

“Taking the Hand of the Monster”: Teaching Critical Mystery Studies in New Mexico

by Matthew David Goodwin

We have to begin in media res. If I begin in the beginning—at one of the many beginnings—you might get the sense that this has all been figured out with one thing inevitably leading to the next, which is not the case. It’s Summer 2024 and I’m hosting a graduate-level field school to explore some of the unique and mysterious locations in New Mexico. We are sitting in complete darkness, in a small chapel next to San Francisco de Asís Mission Church, and we are there to see a mysterious 19th-century painting called *The Shadow of the Cross*, by Henri Ault. The painting depicts Jesus in front of the Sea of Galilee, and when the chapel docent turns off the lights, the background of the painting gradually begins to glow faintly, and a silhouette of a cross appears. The docent explains that Ault did not intentionally create the effect, and that the kind of paint that could glow in the dark was not invented yet. After a while of sitting in the dark, I begin to have the perception of moving and roiling shapes on the canvas, monstrous, ghostly, and bit unnerving. Everyone is seeing something a little different, but for me the painting is coming alive, and I wonder, “Is my mind creating this effect because of the sensory deprivation? Is there actually something in the painting causing this?” The docent is very insistent that the church does not designate the painting as a miracle, but as a mystery, which seems prudent to me given the claims of the skeptic Joe Nickell (2025) to have a non-supernatural explanation for the painting’s effects. Whatever the

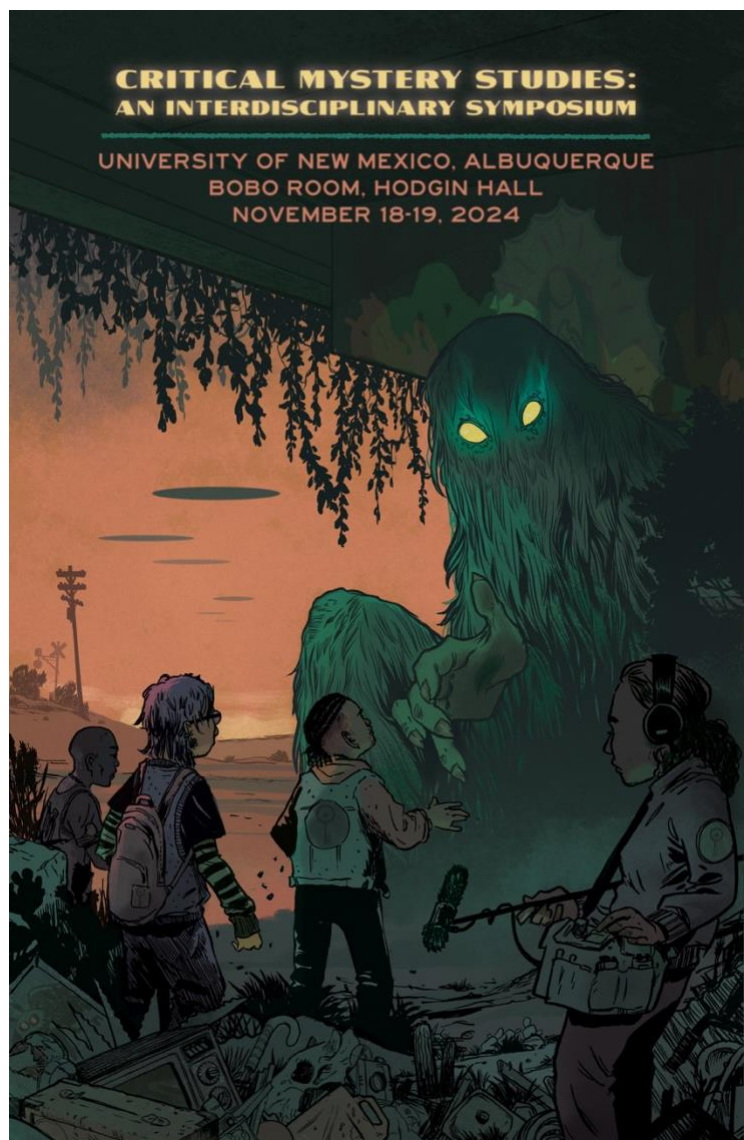


Figure 1. Poster for CMS Symposium, created by Cayetano Valenzuela, 2024.

