Spanish at the time. And it was there that he became interested in the history of Latin America. “I found that Latin American history was just fascinating, and I thought this is far more interesting than what I’ve been learning about U.S. history,” Rice explains.

He became interested in the impact of tourism on Latin American history, and what is one of the most touristic places in that part of the world? Machu Picchu, in Peru. “Machu Picchu has been present-



Dr. Rice at work.

ed through tourism as a mythic place, but it is an authentic site, it’s not invented. It was constructed by the Incas, but the narratives about its being a lost city are false. It’s important to play down those narratives, because while it’s obviously great to make Peruvian history exciting, there’s also a problem that if we make the Inca into a mythic people, a mysterious people, then we downplay the fact that this was a civilization with real political issues, with real political and social questions, no different from any European civilization,” he says.

Rice has observed that, with tourism, “there’s this tension that always exists, especially with cultural tourism and historical tourism, between the business of tourism and the need for historical authenticity. The explorer who takes credit for discovering Machu Picchu—a man called Hiram Bingham, who has been imagined as an Indiana Jones-type figure—found the

site and between 1911 and 1916. He, along with Yale University, organized a series of expeditions to analyze it and collect artifacts—often under questionable circumstances, which is another problem,” explains Rice.

Rice researched how in the 1930s and 40s, during the Good Neighbor policy, the U.S., hoping to generate good will across the hemisphere, started to focus on places like Machu Picchu in newsreels and children’s books. “Suddenly, the Peruvian state begins to realize, ‘Oh, this is something that could be lucrative for us.’ However, the place had nothing of the ‘lost city’ about it, since it was well known to the locals even before the Spanish conquered that part of the world.” Despite its mythical status—or maybe because of it—Machu Picchu has also become a problematic place. “There is a certain tension. Because of tourism and the

actions of the Peruvian government, Machu Picchu has become so famous that it’s become a catchall representation for the indigenous of Latin America, which can be good, but it also creates the potential for abuse when Machu Picchu is made to stand for everything indigenous.”

As a good historian, Rice sees Machu Picchu within the context of U.S.-Latin American relations. “U.S.-Latin American relations are long and they’re complex. They’re often inconsistent, and it’s often a pretty big pendulum that swings back and forth between interventionism, non-interventionism, cooperation and, often, antagonism.”

For Rice, “When we talk about U.S.-Latin American intervention, particularly in the Cold War, it’s important to note that yes, the U.S. has a lot of power, but Latin Americans aren’t pawns. Latin American political leaders had their own plans; they had their own political structures and needs.”

A good example is when Peru had a left-leaning government that tried to play both sides. “While inviting Soviet diplomats to visit Machu Picchu, they were also going to Citibank, and negotiating loans for hotels, while putting out tourist promotion in the United States. Yet, in the 1960s, the people who arrived were not elite tourists but post-Woodstock hippies. So, to everyone’s surprise, instead of jet-set Americans, hippies arrived. This was a big shock to the Peruvian government, which at one point tried to outlaw rock n’ roll,” says Rice.

Once cars became popular in Peru, the Peruvian government passed the law of conscription vial, which was a forced labor draft enacted mainly on indigenous Peruvians and Peruvian peasants. “There’s this contradiction of entering modernity but using a colonial system of labor, a forced labor draft, to do so. It’s a tension between surging toward modernity but retaining pre-modern systems of labor and exploitation, which I think is a fascinating contradiction,” concludes Rice.

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