explanation, the experience *feels* liminal, an event between myself and the painting, combining into something new. Many people report having some sort of spiritual experience with the painting, and I can see why. The optical effects bring to mind my father, who had experienced hallucinations because of Parkinson's and died from the disease. One moment in particular stands out during the worst of his hallucinations, when he needed me to tell him whether the children nightmarishly stuck in the couch were real or not. I became his reality check, when he was no longer himself, my grounded and practical dad. But here I am in the dark, having a weird feeling that perception can easily become unmoored, and I feel the loosening of the hold grief has on me. Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) writes concerning the liminal that "Transformations occur in this in-between space" (243). And yet, even when we have the experience of liminality, and as is the case with the most important of human experiences (love, death, meaning, memory), I still cannot help but try and figure out if the truth is inside of me or if the truth is out there.

One year earlier. In my course on Chicana and Latina science fiction, I was chatting with my students about the infamous Taos Hum, a strange humming noise that some people hear in New Mexico, and it suddenly occurred to me: Could I teach a course that would include this topic and other similar mysteries such as monsters, ghosts, and aliens? I hesitated (my brief moment of what I would call "Academic Mystery Anxiety") but quickly remembered how supportive my department and department chair are and decided to move forward with the class.¹ I taught "Mysteries of New Mexico and Beyond: An Introduction to Critical Mystery Studies" in Spring 2024, and it is now one of the regular courses offered by the Chicana/o Studies Department at the University of New Mexico. A fantastic group of graduate students took an interest in the class, and the discussions have been extraordinarily vibrant, not only because of the curiosity-inducing topics but also because of the collective effort needed to sketch out the key terms, methods, and contours of a new field. Here is our current description:

Critical Mystery Studies (CMS) is the critical and interdisciplinary study of mysteries such as monster sightings, ghost hauntings, and alien encounters, among many more. We examine the role of mystery in the long traditions, histories of resistance, and cultural expressions of BIPOC communities, and at the same time, we explore how mysteries are entangled with racism, sexism, coloniality, and other systems of oppression. Studies within CMS explore the nature and meaning of mysteries, the discourses surrounding them in their specific geographical and cultural contexts, their representation in fiction and film, and how mysteries have been reclaimed, reinterpreted, and reappropriated by cultural creators.²

CMS combines the analysis of mysteries with critical discourses such as Critical Race Theory and Feminist Philosophy, and, in this way, the field has mapped out new territory. Nevertheless, CMS is in dialogue with the whole range of what we can call "Mystery Studies," which includes early texts regarding the epistemology of mysteries such as Immanuel Kant's (1766) *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* and Gurney, Myers, and Podmore's (1886) *Phantasms of the Living*, as well as more recent works from religious studies such as Diana Walsh Pasulka's (2019) *American Cosmic*. I would also discover that there was a good deal of scholarship that would fall under the category of CMS scattered throughout the traditional academic fields, as well as the smaller fields that have significant overlap with CMS, such as Hauntology and Monster Studies. To learn from those already doing this work, in November 2024, I co-organized an interdisciplinary [CMS symposium](#)

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with UNM faculty members Nahir Otaño-Gracia (Medieval Studies) and Sarah Hernandez (Native Studies), with graduate student organizers in Chicana/o Studies acting as respondents for the faculty talks. What became clear was that by combining an attention to the strange and fantastic with a critical analysis of systems of oppression, CMS provides a powerful source of illumination of our cultural landscape. And now you see why we needed to start this essay in media res, and why we keep uncomfortably returning to what Anzaldúa calls the “nepantla” region, the in-between realm, “la tierra entre medio” (243). Not only are the typical experiences we examine in CMS best described as liminal, but the framing of this field is also a bridging and adjoining of fields, as this academic space is an “always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (243). This is why the title of the course is always “and Beyond,” and the topics we discuss are always “among many more.”

I was initially drawn to the title of this special issue, “Teaching with Monsters,” because it dovetails so clearly with the course motto: “Taking the Hand of the Monster.” I am certainly teaching about monsters and their varied histories in the course, and as a class we are reflecting on monsters, but teaching “with monsters” implies a close collaboration, even co-teaching. In the same vein, taking the hand of the monster positions the students and myself as relational to the monsters, and that, indeed, monsters cannot be understood otherwise. To take the hand of the monster is to let them guide us through their side of the story. Through this position, as María Lugones (1987) recommends, we can enter the world of the monster with an attitude of playfulness, creativity, and love rather than arrogance. She writes, “there are ‘worlds’ that we can travel to lovingly and travelling to them is part of loving at least some of their inhabitants...by travelling to their ‘world’ we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes” (17). The monster is often placed in binary opposition to the human, but the entrance into the world of the monster shows to us, as Jeffrey Cohen (1996) writes, that the monster “refuses easy categorization” and has an “ontological liminality” (6). If we take the hand of the monster and step into their liminal world, transformations occur, and we are forever altered. The goal of CMS is not to determine once and for all whether El Chupacabras or Bigfoot are real or not, much less to find and capture them, but to transform ourselves. Collective transformation has always been a foundational purpose of the academy, even if forgotten.

CMS is a bridge across the liminal, but to me and to many of my students, it is nevertheless an intellectual and spiritual home. Anzaldúa writes, “Most of us dwell in nepantla so much of the time it’s become a sort of ‘home’” (243). The work of CMS always begins with our own monstrous companions, with what is close to us, with what is personal and meaningful to us and our communities, as we form our own localized genealogies of mystery. In our case, we begin the class with discussing the state motto of New Mexico, “The Land of Enchantment,” connecting it to the long history of colonization in New Mexico, the colonial travelers who wanted to escape modernity, and the historied tales of *brujería* in the state. It is then vital to take a further step and counter this colonial history of enchantment, which became the source of tourism for the state, by reminding ourselves that entering the world of the monster is not entering into some pre-rational space beyond cultural and intellectual formation. Every monster will have some discourse surrounding it and running through it, as with the countless writings about Bigfoot, even if few are academic. With some understanding about our New Mexican genealogies of mystery and related concepts, the students are ready to theorize monsters, ghosts, and aliens.

For each of the three main sections of the course (Monsters, Ghosts, and Aliens), I demonstrate four steps the students can put into practice in their critical essays and final projects: 1) Understand the Escenario, 2) Examine the Entanglements, 3) Engage Intersectional and Comparative Analysis, and 4) Create the Mystery. The first step is to understand the “escenario,” which refers to the complex interplay of people, events, and systems that evolve over time. Given the nature of mysteries as something hidden and elusive, there must also be a “scene,” a face or an interface, that we can actually perceive, engage, and analyze.³ This step of the investigation is generally accessible to students who are familiar with examining the larger context or assemblage of a cultural phenomenon. El Chupacabras is an important example of the sort of monster mystery in which the escenario is almost entirely absent from the outward-looking face of the monster, since many people do not know that El Chupacabras was born in Puerto Rico in 1995, and from there that it migrated quickly throughout Latin America and U.S. Latinx communities. A year and a half after its birth, El Chupacabras was linked to the discourse of the “alien invader” in the television show *The X-Files* (Gates 1997). El Chupacabras continues to be a Latinx monster used to express the concerns of Latinx communities, but only because it has been continuously liberated from its ties to the figure of the “alien invader” by authors such as Rudolfo Anaya, David Bowles, and Tato Laviera (Goodwin 2021). I think that Cohen (1996) was right that “the monster always escapes,” (4) but for Latinx monsters, that escape occurs through considerable struggle and communal transformation.

To take the hand of the monster comes with a degree of danger and discomfort, as we hear the stories of violence and trauma. The second step of a CMS investigation is to examine the “entanglements” of the mystery, which refer to how mysteries are woven with the threads of cultures or systems of oppression in such a way that they become something new. To be entangled indicates that the threads are woven together so tightly that it may be impossible to untangle them. This use of the term was inspired by Paul Edward Montgomery Ramírez’s (2023) essay “Building Silver Bridges: Paranormal Apparitions, Settler Heritage, and Indigenous Erasure in the Ohio River Valley,” in which he discusses how the 1966 sighting of the Mothman came to be tied to the deadly Silver Bridge collapse of 1967 in Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Montgomery Ramírez shows that there was already a discourse of disaster in the cultural background through the settler myth of Indigenous curses on the settlers, such as the purported “Cornstalk curse.”⁴ The Indigenous people who lived in the area were first designated as “savage,” but after the Indigenous communities were forced from the area, they then became, in the minds of the settlers, the perpetrators of supernatural curses. Montgomery Ramírez observes that the “connection of Mothman to disaster entangles it with the ‘Indian curse’ settler myth” (95). The result is that this settler myth gains new life in the Mothman monster, cementing a colonial mindset far into the future. Such powerful entanglements, however, can be loosened, as was the case when the Mothman became something of a queer icon. Nevertheless, as Gyasi Hall (2026) notes, even with its queer rebellious energy, the new Mothman can become entangled with the bloated system of consumerism in the U.S. in the form of trinkets and T-shirts. There is a fallacy in the idea that criticizing how the monsters are entangled with systems of oppression will ruin them, or somehow make these fun stories into depressing claims about the world. In my experience, critical analysis gives the monsters energy and frees them, at least temporarily, from their stultifying ties to sexism or racism. As Michael Trujillo writes in *Land of Disenchantment*, critical analysis involves a defacing such that “the mystery revealed may become more powerful” (22).

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As the previous paragraph shows, entanglement can be, and usually is, composed of multiple and complex threads. The “Beyond” part of the course title, “Mysteries of New Mexico and Beyond,” points to this depth, as well as to the value of intersectional and comparative analysis for CMS. Tiya Miles (2015) in *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* takes this approach in her exploration of the history of and ghost stories about the New Orleans socialite Madame Delphine Lalaurie, who abused and horrifically tortured her slaves. Her mansion is a common stop for New Orleans ghost tours, and her biography is told alongside the stories of her later appearances as a vengeful ghost. The stories told about her are, of course, overtly tied to the institution of slavery; however, Miles points out that it is Lalaurie’s gender and sexuality that have formed the emotional register of the stories because she was a Creole woman, a domineering wife, and it seems that she was in a relationship with her Black coachman, Bastille. Miles writes: “Due to her Frenchness, gender nonconformity, and strange relations with African Americans that were at the same time too close and too cruel, Madame Delphine Lalaurie is portrayed as a person beyond the pale” (72). New Orleans ghost tours place the horrors of slavery upon the shoulders of this mad horrific Creole woman, while white men are only vaguely present in the background. The truth is that torture was not an aberration of the system of slavery. It is just that her tortures were made public when the cook, who was chained to the stove, set the mansion on fire, and all the torture victims were publicly taken out into the street. After reading this essay, the students then take this intersectional analysis and move it in a comparative direction, discussing other communities or cultures that highlight stories of violent women. The story of La Llorona which is well-known to students in New Mexico comes in quickly, as it is focused on a woman who murders her children after being betrayed by her husband. It becomes clear to students that these two characters occlude the violence of men even as the women bear the stigma of what Barbara Creed (2015) calls the “monstrous-Feminine,” referring to the fact that for the male horror gaze, it is precisely the gender and sexuality of women that is the source of monstrosity (3). CMS then provides a liminal space for the figures of La Llorona and Lalaurie to come together, separated from the monsterizing gaze, and in doing so, students see how gender troubles monsters.

The fourth step of a CMS investigation takes a different tact, more artistic and creative. One of the key texts in the course is the essay “La Llorona, El Kookoóee,⁵ and Sexuality,” by Rudolfo Anaya (1992), which is important because it takes all four steps the students used for their assignments. After a critical analysis of the two monstrous entities and how they were used by Anaya’s religious community to control the sexuality of the youth, he nevertheless affirms that figures such as El Cucuy and La Llorona have a higher purpose than cautionary tales or religious scare tactics. For Anaya they are significant to human development because they serve as “guideposts” for understanding our lives when there is “a crisis of self-identity” (51). We understand the story of La Llorona one way as a child (stay away from the acequias at night) while as an adult we understand it differently (as a source of gender discrimination). The story, through this difference in interpretations, mirrors our development back to us, and in fact, it is in the moment of “a crisis of self-identity” that we need the monster, because the liminal monster can be of comfort to someone who is also in a liminal state. The problem for Anaya is that Chicane monsters are being decimated, not only by modernity but also by the imposition of Anglo monsters through education and media. For this reason, Anaya decided to give artistic and ritual expression to El Cucuy. In Fall 1990, Anaya and fellow artists constructed a Cucuy monster for his community, giving space for everyone to write down their worries and concerns and then burn

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Figure 2. Veladora with the logo of the Speculative Detective Agency. Logo created by Cayetano Valenzuela, 2025. Photo by Violet Goodwin-Otaño.

them along with the monster. Anaya comments: “As the sun set and the Kookoóee went up in flames, we realized that we had created a truly moving communal experience” (55). Monsters are not problems to be solved, but communal transformations that emerge.

Throughout the course, we give new life to our monsters with thought experiments and imaginative readings. As Domino Renee Perez (2008) observes, after Chicanas began to go to college in greater numbers, the new La Llorona stories often located her in cities and universities, and so it became important for my class to imagine La Llorona encounters on the UNM campus (33). To this end, the students read and then expand on Cathryn Merla-Watson’s (2024) speculative thought experiment in which she imagines the protagonist of Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek” as moving past her La Llorona stage and becoming a student at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. The class also collaborated with my colleague Alex Hernandez and his Hialeah Hobgoblin project for which we devised a cross-cultural encounter story at the duck pond in the center of the UNM campus where La Llorona finally finds a child creature to nurture: [“El Güije in New Mexico.”](#) We take the hand of the monster wherever we are.

The movement from critical work to creative activity throughout the course prepares the students for the final project, which can take the form of either taking on the role of a speculative detective and solving a case, or creating a work of fiction centered on a speculative detective. The project topics range from following the monsters created in the Navajo uranium mines to examining the discourse about the metaphysics of Bigfoot. We discuss the difficulty of investigating these kinds of cases, and I encourage alternative modes of detection, including conspiracy yarn boards with their emphasis on complexity as well as various forms of divination with their reliance on intuition. These methods can help provoke us to move past the standard story of the monster, so we can listen to what the monster wants to tell us. The final project is also framed around the students becoming agents of the [Speculative Detective Agency](#) (SDA), an actual detective agency that I founded in 2021. The SDA is a hub for a variety of creative projects, including a literary anthology and various Live Action Role Playing (LARP) events and performances. The final event of the semester is a gathering at my house in which the students are ceremoniously inducted into the

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Here is a sample of the poetry we read at the SDA Induction Ceremony:

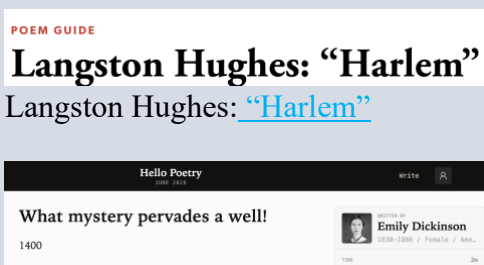
In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa



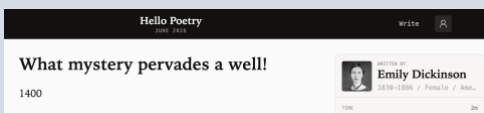
Ada Limón: [“In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa”](#)



Elizabeth Acevedo: [“La Ciguapa”](#)



Langston Hughes: [“Harlem”](#)



Emily Dickinson: [“What mystery pervades a well!”](#)

Speculative Detective Agency, receiving their own veladora that they can light when they need to solve a mystery, or to create one. As we eat bowls of pozole, we read a medley of mystery poetry and collectively ponder life, the universe, and everything. Ada Limón eloquently describes the conjunction of mystery and poetry: “For me, poetry is the language of mystery, it exists in the liminal spaces, the between worlds of waking and sleep, the places where extreme clarity turns into a surreal and unarguable truth. I feel my most free when I am making poems, when I am not searching toward an end goal but instead when I’m unraveling the strangeness of my own human experience...” (Dintino 2024).

Let us end where we began, in the cool dark chapel next to San Francisco de Asís Mission Church. After the docent turns the lights on, we make our way to the threshold and then step into the blinding light of summer. As my eyes begin to adjust, the wider world takes on a liminal aspect, now infused with things we cannot explain. New Mexico has a particularly strong genealogy of mystery, and deep wisdom throbs at the heart of New Mexican cultures which preserve the liminal mysteries, but in reality, these kinds of spaces that encourage the experience of the liminal can be found everywhere. Most major cities in the world have a ghost tour, and probably multiple ones, that are in need of some critical analysis. Everywhere religious institutions and alternate spiritualities guide people to the gates of mystery. Folktales and official reports

worldwide tell of strange encounters with monsters, ghosts, and aliens. The insistent questions and concerns might be different from place to place, but CMS can truly be taught anywhere.

Matthew David Goodwin is an Associate Professor in the Chicana/o Studies Department at the University of New Mexico. His research is centered on Chicanx and Latinx science fiction and *Critical Mystery Studies*, with further interests in philosophy, digital culture, pilgrimage, and larping. He is a co-editor of the *Latinx Archive* speculative fiction trilogy: *Latinx Rising*, *Speculative Fiction for Dreamers*, and *Not Your Papi’s Utopia*. His study *The Latinx Files: Race, Migration, and Space Aliens* introduces the field of Latinx science fiction and demonstrates how the alien has been reclaimed by Latinx creators. He has a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and is an active agent in the Albuquerque office of the very much real *Speculative Detective Agency*.

Endnotes

1 AMA is the anxiety felt about the swirling blank circle at the heart of all mysteries, the thing that resists understanding, as well as the fear of judgment by our academic peers. Because many of the topics discussed in CMS are not normative, they create insecurity in students and scholars and often do in fact incite the judgment of others in the form of belittlement or scorn. AMA is ultimately the fear of transformation, to shed our skin and become vulnerable, and continue in our journey of human development. Rather than being mired in AMA, and to oppose this tendency, the work of authentic scholarship that stays true to oneself, as well as monster creation that connects us to the curative fonts of creativity in our cultures, gives us a degree of agency to work through anxiety rather than react to it.

2 There have been many people involved in the development of CMS, and given the space, I can only give a partial list. The graduate students include Marc Anaya, Paris Baldante, Colton Campbell, Valerie Chavez, Christy Frederick, Audrey Garcia, Sergio Garza, John Hardberger, Ruben Loza, Kristian Macaron, Ashley Martinez, Rebecca Martinez-Baca, Gabino Noriega III, Dante Olivas, Dominique Rodríguez, and Travis Torres Thompson. Faculty and artists include Bernadette Marie Calafell, Ayden Castellanos, Dale Ray Deforest, Jennifer Nez Denetdale, Ramona Emerson, Sarah Hernandez, Michael Lechuga, Kara McCormack, Cathryn Merla-Watson, Paul Edward Montgomery Ramírez, Richie Narvaez, Nahir Otaño Gracia, James Padilioni, Antoinette Rael, Jenny Rice, Sara Rivera, Michael Trujillo, Cayetano Valenzuela, and Irene Vasquez. A heartfelt apology to anyone unintentionally left off this list.

3 There are a variety of meanings of the term “mystery” and a variety of levels of understanding what a mystery is, from the epistemological to the ontological. From the beginning of CMS we have been considering what mysteries are, but the shorthand description we use is that a mystery is a question that resists understanding and that has gained a depth that the everyday question lacks. In addition, we typically are examining the more fantastic or big question mysteries rather than the mundane ones.

4 The “Cornstalk curse” refers to the supposed last words uttered by Shawnee leader Hokolessqua (translated to “Cornstalk”) in 1977. According to legend he proclaimed: “I came to the fort as your friend and you murdered me. You have murdered by my side, my young son . . . For this, may the curse of the Great Spirit rest upon this land. May it be blighted by nature. May it even be blighted in its hopes. May the strength of its peoples be paralyzed by the stain of our blood” (Montgomery Ramírez 2023, 89).

5 El Kookoóee is the phonetic spelling of El Cucuy (or El Coco), the boogeyman common in New Mexico, which is meant to give Chicax people who are English speakers access to this monster.

URLs

Critical Mystery Studies <https://criticalmysterystudies.com>

The Speculative Detective Agency <https://speculativetectiveagency.com>

The Latinx Archive <https://latinxarchive.com>

Ada Limón: “In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa” <https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/a-poem-for-europa>

Elizabeth Acevedo “La Ciguapa” <https://www.latinopoetry.org/featured-poems/la-ciguapa>

Langston Hughes “Harlem” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>

Emily Dickinson “What mystery pervades a well!” <https://hellopoetry.com/poems/3969/what-mystery-pervades-a-well>

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